

Cherokee Nation Historic Cemeteries Preservation Act

FY25 Annual Report

The Cherokee Nation Historic Cemeteries Preservation Act (LA-28-25; herein “Act”) as enacted on September 25, 2025 calls for comprehensive preservation and restoration activities related to Cherokee cemeteries. The Act incorporates the previously established “Historic Cemeteries and Historic Headstone Grant Fund” managed by Community and Cultural Outreach (herein “Grant Fund”) and establishes a new “Historic Cemeteries Survey and Preservation Fund” (herein “Preservation Fund”) to be managed by Natural Resources.

The below report provides a summary of activities related to these two funds, as required by the Act.

Status of Survey Work and Funds Expended

“Survey work” as described within the Act shall consist of comprehensive survey of identified historic cemeteries, which will be incorporated into a database and provide the foundations for an ultimate publication of historic cemeteries. This work is funded under the Preservation Fund, which was first established with the enactment of the Act on September 25, 2025. As such, no survey work took place during fiscal year 2025.

Status of Preservation Work and Funds Expended

Because the Preservation Fund was not extant during FY2025, no work as defined by the Act took place. However, Natural Resources maintains a database of historic cemeteries, regularly updates internal maps with cemetery locations in collaboration with the GIS program, and performs small maintenance on cemeteries located within tracts of land managed by the department (for example, repairing access gates for cemeteries located on leased property). Natural Resources also manages the Cherokee Nation Registry of Historic Places and designates properties and cemeteries alike on the registry. Such work was performed continuously throughout FY25 across several Natural Resources programs and budgets.

For FY26 Preservation Fund work, Natural Resources staff are currently drafting programmatic policies and procedures for identifying and prioritizing cemeteries for survey and eventual restoration work. Additionally, Natural Resources is working with HR to hire a dedicated position to manage the Preservation Fund and its associated activities as outlined by the Act. Furthermore, a cemetery has been recommended for designation to the Cherokee Nation Registry of Historic Places: the Park Hill Mission Cemetery.

Summary of Third-Party Activity

No measurable third-party activity took place in FY25. For FY26, Natural Resources is working to coordinate meetings with the Cherokee Cemeteries Association led by Jennifer Sparks to discuss potential for restoration work.

Summary of Administration of Historic Cemetery & Historic Headstone Grant Program

The Grant Fund is administered by Community and Cultural Outreach. Over the course of FY25, CCO assisted 123 cemeteries throughout the Reservation through provision of cemetery or headstone grants totaling \$75,500.

Grant Type	Number of Awards	Total Awarded
Headstone Restoration	53	\$26,500
Cemetery Restoration	70	\$49,000
	123	\$75,500

Recommendations of Amendments to the Act

Recommendation for Clarification. The Act calls for the creation of a “Cherokee Nation Registry of Historic Cemeteries”. Natural Resources currently maintains a pre-existing Cherokee Nation Registry of Historic Places, which can include cemeteries by policy. Functionally, it could be possible to filter the existing registry so general places could be browsed separately from cemeteries. If such an arrangement is supported by IT and meets the intent of the Act, the existing Cherokee Nation Registry of Historic Places could serve as the Registry of Historic Cemeteries (i.e., a singular Registry is maintained, as opposed to two separate online applications). If such an arrangement does not meet the intent of the Act, Natural Resources will work with IT to establish a separate record system for Cemeteries alone.

Additional related work conducted

The budgets have been submitted to Financial Resources and should be established by January 2026. Additionally, Information Technology is working on a portal for public input of cemetery related information. NR is setting meetings to discuss this project.