

National Cemetery Administration Best Practices Protocol

Cleaning Government-Furnished Headstones and Markers

In addition to national cemeteries and state, tribal and territorial Veterans cemeteries, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) provides headstones or markers to eligible Veterans in private and municipal cemeteries. These Government-furnished headstones and markers remain Federal property; the purpose of this page is to provide information on how to safely clean them.

The goal of cleaning is to remove air pollution soiling, lichen, bird droppings, dirt, salts, and sap — it is NOT to make the headstone or marker look "like new." Improper or unnecessary cleaning can accelerate the deterioration of marble and granite; pre-1970s bronze was not sealed and will have a blue-green patina that will not be removed by cleaning.

VA prohibits the general public from power washing Government-furnished headstones and markers due to the damage it may cause to historical headstones.

Timing and Permission

⇒ Only clean headstones and markers when temperatures are above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and only after receiving permission from the property landowner.

Fragile Headstones

⇒ Even gentle cleaning is not recommended for headstones and markers exhibiting severe surface erosion or cracks, especially older stones.

Equipment

- ⇒ Soft natural or nylon bristle brushes (NO plastic or metal bristles).
- ⇒ Buckets, spray bottles, or hand/backpack sprayers (NO power washers).
- ⇒ Clean water.
- ⇒ Cleaning solution, only if needed; and only after following the manufacturers' instructions.
- ⇒ Wear protective gear if manufacturer requires.

Cleaning Solutions for Headstones and Markers

- ⇒ Most headstones and markers can be cleaned with water alone.
- ⇒ For tougher stains, the use of water with a detergent may be helpful. Examples of detergents include: Vulpex, Orvus, and Ivory Liquid.*
- ⇒ If the headstone or marker displays biological growth (algae, mildew, moss, lichens), water with a product formulated for cleaning these growths may be required. Examples include: Prosoco ReVive, Cathedral Stone Bio-Cleaner, Wet and Forget, and D/2 Biological Solution.*

NOTE:

* Mention of specific cleaning products is for illustration only and is not intended as VA's endorsement of those commercial products.

ALWAYS follow these steps:

1. Read and follow the manufacturer's instructions and the procedures found in the manufacturer's Safety Data Sheet for each product, which provides the properties of each chemical; physical, health, and environmental-health hazards; protective measures; and safety precautions for handling, storing, and transporting chemicals.
2. Test products on the headstone or marker first by applying a small amount to an inconspicuous location and let it dry to ensure it does not discolor the stone.
3. Always pre-wet the stone liberally with water before using a cleaner. By soaking the porous stone beforehand, the cleaner will stay on the surface of the stone and minimize penetration of the cleaner into the stone — minimizing adverse effects.
4. Apply water/product to keep the headstone or marker wet throughout the cleaning process.
5. Agitate surface gently in a circular motion. Work in small areas. Start at the bottom and move upward.
6. Rinse the entire headstone or marker thoroughly, especially if using a cleaning solution, to ensure no cleaner is left behind.

NEVER use these chemicals:

- ⇒ Bleach or products containing Sodium Hypochlorite (NaClO), Calcium Hypochlorite, Sodium Perborate, Sodium Percarbonate, Sodium Persulfate, Tetrasodium Pyrophosphate, or Urea Peroxide.
- ⇒ Strong Acids including Hydrochloric Acid or Muriatic Acid.
- ⇒ Strong Bases including Concentrated Ammonia, Calcium Hydroxide, Potassium Hydroxide, or Sodium Hydroxide.