

OLD ALTON CEMETERY

DENTON, TEXAS

Historical Narrative researched and written by Melbagene Ryan for Texas Historical Commission THC
Subject Marker Application. Denton County. 2002

Old Alton Cemetery

Old Alton Cemetery is closely related to the early establishment of Denton County. Alton was the county seat of Denton County from 1851 until 1856 and home to a small settlement of pioneers. The cemetery began when Rebecca Daugherty, a member of one of those early families, died in 1852 and was buried on Daugherty family property about a quarter-mile north of Alton's log courthouse.¹ Other burials followed on the same site, and in 1909, the land where the graves were located was donated and dedicated as a private cemetery.

Old Alton Cemetery is located on three acres at 5720 Teasley Lane, in Tract 32 of the J. Dickerson Survey, about a half-mile outside the city limits of Denton, Texas. Denton is the fourth and present county seat of Denton County.

When Texas joined the United States in 1846, officials of the new state created a number of counties. Denton was carved out of Fannin County that year, and a county seat was created named Pinckneyville to honor Texas Governor J. Pinckney Henderson.² The first court was held under a big oak tree. In about 1852, the spot where Pinckneyville once stood was identified and the stump of the old tree was secured. The stump was kept by the University of North Texas museum for several years. Pinckneyville remained the county seat for not quite two years. The small settlement was located almost in the center of the county as was provided by the original act of the Texas Legislature that created Denton County, but the site was unsatisfactory for various reasons. Pinckneyville was distant from population centers in south and east Denton County and there was insufficient water.³

On February 24, 1848, by an act of the Second Texas Legislature, the Denton County seat was moved about three miles from Pinckneyville to a new location that was named Alton. This second county seat, located in present-day Corinth, also was unsatisfactory. Again, lack of water was a problem. The pioneers dug a well but couldn't find water.⁴

On November 26, 1850, the State Legislature passed an act removing the county seat to a third site, this one at the residence of Alexander E. Cannon on the banks of Hickory Creek about three

miles southwest of the first Alton. County officials kept the same name — Alton — for the new location, a duplication that has caused considerable confusion through the years. For a time, the two county seats were called Old Alton and New Alton. Eventually, however, memories of the short-lived first Alton dimmed, and the county seat on Hickory Creek became known as Old Alton. ⁵

Alexander Cannon's residence, located on what was later called the "Old Wire Road," was the seat of government only temporarily. Another state legislative act on November 26, 1851, exactly a year later, moved the seat of government to a nearby tract of land donated by Cannon. Citizens built a courthouse there of hewed logs. Before the log courthouse was built, however, court was held under a nearby oak tree. ⁶ A granite stone marked the location. The granite marker stood near the home of Frank Stuart on Hickory Creek Road for many years. When Mr. Stuart sold the property in the 1940s to H.B. Thompson, the granite marker remained on the east side of the road about a hundred yards north of the Old Alton Bridge over Hickory Creek. In 1970, the marker was moved to Old Alton Cemetery and still stands just inside the gate, on the left. ⁷ The inscription reads:

1851 1857

Dedicated to The memory

of The

Denton County Pioneers

Who Founded Alton

By

Benjamin Lyon Chapter

Daughters of The

American Revolutiion

1930

Alton grew into a small village as more families and businesses settled up and down Hickory Creek in the county seat. There were stores, the Murphy Hotel, a post office, a land office, a law office, and a subscription school, the first school taught in Denton County.⁸ In 1851, seven families were said to be living in the Alton community. In 1852, Rebecca Daugherty was buried on family property, and other burials soon followed. That was the beginning of what became known later as Old Alton Cemetery.

In 1855, some of the early pioneers met at the Murphy Hotel to organize a church. The church was first named Hickory Creek Baptist Church but was reorganized in 1890 as Old Alton Baptist Church. In 1904, the church was again reorganized by Dr. W.C. Lattimore, and a new church house was built.⁹ When another new church was built in 1986, the old church building was moved 100 yards from its original site closer to Old Alton Cemetery. Plans were begun then to try to preserve the old church, which is still in good condition. The church parsonage is between the old and new churches.

By 1856, there was another general demand to move the county seat. Alton was at least five miles southwest of the center of the county. The northern and western sections of the county had been filling up and people in those areas found Alton too far away to travel and conduct county business.¹⁰

In an election In November, 1856, voters chose to again move the Denton County seat, this time to a hundred-acre tract only three-fourths of a mile from the center of the county. They named the new county seat Denton in honor of John B. Denton, for whom the county was named.¹¹

Soon after lots were sold in Denton, businesses in Alton moved to the new county seat and the old log courthouse was burned.¹² Historian C.A. Bridges wrote that, although Alton was “small, crude and primitive,” it was a training field for strong leaders of the generations that followed.¹³

After the county seat was moved, family farms and homes remained around the Alton settlement, however, and some families continued to bury their dead in Old Alton Cemetery.

In 1902, a photograph was made of men in the Alton community on horseback beneath the big

oak tree that had served as an early courtroom.¹⁴ Mrs. J.H. Davidson and her brother, Joe Daugherty, identified the men as: Dennis Beard, Jess Hathaway, Joe Daugherty, Louis Anderson, Will Stuart, Emmet Munday, John Fry, Magnas Anderson, Dolf Hathaway, Frank Stuart, Tom Fry, Jess Stuart and Claude Ratliff.

Many members of those families intermarried, and many of their descendants still live in the Alton community, including the Daughertys, Stuarts, Ryans, Frys and others. As new generations grew up, stories of early days were handed down to the children.

James Madison Daugherty (Feb. 24, 1809-July 5, 1863) moved his family to New Alton in 1851. After his daughter Rebecca was buried on family property in 1852, other relatives and neighbors began to use the burial spot. In 1909, Boone Daugherty, son of James Madison Daugherty, donated the three-acre tract that encompassed the existing graves for a community cemetery.¹⁵ The Daughertys were farmers and operated a pottery kiln in Old Alton.¹⁶

John W. Stuart (Oct. 17, 1852-August 9, 1923) moved from Tennessee to the Alton community in 1877. He married Emma Whyburn (June 15, 1857-Dec. 26, 1928) whose family had immigrated to Texas from Devonshire, England. Both are buried at Old Alton Cemetery. John W. Stuart donated land for a school and was a school trustee, among other civic activities.¹⁷

Frank Stuart (1883-1953), son of John W. Stuart, was born in the Old Alton community and lived there all of his life. He was buried in Old Alton Cemetery. His land included the site of the Alton log courthouse and he built his house on the spot where Henderson Murphy's hotel once stood.¹⁸

Wayne Stuart Ryan, (September 21, 1921-July 25, 1998) John Stuart's grandson, was born in the Old Alton community, and lived there for all of his life. He shared many memories of life in Old Alton when he was growing up and the family stories he had heard of earlier days in Old Alton.¹⁹

Decoration Day has always been observed on the last Sunday in April at Old Alton Cemetery. Wayne Ryan accompanied his family to the all-day event regularly. To prepare for the day, families and friends would gather days in advance at the cemetery to scrape the ground. Using hand hoes, they scraped the entire cemetery so clean that no blade of grass could be seen.²⁰

When Decoration Day arrived, people came to the cemetery in buggies, wagons and T model cars. Everyone brought flowers to decorate the graves. The occasion also was referred to as "All Day Singing and Dinner on the Ground." Everyone brought food. Men carried benches from the church outside and placed them back to back under the shade trees just outside the cemetery. People would line up to fill their plates and sit on buggies and wagons or stand to eat their food.²¹

After the meal, singing would begin in the Old Alton Baptist Church. Someone would play the piano while others sang as a group. People would form quartets, or sometimes quartets would come from Denton to perform. While singing was underway, officers of the church would have their annual business meeting in the cemetery. The chairman would stand on the stump of a tree and pass the hat for donations during the meeting.²²

During the year, when burials were scheduled at the cemetery, volunteers dug the graves six feet deep by hand. They lowered the caskets with a crane and shoveled earth into the graves by hand.

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Decoration Day continues to be observed on the last Sunday in April and the business meeting of the Cemetery Association is held in the church on that date. Relatives and friends from a large area attend, bring flowers to decorate the graves and visit.

The association was officially incorporated on October 10, 1974, when the Texas Secretary of State approved the Articles of Incorporation for the Old Alton Memorial Cemetery Association. The four articles specify the association name, its status as a non-profit association, its duration and its purpose. Copies of the Articles of Incorporation and the association by-laws are attached.

The association's stated purpose is: "to maintain and memorialize the Old Alton Cemetery located in Denton County, Texas; to provide for its perpetual care, upkeep and beautification; and to preserve and protect for posterity its historical value."²⁴

A perpetual care fund was established on the same date with donations from relatives of those buried in the cemetery, families who expect to be buried there and others interested in Old Alton

Cemetery.

On May 22, 1980, the cemetery association executed an agreement of trust with a bank in Denton which, as trustee, has investment and management powers.

The association assures that the cemetery is well cared for and maintained, and friends and relatives also carefully tend the cemetery and keep flowers on many of the graves most of the time. There are twelve trees inside the cemetery and more trees just outside the cemetery on two sides.

For many years, a wire fence surrounded the cemetery. In the late 1930s, donations were taken and enough money raised to install a four-foot high cyclone fence with a double gate. Later, an arch was erected over the gate with the inscription "Old Alton Cemetery - Established 1851." Arrangements are being made now to replace the cyclone fence with one of wrought iron.

Old Alton Cemetery has today, at best count, 663 graves; 588 marked with tombstones and inscriptions; 55 marked with rocks or sandstone but without inscriptions; and 20 unmarked graves. The Denton County Historical Commission committee made an inventory of the graves in 1977. The inventory was updated in 1994 and again in 2000.

Thirty-two graves are those of veterans. The oldest are three Civil War veterans: Boone Daugherty, (March 3, 1843-July 24, 1932), who donated the land for the cemetery. He was a sergeant in Company G, 18th Texas Cavalry, Confederate States of America; M.B. Roark, C.S.A., Co. A, 29th Texas Cavalry, no dates; and W.I.N. Roark, C.S.A., Co. H, 2nd Texas Cavalry, no dates.²⁵

The first members of the Daugherty family buried at Old Alton Cemetery lie in an area fenced by red brick. The brick was made in the Daugherty family's kiln just a short distance away. Those buried inside the fence are: Robert Daugherty, 1853; James Madison Daugherty, 1863; his wife Eleanor Daugherty, 1869, and Rebecca Daugherty, 1852.

Alongside the Daugherty graves is a memorial plaque, 36 by 18.5 inches, and about seven inches thick, on the ground that says: "These remains nourish other lands: Guy Daugherty, 1878-1958; Jim Daugherty, 1926-1992; Mary Daugherty Lozzi 1927-1966; Neitha Kencade Daugherty,

1885-1931; and Robert Lee Daugherty, 1914-1992.”

Families with the largest number of graves at Old Alton Cemetery are: Starr family, 26 graves; Roach, 24; Madewell, 22; Burch, 20; Daugherty, 15; McDaniel, 13; Fry and Stuart families, 12 graves each; Yeck, 11 graves; Ryan, Lester, Burgoon and Jones families, ten graves each; Henry and Wright families, nine graves each; Johnson, eight graves; and Moore, six graves.²⁶

Families with the earliest burials were: Daugherty family, nine burials between 1853 and 1880; Edwards, four burials from 1878 through 1880; Burch family, two burials, 1879 and 1880; Yeck, two burials, 1859 and 1880; Bridges, Fry and Starr families, one each in 1880.

Seven graves, marked but unidentified, are those of a man, his wife and five children, who were traveling through the Alton community. They camped on the banks of Hickory Creek near Old Alton Cemetery. All seven died of some sudden but unidentified disease. Neighbors at Old Alton got together and built coffins and buried the family in the cemetery with a sandstone for a headstone. No one ever learned their names.²⁷

By the late 1960s, the Old Alton area was a relatively quiet little community centered around the cemetery, church and parsonage. There were about eight farm homes and three mobile homes within a one and half mile radius.

The community experienced gradual growth through the years. A small drive-in grocery store is just north of the cemetery, also, along with a mobile home park containing 13 homes and another mobile home development with 19 units.

More development is planned, and urbanization is spreading across the Old Alton community. Denton County ranked as the fourth fastest growing county in Texas in the 2000 U.S. Census.²⁸ The city of Denton plans to extend its city limits. Subdivisions are going up on the old farms. A housing development with 17 homes now exists just north of the cemetery. At its northern boundary, about 50 houses have been built in another subdivision that plans 213 homes in all.²⁹

Across Teasley Lane from the cemetery, a sign announces the Denton Independent School

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5. Ibid, p 60-61
6. Ibid, p 62
7. Wayne Ryan interview
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- 9 Rayzor, James Newton; History of the Denton County Baptist Association; William A. McNitsky Printing Co.; 1936; p 136
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2. Gordon Fry, 1998-1999
3. Tommy Calvert, March-November 2000
4. Phoebe Ryan Higginbotham, March 1999 - October 2000
5. Patricia Clark, March 1999 - October 2000
6. Ellen Daugherty Shaeffer, September - November, 2000
7. Robert Michael Ryan Jr., October 2000
8. Curtis Burch Jr., October 2000