



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council Members

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

DATE: November 10, 2021

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Updates

This memorandum provides an update on the Austin Parks and Recreation Department's (Department) continued work on the archeological project and related community engagement for the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel and grounds. This project began in 2017 when the Department discovered that the historic 1914 Oakwood Chapel was constructed over existing graves. The Department provided an update related to DNA and isotopic analyses that were underway as part of an academic partnership with the University of Connecticut (UConn) and the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) in a February 2, 2021 [memorandum](#) to City Council. As the memo detailed, following the DNA extraction process, the Department would proceed with reinterment of the exhumed individuals with oversight from AmaTerra Environmental, Inc. under regulatory authority of the Texas Historical Commission. The preparations for reinterment are underway.

Current and Ongoing Progress

As detailed in a May 14, 2020 [memorandum](#) to City Council, an area near the chapel has been identified as a potential location for reinterment. This location is in alignment with a recommendation from the 2017 community engagement process. The reinterment process will require careful mechanical scraping of the ground surface and monitoring by archeologists to confirm whether the selected sites are devoid of unmarked burials.

The Department will erect protective fencing and begin the process on **November 15, 2021**, weather permitting, with the goal of completing the reinterment within two weeks. The Department has engaged Interfaith Action of Central Texas to give a blessing when all the displaced individuals are laid to rest in late November. The Department will provide notice to city leadership and the community, but the date is tentative due to weather and the potential for unforeseen conditions during the reinterment process. **This is not intended to be a large public event**; later a public memorial service will be held to honor those buried at the site and provide proper memorialization. A public memorial service is in the planning phase and will be held later in 2022. This timeline will allow time for headstone production, setting of grave monuments and the restoration of the sod.

The team's priority is ensuring individuals are reinterred carefully and expeditiously in a respectful and protective environment. If for any reason the team is unsuccessful in identifying suitable locations for the 36 people within Oakwood Cemetery, an alternative location has been identified at Austin Memorial

Park Cemetery. Regardless of burial location, the individuals will be honored at Oakwood Cemetery through a memorial or cenotaph.

Regarding the DNA extraction and analysis, the extraction process is complete, but analysis is complex and will continue for 24 to 36 months. The Department notified City Council in a June 18, 2020 [memorandum](#) about an academic partnership with UConn and UT Austin to undertake DNA analysis, at no cost to the City of Austin, to better understand the lives of the men, women and children who were discovered. The DNA analysis offers a unique opportunity to learn more about identities, familial connections and life experiences. If the preservation of the DNA is sufficient to permit analyses, living individuals who think they have familial connections may be able to submit a saliva sample for DNA analysis. As soon as feasible, the Department will provide further details on how community members can work directly with the UConn research team to explore familial relations. Additionally, the UConn team is conducting isotopic analysis which may provide additional insights into the individuals' diets and regions of origin.

Project Highlight

Related to this project, I would like to congratulate the Department team on recent recognition for the online education symposium, *All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance*, which was held in October 2020. Preservation Austin announced that the Department was the recipient of an award of *Special Recognition for Education* for the symposium and will be honored at an upcoming awards ceremony. As part of the educational outreach for the Oakwood Chapel archeological project, the free, online two-day symposium was attended by more than 300 registrants. The symposium featured sessions from 40 nationally renowned archeologists, anthropologists, historian, and community activists about the archeological findings and comparative projects from around the country and they further engaged the community in ideas for memorialization of the people who were found. The symposium sessions are featured [online](#) on the Department's YouTube Channel. The Department also produced a digital exhibit, [All Together Here](#), about the archeological and bioarcheological findings.

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 was constructed over grave sites. The 1914 chapel was constructed in a racially segregated section of the cemetery known historically as the "Colored Grounds," although, archeological findings suggest this specific area was more racially and ethnically diverse.

The Department informed the community of the discovered burials and announced community engagement opportunities to help the Department determine next steps. Following outreach and public meetings with the community, it was determined that the burials would be exhumed. A May 1, 2017 [memorandum](#) to City Council provided information about the Department's determination and a [staff report](#) summarized the community engagement process and further explained the decision-making framework and criteria behind the Department'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 analysis. Burial context can be inferred 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 cause of death and aspects of lifestyle, such as physical health, levels of nutrition or stresses endured. Further, artifacts helped to date the burials and provide potential cultural significance for those buried in this section.

This 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 the Forensic Anthropology at Texas State University. The reports were also reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission.

The Department 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: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Anne Morgan, Interim Deputy City Manager
Stephanie Hayden-Howard, Assistant City Manager