

## Fact Sheet

### Cleaning Government-Furnished Headstones/Markers

In addition to national cemeteries and state, tribal and territorial Veterans' cemeteries, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) provides headstones/markers to eligible Veterans in private and municipal cemeteries. These Government-furnished headstones/markers remain Federal property; the purpose of this document 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/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.

**Timing and Permission:** Only clean headstones/markers when temperatures are above 40 degrees Fahrenheit and only after receiving permission from the property landowner.

**Take care with fragile headstones!** Even gentle cleaning is not recommended for headstones/markers exhibiting severe surface erosion or cracks, especially older stones.

#### Equipment:

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

#### Cleaning Solutions for Headstones/Markers

Most headstone/markers can be cleaned with water alone.

For tougher stains, use water with a non-ionic detergent (pH neutral). *Examples include:* Vulpex, Orvus, and Ivory Liquid.\*

If headstone/markers display biological growth (algae, mildew, moss, lichens), water with a product containing quaternary ammonium compounds (“quats”) may be required. *Examples include:* Prosoco ReVive, Cathedral Stone Bio-Cleaner, Wet and Forget, and D/2 Biological Solution.\*

#### ALWAYS!

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.

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

Test products on the headstone/marker first, by applying a small amount to an inconspicuous location and let it dry to ensure it does not discolor the stone.

1. 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.
2. Apply water/product to keep the headstone/marker wet throughout the cleaning process.
3. Agitate surface gently in a circular motion. Work in small areas. Start at the bottom and move upward.
4. Rinse the entire headstone/marker thoroughly, especially if using a cleaning solution, to ensure no cleaner is left behind.

**NEVER USE** Bleach or products containing sodium hypochlorite (NaClO), sodium perborate, sodium percarbonate, sodium persulfate, tetrasodium pyrophosphate, calcium hypochlorite or urea peroxide. **NEVER USE** strong acids, including muriatic acid, hydrochloric acid or strong bases such as concentrated ammonia, sodium hydroxide, calcium hydroxide, or potassium hydroxide.

For more information about cleaning and caring for headstones, visit:

<https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/wp-content/uploads/Best-Practices-Final.pdf>

*PRESERVATION BRIEF 48: Preserving Grave Markers in Historic Cemeteries*

<https://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/48-preserving-grave-markers.htm>

<https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/blog/gravestones-bite-the-dust/>

## Examples of Government-Issued Headstones/Markers



Left: Bronze flat markers (newer and older with acceptable patina)



Right: Marble flat marker



Left: Upright marble headstones (with and without darkened paint)



Right: Upright granite headstone (with darkened paint)