




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council Members

FROM: Kimberly McNeeley, M.Ed., CPRP
Director, Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

THROUGH: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager

DATE: August 24, 2023

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Updates

This memorandum serves to notify city leaders about an upcoming virtual community meeting on Tuesday, September 19, 2023, from 6 to 7 p.m. The meeting will be hosted by the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARC) and feature members of the Oakwood Cemetery archeological project team from the University of Connecticut (UConn) and the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). The research team will update the community about the DNA and isotopic analysis work completed to date and share next steps in the process.

PARC notified City Council on June 18, 2020 through a [memorandum](#) about a partnership at no cost to the City of Austin with UConn and UT Austin to undertake DNA and isotopic analysis to better understand the lives of the men, women, and children who were discovered at Oakwood Cemetery in 2016 when the chapel was under renovation. The DNA analysis offers a unique opportunity to learn more about identities, familial connections, and life experiences. Additionally, the UConn team is conducting isotopic analysis, which may provide additional insights into the individuals' diets and regions of origin. The DNA and isotopic analysis will continue for another 24 months. During the analysis process, living individuals who think they have familial connections may be able to submit a saliva sample for DNA analysis. If the preservation of the DNA from those discovered during this process is sufficient for analysis, identifying familial connections may be possible.

The community meeting is part of ongoing programming and community engagement related to the Oakwood Cemetery archeological project. In October 2020, PARC convened an online educational symposium, [All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance](#). The award-winning, free, online two-day symposium was attended by more than 300 registrants and featured sessions from 40 nationally renowned archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and community activists about the archeological findings and comparative projects from around the country. PARC also produced a digital exhibit, [All Together Here](#), about the archeological and bioarcheological findings. The 2020 symposium engaged the community in ideas for memorialization of the people who were discovered. A reburial of the 36 men, women, and children was held, and PARC convened an [interfaith](#)

[blessing ceremony](#) on November 29, 2021. PARD then embarked on the development of a permanent monument that will serve as both a memorial to the people who were reinterred and also honor the hundreds of people interred in unmarked graves throughout Oakwood Cemetery.

In late May 2023, PARD hosted [All Together Here: Monument Dedication and Memorial Event](#), a three-day series of events and programs centered around the dedication for a permanent monument to the individuals who were discovered during the Oakwood Chapel restoration. The events included guided tours of the Historic Colored Grounds and the Oakwood Chapel, a talk by a historian, a racial healing event, a dedication of the monuments, a walking procession, and a homegoing celebration. The May event was part of continued programming PARD has led as part of the archeological and memorialization process associated with the Oakwood Chapel.

Background

Archeologists monitoring construction related to the Oakwood Chapel restoration halted work in late 2016 when human remains were discovered. After months of investigation, it was confirmed that the chapel was constructed over grave sites. The 1914 chapel was constructed in a racially segregated section of the cemetery known historically as the “Colored Grounds;” however, recent archeological findings suggest this specific area was racially and ethnically diverse.

PARD informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement opportunities to help PARD determine next steps. Following outreach and public meetings with the community, it was determined that the burials would be exhumed. A May 1, 2017 [memorandum](#) to City Council provided information about the decision and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind PARD’s recommendation to exhume the burials.

The exhumation process began in late spring 2017 and took several months to complete. Under the requirements of the issued Antiquities Permit through the Texas Historical Commission, a bioarcheological analysis occurred for any exhumed burials. Following the careful exhumation of burials by the archeological team, the remains were transferred to the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University for analysis. Burial context can be inferred by analysis of the physical remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, gender, and approximate age. In some cases, physical remains can also inform cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition, and stresses endured. Further, artifacts helped date the burials and provide potential cultural significance for those buried in this section. This analysis of the remains and associated artifacts, which date to the mid to late 1800s, was completed, and a report was developed by the archeological contractor for the Oakwood Chapel project, Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants, and the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University.

The reinterment project, which was completed November 17, 2021, was led by the archeological firm, AmaTerra Environmental, along with Weston Solutions. All reports were conducted under the authority and reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission and can be found on the project [website](#). PARD will continue to update City Council and community members on the process. Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

cc: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager