



# SAVE AUSTIN'S CEMETERIES

## Winter 2016 Newsletter

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### Speaker Event: If These Walls Could Talk by Megan Spencer

A large audience showed up at the Yarbrough Branch Library to hear about the home that was never quite finished, but whose story lives on with the help of a neighbor, Bobby Cervantes. When I enter an old home, I always wonder about the conversations that happened there. I think Bobby has that same feeling. In fact, if it weren't for Bobby, the limestone remains of the Sneed House might not be standing at all. He has given it a voice through his research and activism.

Bobby grew up in the Dove Springs area just as it was being developed. Open land still existed and the old Sneed Home, built in the 1800s, was one of the places where Bobby loved to play as a kid. The years have passed and Bobby still has an affinity for the Sneed Home, the cemetery, and the land. He has recruited friends to help keep the place clean and he has gone to great effort to save the land from ruthless development. The place has seen hard times and much is lost. The house burned, enormous trees were cut down, and most of the cemetery headstones have been stolen or destroyed. Dale Flatt of SAC assists in the identification and relocation of lost headstones or fragments of headstones. The Sneed family cemetery received historic cemetery designation in 2009.

Construction of the home was started in 1847 by Sebron G. Sneed, a lawyer and a judge. The home was built out in five years, but construction continued for two decades. The original plan called for balconies outside of every door, but they were never finished. The walls were never plastered and the attic was not finished. The house is built of local limestone that was quarried by slaves. The pine was from Bastrop and wooden pegs were used for construction. There were twenty-four windows, fourteen doors, eight fireplaces, and no hallways. Each floor (there were three) was basically the same plan with enormous rooms and very high ceilings for a total of 4,000 square feet.



Sneed Home in 1974 and today.



During the Civil War, the home was used as a recruiting station and hospital.

Some Sneed family descendants were in the audience and we had great discussion after the presentation. Many of us enjoyed the display of historic photographs and copies of primary source documents that Bobby brought with him. What a great neighbor Bobby has been!

### Texas History Self-Guided Walking Tours by Kay Boyd

To acknowledge Texas Independence Day on March 2, 2016, Save Austin's Cemeteries will honor the men and a woman who participated in historical events from that time period. InfoSpots will be placed in Oakwood prior to March 2 and will remain there during March and April. You can use your smart phone to access the information needed for a self-guided tour. Visit the kiosk at Oakwood Cemetery for more information.



Biographies at the gravesites will include:

- Susanna Dickinson Hannig, one of the few who survived the fight at the Alamo on March 6, 1836.
- Francis Dieterich and John Duval who were with Fannin at the Goliad massacre on March 27, 1836.
- Washington Anderson, George Hancock, James Swisher, John Swisher, and James Hill who all fought and survived the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836.
- Thomas McKinney, who was a financial supporter of the fight for Texas independence, also known as the Father of the Texas Navy.
- Also included in this tour will be William H. Huddle who painted the famous scene of Sam Houston and his men after the Battle of San Jacinto.

### Once Forgotten, Painter Alberto Fuster by Danny Camacho

The City of Austin has just begun the process of restoring the chapel at Oakwood Cemetery. I have been researching and documenting its use as a mortuary chapel. Except for the occasional reference in an obituary as to services being held in the chapel, there has been scant newspaper mention. Recently, I came across an article about a service at the chapel (*The Austin Statesman*, Jan. 30, 1922, p. 3). From this, I was able to find a number of related newspaper and other official documents. This story is as singular as any story I have encountered in Oakwood's long history.

On Sunday afternoon at 5 o'clock, January 29, 1922, noted Mexican painter Alberto Fuster's services were held at the chapel, preceding interment in Oakwood Annex. Present were the First Chancellor of the Mexican Consulate at San Antonio, who formally represented the Mexican government, and several other Mexican officials and an assemblage of 250 persons.

A week earlier in the early morning hours of Saturday the 21st, Fuster was found wandering in shock by an attendant on the grounds of the Austin Gas Light Company. He had leaped from a fast moving train and slashed

his throat in an effort to kill himself. The police were called and Fuster was taken to the Austin City Hospital for medical attention.

At the hospital the next day, Fuster escaped from his room attired only in his underwear and was chased by attendants for several blocks before he was captured and brought back. The following evening, he took poison, but was discovered in time to save him. Two days later, he was allowed to go unattended to the men's bathroom. He fashioned a noose from a long neck-scarf, securing the opposite end on an overhead heater pipe, and then standing on a washbasin, jumped; finally, he was successful.

Fuster was diagnosed with a suicide mania and believed that there were those in the Mexican government who were after his life. He had initially boarded a train in Washington, D.C. with nothing but the clothes on his back. Fuster left behind an unpaid hotel bill along with two traveling trunks and other luggage. When admitted to the hospital in Austin, he had about \$430 on his person. This amount was later held in probate and a Travis County judge appointed an administrator to pay expenses.

There was a city hospital bill of \$20.16 for his four-day stay. Funeral expenses were \$354.50 with the real price equivalent today being over \$5,000. This included not just the casket, embalming, hearse, and additional automobiles, but also washing and dressing, shaving, a suit of clothes, and candles. Cost for a cemetery lot and grave opening would be valued today at over \$330.



Aphotheosis of Peace (1903) by Alberto Fuster. Oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Arte

Fuster's paintings hang in the National Museum of Art in Mexico City and other museums in Mexico. Presently, his grave is unmarked and further research indicates that his burial at Oakwood Annex has been forgotten. I contacted Sylvia Orozco, Executive Director of Mexic-Arte Museum. She was very interested and secured a meeting with Austin Consul General Carlos Gonzales Gutierrez. We gave him photocopies of all the documentation I have found. He promised to contact those in the Mexican government, federal and state, to see if there is any interest. He also said that he would commit the Consul here in Austin to at least marking the grave and having a public dedication.

## Preservation Project: Benjamin Raulin Monument by Dale Flatt

**Restoration begins:** Restoration of the Benjamin Raulin monument is slated for April 2016. In the northwest portion of historic Oakwood's forty acres lie the mortal remains of Benjamin B. Raulin. Ben was a saloon keeper in Austin's West Sixth Street area. In 1901, he was shot and killed by a competing saloon keeper named Hamby. Raulin and Hamby were enemies and it is still unknown why Hamby killed him. Hamby refused to talk.

It has been close to 115 years since that day and the stone edifice erected by his widow still stands, but it is showing its age. Underneath the monument, the body and the coffin of Benjamin Raulin have slowly returned to the earth. As that happens, the soil on top of the grave bears down and the ground shifts. Over time, the monument, which was placed just west of the grave, succumbs to the settlement of the soil and starts to lean to the east. The five-piece marble obelisk has a 7.3 degree lean to the east and a 3 degree lean to the south. Its five pieces have an estimated weight of 1,819 pounds and at a height of 6 feet, 10 inches. It is at risk of falling over.

By chance, I was onsite doing some research when I came across a descendant of Ben's family who was looking for the grave. It was none other than Terry Keel, the retired Travis County Sherriff and SAC lifetime member. Terry explained that Ben was a great uncle, and that his mother and other family members wanted to get the monument cleaned and re-leveled. We soon realized that Ben's wife, who passed away thirty years after her husband, rests alongside of him without a stone to mark her grave.



One of the huge challenges we have with the restoration and care of monuments is that monuments are the property of the families who placed them there. The responsibility and expense rests on the families – not the City. Also, due to the many types of record keeping over the years, there are big gaps in the records for many gravesites at our older cemeteries like Oakwood.

**Walking on new ground:** Oakwood Cemetery is not only a historic city landmark, but it is on the National Register of Historic Places, which gives two layers of protection and oversight on all work done at this location. This is to insure that any work performed meets a certain standard, so that we maintain the look and feel of the site – often referred to as a site's historic fabric. This review process also insures that the people doing the work are bonded and insured.

In the past, families and contractors pretty much did what they felt was appropriate to care for their loved ones' graves and monuments, often doing work on the weekends when city crews were not onsite. Since the development and adoption of the City's Cemetery Master Plan, the Parks Department - Cemetery Division has

been working on written policies so everyone follows the same procedures. The first step was to follow procedures to establish the Keel family as descendants and a point of contact.

The next step was to thoroughly document the existing conditions with photographs and measurements, and then look for a qualified cemetery preservationist who would be willing to do the job. Once the family has a cost for doing the job, they revisit the cemetery office. The contractor is required to provide the necessary documentation and a scope of work to ensure that city crews can identify the location of each grave in order to protect other property owner spaces from encroachment and to provide documentation about the surrounding area conditions (i.e. surrounding monuments or trees).

**We are there:** The first few restoration/preservation reviews should be done at a slower pace so the process can be thought out. The contractor will be Texas Cemetery Restoration LLC, from Dallas. Sometime in April, the contractor will teach the cemetery staff and others how to do this type of work. We will film the process and work toward getting the Parks staff what they need, so when we come across a monument at risk that has no surviving family members, we will have a process by which the City of Austin in partnership with Save Austin's Cemeteries, or other groups, can maintain and protect these fragile and beautiful monuments for future generations.

For those of you who have family at any of Austin's five city cemeteries, I encourage you to stop by or call the cemetery office at Austin Memorial Park, 2800 Hancock Drive, (512) 978-2320. Ask about how to update the point of contact for your family's historic grave spaces and how to confirm ownership.

### **It's My Park Day** by Barbara Surles

Once again, Save Austin's Cemeteries is joining the Austin Parks Foundation for its biggest city-wide volunteer event on Saturday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, known as It's My Park Day (IMPD)! Mark your calendar! If you participate, you will get a free t-shirt (select your size when you sign up online) and snacks will be provided by Austin Parks Foundation. We will have water coolers there, too, so please bring your empty water bottles with you. Remember, anyone wanting to volunteer will need to **sign up through the IMPD 2016 website**. What a great way to get some exercise, have fun, and make a difference in our parks and cemeteries!

The City of Austin's historic cemeteries will have three different volunteer sessions for IMPD this year:

**Oakwood Cemetery - Photo Documentation & Trash Clean-Up:** In addition to general trash and brush removal, the Oakwood session will include our usual monthly photo documentation. Those interested in photo documentation should bring a digital camera as well as its USB cord to transfer photos at the end of the session (smart phones work, too, with high resolution). You will need to register through the IMPD 2016 website for this event. You can do that and read more about this event here:

<https://austinparks.givepulse.com/event/15598-Oakwood-Cemetery-Trash-Clean-Up-and-Photo-Documentation>

**Evergreen Cemetery - Beautification:** This project will include planting and landscaping the entrance to the cemetery with additional projects if time allows. You will need to register through the IMPD 2016 website for this event. You can do that and read more about this event here:

<https://austinparks.givepulse.com/event/15766-Evergreen-Cemetery-Beautification>

**Evergreen Cemetery - Mulching:** Volunteer with this group to mulch trees at Evergreen. For those interested in this project, please bring a rake if you have one. You will be able to learn some Evergreen history while you

are there, too! You will need to register through the IMPD 2016 website for this event. You can do that and read more about this event here: <https://austinparks.givepulse.com/event/15696-Evergreen-Cemetery-Mulch%21>

**Saunders Foundation Acknowledgement by Dale Flatt**

The Board of Directors of Save Austin’s Cemeteries would like to acknowledge and thank the Charles and Betti Saunders Foundation Fund for its continued support of Save Austin’s Cemeteries, by providing a gift in the means of an unrestricted grant for our 2016 programs. All of this is possible due to the hard work of the Austin Community Foundation and people like you who donate to foundations and non-profit organizations. Thank you for your continued support.

**Submit an Article to the SAC E-newsletter**

If you would like to submit an article to the SAC e-newsletter, please send your article or idea to [info@sachome.org](mailto:info@sachome.org).

**SAC Board Meetings**

SAC Board Meetings are the second Saturday of each month, typically at Oakwood Cemetery at 10:00 a.m. If you are interested the city’s cemeteries, please join us. Contact [info@sachome.org](mailto:info@sachome.org) to confirm the time and place.

**Calendar**

Please join us for these upcoming events!

March 2	Texas History Self-guided Walking Tours (InfoSpots through April)
March 5	It’s My Park Day, 9:00 to noon (Oakwood and Evergreen)
March 12	SAC Board Meeting
April 2	Photo documentation session at Oakwood Cemetery at 1:00
April 9	SAC Board Meeting
May 7	Photo documentation session at Oakwood Cemetery at 9:00

*If you would like to stop receiving SAC emails, or if you have updated contact information, please send an email to [info@sachome.org](mailto:info@sachome.org).*