

Aluminum Foil and Hydrocal

An Alternative for Cemetery Monument Rubbings

Summary: Through a combination of aluminum foil rubbing and Hydrocal pourings, it's possible to learn a great deal about an otherwise unreadable cemetery monument engraving and to preserve the information in a unique and safe manner.

Background:

Paper and Charcoal

Traditionally, people did cemetery stone rubbings with art paper and charcoal sticks. While, on the surface, this appears to be a non-destructive means of "recording" the information on the stone, there are more than one occasion where the paper ripped, mid-rubbing, and graphic streaked across the stone.

Photograph

An alternative to the traditional paper and charcoal rubbing is a photographic method. With a combination of a digital camera and a graphics software package, such as PhotoShop or PaintShop Pro, a person can take photographs of engravings and then adjust brightness, contrast, and other features, to bring out the clarity of the engraving. This is an economical method, but doesn't provide a "take away," except for a photographic print. Also, there are times of the day that are better or worse for optimal photos of engravings as well as climatic conditions (e.g. bright sun vs. overcast).

Aluminum Foil and Hydrocal

Supplies Needed:

- Aluminum Foil (basic, not heavy-duty)
- Soft cloth (terry cloth hand towels work well)
- Blue tape (optional)
- Hydrocal (obtainable from a hobby store)
- Disposable plastic tub (1 qt.)
- Disposable plastic spoon (for mixing the Hydrocal and the water)
- Shadowbox (for display)

Steps:

On-site at the Cemetery

1. Locate a stone with moderate to low relief.

How much works best is simply a matter of experimentation. This example is very low relief and so the final casting lacked a lot of definition. However, if you are doing the rubbing to help read the inscription, it may lack very much relief, but you may be able to read the inscription on the foil. Stones or monuments with high relief may cause the foil to tear if not very carefully done.



2. Pull out a piece of foil that best covers the area for the rubbing. Make sure to include enough extra that the foil can be wrapped around the side/back of the monument.
3. If necessary, use the low-adhesive blue tape on the back side of the monument to hold the foil in place.



4. Holding the foil in place by pressing your hand against the foil and stone in the upper left corner (assuming you are right-handed), very gently rub the foil down and from upper-left to lower-right in a smooth motion.

5. It may also be necessary to gently pat the foil in certain places to acquire a better “copy” of the engraving.
6. Continue to rub and pat until you are satisfied that you have all the detail desired.



7. Carefully pull the foil (and tape, as necessary) from the monument.
8. Lay the rubbing carefully on the ground and document the engraving. This is also a good time to check for any gaps in the rubbing. Always easier to do another rubbing now than to get home and discover that you missed some parts and need to do it over again.
9. Very carefully transport the rubbing home. Do NOT fold, roll, or otherwise manipulate the foil. It must be transported flat.

At Home

10. Once at home, carefully carry the foil rubbing in and place it on a flat surface.
11. Turn up the foil edge on all four sides approximately ½ inch. You’re making a little mold.
12. Prepare Hydrocal, according to the instructions on the box. Thoroughly mix the Hydrocal and water with a plastic utensil. Hydrocal will be a pretty thick, but pourable liquid (like gravy?) Always use the exact proportions (2 ½ cups Hydrocal to 1 cup water). Make sure to add the Hydrocal to the water, NOT the other way around.

Note: Hydrocal should be mixed with water immediately before casting. It will not “keep.”

13. Carefully pour the Hydrocal mixture into the foil rubbing.
14. Very carefully spread the mixture around into the rubbing. It is OK if the back isn’t perfectly smooth. Don’t work the mixture too much; you might introduce air bubbles.
15. Allow the Hydrocal to dry for at least 24 to 36 hours.
16. After the Hydrocal is completely dry, CAREFULLY pick up the foil and peel off the foil. It is generally not possible to save the foil rubbing.

Clean Up

Do your Hydrocal with a plastic disposal tub and disposable spoons. Do NOT put any Hydrocal, mixed or as powder down any sink. It will harden, when exposed to water and will clog up the pipes.

Mounting and Display

Shadow boxes, with a black background, work well to mount the casting and to display. I recommend mounting the photograph of the original monument on the back of the shadow box and noting its location for future information.

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