

OAKWOOD CEMETERY

DENTON, TEXAS

Historical Narrative researched and written by Carroll Rich for Texas Historical Commission THC

Subject Marker Application. Denton County. 1982

TEXAS HISTORICAL MARKER APPLICATION

OAKWOOD CEMETERY

CITY OF DENTON

DENTON COUNTY

TEXAS HISTORICAL MARKER APPLICATION NARRATIVE

OAKWOOD CEMETERY

DENTON, TEXAS

When the county seat was moved to its present location in 1857, the new town of Denton required a cemetery easier to reach than the old one at Alton. Increasing numbers of settlers were building homes near the townsite, and merchants who had formerly operated businesses at New Alton were transferring their goods to building around the square. (1) A burial ground for the rapidly growing town was a necessity.

Hiram Cisco, who had earlier donated forty acres of his land as a part of the original one hundred acres used for the townsite, now offered another acre only 1/4 mile off the southeast corner of the square. The land was a flat pasture covered with a large grove of oak trees. (2) When the property was transferred, the town agreed to its upkeep and named it "City Cemetery." The first grave was for a Mrs. Wilson, who passing through Denton in a covered wagon had died in childbirth. The newborn infant, a daughter died a few days later and was buried beside her mother. (3) Their graves were marked simply with large sandstone slabs laid upright at an angle to resemble roof tops. There are no inscriptions, but the gravestones are still here, the child's having fallen.

In subsequent years many of Denton's early settlers were buried in City Cemetery, among them Jesse M. Blount and his wife Sophie, who came to Denton from Mississippi in 1857, arriving with their children and slaves in an oxen wagon. Blount helped to lay out the new county seat and bought one of the lots on the west side of the square, where he and Dr. J. M. McIlheny owned a mercantile building which burned in the fire of 1860. Shortly after his

arrival in Denton, J. M. Blount was elected county treasurer and later chief justice (county judge). After the Civil War he was elected to the State Senate, but in 1866, the federal reconstructionist government removed him from that office. (4)

Near the graves of the Blounts are those of the family of J. M. McNeil, another early settler, a merchant and county clerk, who died at age 49. In his account of McNeil's death, I. D. Ferguson, a former mayor and teller of sentimental anecdotes, says that McNeil, having "a premonition of his approaching dissolution," asked that his favorite preacher, W. E. Bates, come to Denton so that McNeil could hear a final sermon before death. The minister was invited to spend Saturday night at the McNeils' house, and the two men talked far into the evening. After going to his room, the host became ill, and when Bates was called to his bedside, McNeil, reaching a hand toward the minister, said, " 'Preacher, goodbye. I am goin'. He fell back on his pillow, dead." (5)

Buried near McNeil is his brother, W. J., a Confederate soldier who later served as county clerk and then tax assessor, and some twenty yards southeast of these graves lies Colonel Thomas Gynn Cosbey Davis, a cousin of Jefferson Davis, "whom he resembled very much in manners and features." Colonel Davis was born in Richmond, Virginia, in 1814 and later served in the Illinois Senate. He was a friend of Abraham Lincoln before Lincoln's election to the Presidency, but with the outbreak of war Davis' sympathies lay with his family in the South. He died in Denton at the home of his niece, Mrs. J. R. Ruddell, on January 10, 1891. (6)

Other graves of interest are those of the following: Henderson Murphy, county treasurer, first hotel owner in Denton, and father of the first white child born within the limits of the original townsite; Colonel C. C. Lacy, dis-

strict surveyor who platted the city; Dr. G. W. Hughes, early settler, alderman, merchant, and physician; and John A. Withers, a Confederate veteran who served as mayor. The list is long of locally famous men and women whose graves are here. (7)

The locally infamous are here also. On the west side near the middle of the cemetery stand two sandstone markers for the graves of Andrew and George Brown, young murderers who on a change of venue from Montague County were tried and executed in Denton in 1879. Their public hanging in November of that year drew a vast attendance.

A hugh crowd gathered at Denton for the occasion. Crowds of people from everywhere began to gather two or three days before the event and camped around the town. There was not room enough inside the jail house, and the gallows were put up outdoors just north of the jail. The curious crowd filled the street and overflowed into the unoccupied brush-covered pasture across North Elm Street.....(8)

It was an exciting day. The saloons filled early, and by nightfall there was a drunken riot. The next day the crowd had dispersed, and "the bodies of said George Brown and Andrew Brown were each and both decently buried." (9) Today Andrew Brown's sandstone marker is legible, and although George Brown's is badly eroded, the word EXECUTED is still clear.

During the Confederate memorial services fifty years after the Civil War there arose great dissatisfaction over the town's neglect of the old cemetery. Many of the graves were so overgrown that flowers could not be placed on them, a far cry from the time when the grounds had been praised in fine writing as a beautiful place " where the sun finds the rose trees that were planted many years ago, and the tangles of the wild flowers and tame flowers in great profusion at the first break of day, and sends its last smile over the western

prairie down into the lonesome little city.....(10)

Because of the appalling condition of the cemetery in 1915, the City Commission agreed to clear it at town expense and to lay out new walks. One hundred dollars was allocated for its care for two months. (11) In 1915 there was also some unhappiness with the stark old name, "City Cemetery," but not until 1931 was its name changed to Oakwood. (12)

Today the cemetery is infrequently used; perhaps one new grave is dug each year. There are approximately seven hundred and fifty marked graves and any number of unmarked ones. In the 1960's when the city installed a drainage ditch on the lower southwestern side, many unmarked graves were unearthed in the process of digging and grading. This part of the cemetery had in earlier years been used for indigent burials. (13) Before a chain link fence was installed (sponsored and paid for by the Denton Business and Professional Women's Club) around the grounds, vandalism was rampant. Many of the markers were broken or stolen. Others still present are now obviously not at their original sites. Some of the gravestones lean dangerously; others are shattered. Locking the two gates at dusk would help to preserve the stones, but at present both are open at night. Under the supervision of the Denton Parks and Recreation Department, maintenance and security has been inconsistent over the past decade. Again, the Denton Business and Professional Women's Club is taking the leadership role in trying to encourage the City to provide better care for this historic cemetery. Under the direction of Chairman Hazel Frederick, the organization has raised the funds necessary to pay for a Texas Historical Marker for Oakwood Cemetery.

Written by:

Carroll Rich
Denton, Texas

F O O T N O T E S

(1) C. A. Bridges, History of Denton, Texas, (Waco, 1978), - pages 72-76.

(2) Edmond F. Bates, History and Reminiscences of Denton County, (Denton, 1918), page 315 .

(3) Bates, page 318, and Lorena Bates Smith, the historian's daughter. Invaluable details from Mrs. Smith concerning other graves in Oakwood Cemetery have been collected by Yvonne Jenkins and are now in the archives of the Denton County Historical Commission.

(4) Captain B. B. Paddock, ed., History of Texas: Fort Worth and the Texas Northwest, (Chicago, 1922), IV, pages 681-82.

(5) Bates, page 317.

(6) Denton Monitor, January, 1891. Reference in Jenkins' notes from Mrs. Smith.

(7) Both Bates and Bridges list many others buried here whose markers have disappeared or were never made.

(8) Bridges, page 166.

(9) Bates, page 149.

(10) Bates, page 315.

(11) Bates, page 315.

(12) Bridges, page 389.

(13) Thelma Stevens, curator of Denton County Courthouse on the Square Museum.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Bates, Edmond F., History and Reminiscences of Denton County, Denton: McNitzky Printing Company, 1918. Reprinted, Terrill Wheeler Printing, Inc., 1976.

Bridges, C. A., History of Denton, Texas, Waco: Texian Press, 1978.

Jenkins, Yvonne A., "Oakwood Cemetery". Denton, 1981. Typewritten notes on file in the Denton County Historical Commission Archives.

Paddock, Captain B. B., ed., History of Texas: Fort Worth and the Texas Northwest. Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1922.