

Underground Heroes

If you haven't been to the Texas State Cemetery in a while, you owe yourself a visit. It holds intrinsic fascination, all the more so since its recent renovation. Appalled by the site's neglected condition, the late former lieutenant governor Bob Bullock initiated an extensive makeover in 1997. His vision was for children to learn more about Texas history with one trip to the Cemetery than they would in a whole school semester. That goal is handily realized on these 18 acres, with features modern and ancient.

A plethora of improvements enhance the Cemetery. Served by its own numbered state highway, the grounds boast innovative gateway arches, one of which contains a columbarium, or burying wall. Curving paved paths connect the various sections of the Cemetery, allowing visitors pleasant and convenient walking throughout the spacious setting.

Parking is offered in spaces off Navasota Street, the plot's west boundary between 7th and 11th streets. Once afoot, you are drawn through a gap in the visitor center's two limestone buildings. If they appear similar to a fortress, it's because the exterior was modeled after the Alamo's Long Barrack. The center provides the best introduction to the site's many areas. Within it are research facilities, offices, and interpretive exhibits on other Texas cemeteries. In a splendid example of repurposing, limestone blocks that formerly supported Confederate headstones make up the exhibit wing's interior walls.

Once outside the visitor center, the next view is of the Crescent Pond and its recirculating feeder stream that also performs runoff control. Designed for quiet reflection, the banks of this aquatic paradise are lined with massive boulders brought in from San Saba and endemic plants. In fact, all of the Cemetery's new landscaping consists of native botany. Beyond the pond is the Hilltop, which is made of dirt and rocks dredged from the waterway, and which offers a commanding view of the downtown Austin skyline.

But more notable than the new vegetation is what's beneath: heroes and statesmen from 158 years of tumultuous Texas events. Modeled after the U. S. national graveyard, this is the official place to be buried if you have been great either politically or militarily, or married to someone who was.

The first grave was that of General Edward Burleson, an important Republic of Texas figure, who died in 1851. The land that became the Cemetery had been owned by Andrew Jackson Hamilton, then a state Representative and later the Texas governor who frequented Hamilton Pool. Oddly enough, the much-respected Hamilton isn't buried here, but the much-reviled Reconstruction governor Edmund J. Davis is. Moreover, Davis' monument is the tallest on the grounds.

Other ironies rise to the surface as you begin strolling. For instance, Robert Potter, an early patriot and legislator, has a monument, but he's not buried here or anywhere else. His body was never recovered from Caddo Lake in Northeast Texas after his 1842 murder.

One of the South's greatest Civil War figures, General Albert Sidney Johnston, perished at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. Subjected to an unquiet journey home, his body was delayed by the Union capture of New Orleans, where he lay until 1866, when he was

finally reinterred at the State Cemetery. Elizabeth Ney's recumbent sculpture of the general lies atop the gravesite, encircled by a spear-point fence.

Union casualties were buried here for a brief time until they were transferred to a federal cemetery in San Antonio. By far the majority of graves belongs to Texas Confederate soldiers and their wives, many of whom lived out their final days in two Confederate homes in central Austin.

The long list of reburials continues with Stephen F. Austin himself (moved from Brazoria County in 1910), Georgia's Joanna E. Troutman (the "Betsy Ross of Texas," who never came here alive), and Louis W. Kemp, an oil company executive who was responsible for most of the other reinterments prior to Texas' 1936 Centennial. He was relocated to here in 1956. Governor John Connally, whose proclamations allowed many of these burials, is also here.

Several of Texas' literary giants slumber here, as well. Walter Prescott Webb, the eminent historian and writer, died in a car wreck in 1963. His friend and colleague J. Frank Dobie, who brought Texas folklore to the printed page, lies close by. Nearby is Fred Gipson of *Old Yeller* fame.

In a nod to cultural diversity, the Plaza de los Recuerdos memorializes non-Anglo Texans buried elsewhere. Its curving stone wall displays 31 tablets with names and quotes from Texas Native Americans, Hispanics, and Blacks. In the center is a grand fountain, and round its periphery grow indigenous giant Muhly and brushy bluestem grasses.

Other parks may be larger, but not one claims so much history in such a small space. Other states have their champions, but ours call Austin their final home. A visit to the State Cemetery honors its residents and, in some small part, returns the favor.

Located in Austin between Navasota and Comal, 7th and 11th streets. Grounds open seven days a week, 8 to 5; Visitor Center open 8 to 5 Monday through Saturday. Guided tours for groups smaller than 40 are available with advance notice. 512-463-0605.

- Howie Richey

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