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HEADLINE: ‘A state of disrepair’: Cemetery maintenance in Texas becomes increasingly relevant as urban development escalates

Ryan Dees’ life for the past two-and-a-half years has revolved around the dead.

As the sun begins to stretch across the sky, lighting up the shadows that accompany the nighttime, a chapel sits in a cemetery. It’s seemingly inconspicuous — only a small building surrounded by weathered gravestones and cracked sidewalks. But like most monuments in cemeteries, it holds a history behind its facade.

Every day, rain or shine, that chapel becomes Dees’ headquarters for cemetery maintenance, whether it be restoring damaged grave markers by creating molded replicas of the tombstones or re-leveling sunken markers. It also encompasses researching the ancestral history of those buried in the oldest city-owned cemetery in Austin, Oakwood Cemetery.

“Oakwood has a lot of influential people who really built the city,” Dees said. “It’s the fun part of the job — we find these relationships between different plots and how they interact with their lives throughout time.”

Dees is one of the few conservators authorized and trained in Texas to restore burial sites and gravemarkers to a well-preserved status while protecting their history. Oakwood Cemetery is only one of five cemeteries he maintains as part of the city’s Historic Cemeteries Master Plan, which Austin formalized after several years of community advocacy calling for guaranteed restoration and maintenance for cemeteries across the city.

Unlike with city parks, determining responsibility for cemetery maintenance lies in a gray area. If a cemetery is on city-owned land, then the city is in charge of the maintenance. But if a cemetery is located on private property — as many found in neighborhoods or behind businesses are — then the responsibility falls on the land owner, people who have relatives buried in the cemetery or local stakeholders willing to form maintenance groups. If there is no one able or willing to take up maintenance, the cemetery becomes defunct and is deemed abandoned.

The five cemeteries are the only ones included in Austin’s master plan because they reside on city-owned property, unlike the other 52 cemeteries the Texas Historical Commission records in the city.

“Whenever a cemetery goes defunct, it technically should be turned over to the city,” Dees said. “From what I was told, (Oakwood) was abandoned and overgrown, and there was a lot of community outreach and complaining to get it back into shape.”

Funding also plays a large role in determining how preservation is handled in cemeteries. This kind of maintenance has been historically underfunded in Texas, Dees said, including at the state and local levels. For many of these efforts, including ones led by Austin, it means trained professionals like Dees sourcing materials to restore gravesites accurately yet inexpensively.

However, funding is more complicated for local neighborhood maintenance groups. Because they lack city funding, they rely on community donations and volunteer efforts, said Cheryl Johnson, president of Williamson Creek Cemetery Care Association. She created the association in 2023 after the people in charge of a previous maintenance team for the cemetery died.

“It's all based on volunteers — a lot of the tools and everything are (gathered) by donations,” Johnson said. “Like Home Depot, Lowe’s, they usually donate their supplies to the organization, and then we get donations from some of the other businesses around as well to try and help out because the cemetery is a sore eye to the community.”

Williamson Creek Cemetery is not one of the cemeteries the city maintains. On first glance passing by it, a person might not even recognize it as a cemetery. Though it’s gated on all sides, with large red “no trespassing” signs posted every so often, it’s cornered on all sides by businesses. A Holiday Inn on one side, a Twin Peaks on another — it’s a piece of Austin’s past surrounded by the proof of the city’s growth in the present.

“The sole purpose of the nonprofit is to bring awareness to the cemetery because a lot of the descendants of the ancestors that are buried there are not even aware ... that they have ancestors buried in the cemetery,” Johnson said.

Besides understanding the history of recorded cemeteries, another complication with preservation is locating cemeteries that have not been historically tracked, said Jordan Davis, a historic archeology doctoral student focusing on Black diaspora. Texas did not always track cemeteries or mark where people, particularly slaves or former slaves, were buried within those cemeteries. Time, along with weather events such as thunderstorms or snow, have damaged the existing gravestones, Davis said, making it more difficult to distinguish burial sites.

“Historically, with African American burial practices and the kind of cemeteries here, they look different than the mainstream cemeteries, because a lot of times they will have a lot of grave markers that on the surface might look like trash,” Davis said. “A lot of the cemeteries that have enslaved individuals, they don't have individual headstones. ... If you don't have an understanding of what Black cemeteries look like, you're going to pave over them.”

The Texas Historical Commission has mapped about 14,000 cemeteries in the state, and has unverified information about thousands more, said Carlyn Hammons, the cemetery preservation programs specialist for the commission. She said the department began record-keeping in the early 2000s when concerned citizens began reaching out about preserving historical cemeteries. Since then, those phone calls have multiplied to about 150 a month, split between her and Jenny McWilliams, the commission's cemetery preservation programs coordinator.

“Not all of them are ‘there’s a bulldozer knocking down the fence,’” McWilliams said. “They're not all that sort of level of severity. But there are phone calls, primarily from people who are interested in preserving historic cemeteries for one reason or another, and are looking for ways that either they can help or where they can find assistance for a variety of issues in their cemeteries. Sometimes it's pressure from development, sometimes it's long periods of neglect that they're trying to undo.”

The historical commission's database has grown significantly over the past few decades, McWilliams said, but it's slow progress in the face of urban development and limited resources. However, it's becoming even more critical to track these cemeteries as encroachment onto unmarked gravesites becomes a growing concern, she said.

In Austin, a company plowed through a third of Plummers Cemetery, a historically Black cemetery the city protects under its master plan, in the early 2000s before the city realized the borders extended farther past the pre-existing cemetery lines than previously thought, Dees said. Once a cemetery has been encroached upon, he said the damage is “pretty definitive” and cannot be reversed without disintering and reintering bodies, which is a sensitive process.

Of the roughly 16,000 cemeteries the commission has identified in Texas, a minority are city-owned or are perpetual care cemeteries maintained by set ordinances. The rest either reside on private property in neighborhoods or churches, Hammons said. Somewhere between one-third to two-thirds of cemeteries in the state are abandoned altogether, making it more difficult for maintenance to resume because of the heavy state of neglect.

“When you find a severely neglected cemetery, or a cemetery has been abandoned for a long time, the conditions that you're dealing with there are very much like you're recovering from a disaster,” Hammons said. “There's no records, and the material might be in a state of disrepair.”

America's shifting culture to moving farther away from home is contributing to the difficulty with locating living descendants of people buried in cemeteries, McWilliams said. Where the older generations once went frequently to clean up the resting places of their ancestors, she said society has now shifted to a norm where who is buried is now overwhelmingly forgotten.

“The last man standing is the person who's still there on premise to clean the cemetery,” McWilliams said. “When that person passes, that's the end of that generation, and nobody's really stepping up to take the reins on these historic cemeteries.”