1991

Oaklawn Cemetary Ramble

Theodore Lesley
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On April 28, 1991, the Tampa Historical Society sponsored another successful ramble at Oaklawn Cemetery.

Over 150 people showed up to take a stroll through Tampa’s history and to honor those individuals who contributed to making our city the great place it is.

Special thanks go to Board member Arsenio Sanchez, who organized the event. Ross Ferlita, Tampa City Parks Department, and Jerry Tschedener, Calvary Catholic Cemetery, assisted in making this event successful.

Mr. & Mrs. Lester Olson demonstrated their interest in this event by donating their time, money, and effort to make sure the cemetery was cleaned up.

The late Theodore Lesley wrote the following history of Oaklawn Cemetery which was printed in the "Pioneer Florida Page" of the Tampa Tribune, March 9, 1958.

The History of Tampa’s Oaklawn Cemetery

By THEODORE LESLEY

The original plot, now incorporated in the enlarged cemetery, was set aside April 1, 1850, by the board of county commissioners. It was described in a very general way as "all that part of the county’s land lying north of Harrison and east of Morgan streets."

When platted the small northeast section which fronts the paved north-south walk, and joins what later became St. Louis (Catholic) cemetery, was reserved for burial of Negro servants in slavery time. Therein occurred the first burial in the cemetery, a slave of Rev. L. G. Lesley, shortly after the above date. Up to 1865 many colored servants were interred there by their owners.
The second burial was that of a white man, a "Mr. Hubbard, one of the Cuban pirates found dead in the woods on the 18th of June, 1850." Alexander Gage, who operated the first ferry in the county across the Hillsborough river at what is now Sulphur Springs, was paid $7 for the pirate's coffin, following (according to the quaint wording of the county commissioners' minutes) an "inquisition," over the body.

Possibly the oldest stone in the cemetery is that erected to the memory of Rev. Alexander Martin, a retired Methodist minister who resided at his plantation on the Alafia river, and who died there October 7, 1850. This could be debated with one over the grave of Samuel Friebel, on which is inscribed the date of death, August 9, 1849. However, it is believed the body was removed from another grave after this cemetery was established.

Many other stones cut in this period exist there today. Notably among these is one to Florida, wife of Col. Hugh Fisher, who died February 16, 1851.

The first Masonic funeral to be conducted in Tampa was that of Thomas J. Cook, who died May 22, 1851. The members met at the lodge room the following day, marched to the house of the deceased brother, thence to the grave in the burial ground and conducted all the ceremonies of the ancient order of Masonry. The large marble stone covering his vault is still in evidence, but badly in need of repair, as it is cracked and chipped in many places.

SOME 80 YEARS ago the original plat of the cemetery was lost, but at that time it was resurveyed along the old lines. But, unfortunately, many graves of Tampa's early citizens were lost sight of forever, as few stone markers were erected in that era.

Hillsborough County, 100 years ago, was frontier territory, far removed from natural deposits of marble, thus only the few well-to-do families could afford this stone, it having to be shipped by sailing vessels from far away ports like Philadelphia and New York. Others had to be content with simple cypress slabs. However, nearly every lot had its own fence of iron or wood, and the grouping of these many fencings made it a picture of unique and interesting design.

Occasionally fires reduced the wood to ashes, but each was speedily rebuilt.

AT THE OUTSET burial lots were sold by the county at 2 ½ cents per square foot, each lot being approximately 400 feet square. In January, 1853, the cemetery appears for the first time on a Tampa map, when the city limits were extended to include the area.

December 7, 1855, the county commissioners appointed William S.
Spencer sexton and superintendent of the "public grave yard." He was authorized to charge and collect $5 for each corpse buried by him.

E. A. Clarke, county treasurer, was ordered to sell lots in the public grave yard. Said funds were to be kept separate from other funds and be known as the "grave yard funds." To this was to be added the amount received by the corporation of the town of Tampa (then a defunct organization) for lots herefore sold, which funds were to be entirely used to fence and to keep in repair the grave yard.

To this amount was added a bequest from J. W. Brookbank, M.D., who died in May 1854, and being without immediate family left $50 towards fencing the public burial ground.

Many pioneer Tampa families purchased burial lots at this time, notably James McKay, William T. Brown, Andrew H. Henderson, John T. Givens, Sheldon Stringer, John T. Givens, M. C. Brown, John P Crichton, M.D., Franklin Branch, M.D., the Kennedys, Perkins, DeLaunays, Grillons, Ghiras and others in subsequent years.

Tampa was rechartered under legislative act December 15, 1855, and organized by election of officers in February, 1856. The supervision of the burial ground again passed to the city officers, but the county did not return the grave yard fund. Repeated requests were made of the county board for this amount during the next five years, but each time it was met with refusal.

April 6, 1858, the county board in conjunction with the mayor agreed that $10 be the uniform rate of burying the dead who were destitute; those who died within the limits of the town to be buried by it, and all who died outside the limits of the corporation to be buried by the county.

IT HAS LONG been a puzzling question as to what became of the original plat of the cemetery. That it survived the several bombardments of the city by Federal gunboats during the War Between the States is evident from the following resolution adopted by the county commissioners July 22, 1866, when John T. Lesley was sheriff:

"Resolve: That, whereas, graves have been dug and persons buried in the streets and avenues of the city burial ground, and

Whereas, the said practice is improper and ought to be prevented,

Therefore resolved, that no person shall be buried in burial grounds of the city of Tampa except upon private lots, without permission of the sheriff.

"Resolve 2. That persons desiring to bury a body in said burial ground, or to purchase a lot in said ground, shall apply to the sheriff, who will point out the place for the grave to be dug, and for this service the applicant shall pay the sheriff $ 1, or the sheriff may sell a lot of that purpose not less than 10 feet square at 4 cents per square foot, in accordance with map or survey of same.

"Resolve 3. That any person violating this order or disregarding the same will be indicted before the grand jury for trespassing."

Unfortunately, enforcement of this order lasted only a few years.
Little was done in the city graveyard during the post-Civil War period. It was inevitable that it soon became overgrown with weeds. As it was far removed from town, it was again occasionally swept by fires which destroyed the few remaining cypress markers. Thus, these graves, too, passed into the classification of unknown. It would seem that the missing plat was lost sometime in these years.

The burial ground was surveyed by W. C. Brown in the Spring of 1878, and it is along his lines the present plat is known today.

The ladies of Tampa organized to insure proper care of the hallowed spot.

First the Nickel Club was organized in the 1870s, and through musical programs raised funds from the nickels collected at each meeting to clean the cemetery. The famous Southern poet Sidney Lanier appeared on several programs with his flute while visiting in Tampa in the Spring of 1877.

The Ladies’ Memorial Society was later organized. For years its officers were Mrs. H. L. (Meroba Hooker) Crane, president; Mrs. John T. (Crossie Krause) Gunn, secretary. Subsequently Mrs. R. B. (Fannie Givens) Thomas was elected president, and at no time in the history of the cemetery was such loving care given to it.

Some years later, when all the original lots had been sold, James T. Magbee in 1880 deeded as a gift land adjoining the burial ground to the east. This was immediately divided into lots and offered for sale. It is in this section that Magbee’s own tomb is located.

In 1874 the need for a Catholic cemetery was met when B. C. Leonardi and wife Mary deeded to the Roman Catholic bishop of St. Augustine one acre joining the Tampa burial ground on the north. It was then as now known as St. Louis cemetery, taking its name after the first Catholic church built in Tampa. A fence with a double gate long divided it from its neighbor to the south. But it, too, has long suffered ravages of time and recently had to be disposed of as junk.

After the death of Mrs. Thomas in 1923, the Ladies’ Memorial Society closed its active association with Oaklawn cemetery, as it was now known.

With the development of other units of this nature in the city, and the passing of the generation whose loved ones rest there, Oaklawn became again neglected, and only visited once a year by crowds on the Southern memorial day.

For years the beautiful custom of the Daughters of the Confederacy visiting the graves of the Southern soldiers and decorating them with flowers and small Confederate flags was observed.

An orator of note always addressed a great assembly of people on this day, April 26th. Surrounding him on the open porch of the pavilion sat the aged survivors of the armies of the Confederacy.

Since the establishment of Oaklawn cemetery, 108 years ago, it has had a close and unique association with Florida’s historic past. Here rest framers of all five Florida constitutions: William B. Hooker, 1839; James Gettis and Simon Turman, 1861; James Gettis and James T. Magbee, 1865; C. R. Mobley, 1868; Dr. John P. Wall and Vice-president John T. Lesley, 1885.

Two Florida supreme court judges’ tombs are here, including one, Joseph B. Lancaster,
who sat on the second bench, in 1851. Judge Lancaster had the further distinction of being Tampa’s first mayor. In the extreme southwest corner of the cemetery is the grave of the 15th governor of Florida, Henry L. Mitchell.

No set of stones offer greater contrast than those erected to the soldiers of the wars of this country. They range from the Indian wars of 1835, the Mexican war in 1848, through the Civil, Spanish-American, World Wars I and II, to the Korean conflict in 1950.