



Bethany Cemetery

Presented by:
Bethany Cemetery Association

1308 Springdale Road
Austin, Travis County, Texas

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4, 1996



Bethany Cemetery

On his 47th birthday, December 18, 1850, John Hemphill, Chief Justice of the Texas Supreme Court, purchased a City of Austin Government Tract - Lot 18 1/2 - Division B, (31.5 acres) from the State of Texas. ¹

One year passed before Hemphill paid the last installment on the property. On June 2, 1852, the State of Texas, represented by Governor P. Hansborough Bell, patented Outlot 18 1/2 to John Hemphill. ² In the next 41 years between 1852 and 1893, title to the property known as Bethany Cemetery would pass through the hands of 36 people, either as owners or agents for absentee owners. (See attached title search.)

Bethany Cemetery is located in east Austin on the 1300 block of Springdale Road across from Sims Elementary School. Large white oaks, winged elms, and eastern Cedars, an evergreen that symbolizes everlasting life, are clustered along the Tannehill Branch of Boggy Creek. Other than the headstones that bear witness to the people who lived in the Austin community, the land has remained unchanged since the time in 1892, C. W. Jones paid \$432.60 for the property that would become Bethany Cemetery. ³

Whether Mr. Jones had the intent to begin a cemetery for African Americans is unclear. However, during the time of his purchase, two graves of young children were already present on the property. Hellen Moore, an infant, was buried in 1879. Alice Maud Miller, 9 months old, was buried in 1886. Little is known about these two children. ⁴ Other sources indicate that more burials may be present. A brief history of the property was presented during an Historical Landmark Commission meeting on September 19, 1977. In the Landmark's

1. Certificate No. 129, *The Comptroller to John Hemphill*, File No. 482, Archives and Records Division, Texas General Land Office (1850).

2. *Patent No. 212. to John Hemphill*, Vol. 2 Patents, Deed, Records, Travis County, Texas (1852).

3. *Wheless, et. al., to Jones* (deed), vol. 113, p. 235, Deed Records, Travis County, Texas, (1892).

4. _____, Texas State Historical Commission List, 1995 Cemetery Clean-up. unpublished document.

minutes, it states that the property was known as Hungry Hill and that the earliest burial date was 1875.⁵

In 1893, Mr. Jones and his wife, Emma, sold a 4/5ths undivided interest to John M. Holland, William M. Tears, Henderson Rollins and Allen Bradley.⁶ These five men formed the Bethany Cemetery Company. Jones was Superintendent; Holland was President; Tears was Secretary; Rollins was Treasurer; and Bradley was Assistant Secretary.⁷ These five men responded to a community need. Ada Simond in her publication, Looking Back, A Focus on Austin's Black Heritage, wrote, "When the Austin cemetery named Oakwood was laid out in 1856, a small section in the northeast corner was designated "for colored." When the space was filled, as was the section for whites, the cemetery was expanded across Comal Street to the east, but did not include a section for blacks."

Like many of the people who would find eternal rest in Bethany Cemetery, Henderson Rollins, C.W. Jones, Allen Bradley, and John Holland were ordinary folks who did extraordinary things. Mr. Rollins was listed in the City Directory as a laborer.⁸ C.W. Jones was a plumber.⁹ Allen Bradley was proprietor of a meat market on 1108 East 11th Street.¹⁰ John M. Holland was a real estate agent.¹¹ Only two men, William H. Holland and William M. Tears reached prominence in Texas history.

In 1849, William H. Holland was born in bondage. As a slave, he received a college education in Oberlin College. After freedom, William Holland returned to Texas. He worked in Austin's post office, taught school and was elected as a Wharton County's representative in the Texas House.¹² There, he wrote and

5. _____, Historic Landmark Commission Records, September 19, 1977, C14th-77-035.

6. *Jones to Holland, et al. (deed)*, vol. 117, p 139, Deed Records, Travis County, Texas (1893).

7. *Ibid.* p. 139.

Jones, et. ux., to Holland, et. al. (correction deed), vol. 118, p. 515, Deed Records, Travis County, Texas, 1893.

8. *General Directory of the City of Austin, 1891-1892*, Morrison & Fournery Publishers, Galveston, TX, 1892. p. 221.

9. *Ibid.* p.161.

10. *Ibid.* p. 84.

11. *Ibid.* 149.

12. Webb, W. P. & Carroll, H. B. Bailey, *The Handbook of Texas*, Texas State Historical Commission, Austin, 1952. p 826.

presented the bill for the establishment of Prairie View University. Through his efforts, the bill was eventually passed and today, William M. Holland is recognized as "the Father of Prairie View."¹³

Throughout his life, he supported education. During the time he served as president of the Bethany Cemetery Company, William H. Holland helped found the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Institute for Colored Youth in Austin. For thirteen years, he served as its president. Later, he began the Friends in Need, an organization that supported African Americans.¹⁴

Two years after founding the Bethany Cemetery Company, William M. Tears became one of Austin's first African American policemen. He served for six years. Then, in 1901, he founded the Tears Mortuary, known as the oldest established business in Central Texas.¹⁵ In 1893, Bethany Cemetery was subdivided into burial plots. The Bethany Cemetery officers, granted William Tears power of attorney to conduct all sales of burial plots.¹⁶

The cemetery records depict the graves in a long, narrow arrangement. Individual burial plots border the cemetery on the north and south sides. Ten family-sized plots are separated by wide grassy pathways, referred to as alleys in the Bethany Cemetery Plat.¹⁷ All the graves are oriented on an east-west axis, a Southern Christian tradition. This common practice was founded on the belief that during the Second Coming, all souls will rise out of their graves and face Christ on Judgment Day.¹⁸

Community members believe that the charred wood and a cement slab are the remains of the Bethany Cemetery office which housed its records. This cement structure is located just south of the main pathway on the west side of the cemetery. However, during an oral history interview with Willene Ross Wilson, daughter of Mrs. W. M. Ross, who was the last surviving member of the Bethany Cemetery Association, indicated otherwise. Willene said that the Bethany

13. Pitre, Merline, *Through Many toils and Dangers, Black Leadership in Texas, 1868-1900*, Eakin Press, Austin, p. 67

14. Webb, W. P. & Carroll, H. B. Bailey, *The Handbook of Texas*, Texas State Historical Commission, Austin, 1952. p 826.

15. White, Lewis, Captain, *A Pictorial History of Black Policemen Who Have Served in the Austin Police Department, 1871-1982*, Full-Service Printing, Austin, TX, 1983, (no pages listed).

16. *Holland, et al., to Tears (power of attorney)*, vol. 108, p. 279, Deed Records, Travis County, Texas.

17. *Bethany Cemetery*, vol. 1, p. 96, Plat Records, Travis County, Texas.

18. Jordan, Terry, G. *Texas Graveyards, A Cultural Legacy*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1982, p.30.

Cemetery records were housed in a separate building at Oakwood Cemetery. It was at that location that the Bethany records were destroyed.¹⁹ Today, the only Bethany Cemetery records that survive are in the Travis County Court House, the Austin History Center, and the homes, hearts and minds of the East Austin community.

In 1914, Bethany Cemetery Company hired a caretaker who worked there until 1930.²⁰

In 1928, the City of Austin opened Evergreen Cemetery. With knowledge of family members receiving perpetual care, African Americans choose to buy burial plots at Evergreen. Others had their departed loved ones removed from Bethany and interred in the newly opened cemetery.²¹ Throughout Bethany, there are many deep holes that stand as evidence of this silent migration.

Of the original six men who started the Bethany Cemetery Company, only two death notices are present in Travis County. William H. Holland died in 1907.²² William M. Tears, Sr. died in Austin in 1930.²³ Travis County probate does not record the remaining gentlemen: Charles W. Jones, Henderson Rollins, Allen Bradley, and John M. Holland.

African American historian, Ada Simond continued the story. In her publication, *Looking Back*, she wrote, *"In 1931 when Ruthie Taylor, mother of Eva Taylor Ross died, Ross' father decided to bury his wife in Evergreen Cemetery. ... Eva Taylor Ross, touched with the agony of having her mother buried in a different location than some of her children, her family, her parents and close friends promised her father she would dedicate her life to maintaining Bethany as a respected burial ground and honored spot if he would bury her mother there."*

19. _____, Oral History Interview with Willene Ross Wilson, Monday, June 10, 1996 by members of Travis County Historical Commission.

20. Eckols, Robert, *Bethany Cemetery*, unpublished manuscript, Austin, Texas, 1971, p. 1.

21. Simond, Ada DeBlanc, "Family burial site holds special meaning for blacks," *Looking Back, A Black Focus on Austin's Heritage*, Austin American Statesman - Austin Independent School System, 1984. p. 42.

22. Webb, W. P. & Carroll, H. B. Bailey, *The Handbook of Texas*, Texas State Historical Commission, Austin, 1952. p 826.

23. White, Lewis, Captain, *A Pictorial History of Black Policemen Who Have Served in the Austin Police Department, 1871-1982*, Full-Service Printing, Austin, TX, 1983, (no pages listed).

In 1976, Eva Ross, Carl Wilson and Willie R. Conley, representatives of Bethany Cemetery Association filed for possession of Bethany Cemetery.²⁴ In their Alternative Pleading, they informed the Travis County Court, *"That up through 1933, an association by the name Bethany Cemetery Company provided services and care for the property and graves for the black citizens of Austin. That through death the officers of Bethany Cemetery Company (a private association) ceased to function."*

Furthermore, Mrs. Ross, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Conley stipulated that in February 23, 1965 they began the task of maintaining Bethany Cemetery and in 1971, they, and other interested parties, formed the Bethany Cemetery Association.²⁵

On April 27, 1976, Travis County Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, Eva Ross, Carl Wilson and Willie R. Conley, and the 6.18 acres known as Bethany Cemetery were legally transferred to the Bethany Cemetery Association.²⁶

Willene Ross Wilson recalls the Bethany Association as a strong, active organization. She remembers that her mother, along with approximately 25 senior citizens -- all ladies excepting for one couple, began the non-profit association. Dues were \$10.00 a month and they would meet in each other's homes to plan fundraising activities for the cemetery.²⁷

Bethany Association members raised money through homecoming gatherings, and solicitation of donations. Although people continued to maintain their own family plots, they sought assistance with care from county and city officials. Through their efforts and support of local African American organizations, they fenced the property, built a limestone entranceway and placed on its top an arch with the words, Bethany Cemetery. This arch was accidentally damaged by a City of Austin work crew.²⁸

24. Alternative Pleading at *1, Bethany Cemetery Ass'n of Travis County, Inc., v. Bethany Cemetery Co., et al., No. 244,500, Dist. Ct. Records, Travis County, Texas (1976).

25. Ibid.

26. Bethany Cemetery Co., et al., to Bethany Cemetery Ass'n of Travis County, Inc. (reformed judgment), vol. 6558, p. 628, Deed Records, Travis County, TX, (1976).

27. _____, Oral History Interview with Willene Ross Wilson, Monday, June 10, 1996 by Travis County Historical Commission.

28. Ibid.

Peterson, Chris, "Old Black Cemetery Falling Into Disrepair," Austin American Statesman, (no date.). p1.

Starting in 1969, the Association began annual memorial services.²⁹ In 1970, Reverend G.M. Relford, Pastor of Rosewood Avenue Baptist Church gave the Scriptures, the memorial service was presented by Reverend Bacon of Greater Mt. Zion Baptist and the Ebenezer Gospel Choir led the congregation in "Precious Moments."³⁰ Throughout the years, this spirit of community involvement and cooperation continued.

Willene Ross Wilson fondly remembers the gatherings, *"Oh, yes, Memorial Day and different programs. They'd put a tent there and they'd have a meeting there. Then, they used to have barbecues there. They'd used the barbecue to raise money."*³¹

During the interview, Willene Ross Wilson proudly displayed her mother's posters listing the people buried in Bethany Cemetery. Entitled, "Loved Ones In Bethany," these large white posters bordered in black were used for special church services honoring the dead.³² Willene presented them to the Travis County Commission. In accordance with Willene Ross Wilson's wishes, Commission member Diana Dorman presented them to City of Austin's Carver Museum.

As time passed, Bethany Cemetery Association members died. Overwhelmed by the encroaching high grasses, vines and shrubs, Association members sought assistance from the City of Austin, the Historic Landmark Commission and community members.³³

29. _____, Announcement, Bethany Cemetery Association, Annual Memorial Service, Bethany Cemetery, November 11, 1973. "Note: We are thankful and proud to celebrate our Fifth annual memorial services."

Simond, Ada DeBlanc, "Family burial site holds special meaning for blacks," *Looking Back, A Black Focus on Austin's Heritage*, Austin American Statesman - Austin Independent School System, 1984, p. 42.

30. _____, Announcement, Bethany Cemetery Association, Memorial Day Service, Bethany Cemetery, 1969.

31. _____, Oral History Interview with Willene Ross Wilson, Monday, June 10, 1996 by Travis County Historical Commission.

32. Ibid.

33. German, John L., Director of Public Works, August 22, 1977, City of Austin Memorandum to Dan Davidson, City manager, Subject, Bethany Cemetery. _____, Historic Landmark Commission Minutes, September 19, 1977, C14-77-035. Petrisson, Chris, "Old Black Cemetery Falling Into Disrepair," Austin American Statesman, (no date.). p1.

In 1982, Donald Nesby, Constable in Travis County's Precinct 1 submitted a letter to the Austin American Statesman requesting community assistance for Bethany. In the letter, he stated, *"Many battles have been engaged in the fight against the weeds by many concerned citizens since the early sixties until 1975. The last to succumb in this battle was Mrs. Eva Ross, President of the Bethany Cemetery Association. Because of sickness in her family, and the fact that she is getting along in age, has cause her to give up the physical fight."*³⁵

Eva Ross died, but she was not laid to rest in the cemetery that she fought to preserve. With their mother's approval, the family buried her in Pflugerville. Willene Ross Wilson said, *"I didn't put my mother out there. We carried her up to Pflugerville. Earlier my brother died and so we just our tombstones (unclear) and I asked my mother if we could move daddy. She told me 'No, please. ... Don't take my daddy up to Pflugerville.' And I told her I wouldn't. And I'm going to try to do the best I can 'til I'm gone. Then, I don't know."*³⁶

Today, there are many people in the community that care for Bethany Cemetery. Some tend their family plots. Others continue to fight the weeds throughout the cemetery. They believe that this historic cemetery is a silent tribute to the people who lived in Austin, worked, raised their families, worshipped in the churches, contributed to the community, fought for their country, and dreamed of better lives for their children.

34. Nesby, Donald, Constable, "Letters to the Editor," Austin American Statesman, January, 14, 1982.

35. _____, Oral History Interview with Willene Ross Wilson, Monday, June 10, 1996 by Travis County Historical Commission.

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- _____, Oral History Interview, Helen Lee-Khan, June 18, 1996, Travis County Commission Member, Austin, TX.
- _____, Oral History Interview, Mary Crawford Kimble, June 12, 1996, Travis County Commission.
- _____, Oral History Interview with Willene Ross Wilson, Monday, June 10, 1996 by Travis County Historical Commission, Austin, TX.
- _____, Texas State Historical Commission List, 1995 Cemetery Clean-up. unpublished document.
- Alternative Pleading at *1, Bethany Cemetery Ass'n of Travis County, Inc., v. Bethany Cemetery Co., et al., No. 244,500, Dist. Ct. Records, Travis County, Texas (1976).
- Bethany Cemetery Co., et al., to Bethany Cemetery Ass'n of Travis County, Inc. (reformed judgment), vol. 6558, p. 628, Deed Records, Travis County, TX, (1976).
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Nesby, Donald, Constable, "Letters to the Editor," Austin American Statesman, January, 14, 1982.

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Proclamation

*Be it known by these presents that
I, Bruce Todd, Mayor of the City of Austin, Texas,
do hereby proclaim*

February 28, 1997

as

Bethany Cemetary Day

*in Austin, and call on all citizens to join me in recognizing
Bethany Cemetery as a historical reminder of the development of Austin's
African American community from the time of slavery and the Civil War
through the present, in acknowledging the importance of preserving our history
for future generations, in honoring those laid to rest in this beautiful and
peaceful place and all those who, for over a century, have dedicated much
time and effort to maintaining the cemetery grounds and family plots,
and in celebrating on this special occasion, the dedication of
Bethany as Austin's first black cemetery.*



Attest

Jan Aldridge
City Clerk

Bruce Todd

Mayor
Bruce Todd



TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION

The State Agency for Historic Preservation

RICK PERRY, GOVERNOR

JOHN L. NAU, III, CHAIRMAN

F. LAWRENCE OAKS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

August 6, 2003

Ms. Sue Spears
7318 Colony Park Drive
Austin, TX 78724

RE: TV-C062: Bethany Cemetery, Travis County

Dear Ms. Spears:

The Texas Historical Commission is honored to designate the Bethany Cemetery as a Historic Texas Cemetery (HTC). The enclosed certificate is a testimony of your commitment to the preservation of this important historic resource.

A cemetery or burial site that has received the Historic Texas Cemetery designation is eligible to display the special HTC markers. The purchase of a cemetery marker is not required in conjunction with this designation, but if you would like to order one, we are enclosing the application form. **Please note that the marker process is separate from the designation process and therefore has different requirements.** The basic information you will need to provide if you are ordering a medallion with interpretive plaque is a detailed narrative history (4-5 pages, or longer, and double-spaced) with footnotes and a bibliography, a county/city map showing the cemetery location, and a photograph of the proposed marker site. To begin the marker process, send the application and the required documentation to Barbara Hankins, Chairperson, Travis County Historical Commission, 1801 Lavaca #14J, Austin, Texas 78701 for review and approval.

Please find enclosed a sample press release and a fact sheet with background information on preserving cemeteries should you choose to publicize your cemetery's HTC designation. This is an optional choice that we leave to the discretion of those affiliated with the cemetery, as there are circumstances where drawing attention to an isolated burial ground may not be prudent. However, highlighting this additional level of recognition for an already highly visible cemetery can be a positive way to reassert the fact that the community treasures the sacred burial ground.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gerron S. Hite".

Gerron S. Hite, RA
Cemetery Preservation Coordinator

cc: Barbara Hankins, Chairperson, Travis CHC
Leslie Wolfenden, applicant
Andy Bucknall

Enclosures



WHAT HAS BEEN DONE: ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

- Identify the need (Mid 1990s)
- Got Historical Marker – Texas Historical Commission designated Bethany Cemetery as a Historical Texas Cemetery (HTC 2003)
- Many Past Community Clean-up efforts
- Reactivated The Bethany Cemetery Association of Austin
- Travis County Sheriff's Weekend Alternative Program (SWAP) Periodically cut grass when requested by Sue Spears
- Participated in Keep Austin Beautiful Day Clean-ups (2021-2023)
- Remembrance Day Celebration (February 25, 2023)
- The Stories of Bethany Tour with Black Austin Tours/ Javier Wallace (June 21, 2023)
- Post Historical Banners during February and Juneteenth Week.
- Odd Fellows Capital Lodge #23 continually repair broken grave markers
- MLK Contact Group support the protection of cemetery as development encroaches on cemetery boundaries
- The Original Peoples Coalition work to trim trees damaged by the winter storms and participate and donation refreshments at clean ups
- Met with Six Square (December 14, 2021) to solicit support.

BETHANY CEMETERY LONG TERM GOALS

- Map unmarked graves with ground penetrating radar and mark them.
- Survey and Inventory-Create a Map of the cemetery grounds that includes the location of trees, bushes, and other landscape features. Include all marked and unmarked graves (headstones, footstones, etc.)
- Fill in graves that have sunken with fill dirt and loam
- Tombstone Care -Record stones that need restoring. Conduct an individual marker survey and record each.
- Install new fence where needed-Clear overgrown brush and vines from fence
- Restore the entranceway of cemetery. Replace name sign that was over entranceway to cemetery-Replace the Archway.
- Driveway-Restore driveway and create a clear and visible boundary to it
- Security in Cemetery- Solar lights, Large protective stones/ boulders for the back of the cemetery to deter vehicles from crossing/parking
- Signs-Adding informational Kiosk telling the stories of those who are interred in the cemetery. Create historical markers and background on former slaves interred in Bethany
- Other signage: Association Contact information. Time the cemetery is open.
- Tree Care-Trim and removal of dead branches and add Mulch



Resident recalls rich history

You may, on occasion, encounter a plain, humble little lady sitting on the porch of a small cottage in our community. She may be tending a small garden or gathering pecans in her yard. You may see her on the street, in a supermarket, or in church and pass her by — never to discover the rich history she carries in her memory.

Such a person is Idella Lewis who was born in 1899. She speaks of her love of Austin and its beauty. She does not mind seeing Austin grow. She was born and lived all of her life in the homestead she now occupies and would not want to live any other place.

She attended Gregorytown School (now Blackshear) and graduated from Anderson High School on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1917. She fondly recalls some of her classmates — Annie Grant, Hallie Dickerson, Seresa Preston (Upshaw), Tillie Dedrick (Steward) and some special teachers: Cora Woodard, Effie Yerwood, Willie B. Campbell, M.E. Durden and Principal L.C. Anderson. She loved history, especially Negro history, which was collected through information from current events and what teachers, preachers and community leaders shared.

After graduation, Lewis worked for a while as a domestic. She earned a living as a cook at Grace Hall at the University of Texas. She described those days as happy ones, and she recalls many special girls who lived at Grace.

Lewis recounts her family history. Her great-grandmother, Dicey Walker, was sold on the block in Macon, Ga. At the time of the sale she had a baby, Lydia, in her arms. Her new master did not want the baby, and no one bought it, so the baby was left at the block in Macon. Dicey's older daughter, Margaret Peoples, raised the infant as her child. The baby, Lydia Walker, had a son, William Lewis who became the father of Idella Lewis.

Some Austinites may remember Dick Walker, also one of Dicey's children. He was the father of Carl Walker, who was well known in the black community. After Emancipation, Dicey walked from where she was in Georgia, looking for her three children, Dick, Margaret and Lydia. She went to the place she left them and followed a trail of information until she found them in Bastrop.



Looking back

Ada Simond



Idella Lewis, a resident who has lived in East Austin all her life, is the great-granddaughter of a woman sold on the auction block in Macon, Ga. Her great-grandmother was separated from her children and later reunited with them.

Today, Dicey's body rests in Bethany Cemetery beside that of her daughter, Lydia.

Idella Lewis's father, William, was prominent in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He helped in the organization of Grant Chapel AME Church, which was founded by the Rev. James W. Howard in the home of Floury James. William Tears, Sr., Alex Ferguson and his wife and Queen Wilson and her husband were also involved in the organization of the church.

Lewis, who attends Salina and Rosewood-Zaragoza centers today, remembers that Metropolitan, Grant Chapel, Wesley Chapel and Simpson often held camp meetings together many years ago. Lewis was active in her church then, and still is. She recalls that church was always filled. She also remembers Elouise Young-Perry as the outstanding music director and that E. Marie Davis (Gilbert) often provided music.

Ada Simond is a lifelong resident of Austin and the author of a series of books on Austin's black history. "Looking Back" examines some of the history of East Austin.





Family burial site holds special meaning for blacks

Historically, the black community has had great respect for their family burial ground. In most small communities, graveyards are part of the church grounds. In many of these communities there is a time set aside known as homecoming. On this day, family members gather from miles around to join their neighbors in cleaning family plots, as well as surrounding ones if no one comes representing those families.

After grave cleaning and decorating, a memorial service with preaching, singing of favorite hymns and praying is a common practice. This is followed by "a spread" and family reunion. There is a lot of socializing, hugging, laughing and crying. Everyone is joyful at being together again and recalling past pleasures, as well as times of sadness. Adults point out new babies and notice how the children have grown. The scene is repeated in many communities in and around Austin.

When the Austin cemetery named Oakwood was laid out in 1856, a small section in the northwest corner was designated "for colored." When the space was filled, as was the section for whites, the cemetery was expanded across Comal Street to the east, but did not include a section for blacks.

In 1893, William M. Tears, Austin's first black mortician, joined J.M. Holland, Henderson Rollins, Allen Bradley and W.H. Holland, then superintendent of the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute for Colored Youths of Texas, to buy East Austin acreage for a black cemetery. The land, located on Springdale Road across from Sims Elementary School, was named Bethany Cemetery.

THE MEN ORGANIZED a burial association, with L.M. Mitchell as secretary-treasurer. Active members received aid for their burial at Bethany. Survivors practiced the habit of keeping the graves clean. Some families performed the task themselves, others paid some person who made a business of cleaning graves monthly, weekly or biweekly.

For many persons buried at Bethany, there are no longer survivors to care for their graves or memorialize them.

In 1928 when the city opened Evergreen Cemetery, many families, including that of Tears, moved the remains of their loved ones from Bethany to Evergreen, where the graves would have perpetual care.

IN 1931 WHEN Ruthie Taylor, mother of Eva Taylor Ross died, Ross' father decided to bury his wife in Evergreen Cemetery so her grave would have perpetual care. Eva Taylor Ross, touched with the agony of having her mother buried in a different location than some of her children, her parents and close friends,



Looking back

Ada Simond



William M. Tears



Eva Taylor Ross

promised her father she would dedicate her life to maintaining Bethany as a respected burial ground and honored spot if he would bury her mother there.

As the years passed, her promise became harder to keep. To continue the work, Ross, joined by other interested Bethany families, organized and chartered the Bethany Cemetery Association of Travis County, Inc.

Members pay dues, solicit donations and conduct fund-raising projects to maintain the cemetery. The association has conducted annual memorial services on the grounds. Many churches, their ministers and choirs, have participated. Refreshments are often served on the grounds.

ON INVITATION FROM the Rev. D. Harris, this year's memorial will be held at 3 p.m. on Sunday at Metropolitan A.M.E. Church at the corner of 10th and Waller streets. This is an opportunity to remember our ancestors who are buried in Bethany.

Persons wanting to support the association should contact Eva Ross at 1001 Chicon St. or phone 478-8390.

...

In last week's column, Maggie Washington worked on her own farm, not that of Azle Taylor-Morton, as was incorrectly reported.

Ada Simond is a lifelong resident of Austin and the author of a series of books on Austin's black history. "Looking Back" examines some of the history of East Austin.

Beglected cemetery for blacks begins to get some attention - Volunteers clear some weeds, but much work remains in cleanup of East Austin graveyard

*By Starita Smith August 4, 1996 Publication: Austin American-Statesman (TX) Page: B1
Word Count: 483*

Helen Lee-Khan went looking for her great-grandfather Saturday.

The Rev. James Harrold, a well-known Baptist minister in his day, is among more than 500 people believed to have been laid to rest in Bethany Cemetery.

"I lived away from Austin for 27 years," she said. "Elders in the family told me about this."

Relatives told Lee-Khan the tall marker on Harrold's grave had been broken by vandals. That made it difficult to find his plot.

Bethany is the oldest African American cemetery in Austin, according to the Friends of Bethany Cemetery. It is in the 1300 block of Springdale Road in East Austin, across the street from Sims Elementary School, 1203 Springdale Road.

This weekend, the Friends of Bethany Cemetery, aided by a crew from the Travis County

cleaned and cleared weeds from the graveyard, whose earliest identified graves belong to two infants who died in 1879 and 1886. Historians, such as Eve Williams, curator of Jourdan Bachman Pioneer Farm, believe there may be earlier graves there, but vandalism, time and nature have caused scores of grave sites to be obscured.

Sue Spears, a leader of the Friends group, said among those buried in Bethany are war veterans, prominent builders of Austin's black community and former slaves. Many have relatives living in Austin who may not be aware that the old graves exist, she said.

African American families used to bury their loved ones in cemeteries that they had to maintain themselves. Unless someone takes

on the maintenance, these cemeteries become overgrown, weed- choked lots like Bethany.

Spears said that is far from an ideal way to treat the dead.

"They should be respected because they contributed greatly to the society we live in," said Spears, who is also a member of the East Austin Watershed Task Force, an environmentalist group.

Spears, mother of three Sims students, has helped bring the school PTA, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and the Texas Historical Commission into the effort to save Bethany. Members of the Boy Scouts, Austin Moose Lodge #1735 and the Church of Latter Day Saints also have helped.

Spears said she hopes people will donate herbicide, fencing, gravel, refreshments for volunteer workers and labor to the project.

She also has a list of those buried in Bethany for people to consult to find out if family members are buried there. The list contains some discrepancies. Lee-Khan's great-grandfather's name isn't on it, even though family members remember going to his burial and buying his monument.

Lee-Khan didn't find her great- grandfather's grave on Saturday, but she vowed to return -- with herbicide and relatives -- to recover a piece of her family's past.

Workers were busy clearing weeds and heavy brush in Bethany Cemetery on Satur day. This neglected burial place is in the 1300 block of Springdale Road.

Tom Lankes/AA-S COLOR PHOTO

Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Date: August 4, 1996

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