

## ***"Old" City Cemetery Targeted for Restoration and Preservation***

Join me as we take a trip through time. But, our trip may only last a few moments for as a community, we are losing some of our stories. These stories are in our old cemeteries and we weave them together to tell the story of the founding of the community and the families we see today. But, time and the tornado that roared through the town in 2002 has worn away the "faces" of the stories. Thus, the formation of a cemetery committee, initiated by Abbeville Mayor Ryan Blalock, to coordinate the history, preservation, appearance and maintenance of the old city cemetery located behind First Baptist Church, has been created and is working hard to acquire funding for the old burial grounds. No formal committee for this purpose has existed previously.

Members serving on the committee which is headed by Councilwoman Lucky Armstrong include Reeves Espy, A.D. Pope, Buddy Riley, Jackey and Clea Harpe, Veston and Margie Bush, Emma Espy, Sandra Barton, Hazel Johnson, council member Terry Allums, City Clerk Pam Ward and Sylvia Clark, secretary. A historical marker has been presented to the city that includes historical information about the old burial grounds on one side and highlights of First Baptist Church on the other side. After a year of meticulous and pain staking work, the old city cemetery has been surveyed and information alphabetically compiled that lists every identifiable grave in the old burial grounds. The old cemetery contains many of the pioneers and founding families of not only Abbeville but of Henry County. The work revealed 869 identifiable graves and over 120 sites that are not identifiable. There are probably more as some are evidenced only by a sunken place in the ground, a piece of old broken stone or just someone's memory that says great, great grandfather was buried here. Many of the markers are gone, damaged or were destroyed by the 2002 tornado which came through the cemetery. This survey was submitted to the state and has resulted in the cemetery being listed on the Alabama Historic Registry of Cemeteries but the work is not complete.

There are stories here that are told as the cemetery committee members and volunteers work to put the grounds back in order. Stories are woven together as veterans of the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and the conflicts of our country are honored by those who served become visible with their markers. Family members tell tragic stories of horrific losses. One marker bears the names of seven children all in one grave with us to guess what took all of these little ones - a house fire, some dreaded disease?

We have lives that are celebrated with their markers. One tells us that the gentleman buried beneath lived to be 110 years old. That's a legacy for any family to be proud to share. But, then we find so many little graves, little ones lost so quickly. The old cemetery holds these tiny ones from so many mothers' arms. Two monuments are very elaborate cast iron, above-ground ornate little sarcophagus-like structures that are very rusty and very small; sweet baby children resting there. One marker states that the little one was "the sunshine of our home".

Then, we have beautiful marble statues. These are mostly in the oldest part of the cemetery located in the far back part right behind the church. These are elaborate marble carvings of flowers, tree trunks, small animals, children, crosses, urns, angels, etc. Truly works of art and beautiful

memorials placed lovingly many years ago in tribute to the founding citizens of our town. We have Gov. Oates' mother Sarah buried here, the first merchant in Abbeville is buried on the old grounds, many doctors, several judicial judges and many more stories from these tombs. We have one civil war veteran buried right here in Abbeville that according to Gov. Oates gave the order to fire the last shot of the Civil War. This was reported in a speech the colonel was giving at the old agriculture college in the 1880's. Did I mention that we found Cinderella's grave? And yes, we are looking for Huggin' Molly's grave...

We have a dentist who practiced by horse and buggy; i.e., he had a portable chair and carried it out to homes. One young man and his half brother were abducted by the Indians when he was 11 years old and carried to their towns on the Apalachicola where they were found five months later.

There are so many stories that arise from these old pioneers of our community. But, we must work together to save these old homes of our forefathers. If not, they will not be around for our children and grandchildren to enjoy...In an effort to generate funds for the restoration of the old cemetery, cemetery tours with "characters" in costume telling the story/history of several prominent and interesting founders of the area buried there are presented in the Spring of the year as "Yatta Abba Day" is celebrated in the town. Many generous donations have been received and Phase I of the restoration has been completed but there is still much work and more funding needed. Donations are tax deductible and may be made payable to the City of Abbeville Pioneer Cemetery Fund. Donations may be mailed to P O Box 427, Abbeville, AL 36310.

By Sylvia Beasley Clark

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