Cemetery relocations are occurring more frequently throughout the United States and abroad. Unlike a single disinterment within a cemetery, the relocation of multiple graves or the relocation of an entire cemetery requires forethought, preplanning, and a team of specialized and devoted members.

A cemetery may be a typical memorial park with markers and monuments arranged on a formal landscape, a mausoleum, a columbarium, an area of fieldstones marking the location of interments, a rural family burial ground associated with a farmstead, a churchyard, an institutional burial site, a potter’s field or even a forgotten graveyard hidden beneath a parking lot.

Why Relocate a Cemetery?

In some situations, a “win-win” can be achieved – providing the property required for a proposed project while ensuring that the remains of deceased individuals get the respect they deserve. In other cases, the overwhelming demands of expansion and improvement may require the acquisition and relocation of a cemetery.

Our perspective comes from the involvement with several cemetery relocations in the last decade. These include the Potter’s Field Cemetery in Secaucus, N.J., with 4,571 reinterments; Knights of Pythias Greenwood Cemetery in Philadelphia, with 2,427 reinterments; and St. Johannes Cemetery, O’Hare International Airport, Chicago with 1,494 reinterments.

Cemetery relocation should never
be conceived as a “project.” It is not simply the act of excavating and moving a vault with a grounds crew, nor scientifically recording the archaeological excavations. It’s about family, compassion and understanding while applying various skills, tools and procedures in the most dignified and careful manner.

Debunking the Myths

One of the myths held by many cemetery workers, funeral directors and families is the belief that there is “nothing left” to relocate. Human remains as well as items and objects that reflect the heritage and legacy of the deceased can survive decades – and all can be relocated. The smallest of all grave goods or personal effects have memories and value to the family. It may be a safety pin, a cane, a deteriorated broche, remains of a fedora, or a pair of a little girl’s shoes or her favorite doll. In taking care and preserving history we are able to comfort the family with observations from the disinterment process.

A frequent misconception is that because the gravesite has not been visited or the plot cards are out of date or illegible, there is no next of kin. Over the decades family members may have lost their genealogical connection to the deceased, but relocation evokes a renewed sense of family and commitment. Next of kin can and should be determined and notified for each disinterment and relocation. Although state laws vary, the best outcome will always be to involve the family members/next of kin prior to commencing with the relocation.

Tracking down the next of kin, however, can be complicated. Not every family tree on the Internet is correct, and records are sometimes unavailable. But tracking down descendants can be rewarding as it gives you the opportunity to share with them details about their family’s heritage.

Another common misconception is that the replacement cemetery will be prepared to receive various sized vaults and historic markers/monuments. Historic cemeteries did not operate in conformance with modern-day grave dimensions or cemetery rules and regulations. As such, the replacement cemetery staff, including the counselors and grounds crew, need to be debriefed on what they will need to handle.

An experienced team of cemetery relocation specialists can assist in the preplanning and reburial aspects of the relocation. The reinterment of metal and concrete vaults cannot be treated in the same manner as current industry standard vaults. In addition, cemeteries that were established prior to the 1920s will require the recasketing/revaulting of human remains. Therefore, the cemetery staff will need to consider and understand the replacement containers in order to inform both the grounds crew and family.

A typical cemetery may conduct dozens of interments per month, but a cemetery relocation may require handling dozens of reinterments in a single day. As with outer burial containers, historic markers/monuments may present challenges associated
with their material type, shape, color, size and height. Historic grave markers and monuments form a visual legacy of those who have died and a bridge for communication with the living. They contain symbolism, epitaphs and other information that provide links to the family heritage. The replacement cemetery must develop a working plan as to the placement, type/depth of foundations, installation and ultimate maintenance of these irreplaceable memorials. The objective is to ensure that the markers/monuments are treated with the same respect and care as the remains of the deceased.

Another misconception is that the replacement cemetery rules and regulations will be adhered to throughout the relocation process. It is imperative that the overall scope of the relocation be fully understood prior to its commencement so that specific aspects and questions can be addressed early and not result in animosity. Do the regulations allow for the reburial of second and third rites within a grave, or the placement of two or more markers/monuments on the same grave space? How will the pricing and contractual obligations be applied to the process? No one wants to cause undue stress to the family, so you need to ask questions first – not later.

Another myth is that all burials are contained within the boundaries of the cemetery fence line. Cemetery fence lines shift, migrate and change over time. Just because there is a fence line does not mean that the burials are all contained within the area. In addition, not all cemeteries are obvious. Some have had above ground features altered, including the removal of headstones. Others have been backfilled and reused for other purposes. As such, encroachment to a cemetery boundary should always be handled with due diligence. Specialists familiar with surveying, archaeology, history, land-use and compliance should be contacted if utility work, transportation improvements or other construction comes in close proximity to the active cemetery boundaries. Moreover, the displacement or lack of lot pins and section markers in active cemeteries can lead to confusion and errors. Many active cemeteries have “older” sections within their parks for which plot cards and burial ledgers may be less than accurate. It is imperative that these locational markers be maintained in situ.

A general misconception is that the replacement cemetery’s involvement is completed once the remains of the deceased are reburied and the markers/monuments are reinstalled. Cemetery relocations have the ability to foster new relations with the next of kin and family members that can ultimately result in increased revenue for the cemetery. The replacement cemetery may establish memorial gardens dedicated to the relocation, reunite family members through marketing...
and preneed sales within the same section; and/or institute an annual remembrance/celebration day. In all a cemetery relocation serves in perpetuity as a reminder of those associated with the relocation, preserves their connection with the past and provides a legacy for future generations.

Cemetery relocations require a commitment and an experienced team to ensure that the stakeholders, deceased, and the families’ needs are balanced. We hope to be at the forefront of a new approach to cemetery relocation that provides stakeholders with a feasible and prudent approach to acquisition and families with rekindled relationships to their heritage.

Melody Carvajal and Susan Grzbowski will detail the puzzle pieces of cemetery relocation and illustrate the importance of carefully interlocking the pieces to reveal the overall image in their April 11 presentation, “RIP: Relocation in Pieces,” at the ICCFA Convention in Las Vegas. •