

OAKWOOD CEMETERY CHAPEL

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TIMELINE

Background

The Oakwood Cemetery was established as a city cemetery in 1839. Seventy-five years later, in 1914, the Oakwood Cemetery Chapel was constructed for funeral and memorial services on site. The chapel was constructed in an area of the cemetery that was designated as a racially segregated section beginning in 1859. Within this section, there is scarce burial documentation and comparatively few remaining gravestones. Efforts to improve Oakwood Cemetery were spurred by Austin's community-based, award-winning [Historic Cemeteries Master Plan](#), which was adopted by Austin City Council in 2015. Through funding from the 2012 GO Bond funding for Cemeteries, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) initiated a full rehabilitation of the historic chapel.

On November 29, 2016, archeologists monitoring construction discovered small bone fragments drilling a pier shaft from the Chapel interior. All construction activity was immediately halted. The Texas Historical Commission (THC), City Council District 1 Member Ora Houston, and City leadership were immediately informed. With direction from the THC, the contractor and archeological team proceeded with closely monitored soil removal in order to better understand the scope and scale of potential burials. By late February, 2017, enough soil had been carefully removed in order for the archeological team to assemble a more complete assessment of indicated burials within the building footprint. At that time, 25 burials were estimated, but that number later grew to approximately 38. It was then understood that the chapel had been constructed on top of pre-existing graves. Community engagement began within a week of the initial assessment.

- March 4, 2017: Council member Houston held a small meeting at the Britton, Durst, Howard & Spence Building to notify local clergy leaders.
- March 6, 2017: Memo to Mayor and Council –Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Investigation ([link](#)).
- March 7, 2017: Press conference was held by Council Member Houston and PARD ([link](#)).
- March 25, 2017: Community Meeting #1 to share the findings with the community and receive feedback about options moving forward ([link](#)).
- March 25-April 7, 2017: Open feedback period for community input.

- April 11, 2017: Community Meeting #2 to share PARD's to share the findings with the community and receive feedback about options moving forward.
- April 11-April- 21, 2017: Open feedback period for community input.
- April 27, 2017: Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Investigation: Staff Report and Recommendation for Discovered Burials ([link](#)).
- May 1, 2017: Memo to Council—Oakwood Chapel Rehabilitation Project and Archeological Findings; Provides PARD recommendation to Austin City Council ([link](#)).
- May 23, 2017—October 2017: Burials are exhumed and remains are transferred to Texas State University for analysis.
- November, 2017: Construction resumes with archeological monitoring for all ground disturbing activities.
- August 24, 2018: Oakwood Chapel Restoration Celebration for building completion.
- March 20-April 30, 2019: Public community engagement project for programming included an update on the ongoing bio-archaeology study of the discovered burials during eight focus group meetings with Save Austin's Cemeteries, Rescue Austin Memorial Park, Congregation Beth Israel, Tejano Genealogical Society of Austin, Six Square Cultural Heritage District, Swede Hill Neighborhood Association, Blackland Community Development Corporation, and a public community meeting.
- May 15, 2019: Chapel opens to the public.
- December 13, 2019: Memo to Council— Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update ([link](#)).
- February 5, 2020: Memos regarding Oakwood Cemetery Archeological Findings Update sent to Parks and Recreation Department, African American Resource Advisory Commission, Human Rights Commission, and Historic Landmark Commission.
- February, 2020: Archeological and Bio-Archeological analysis complete; Archeological consultant delivers reports to Texas Historical Commission.
- May 14, 2020: Archeological and Bio-Archeological Report released to the public. Memo to Council ([link](#))

- June 18, 2020: Memo to Council—Oakwood Cemetery Academic Partnership for DNA testing ([link](#))
- June 22, 2020: Briefings to Human Rights Commission and Historic Landmark Commission on status of Oakwood Cemetery Archeological investigation ([link](#) to presentation)