
A Look at Oakwood, the Oldest Cemetery in Austin

By [Krista](#) on Apr 21, 2006 in [Cemeteries](#)

The Austin Chronicle has a good article on the history of Austin's first city-owned burial grounds as of the mid-1850s - [Oakwood Cemetery](#).

Some of the interesting features of the article include social segregation and blunt descriptions of death.

Like all cemeteries, Oakwood's 40 acres mirror their inhabitants' living societies. In the cemetery's early days, the north section was designated as "colored grounds." Paupers' bodies were carted from the gate to a small plot in the northwestern portion of the cemetery, then buried in unmarked graves. And if you had a family and you weren't black or Latino, you were buried on the south side, with some sort of grave marker □ perhaps just a plain, wooden remembrance, or maybe a fancy, carved or cast tombstone. Here is the tall "white bronze" (that is, cast zinc) marker of brother and sister Robert and Mable Tumey, who, according to the Austin Daily Statesman, died seven days apart in 1888 of diphtheria:

"Robert Homer Tumey, aged 2 years, infant son of Mr. and Mrs. William Tumey, after a brief illness with diphtheria, passed over the river into the realms of infinite peace and goodness, where, among the blessed of all worlds, he will be at rest and know no sorrow, no pain, no grief, forever and forever."

The paper wasn't quite as gentle in breaking big sister Mable's passing to readers, blurting "The Grim Reaper. Death has again invaded the household of Mr. and Mrs. William Tumey." This bluntness reflects the fact that death was a more commonplace part of everyday life than it is now. Local genealogist Danny Camacho, whose research greatly informs this story, recalls his aunt recounting what it was like in 1918, when the Spanish Flu pandemic hit Austin. Hearses, she told him, had a consistent, looming presence on the city's dirt roads - effectively doubling as ambulances, hauling bodies from home to embalmer to cemetery. "So many people were dying daily that they were a common site on the streets," said Camacho, aged 60, who knows the history of Oakwood as well as anyone.

The article also addresses problems the cemetery has been facing - such as people letting their pets run wild, lack of police surveillance, and maintenance problems like overgrown ivy, tall weeds, and fallen trees from storms.

Non-profit called [Save Austin's Cemeteries](#), which is devoted to preserving and restoring historic cemeteries in Austin, has started trying to raise awareness and money.