

Belew Cemetery

Historical Narrative researched and written by Jean Burk for 2012 Historic Texas Cemetery Marker application for Denton County

BELEW CEMETERY

I. CONTEXT

The Belew Cemetery is located 3 miles north of Aubrey on Highway 377, just west of the Texas & Pacific railroad tracks on Belew Road. The land has been acquired in four different purchases over 100 years with an estimated area of twenty-eight acres. As you cross the tracks, the newest section is north of the road and immediately to your right, while the older part is west of the intersection of Belew Road and Massey Road a tenth of a mile from the highway.

Texas became the 28th State of the Union in 1845, but it was not until 1848 that Mexico gave up all claims on Texas. During the 1850's there was a push for settlers to move west and help settle the land. Around 1856 Richard (Dick) Aaron (1820 – 1900) and Mary Jane Belew (1822 – 1902) with their five children and thirty-nine other families came together by wagons from Tennessee to Denton County, Texas. They stopped on a hill in an area which was later to be known as the Belew Schoolhouse settlement.ⁱ

The area they chose was part of the A.G. Stapp Survey north of Aubrey. The deed shows they had approximately 160 acres in this track. There is some thought of possibly a small log cabin already on the land. If so, they probably lived in it until a larger home was built and the log cabin became the Belew schoolhouse.ⁱⁱ There is a hand drawn map by Sena Mounts Wright in the Denton County Museum, which dates

the early settlements in Denton County. It shows the Belew (spelled Bellew on the map) schoolhouse settlement in 1856. ⁱⁱⁱ

II. OVERVIEW

There are several deed documents which Richard Aaron Belew wrote and signed his name, and with the schoolhouse on his land very soon after his arrival, it appears education was important to the Belew family. The 1860 census shows a school teacher by the name of Ed F. Hicklin living with the Belew family, and it is believed he was the teacher for the Belew schoolhouse. When the census asked if the children were attending school, it shows three of the Belew children attending. ^{iv v}

Shortly after getting settled into the Belew community and the school being established, the Civil war broke out. The older two sons of Richard Aaron enlisted in the armies of the South and even Richard Aaron Belew left with Jasper's Company in the Texas State Troops; a home guard unit.^{vi} It was after the Civil War when the men of the South returned home to find little land for their large families that the Aubrey area really began to grow. As the stories of rich fertile land for growing cotton and other crops in Texas were shared the men of the South made their way to Aubrey. One such wagon group of farmers came from Alabama. This group of families and friends were the Caddells, Coffeys, Hodges, Loopers and Tidmores. Today as you walk the older part of the cemetery, you see those same familiar family names of those who farmed the area and settled the town of Aubrey. You can also walk the area purchased in 1962, known as the school house lot, and see those next generation

families of the Aubrey area, who not only purchased their farms side-by-side but also purchased their cemetery lots side-by-side.

The Baptist Church was organized by Rev. T. B. McCombs in 1875 under a large oak tree next to the Belew schoolhouse. They met for services on Saturdays and Sundays using the schoolhouse as a place of worship for seven years.^{vii viii}

Like so many settlements in the beginning where there was a schoolhouse and church a small cemetery would be close by. The first piece of land that is known today as the Belew Cemetery was purchased for \$56 in October 1880 from Richard Aaron Belew by the citizens of the Belew Schoolhouse community to be used as a public grave yard or cemetery forever.^{ix}

West of the schoolhouse about 100 yards on the first 2.8 acres of land deeded for a cemetery in 1880, there are over 70 red sandstone rocks marking graves which can no longer be read, and probably hundreds of graves which are lost due to being marked by wooden crosses. Close to the middle of this area there are grave markers dated before October 1880, when it became an official cemetery for the Belew Community. Some of the names of those buried before the purchase are N. M. Tidmore 3/11/1866 -9//26/1866, Infant Jennie Barton 6/16/1861, Luther Caddell 3/13/1878 -9/29/1880, Infant son Coffey 6/22/1878 -8/1/1879, Hodges infant son 6/18/1879, Hodges infant daughter 7/30/1880, Elizabeth Graves 12/28/1823 – 7/10/1876, E. F. Henderson 8/13/1867 – 11/11/1876, Tilda Henderson 3/16/1848 – 4/13/1875, Judy Ann Hollar 5/26/1860 – 10/13/1873 and Susan Jane Hollar 9/22/1862 – 12/23/1878, therefore leaving us to believe this area was recognized as a

cemetery shortly after the school and church was established. Belew Cemetery was not the only cemetery in the Aubrey area in the late 1800's, but by the early 1900s, it had been established as the main cemetery and continues today as the primary burial site for the Aubrey area.

Not only was the Belew Community population on the rise, but so were many other small settlements in the area. However, in the early 1880's the Texas & Pacific Railroad tracks were laid and a train depot was build in Aubrey. The tracks running from Denton to Pilot Point came through Aubrey dividing the small rural communities due to few access crossings. With the train stopping in Aubrey, it became a major trade area and the church congregation meetings at the Belew School house moved to Aubrey in 1882.^x

In 1902 with the cemetery recognized as the main cemetery in the area, a Ladies Cemetery Society was organized by six ladies, Kate Hodges, Mollie Henderson, Ola Price, Bettie Catlett, Mary Caddell, and Nora McIntosh on March 27th. Their purpose was to hire a man to keep the cemetery in good condition, also to look after the unknown and uncared for graves. To be a member of this group the ladies paid dues at each meeting. They opened each meeting with singing, Bible study, and prayer and then the business of the cemetery. At the first meeting the ladies were appointed to see those interested and to collect donations for support.^{xi} Their meetings were held at various churches and homes in Aubrey, with some of them held at the cemetery under the trees or while working the graves. Later when dues did not come in or there was a need for more money at the cemetery, Nora McIntosh and Kate Hodges were appointed to collect past dues or ask for the donations.^{xii}

As the town and surrounding area of Aubrey grew so did the cemetery and the need for additional land. The Ladies Cemetery Society went to work trying to decide how to raise more money. During the October 15th meeting in 1902 they voted to hold a Thanksgiving Dinner for the benefit of the Belew Cemetery. In their resolution it was stated that they kindly ask the ladies of each Aubrey area church to respect their decision on holding a Thanksgiving Dinner for the community. As expected, when all the ladies of town decided not to cook Thanksgiving Dinner at home but for the community, it was a big success that first year with the ladies making \$97.95.^{xiii}

November 28, 1903, the second piece of land was purchased and an additional 9.81 acres was added.^{xiv} This new piece was part of the original A. G. Stapp survey owned by Aaron Richard Belew.

The love the Ladies Cemetery Society and the community had for the Belew Cemetery shows in their continued work to improve and maintain the Cemetery as evidence of the house for the sexton being built in 1906 and the Pavilion in 1910.^{xv xvi} The pavilion was 100 feet in circumference, nicely seated, well lighted and ventilated with a driveway through the center.

In 1915 those interested in the cemetery begin talking about having an endowment fund. Their hope was to put enough money into an endowment in order for the cemetery to be self supporting.^{xvii}

Once again the cemetery had growing pains and they looked for a way to improve the organization. November 1922, the Ladies Cemetery Society and a number of

interested citizens in Belew Cemetery were asked to meet at a local store on Saturday at 3:00 to discuss incorporation of the cemetery. After what must have been a long discussion over the difference between forming a trust company and incorporation, there was a motion that the society be called the Belew Cemetery Association, and it carried. During this meeting it was also determined the trustee or directors be appointed from each school district surrounding the cemetery. The first directors and their district were: Lud Hunn (1877 – 1977) Belew, W.F. Fulmore (1869 – 1950) New Hope, Lillie Henderson (1881 – 1961) Aubrey, Beulah Jones (1887 – 1973) Aubrey, and Ada Allen (1885 – 1955) Aubrey, Dallas Hollar (1884 – 1935) Friendship, J.T. Mohon (1867 – 1947) Rockhill, W.R. Coffey (1869 – 1965) Springhill and T.J. Young (1852 - ?) GreenValley.^{xviii} After the incorporation most of the meetings for the next twenty years were held at 3:00 on a Saturday in one of the stores in Aubrey so all citizens in town could attend.

August 1923 the Belew Cemetery Association and Mr. Stoup entered into an agreement for a new road on the south side of the cemetery running east to the railroad. In 1924 a new railroad crossing was added over the railroad tracks.^{xix}

By 1940s the Belew Schoolhouse had closed its doors and the students in the area traveled to Pilot Point. In 1948, the two room frame building was sold to the Belew Home Demonstration Club, an unincorporated association, for civic purposes.^{xx}

As the area continued to grow, and with most of the early Belew and Aubrey area families being buried at the cemetery, more land was needed. Therefore with the help of E.L. Tisdell, County Commissioner of Precinct #1, in 1962 the cemetery board

entered into an agreement with Denton County for the 2.5 acres of land that had once been the Belew schoolhouse lot.^{xxi} This area would provide an additional 112 lots or approximately 650 burial spaces. Then again in 1983, the Board of Directors looked to the future needs and purchased 10 acres adjacent to the cemetery, just west of the railroads tracks.^{xxii} For members of those families who have lived in the Belew and Aubrey area for generations, buying land next to the railroad tracks just seemed right.

III. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

A number of individuals are remembered for their special contributions to the area and development of the cemetery. That first group of ladies who organized the Ladies Cemetery Society is buried there: Kate Hodges (1857-1906) (also served as the first president of the organization), Ola Price (1877-1955), Bettie Catlett 1855-1918), Mary Caddell (1854-1940), and Nora McIntosh (1872-1965). All of that first group of directors elected to govern the cemetery in 1922 when they formed the association, are also buried there, as well as past presidents Polly Tidmore (1851 – 1948 , George Tisdell (1891 – 1970), Lud Hunn (1877 – 1977), Nannie Coffey (1874 – 1947), Homer Coffey (1897 – 1961), and Loren Tisdell (1913 – 1976).^{xxiii}

One interesting fact is even with the cemetery being named after the community and school, which was named after Richard Aaron and Mary Jane Belew, none of the Belew family is buried in the cemetery to our knowledge. Richard Aaron and Mary Jane Belew were buried at the Masonic Cemetery, now called the Pilot Point Cemetery.^{xxiv}

As you walk through the cemetery, you find many of the early settlers; those who helped develop the town of Aubrey and those who came later to continue their work. Buried there is L. N. Edwards (1837 – 1910) who laid off the city in lots, and noted lawyer A. Q. Mustain (1876 – 1943) who had also served as principal for the Aubrey School, and worked in the Security State Bank. There are those who worked in the establishing of the area churches such as J.T. Mohon (1867 – 1947), E. Cain (1838 – 1920), J.D. Pugh (1843 – 1909), A. Coffey (1842 – 1918), J.J. Price (1855 – 1907), A.A. Green (1853 – 1935), and J.A. Harmon (1848 – 1897) to name a few. Those who were part of the city government and business: Otis Lipstreu (1885 – 1946), Will McNatt (1885 – 1971), Dalton Keen (1884 – 1940), John Rachford (1870 – 1957), and James M. Coffey (1873 – 1940) Denton County Representative in the Texas Legislature in 1925 regular session and also the special called session.

For more than 80 years the Thanksgiving Dinners and the Annual Cemetery Decoration Days in May were like a large homecoming or family reunion for all those who had family buried at the cemetery. Families would arrive early and stay late visiting and telling stories.

The women, and later the men worked alongside to prepare and serve a home cooked meal on Thanksgiving Day. These fund raisers made certain there was enough cash to provide for the upkeep until the next dinner. These dinners were held in various locations in Aubrey through 1952 when under the leadership of Homer Coffey, President of the Cemetery Board and also pastor of the First Christian Church in Aubrey, a community building project for the purpose of the dinners and to be used for other activities of the community was begun. The Aubrey Christian Church

granted the use of the vacant lot south of the present church building for a 40x60 foot concrete tile building, which included a cement floor and metal roof with a 12x30 foot kitchen attached, for an estimated cost for materials at \$2,500. The men of the Aubrey area provided the labor. A board of six members was elected as the community building committee; the board consisted of one member from the Methodist Church, Assembly of God, Baptist Church, Christian Church, Belew Cemetery Association, and Aubrey City Council, just as the cemetery was for the community so was the community building. It still stands today at 410 North Main Street in Aubrey and continues to serve the community.

November 1959, Norris Jackson of the Denton Record Chronicle interviewed Nora McIntosh, the last living charter member of the Ladies Cemetery Society and Aubrey Belew Cemetery Association. In his article the question was asked: "Why Thanksgiving?" Mrs. McIntosh responded, "We thought it would be a good time. The churches had family dinners and homecoming programs where people could visit on Thanksgiving. We'd like to have that time to raise money for the cemetery." "So we've been feeding more and more every year. Not too many people showed up for the earlier dinners because there just wasn't room for many to eat. Any empty store building or garage or school room was apt to be where we'd serve the dinner. Then in 1953 they finished the community memorial building and that's where it's held every year now. Now two and three "settings" are needed to feed the people." The reporter went on to write, "This year ticket takers counted well over 500 visitors. Each paid \$1 for a plate and silverware. The tables were loaded with turkey and ham,

sweet potatoes and green beans, dressing and giblet grave, untold kinds of cake and pie, salads and cranberry sauce and coffee and tea.”^{xxv}

In 1962, the Denton Record-Chronicle wrote “Hundreds Due In Aubrey For 61st Annual Dinner-Reunion”. The article stated, “During the years, as many Aubreyites moved away, they remembered the Thanksgiving dinner and still return each year to attend. Many regard it as sort of a homecoming event, and former residents come from as far away as California. They mix with the old-timers, new residents and guests from other towns. Everyone is invited to attend the dinner which will start at 11:30 and last until everyone has eaten”.^{xxvi}

November 1988, as another generation took their place at Belew Cemetery and the world changed to meet the needs of the next generation, the Thanksgiving Dinner was held for the last time. Those large gatherings of families and friends on the first Sunday in May to decorate the graves of their love ones and to visit with each other have also gone the way of the past. Rest assured the families and friends still decorate the graves, and it is a beautiful place by the first week of May, but it happens over several days, and so many times they come and leave without talking to others.

In 1980 Belew Cemetery entered into an agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer to sell spaces for the relocation of some of the graves at Jackie Davis Cemetery due to the Aubrey lake project later to be known as Lake Ray Roberts. November 24, 1980, the Belew Cemetery Association Board of Directors met to discuss the updated letter from the Corps of Engineer. It was agreed the cemetery would sell 30 spaces at \$50 per space in Block 15 Lots 4-5-6-7 and Block 16 Lots 4-5

of section D. The spaces would be provided with the understanding they were to be used for the families of Cagles, Plunkett, Stiles, West, and Peters from Jackie Davis Cemetery. These 30 spaces would be held for 12 months after which they would be sold.^{xxvii} There were a total of eighteen graves with monuments and two unknown graves moved from Jackie Davis to Belew. The other 10 spaces have not been sold.

For generations, families continue to put their own personal touch to the family plot. October 25, 1983, two neighbors, Mary Bell Taylor (1903 – 1983) and Ruby Coffey (1903 – 1983), decided to “clean off” their family burial plots at Belew. Living side-by-side this was something they had done together for years, so after lunch and a little rest, they each placed their hoe, gloves, and other tools in the back of the car. At the cemetery each worked their own family plot cleaning them of weeds, sweeping off the curb and monuments. Cleaning the grave plots was something Ruby Coffey had learned from her parents as they had set the example of taking care of their parents at Belew. This day was to be different for Mary Bell and Ruby, as they left from the cemetery, the car stalled on the railroad track with a south bound train coming. Two days later their earthly bodies made their final trip and took their resting place at Belew.^{xxviii}

Today the cemetery continues to be governed by a 12 member board of directors, and financially funded from endowments, donations, and the sale of grave spaces. In 2008 a office building was built and dedicated with a plaque that reads, “On May 3, 2008, this building was dedicated in loving memory to honor everyone committed to the founding and development of the Belew Cemetery.”

Throughout these past 100 plus years, a golden thread runs through this history. That golden thread was the life blood of several generations of families who came to Texas as pioneers, searching for a new life. Due to their dedication, fortitude, faith and love, this cemetery remains a community honored memorial. Many cemeteries have become a “for profit” business or are no longer active. Belew remains a caring family, passing on this same sense of commitment; a commitment to honor their heritage and a commitment to provide for the future. This is evident in those like W. A. Kelly (1851 – 1923), who served on the board as treasurer from 1905 until 1923, his son, Bill Kelly (1894 – 1980) taking his place on the board at his death and served over 35 years. Also, George Tisdell and his nephew, Loren Tisdell served the board for 22 years and left an endowment for future needs. Finally, Nora Irick McIntosh, who helped organize the Ladies Society in 1902 and served over 40 years on the board. Nora’s daughter and son-in-law, Homer and Kate McIntosh Coffey (1899 - 1978) worked beside her. Homer Coffey served as president for 26 years until his death. Nora’s nephew and wife Howard and Juanita Irick served on the board for over 30 years and another nephew W.C. Irick also served. Nora’s granddaughter & husband, Mary Alice Coffey and Bill Reding (1920 – 1973) followed on the board with Mary Alice still serving today. Serving on today’s board is the great niece and great-grand-daughter of Nora McIntosh and a grandson of W.A. Kelly. Finally Faith and love for God, a commitment to maintain a memorial to ancestors and a dedication to provide for generations to come continues in that golden thread even to this day when the third and fourth generation of those early members is on the board.

IV. DOCUMENTATION:

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- ⁱ Paul Belew, *Our Belew Line A family rich in American history* (United States 2010), p. 180.
- ⁱⁱ Belew, p. 180.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sena Mounts Wright, Early Settlement Hand drawn map, Denton County Historical Commission Museum.
- ^{iv} Belew, p.184.
- ^v 1860 United States Census, Denton County, Texas Pilot Point, p. 11.
- ^{vi} Belew, p. 185.
- ^{vii} Belew, p. 175.
- ^{viii} Rev. Charles C. (Buddy) Owens, Dr. L. Robert Stevens, *History of Denton Baptist Association Centennial Edition*, (Denton, Texas: Terrill Wheeler Printing, Inc. 1986), p. 124.
- ^{ix} Denton County Deed Record, Volume 597, p. 178-180; December 17, 1880.
- ^x Belew, p. 187-188.
- ^{xi} Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association Minutes 1902-1960. Belew Cemetery Association Office, 9500 Belew Road, Aubrey, Texas, 27 March 1902, p.120.
- ^{xii} Minutes from Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association 1902-1960, 13 October 1904, p. 100-103.
- ^{xiii} Minutes from the Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association 16 October 1902, p. 127.
- ^{xiv} Denton County Deed Record, Volume 93, p. 63-64; November 28, 1903.
- ^{xv} Minutes from the Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association, 29 September 1910, p.162.
- ^{xvi} "Pavilion completed at Belew Cemetery," *Aubrey Herald*, 9 September 1910.
- ^{xvii} Minutes from the Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association, 14 October 1915, p. 187.
- ^{xviii} Minutes from the Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association, 30 November 1922, p. 194.
- ^{xix} Denton County Deed Record, Volume 597, p. 175.
- ^{xx} Denton County Bill of Sale Record, Volume H, p. 249.
- ^{xxi} Denton County Deed Record, Volume J, p. 556.
- ^{xxii} Denton County Deed Record, Volume 1229, p. 759-761.
- ^{xxiii} Minutes from the Ladies Cemetery Society and Belew Cemetery Association, p. 194.
- ^{xxiv} Belew p.224.
- ^{xxv} "Aubrey Feeds A Multitude," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, 27 November 1959, p.1.
- ^{xxvi} "Hundreds Due In Aubrey for 61st Annual Dinner-Reunion," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, 18 November 1962.
- ^{xxvii} Minutes from Belew Cemetery Association, 21 October 1980 and 24 November 1980.
- ^{xxviii} "Two Elderly women killed near Aubrey," *Denton Record-Chronicle*, 26 October 1983, p.1.