

## L-GOOD SHOW

On Musical Theatre  
on 'Annie' with sparkle

ENTERTAINMENT ♦ E2



## ON TOP IN TEXAS

Mark Martin wins Texas 500  
with 200,000 fans on hand

SPORTS ♦ C1



## BOY CHARGED

13-year-old charged  
in death of 8-year-old

METRO & STATE ♦ B1

## FORECAST

High Low  
77 60  
CHANCE OF RAIN,  
DETAILS, B6

50 CENTS ★★ NS

PUBLISHED SINCE 1871

MONDAY, APRIL 6, 1998

# Austin American-Statesman

## Washing away of a final resting place

Creek  
By Scott S. GREENBERGER  
American Statesman Staff

Maybe, between coughs, 51-year-old Henry Sellers whistled to himself as he swept sawdust off the floors at Nalle and Co., the downtown mill and lumberyard where he worked in the summer of 1899.

The job didn't pay much, but a black man in the Austin of that era couldn't hope for much more. Born in Virginia in 1841, Henry couldn't read or write. He and his wife, Mary, a washerwoman, earned enough to afford a modest bungalow a few blocks from the lumberyard. Maybe, given the realities of the time, Henry considered himself lucky.

Maybe the cough that interrupted Henry's

whistling was the first sign of an illness that would take his life.

Henry was buried July 12, 1899, at Highland Park Cemetery in East Austin. It's not hard to imagine that scene: a preacher's prayers mixed with the soothing sounds of a nearby branch of Boggy Creek. Mary sobbing as Henry's body was lowered into the ground.

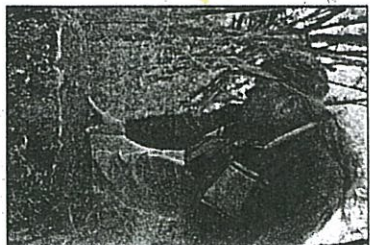
Nothing remains of Henry's home or workplace, and not much is left of the Austin he knew. But Henry's remains, and those of at least 156 other people buried at Highland Park, are still with us. Their bones, in fact, have emerged from graves dug more than a century ago, the burial places disturbed by the natural erosion of the creek bank. Now

they are washing into the creek that Mary Sellers likely stood next to in 1899.

In the spring of 1995, archaeologists hired by the city to investigate the site of a city flood control project discovered a human femur in the Tannehill Branch of Boggy Creek, off Greenwood Avenue. Upstream, they found more bones protruding from an eroded bank. Nearby, nearly hidden in the thick undergrowth, were six tombstones.

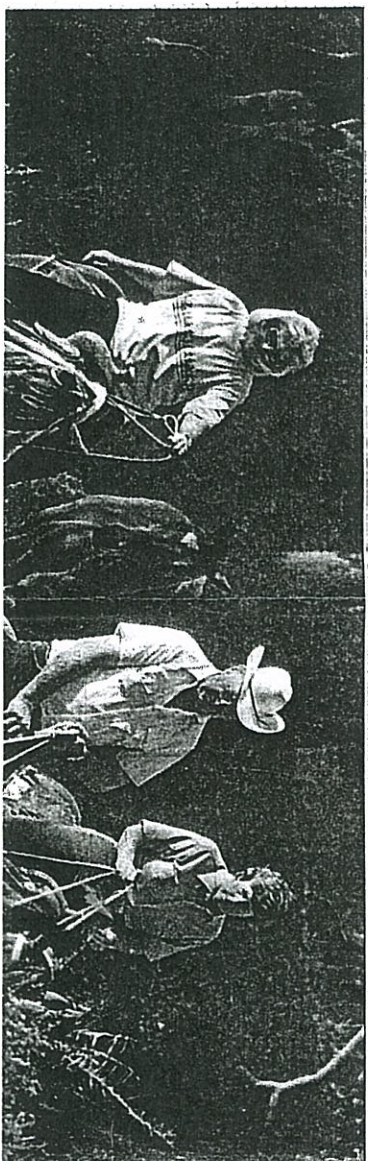
Tramping through the woods, the archaeologists had stumbled upon Highland Park, abandoned long ago and nearly forgotten. The city assumed ownership of the burial ground at some point — no one is sure when — but

See Creek, A7



Archaeologist Jerry Jones, who for three years has sought protection for the graves at Highland Park Cemetery, examines a marker from the 1890s burial ground. Thick vegetation covers some of the tombstones and graves that haven't eroded into the banks of Boggy Creek. Rebecca McElree

## Urban sprawl putting horses out of the pasture



## Drug may cut rate of breast cancer

■ Researchers in six-year study say tamoxifen reduces risk by 45% in some women



# Austin Creek erosion washing away century-old burial ground

Continued from A1  
By Rick Kiser for the Star-Telegram

Archaeologist Terry Jones later uncovered a list of the people buried at Highland Park. The vast majority of them likely were African American, based on the cemetery's location and the absence of permanent markers. The list also includes about 20 people with Hispanic surnames. At that time, white people usually weren't buried with minorities.

For three years, Jones has had to get the city to protect the graves. But city officials questioned whether Austin was responsible for the site — despite the archeologists' May 1995 report, which cited a 1975 city document saying the city owned the land. Last week, the Austin American-Statesman presented city officials with information submitted by the archeologists three years ago. Given those findings, the city conceded Austin owns the cemetery.

Ron Sparks, who oversees the city's five cemeteries, says the city probably will conduct a survey to determine Highland Park's boundaries. When that is complete, it may extend the boundaries of nearby Evergreen Cemetery to take in the older cemetery. Archeologists, in their 1995 report, noted that several of the tombstones they found were inside Evergreen's back fence, in a heavily wooded area about 100 yards behind the city cemetery's manicured rows.

More urgent, Jones says, is the need to halt the erosion that is disturbing the graves. The city's watershed protection department says it could do so fairly easily but that its normal mission is to prevent the flooding of homes, roads and bridges, not abandoned cemeteries.

Cost is also an issue. Stopping the erosion would require about \$100,000, money that isn't in the department's budget.

Jones says city officials promised him years ago they would take action. He wonders whether events would have unfolded more quickly in another part of town.

"If these were the ancestors of some white folks in West Austin, there's no way in the world their



Rebecca McElroy/AAS  
Archaeologist Terry Jones combs the eroding banks of Boggy Creek near what was once Highland Park cemetery. Bones have been unearthed naturally from the site's unprotected or ill-marked graves.

bones would be washing into some creek over there," Jones said. "It's something that people at the city have been aware of for a long time. I don't think they'll do anything about it until they have eggs on their face."

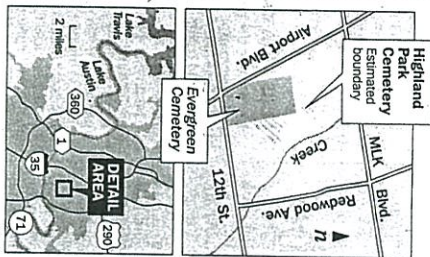
## Silvers of history

Scraps of information from the 1880 census and century-old Austin city directories, which identify residents by race, make it possible more than 100 years later to partially reconstruct Henry Sellers' life.

According to the census, there

was one Henry Sellers in Travis County in 1880: a 38-year-old African American who lived with his wife, Mary, and two grandsons, 6-year-old Eugene Ochiltree and 4-year-old Walter Ochiltree. Neither Henry, a "laborer," nor Mary, a "washerwoman," could read or write. Both Henry and Mary were born out of state, Henry in Virginia and Mary in Tennessee. In all likelihood, both were born into slavery.

Those buried at Highland Park died during the early 1890s, according to the burial list, which might be incomplete. But the 1880



AAS

census offers the best possible snapshot of their lives. As generations of frustrated historians know, the 1880 census buried in a Washington, D.C., fire in 1921.

The 1891-92 Austin city directory includes a black Henry Sellers, listing his residence as 1311 E. Seventh Street and his occupation as a laborer at Nalle and Co., a mill and lumberyard on East Fifth Street.

Sellers was buried at Highland Park on July 12, 1892, according to the burial list. His name disappears from the city directory in 1893-94.

Is the Henry Sellers on the Highland Park burial list the same Henry Sellers in the census and the directory?

Perhaps, but not definitely. The directory lists another black Henry Sellers, a porter at a downtown liquor and cigar store. His name continues in the directory after 1892, but the directories often list people several years after they died.

Imprecise as they may be, the city directories offer more clues about the origin of the bones in the creek.

Perhaps they are the remains of Fannie Washington, another person who is on the burial list and in the directories. Washington

taught blind children at the Texas Colored Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute.

Or they could belong to Charles Organ, a huge washer at Weed and Rosenburg's staples on East Eighth Street. Maybe they are the bones of Charles Johnson, a stocker at the Austin Gaslight and Coal Co., or Robert Turner, a waiter at the Driskill Hotel.

They could belong to Maria de Montalvo, whose weathered gravestone still stands. Burial records from St. Mary's Church state only that de Montalvo, "age about 30," was buried July 27, 1892. She isn't listed in any directories, although a barber with a similar name may have been a relative.

Of the 159 people on the burial list, only a handful are in the city directories or in the census, and church burial records are hard to come by. The county didn't keep death records until after the turn of the century, and newspapers rarely mentioned the deaths of blacks and Hispanics.

In the Texas of the early 1890s, the backlash against Reconstruction, during which African Americans enjoyed a brief flowering of civil rights, was in full force. To be a minority resident of Austin near the turn of the century was to be a second-class citizen — with a history not deemed worthy of record.

"The silvers, the little bits of history that are there — that's all we have," said Gene Burd, an associate journalism professor at the University of Texas. Burd helped Jacob Fontaine, a local African American minister, research a 1880 book about his grandfather, who died in 1886.

"If you don't have the power or the medium, your story's never going to get told."

## Lost in the brush

The unpaved road that leads to Highland Park begins behind a dead-end barrier on East 17th Street, near the corner of Loreo Drive. The road, barely perceptible under weeds and earth, descends through the woods along Evergreen's northern boundary for several hundred yards, finally reaching a clearing filled with

bluebonnets and pink evening primroses. The creek lies just beyond the clearing.

The tombstones are along, and within, Evergreen's eastern fence, but the area is so thick with underbrush that it isn't readily apparent that anyone has touched the area. Only an expert such as Jones recognizes the common periwinkle growing nearby as a critical clue. The plant, commonly known as grave myrtle, isn't indigenous to the area and often was planted in 18th-century cemeteries.

The tombstones aren't easy to find. Even the people who live in the homes nearest the dead and — some of whom have lived there for 30 years — weren't aware of their existence. "Twenty-one-year-old Quentin Blakey, who grew up at 3305 E. 17th St.," said he and his friends used to play in the woods, but the old burial ground was new to him, too.

Of the six tombstones found, only two have legible inscriptions — de Montalvo's and the grave of Albina Mendosa, who died in 1894. A few small cobblestones suggest infant burials, Jones says.

What happened to the rest of the tombstones?

Gerron Hite, a cemeteries expert at the Texas Historical Commission, points out that poor 19th-century Texans couldn't afford to mark the graves of their loved ones with granite or limestone, settling instead for simple wood and metal markers that would not stand the test of time.

Traces of the lives — and deaths — of the people buried at Highland Park are hard to find more than a century later. They weren't given much of an opportunity to make a lasting mark. For the most part, they worked and raised their families in obscurity.

Today, city officials acknowledge that the people buried at Highland Park deserve a better final resting place. The question is whether the city has the will, or the money, to guarantee that they will have it. Sparks said.

"Our heart's in the right place, but are we willing to put our pocketbooks in the right place?"