

RITTER CEMETERY

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(THC) Historic Texas Cemetery Application, Denton County. 2001

Ritter Cemetery

The Ritter Cemetery is in Denton County approximately five miles east of Lewisville, Texas and about two miles north of Highway 121 on Fish Hatchery Road. This cemetery is on County Survey No. 1090 for 320 acres that Illinois native Columbus Ritter received in 1843-4. Peters Colony issued certificate No. 961 and he was listed as a single male in 1850 when the first census was taken.¹ The cemetery is now completely surrounded by land owned by the U.S. Corp of Engineers. Looming over the cemetery to the north is the levee and dam of Lewisville Lake, one of the main sources of water for Dallas, Highland Park, Lewisville and other towns in northeast Texas.

The settlement in this area of Texas began when Peters Colonist Isaac F. Stewart led a group to the westernmost edge of the Colony grant. This group of twelve original pioneers came to Texas from Green County, Illinois and family lore states that it took nearly two years for the entire group to get to Texas and get settled, traveling only a few miles a day, with livestock and equipment along with their families. Isaac's son, Isaac T. Stewart led another group of settlers to land that was to the west of Peters Colony boundaries and the creek they camped by is known as Stewart's Creek.¹¹

The Ritter's land is near the Elm Fork of the Trinity and the nearby crossing was called Ritter's Ford and the small lake was called Ritter's Lake. John Ritter (1795-18--) was listed on the census as being fifty-five when he and his wife Elizabeth came with their six children - Columbus born 1829, William M. born in 1832, Jacob born in 1834, Catherine born in 1837 died in 1898, Delilah born in 1839, and Nancy born in 1841. Columbus was just barely old enough to receive a Peters Colony certificate after he came to Texas with his family.ⁱⁱⁱ

Tom Decker (1858-1935) was eleven years old and the youngest son of Mary Nance Decker (-1879) a widow, when she came to Texas in a wagon train in 1869 with her children from Missouri. They settled in Collin County. John Decker, an older son, who had been wounded in the Civil War was the "man in the family." He died and is buried in Collin County in 1877. ^{iv}

After Tom and Josephine Ritter the daughter of William Ritter married in 1878 they continued to live in Denton County in the Ritter community with their eight children. One son, Lawrence, became a deputy sheriff in Denton County and one of their daughters, Ila (1897-1946), was a nurse in a Denton County hospital. Jacob (1889-1913) was killed in a farming accident when he was twenty-five and his wife, Frances Higgins Decker moved away. ^v

The approximately three acre cemetery was selected by William Ritter and his brother Columbus along with their brothers in-law after they searched for the most beautiful, suitable location on all of their land grants. The head of each household marked off sections for their family members. Brother in law, Tom Decker, marked off his plot by planting small cedar trees at its four corners. He is quoted as saying, "I want to be buried here in this spot when I die" - and he was in 1935. The trees are still growing. The oldest legible marker is that for Elizabeth, the five year old daughter of William and Marinda Ritter, who died in 1860. It is believed others had been buried here prior to 1860, but there are no markers for them.^{vi}

The Stewart's Creek Baptist Church history states that the church was organized in " Mrs. "Rinda" Ritter's home a little one-room log house in 1861." She was the wife of William M. Ritter. Associated with this church were others of the original twelve families that came to Texas from Greene County, Illinois.^{vii}

Of the families whose loved ones are buried in the Ritter Cemetery, is the one grave of George Jackson Miles (1834-1887). He was a member of Co. I, Georgia Infantry, Simm's Brigade, Kershaw's Division and Longstreet's Corp. This was verified in his application for a pension. Longstreet's Corp was in the Battle of Gettysburg and Longstreet was with General Lee at the surrender on April 9, 1865.^{viii} George Jackson Miles was a tenant farmer in Georgia after the civil war

and married his second wife, Martha Amanda Lord "Mandy" (1845-1931) in 1866 and they had nine children. They came to Texas in 1886 to join relatives of both, already in Texas, arriving by train. In Denton County the Miles family lived near the village called Garza before the Trinity was dammed for the Garza-Little Elm Lake. There are six graves in the Ritter Cemetery for this family several were young people killed in tragic accidents as teenagers or young adults.^{ix}

Another family with several gravesites in the cemetery is that of the Newton's. New York native Damon W. Newton (1851-1912) and his wife Mary A. (1859-1945) had nine children but one had died by the time they came to Denton County. Of these children several are buried as adults at the Ritter Cemetery. Son Damon W. (1890-1969) and wife Tommie Decker Newton (1893-1963) daughter of Tom Decker; Fate (1877-1921) and his wife Maude (1882-1974). Fate and Maude's baby, Irene, lived only a few months in 1902. Another infant, Elmer was six months old when he died in 1899. These Newtons first settled in Palo Pinto and other Texas counties before coming to Denton County around the turn of the century. These Newtons were related to the original pioneer Newton family that was one of the twelve original families in 1850s.^x

Another section with interesting history in the cemetery is that of the Curtis family. Mattie Warnack came to Texas ca. 1915 as a widow with six children. She came as a housekeeper for W.R. Curtis (1859-1920) whose wife Elgretta

In 1875, a county court's building on the north side of the square in Denton burned destroying most of the county records.^{xv} The deed records for the cemetery were found in the company files of the Jagoe Abstract Company in 1971. The letterhead for this company states they were founded in 1856 by Judge Joseph A. Carroll and operated since 1874 as the Jagoe Abstract Company.

The Ritter Cemetery Association, Inc. was incorporated in 1973 as a non-profit organization to assist with the upkeep of the cemetery. The original trustees at that time were George Ritter, Joe Decker, and Olen Hasten.^{xvi} In December 1977 a savings account was established at the Lewisville State Bank and the principal was not to be used, only the interest, except for the care of the cemetery.

The cemetery was vandalized between December 1989 and February 1990 and the Association was concerned as sixty-five headstones had been upset and some broken. Some members wondered about moving the cemetery to another location, not so remote. In 1998 a member of one of the families approached the Corps of Engineer concerning moving the 350 graves at the cemetery to another spot on government land. He was concerned with the remote location and others had been afraid that the dam might break and the entire cemetery would be under water. The Corps, in a letter to Dick Arme, the congressman for this

district, assured him that unrestricted access was maintained during normal business hours and after hours the gate was closed and locked, with one key belonging to the Ritter Cemetery Association and one key belonging to the Corps. Colonel James Weller, who signed the letter also stated that there were no funds available to re-inter the bodies.

A separate organization Friends of Ritter Cemetery is being formed and will have annual meetings. This group intends to provide a means of raising money to keep the headstones repaired or replace the ones that are beyond repair. This is also the group who is paying for the Texas Historical Marker at the site.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Denton County Deed Records, Volume C page 284.
- ⁱⁱ History and Reminiscences of Denton County page 37.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Denton County Records furnished by Jagoe Abstract Company.
- ^{iv} Furnished by family members from their personal records.
- ^v Memoirs of family members
- ^{vi} Information taken from the headstones in the Cemetery.
- ^{vii} Baptist Churches in the Denton County Association page 102
- ^{viii} The Story of America page 153.
- ^{ix} Family history compiled by Billye Naugher Myers in 1988.
- ^x History of Denton County – Stewart's Creek Settlement page 37.
- ^{xi} Personal papers of the families.
- ^{xii} Information from the headstones in the Cemetery.
- ^{xiii} Denton County Deed Records Volume 153 page 565 dated February 20th 1917.
- ^{xiv} Denton County Historical Commission has copies of the Cemetery Guide available in their offices.
- ^{xv} Information included in pamphlet prepared by the Denton County Commissioners Court and the Denton County Historical Commission.
- ^{xvi} Filed with the Secretary of State December 21, 1973. Filed in the Denton County Deed Records Volume 871 page 293.

Bibliography Ritter Cemetery

Articles of Incorporation filed for record December 21, 1973

Baptist Churches in The Denton County Association – no date

Bates, Ed. F., History of Denton County published in 1918 by Nitzky Printing Company Denton, Texas

Dallas Morning News article dated May 6, 1999

Denton County Cemetery Guide brochure and Online

Denton County Deed Records

Handbook of Texas – History of Denton County – Online

History of Denton County brochure published in cooperation with Denton County Commissioners Court, Denton County Historical Commission, Courthouse-on-the-Square Museum, City of Denton no date

Letter to Congressman Dick Armey from James Weller – District Engineer – October 13, 1998

Ritter Cemetery Directory – revised April 2000

The Story of America published by the Readers Digest in 1975

Various United States Census Records

Oral History

Norma Decker - April 15, 1999

James Higgins – March 10, 1999