

Oak Grove Cemetery AN AMERICUS TREASURE

While ghouls and goblins are thought to frequent cemeteries this time of year, Oak Grove Cemetery in Americus, Ga., is worthy of a visit by history buffs throughout the region as well. The largest active historic cemetery in Georgia, Oak Grove offers glimpses of the lives of luminary individuals who went before us as well as clues to the circumstances surrounding their day-to-day survival. Oak Grove also boasts winning the Georgia Historic Trust's Preservation Award for Excellence in Rehabilitation in 2004.

Twice Restored

In 2003, superior leadership in Americus, including Sen. George Hooks, spearheaded an extensive restoration of the historic portion of Oak Grove Cemetery. With inmate labor, 26 wrought iron fences were painstakingly refurbished or replaced. Having previously set boundaries around particular graves and groups of graves, the fences had become broken over time due to decay, erosion and fallen trees. Also, 363 grave sites were preserved, and 156 different Southern camellias were planted within the cemetery.



Sen. George Hooks spearheaded restoration of the historic portion of Oak Grove.

Pleased with these efforts as well as a professional restoration of the sexton's office in 2001, the cemetery team, and the community at large, were distressed by the effects of the infamous tornado that swept through Americus on the night of March 1, 2007.

"In essence, we did a lot of the work twice, because much of what we had accomplished in 2003 had to be re-done," explains Hooks. "We lost a great deal of trees in the

historic area and throughout the cemetery as a whole, and many had to be cut and cleared out.

"But, we were fortunate to obtain a master plan from the University of Georgia's School of Environmental Design. Through that master plan, which included the on-site assistance of several of the department's graduate students, we were able to re-plant appropriately based on both historic accuracy and disease resistance.

"In paying homage to the name 'Oak Grove', we planted at least three different varieties of oaks – Shumard Oaks, Overcup Oaks and Nuttail Oaks – all of which are of significant size already and are thankfully thriving.

"This cemetery has been totally and completely restored such that we've been able to create a living memorial for subsequent generations. It's a perfect place for individuals, families, and groups such as school students to come, enjoy a beautiful walk in a park-like setting, and feel the richness of history."

Notable Americus Residents

There are certain gravesites of individuals who hold particular merit with the citizens of Americus and Sumter County. Many of those plots are shown in a free brochure that can be obtained at the sexton's office. Following are several that we find unique and well worth finding.

Wright Brady (1808-1871)

He was one of the original settlers of Americus and one of its "most useful citizens." In October and November of 1865, he was one of three delegates to the statewide convention which repealed the Ordinance of Secession and formally abolished slavery. What is unique about Brady's grave is not only its size but that he is supposedly buried with his horse (whereas his wife is merely alongside).



Dr. George Franklin Cooper (1825-1882)

Dr. Cooper was an honor graduate of the University of Philadelphia Medical School and practiced medicine in Georgia. He also was later ordained as a minister and pastored churches in Plains, Americus and Albany while concomitantly practicing medicine.

During the Civil War, Cooper was the chief surgeon of Gen. A.R. Lawton's Division at the Battle of Atlanta. He was responsible for setting up the hospital on Jackson Street (in Americus) for soldiers who had been wounded in the Battle of Atlanta and shipped here. After the war, he established a public school system for both whites and blacks.



Thus, Cooper cared for the medical, spiritual and educational needs of the Americus community. He was so highly regarded that in 1940 Episcopal rector James B. Lawrence had a massive stone made of flint placed on Cooper's grave as a tribute.

Francis M. Coker (1827-1905)

A talented and successful businessman who returned to Americus after the Civil War, Francis Coker became president of the First National Bank of Americus and then the president of the Bank of the State of Georgia (in Atlanta). He was reputed to have been the richest man in Georgia, dying with a \$5 million estate.

Charles F. Crisp (January 29, 1845-October 23, 1896)

Charles F. Crisp was born in Sheffield, England, served in the Civil War in the 10th Virginia Infantry, and endured capture and imprisonment after May 1864. He later



became the Judge of the Southwestern Judicial Circuit, a United States Congressman representing the 3rd District of Georgia, and ultimately the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives for the 52nd and 53rd Congresses.

Col. Samuel Hugh Hawkins (January 10, 1835-May 25, 1905)

Col. Hawkins was a Confederate Cavalry Officer who founded what would later be named the Savannah/Americus/Montgomery (SAM) railroad, the first railroad ever built in Georgia by local capital. This railroad was responsible for increasing the population of Americus and broadening its industrial scope substantially.

Littleberry Walker Carter (1829-1873) & Mary Ann Diligence Seales Carter (1838-1873)

This couple was the great grandparents of former Pres. Jimmy Carter, who, along with an uncle, had their graves moved from a site near Souther Field air facility to their current resting place at Oak Grove. Littleberry died at age 43 after a fight over the proceeds of a flying ginny (now known as a merry-go-round); his wife died four days later of "a broken heart."



Mary Elizabeth Myrick (1835-1891)

Myrick was one of three founders of Phi Mu Fraternity (in actuality a sorority), established at Wesleyan College in Macon, Ga., on March 4, 1852.

Confederate Soldiers

The Civil War impacted a wide swath of families in Sumter County, and many of those soldiers were buried at Oak Grove, whether in their own family plots or in the Confederate Cemetery portion. Of the latter, there are 129 soldiers buried here, 45 of whom are of "Unknown" status: all served in the Army of Tennessee.



Continued next page.

"Most every 'boy' in the South between the ages of 15 and 50 served in the War Between the States, whether on the front lines or in light duty," explains Hooks. "Obviously, a great number of them died, primarily at locations several states away from their homes. The whole country at that time was ripped apart, including the railroad service, making transportation that much more difficult.

"However, out of these tragedies, one witnessed a unique and moving phenomena. Many of the young lads who had gone off to war went with an enslaved family servant, just as that servant would have accompanied them on any other travel or adventure. When the soldier was killed, that very same servant made it their own duty to get the body back home for proper burial, which was no easy feat at that time.

"Most of the bodies were not embalmed but were wrapped in blankets into which both charcoal and salt had been placed. The salt helped with preserving the body, and the charcoal cut down on odor, though it certainly could not have eliminated it considering the heat, especially in the summer months. The body was put in a wagon which then had to travel hundreds of miles through what was basically wilderness. It's an amazing testament to those enslaved servants of their affection and respect for that family."

Some of the memorable Confederate soldiers include the following:

Maj. John Emory Rylander
(September 15, 1836- June 3, 1864)

He started Rylander Academy on Rees Park and later formed a company of Muckalee Guards from the students. As a major in the Civil War, he was killed in battle near Richmond, Va., leaving behind a wife and five children (though one died in infancy).

Joseph A. B. Rylander
(August 11, 1846-August 27, 1864)

He was also killed in battle near Richmond, and is buried in the same crypt of his half brother, Major John Emory Rylander. Thus one family lost two sons in the span of less than three months.

Lieutenant Lucius Gibson Rees (1841-1864)

He was the son of a pioneer local physician, Dr. Albert Rees, who deeded the land for Rees Park to the citizens

of Americus in 1846. Two decades later, when Lt. Rees died on the battlefield near Parkersburg, Va., Dr. Rees set the park aside as a permanent memorial to his son. It is here at Rees Park, near Oak Grove Cemetery, that you will find a historic marker honoring Lt. Rees.

A member of company A, 11th Georgia Artillery of the Army of Northern Virginia, known as the "Sumter Flying Artillery," Lt. Rees participated in many of the major battles of the War Between the States, under overall command of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Against horrendous odds, an enslaved family servant who accompanied him to war single-handedly returned his body to his grieving family here in Americus for burial in Oak Grove Cemetery.



Death: Not Just Reserved for the Elderly

In prior generations, such as those buried at Oak Grove, it was typical to have children die in infancy due to various diseases and epidemics. Women quite often died in childbirth and never lived to raise their offspring (if they indeed survived the trauma of birth).

"Death was a sad but common occurrence, and people were forced to come to grips with the fact that young people were just as susceptible as the elderly," says Hooks.

Throughout Oak Grove, there are examples of families losing multiple children within a short period of time or parents outliving all of their children.

A.J. Lester and Amelia Barlow Lester

All of their children died before them. Not only that, but five children died within one week, with three of them dying on the same day (June 5, 1853). The only surviving son was killed at Richmond, Va., on March 26, 1863 while serving in the Confederate Army.

Oak Grove Cemetery Sexton Paul Player is amazed at the number of groups from other states who have heard about the restoration and come to visit Oak Grove in an effort to potentially gain insight for improvement of their own historic cemeteries.

"So many of them comment about what poor condition their older cemeteries are in," Player explains. "So it's wonderful if we've spawned this interest that could inspire other towns to do the same." Player encourages visitation of the cemetery every day of the week with preferred hours from approximately 8a.m. to 4 p.m.

Additional Features at Oak Grove Cemetery
Funeral Bell (mounted on a brick column)

From the 1850s until the 1920s, the bell would be rung by the sexton to let everyone know that a funeral was about to take place.

1880 Fish Pond

This fish pond was refurbished into a functioning pond and reflection area in 2003 and 2004. The design is of the three interlocking circles of the Trinity, the strongest symbol of the Christian faith. It contains goldfish and koi and numerous plants and trees.



Kneeling Angel

Mrs. Loula Hansford left funds in trust to a local church for the perpetual care of this angel atop the grave site.

Burial site of Jennie Foster

This woman was a known prostitute. At her death, five local men, whose names were purposely erased from the books, paid for her lot and marble slab, which has a quote about love inscribed. They also planted an oak tree, which Nature left untouched during various storms such as the tornado of March 2007.

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