

Austin Parks and Recreation Department

Oakwood Cemetery

Archeological Investigation and Findings

Briefing to Boards and Commissions



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Austin Parks and Recreation Department

Oakwood Cemetery

- Established in 1839, Oakwood Cemetery is Austin's oldest municipal cemetery
- 40 acres in size with more than 23,000 burials
- Receives approximately 40 burials a year; Lots sold out by early 20th century
- Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Official Texas Historic Cemetery, and a City of Austin Historic Landmark
- One of five municipal cemeteries managed by the Parks and Recreation Department

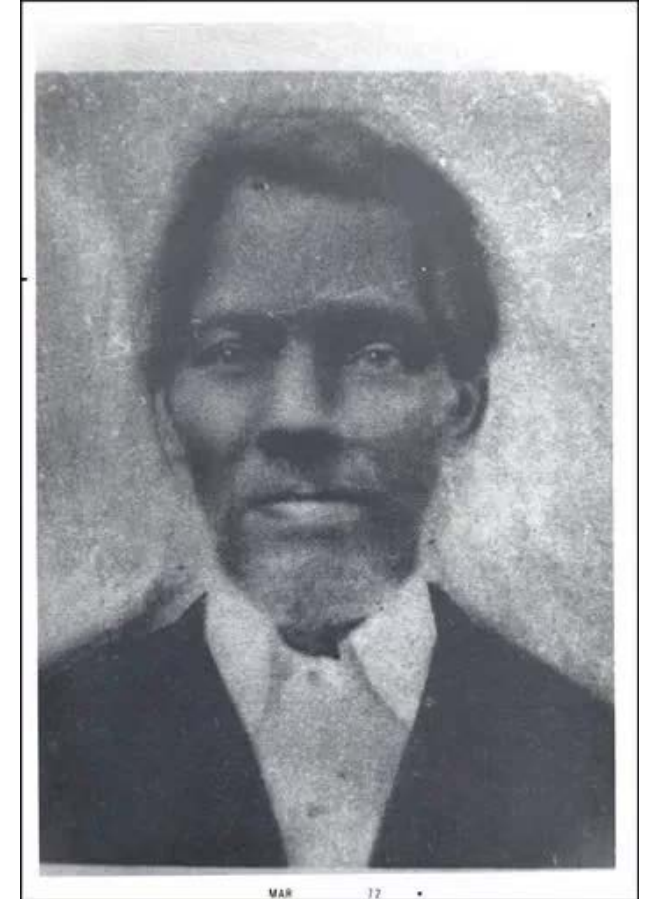


Figure 3. Bird's Eye View of the City of Austin, Travis County, Texas, 1873. Hand-colored lithograph published by J. J. Stoner, Madison, Wisconsin, with addition of arrow showing location of city cemetery (Library of Congress)



Segregated section for People of Color

- Entire cemetery relatively informal until 1859, when the mayor designated three sections, including a section for people of color
- Approximately 1,200 people were buried in the section designated for people of color between 1859-1880
- Burials include:
 - Jacob Fontaine (1808-1898) - Political and civic leader, newspaper publisher and established numerous churches throughout Travis County, including the St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association
 - Laurine Cecil (L.C) Anderson (1853-1938) - Longtime principal of L.C. Anderson High School; First president of the Colored Teachers Association and president of Prairie View University, the first state-supported Texas college for African Americans
 - Dr. Everett Givens (1888-1962) - Though recognized as an excellent dentist, is better known for efforts to gain equal privileges, rights, and opportunities for African American citizens of Austin
- This section of the cemetery also holds the remains of those of Hispanic and European descent and within or overlapping this section are “stranger grounds” and “pauper grounds”



Reverend Jacob Fontaine

Oakwood Cemetery Chapel

- Built in 1914, the Oakwood Cemetery Mortuary Chapel was designed by Austin architect Charles Page and hosted non-denominational memorial services and temporary interments; Used as office by 1940s
- 2015 Historic Cemeteries Master Plan calls for better interpretation of cemetery history including section for People of Color
- Master Plan also recommends Chapel be programmed as community space and visitor center
- Project Components: Structural stabilization of foundation; drainage improvement; ADA improvements; Rehabilitation of single-occupant restroom; Full architectural, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing rehabilitation



Antiquities Permit #7709

- Archeological firm, Hicks and Company, hired to ensure compliance with all requirements and regulations
- Antiquities Permit obtained from Texas Historical Commission
- Archeological monitoring throughout course of project
- Documentation of all cultural resources
- Procedures in place for discovery of remains—Under the requirements of Antiquities Permit, a bioarcheological analysis would occur for any exhumed burials. Burial context can be provided by a non-invasive and non-destructive analysis of the physical remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, sex and approximate age. Physical remains can also inform about cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition, or stresses endured. Further, artifacts may reveal aspects of material culture and possibly the cultural significance for those buried in this section.
- Production of project report

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
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July 15, 2016

Josh Haefner
Hicks & Company
1504 West 5th Street
Austin, TX 78703

Re: Project review under the Antiquities Code of Texas
COA Oakwood Chapel Restoration, Travis County, Texas
Texas Antiquities Permit Application #7709

Dear Colleague:

Thank you for your Antiquities Permit Application for the above referenced project. This letter presents the final copy of the permit from the Executive Director of the Texas Historical Commission (THC), the state agency responsible for administering the Antiquities Code of Texas.

Please keep this copy for your records. The Antiquities Permit investigations requires the production and submittal of one printed copy of the final report, a completed abstract form submitted via our online system, two copies of the tagged PDF final report on CD (one with site location information & one without), and verification that any artifacts recovered and records produced during the investigations are curated at the repository listed in the permit. The abstract form may be submitted via the THC website (www.thc.state.tx.us) or use url: <http://xapps.thc.state.tx.us/Abstract/login.aspx>. Additionally, you must send the THC shapefiles showing the boundaries of the project area and the areas actually surveyed via email to archeological_projects@thc.state.tx.us.

If you have any questions concerning this permit or if we can be of further assistance, please contact Lillie Thompson at 512/463-1858. The reviewer for this project is Tiffany Osburn, 512/463-6096.

Sincerely,



for
Mark Wolfe
Executive Director

MW/lft

Enclosures

Cc: Kevin Johnson, City of Austin

GREG ABBOTT, GOVERNOR • JOHN L. NAU, III, CHAIR • MARK WOLFE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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Oakwood Archeological Findings Timeline

- November 29, 2016: All construction halted when archeologists discovered small bone fragments during drilling of pier shaft from Chapel interior. The Texas Historical Commission (THC), City Council District 1 Member Ora Houston, and City leadership were immediately informed. With direction from the THC, the contractor and archeological team proceed with closely monitored soil removal to better understand the scope and scale of potential burials.
- Late February, 2017: Enough soil had been carefully removed in order for the archeological team to assemble a more complete assessment of indicated burials within the building footprint. At that time, 25 burials were estimated, but that number later grew to approximately 37. It was then understood that the chapel had been constructed on top of pre-existing graves.
- March 4, 2017: Council member Houston held a small meeting at the Britton, Durst, Howard & Spence Building to notify local clergy leaders
- March 6, 2017: Memo to Mayor and Council –Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Investigation ([link](#))
- March 7, 2017: Press conference was held by Council Member Houston and PARD ([link](#))

Oakwood Archeological Findings Timeline

- March 25, 2017: Community Meeting #1 to share the findings with the community and receive feedback about options moving forward
- March 25-April 7, 2017: Open feedback period for community input
- April 11, 2017: Community Meeting #2 to share PARD's to share the findings with the community and receive feedback about options moving forward
- April 11-21, 2017: Open feedback period for community input
- April 27, 2017: Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Investigation: Staff Report and Recommendation for Discovered Burials ([link](#))
- May 1, 2017: PARD recommendation to Austin City Council ([link](#))



Oakwood Archeological Findings Timeline

- May 23, 2017: October 2017: Exhumation of burials begins and remains are transferred to Texas State University for bioarcheological analysis
- November, 2017: Construction resumes with archeological monitoring for all ground disturbing activities
- August 24, 2018: Oakwood Chapel Restoration Celebration for building completion
- May 15, 2019: Chapel opens to the public
- December 13, 2019: Memo to Council— Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update ([link](#))
- February 5, 2020: Memos regarding Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update sent to Parks and Recreation Department, African American Resource Advisory Commission, Human Rights Commission, and Historic Landmark Commission



Oakwood Archeological Findings Timeline

May 14, 2020: Memo to Council, Boards, and Commissions regarding Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update ([link](#)); Archeological and Bio-Archeological analysis completed and accepted by Texas Historical Commission; reports posted for public review ([link](#) to full reports)

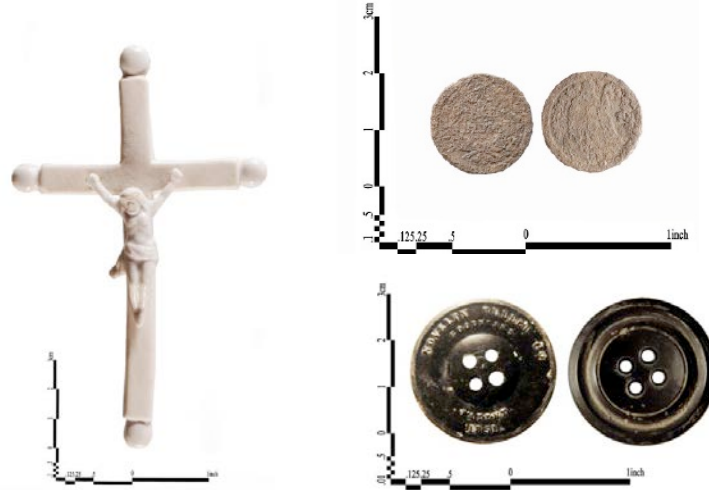


Plate 50. White porcelain crucifix from Burial 27.



Plate 46. Goodyear Rubber button, front and back faces, from Burial 7.



Plate 40. Swing bail handles from Burial 9.



Next steps

- Exploration of academic partnership with University of Connecticut for DNA testing of Oakwood Cemetery remains
- Reinterment of individuals into Oakwood Cemetery with archeological monitoring and Antiquities Permit from the Texas Historical Commission; PARD has contract with Weston Solutions and archeological sub-consultant, Amaterra Environmental, for next phase of project, which is the reinterment of burials, memorialization, public symposium, and public exhibit
- An educational symposium for the public will give community members an opportunity to hear from expert archeological and bio-archeological professionals to provide context for the findings and allow for community conversations about future commemoration and interpretation
- Remembrance ceremony to honor the individuals who were rediscovered and reinterred in Oakwood Cemetery
- Permanent memorial explaining exhumation and reinterment process and honors the individuals who were rediscovered in this process
- A digital exhibit interpreting the findings will be developed for display at Oakwood Cemetery Chapel; for more information about Oakwood Cemetery exhibits and programming, visit this [link](#)
- Interpretive plan for Oakwood Cemetery as recommended in the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan. The report that will be derived from this process will help inform the opportunities to better interpret Oakwood Cemetery including this historically significant section of the cemetery

Questions