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Cemetery theft a growing trend

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By: Allie Rasmus

Texas has more than 50,000 historic cemeteries. In some areas, they're the only thing left of once-thriving communities in our state.

While they provide a valuable resource for historians, they also house something valuable for thieves.

Oakwood Cemetery in East Austin is a final resting place for city residents and city history.

"It's a link to the past," preservationist Dale Flatt said.



Last year, Flatt founded the local non-profit group Save Austin's Cemeteries. When he's not busy with his full-time job as an Austin firefighter, he spends much of his time taking black and white photos at each of Austin's five historic cemeteries.

Flatt took snapshots of a recently robbed gravesite this afternoon. "You can see where somebody just kicked the pole off down at the bottom," Flatt said, pointing to the site.

He's documented more than 400 feet of antique iron fencing stolen from Oakwood Cemetery in recent months. On Wednesday, even more was missing. More than 100 feet of fencing had disappeared. Then twenty-four hours later, thieves came back for more.

"A couple of panels that they dropped... They came back in last night and picked it up and took off with it again," Flatt said.

Historians have documented the same thing happening in cemeteries across the state and country. They believe the stolen items are entering the fast-growing antiques market. Iron fencing can sell for as much as \$150 per foot.

"It's not just fencing, but urns, sculptures and benches," Gerron Hight said, a Texas Historical Commission Cemetery preservation specialist. "It's increasing because people see that they can make a quick profit and sell stolen items as antique garden features. There's on-site auctions and more places to sell stolen goods."

Preservationists said it's difficult to keep track of the number of thefts in historic cemeteries. Oftentimes, the only evidence left is an empty post to which the fencing was once connected.

"Some of these graves are more than 150 years old, so there's no family left in the area. Nobody visits, so it can be two or three years before someone realizes it's been vandalized," Flatt said.

Volunteers and local law enforcement plan to show up at antiques shows in the area in the coming weeks, with photos of the stolen fence in hand.

"If somebody shows up with a trailer of stuff, we'll be able to get some information and track it down," Flatt said. "Our hope is that someone will see this stuff and let us and the authorities know."

Meanwhile, state officials urge antique shoppers to look out for signs they may be buying stolen cemetery decor.

"If you see lambs and such, or other cemetery symbols, like a willow [tree] on a gate or something, that's not from a house, and you should ask where it came from," Hight said.

Even though Oakwood is a designated state historical site, it sits on city property. The city doesn't have the budget to pay for 24 hour surveillance crews to monitor the 150 year old cemetery. The city contracts with a private company to maintain the grounds.

Austin Park Police are investigating the most recent theft at Oakwood Cemetery. Under state law, it's a misdemeanor to steal from or vandalize a gravesite. State lawmakers filed a bill earlier this session to increase the penalty to a state jail felony.

Preservationists are looking for volunteers to help document the grave sites at Oakwood and Austin's five other historic cemeteries. For more information you can contact Dale Flatt with the local non-profit Save Austin's Cemeteries.

The e-mail address is daleflatt@aol.com.

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