



Southport Historical Society member Marvin Johnson pushes loose gravel under a once-skewed grave marker while workshop leader Jonathan Appell uses a pry bar to lift the aging stone.



One of a pair of obelisks at Old Smithville Burying Ground has developed a severe lean over the years. Techniques taught during a recent conservation workshop can be used to easily right the stone.



## Ritual of Restoration

Cemetery conservation workshop teaches simple, easy steps to revitalizing damaged headstones

By Lee Hinnant  
News Editor

They seem solid and imposing — built to last forever. But gravestones can actually become fragile over time and require a gentle touch if they are to remain as silent sentinels of history.

With the help of Jonathan Appell, 20 people from across the state learned Friday and Saturday how to breathe new life into damaged, dirty or decaying headstones. Appell, operator of New England Cemetery Services, is a nationally known conservator and taught parts of a two-day, hands-on workshop that met at old Brunswick Town, Southport and Wilmington.

Appell talked about simple but perhaps not obvious restoration methods. He warned against, for example, pushing a tilted headstone from front to back, because doing so could snap it in two. Instead, flat, thin markers should be gently rocked from side to side to free them for resetting.

Appell also showed how he employs common items in his craft. Sand and fine gravel, pushed in with shovels, is used to right stones that have gone askew over time. Pieces of scrap wood and fire hoses can safely space and prop even heavy stones. He cautioned against letting metal pry bars come in direct contact with stone for fear of chipping or cracking.

Bev Wiggins and Edith Thompson Calhoun traveled from Chatham County to learn from Appell. With their new knowledge, the pair aspires to produce a "low-tech" brochure for the Chatham Historical Society. As the area grows, inquires from residents about how to save numerous family plots are posed to society members more and more frequently.

"People keep asking us, how do we fix old stones; how do we clean them?" Calhoun said. "We're hoping to take what we've learned back. It's certainly been fascinating."

Calhoun's grandfather was a Southport sea captain and the Thompson family plot is along the Moore Street border of Old Smithville Burying Ground, near where the class worked on several monuments Friday.

Also on hand were Marvin Johnson, Musette Steck and Pat Kirkman of the Southport Historical Society, whose members have spent the past two years working to revitalizing old cemetery. The historical society was one of six organizations to spon-



Years of dirt, lichen, moss and other otherwise unsightly debris is rinsed clean from this 98-year-old headstone. Below, a closer look at the difference a light scrubbing can make.



Photos by Suzi Drake

Hailing from across the state, workshop participants crowd around well-known cemetery conservator Jonathan Appell as he digs for parts of a headstone, now covered by dirt and grass.

sor the workshop.

As well as instruction on stone care, the discussion included an overview of history and trends of the times. Appell showed how a number of late 19th century markers, which appear to be solid, are actually hollow and constructed of white bronze. Tipping one obelisk to the side, he explained how the hollowed interior was once a popular hiding spot for liquor during Prohibition. Other markers employ artwork, poetry and elaborate scrolling.

Appell described how fallen stones could be restored with pins or with epoxy compounds. He warned against using wire brushes, power washers and harsh chemicals to clean stones. According to Appell, all you need is diluted ammonia or a commercial, biodegradable formula called D/2 that is chemically neutral but will kill lichen, moss and other biological growth.

Participants took turns on a full-scale renovation to the large monument belonging to Theodore (1825-1910) and Hannah (1831-1914) McKeithan.

"A monument like this can be as heavy as a small car," Appell warned as he tackled the chore.

Participants first leveled the entire monument, carefully applying pry bars and adding

gravel at the base. Using a strong shoulder, Appell tilted the main stone just enough to place wooden blocks between the base and marker. With the marker raised, the group went to work cleaning the joint and adding lead spacers, along with a grout-like joint compound.

With the marker firmly affixed to the base and only a neat seam as evidence of their work, the group finished this grave stone makeover by taking years off its appearance with a good cleaning.

Spraying a liberal amount of D/2 on the stone's façade, Appell and others began to gently scrub, watching as the once-clean solution took on a brownish hue.

"If it changes color, that means it's really working," Appell said. "And I can tell this is working. This is going to look really nice."

A light stream of water rinsed the foam away, revealing an almost-new looking headstone.

Righted, re-secured and spotless, the nearly century-old grave marker was given a second life. And, with historical society volunteers among those now equipped with the know-how to restore aging stones, it may be just a matter of time before other ailing graves at Old Smithville Burying Ground are treated to such a makeover.