

Standardized Naming for Digital Photographs of Gravestones

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As digital photography takes over from film photography, one feature must be dealt with, the file name. Digital cameras assign file names with no relation to what is on the photo like DSCF7621. A standard for file name has many benefits. The computer's folder list will alphabetize the photographs which will make specific photos easier to find. Combining the photos from two collections can be greatly simplified if both collections use the same standard.

For three years I have been working with Vincent Luti to scan his photograph negatives to digitize his collection of 8,000 gravestone photographs. As the number of digital photographs grew it became clear that we had to name them so that they could be organized and located. After several tries, some additional adjustments and some input from John Spaulding, we hit on a system that works quite well.

The first eight character block defines the location of the gravestone. First comes the state, then the town (possibly county for Midwest and western states) and finally the cemetery number.

[state] - [town] [cemetery number]

- state: two letter postal abbreviation
- town: two letter code assigned to each town in the state (MA, CT and RI are done)
- cemetery number: a three digit number assigned to each cemetery within a town. RI registers every historical cemetery and assigns an HC number. Massachusetts assigns similar numbers with form E by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and keeps the records at the Archives. If the cemetery number is not known three underline characters should be substituted (____).

The next part of the file name is the last name, first name and the year of death of the person memorialized on the stone.

[last name on gs] , [first name] [year of death]

- last name on gravestone: For men use their family name. For women use their married name if married. Use upper case for the first letter and lower case for the rest.
- first name: Use upper case for the first letter and lower case for the rest. If the middle initial is clear on the gravestone include it in upper case after the first name with no spaces.
- year of death: Include the numbers for the year of death with no spaces.

Example: The gravestone for Silvanus Hopkins, who died April 23, 1753, is to be found in the Providence, Rhode Island, North Burial Ground, HC #001. The file name for this photograph would therefore be:

RI-PV001Hopkins,Silvanus1753.jpg

RI abbreviation for Rhode Island
PV code for Providence
001 North Burial Ground historical cemetery #1
in Providence
Hopkins last name
Silvanus first name
1753 death year

Variations on the standard code

If two people with the same last name appear on the gravestone, they can both be included in the code as follows:

[state] - [town] [cemetery number] [last name on gs],
[first name of person #1] - [first name of person #2] [year
of death of first person] - [year of death of second person]
.jpg

Example: The code for a gravestone photograph for John and Mary Smith, also buried in the Providence, Rhode Island, North Burial Ground, where John died in 1802 and Mary died in 1806, would be:

RI-PV001Smith,John-Mary1802-1806.jpg

The same code would be used for a photograph showing separate gravestones for John and Mary next to each other.

For a photograph of a gravestone with more than two names on it, the code should contain only the one or two most important names.

Suffix code

Some gravestone photographs capture only a part of the gravestone. To identify these, a code can be added to the end of the file name directly after the death date. These codes are all lower case.

a,b,c,etc. for the second, third and fourth
photograph of the full stone
e end panel photo

fs footstone photo
sign for a close up of the carver's signature
t tympanum (1,2,3 can be added if there are more than one tympanum shots)
d for a close up of a detail on the gravestone
rub for a photo of a gravestone rubbing
back for a photo of the back of a gravestone

When looking at the files in a folder, Windows Explorer will sort them into alphabetical order. All photographs will be sorted by state, then by town, then by cemetery where they will be sorted alphabetically by name within each cemetery. An index by name can be made by stripping off the eight character location block and then indexing all the names in the collection. This can be done using Excel. I have been using this naming standard for several years now and have 30,000 named gravestones on my hard drive. I can find any photo in my collection in less than a minute either by location and name or by name alone.

While working on a book on the colonial burial grounds of Newport, I had three collections of photos that I wanted to combine and select the best photo of each stone. All of the photos were named with this standard so all pictures of the same stone were together in the folder. It was easy to look at each photo for one gravestone and select the best one. You might consider adding the photographer's initials to the end of the file name to keep track of where the photo came from or you could add the name to the metadata.

Metadata

The naming standard is not meant to be a database with full search capabilities, but that function can be partially met with metadata fields stored within each JPEG file. You may have seen the camera information that is written into the JPEG file by the camera. It is called EXIF [EXchangeable Image File format] data and contains such things as the date and time the picture was taken, the camera model, shutter speed and f stop. This data can be seen by right clicking on the JPEG file and selecting PROPERTIES. Next click the summary tab and this data will be displayed.

There is also another metadata file that I was exposed to by Dan Lynch in his participation session at the 2007 AGS Conference in New Hampshire. It is called IPTC [International Press Telecommunications Council] and was originally designed to allow press photographers to imbed information in their digital photographs that they transmitted to the home office. Some of the fields that are available are Copyright, Caption, Key words, Comments, Category. The IPTC web site, IPTC.org, lists over sixty software products that support IPTC photo metadata standards. Windows XP, Windows Vista, Windows 7 and

Apple Mac operating systems all give you some access to these fields. Vista shows you 61 different metadata fields and it allows you to add data and edit nine of these fields. For example, if you are studying a carver and you want to track the different styles of the letter "g" he used over his carving career, you can add tags to your photos to track this feature. In the tag field, add Type I g, Type II g, or type III g. You can then call up all of your photos with Type II letter g. If you are interested in motifs, you can tag your photos with skull, cherub, urn and willow. You can then view these as groups. There is a comment field where you can store notes within the jpg file that will travel with the photo. You might document conservation efforts on gravestone or who gave you the photo. These are free fields that you can use to store information about the gravestones.

Besides your computer's operating system, there is a program called Picasa by Google that will allow you to add tags (key words) to your photographs. This program is a free download from Google. You might have a photograph of the Reverend Jonathan Helyer box tomb in Newport, RI, with a death date of 1745, made by the John Stevens shop. You might add three tags to the metadata: 18th century, Stevens shop, box tomb. This supplement would allow you to bring up all like grave markers from your collection using the Picasa search function.

You can also geotag your photos in Picasa using Google Earth or Google maps. This writes GPS coordinates of longitude and latitude for the cemetery into the metadata fields in the photo jpg file. In Vista and Win 7 you can look at these coordinates in the property area. This would allow you to see the exact coordinates of where you took the photograph or zoom right to the location on Google Earth.

Technology is changing gravestone photography in some amazing new ways. The proposed naming standard allows you to store and find your gravestone photos with much greater ease than the shoe boxes used for film photographs. Metadata fields contained within all jpg files allow you to write searchable tags and digital notes within your jpg files. You are able to bring to your computer screen all gravestones carved in the Stevens Shop in Newport from a collection of 30,000 photos in two and one half seconds (there are 3610). Try renaming 25 of your gravestone photos from several different cemeteries in several states and/or towns. You will be amazed at how easy it is to find individual photographs.

John Sterling is a Forbes Award recipient. He has lead a group of volunteers who have been recording gravestones in Rhode Island since 1990. Their database contains information on 454,256 gravestones; they are now adding 30,000 digital gravestone photos that were taken over the last six years.

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