




MEMORANDUM

TO: Human Rights Commission

FROM: Kimberly McNeeley, CPRP
Director, Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

DATE: June 18, 2020

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Academic Partnership for DNA testing

The purpose of this memo is to notify City Council that the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) is in the early stages of exploring an academic partnership to conduct DNA testing of human remains exhumed at Oakwood Cemetery in 2017. As you may recall the remains were discovered during the Oakwood chapel restoration project and date from the mid to late 1800s. A May 14, 2020 [memo](#) to City Council provided a project update regarding recent reports from the archeological and bio-archeological analysis as well as community engagement and educational outreach activities.

Since May 14th PARD entered into discussions with Dr. Deborah Bolnick, Associate Professor, University of Connecticut, about how the field of anthropological genetics may be applied to the Oakwood Cemetery archeological investigation. Dr. Bolnick is an anthropological geneticist and biological anthropologist who explores how sociopolitical forces, historical events, and social inequalities shape human genomic and epigenomic diversity, as well as human biology more broadly. While discussions are in the early stages, PARD is interested to learn if Dr. Bolnick's research can shed more light on the lives of the 36 individuals who were discovered during the restoration of the 1914 Oakwood Chapel. Should the partnership move forward, the city would incur no costs associated with the research or analysis.

The extraction and analysis of DNA from the remains offers a unique opportunity to learn more about the identities, familial connections, and life experiences of the exhumed people. DNA analysis may make it possible to shed light on (1) the genetic ancestry and genetic sex of each individual, (2) the individual's diet and experience with disease, (3) experiences of stress and trauma and the way those lived experiences may have become embodied, (4) patterns of genetic variation and relatedness among these individuals, and (5) relatedness between individuals buried at the Oakwood Cemetery and individuals alive today. If the preservation of the DNA in the Oakwood Cemetery remains is sufficient to permit these analyses, living individuals who think they may have a familial connection may be able to submit a saliva sample to the Bolnick lab for DNA analysis, allowing relatedness to be assessed. All genetic data would be considered in conjunction with osteological, archeological, genealogical, ethnographic, and archival

research in order to contextualize the genetic findings and better reconstruct the identities, experiences, and relations of these people.

In order to undertake DNA analysis, a tooth and/or bone sample would be collected from the remains of each individual selected for DNA testing and would be returned and interred along with the remains. Nondestructive and minimally destructive sampling techniques would be used at all stages of the analysis. The samples will be analyzed in the newly constructed, 800 sq. ft. state-of-the-art Ancient DNA Laboratory at the University of Connecticut.

The proposed collaboration offers an unprecedented opportunity because there is a significant dearth of ancient DNA studies from the post-colonial American South and very few studies of ancient DNA from marginalized communities in the United States, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and poor white communities, all of whom are represented in the Oakwood burials.

Dr. Bolnick works closely with Indigenous partners to assess the genetic and epigenetic impacts of settler colonialism in the southern United States and central Mexico, and her lab is currently analyzing DNA from African American cemeteries in Texas and Georgia to help elucidate the identities and experiences of individuals interred there. Dr. Bolnick was a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin from 2005 – 2018 and is now affiliated with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Connecticut. Joining Dr. Bolnick in this research endeavor is Dr. Maria Franklin, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Franklin is a historical archaeologist whose research focuses on the experiences of people of African descent in the U.S. from the colonial era to the 20th century. She has published on topics that include African American cultural production and social life, race and gender, and the racial politics of archaeology. Dr. Franklin's current research explores the lifeways of black Texans following emancipation. The team also comprises Ms. Samantha Archer, ancient DNA researcher and PhD student at the University of Connecticut. She is leading the laboratory analysis of the Sugar Land 95, a group of nearly 100 people identified in unmarked graves in Sugar Land, TX, a suburb in southwest Houston, in February 2018. Her Ph.D. dissertation will analyze genomic data from historical archaeological sites in Texas from the 19th and 20th centuries in order to investigate the molecular correlates of stress and violence experienced by African Americans in the Jim Crow South and the ways in which ancient DNA can help resurface identities of individuals lost to the historical record.


PARD will continue to update city leadership and cemetery stakeholders as the project progresses. For more information and complete background on the Oakwood Cemetery archeological investigation, please visit the project [website](#).

PARD will continue to update City Council and community members on the process. Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.



MEMORANDUM

TO: Human Rights Commission

FROM: Kimberly McNeeley, CPRP
Director, Austin Parks and Recreation Department 

DATE: May 14, 2020

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update

The purpose of this memo is to update City Council on the completion of the Oakwood Cemetery archeological report and next steps for the reinterment, memorialization, and educational outreach related to burials that were discovered beneath the Oakwood Chapel during its rehabilitation. The Parks and Recreation Department (PAR) is moving forward to the next phase, which was outlined in a December 13, 2019, [memo](#) to City Council.

The analysis of the remains, which date to the mid to late 1800s, is complete and the report is posted on our project [website](#). The report was developed by the archeological contractor for the Oakwood Chapel project, Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants, and their sub-consultant, the Forensic Anthropology at Texas State University. The reports were also reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission.

Of the individuals analyzed, the biological affinities of many could not be determined. Of the 20 individuals that could be determined, the findings demonstrate a likely diverse racial and/or ethnic representation including individuals determined to be Black/African American, Hispanic/Mexican/Mexican American, White/European-descent, and Asian, which supports historical documentation that an indigent burial ground may have been located adjacent to or overlapped a section historically referred to as the "Colored Grounds." Oakwood Cemetery had segregated sections of burials based on race and ethnicity as well as socio-economic class. The section that includes the chapel was likely set aside for burials of people of color, out of town visitors, and individuals who suffered from extreme poverty.

The next step in the process will be the reinterment of the burials within Oakwood Cemetery. PAR has executed a contract with Weston Solutions and their subconsultant, Amaterra Environmental, Inc., to provide professional archeological services associated with the next phase of work, which includes reinterment, community and educational outreach, and memorialization. While the timeline will likely be delayed due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, PAR and the consulting team will work to identify areas in the vicinity of the chapel for the re-interment of remains, which is a recommendation from the 2017 community engagement process with stakeholders. PAR will communicate the reinterment plan to City Council and cemetery stakeholders.

Following the reinterment, PARD will undertake a number of activities related to public outreach, and commemoration, which may be subject to constraints due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. These activities include:

- An educational symposium for the public is being planned to allow for further exploration of the lives of the people who have been re-discovered and reinterred. The symposium will allow community members to hear from expert archeological and bio-archeological professionals to provide context for the findings and allow for community conversations about future commemoration and interpretation.
- Remembrance ceremony to honor the individuals who were rediscovered and reinterred in Oakwood Cemetery.
- Permanent memorial that explains the exhumation and reinterment and honors the individuals who were rediscovered in this process. Gravestones and interpretive markers will be erected to interpret the graves of those reinterred as well as the unmarked burials that were located during the process but were able to stay in place.
- A digital exhibit interpreting the findings will be developed for display at Oakwood Cemetery Chapel.
- Interpretive plan for the historic “Colored Grounds” as recommended in the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan. The report that will be derived from this process will help inform the opportunities to better honor and interpret this historically significant section of the cemetery.

The commemorative process offers an opportunity for reflection about a past injustice while honoring the people who were rediscovered during the Chapel rehabilitation.

Background

To recount, archeologists monitoring construction related to the Oakwood Chapel restoration halted work in late 2016 when human remains were discovered. After months of investigation, it was confirmed that the chapel had been constructed over grave sites. The 1914 chapel was constructed in a racially segregated section of the cemetery known historically as the “Colored Grounds,” however, this specific area appears to be diverse in terms of race and ethnicity.

PARD informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement opportunities to help PARD determine next steps. Following outreach and public meetings with the community, it was determined that the burials would be exhumed. A May 1, 2017 [memo](#) to Austin City Council provided information about PARD’s determination and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind PARD’s recommendation to exhume the burials.

The exhumation process began in late spring 2017 and took several months to complete. Under the requirements of the issued Antiquities Permit through the Texas Historical Commission, a bioarcheological analysis would occur for any exhumed burials. Following the careful exhumation of burials by the archeological team, the remains were transferred to the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University for professional analysis. Burial context can be provided by a non-invasive and non-destructive analysis of the physical remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, gender and approximate age. In some cases, physical remains can also inform about cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition, or stresses endured. Further, artifacts may reveal aspects of material culture and possibly the cultural significance for those buried in this section.

PARD will continue to update City Council and community members on the process. Should you have any questions, please contact my office at (512) 974-6717.

cc:

Liana Kallivoka, PhD, PE, LEED Fellow, Assistant Director (PARD)
Lucas Massie, M. Ed., CPRP, Assistant Director (PARD)
Suzanne Piper, DBA, Chief Administrative Officer (PARD)
Anthony Segura, Assistant Director (PARD)



MEMORANDUM

TO: Human Rights Commission

FROM: Kimberly McNeeley, CPRP
Director, Austin Parks and Recreation Department

DATE: February 5, 2020

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update



On December 13, 2019, the Parks and Recreation Department (PAR) sent a [memo](#) to Mayor and Council outlining the next steps for the reinterment, memorialization, and educational outreach related to burials that were discovered beneath the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel during its rehabilitation.

To recount, archeologists monitoring the construction at the Oakwood Chapel halted work in late 2016 when human remains were discovered. After months of investigation, it was confirmed that the 1914 chapel had been constructed over grave sites. The chapel was constructed in a racially segregated section of the cemetery known as the “Historic Colored Grounds.”

In March 2017, PAR informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement events to help PAR determine next steps. Following outreach and public meetings with the community, it was determined that the burials would be exhumed. A May 1, 2017 [memo](#) to Austin City Council provided information about PAR’s determination and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind PAR’s recommendation to exhume the burials.

The exhumation process began in late spring 2017 and took several months to complete. Under the requirements of the issued Antiquities Permit through the Texas Historical Commission (THC), a bio-archeological analysis is both necessary and appropriate for any exhumed burials. Following the careful exhumation of burials by the archeological team, the remains were transferred to Texas State University for professional analysis. The Texas State University burial context was provided by a non-invasive analysis of the physical remains, which often provides demographic data, including race and ethnicity, gender and approximate age. In some cases, physical remains can also inform about cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition or stresses endured. Further, artifacts may reveal aspects of material culture and possibly the cultural significance for those buried in this section.

The process does not provide information about the individual identities of the people who were discovered. The archeological report is under review by the THC, and PARD is anticipating release to the public in March 2020.

The next step in the process will be the reinterment of the remains within Oakwood Cemetery, which is anticipated to take place in spring 2020. PARD is currently finalizing a contract with a firm for archeological services to provide oversight of the reinterments. As recommended in the 2017 public engagement process, the goal is to reinter all burials in proximity to the Oakwood Chapel. Should reinterment at Oakwood Cemetery not be feasible following archeological analysis, PARD will propose alternatives that will still allow for commemoration and memorialization on site. Once the reinterment process is completed, the burials will be memorialized with commemorative markers.

Following the reinterment, PARD will initiate a commemoration process. This work is still in the planning phase and more information will be forthcoming in spring 2020. The commemorative process offers an opportunity for reflection about a past injustice while honoring the people who were rediscovered during the Chapel rehabilitation. This process may include:

- Ceremony to honor the individuals who were rediscovered and reinterred in Oakwood Cemetery. At the same time, PARD will dedicate a permanent memorial that explains the exhumation and reinterment process and honors the individuals who were rediscovered in this process.
- An educational symposium to allow for further exploration of the cultural context of the people who have been rediscovered and reinterred. The symposium will allow community members to hear from expert archeological professionals to provide context for the report and allow for community conversations about the findings.
- A digital exhibit at Oakwood Chapel that interprets the archeological findings.
- An interpretive plan and signage for the “Historic Colored Grounds” as recommended in the Historic Cemeteries Master Plan. The archeological report will help inform the opportunities to honor and interpret this historically significant section of the cemetery.

PARD is aware of community concerns related to the replacement of infrastructure associated with the chapel restoration. As required by the Antiquities Permit for the restoration project, the archeology firm that was contracted by the City of Austin has submitted final reports to the THC. PARD will continue to update the Human Rights Commission as additional information becomes available. Should your commission prefer a briefing once the archeological reports are released to the public, PARD would be happy to accommodate that request.

Should you have any questions, please contact me at (512) 974-6717.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Nuria Rivera-Vandermyde, Deputy City Manager
Chris Shorter, Assistant City Manager