7-1-1994

An Overview of the Phillips Memorial Cemetery

Helen Danzeiser Dockall

*Texas A&M University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan)

Recommended Citation

Available at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol1/iss2/4](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol1/iss2/4)

This Article, Essays, and Reports is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
An Overview of the Phillips Memorial Cemetery

Submitted by Helen Danzeiser Dockall, Texas A&M University

In the Spring of 1991, during the widening of State Highway 3 in Texas City, Texas, highway workers exposed a number of grave shafts of the existing Albert J. Phillips Memorial Cemetery. The Texas Department of Transportation contracted with Texas A&M University to remove the burials. The crew of archaeologists and bioarchaeologists spent the summer of 1991 and part of 1992 excavating and analyzing burials, some of which were located under the existing highway. All analyses of the excavated material were done on the same day the burials were excavated as all burials had to be reinterred on the same day they were excavated.

A search of documents suggested that five graves within the highway right-of-way had been located and moved during the original construction of the road in 1927. However, the Texas A&M crew located 53 burial features during the two field seasons. Historic records and information from community members indicated that the interments in the excavated portion of the cemetery occurred between the late 1890s and 1927.

Of these 53 burial features, only 44 contained some skeletal remains, and only four were complete or almost complete. The typical individual was represented solely by bones of the hands and feet, a few isolated vertebrae, and a few long bones, usually the tibia and fibula. This patterning could be explained if the workers in 1927 had exhumed and moved those bodies in the immediate right-of-way of the road, and if skeletal remains were removed, and caskets and associated hardware were left behind. Presumably, those bones that were not enclosed in clothing (such as hands and feet) or those small skeletal elements that could be easily missed were accidentally left behind. The highway was then built over the remains. Those bodies found by archaeologists that were relatively complete may have been missed by the highway workers, possibly because the graves lacked markers. Conversations with community members visiting the site corroborate this reconstruction of events. One informant stated that he remembered workers opening coffins, removing bodies, and leaving the coffins in the ground.

All individuals were interred in coffins that were either rectangular, rectangular canted, or hexagonal. One had a tapered-to-the-feet design. All individuals were interred with their heads to the west, and many of the coffins were placed in coffin boxes (or liners). Mortuary hardware from the site included handles, plaques, thumbscrews and escutcheons. Only twelve of the excavated graves lacked handles of some kind. Few grave goods were recovered from the site, due primarily to the relocation of burials in the 1920s and to the stripping of soil from the site prior to the arrival of the Texas A&M crew. However, portions of glass jars and bowls, a milk bottle, and broken pots were associated with some graves. Interestingly, in spite of the importance of shells in African-American mortuary practices (Fenn 1985, Jordan 1982, Vlach 1977 and 1978) and in spite of the proximity of the cemetery to the Texas Gulf Coast, no shells were found in the cemetery.

A report providing the results of almost two years of analysis of the data will be ready for review in June of this year. Researchers other than myself associated with this project include: Joseph F. Powell; Leah Carson Powell; and D. Gentry Steele. In addition to the primary report, papers
related to this site have been presented at the sixty-third annual meeting of the Texas Archeological Society (Dockall et al. 1992) and the fifty-eighth meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (Powell and Dockall 1993).

The site of the Albert J. Phillips Memorial Cemetery has provided an excellent opportunity to study the life and death of a group of African Americans living in a small Texas town during the late 1800s and early 1900s. For more information, the author can be contacted at the Department of Anthropology, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-4352.

References Cited

Dockall, H.D., J.F. Powell and D.G. Steele

Fenn, E.A.

Jordan, T.G.

Powell, L.C. and H.D. Dockall

Vlach, J.M.