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The Oldest Cemetery in Dallas Rediscovered: The Lost Location of Dallas's Slave Burials

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The earliest cemetery established in Dallas, Texas, had lain buried, lost, and forgotten for nearly a hundred years. Now, from a clue found while researching the origin of Freedman's Cemetery (the historic African-American cemetery that was the focus of intensive archaeological investigations in recent years), this lost cemetery, the Old Dallas Burial Ground, has been rediscovered. The information recovered regarding this cemetery's origin and demography has provided significant insight into life in antebellum Dallas.

Dallas's oldest cemetery is located a mere four blocks north of two famous landmarks in Dallas history -- the Texas School Book Depository and Dealey Plaza -- and some two miles to the south of Freedman's Cemetery. While the village of Dallas itself was founded in 1841 by John Neely Bryan, the precise founding date of the old Dallas Burial Ground remains unknown. From our current understanding, however, it is likely that it was formed in the early 1840s in an impromptu manner, and only when the first death to visit the village of Dallas dictated its necessity. Importantly, and not atypical for the antebellum South, the Old Dallas Burial Ground marked the final resting place of both "anglo" settlers and enslaved African Americans, making it a true communal graveyard. From the archival record, it would seem that Dallas's first cemetery was closed to further interments sometime around 1869, the very year that Freedman's Cemetery was founded.

Prior to the discovery of the Old Dallas Burial Ground, it had been widely believed that Freedman's Cemetery actually contained the remains of both freedmen and slaves, and that Freedman's Cemetery could ultimately trace its origin to a slave cemetery. The discovery of this earlier burial ground will thus alter many basic assumptions regarding the origin and history of the early community of Freedman's Town, of which Freedman's Cemetery was but one part.

Ironically, like Freedman's Cemetery, an acre of which was paved over by highway construction in the 1940s, the Old Dallas Burial Ground suffered a similar fate. It was first impacted by the physical plant of the Dallas Brewery during its expansion at the turn-of-the-century, and was finally paved over by the creation of Woodall Rogers Freeway in the 1970s.

There is indirect archival evidence suggesting that most, if not all, of the graves of whites were moved from the Old Dallas Burial Ground in the early 1870s to the newly formed City Cemetery. No archival evidence, however, has been found regarding the fate of the remains of the enslaved African Americans. Freedman's Cemetery was formed in 1869 specifically to supersede the Old Dallas Burial Ground's role, and so it would have been the logical (and indeed the only) place available for such re-interments. Although the earliest portion of the Freedman's Cemetery was completely cleared of graves during the highway department's archaeological investigation, no cases of graves containing the disturbed remains of secondary burials were recovered. With the complete lack of secondary burials at Freedman's Cemetery, and nothing in
the archival record to suggest their removal, it seems highly likely that the remains of Dallas's slaves and early freedmen still lie within the Old Dallas Burial Ground.

The presence or extent of subsurface impacts that may have occurred to the graves, due either to the turn-of-the-century brewery expansion or the construction of Woodall Rogers Freeway, is unknown. In the vicinity of the Old Burial Ground, Woodall Rogers Freeway consists of an elevated roadway, and so the cemetery is not capped off with roadbed materials in any conventional sense. Accordingly, archaeological investigation could potentially reveal any surviving graves, which could then be removed to a nearby cemetery.

Note: A full length article on the Old Dallas Burial Ground will be published in the October 1998 issue of the Southwestern Historical Quarterly.