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## Cemetery Research in North Carolina

by Terry Moore, CG

*Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling* are the opening words to a ballad written by Englishman Fredric Weatherly and set to the Irish tune of *Londonderry Air*.<sup>1</sup> This song is often sung at funerals and touches my very soul; I feel close to those who have gone before me each time I hear it and often think of it in quiet, peaceful cemeteries.

When I was a child, my friend Annie and I walked uptown to “shop” on Saturday afternoons. It was about a two-mile walk from my house, but there was a short-cut through the cemetery between Elmendorf Street and Albany Avenue. It was an old cemetery and we loved to read the inscriptions on the stones and talk about the ornamentations. On the way home, as it was beginning to get dark, we walked or ran through the cemetery, occasionally screaming, certain that something was going to get us. Despite this, I have always loved the serenity of cemeteries. I remember many Sunday afternoons taking my Nana for a ride. She always brought potted plants with her to place on the graves of her parents and grandparents in St. Peter’s Cemetery in Rosendale, New York. On national holidays, such as Memorial Day and Fourth of July, on our way to the family picnic, we always drove through the large cemeteries to look at the flags placed on the graves of veterans. As an adult, whenever I go home for a visit, I always go to the cemeteries to contemplate, pay my respects, and to search for more ancestors.

### Cemetery Surveys

Gravestones often provide the only record of birth and death dates for our ancestors. Many North Carolina cemetery surveys have been done over the years. Some of these surveys have been published in book form and are available at the North Carolina State Library and Archives, the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, and other local and university libraries. The State Archives has a

collection of many of the survey worksheets, including those never published, which can only be accessed at the Archives. There was another set of surveys done by the Daughters of the American Revolution and some of those worksheets were also donated to the Archives; some of these surveys may not have been published. Both sets are arranged by county, have not been indexed, and can take a while to go through. But the largest single collection of cemetery records is the Pre-1914 Cemetery Index cards.

In 1935, through the Works Project Administration (WPA), North Carolinians were employed to conduct a survey of cemeteries, recording the inscriptions on approximately 100,000 gravestones prior to 1914. An index card was created for each stone and these cards are filed at the North Carolina State Archives in the Search Room; this collection is called the WPA Pre-1914 Cemetery Index. The cards are arranged in alphabetical order and each card includes the information from the stone, the county, the name of the cemetery, and sometimes the address or directions to the cemetery. At the end of the alphabetized cards is an index of each cemetery surveyed. If an ancestor is not found in this index, he may not have had a stone or his cemetery may not have been surveyed. This index is also available through the Family History Library on microfilm and can be loaned to Family History Centers. To find the index, go to <http://www.familysearch.org>, click on Catalog, then select Place-names and enter “North Carolina”. A list of topics will come up; click on “North Carolina–Cemeteries–indexes (4)”. There will be two entries for the “Pre-1914 cemetery inscription card index”: one will list cemeteries by county and one is indexed by surname. I recommend using the surname index. This card index may be the only record of your ancestor’s cemetery stone

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Weatherly, *Oh Danny Boy*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danny\\_Boy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danny_Boy), 17 December 2012.

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because, over time, stone engravings can wear off or become illegible.

### Online Resources

Researchers often live far from the gravestones of their ancestors and from the North Carolina State Archives or Library. Fortunately, many cemetery records are now available online. The North Carolina Cemetery Census (<http://cemeterycensus.com/nc/>), is a great resource. A search or browse can be done of the individual county cemeteries or by a deceased's name. Find A Grave ([www.find-a-grave.com](http://www.find-a-grave.com)) and BillionGraves ([www.billiongraves.com](http://www.billiongraves.com)) are two more excellent online sources of cemetery records. Pictures of the gravestones may be found on all of these websites. Sometimes there will be a picture of the deceased and perhaps a short biography. The USGenWeb website at <http://www.usgenweb.org> may also contain cemetery records for the state and county in which you are searching. These cemetery records often have to be searched by individual cemetery and may not be indexed. Be sure to keep a list of the cemeteries searched by county, and the names you looked for; this will help prevent researching the same cemeteries for the same people. Some of the above sites allow you to leave a request asking a volunteer to go to a particular cemetery, take a picture of your ancestor's gravestone, and post it. Help these databases grow by taking pictures of stones when you visit cemeteries and submit them to your favorite online resources.

### In Conclusion

I like lists and when there are multiple collections to search for a subject, a list helps to ensure nothing is missed. This is the list I use for North Carolina cemeteries:

- Cemeterycensus.com
- Find-a-grave.com
- Billiongraves.com
- USgenweb.org
- The North Carolina Pre-1914 Cemetery Index
- Cemetery books

- Cemetery surveys at the North Carolina State Archives
- DAR cemetery surveys at the North Carolina State Archives

Sometimes a cemetery has not been surveyed and a trip to that cemetery will be necessary. My Nana did not know where her great-grandparents were buried, but based on their religion and where they lived, a visit to the sexton's house at nearby St. Mary's cemetery was warranted and they were indeed buried in that cemetery. You never know what might be recorded on a cemetery stone. Their stone was a tall obelisk, and recorded on it were their birth and death dates along with the birth and death dates of several of their children and a daughter-in-law. Near them in their cemetery neighborhood were other relatives. Finding the location in Ireland an ancestor came from can be very challenging, and there, etched in stone, was my great-grandparents place of origin: Kilmanmon Parish, Queen's County, Ireland. The words of the Irish ballad played in my head: *And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me. Oh, Danny boy, oh, Danny boy, I love you so.*

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