

## PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

**LANDMARK NAME:** Olivewood Cemetery

**OWNERS:** Margott Williams, Descendants of Olivewood, Inc.

**APPLICANTS:** Antwanysha Johnson

**LOCATION:** 1300 Court St, Houston, TX 77007

**AGENDA ITEM:** B

**HPO FILE NO.:** HP2023\_0128

**DATE ACCEPTED:** 6/7/2023

**HAHC HEARING:** 6/29/2023

**SITE INFORMATION:** Tracts 9, 29, & 30 Court & Clay subdivision, Lots 1-11, Block G, Forest Park Annex subdivision, and Lots 2 & 6-21 Bisbee JR subdivision, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes an over 7.5-acre cemetery

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Protected Landmark, Protected Archeological Site as a Cemetery Designation

### HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

The Olivewood Cemetery served the early African American community in Houston for approximately 100 years. The Olivewood Cemetery Association was incorporated in 1875 and purchased 5.5 acres of this property that same year from Elizabeth Morin Slocomb. The organization bought two adjacent acres in 1917. Also known in its early years as Olive Wood, Hollow Wood, and Hollywood, it is one of the oldest known platted cemeteries in the city. The original 444 family plots comprising over 5,000 burial spaces were laid out along an elliptical drive. The burial ground contains several hundred marked graves, in addition to an unknown number of unmarked graves.

Interred here are pivotal leaders of Houston's post emancipation African American community, including the pastor of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, the Rev. Elias Dibble; Businessman James B. Bell; Alderman and Landowner Richard Brock; Attorney J. Vance Lewis; Educator James D. Ryan; Physician Russell F. Ferrill; and Dentist Milton A. Baker. Also buried here are formerly enslaved people, laborers, sororal and fraternal organization members, and military veterans.

The burial ground also includes examples of pre-emancipation burial practices, including upright pipes (symbolizing the path between the worlds of the living and the dead), ocean shells as grave ornaments and text containing upside down or backwards letters (as used in some West African cultures to signify death). Today, Olivewood Cemetery remains as a key historical site in Houston, serving as a testament to the foresight and perseverance of the cemetery founders.

### HISTORY

On November 1, 1875, Elizabeth Morin Slocomb sold 5.5 acres to the Olivewood Cemetery Association. Many interred here were the leaders of 19<sup>th</sup> century black society, and included ministers, doctors, dentists, teachers, and lawyers. Of note are, Reverend Elias Dibble, pastor of the oldest African-American church in Houston, businessmen Frank Vance and James B. Bell, attorney J. Vance Lewis, educator James D. Ryan, physician Russell F. Ferrill, dentist Charles Johnson, and Richard Brock, to name a few. Brock was a member of the African

Mission Church who became a landowner, operated his own blacksmith shop, founded two schools, helped purchase land for Emancipation Park, and became one of the city's first African-American aldermen. When he died in 1906, he was buried in the cemetery.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the Board of Directors of Olivewood Cemetery Association, and veterans of World War I and World War II, and perhaps of other wars, are buried here. Many infants and young children are also interred at Olivewood. No doubt this cemetery holds many ex-slaves.<sup>9</sup> The collection of Texas Death Certificates now being gathered also shows many of less financial stature, being domestics, laborers, brick masons, etc.<sup>10</sup>

This was no "poor man's cemetery," as it held some of the most beautiful statuary in the city. These headstones, monuments, and epitaphs reflect a rich cultural heritage and religious traditions. There were those who spent considerable amounts of money on bordered, multi-stone family plots, sororal and fraternal organization members, and many others also had financial means to only allow for hand-made concrete markers.

Olivewood's original 1877 plat map of 5.5 acres includes more than 400 family plots<sup>11</sup> around a graceful, elliptical drive (still visible) that originated at an ornate entry gate.<sup>12</sup> Many mature specimens of oak, pecan and elm trees provide shade while tulips and lilies still bloom along with other species of flora and fauna.

Several grave markers represent continuations and relatively unique permutations of African-American burial practices that were developed in pre-emancipation African-American communities. The continuations include two examples of upright pipes as grave features and the use of ocean shell as a grave ornament. At least six of the grave markers take the form of upside-down, inverted, and backwards letters and text. The graves are laid out in the Christian traditional west-east cardinal orientations, with the exception of several east-west alignments, and there are many examples of bordered family plots.<sup>13</sup>

The Texas Secretary of State has provided information that on November 23, 1875, the Olivewood Cemetery Association filed Articles of Incorporation. The incorporators were Ed. P. Turner, Edward Williams, David Osborne, and George Hooper. When the "Map of Olivewood Cemetery, Houston, April 1877" was filed on May 4, 1881,<sup>14</sup> seventeen stockholders held 21 of the 22 shares indicated. Stockholders of 21 shares were Frank Vance, Ed Williams, Jerry Smith, David Osborne, and Milton A. Baker, each with two shares, and Elias Dibble, Matilda Dickerson, Abe Russell, Aaron Jefferson, James S. (Jim) Kyle, J.L. James, Joe Sanders, Tom Freeman, Dave Righton, Henry Franklin, and Monroe Butler, each with one share. The map also indicates that the Rev. Elias Dibble owned Lot No.70 and the (Trinity) Methodist Episcopal Church owned Lot No.8, perhaps giving sway to the erroneous idea that Olivewood Cemetery was "owned" by the Church.

Although originally incorporated as Olive Wood Cemetery, during its early years, the cemetery was known also as known Hollow Wood, Hollywood,<sup>15</sup> and finally Olivewood Cemetery, per old maps and Houston City Directories. In the 1897-98 Houston City Directory, the following appeared: "Hollywood Cemetery (Colored) - 1/4 miles nw of Chaney Junction, Washington road. Jack Calloway, sexton." By 1900 the Johnson family had become caretakers.

A.D. “Pick” Johnson was born on the cemetery property, one of 13 children of the caretaker, and he later became the caretaker. By 1936 he was digging graves for the Harris County Cemetery on Oates Road. His two brothers, Ben and Fred, were in the funeral home business.<sup>16</sup>

In 1917 the cemetery corporation purchased about two additional acres of property adjacent to the western boundary of the cemetery: Lots 1–11 in Block G of the Forest Park Annex Addition and Lots 6–27 in the J.R. Bisbee Addition.<sup>17</sup> Harris County Appraisal District records reveal three additional lots owned by the Association adjacent to the Court Street entrance but deed records have not been found.<sup>18</sup> It is not certain whether graves are present in these new sections. The last known, marked burial in the oldest section of the cemetery occurred in 1961.<sup>19</sup>

Olivewood, like the other major black cemeteries in the city, has had many years of neglect that has resulted in a loss of markers and therefore, a loss of history.<sup>20</sup> Through the years it has been stated that the cemetery’s official owner was the Trinity United Methodist Church. Perhaps this was because of the connection of the Rev. David Elias Dibble, the church’s first minister, who owned a lot and is buried at Olivewood Cemetery. <sup>21</sup> Even so, there has been no known official support from the Church, which states that it never owned Olivewood Cemetery and does not now have any interest in it.<sup>22</sup> The City of Houston’s legal department gathered information upon request and on May 4, 2004, stated that the material they gathered “clearly shows there is no official connection between the cemetery and church,” and “as such it is classified as private property and neither is it subject to city ownership.”

As evidenced by several newspaper articles,<sup>23</sup> many attempts by individuals and groups were made to reclaim Olivewood but none seemed to have sustaining willpower. With no recent claim to ownership, encroachment has apparently occurred twice. “Old timers” report that an entry on the east side off Studemont was closed by Grocers Supply, <sup>24</sup> and is now a fenced parking lot covering that ingress. At the present time, the only access is by Court Street, which divides two parts of the same business’ holdings. It seems this company also recently encroached on cemetery property when they installed a water tank. <sup>25</sup> There are graves to be seen on two sides of it and it is extremely doubtful that the company owned a “dogleg” that juts into the cemetery.

In April 2004, a new restoration project got underway with Ms. Margott Williams who has ancestors buried in the cemetery. She formed the Descendants of Olivewood, Inc., a nonprofit organization chartered on September 10, 2005, “committed to restoring, preserving and maintaining Olivewood Cemetery as a historic, educational, charitable, religious, and cultural site of importance.” Under her supervision various volunteer groups have come out to clean the cemetery.

Now that this descendant group has stepped forward to undertake the restoration and continued maintenance, Olivewood can no longer be classified as abandoned. While it is doubtful that a complete and accurate listing of burials can ever be made, historical research will continue under the leadership of Trevia Beverly and Debra Sloan, with the assistance of the Afro-American Genealogical & Historical Society. It is anticipated that a history, using this

narrative as a basis, will accompany the burial list and be made available to the public. The cemetery received a Texas Historic Cemetery designation from the Texas Historical Commission in 2005.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Olivewood is one of the oldest known platted, incorporated African-American cemeteries within Houston city limits. It was founded in 1875 by the Olivewood Cemetery Association, a chartered African-American organization, with 22 shares of stock. The original 1877 plat map of 5.5 acres includes more than 400 family plots around a graceful, elliptical drive that originated at an ornate entry gate. Many mature specimens of oak, pecan and elm trees provide shade while tulips and lilies still bloom along with other species of flora and fauna. The headstones, monuments, landscapes, enclosures, and epitaphs reveal the cultural heritage and religious traditions of this Houston African-American population.

Interred here are several pivotal religious, social, economic, and political leaders from Houston's post-emancipation African-American community. Among those buried here are Reverend Elias Dibble, pastor of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest African-American church in Houston; Richard Brock, one of the city's first black aldermen; J. Vance

Lewis, attorney; Dr. Russell F. Ferrill, physician; Dr. Charles Johnson, dentist; James D. Ryan, educator; Frank Vance and James B. Bell, businessmen; and Milton A. Baker, a stockholder of Olivewood shares.

Olivewood Cemetery is landlocked on all sides and faces potential residential and commercial development. There is also danger of the street being closed, therefore prohibiting entrance to the cemetery. An official Texas Historical Marker for Olivewood would help to preserve, protect, and document its rich history.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>1</sup> Narrative based on "Olivewood Cemetery: Recovering A Lost History, Houston, Harris County, Texas," by Trevia Wooster Beverly, with the assistance of Debra Blacklock-Sloan and Margott Williams, 2004. Awarded Historic Texas Cemetery designation, August 9, 2005. (Edited by Debra Blacklock-Sloan, member of the Harris County Historical Commission.) Additional research by Debra Blacklock-Sloan.

<sup>2</sup> Olivewood Cemetery Map. Harris County Clerk. filed March 27, 2006. RP 019-54-0221.

<sup>3</sup> Harris County Deed Records. Vol 15, pp. 250-251; Vol. 383, pp. 325-326 and 524.

<sup>4</sup> Harris County Deed Records, Vol. 15, pp. 251-252. Also, Secretary of State records, Charter Number 555.

<sup>5</sup> Map for Olivewood Cemetery was recorded in 1881. College Park on West Dallas dates to 1896, and Evergreen Negro that is split in two portions by Lockwood Drive, dates to 1897. See Trevia Wooster Beverly, *At Rest: A Historical Directory of Harris County, Texas Cemeteries (1822-2001) Including Burial Customs and Other Interesting Facts, With a Listing of Past and Present Communities, Funeral Home and Monument Companies.* (Tejas Publications, 2001).

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<sup>6</sup> 1840 City Ordinance dated Dec. 17, 1840, "An Ordinance Regulating the Burying Ground" by J.H. Brown.

<sup>7</sup> Harris County, Texas Deed Records. Vol. 15, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Smith Prather with Bob Lee, *Texas Trailblazer Series* (Houston: Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2000). One page biographies. Bernice S. McBeth, *Trinity United Methodist Church* (unpublished manuscript narrative for a Texas Historical Marker, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> While there were a few free blacks in Houston, in the 1850 and 1860 censuses, slaves composed 22 percent of Houston's population.

<sup>10</sup> Texas did not begin statewide registration until 1903. Death records taken from (a) Transcribed City of Houston ledgers (1874-1894, 1896, 1900) at Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research, Houston, Texas. (b) Texas Department of Vital Statistics Death Certificates, 1903-1976, microfilm available through Family History Library, Church of Latter Day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, microprints of selected certificates collected by Trevia W. Beverly.

<sup>11</sup> Deed Map, Harris County, County Clerk's Office, Vol. 22, Pages 444-447.

<sup>12</sup> *Trinity United Methodist Church* (unpublished manuscript narrative for a Texas Historical Marker, 1984, by Bernice S. McBeth.

<sup>13</sup> David E. Bruner, *Symbols for the Living: Synthesis, Invention, and Resistance in 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mortuary Practices from Montgomery and Harris County, Texas*. (Dissertation) Binghamton University.

<sup>14</sup> Deed Map and list of Stockholders, Harris County, County Clerk's Office, Vol. 22, pp. 444-447.

<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with Hollywood Cemetery at 3506 North Main, that began in 1895.

<sup>16</sup> "Gravedigger. At 80, 'Pick' has buried thousands," *Houston Post*, August 22, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Harris County, Texas Deed Records. Vol. 385, p. 325. The original 5.5 acres purchased in 1875 is also in the J.R. Bisbee Addition. See Harris County Appraisal District (HCAD) Facet Maps 5853C8 and 5853C12. Account Number 0070850000028 - Lot 2 Bisbee Addition (5.5 ac).

<sup>18</sup> Harris County Appraisal District Records. Account Number 0102470010008 - Tracts 9, 29 & 30 (TRS 8A 8B & 9) Court and Clay Addition.

<sup>19</sup> Lettie Norton Johnson. March 13, 1961. Texas Bureau of Vital Statistics. Death Certificate # 15484.

<sup>20</sup> David Plesa, "A Case of Grave Neglect: Many of Houston's Old Cemeteries Lie Abandoned, Choked by Weeds and Ravaged by Vandals," *Houston Post*, Wednesday, October 20, 1993, p. A21.

<sup>21</sup> His plot, #70, is clearly shown on the Cemetery deed: Deed Records, Harris County, County Clerk's Office, Vol. 22, p. 447.

<sup>22</sup> Per the current pastor, Rev. Robert McGee. Church website at < <http://www.tumchouston.org> >.

<sup>23</sup> Armando Villafranca, "Volunteers clean graves, hope to restore history" *Houston Chronicle* 28 December 1994; Carlos Byars, "Historic cemetery receives a face lift along local bayou," *Houston Chronicle* 28 February

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1999; Kevin Davis, "Community groups give dignity back to 'African Cemetery,'" *Houston Chronicle* 23 January 2000: (p. 34, Sunday).

<sup>24</sup> The Levit family-owned grocery wholesaler. Founded in 1923 by Joe Levit, the business was left to his sons, Milton (died June 2004) and Max Levit.

<sup>25</sup> When the permit for the construction of the water tank was applied for, the City of Houston did not require a deed of ownership to be submitted with the permit application. Per Real Estate Division, City Legal Department.

**APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

**Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation**

(a) The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

<b>S</b>	<b>NA</b>		<b>S - satisfies</b>	<b>D - does not satisfy</b>	<b>NA - not applicable</b>
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|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;                    |  |  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;   |  |  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;                    |  |  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;  |  |  |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;   |  |  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation; |  |  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;   |  |  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.   |  |  |  |

**AND**

- |                          |                                     |  |  |  |  |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)). |  |  |  |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|

**Sec. 33-229. Criteria for protected landmark designation**

**S      NA                                      S - satisfies    D - does not satisfy    NA - not applicable**

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- (1) Meets at least three of the criteria for designation in section 33-224 of this Code;
- (2) Was constructed more than 100 years before application for designation was received by the director;
- (3) Is listed individually or as a contributing structure in an historic district on the National Register of Historic Places; or
- (4) Is recognized by the State of Texas as a Recorded State Historical Landmark.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Protected Landmark Designation of the Olivewood Cemetery at 1300 Court Street, Houston, 77007.

**HAHC RECOMMENDATION**

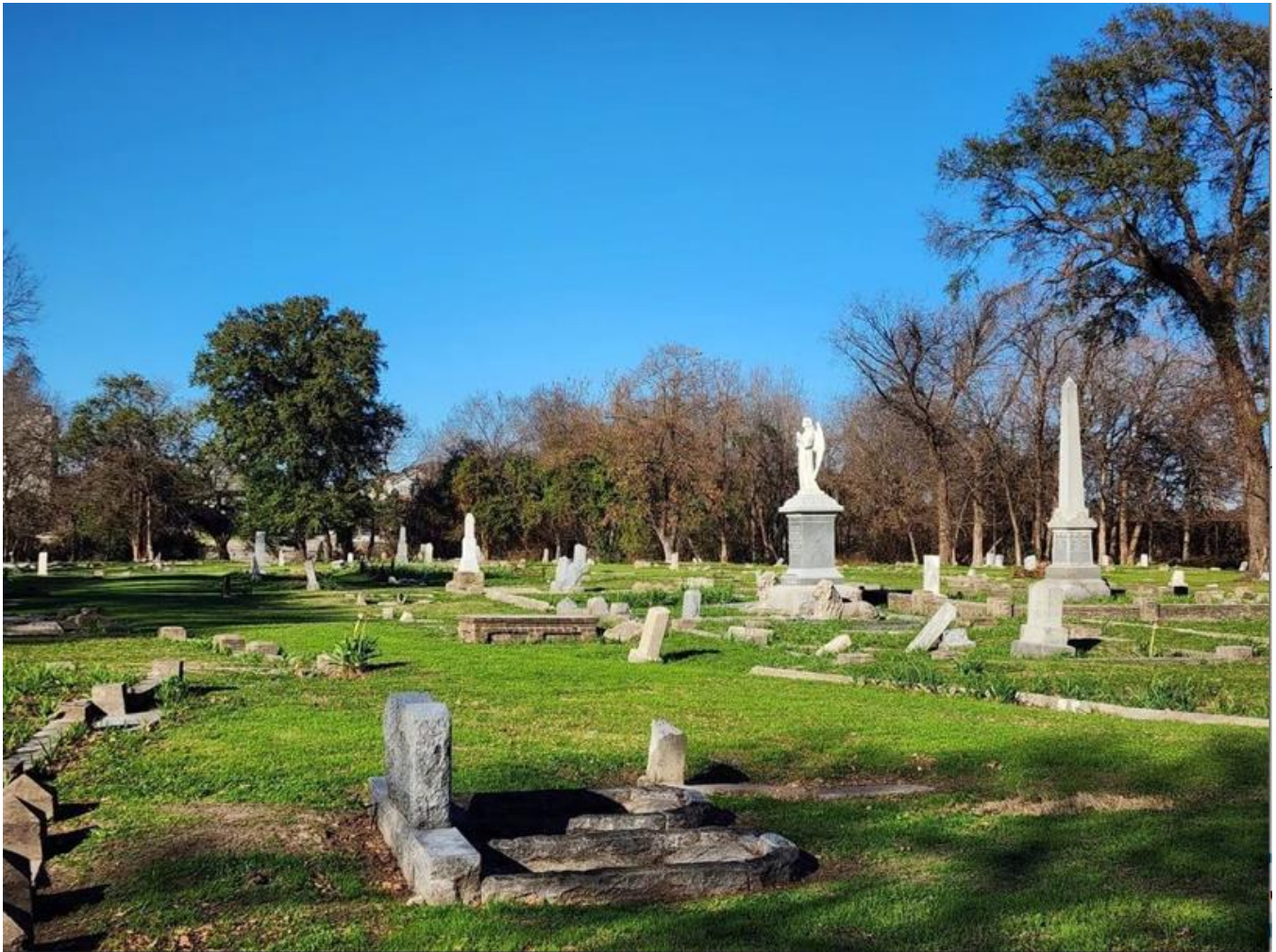




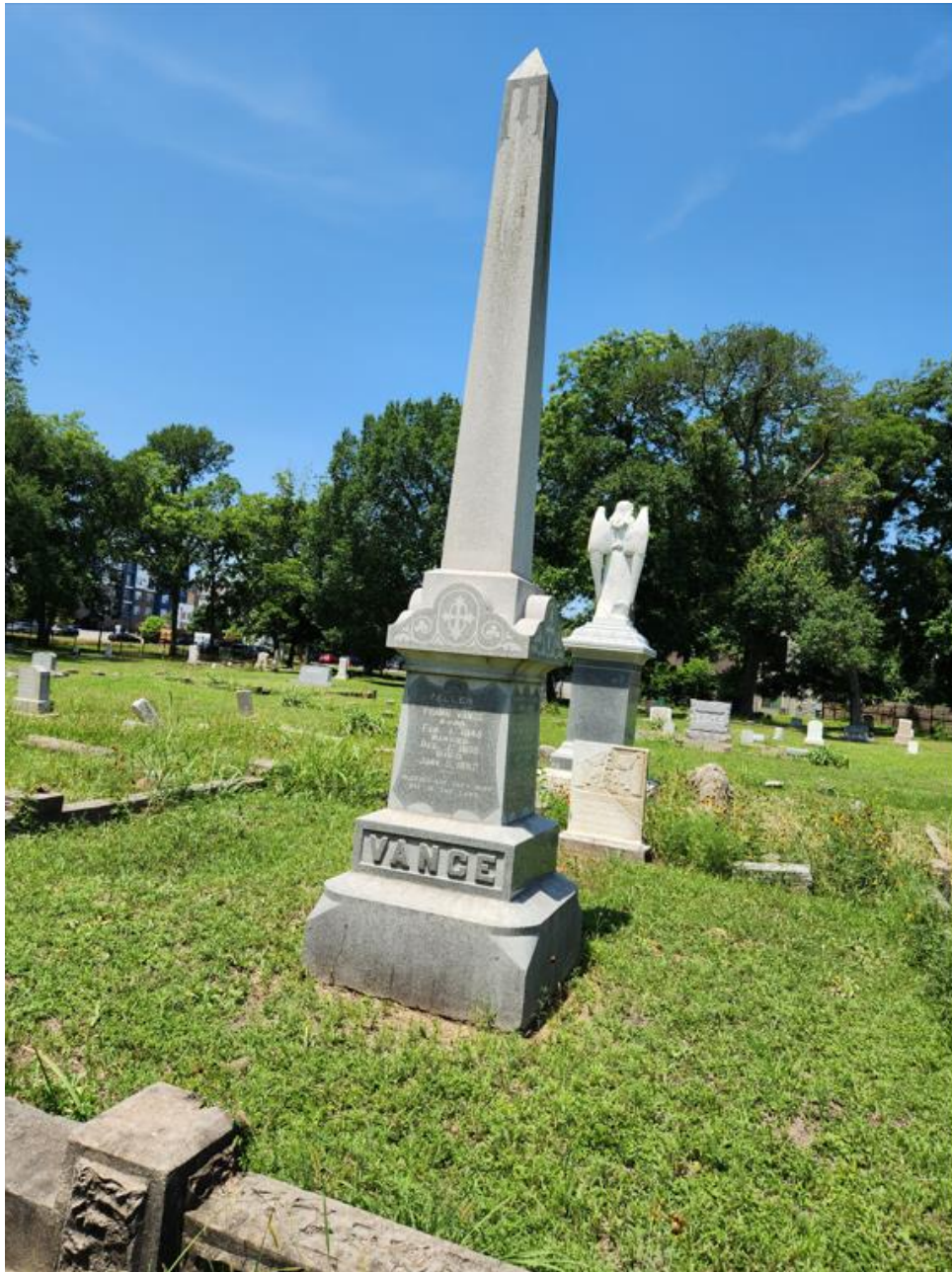
**EXHIBIT B**  
**OLIVEWOOD CEMETERY SIGN**



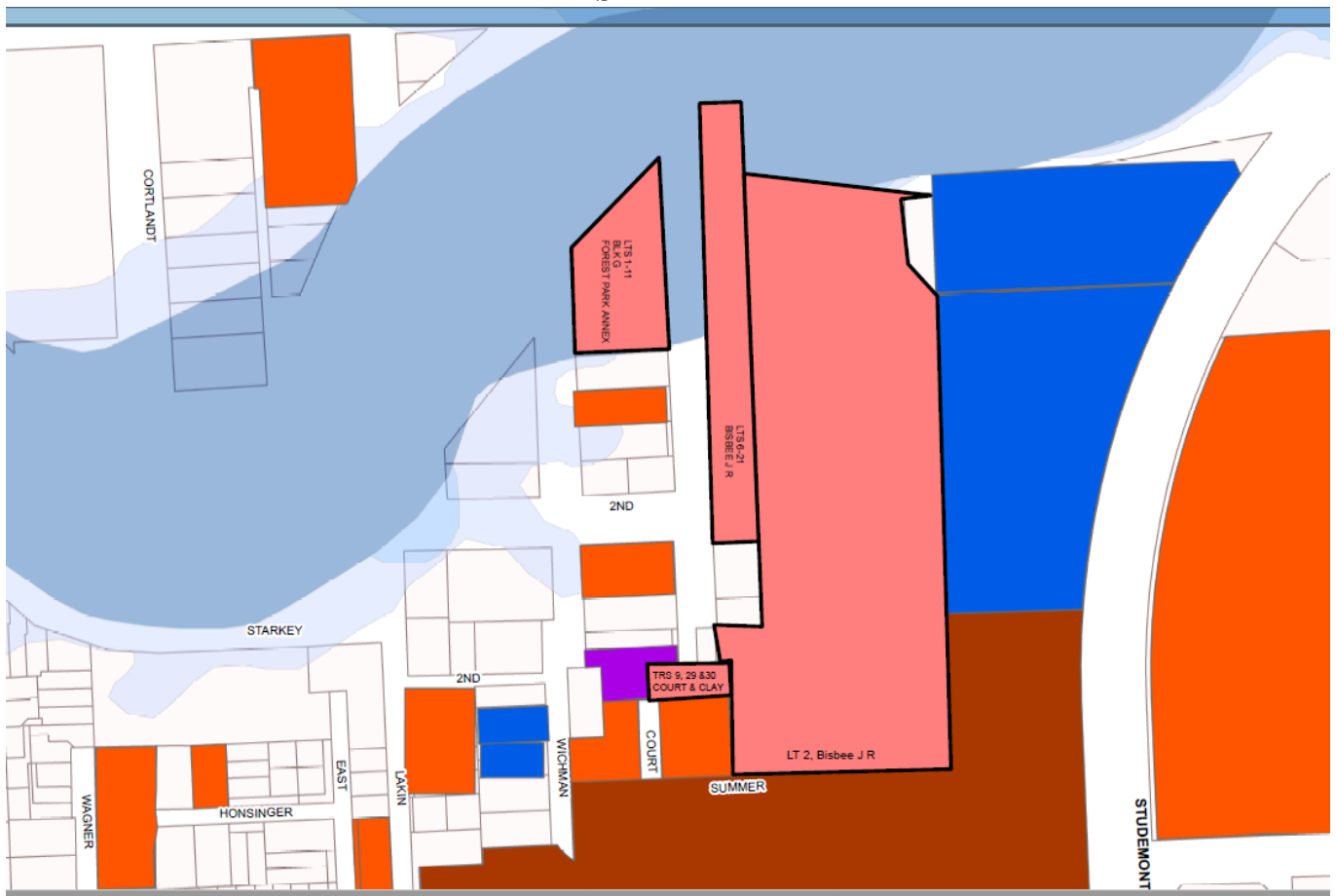
## EXHIBIT C GRAVESITES



## EXHIBIT D GRAVESITES



## EXHIBIT E SITE MAP



## EXHIBIT F AERIAL VIEW



## EXHIBIT G SITE PLAN



Olivewood Cemetery  
1300 Court Street  
Harris County Appraisal District Site Plan