

## CUR Focus

**Speaking Stones: The Cemetery as a Laboratory for Undergraduate Research in the Humanities**

It is sometimes hard to convince colleagues in the humanities that they can engage undergraduate students in professional research projects. There is a whole liturgy of objections in this church of little faith: “We are an undergraduate institution—we don’t have graduate research assistants.” “Undergraduate students are not committed enough to do professional work.” “Undergraduates don’t have the special skills necessary to assist my research, don’t have the opportunity to travel to the necessary archives, dig sites, libraries...” “They simply don’t know enough.” “We don’t have the funding to train them.” “This isn’t just lab science, you know!”

I hold the opposite belief. For three years, undergraduates at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, have been working on a cemetery documentation project for the college’s history department and the City of Berea. This project has engaged students in archival and interdisciplinary research and has resulted in professional-level outcomes, at minimal expense.

**The Adams Street Cemetery Project**

In May of 2006 after I became chair of the history department at my college, a group of concerned citizens from the city’s Service Department, the local historical society, and a local American Legion post contacted me concerning a problem: they could not locate veterans’ graves in the city’s oldest graveyard. The person who had always decorated the graves for Memorial Day had died suddenly, leaving behind no records. The city government, which was responsible for maintaining the cemetery, had incomplete records of the burials. The citizens contacting me wanted to know whether anyone in the history department might be able to locate the veterans’ graves. At that time, Baldwin-Wallace College was pursuing an initiative to involve more students in experiential learning, so I sent out an email to history majors. I pitched the project as an opportunity to learn how to do archival research and put those skills to use for an important civic project. Six students volunteered.

We envisioned the project initially as simple biographical research. We would take the names from burial records, discover which graves belonged to veterans, and then locate their gravestones. We soon realized it would not be that easy. There



Baldwin-Wallace students Jeremy Feador and Dan Maxymiv (left to right) conduct a ground-penetrating radar scan of the cemetery with geophysicist Terence Hamill.

were 589 recorded burials and only 172 tombstones. A few tombstones appeared to be shaped like Civil War grave markers, but not all of them were legible. One of the students then had an idea—he contacted a local geophysicist (Terence Hamill of GeoSearches, Inc.) and promised him media coverage if he would do a ground-penetrating radar scan of our cemetery. Ground-penetrating radar can detect subsurface objects such as pipes, tree roots, or even coffins. A scan usually costs about \$9,000 an acre. Hamill agreed to scan our one-acre cemetery in return for \$500, an article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* highlighting his technology (Price 2006), and five minutes of local TV coverage. His scan located 116 unmarked burials, which we were then able to plot onto a land survey of the cemetery. One of the students described the results as “better than Christmas.”

The students then began the laborious process of deciphering the inscriptions and matching them to a partial list of lot purchasers that they had located in the archives of the Berea Historical Society. This allowed us to hypothesize a grid of the lots’ layout. At the Cuyahoga County Archives, students found transcriptions of the inscriptions on the stones from a 1934 Works Projects Administration survey—conveniently recorded by row. We were then able to test our lot grid by choosing a tombstone with a partially legible inscription (a date or sometimes even a single letter), guessing who should be buried there

based on our list of lot purchasers, and using the transcription records to match the partial inscription (an inscription with the same date, or a name with the same letter) to our hypothesized person.

This was successful more often than one would expect. For example, a tombstone with only the letter “M” was conclusively identified as belonging to one Myra S. Proctor; a tombstone broken off at mid-inscription had only the date “DIED Nov 5 18..,” which was enough to identify it as belonging to Reverend Jno. Johnson. In addition, genealogical research, for example with census records, helped identify family groupings in the cemetery. Baldwin-Wallace biology and geology professors trained a student to do tree coring, so we could determine whether trees in the cemetery were young enough to have grown up on top of burials, and to identify rock types, so we could match fragments of tombstones to their bases.

Using these methods—along with some long sessions of just staring at inscriptions—we were able to identify the graves of 16 Civil War veterans and one World War I veteran. We also located the unmarked burial of an Indian War veteran whose gravestone had been stolen in the 1980s, and we tracked down a Civil War surgeon whose body had been exhumed and reburied at another cemetery, where his tombstone had been allowed to wear away into illegibility. The federal government’s Department of Veterans Affairs will replace any veteran’s tombstone that has been lost or become illegible, and the Cuyahoga County’s Veterans Service Commission assisted us in preparing the necessary evidence and paperwork, so today both graves have new granite military markers. In addition to this, we discovered three men whom the community had considered veterans, but whose service had never been documented. One of these men, it turned out, had been masquerading as his father, a Revolutionary War veteran.

After completing the map of the cemetery, some of the students asked me if they could continue with the biographical research. They knew from researching the veterans’ burials what it felt like to walk through the cemetery, see the names on the stones, and know the story behind the names. “The stones speak to me now,” one student told me. There were so many undiscovered stories that were now totally forgotten. We could “resurrect the dead,” she said, in the sense that we could restore the memory of these people, in effect making the stones speak to the community. The students decided to pursue two projects: the first would be a searchable online



Left: Gravestone preservationist Jonathan Appell (left) shows student intern Rob Chiuchiarelli how to repair gravestones with a historic pointing mortar.  
Right: Baldwin-Wallace geologist Sabina Thomas demonstrates how tombstone fragments can be matched using stone typing.

database containing all the genealogical and biographical data we uncovered (<http://mcs.bw.edu/~bereahis/>), and the second would be a walking-tour brochure for distribution at the Berea Historical Society.

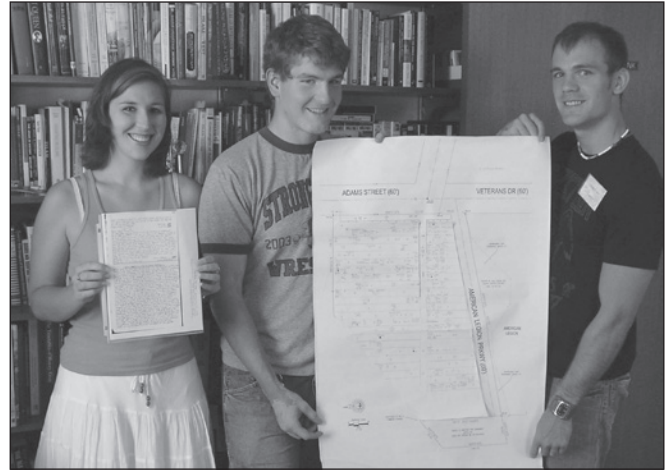
In addition to documenting the lives of more people, the students would also do contextual research on local history, and some statistical analyses of our data—for example, on child mortality rates. This helped to flesh out the stories we presented in the brochure for the walking tour, as well as the online biographies. We knew that all of this would be of interest chiefly to descendants of the dead, who would appreciate being able to view the stories of their ancestors within the contexts of their times.

Since those beginnings, student interest has kept the project running. I should note that I am a historian of the Middle East by training; I probably had no business initiating a research project on the Midwest. However, I found that I learned along with the students, and as their fascination with local history grew, so did my own. By December of 2007, I was hooked and was thinking about ways that I could apply my growing expertise in gravestone studies to my research in Egypt, on nineteenth-century Cairo. The students were also hooked, as their unscripted investigations allowed them to overcome on their own the frustrations with dead-end searches and experience the joys of discovery. One student, Jeremy Feador, located a diary written by one of the Civil War veterans, George N.

Huckins, while Huckins was a student at Baldwin University, a predecessor of Baldwin-Wallace College.

The diary alternates between discussions of Huckins's poor marriage prospects, his failing faith (he was training to become a Methodist minister), and his horror at the results of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. As the U.S. slid toward the Civil War, Huckins's pronouncements of abolitionist sentiment grew stronger, until he finally determined to lay himself on the "altar of the nation," as "the sin of slavery must be washed from the garments of the nation, if necessary in blood" (Huckins 1858-1861). Huckins enlisted in the Union Army and, sadly, died of typhoid within a few months. However, Jeremy was able to parlay the discovery of this diary into a presentation at the 2008 National Conference on Undergraduate Research. He also received a grant from the Ohio Humanities Council to prepare an interpretive exhibit on the cemetery project, which was displayed at the Berea Historical Society's museum in 2008. Jeremy later secured a scholarship to graduate school to study public history and a research assistantship at the Wright State University archives. He attributes his choice of profession to his work on this project. He is just one of several students whose work on this project has helped them choose professions and gain admission to graduate schools.

In 2009, students told me that they wished the cemetery were in better physical shape and asked if there was some way we could clean the stones. Preservation, I was sure, would require large amounts of money. Professional restorers gave me several estimates on the cost of preserving 172 tombstones, and the lowest estimate was \$17,300. Then Jeremy sent me to the Web site of Jonathan Appell, a professional gravestone conservator who travels about the nation teaching people how to clean and repair tombstones using historically appropriate materials and techniques. Appell was willing to lead a training workshop of whatever duration was necessary—one day for basic cleaning techniques, a week for advanced stone masonry. We settled on a two-day weekend workshop that covered where to purchase historically appropriate materials for repair, cleaning techniques, basic repairs using historic pointing mortar and stone epoxy, and assembling multi-piece monuments using tripods. Best of all, for a tenth of the cost of a professional repair, we were able to train five students, two professors, and seventeen members of the community in historic gravestone conservation. The students then spent the next several months putting their newly learned skills to work in the cemetery.



Student researchers Ashley McMillin, Dan Maxymiv, and Jeremy Feador (left to right) pose with their map of the Adams St. Cemetery

This year, my students elected to pursue community education as their focus. Eleven students from the departments of history and theater decided to write a play that would tell the history of Berea and early settlement from the perspective of its dead. In order to get a comprehensive perspective on the life of the community, these students expanded the research project to include burials in other area cemeteries. They also incorporated research that resulted from one of our other experiential learning initiatives: oral histories of the Polish and black communities in Berea. Two of the students were already experienced playwrights, but all the students contributed material to the script and all played some role in the performance. The initial performance, in December 2009, was well received, and we expanded the script into a full-length production, which we performed in April 2010 to great public acclaim.

### Practical Matters

Cemetery research is relatively cheap. In three years, the project's expenditures have yet to exceed \$5,000. Almost all our research and materials costs have been covered by the City of Berea, the Berea Community Development Corporation, and American Legion Post 91. Individual donations (no more than \$150 each) from community organizations such as the Berea Rotary Club, from political candidates, and from descendants of those interred made up the balance. It is important to secure support from the organization that maintains the cemetery before starting work; some cemeteries are privately owned, and some poorly maintained cemeteries can be dangerous.





Top: Student interns Jamie Orlando, Rob Chiuchiarelli, and Nick Gattozzi (left to right) cleaning tombstones. Bottom: Dr. Indra Gesink (right) with student researchers Jeremy Feador, Holly Gaidelis, and Michael Columbro, reading inscriptions at the Adams St. Cemetery.



Tombstones can easily weigh over 800 pounds, and cracked or loose stones can fall on people and may even kill them which happened to a boy in a Connecticut cemetery in 1986 (as reported in an article in the *Waterbury Reporter* on May 14, 1986). A simple letter outlining the project, its potential benefits to the community and the students, and a request for a donation—with the promise of an oral presentation on the results—usually garners small but sufficient donations.

Our experience suggests that a project like this is a win for everyone involved. The city benefitted from the restoration of the cemetery itself and from the media coverage, and outcomes like a walking-tour brochure can increase tourism. American Legion posts have an interest in maintaining veterans' graves and learning more about the stories of veterans. Community groups such as the Rotary Club or local churches may also be willing to pitch in for a restoration or community-education project. Candidates for local political office may also donate for the added publicity of having their names on a project's publications. We also were able to use registration fees from our workshop on gravestone conservation to purchase materials for actual conservation work. In addition, students can apply for external grants from state historical societies, and the college or university may have funds to cover students' costs for traveling to conferences.

To my colleagues who still doubt the feasibility of using undergraduates as research assistants, I would reply that, yes, there are obstacles, but they can be overcome. Student research candidates should be vetted carefully. My experience suggests that enthusiastic and determined students produce better



Student researcher Jeremy Feador examining historical newspapers at the Berea Historical Society archives.

results than students who merely have high GPAs. The unscripted pitfalls of archival research (the dead ends, the missing folders, the dust, the people who left no trace of their existence) stymie many. Often curiosity and enterprise alone keep a student looking for evidence. Faculty supervisors need also to be alert for opportunities. Department chairs may be aware of requests from community groups for assistance with research, from K-12 teachers looking for projects for honors students, or from local residents seeking help on personal investigations.

For example, we started an oral-history initiative after local veterans asked for help recording their stories; our students have also helped homeowners document the age of their century homes, so they can receive official plaques from the local historical society. We are also beginning to involve students in international research projects; the main obstacle had been lack of the necessary language training. However, with the college administration's support, I applied for a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant to pilot an Arabic program here (<http://flta.fulbrightonline.org/home.html>). Fulbright will send a young, enthusiastic teacher of the language to your institution at no cost other than a tuition waiver so he or she can take two classes each semester. There is little competition for non-European language teachers.

And finally, consider institutionalizing research assistantships in a way that supports faculty supervisors. My colleague in theater, Jack Winget, and I were able to find time for the

cemetery project through a combination of small institutional summer grants (\$4,000) and a Baldwin-Wallace program called Faculty-Student Collaborative Scholarship. This program allows students to get credit for participating in faculty research, gives the faculty members credit toward their teaching loads, and brings all program participants in the college together every month to share results in a truly interdisciplinary collaborative learning experience (<http://www.bw.edu/resources/dean/fscs/>).

When I came to this liberal-arts college, I wondered whether I would miss having graduate students. I have not; I have come, instead, to understand that undergraduates can be junior colleagues just as much as graduates can. I only had to have faith.

#### References

Huckins, George N. Diary 1858-1861. Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC; Ritter Library, Baldwin-Wallace College, Berea, OH.

Price, Jennifer. 2006. B-W history project helping bring honor to veterans. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, August 13, B10.

#### Indira Falk Gesink

308 Marting Hall  
Baldwin-Wallace College  
275 Eastland Rd.  
Berea, OH 44017  
igesink@bw.edu

*Indira Falk Gesink is associate professor and chairperson of the history department at Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. She earned her PhD in Middle Eastern history from Washington University in St. Louis in 2000. Her most recent publication is Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam (I.B. Tauris, 2009). She is currently working with an undergraduate to co-author a textbook on historiography and postmodern theory.*