



Historic Bethel Cemetery, Coppell

By Frances James (1922 – 2019)

The Historic Bethel Cemetery in Coppell is near the intersection of Christi Lane and Moore Road off of Bethel School Road on the west side of the James Parrish Survey (about three miles northeast of the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport). This site was set aside for a cemetery by Peters Colonist James Parrish and his wife Eliza Jane Record Parrish in the 1850s. Before they had received title to the 640 acres of land, James died in 1853 and is buried in the Parrish Family Cemetery nearby. Travelers who had crossed the Trinity River at Trinity Mills heading west frequently camped on this land. When a young traveler in a wagon train died, he was buried on this land and the cemetery was established. At first it was called Sands Cemetery because the soil was so sandy making easy digging for a grave. The cemetery became a community grave yard for friends and neighbors. By 1885 the name was changed to Bethel Cemetery. The name was again changed to Historic Bethel Cemetery in 1986 to avoid conflict with another cemetery with the same name.

Among the earliest burials in the Bethel Cemetery was that of Joshua Hill (1820-1859). He was born in Pennsylvania and had come to Texas in 1853 with his wife Elizabeth Hesson Hill who was born in Ohio. Their six children were all born in IoYa. Their youngest was daughter Charity Elizabeth, seven months old. The "Dallas Herald" printed an article on March 9, 1859 (Volume 7, page 1) which said "It is not to be denied that the malady (small pox) or something resembling it is now upon us, yet it appears to be the mildest form before known history of the disease." This is what Joshua died of. Charity Elizabeth always claimed that she had proof that Joshua Hill was a first cousin of President James Buchanan, but that proof died with her August 8, 1940.

Kentucky native James Pinson Howell (1806-1865) was born in Barren County, Kentucky. He and Malinda Pemberton (1817-1869) were married at Blue Springs, Kentucky on September 27, 1836. They first migrated to Johnson County, Missouri in 1845, with their six children but heard of better opportunities in Texas and came to Grapevine Springs (about two miles west of the Bethel Cemetery). James had freed his slaves before he left Kentucky. Two of them ran along behind holding onto the wagon and pleading not to be left behind. James Howell relented and brought them to Texas with him. They continued to work for the Howell family until death and are also buried in the Bethel Cemetery.

In 1865 James was buried in Bethel. His son, John L. Howell died the next year, and Malinda was buried beside her husband about 1869. James was the descendant of James Howell who fought under General George Washington in the American Revolution. His descendant, the late Coppell Mayor W.T. (Bill) Cozby, had been negotiating with land developers about the cemetery when he died suddenly in 1985. Mayor Cozby's sister, Mary Evelyn Cozby, was active and interested in everything that was good for their expanding town and took up this negotiation project.

The Bethel School was built across the road from this cemetery on land sold to the trustees by Mrs. Sarah A. Moore for the school house in 1858. These two acres were sold for \$5.00 under bond until title could be given. The deed states that this was to be a public church and to be open and free to all other denominations to preach in when not occupied by the Free Will Church and also to be used for a school. Henry Parrish had inherited a portion of the Peters Colony patent from his brother James and was one of the school trustees. The land for the Free Will Baptist Church was on the same side of the road. Minutes of the church, from its beginning with six charter members, describe the land transaction when it was erected in 1886.

There were only two stones left and a small fenced area when determined descendants began the preservation of the cemetery in the 1980s. One stone was for Ada Kirby who was born and died the same day, September 17, 1909. The other stone was for Ervin Wickersham, born October 11, 1910 and died December 5, 1913. When Moore Road was widened to four lanes many graves were destroyed. One resident recalled that Moses Franklin Thomas had died in 1904 and his grave was in a row near the front. There were three sisters named Cora, Dorothy, and Sally Thomason but dates of death are unknown. The resident said there was a boy named Boyd who was bitten by a snake while traveling through the countryside in a wagon train and he was buried in 1907. Ann Rebecca Richardson was buried in 1910, and the nineteen year old son of the Berry family died of the flu in 1918. Others remembered were James and Elizabeth Thomas, husband and wife; Peter P. Parkay, Martha Ellen Kirby, Minnie Pugh, Thomas Barkley, William James, John Wayne Ward, and Gerald Ward who may have been brothers. Another group remembered was John Scott Alexander, Peggy Sue Marcum, and Mosey Hixon Compile. No dates are furnished with these names. The markers are gone.

Ruby Hood McDowell, 84, remembered when her little sister, Ida, was buried on February 12, 1913, and her little brother Joseph on April 16, 1913. Their graves were under a big tree that is no longer a part of the cemetery. It is now in a front yard of a house on the edge of the cemetery. The weather was so cold in February that they could not drive the hearse and the funeral home brought the casket to the gravesite in a wagon! The last known burial was in 1925 when Laura Burden was buried beside her husband who had died in 1919.

When asked, some old settlers who had lived in the area for a long time thought it was five acres, but that would be a lot of land for a small community cemetery. It was closer to one acre. Even that one acre was unprotected from developers.

After the Dallas Fort Worth International Airport was built in the 1970s, this area of Coppell started to develop. When Northlake Woodlands was platted a small space for the visible area of the cemetery was set aside. As the houses crept closer to the site, the old settlers asked the city of Coppell for assistance. Many of the head stones remembered by the old settlers were gone, due to vandalism. The local paper took up the concern and asked for information about the site. A source

recalled the headstones being used as land fill on a nearby development. They recalled the pick-up truck driving away, loaded with broken head stones. One person sitting in her yard chair with her camera in her lap was watching and when the trencher came up with a skull, she knew at that moment she was right- more space should be delineated for the cemetery. The picture was proof enough! The development was halted; the City Council put this on the agenda. The City of Coppell hired Larry Banks, a consulting archaeologist with the Corp of Engineers to establish the cemetery boundaries.

Reluctantly, the developer had to give up some lots that he had planned to build on. It was presumed the old settlers might have not known exactly where the lines were. All that was left was a small fence around one plot with a couple of head stones. With the information gathered from the newspaper sources, the families who had ancestors buried here preserved the Historic Bethel Cemetery! Nearby neighbors take turns keeping the site mowed. There was a Historic Bethel Cemetery Association formed that received funds for a fence and arch over the entrance and there is hope that in the future the residents of Coppell will protect this hallowed ground that is the burial place of the ancestors of early Coppell settlers.

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