[**Finding Cemeteries With Your Computer – Part 1**](http://eogn.com/wp/?p=39203)

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Perhaps you found a reference that says your ancestor lived in Holladay, Tennessee. Now you ask, “Where the heck is that?” Even more interesting, the record might say that the ancestor was buried there in the Brinkley Cemetery. Now you really want to know where that cemetery is located! Luckily, in this modern age, this is easy to do, using your home computer and an Internet connection.

Back in the B.I. age (Before Internet), you would purchase a map of Tennessee and then look for the town. However, many small locations are not shown on modern maps. It is also possible that the place may have existed only in past years and has since disappeared. A current map may not show the place you are interested in. Most importantly, finding a small cemetery on a modern map is often impossible.

Today you can sit at home, type on the keyboard, and in a few minutes find that Brinkley Cemetery is located at latitude 35 degrees, 49 minutes, 17 seconds North and 88 degrees, 12 minutes, 2 seconds West (plus or minus 300 feet).

You can also look at a map of the area, displayed on your computer screen or printed on your own printer. The map shows that the cemetery in question is located on a small road, not far from U.S. Highway 40, about four miles south of Holladay, Tennessee. If that isn’t enough, you can even look at a satellite view of the area. Your computer screen can display a satellite photo that even shows individual houses and other small buildings, although you probably will not be able to see individual tombstones.

Then, just for more convenience, you can grab your gps, jump in the car, and drive to the cemetery as your gps calls out the turns.

Complicated? Not really. It took me about two or three minutes to find that information online and another minute or two to tell the gps device where I wished to go.

Online genealogists have tools available today that were only dreamed of a few short years ago. The primary tool for U.S. locations is the government’s Geographic Names Information System. The GNIS database can quickly tell the precise location of any named place in the United States, many foreign countries, and in Antarctica. I don’t have ancestors in Antarctica, so I’ll focus on U.S. locations in the rest of this article.

The **Geographic Names Information System (GNIS)** database was developed by the U.S. Geological Survey in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN). It contains information about more than2 million physical and cultural geographic features in the United States. The GNIS identifies the federally recognized name of each feature described in the database and provides references to each feature’s state and county, as well as it exact latitude and longitude. It lists villages, towns, cities, rivers, mountains, airports, beaches, and much, much more. The database includes almost all obsolete names, including those of many villages that disappeared years ago. Best of all, you can find a location and then click on an icon to display a map of that area on your computer screen.

There is still one more interesting feature: clicking on another icon will allow you to view a spy satellite photograph of the area. The photographs are stored in both Microsoft’s TVirtual Earth and in TerraFly.com. Both services have photographs taken by satellites. Occasionally, one service will have a better photograph of a certain neighborhood than the other service has. Always try both services to find the best photograph for the location you seek.

Here is perhaps the best news of all for genealogists: the GNIS also lists many cemeteries, although not all of them. For instance, I know that my great-grandparents are buried in Pine Grove Cemetery in Bangor, Maine. The GNIS describes Pine Grove Cemetery as being in Penobscot County at 44 degrees, 47 minutes, and 54 seconds North, and 68 degrees, 49 minutes, 38 seconds West. If I know the name of the cemetery but not the town, the GNIS database will find all cemeteries of that name in the state. The database will also list all the cemeteries in a given county, if you wish.



All is not perfect, however. While nearly every village, city, and airport is listed in the U.S. government’s database, not every cemetery is listed. For instance, it does not list the small, rural cemetery where my father, mother, son, and several of my aunts, uncles, and cousins are buried. In fact, I also plan to spend eternity in this same unlisted cemetery.

In looking around the database, I noted that a number of other cemeteries also are not listed. However those that are listed include even the tiniest of cemeteries containing only two or three tombstones located on someone’s farm. For instance, I found a database listing for a cemetery that I found by accident years ago. It is a handful of tombstones now covered with brush, located deep in the woods, two or three miles from any modern-day road. In short, you won’t know if the cemetery you seek is listed or not until you search the database.

The Geographic Names Information System is available online at: [http://geonames.usgs.gov](http://geonames.usgs.gov/). You can find the cemeteries I mentioned earlier and thousands more at that web site.

Now that you know the geographic coordinates of the cemetery in question, driving to that location involves a few more small challenges. You can also use any of several online sites that will give you driving directions from any starting point you wish directly to the cemetery location. With the use of a high-tech device, you can easily obtain real-time instructions on how to drive directly to the cemetery. In many cases, a robotic voice will even tell you when to turn left or right along the route.

Several online sites will give you driving directions. My favorite is **Google Maps** at [http://maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com/).

One feature found in Google Maps can be very useful, too. If you know the longitude and latitude, you can go to Google Maps and enter that information. You may enter it either in decimal format (44.798404, -68.827259) or as degrees/minutes/seconds (+44° 47′ 54.25″, -68° 49′ 38.13″). Note that latitude north of the equator is entered as a positive number while locations located south of the equator must be preceded by a minus sign. The same is true of longitude: anything east of the Zero Meridian must be entered as a positive number while anything west of zero degrees (such as North and South America) must be preceded with a minus sign.

Once Google Maps displays a map with the cemetery in the exact middle, all of Google Maps’ functions are available to you. You can get driving instructions from anyplace in North America to drive directly to the site. You can print the instructions and take them with you to guide you to the cemetery of interest. You can also view satellite photos of the area.

If you do not know the cemetery where your ancestor is buried, you can use GNIS and the mapping services to find all the cemeteries in the area and to show the route for a planned visit of all the potential cemeteries.

Armed with information from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) and any of several online map services, you should be able to locate many of the cemeteries where your ancestors are buried.

In Part #2 of this article, I will describe the use of modern high-tech devices to replace the paper maps. As a matter of fact, your laptop computer or other high tech devices can talk to you, giving you turn-by-turn directions, as you travel the route.