

PADGETT Methodology for Cemetery Research

Cemetery research for genealogy offers a tangible connection to the past and can unlock clues not found in traditional records.

The PADGETT method provides a structured, field-tested approach to guide your research from preparation through storytelling.

P – Prepare Before You Go

- Identify target individuals or families and review burial records, obituaries, and maps.
- Assemble your toolkit: camera/phone, mirror (for lighting), gloves, brushes, notebook, archival pens.
- Check access rules, hours, and ownership status for the site.
- If possible, recruit a friend to help



A – Assess the Site on Arrival

- Walk the perimeter. Observe terrain, layout, section divisions, and overall condition.
- Note landmarks, natural features, and potential threats (erosion, vandalism, vegetation).
- Orient yourself using a compass or mapping app.

D – Document Everything

- Photograph headstones from multiple angles (front, side, inscriptions, setting).
- Record full epitaphs and note materials, iconography, and condition.
- Capture nearby stones that may be part of a family cluster.

G – Gather Additional Clues

- Look for footstones, fragments, unmarked depressions, or temporary markers.
- Scan for patterns in surname placement or birth/death dates.
- Consider GPS-tagging grave locations for future reference or mapping.

E – Engage with the Community

- Speak with caretakers, church staff, local historians, property owners, or nearby residents.
- Ask about undocumented burials, traditions, or restoration efforts.
- Offer your findings to local repositories or societies.

T – Transcribe and Translate Thoughtfully

- Use a consistent format and double-check accuracy.
- Preserve original spelling, punctuation, and errors.
- Translate foreign-language inscriptions carefully; note uncertain interpretations.

T – Tell the Story

- Link your cemetery findings with census, probate, land, and military records.
- Build a family narrative or publish a cemetery survey.
- Share your work through blogs, articles, public talks, or society newsletters.

TOOLS, TEMPLATES, AND EXAMPLES

Field Kit Essentials:

- Smartphone / tablet or digital camera with backup batteries
- Clipboard and notebook
- Soft brushes
- Mirror or reflector for better lighting on inscriptions
- GPS-enabled mapping app (like Find A Grave or BillionGraves)

Quick Reference: Common Gravestone Symbols

- Lamb: Infant or child
- Willow tree: Mourning or sorrow
- Hand pointing up: Soul rising to heaven
- Broken column: Life cut short
- Clasped hands: Farewell or marriage

Sample Transcription Template:

Name: Thomas W. Bennett

Birth: 14 February 1818

Death: 2 July 1876

Inscription: "A faithful friend, a father dear / A loving husband lieth here."

Symbol: Dove (peace)

Stone Type: White marble tablet

Condition: Partially eroded; moss obscuring lower third

Notes: Adjacent to wife Sarah Bennett, d. 1889

Documentation Tips:

- Always transcribe from the stone itself, not just a photo.
- Mark unreadable words with brackets: [illegible].
- Take wide shots to show marker context and orientation.
- Photograph unmarked graves in relation to marked graves.

Where to Share Your Work:

- Local historical society archives
- FindAGrave or BillionGraves platforms
- FamilySearch Memories
- Local library or church records collection

The PADGETT Method isn't just a method—it's a mindset: respectful, observant, and deeply curious about the lives that came before. Learn more and follow my work at www.cornislandproject.org