Sprinklers often use well water to keep grass green and lush.

Over time, the repeated thermal shock can have ruinous effects.

Monday, 1 P.M. 110°F

Tuesday, 1 P.M. 112°F

Wednesday, 1 P.M. 108°F

Thursday, 1 P.M. 106°F

Friday, 1 P.M. 110°F

Saturday, 1 P.M. 112°F

Sunday, 1 P.M. 115°F

In the 1800s, Texas saw...

Mormon pioneers settling the west

Chinese immigrants building the railroad

And notorious outlaws like John Wesley Hardin.

These figures rest in Concordia Cemetery in El Paso, Texas. Their history remains written on well-preserved headstones in this dry, dusty place.

Meanwhile...

In other parts of the southwest, landscaping intended to make cemeteries look attractive may actually be destroying gravestones.

Water underground sits around 60°F.

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Gravestones bite the dust

By Johnna Rizzo and Matthew Twombly

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Stone, like most material, expands as it gets hot. And contracts as it gets cold. As hot stone is shocked with cold water, exposed areas contract quickly, resulting in cracks.

Granite, a common material for gravestones, is especially good at holding heat. These stones can reach temperatures more than 40 degrees higher than the surrounding air on a sunny day, and the darker the stone, the hotter it gets.

Temperature is not the only problem. The water’s chemical composition plays a role. Southwestern groundwater is high in dissolved minerals, such as iron, which can stain, and calcium, which can leave deposits. As the water evaporates, these minerals are left behind on the gravestone’s surface, over time forming a skin.

Avoiding this buildup requires regular, careful cleanings, but there aren’t enough volunteers to clean every headstone.

Watering in the early morning while graves are still cool can minimize mineral deposition and prevent thermal shock. Even better, keeping to native landscaping is a sure way to preserve the pieces of America’s history among the headstones for generations to come.

Source: National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, National Park Service