

BRIDGES CEMETERY, DENTON COUNTY, TEXAS
Its Value As A Historical Landmark

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Bridges Cemetery in southeast Denton County, Texas, is proof of the existence of the early settlers who migrated to Texas during the 1800's. By studying the lives of the people buried there one can recapture a part of Texas' past.

Bridges Cemetery is located on a one and one half acre tract, carved out of a one hundred sixty acre tract, originally patented to William A. Bridges. He migrated to the Peters Land Colony area as a single man prior to July 1, 1848. He received a land certificate by Thos. Wm. Ward in 1850 and patented 320 acres in Denton County (Fannin 3rd Class Certificate No. 1602). The 320 acres consisted of two separate tracts of 160 acres each. Abstract number 112, patent number 679/10 is the 160 acre tract on which the cemetery is located.⁽¹⁾

Ed. F. Bates' History and Reminiscences of Denton County, (1918) contains a letter written by an early settler who tells of coming to Denton County with his family at the age of 14 years and renting a cabin at Bridges Settlement near the cabin in which Mildred Bridges and her two sons lived. This was in 1851. The cabins, of the type often found among the early pioneers, were described as being log houses with dirt floors and cracks filled with mud.⁽²⁾

Mary Jo Cowling's Geography of Denton County, (1936) states:

("The first settlement in the county was the Bridges Settlement, made in 1843.....This was near the office of the Peters Colony Land Company... The people who settled here were mostly Baptists and Methodists from Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas.") (3)

From these and other readings it would appear that the Bridges Settlement was so named because the Bridges family was there. Other families, no doubt, came at the same time or soon after settling in the area. We find

more information about the Bridges family from the 1850 Denton County, Texas, census records and from Seymour V. Connor's The Peters Colony of Texas.

John and Mildred Bridges came with their sons William A. Bridges and Dave Bridges, to Texas prior to July 1, 1848. John died before 1850. As Mildred was born in North Carolina, William in Tennessee, and Dave in Illinois, one can trace their pattern of migration to Texas. On the 1850 census, Mildred was living as family #92 with her two sons. By 1860, the census showed family #153 as William A. Bridges, age 30, with his wife Rachel, age 25, who was born in Illinois and their three children, Elizabeth, age 6, Mary, age 3 and Louisa J. age 2, all born in Texas. A son, F.M. Bridges was born in 1860 according to family Bible records.⁽⁴⁾ The Denton Record Chronicle in 1953 published the following:

"The oldest settlement in Denton County was the Bridges Settlement near the present community of Hebron. The Bridges Settlement began to take shape in 1843 when Texas was a Republic. The Peters Colony, which was organized to encourage emigration to this area, had its land office and settlers store in the Bridges Settlement and all Peters Colony employees made their headquarters there." (5)

As the Bridges family settled in this area, so too, did others from their native state and from states in which they had lived during their migration to Texas, where land was plentiful and cheap. Opportunities seem to beckon. Census records for other names shown on the Burial markers in the Bridges cemetery attest to the origins being the same, or similar to that of the Bridges family. As their children reached marriage age, during the migration and after settling in Texas; many of the families became relatives by marriage.⁽⁶⁾

As the settlers in this community began to make their homes in the wilderness area, that was to become known as Denton County, Texas, they must have endured many joys and sorrows. This is evident by reading the markers in the cemetery. The earliest burial date on a stone marker is in-

scribed, "Infant daughter, April 5, 1855". There is no name nor has it been established who the child was; but the marker is among the many Stover family markers. Using this date, the Bridges Cemetery is at least 131 years old. Could the sandstone markers be read, an earlier date is possible. The last marked burial is a child's stone bearing the inscription B. 1969, D. 1969. (7)

The next earliest markers are those of William A. Bridges' two young daughters. He and his wife, Rachel Cook Bridges, buried Louisa J. Bridges, age 21 months on October 12, 1860 and on October 27, 1860 they buried their 6 year old daughter Elizabeth Bridges. These are but a few of the many young children's graves found in the cemetery. Most of the children's markers are engraved with symbols suitable for the very young who were greatly loved and grievously missed after their deaths. (8)

The next deaths noted on the stones are those of William A. Bridges and his brother, Dave Bridges, who died within a month of one another. William died on June 10, 1862, and Dave died on July 7, 1862. Family tradition says that the brothers had returned from the Civil War due to an epidemic of measles and forded the Red River. As a result of the river crossing, complications of the disease set in and both died. Mildred Bridges, their mother, died on July 8, 1868 and is buried in the row of Bridges' family members. William's wife, Rachel, was left a widow with two young children, Mary and F.M. Bridges. F.M. (Francis M.) married Sallie Ashlock Bridges. She was born in Denton County on May 19, 1866. He was born May 12, 1860. They married in October of 1882 and buried their first child in Bridges Cemetery as is shown on the infant's marker; "Infant daughter of F.M. and Sallie A. Bridges, B. 6/24/84 D. 6/24/84". F.M. Bridges later inherited the 160 acres on which the Bridges Cemetery was located and in 1889 he and his wife, Sallie Ashlock Bridges, executed the following deed. (9)

"That we, F.M. Bridges and wife Sallie Bridges of the County of Denton and State aforesaid, ...to us in hand paid by F.M. Davidson, County Judge of Denton as trustee of a Burial Ground for the benefit of the heirs of W.A. Bridges, deceased, and their friends and public.... Witness our hand at this 8 day of Feb. A.D. 1889." (10)

(See copy of deed, appendix I)(See letter from present Denton County Judge, Buddy Cole, granting permission for this application, appendix II)

And so it was that the little family and community cemetery became a permanent burial ground for the friends, relatives, and others who had already claimed it as their final resting place. Today it stands as tangible evidence that at one time there was a Bridges Settlement.

The Cemetery is on a rise with trees along the edge and some one or two in the middle. Wild primroses grow along one fence row while Iris or flags, as they were called by the early settlers, grow among the grave stones. The cemetery is laid out in rows going north and south with the head of the graves at the west and the foot of the graves at the east. Over 100 markers are easily read. Many bear symbols of the Masonic and IOOF Lodges. Most of the stones are tall and indicative of the styles used prior to 1900. Surnames of settlers who came to Denton County before 1900 which are marked with stones and appear on the Denton County Census rolls are: Akers, Ashlock, Bradley, Brady, Branaman, Bratton, Bridges, Cole, Davis, Duncan, Donnell, Ellis, Fortman, Fouts, Gamble, Hays, Herd, Howard, Hughes, Jones, Jennings, Kemp, King, McDaniel, McWhorter, Mayes, Miles, Morton, Nelson, Newman, Ogles, Schultz, Sevedge, Sherrod, Slater, Stover, Trout, Turner, Vardaman. (11)

The cemetery is enclosed by a wire fence and gate. One family plot, within the cemetery, is enclosed with a fine old wrought iron fence handmade before 1900 and in excellent condition. Within this iron fence is the plot of a family named Hays which is designated with a large central granite stone estimated to weigh over a ton. Other individual markers within the Hays plot are of sandstone and granite. (12)

The earliest birth record shown on any of the markers is that of Polly McWhorter born 9-4-1797 and her husband W.P. McWhorter born 7-8-1799. She died in 1887 and he in 1874. Several Confederate Soliders graves are located here. Confederate soldiers who fought with Texas regiments are among the burials.⁽¹³⁾ These early settlers represented merchants, farmers, homemakers, ranchers, doctors, preachers, elected officials and other occupations necessary to make a community viable. Using the surnames to track the history of these settlers, you find they supported the churches, schools and other endeavors of a growing Denton County.⁽¹⁴⁾ Through oral history interviews with those born in the early 1900's you can hear stories of the early cemetery cleanings, memorial celebrations, funeral services, covered dish suppers, picnics and playing with cousins and friends after the labors were done in the cemetery. These are all memories shared with the present generation.⁽¹⁵⁾

The many Stovers buried here are said to be close relatives of the mother of former President, Dwight David Eisenhower. Ellis relatives by tradition tell of being related to Richard Ellis, whose name appears on the Texas Declaration of Independence.⁽¹⁶⁾

Today, the cemetery is a magnet to those present generations who have scattered across the land, but keep in touch by coming back for a walk through the cemetery or for memorial days. Until the late 1970's the land around the cemetery continued to be farm land....at that time radical changes were made.

The cemetery no longer sits on a lonely hill, but is within the city limits of a newly founded town called The Colony, Texas. This new town was devised by real estate developers not unlike those men of the Peters Colony Land Company of long ago. The Colony, Texas was built on farm land purchased from many of the descendents of early families buried in Bridges Cemetery.⁽¹⁷⁾

From the raw farmland rose a town of many thousands. Hundreds of acres of farm land was used to develop a city complete with homes, schools, churches, parks, business strips, libraries and other endeavors indigneous to a thriving city. In developing this new town, the planners have used the early settlers' names from the area around the original Peters Colony Land Office and the settlements that once existed there.⁽¹⁸⁾ They have created something entirely new to the area. The something old is Bridges Cemetery. It can be reached from Lewisville by taking Hwy 121 East to Page Rd. traveling North on Page Rd. to Colony Blvd. and traveling East on Colony Blvd. about 1/2 mile until you stop in view of Bridges Cemetery. A Texas Historical Marker within the cemtery could be a place for future generations of school children to come and view, for study, a part of the area's history.

Through the reorganization of the Bridges Cemetery Association, efforts are underway to preserve the cemetery and its history. Work is being done to document all known graves and mark them. A phamplet is being written detailing the history of the people.

The early Peters Colonists were the new Texans in the early 1800's. Future generations were to become native Texans who are teachers, farmers, merchants, politicians, lawyers, doctors, housewives and ranchers.⁽¹⁹⁾ Each in their own way have, since 1843, left their mark on this great state of Texas. It would be most fitting, as these sons and daughters of the present generation gather to memorialize their past generations, that they should also commemorate the contributions the early settlers made to Denton County and the State of Texas through the dedication of a historical marker noting the final resting place of many of the Denton County, Texas pioneers.

NOTES

1. Denton County, Texas, Original Surveys
Assessor's Abstract Master Cards
Texas General Land Office
William A. Bridges Survey
Abstract of All Original Land Titles
2. Ed. F. Bates, History and Reminiscences of Denton County (Denton, Texas; McNitzky Printing Co., 1918) p. 293-295
3. Mary Jo Cowling, Geography of Denton County (Dallas, Texas; Banks, Upshaw, 1936) p. 16-17
4. 1850, 1860, Federal Population Census, Family # 92, Family # 153, Denton County, Texas; Bridges-Dennison Family Bible, Zelma Messenger, Denton, Texas
5. Denton Record Chronicle (Sunday, Aug. 2, 1953, Sec. 7, p. 5, Col. 5, 50th Anniversary Edition)
6. 1850, 1860, 1870 Federal Population Census, Denton County, Texas
7. Bridges Cemetery Inventory, (Denton County Historical Commission, 1978)
Bridges Cemetery Inventory, (N.L. Gamble, 1986)
8. Ibid
9. Bible Records, Messenger
10. Denton County Deed Records, Book 146, page 119; Original Copy of Deed (Ray McDaniel, Lewisville, Texas)
11. Bridges Cemetery Inventory; Bates, Denton County; p. 27-29, p. 90-104, Census Rolls, Tax Records, Denton County
12. Cemetery Inspection, 1986
13. Bates, Denton County, p. 90-104
14. Ibid, p. 90-104
15. Oral Interviews; Mattie Nelson Howard, Vera Miles Burk, Ray and Betty McDaniel, Zelma Messenger
16. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Mailing list of Bridges Cemetery Association, 1986

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- Texas Mortality Schedules, 1860 Census, Denton County
- U.S. Census Bureau, Federal Population Census, 1850, 1860, 1870; Denton, County, Texas, U. S. National Archives, Microfilm; Washington, D.C.
- Welch, June Rayfield, A Family History; Taylor Publishing Company, Dallas, Texas, 1966
- Addendum I, Deed of Cemetery
- Addendum II, Letter from County Judge Buddy Cole, Denton County, Texas

ORAL INTERVIEWS

1. Lula McDaniel Bridges (Daughter-in-law of F.M. and Sallie Bridges); Garland, Texas
2. Jewel Chumbley; Carrolton, Texas
3. Vera Miles Burk; Plano, Texas
4. Mattie Nelson Howard; New Braunfels, Texas
5. Ray McDaniel and wife Betty McDaniel; Lewisville, Texas
6. Zelma Messenger (granddaughter of F.M. and Sallie Bridges); Denton, Texas
7. Fannie J. Parsons (granddaughter of F.M. and Sallie Bridges); Russell, Kansas