




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council Members

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

DATE: December 15, 2021

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Updates

This memorandum serves to update City Council on completion of an archeological project as detailed in the November 10, 2021 [memorandum](#). On November 17, 2021, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (Department), with oversight by archeologists, successfully reinterred 36 displaced individuals at Oakwood Cemetery. The Department held a blessing on November 29, 2021 for the reburial of the men, women, and children. A larger public memorialization event will be held in 2022.

Ongoing Progress

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 DNA extraction process is complete, but analysis will continue for 24 to 36 months.

Background

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 the Department's project [webpage](#). The report was developed by the archeological contractor for the Oakwood Chapel project, Hicks & Company Environmental/Archeological Consultants, and the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University. The reports were also reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission.

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.

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