



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council Members

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

THROUGH: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW
Assistant City Manager

DATE: April 5, 2023

SUBJECT: Oakwood Cemetery Updates

This memorandum serves to update City Council on an archeological project at Oakwood Cemetery and to provide information about an upcoming event to dedicate a permanent monument in the cemetery. As detailed in a December 15, 2021 [memorandum](#), the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (Department), with oversight by archeological teams, managed the exhumation and reinterment of 36 individuals at Oakwood Cemetery as part of the Oakwood Chapel restoration project. This process began in 2016 and has encompassed extensive and ongoing community engagement.

The Department will hold a dedication at 2pm, Saturday, April 29, 2023, for a permanent monument that memorializes the individuals who were discovered during the Oakwood Chapel restoration. The dedication is part of the *All Together Here* memorial event April 28–30, 2023 (rain date May 19–21, 2023). The events will be free and open to all, occurring over three days with options for drop-in tours and RSVPs to participate. Information can be found on the Oakwood Chapel [website](#).

The event is part of continued Department programming associated with the archeological and memorialization process at the Oakwood Chapel. In October 2020, the Department convened an online educational symposium, [All Together Here: A Community Symposium for Discovery and Remembrance](#). The award-winning, free, online two-day symposium was attended by more than 300 registrants and featured sessions from 40 nationally renowned archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and community activists about the archeological findings and comparative projects from around the country. The Department also produced a digital exhibit, [All Together Here](#), about the archeological and bioarcheological findings. The 2020 symposium engaged the community in ideas for the memorialization of the people who were discovered. Following the reburial of the 36 men, women, and children, the Department convened an [interfaith blessing ceremony](#) on November 29, 2021, and embarked on the development of a permanent monument that will serve as both a memorial to the people who were reinterred, and also honors the hundreds of people interred in unmarked graves throughout Oakwood Cemetery.

The Department continues its academic partnership with the University of Connecticut (UConn) and the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). The Department notified City Council in a June 18, 2020 [memorandum](#) about a project in 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. DNA analysis offers a unique opportunity to learn more about identities, familial connections, and life experiences. If the preservation of the DNA is sufficient, living individuals who think they have familial connections may 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 DNA and isotopic analysis will continue for another 24 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," however, recent archeological findings suggest this specific area was 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 occurred 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 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 date the burials and provide potential cultural significance for those buried in this section.

This analysis of the remains and associated artifacts, which date to the mid to late 1800s, was completed, and a 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 reinterment project, which was completed November 17, 2021, was led by the archeological firm, AmaTerra Environmental, along with Weston Solutions. All reports were conducted under the authority and reviewed by the Texas Historical Commission and can be found on the project [website](#).

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: Jesús Garza, Interim City Manager