

Megan Rector

## Loachapoka Cemetery Story

At the bottom of a gently sloping grassy hill stands a four foot tall slab of concrete surrounded by a rusty wrought-iron fence. Upon this decaying slab are engraved the words “Remember youth as you pass by, as you are now and once was I. As I am now and you must be, prepare for death and follow me.”

This is the grave of 15-year-old Martha Ingram, who passed away in 1845 and is believed to be the first person buried in the Loachapoka, Ala. cemetery.

However, nobody knows for sure.

This is the case with much of this small town’s cemetery. Believed to be started as a cemetery in 1845, this piece of land holds pieces of history that may never be discovered. Even known stories about it and its inhabitants are beginning to disappear from the landscape.

“Cemeteries are interesting places,” said Ruth Ann Bond, the cemetery’s local expert and caretaker since 1995. “Most people don’t realize all the stories they hold.”

The town of Loachapoka, Ala. was founded in the mid 1800’s. Originally settled by the Creek Indians, the town began to grow rapidly as the Indians moved west and the railroad was built in 1840. For more than a decade, the town flourished and was the center of trade for Tallapoosa County until a fire in 1858 destroyed most of the downtown businesses.

It was during this time period that the first bodies were laid in the Loachapoka Cemetery, and although much is known about the history of the town before this time, a large portion of the town's history has died along with the people who lived it.

“There was a 96-year-old woman who knew more about this cemetery than anybody,” said Bond. “But she's been dead for about 25 years now. It's a shame she isn't still around to teach us about it.”

The town now has a dwindling 165 person population, but it is still central to Alabama culture and history.

Some of the identifiable figures buried in the cemetery include Confederate soldiers John Ellis McNeill and Joe Baggette. The grave of Major John Herbert Orr, pioneer of the uses of electromagnetic tape, can also be found there. Other notable figures buried in the cemetery include J.R. Leftwich, a member of Robert E. Lee's staff, and a number of WWI veterans.

These graves, however, are only a fraction of the more than 1,200 graves the main cemetery and adjoining African American cemetery are believed to hold. Of these, only half are marked, and slightly more than 100 are actually identifiable.

A number of slave graves are rumored lie in the main cemetery and in the forest bordering the back of the cemetery, but none of these rumors can be verified.

The cemetery also isn't without its fair share of lore. A number of mysterious events have occurred there, such as dimes appearing each year on the grave of a young boy, and an apple appearing on a monument and staying there for months. There are also graves decorated with seashells, whose origins remain a mystery. These stories are all

part of the history of the cemetery that continues to fade as the people who know the most about it pass away.

Besides lacking important historical records, the cemetery also faces other problems. One of these is vandalism. Bond can often be found out among the graves, picking up rubble and re-righting headstones that have been knocked over. Sometimes vandals will go as far as steal from the cemetery.

“There was a man who was stealing the giant marble slabs straight from the graves,” said Bond. “Turns out he was using them to floor his house.”

Other pieces of the cemetery have also been stolen. Small statues and sometimes even whole headstones will vanish.

Another problem that the cemetery has is upkeep. The cost of taking care of the cemetery just during the summer months is \$2,500. This includes mowing, weeding, and cleaning the headstones.

Despite the problems facing this historical piece of land, efforts are being made to keep it preserved and to dig into its history.

“Cemeteries represent a great part of Alabama’s history,” said Ted Urquhart, president of the Alabama Cemetery Preservation Alliance, or ACPA. “They are sources of priceless personal and historical information, and their locations must be identified and protected.”

The ACPA is one organization that is making an effort towards cemetery preservation. It is attempting to register every cemetery in the state of Alabama. Anyone with information on a certain cemetery can submit it to the organization and it will be

posted on the register website. The Loachapoka Cemetery is one of the hundreds of cemeteries on the register.

“The fact that a cemetery exists needs to be recorded in as many places as possible and those records made available to the public,” said Urquhart.

Other efforts are also being made to help preserve the cemetery. Bond is the chairperson of a board that is dedicated to cemetery upkeep. Through a trust fund and donations, the board tries to raise as much money as possible to cover cemetery expenses.

“We pretty much beg, borrow and steal just about everything we can,” said Bond. “But we aren’t making enough money to cover all the expenses.”

Bond also sends letters out every year to wealthy families in different states, asking for donations.

As far as preserving the history is concerned, Bond tries to learn as much as she can about the cemetery and its inhabitants.

She said, “Most cemetery history is word of mouth. I try to learn what I can and then pass it on so it isn’t lost forever.”

Sometimes she gets help from outside sources. People from different states frequently come to the cemetery in search of deceased relatives. The cemetery has had visitors from states as far as Arizona and Delaware.

Urquhart himself has been one of these people.

“I have walked the Loachapoka Cemetery several times trying to find relatives who I believe died in the area and hoping to find them there.”

Other groups outside of the area have an interest in the cemetery as well. A group in Montgomery is making an effort to mark as many Confederate graves as possible, and

Washington D.C. wants Bond to send in all of the names in the cemetery in order to do research.

ACPA secretary Lisa Baggett said, “So much history is contained in cemeteries, so many stories are told of love, struggles, religion, death, pain, triumph, and joy. These monuments tell a story with their symbolism.”

Despite all that is being done to preserve its history, the Loachapoka Cemetery is still short of the resources it needs to continue upkeep. With more than 27 percent of its population over the age of 40, Loachapoka’s past is dying along with those who helped create it.

“Cemeteries are non-renewable resources,” said Urquhart. “Once lost, they and the information they can provide about our heritage are gone forever.”

Sources

Lisa Baggett (205)814-1215

Ruth Ann Bond (334) 821-0361

Ted Urquhart (850)243-7010

Loachapoka Profile. <http://www.idcide.com/citydata/al/loachapoka.htm>

Nunn, Alexander. Yesterdays in Loachapoka and Communities Nearby.

Homecoming Association, 1968.