# Oakwood Chapel Structures Report

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Historical summary of site

Founded in 1839, Oakwood Cemetery is the oldest city cemetery in Austin, Texas. Located in east Austin, the cemetery consists of 40 acres, set up in a four-quadrant pattern, subdivided into smaller grids. Along the main street that divides the north half from the south half, appropriately named Main Avenue, a chapel sits on the north side of the street in the corner of a large burial section known as the African American grounds.

Historical summary of building

The Cemetery Association of Austin, headed by Mrs. Mary E. Mitchell, instigated the project of the mortuary chapel at Oakwood Cemetery in 1914. For a price of $5,000.00, the chapel was completed and opened to the public in November of 1914** for use as a mortuary chapel with several receiving vaults in a tower room, a record vault, and a dressing room for attendants. Architect Charles H. Page donated the building design and also superintended the job at no charge.[1] Contractor James Waterson oversaw the construction.[2] The chapel did not replace the existing dead house that was extant on the grounds since 1880. The purpose of the dead house was to provide a building to store corpses of strangers or paupers until the ground could be prepared for interment. The purpose of the mortuary chapel was to provide a place to hold burial services and temporary interment in the receiving vaults.[3]

Since 1914, the chapel has undergone some remodelings, one done in 1944, designed by architect J. Roy White, where several interior rooms were added to the interior space, and then again later in the second half of the 1900s. It is currently used as an office space for a part-time employee for the InterCare Corporation, who oversees the burials at the cemetery and provides maintenance for the cemetery.

Both Charles Page and J. Roy White were well-known architects in Texas. Charles Page (1876-1957) had a long and illustrious career spanning 65 years. His projects include the Texas Building at the St. Louis World's Fair, the Pasteur Institute, Travis County Courthouse, and Confederate Home in Austin, along with many other public buildings.

J. Roy White (1907-1985) also had a long career of some 60 years. His projects include Austin Public Library, which now houses the Austin History Center, the Huston-Tillotson College buildings, the Lyndon B. Johnson Ranch buildings, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Library. White was also an artist of the Texas Hill Country and did architectural restoration projects, including St. David's Episcopal Church, Murchison Junior High School, and LBJ's childhood home in Johnson City.

Description of building form and fabric

The rusticated Gothic revival style building is on the north side of Main Avenue. The L-shaped floor plan has a square tower in its interior angle. The ashlar limestone load-bearing walls support heavy wood brackets and deep overhanging eaves. The corners of the building and

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[1] Austin Daily Statesman, 9 January 1914, 10.

[2] Ibid., 4 November 1914, 10.

[3] Ibid., 9 November 1914, 10

** Interesting to note, the chapel was being built at the same time Oakwood Cemetery Annex was being laid out to the east according to Austin Daily Statesman article, 1 September 1914, 10.

tower are buttressed. The doors and windows are lancet arches framed by smooth limestone blocks, along with a curved triangular equilateral arched window in the upper part of the rear wall. Hammer beam rafters support the asphalt-shingled gabled wood roof. A smaller gabled roof protects the double front door.

The building's exterior has not changed much. According the 1944 floor plans, it appears that a couple of windows were added or changed – one in the tower room and one on the rear wall. The original roofing material is unknown as of this date, but is currently asphalt shingles. The interior has been divided up into small, insignificant spaces. The office room at the front had a hanging plastic lighting grid ceiling installed at some point. The wall plaster is cracked and falling off in places. The floor has experienced upheavals.

The whereabouts of the original floor plan is unknown at this date. According the floor plan of 1944, the remodel of this time period added two small rooms at the rear of the building within the building envelope – an additional restroom with a new window opening and a storeroom with an overhead loft. It appears that the receiving vaults were removed from the tower room and a larger window inserted into the south-facing wall of the tower room. Also a raised platform at the rear of the main space was removed to make room for the new restroom and storeroom. The later remodel added an interior partition that divided the main room into front and back sections, creating a small office space in the front, probably cheaper to heat and cool. So, if one removes the additions from 1944 and later, it appears that originally the layout had one main space featuring a lofty hammer beam ceiling with a rear platform area on center. The tower room to the east contained the receiving vaults along the north and south walls and the room to the north of the tower contained the attendants' dressing room, record vault, and small restroom.

<u>Description of existing conditions</u>

What needs attention and why

The ground around the building is currently above the interior floor level on the north, east, and west sides. This causes interior flooding when it rains heavily and also creates rising damp in the walls.

The walls' lime-based mortar has eroded. In some places, the lime-based mortar was replaced with cement-based mortar, which is detrimental to the soft limestone blocks. Some of the limestone blocks have lost structural integrity, due to cracking and weathering. The stone has experienced some weathering from pollution, but it appears to be mostly superficial dirt.

The roof has lost several asphalt shingles and needs to be repaired. Some of the eaves and brackets are rotting, due to water damage and lack of paint. The tower roof needs to be inspected for damage and the tower's stone downspouts need to be checked for blockage.

The window frames have also experienced rotting, due to lack of maintenance and paint. The rear exterior doors to the dressing room, ladies restroom, and storeroom all need to be replaced, due to water damage and rot.

The floor has heaved and cracked as have the walls, possibly caused by foundation movement, inadequate structural integrity of the foundation to hold the weight of the stone load-bearing walls, and/or the clay-based soils of central Texas. The foundation issue could be exacerbated by water erosion, interior flooding caused by high exterior ground grade, and rising dampness in the walls.

The interior wall plaster has cracked with some plaster falling away from and off the walls, caused by floor upheaval and deteriorated metal lath behind the plaster.

The electrical wiring is minimal and should be inspected. The plumbing should also be documented and inspected for locations and conditions.

Description of work needed to return building to stable, standard condition

In order to return the chapel to a stable and standard condition, the building needs extensive, historically appropriate, repair/replacement work to the foundation, walls, roof, and windows. The ground around the building needs to be graded appropriately to divert water away from the building, so water does not enter the building. This will prevent flooding and reduce rising dampness in the walls. The foundation needs to be inspected by a structural engineer and work done to repair and prevent upheaval. The mortar needs repointing with the correct lime-based mortar. Incorrect mortar, such as cement-based, will be detrimental to the soft limestone. The stone wall blocks need to be inspected for cracking and excessive erosion, and replaced with same type. The roof shingles need to be replaced, along with repairs to the sub-roofing, rafters, and eaves. The tower roof needs to be inspected and repaired as needed. The wood window frames need re-puttying and repairs, due to rot. All of the wood components of the roof, windows, and doors need to be repaired and repainted.

On the interior, the wall plaster needs to be removed as necessary and replaced in the same manner as initially installed. The floor tiles need to be tested for asbestos before repair/removal of the floor. The later wall additions and dropped ceilings should be removed to regain the impact of the historically single large main space. It should be discussed about which time period to use as the restoration date – 1914 or 1944, as both dates are historic, based on the minimal 50 years. If 1914 is the date to which the building should be returned, then the 1944 additions should be removed – the storeroom, loft, and the ladies restroom. This would return the raised platform centered on the large main room with its equilateral triangular window visible again, high up in the double volume space. However, the 1944 additions of the storeroom and extra restroom would be useful to have. The electrical wiring needs to be inspected and upgraded to meet current and future needs. The exterior overhead wiring for electricity and telephone should be placed below ground along with the gas line when the street is upgraded.

The building could be returned to its original use as a chapel for funeral services and memorial services, as well as a visitors center and cemetery history museum.

Priorities

The priority for the building is to correct the foundation and ground grade issues and to replace the roof to stop water from entering the building, preventing further damage to the roof and walls. A structural engineer needs to be consulted regarding the foundation.