

WYATT CHAPEL COMMUNITY CEMETERY
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Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery, an abandoned all-black burial ground, is located on the north side of Prairie View A & M University campus, the Jesse Clary Survey, Abstract 111, Waller County Texas.¹ Exact location of the cemetery with reference to the enclosed map and the Prairie View A & M Campus was attested by tax office personnel of Waller Independent School District, Waller, Texas, in which district the cemetery and the university are located.²

The burial site is a portion of the Jared E. Kirby plantation which the state of Texas purchased in 1876 from Mrs. Helen Marr Swearingen Kirby, widow of Jared E. Kirby, for the purpose of establishing the "Agricultural and Mechanical College for Colored Youth".³ Size of the burial place is not definitely known, but is believed by various residents of the Prairie View area to consist of about five acres, more or less.⁴

The burial place is bounded on the west by old Farm Road 1098 by which

¹ "Map of Cemetery Area" from the District Tax Appraisal Office, Katy, Texas.

² Holt, Stanley, Assistant Superintendent for Finance, the Tax Office, Waller Independent School District, Waller, TX. November 6, 1989.

³ A HISTORY OF WALLER COUNTY, TEXAS, P. 263. (County Library, Hempstead, Texas.) Waller County Historical Survey Committee, Hempstead, TX., 1973.

⁴ Notes by Bessie Thomas, Prairie View, TX. (Attached.)

a north entry is made to the campus, on the south by Flukinger Road, and on the northeast by Pond Creek (See map), with Farm Road 1488 paralleling the creek, in general at a distance of some one-eighth mile. Just when the cemetery began to be used is not known. However, Alta Vista, the Kirby plantation mansion is believed to have been built at some time between 1858 and 1861 and Kirby is reported to have owned some four hundred slaves.⁵ Since the beginning date of the cemetery is lost in the haze of time and the lack of records, Dr. George Woolfolk, Chairman of the History Department at Prairie View A& M University, Emeritus, said, " It is feasible to believe that what is now known as Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery was in the beginning simply the burial place for the Kirby slaves and other black people of the community".⁶

Worthy of noting is the fact that when Waller County Historical Commission surveyed the County to obtain information for publishing a county cemetery directory (Published in 1977.), Mrs. Carrie B. Coss, of Prairie View, gathered the needed information for black cemeteries.⁷ She was advised by several elderly persons of the Prairie View area that slaves from

⁵ ONE HUNDRED ONE HERITAGE HOMES OF WALLER COUNTY, TEXAS, " Alta Vista: A Monument of Sorrow" by DR. George R. Woolfolk, Chairman of History Department, Prairie View A & M University, Emeritus . p. 257, (Waller County Library, Hempstead, TX.) Published by Waller County Historical Society, Hempstead, TX, 1976.

⁶ Interview with Dr. George R. Woolfolk, Prairie View, TX, August 1, 1989.

⁷ Notes by Mrs. Carrie B. Coss. (Attached.)

nearby Liendo plantation were buried in the cemetery in question. Interestingly, Jared E. Kirby, owner of Alta Vista plantation which was to become Prairie View A & M University campus, and Leonard Waller Groce, owner of Liendo plantation, were cousins and their plantations were in close proximity. The present owner of Liendo has indicated that he did not know where the Liendo slaves were buried.⁸ No one, other than those whom Mrs. Coss interviewed (Coss note), was able to point to a spot where the Liendo slaves were interred.

On June 22, 1989 researchers (Mrs. Bessie Thomas, Mr. Frank Jackson, Mrs. Carrie Coss, and Dr. Mildred W. Abshier) visited the abandoned burial site. Mrs. Ida Lou Wells Owens Pierce, age eighty-two, a Wyatt descendant and long time resident of the Wyatt Chapel/Prairie View area, accompanied the researchers.

Abandoned since the early 1950s (The latest death date available from head stones was 1953.), the cemetery was quite overgrown, covered with dense growth of underbrush and shrubs. A few large trees stood among the under growth and this would seem to indicate that once the place had been kept cleared of all but a few trees. Professor Howard Jones, History Department of Prairie View A & M University, with students from the University, had cut a pathway through the underbrush to a portion of the burial ground where markers - generally slab-type headstones, some of which were broken and/or overgrown with lichen -

⁸Interview with Carl Detering, of Houston, at Liendo, Oct., 1989.

were yet standing, however some were broken and lying on the ground. Researchers were able to record names and dates on those visible markers. (See listing.) On every side there were numerous depressions in the soil which indicated the presence of unmarked graves. Of these, Mrs. Pierce said that they were indeed old grave sites. She further said that Caroline (See listing.) was her grandmother and that she had been a slave. She believed that many slaves, or those formerly held in slavery, were buried at the site. She pointed to a grave within a wire enclosure and noted that was the grave of her mother, Mrs. Mattie Wyatt Wells. Although not attested by markers, Mrs. Pierce indicated that numerous members of the Wyatt and Owens families, as well as other black persons, were buried at the site. She also said that an uncle of hers who was a minister had established the Wyatt Chapel Church which is a mile, or more, from the cemetery.

The consensus of opinion of the elderly ones who live in the area is that the Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery was abandoned when a more easily accessible burial place became available in the nearby Hempstead area. From dates on stones observed and recorded the site appears to have been abandoned in the early 1950s, as the latest death date found was 1953.

In conclusion, it appears most likely that the cemetery was originally the burial place of Kirby slaves, probably also slaves from nearby Liendo Plantation. After the Emancipation it continued as a burial place for black persons of the area until the 1950s.

Headstone Recordings in Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery

James Duckworth
Nov. 19, 1909
Died Sept. 3, 1949

Luther B. Felder
Tex. Pvt.
24th Q M Group, WWII
May 9, 1926 - Apr. 24, 1948

Milo Wilson, Jr.
Tex. Pvt.
U.S. Army WWI
July 22, 1892-Nov. 8, 1953

Theodore Anderson
JUNETH 5 (handmade marker)

Albert Collings
Died
July 5, 1922
Gone but not forgotten
OLD PAP

Eslie Bailey
Texas
Pvt. Q M Corps, WWI
March 31, 1892-May 19, 1948

Mrs. Mattie Wyatt
Died 8-17-82

Memory of Caroline
Wife of _____
(stone broken)
Died June 24, 1898

Mrs. Pierce, who accompanied the research team, noted that Caroline (above) was her grand mother and that she had been a slave. She believed that many slaves, or those formerly held in slavery, were buried at the site. Jared Kirby, of the Kirby Plantation, was a slave owner. (See note below.) Mrs. Pierce pointed out a nearby grave within a wire enclosure and noted that it was the grave of her mother, Mrs. Mattie Wyatt Wells.

Note:

Frank E. White. A HISTORY OF THE TERRITORY THAT NOW CONSTITUTES WALLER COUNTY, TEXAS, FROM 1821-1884. A Master's Thesis for M A Degree, Sam Houston State University. On file in Waller County Library, Hempstead, TX.

Statement from an interview with Mrs. Carrie Bell Coss, long time resident of Prairie View, Texas and retired professor from Prairie View A & M University:

While surveying Waller County to determine the location of the black cemeteries in this area several old citizens in the Prairie View Community, all of whom are now deceased, were contacted by me. I was told by these people that the cemetery on the back road from Prairie View (now referred to as the Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery) was the burial place of slaves from Liendo Plantation.

Signed: Carrie B. Coss

September 18, 1989

Note: The Jared Kirby Plantation which now comprises Prairie View A & M University, and Liendo Plantation were in close proximity to each other and were owned by cousins, Jared Kirby and Leonard Groce. No known burial site exists at Liendo. It would seem possible that the two plantations used a common burial site (now known as Wyatt Chapel Community Cemetery) for the slaves from the two plantations.

Mildred W. Abshier