

FRIENDS OF THE CEMETERY

A newsletter sponsored by the
Athens Cemetery Association

Vol. 2

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CROSS DEDICATION SET FOR OCTOBER 24TH

You are cordially invited to attend the dedication at 10:30 AM on Friday, October 24th, of the new Celtic cross which has been erected in the cemetery. This impressive cross, which is over seven feet in height, has been placed in the center of the newly expanded section of the cemetery. At its base is a circular, red brick bench with foot paths leading to it. The cross represents the first beautification project provided entirely by the **FRIENDS OF THE CEMETERY** and a plaque commemorating this gift is attached to its base. The cross and bench make a perfect place for quiet contemplation in our beautiful and serene cemetery.

The new one acre expansion to the cemetery will also be dedicated on October 24th. It has a sprinkler system for its landscaping and is circled by an asphalt road making it easily accessible. This new section was acquired in 2001 by the cemetery association and was originally a part of the historic La Rue family homestead in Athens. It contains 1290 spaces which, in addition to the approx. 1,000 spaces available in the rest of the cemetery, will provide for the needs of Athens for many years to come.

Through the **FRIENDS OF THE CEMETERY** program, your cemetery association plans on many more beautification projects in the future. If you have not yet joined the Friends, please consider doing so now. And to those who have already become a Friend, thank you for your generous support which makes these beautification projects possible.

HISTORICAL MARKER

On May 16, 2003, the Athens Cemetery Association held a dedication ceremony at the entrance to the cemetery, unveiling a historical marker chronicling the cemetery's long and interesting history, and also unveiling an official medallion designating the cemetery as a "Historic Texas Cemetery". Principal speakers at the dedication were the honorable Jerry King, Mayor of Athens, the honorable David Holstein, County Judge of Henderson County and George Harris, Chairman of the Henderson County Historical Commission. Also on the program was Arthur Hall of the Athens Cemetery Association, who related the interesting history of the cemetery to the large number of persons who were in

attendance. Steve Grant, president of the cemetery association, served as master of ceremonies, and Rev. Joe W. Warren, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Athens, gave the invocation and benediction. Following the dedication, a brief walking tour of the old pioneer section of the cemetery was conducted, pointing out some of the more historic grave sites.

CEMETERY HISTORY

When this part of East Texas was first opened to Anglo settlement in the early 1840s, a small settlement soon developed where Athens is today. This small village was called "Alfred", named for its first postmaster, Alfred F. Mallard. It existed by

that name until 1850 when the town became the county seat of newly-created Henderson County. "Alfred" was at that time renamed "Athens".

The current Athens Cemetery was not the first burying ground to be used by the local citizens. The original settlers chose one of the seven hilltops upon which Alfred/Athens was established as the site of the city's first cemetery. This first cemetery was located on what is today the northeast corner of Old Town Alley and Royal Street, just across the street from Bruce Field.

Thirteen persons were interred there but no record has survived to identify them. In 1857, the title to this original cemetery was "donated and granted to the friends of the deceased buried therein to wit: E.J. Thompson, William Iley, John Hanna, Mrs. Robinson, Beuford Holland, John P. Thompson, Susan Cavitt and Rufus F. Dunn" by the Henderson County Commissioners Court with the restriction "that there shall be no more persons buried there at any future time". It is unknown why the decision was made to discontinue the use of this original burying ground.

Those buried in the original cemetery were moved to the new Athens Cemetery on Cemetery Street (now South Prairieville St.) around 1858, soon after the new cemetery was started. All of their graves in the new cemetery were marked with large, flat native stones. Ten of these stones can be seen today in the Pioneer Section.

William J. Brantley, who died on June 7, 1857, was the first person to be buried in the new Athens Cemetery. Mr. Brantley was a prominent planter and was the first county school superintendent of Henderson County. He was also a founding member of Masonic Lodge #165 in Athens. Pleasant P. Tannehill was then serving as Worshipful Master of the Athens lodge and donated land for a Masonic cemetery so that

Mr. Brantley and other lodge members would have a suitable place for burial. This land thus became the beginning of the present Athens Cemetery.

The second burial was that of the daughter of Mr. A.J. Ward, who lived several miles southwest of Athens. Mr. Ward came to Athens with his daughter's body and sought burial in the new cemetery but was told that it was restricted to members of the Masonic Lodge. To accommodate this burial, another acre adjoining the first was donated by Mr. Tannehill and the body of the young girl was laid to rest there. Unfortunately, her grave was not marked and its location today is unknown. Later, as the number of burials increased, another acre was donated by Nat Coleman and added to the first two acres. To this original three acres, one more parcel of land was later donated by Joseph M. La Rue. These four donated parcels became what is today known as the Pioneer Section of the Athens Cemetery.

In 1858, Joseph M. La Rue traveled back to Tennessee to visit kinfolks. While there, he gathered a bag of seeds from the Lebanon Cedar Tree in Lebanon, Tennessee, a tree which had its beginnings in the country of Lebanon. When he returned to Athens, Mr. La Rue planted the seeds at the graves of fellow Masons. He continued this practice until his death in 1887. While some succumbed to lightning strikes and disease over the years, many of these magnificent old cedar trees can still be seen today in the Pioneer Section of the cemetery.

The original Masonic Section, as such, soon lost its identity as it was the desire of many of the lodge's members to be buried with their families. Some of these family plots today have as many as six generations buried in them.

Some time after the turn of the century, the City of Athens decided to no

longer be responsible for the cemetery, and its maintenance and upkeep was left to friends and family members as well as to civic organizations. This system worked well for many years but by 1922, Athens found itself with a cemetery which was running out of both funds and space. In that year a group of concerned citizens met and organized the Athens Cemetery Association. They purchased twelve acres of land from Matthias E. Richardson, Jr. which included not only space for burial purposes, but land for a park between the cemetery and South Prairieville St.

A portion of this newly acquired land, that part which is located in the far southwest corner of the cemetery, was given to Henderson County for use by its citizens who could not afford to purchase a grave space. Of all of the graves in this section, few are identified. Many of the unidentified were disinterred from the County Farm Cemetery which was located on the northeast side of HWY 175 West just south of the T & NO Railroad underpass. These graves at the "county poor farm" had not been individually marked or identified but the superintendent of the county farm had maintained a list of those person buried there. Although lost for many years, the list was discovered a few years ago, although their individual graves remain unmarked.

In 1959, the Athens Cemetery Association took over responsibility for the Pioneer Section. And in 1982, the City of Athens closed Comanche Street which had run through the twelve acres purchased from Matthias Richardson, and the commissioners court turned the county, "paupers" section over to the cemetery association. For the first time, therefore, the entire cemetery came under the stewardship of the cemetery association.

In 1999, a comprehensive survey of the cemetery was made by Frank and Betty Hollowell, indicating that there were 3,694

marked graves. In addition, there are many unmarked graves, particularly in the Pioneer and County Secitons.

In 2001, the cemetery association purchased an adjoining two and one-half acres on the northwest side of the cemetery for future expansion. Approximately one half of this additional land has been fully developed for use today with the remaining acreage being reserved for future development as the need arises.

The individuals buried in the Athens Cemetery came from all walks of life. Among them were veterans of the Indian Wars, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Two served as Grand Masters of Texas Masons. Some were ministers of the gospel while others were doctors, lawyers, judges, newspaper publishers, farmers, ranchers, business people and housewives. Some were wealthy while many others were everyday citizens with no special claim to fame, except that they all contributed to make what Athens and Henderson County are today.

Judge Faulk, in his 1929 history of Henderson County, said with respect to our cemetery-----

"Here can be seen the last resting place of practically all of the old pioneers who laid the foundation for this beautiful little city. Is it too late to return thanks to them for the hardships and inconveniences they underwent that we might enjoy the blessings and comforts which are ours now?"

Judge Faulk's sentiments are as appropriate today as they were in 1929.

For more information, including lot sales, contact:

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