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What to Do When Disaster Strikes Historic Cemeteries

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by [Mary Striegel](#)



Trees downed by a tornado in Raleigh, North Carolina cause damage to historic grave markers in City Cemetery.
Courtesy: City of Raleigh Parks and Recreation Department.

On April 14-16, 2011, at least 153 confirmed tornadoes led to severe destruction across 14 U.S. states in [one of the largest single-system tornado outbreaks](#) in the country's history. Along this swath of destruction, historic properties such as cemeteries have also been damaged. I thought that it would be useful to review strategies for responding to emergencies in historic cemeteries. While the recommendations are specific to cemeteries, they can serve as a general guidelines for other historic properties as well.

1. Take a deep breath and understand that the damage is already done. Don't rush your response. Make informed decisions so that well-meaning efforts don't cause more damage.
2. Identify the hazards. Make sure that unstable tree limbs and monuments are identified and roped off or flagged. Before work begins, note any holes, downed wires, and disrupted insect nests such as ants, wasps, bees, etc.
3. Stabilization may be needed to prevent grave markers from toppling. This can be done using wood timbers and clamps.
4. Do not discard monument or fencing material until it has been properly assessed and documented. These materials may be reusable to make repairs. A rapid assessment form is one of the links below.

5. Volunteers can assist in written and photographic documentation of the damage. They can help remove small tree limbs so that damage can be more thoroughly assessed.
6. Professionals who are sensitive to working in and around historic features should remove the trees. As you know, tree removal can be a dangerous undertaking. Professionals are recommended. This is not a job for volunteers.

Keep in mind that the safety of people always comes first for both professionals and volunteers working in the affected areas. Once the cemetery is initially stabilized and damage assessed, you will have a better handle on how to prioritize further efforts. The NCPTT website has a few other resources you may want to check out as well:

- General Disaster management tools can be found at <http://ncptt.nps.gov/2006/damage-assessment-tools/>
- Cemetery Disaster Response helpful hints can be found at http://ncptt.nps.gov/pdf/Katrina_Cemetery_Response.pdf
- Rapid Cemetery Assessment can be found at http://ncptt.nps.gov/pdf/Rapid_Cemetery_Assessment.pdf and http://ncptt.nps.gov/pdf/Rapid_Cemetery_Assessment_Definitions.pdf

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