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Universe Cemetery

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Universe Cemetery

Vicki Betts

On January 29, 1870, William Taylor and Ben Goss, freedman, of Smith County, Texas, deeded 3½ acres of land to Orange Humphreys, Robert Daniel, James Evans, Daniel Curtis, and Goss, trustees of the University Colored Church, for use as a church lot. It eventually also included the cemetery, later known as Universe Cemetery. On July 3, 1891, Goss deeded another acre out of his James Kelly survey land to the trustees of Universe Church, Colored Methodist Episcopal denomination, but on the Tyler-Henderson Road, indicating that the original site would no longer be used as a church. However, the property continued to be developed as a cemetery as noted by grave marker dates. On September 19, 2007, Rev. Donald R. Madlock, Sr., trustee of University Colored Church, also known as Universal CME Church, sold the property, including the cemetery, to Bobby Joe Manziel.¹

According to the website Findagrave.com, there are 334 graves at Universe Cemetery although some are known only by death certificates or obituaries. The oldest marked graves are from 1871 and the most recent is from 2005. Among those buried at Universe is W. A. Peete, a leading black educator in early 20th century Tyler who was also a Republican Party leader and a local contributor to the *Dallas Express* newspaper. Tyler's Peete Elementary School is named for him. Myles Anderson, who was an All-American fullback for Texas College and an educator and coach, is also buried there. The top four surnames

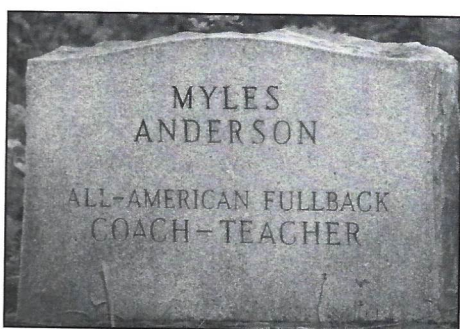
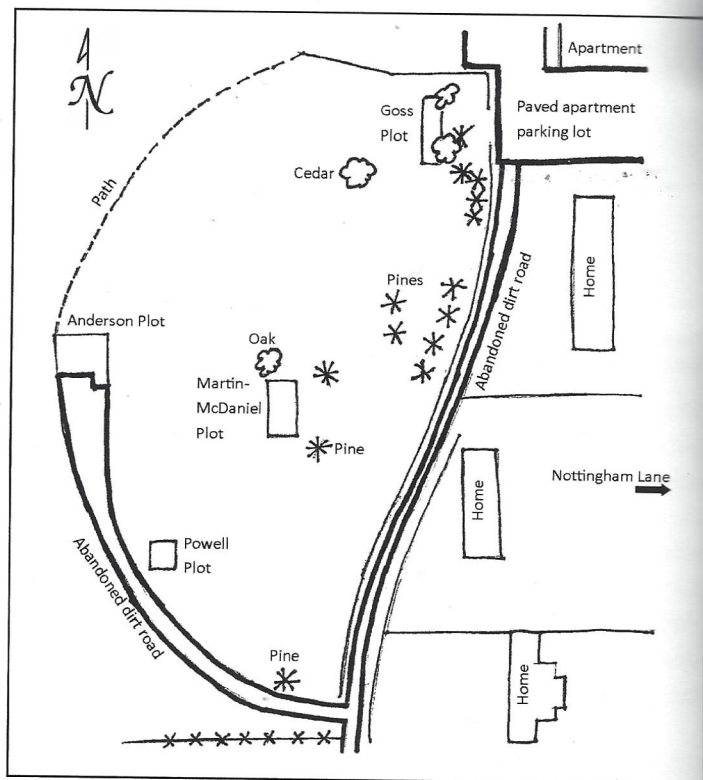


Photo by Clarence Shackelford

listed in Universe Cemetery are Goss, Murphy, Henry, and McDaniel. Sixty-three people buried there were known to have been born into slavery and probably many more who did not list birthdates or whose graves are unmarked. The cemetery includes markers for six known World War I veterans and seven World War II veterans.²

The cemetery is currently (2020) very overgrown with young pine and oaks, bushes, and brier vines. Several large pines have died and fallen, damaging fencing and markers. The original dirt road from the south has been cut off, and the only access is through an apartment parking lot.



Universe Cemetery. Map by Vicki Betts

In order to recognize and possibly protect Universe Cemetery, I decided to pursue a Historic Texas Cemetery designation from the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Information was available at <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/cemetery-preservation/historic-texas-cemetery-designation>. According to the THC, the designation "was developed in 1998 to help protect historic cemeteries by recording cemetery boundaries in county deed records to alert present and future owners of land adjacent to the cemetery of its existence. . . . The HTC designation is the first step toward preservation of a historic cemetery." The cemetery must be at least 50 years old and deemed worthy of recognition for its historical associations. The application required a narrative history with bibliography, deeds, photographs, a sketch map, a property ownership map, a location map, and a \$25 fee. The brief narrative history came from the deeds, census, and cemetery lists from Findagrave and the East Texas Genealogical Society. There were only two relevant deeds for the property, and they came from the County Clerk's office. I was able to go out to Universe Cemetery several times and get the required photographs. The property ownership map was drawn from the Smith County Appraisal District map property search, and the location map was based on Google Maps.

The most difficult piece of the application was the sketch map of the cemetery due to its condition, the terrain, and its irregular shape. After the first hard freeze in the fall of 2019, Andy Leath, Matt Stith and I went out with a measuring wheel and a notepad and made a rough sketch with measurements which then had to be refined. I sent the completed digital application to Austin on December 31, 2019, followed by the fee.

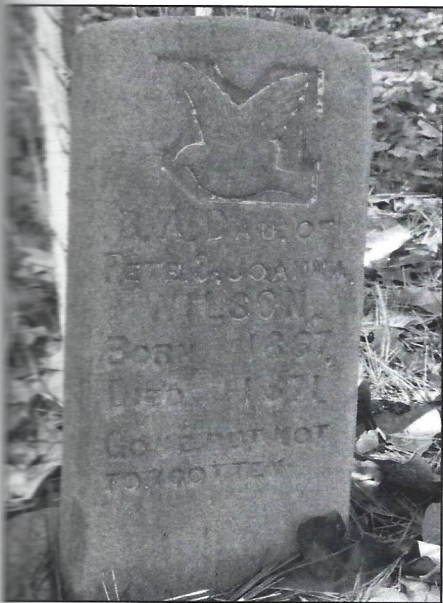


Photo by Vicki Betts

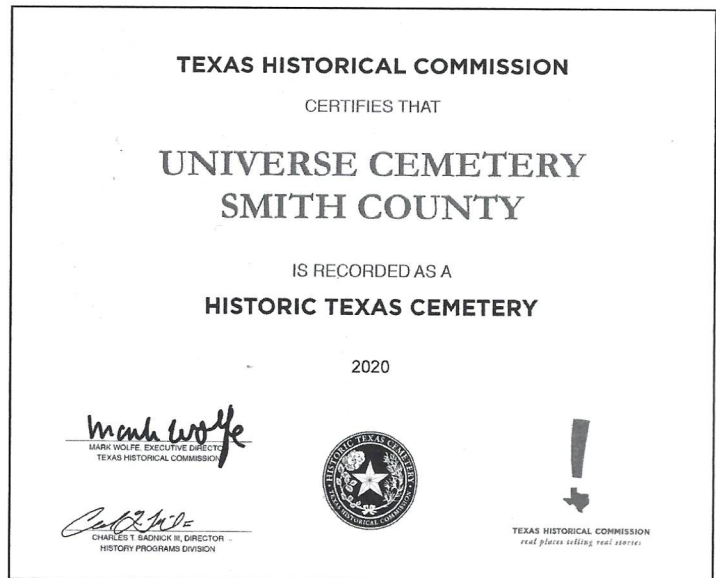
The THC states on their webpage that the process of securing a Historic Texas Cemetery designation may take four months. However, that did not take into account the outbreak of COVID in the spring of 2020. Fortunately, Carlyn Hammons was working from home, and in April she started on Universe

Cemetery. On April 21, she let me know that letters had been sent to the cemetery landowner and adjacent landowners letting them know about the application. They had four weeks to comment. On May 29, I received a signed and notarized Declaration of Dedication to take to the county clerk's office to file, and I paid that fee, emailing a copy of the receipt back to Austin. The actual certificate required signatures, but the necessary persons were also working from home, which took additional time. On July 14, the certificate finally arrived in Tyler.



Photo by Vicki Betts

Within a week Larry Wade of the Smith County Historical Society and the National African American Historical Society Museum in Tyler had contacted me about going out to the cemetery. He, Gloria Washington, and Clarence Shackelford, both of the Texas African American Museum of Tyler, and I drove out there and looked it over. We all agreed that something had to be done to keep the cemetery from disappearing forever because it was truly a community treasure. Larry called a meeting which brought in Goss descendants from Eules and Tyler who shared information and amazing photographs. Randy Gilbert called Bobby Joe Manziel, and we received permission to start cleanup. Larry contacted reporter Frank Jefferson with



KETK Television who filmed a story on Universe Cemetery which aired August 18, 2020. Larry also organized monthly Saturday work days starting in September and recruited volunteers with limb loppers, rakes, and chainsaws. It will take a lot of work and time, but Universe Cemetery will emerge from the forest.³ •

¹ Smith County, Texas, Deed Records, Y: 257, 30: 271, Document 2007-R00058205.

² Findagrave.com for Universe Cemetery, sorted by oldest graves first, (accessed October 25, 2020), <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/7355/memorial-search?page=1&orderby=d>; East Texas Genealogical Society, "Universe Cemetery, Headache Springs Area, Tyler, Smith County, Texas," (accessed October 25, 2020), <http://files.usgwarchives.net/tx/smith/cemetery/universe.txt>.

³ Frank Jefferson, "Forgotten African American Cemetery Will Be Restored by Two Tyler Groups," (accessed October 25, 2020), <https://www.ketk.com/news/top-stories/forgotten-african-american-cemetery-will-be-restored-by-two-tyler-groups/>.