Oakwood Cemetery Chapel Archeological Project

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What happened?

Oakwood Cemetery was established in 1839. The Oakwood Cemetery Chapel was constructed in 1914 as a mortuary chapel and later served as an office space for cemetery sales. The building was in a deteriorated condition and was vacant for several years.

In 2016, during the rehabilitation of the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel, archeologists who were monitoring construction, discovered that the graves of men, women, and children were beneath the footprint of the chapel. An ongoing community engagement process was initiated to seek community feedback. Careful exhumation of these rediscovered individuals proceeded in close consultation with the Texas Historical Commission (THC), under an Antiquities Permit issued by the THC. The individuals' skeletal remains were transferred to bio-archeologists at Texas State University. Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants (Hicks & Company) conducted the monitoring, exhumation, and the analysis of the artifacts associated with the chapel and burials.

While the archeological project is ongoing, the building rehabilitation project was completed in 2018. The Chapel now serves as a visitor center and museum as part of the Museums and Cultural Programs Division of the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD).

2. Have the identities of the people who were found been confirmed?

At this point in time, the identities of the individuals who were found are not known and despite ongoing analysis, may never be known. Oakwood Cemetery, like many historic municipal cemeteries in the United States, originally segregated burials based on race, ethnicity, and class. In 1859, the City of Austin set aside most of Section 4 for burials of people of color, out-of-town visitors, and impoverished people buried at the City's expense. Despite appearances, this area of section 4 is not empty. In fact, records show there are thousands of burials in this area. It is possible that the markers for these burials were constructed of less durable materials, such as wood or small stones, and that many of the markers have deteriorated in the elements or sunk into the ground over time. Most individuals interred within this area were of African American descent, but some people were of Mexican and European descent. Interment records list burials in this area as taking place in the "Colored Grounds," "Negro Grounds," "Stranger's Grounds," "Mexican Grounds," and "Pauper Grounds." This language is a clear reminder that the segregation by race and by socioeconomic class that defined people in life, also defined them in death.

3. What did the bio-archeological and archeological analysis entail?

The bio-archeological team based at Texas State University conducted an analysis of the individuals' skeletal remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, gender, and approximate age. In some cases, physical remains can also inform about the cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health and levels of nutrition or stresses endured. Further, artifacts analyzed

by Hicks & Company revealed aspects of material culture and the cultural affiliation of those buried in this section. These analyses did not, however, provide information about the individual identities of the people who were unearthed. The analysis of the remains, which date to the mid-to-late 1800s, was completed in 2020. The report was developed by the archeological contractor for the Oakwood Chapel project, Hicks & Company, and their sub-consultant, the Forensic Anthropology at Texas State University. The reports were also reviewed by the THC. The reports can be found here:

- **Volume 1: Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Monitoring and Exhumation Report** (PDF, 13 MB)
- **Volume 2: Oakwood Cemetery Bio-archeological Report** (PDF, 1 MB)

The Oakwood Chapel Museum and Visitor Center developed an interactive digital exhibit based on the reports, All Together Here: Discovery and Remembrance of Chapel Burials.

4. Will the city conduct DNA testing? Are there other tests being conducted? What can DNA testing tell us about the individuals who were discovered? How will DNA analysis be conducted?

PARD has partnered with researchers at the University of Connecticut to conduct DNA analysis and isotopic testing of the individuals who were unearthed.

DNA analysis offers a unique opportunity to learn more about the demographic identities, familial connections, and life experiences of the exhumed people. DNA analysis has the potential to shed light on the following:

- Genetic ancestry and genetic sex of each individual;
- Individual's diet and experience with disease through analyses of dental calculus (hardened tooth plaque) from the individuals' teeth;
- Experiences of stress and trauma and the way those lived experiences may have become embodied;
- Patterns of genetic variation and relatedness among these individuals;
- Relatedness between individuals buried at the Oakwood Cemetery and individuals alive today.

To undertake DNA analysis, a tooth and/or bone sample was collected, sampled, and returned afterwards and was interred along with the respective skeletal remains. Nondestructive and minimally destructive sampling techniques were used. These techniques traditionally involve soaking the tooth or bone sample in a demineralizing solution to release the DNA without drilling or powdering the sample. This process greatly reduces the potential for substantial damage to the sampled tooth/bone. The analysis is taking place in the newly constructed, 800 sq. ft., state-of-the-art Ancient DNA Laboratory at the University of Connecticut. To date, few ancient DNA studies have included individuals from the post-colonial American South and very few ancient DNA studies have focused on marginalized communities in the United States, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and poor white communities, all of whom are represented in the Oakwood Cemetery burials. All genetic data will be considered in conjunction with osteological, archeological, genealogical, ethnographic, and archival research to contextualize the genetic findings and better reconstruct the identities, experiences, and relations of these people.

Another type of analysis that is taking place is isotopic testing, which is used to determine a rough estimation of an individual's geographic region of origin. Isotopic testing uses isotopes (two or more

forms of an element that have the same chemical properties but different atomic masses) to help determine diet and movement across an individual's life. Molars from each individual were sampled for dental enamel as well as dentine, a layer of material beneath the enamel. The dental enamel will be processed to isolate oxygen isotopes. Oxygen isotopes in dental enamel reflect the isotopes found in childhood drinking water. Oxygen isotopes found in drinking water, in turn, reflect local climate patterns providing an approximation of the individual's childhood location. The dentine was processed to isolate the collagen, which reflects carbon and nitrogen isotopes. These isotopes can provide clues as to what kinds of plants and animals an individual consumed during their life. All the samples were returned and reunited with the individual from which they were derived prior to reinterment. The City will not incur any costs associated with the research or analysis.

5. With DNA testing and further examination, will we know more about the causes of death for these individuals?

It is very unlikely that causes of death could be determined through DNA analysis. There is the possibility of gaining further insight into a person's experience with disease, but it would be very difficult to definitively say whether the presence of pathogen DNA was or was not the cause of death for an individual.

6. If a community member is interested in having their DNA compared with DNA from these individuals, how can that happen? How will their DNA sample, genetic information, and privacy be protected?

Living individuals who think they may have a familial connection to one or more of the individuals studied will be invited to work directly with the University of Connecticut researchers and submit a saliva sample for DNA analysis, allowing relatedness to be assessed. Criteria for participation in this process are currently being developed. A community member who wishes to submit DNA for analysis will be asked to provide information about the potential familial connection and sign a consent form that describes the study and any risks or benefits of participation. The DNA samples provided by community members will only be used for comparisons with DNA from the Oakwood Cemetery individuals, and research participants will retain ownership of their biological sample. The sample will not be used for any unrelated research or commercial enterprise, and genetic material or information derived from the sample will not be patented or shared with anyone outside of the research team. There will be no cost to participants in the study and participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

DNA from the 36 individuals interred in Oakwood Cemetery will not be submitted to any commercial DNA labs. Submitting a saliva sample to the University of Connecticut will be the only way to assess whether one has shared DNA with one of the individuals.

Once the University of Connecticut research team is ready to announce a call for samples, PARD will share information through the PARD Cemetery email list (register here) and the Oakwood Chapel email list (register here). A call for samples is expected in 2024. The analysis process is expected to continue through 2025 at the earliest.

7. Where were the remains of the people stored before reinterment?

All human remains were securely stored at the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University (FACTS) prior to reinterment. The mission of FACTS is to advance forensic anthropology and related sciences through world-class education, research, service, and outreach. FACTS faculty, staff, and students uphold the highest code of ethical conduct when conducting forensic anthropological and bio-archeological investigations. Shortly before reinterment, the remains and all associated artifacts and DNA sample material were transferred into purpose-built wooden burial boxes. Each box measures approximately 27 x 14 x 12.5-inches.

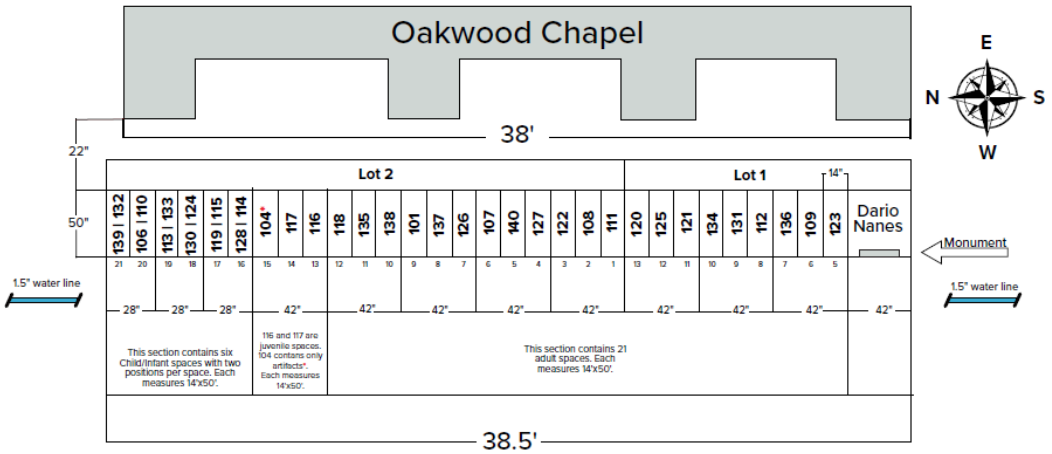
All archeological activities are governed by processes documented in an Antiquities Permit obtained from the THC, which states that if a human burial or human remains were encountered during construction activities, the archeological firm and the City of Austin were to comply with the Texas Administrative Code (Title 13, Part 2, Chapter 22, Rule 22.4 and Rule 22.5), the Texas Health and Safety Code (Title 8, Subtitle C, Chapter 711), and the Texas Penal Code (Title 7, Chapter 31; Title 9, Chapter 42, Section 42.08). In addition, treatment of the discovery was in accordance with Texas Administrative Code, Title 13, Part 2, Chapter 26.

8. Where were the people reinterred?

The feedback from the community engagement process in 2017 was that reinterment of each individual back into Oakwood Cemetery was the most desirable outcome. A 38.5' (North to South) x 50' (East to West) area directly west of the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel was identified. In November 2021, archeologists with AmaTerra Environmental, Inc. monitored careful mechanical scraping in the specified location to verify that the area was devoid of human burials, and to assure that the exhumed adults and children and associated artifacts were reinterred without impacting human burials. The AmaTerra Environmental team led the transfer of remains from the FACTS lab to their final re-interment location. A report summarizing the reinterment project can be found at the following link:

- **Summary Report on Archeological Investigations Supporting the City of Austin's Exhumed Burial Reinterment Effort at Oakwood Cemetery Chapel** (PDF, 26 MB)

A standard cemetery space is 42" wide as defined in the Cemetery's grid system highlighted below and the dimensions of the reinterment boxes are 27" x 14" x 12.5". Each 42" space accommodates three reinterment boxes. Adult skeletal remains were placed into an individual reinterment box and set into the space in an east to west orientation. For infant and child burials, the boxes were constructed with a divider to delineate two individual 28" spaces within each box. Each infant/child space is recorded with four positions identified as Northwest (NW), Northeast (NE), Southwest (SW), and Southeast (SE). The numbering system was based on the archeological process noted in the April 2020 biological summary report and each burial number was preceded by the number 1 (one) to conform with Cemetery Operations internal system. A diagram is provided below, but can be found at this link.



Lot 1

Space/	ID Number
4/Dario Nanes	9/131
5/123	10/134
5/109	11/121
7/136	12/125
8/112	13/120

Lot 2

Space/	10#
1/111	9/101
2/108	10/138
3/122	11/135
4/127	12/118
5/140	13/116
5/107	14/117
7/126	15/104*
8/137	

**Space 104 contains only artifacts, no remains*

Child & Infant Spaces

Space/Position/D#	
16/1/128	19/1/113
16/2/128	19/2/133
17/1/119	20/1/106
17/2/115	20/2/110
18/1/130	21/1/139
16/2/124	21/2/132

Monument Dimensions

The following dimensions reflect the two dimensional footprint of the monument on the ground (length and width). The recommended overall height of these monuments is a maximum of 24". The overall height of any monument design selected shall not exceed 42"

- A monument set over three spaces (42" North to South) to commemorate three adults or juveniles can be a maximum of 40" North to South and 12" East to West (40"x12").
- A monument set over a single space (14" North to South) to commemorate one adult or juvenile can be a maximum of 12" North to South and 6" East to West (12"x6")
- A monument set over a single space (14" North to South) to commemorate two children or infants can be a maximum of 12" North to South and 6" East to West (12"x6") Note: two 12"x6" monuments may be set over a child/infant space to individually commemorate one child or infant per monument *See Infant/Child space diagram*
- A monument set over two child/infant spaces (28"North to South) to commemorate four children or infants can be a maximum of 24" North to South and 12" East to West.

9. How has the community been notified and engaged through this process?

Opportunities for the community to provide input and feedback on the process began within a week of the initial announcement to the community in 2017 (link). In addition to continual updates through email lists to community members, there was an update on the ongoing archeology study of the discovered burials during eight focus group meetings in 2019 with Save Austin's Cemeteries, Rescue Austin Memorial Park, Congregation Beth Israel, Tejano Genealogical Society of Austin, Six Square Cultural Heritage District, Swede Hill Neighborhood Association, Blackland Community Development Corporation, and a public community meeting. Community engagement continues through the process.

As part of the educational outreach for the Oakwood Chapel archeological project, PARD produced *All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance*, a free online two-day symposium held in October 2020, for more than 300 registrants. The symposium featured sessions from 40 nationally renowned archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and community activists about the archeological findings and comparative projects from around the country, and PARD staff further engaged the community in ideas for memorialization. The symposium sessions are featured online on PARD's YouTube Channel. PARD also produced the *All Together Here* online exhibit about the archeological and bioarcheological findings.

In late May 2023, PARD hosted *All Together Here: Monument Dedication and Memorial Event*, a three-day series of events and programs centered around the dedication for a permanent monument to the individuals who were discovered during the Oakwood Chapel restoration. The events included guided tours of the Historic Colored Grounds and the Oakwood Chapel, a talk by a historian, a racial healing

event, a dedication of the monuments, a walking procession, and a homegoing celebration. The May event was part of continued programming PARD has led as part of the archeological and memorialization process associated with the Oakwood Chapel.

- **All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance Press Release** (PDF)
- **All Together Here: A Community Symposium, October 9-10, 2020** link with video recordings of symposium
- **All Together Here**: online exhibit
- **All Together Here: Monument Dedication and Memorial Event, 19-21, 2023** link with video recordings of event

10. What firms and organizations are involved in this project?

The project has been divided into two phases. For the Oakwood Chapel construction phase, which included the exhumation and analysis, Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants (working under prime firm URS) worked with Dr. Kate Spradley from the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University (FACTS). Together, the team produced the Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Monitoring and Exhumation (Vol. 1) & Bio-Archeological Report (Vol. 2) (PDF, 14MB).

For the second phase of the project, Weston Solutions and subconsultant AmaTerra Environmental, Inc. were contracted to conduct the reinterment and advise on the symposium and exhibit. The report can be found at the following link: **Summary Report on Archeological Investigations Supporting the City of Austin's Exhumed Burial Reinterment Effort at Oakwood Cemetery Chapel** (PDF, 26 MB)

The academic partnership for DNA and isotopic analysis is being led by Dr. Deborah Bolnick and graduate students Samantha Archer, M.A. and Corrin Laposki, M.A. from the University of Connecticut in partnership with Dr. Maria Franklin and graduate student Lauren Springs, M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Kate Spradley from FACTS was engaged throughout the entire process. For more information, please see this June 18, 2020 memo to mayor and council.

11. How will the individuals be honored and memorialized?

On Monday, November 29, 2021, at 6:00 p.m., the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel hosted Interfaith Action of Central Texas to conduct a blessing for the reburial of the men, women and children found during the Chapel's rehabilitation. The program was held outdoors in front of the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel and can be **viewed online here**.

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event was part of continued programming PARD has led as part of the archeological and memorialization process associated with the Oakwood Chapel.

12. Can I interview someone about this?

To request an interview, call the City of Austin Parks and Recreation Media Line (512) 974-6723.

13. Where can I find out more?

For more information about this project, visit AustinTexas.gov/OakwoodProject or call (512) 974-2310.