

Bringing New Life to an Old Cemetery: The Preservation of Oak Grove Cemetery
for Heritage Tourism Interpretation in Nacogdoches, Texas

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ABSTRACT

Nacogdoches is known as the oldest town in Texas and as the location of some of the first shots fired of the Texas Revolution. Visitors travel to the city to learn about this exciting period in history but are rarely exposed to a rich array of events in subsequent years or the variety of resources off the beaten path. This thesis connects individuals from the Texas Revolution through the mid-twentieth century who are buried in Oak Grove Cemetery with historic sites, structures, artifacts, and documents associated with them through a set of interpretative materials. By connecting these resources, tourists have the encouragement to explore a wider range of historic topics that are usually passed by. Through this information, this thesis emphasizes the role of Oak Grove Cemetery as a heritage tourism resource and the importance of cemetery preservation. The significance of this thesis lies in its combination of usual site based, heritage tourism, major events, and individuals with a broader scope of historic resources to create a combination of print and web based interpretation and preservation materials.

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INTRODUCTION

The foundation for this thesis was laid about ten years ago after a tour of Saint Louis Cemetery number one in New Orleans, Louisiana. As the guide led us between crypts, he told the group about the lives of some of the individuals who were interred there. Though the tour was fascinating and I recall having a great time, within a few hours, I could not remember many of the details that I had learned. Who was interred there? Where was their home? I knew so little information that I was not able to find books or do a web search on the individuals, which made me think about how nice it would be to have a brochure touching on everything we had been told.

Eight years later, I was asked a the descendant of Adolphus Sterne to put my newly gained gravestone cleaning knowledge to work in cleaning the Sterne's graves. While I knew that Adolphus Sterne was a prominent figure in Nacogdoches's history, being a newcomer to town, I did not know very much about the man whose gravestone I was cleaning except that he must have been a Mason because Masonic insignia was carved into the back of his gravestone. A few days after cleaning, I decided to visit the Sterne-Hoya House Museum to see what I could learn about this man. The tour was fascinating and led me to do further research online, in books, and at the East Texas Research Center. I found that Sterne's Masonic ties did not end at his being a member of the fraternal organization but that his affiliation with the organization helped him gain

his freedom from prison in Mexico and led to his secret involvement in the Texas Revolution. Upon finding all of this information, I thought that tourists might like to know some of these fascinating facts but they do not have the time or resources to do further research after a tour.

These events melded together to create this thesis. By using Oak Grove Cemetery and cemetery preservation as a starting point, since that is where my Sterne adventure began, I selected individuals and topics from the cemetery who have sites and documents associated with their lives in Nacogdoches. The first individual is Adolphus Sterne who lived from 1801 until 1852, he was a merchant, held multiple political offices, and helped to finance the Texas Revolution.

Thomas J. Rusk was born in 1803 and died in 1857; he served as a lawyer and a politician, and also served in the Texan Army, fighting in the Battle of San Jacinto. Charles Hoya lived from 1848 until 1926, he was a businessman and a trusted land surveyor. Diedrich Rulfs was born in Germany in 1848 and passed away in Nacogdoches in 1926 after building a celebrated career as an architect.¹

Frank Aikman lived from 1862 until 1939. He arrived in Nacogdoches from New York and earned his living as an entrepreneur and businessman. Karle Wilson Baker was born in 1872 and died in 1960 after a career as a poet, writer, and professor at Stephen F. Austin State Teacher's College. Lera Millard Thomas lived from 1900 until 1993 and served as a United States Representative and a local preservationist. Jack McKinney was born in 1911 and lived until 1997, he

¹ Dr. Jere Jackson's forthcoming book *Diedrich Rulfs: Designing Modern Nacogdoches* explores Rulfs's architectural influence on the City of Nacogdoches.

was a businessman and the driving force behind the construction of the Hotel Fredonia. Along with these individuals, there are also three topical guides. The first topical guide is the Texas Revolution; this theme includes information about the Fredonian Rebellion, The Law of April 6, 1830, The Battle of Nacogdoches, and Nacogdoches's role in the Texas Revolution. The second guide is about War in Nacogdoches, which includes the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam and their local impacts. The final topical guide is for Oak Grove Cemetery and describes the types of materials used for gravestones, notable stones around the cemetery, and the dos and don'ts of cemetery cleaning. Some of the subjects chosen for this project are already well known to tourists but this thesis expands previous tour itineraries by including brochures, a website, recommendations of sites associated with the individuals, and access to primary sources.

This thesis documents the scholarship behind researching and creating these tour itineraries. The first chapter of this thesis is an overview of the history of Nacogdoches and its place in Texas history. Chapter two explores the history of Oak Grove Cemetery within the broader history of early American cemeteries is explored along with their influences on Oak Grove Cemetery. The study of cemeteries as historic resources and the information that they hold for the study of social, cultural, political, and economic history is also discussed. The third chapter begins with an overview of the history of heritage tourism from its European roots to the role of local heritage tourism in Nacogdoches today. Next,

the thesis explains the rationale for the selected interpretive writing style and format of the brochures and website based on best practices in learning styles, interpretive research, and exhibit development. Chapter four begins with a description the thesis's genesis and purpose. This is followed by an overview of projects associated with this thesis including cemetery cleaning workshops, the creation of brochures, and the construction of a website, all of which detail public history methods consulted, any problems encountered, and how those problems were overcome. The appendixes that follow include a preservation plan for Oak Grove Cemetery, a tutorial for RedDot, copies of the brochures, and biographies of the individuals and topics chosen for the project and used on the website.