Transported through time: The story of the Bolivar Project

by MaKenzie Givan

When the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) planned road construction in the small Denton County town of Bolivar, little did they realize it would uncover remains of the Sartin Hotel and Tom Cook’s blacksmith shops. Both the hotel and blacksmith were significant enterprises serving travelers on the Chisholm Trail in the 1870s.

Notably, Cook’s shop was possibly the first in Texas owned by a Black freedman.

Against all odds

The Bolivar Project began in 2016 when archaeologists matched up markings on old maps with their respective locations today.

“It’s very rewarding to actually be able to tell the story of something you don’t really read about in history books,” said Kevin Hanselka, an environmental specialist and archaeologist for TxDOT. “This project is an opportunity to tell the story of a man [Cook] becoming a success in an ‘against all odds’ situation.”

Over the years, the TxDOT has investigated and preserved archaeological sites with the help of historical societies, archaeological contractors, and other partners.

Archeologist Reid Ferring to speak about Aubrey’s 13,500 year-old Clovis site

By The Denton County Office of History and Culture

Discovered in 1988, excavations at the Aubrey Clovis Site revealed an exceptionally preserved record of Late Pleistocene environments and the activities of Clovis people along the Trinity River.

At 13,500 years ago, these are the earliest record of Clovis in Texas, and expand our understanding of the Clovis culture across North America.

Dr. Ferring is Professor Emeritus of the University of North Texas and has doctorates in both Archaeology (SMU) and Geology (UT Dallas). In addition to Texas, he has worked on sites in Oklahoma, Israel, Portugal, Ukraine (Crimea) and for 30 years in the Republic of Georgia.

His appearance, during Texas Archaeology Month, is sponsored by the Denton County Historical Commission in conjunction with the Office of History and Culture’s Texas Talks Speaker Series.
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the Texas Historical Commission in Bolivar, and the Denton County Historical Commission.

The hotel story

Jesse Sartin, owner of the Sartin Hotel, may be one of Bolivar’s founders according to research conducted by archaeologists Mindy Bonine and Sara Parkin. Sartin bought the property in 1881 and through the 1890s expanded the hotel, which was most likely a two-storied wooden building.

The team also exposed part of the hotel’s rock foundation and remnants of a rock-lined well. They recovered a lightning rod, silverware, bits of ceramics and glass emanating from plates, bowls, serving vessels, glasses, and bottles. An excavation of the Tom Cook Blacksmith shop.

Photo by Douglas Boyd, Stantec Inc.

One of the most notable artifacts, according to Doug Boyd, one of the contracted archaeologists for the Project, were parts of a small hand-crank sewing machine developed by the Secor Sewing Machine Company in the 1880s.

Cook’s blacksmith shop

Tom and Lethia Cook, both born into slavery in South Carolina, had eight children together. After they migrated to Denton County, Cook purchased the land for his blacksmith shop in 1882. He became locally renowned for his smithing skills and as a minister. After his death in 1898, his daughter Kitty Clark sold the shop and moved to Quakertown, a former African American neighborhood in the City of Denton. The Cook family descendants played a large role in desegregating Denton in the 1950s and 1960s.

On site, Boyd and other archaeologists located the general area of the blacksmith shop based on how the hammer scales, tiny fragments of hammers chipped off while hitting hot metal, were arranged on the ground.

Boom. No scales

“We could see where the floor zones seem to disappear and that’s the exact point where the hammer scale stops,” Boyd said. “The hammer scale, it’s just dense and then all of a sudden. Boom! You’re at the edge of the building and then one foot over, there's no hammer scale in the sediment at all.”

From the artifacts recovered from the site, archaeologists determined that Cook repaired wagons, as well as shod horses for those passing along the Chisholm Trail. On one side of the shop, remnants of nails indicated this was a corral where Cook worked as a farrier.

“It's amazing how much you can infer as to the kinds of iron he was using, the coal that he was getting, and how he was heating his iron,” Boyd said. “You can see evidence of forge welding, where he's taking two different pieces of hot iron and pounding them together. Just lots and lots of little details about the daily business of blacksmithing that make him really come to life.”

Dugout

To the east of the shop was a dugout used as a storehouse for canned goods since the temperature below ground was likely to be lower. Yet at the bottom of the dugout, the team found domestic articles that lead to the conclusion that Cook and his family lived in the dugout for a few years.

Apart from structural remains, other artifacts discovered were toys and fabric, pieces of broken harnesses, tools, and utility items such as cast-iron stove fragments and doorknobs.

Each of these items has helped build a clearer picture of life in Bolivar in the late 1800s. The artifacts are now at the University of Texas, Austin, where they are closely analyzed by Dr. Maria Franklin, Ph.D., the outreach coordinator of the Bolivar Project.

Dr. Franklin hopes to better understand Bolivars’ historic economic environment and how the Sartin Hotel and Tom Cook’s blacksmith shop contributed to the commerce of North Texas.

Amazing descendants

To bring the blacksmith’s legacy back to light the direct descendants of Tom Cook have been involved in the Project. These lineal descendants of Cook; Howard Clark, his daughter Halee Clark Wright, Betty Kimble, Mylah Willis-Clark, and Howard Clark.

Photo by Douglas Boyd, Stantec Inc.

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On site he helped screen buckets of excavated dirt. Through the process he learned about his ancestor

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and shared his knowledge with the team. Wright, Kimble and Clark connected Boyd's and Franklin's researchers with the African American community in Denton to conduct interviews and document their oral history.

“I cannot overstate the value of what they have brought to this project, and it's been amazing for us to work with them,” Boyd said.

Another person who assisted the Project was Kelly Kring, a professional blacksmith, who analyzed artifacts from Cook's shop.

**See Bolivar at Dig It!**

On October 28, the Bolivar Project will be a feature attraction in the annual ‘Dig It!’ archeology Fair in Denton to display artifacts from site. Another professional blacksmith will be alongside Clark to reenact one of Cook’s workdays.

Eventually, Boyd said the artifacts will be displayed in the Denton County Museum. The project leaders also hope that discoveries about Tom Cook and the Sartin Hotel will be incorporated into school curriculum.

“There are a lot of gaps in the true history of Texas and African American history, of course, is a big one because almost all the history that’s been written has been written by white people and from a white perspective,” Boyd said. “Any chance we have to investigate sites of African American occupation and activities tells us some of the story that you can't get otherwise.”
Prosper Historical Society

By Kendrick Hurst

Prosper, located in both Denton and Collin counties, is one of the fastest growing North Texas suburbs. Once a rural community that the Dallas Morning News noted lacked a single traffic light in 2000, today Prosper has more than 35,000 residents.

47 guardians

Within this expansion the Prosper Historical Society—a group of 47 residents—works to preserve its treasure trove of local history.

"My mission for the Prosper Historical Society is to have historical buildings, homes, and markers where anyone can visit and visualize Prosper’s past and its evolving surroundings," said Christy Kreger, the Society’s president.

The Society has exhibits in the school district’s office, Prosper High School, the Texas Bank building, and the town hall. At the town hall, you’ll find pictures of Prosper’s first post office which opened in 1902. Under postmaster Benjamin J. Naugle, it operated for 40 years.

A video, "King Cotton," was produced by the Society which focuses on the town’s cotton enterprise in the late 1800s through the late 1900s. Locals familiar with Prosper’s cotton heydays make appearances in the video. Additionally, the Society has developed teaching materials about the town’s history.

A cluster of silos

Cotton cultivation in the area started in the 1860s. As this commodity’s market boomed, area farmers established a gin affiliated with the Texas Cooperative Gin Association. Eventually cotton farming was phased out in the late 1900s.

Besides maintaining locations associated with cotton, the Society also preserves sites such as a cluster of historic grain silos, buildings, and markers.

The group also cares for nearby cemeteries such as Walnut Grove and Good Hope. Jack Reeves, a Society member, is involved in cemetery conservation at Wear Cemetery where veterans are buried and their graves are honored during holidays. “I spent many hours at their graves, and I just want to see the legacy live on,” Reeves said.

Recently the Society dedicated a park in honor of former Mayor Chester Hays; a longtime resident who owned one of Prosper’s earliest grocery stores.

Flour mill Christmas ornaments

As a unique holiday fundraiser, Society members create and sell Christmas ornaments showcasing Prosper’s heritage with replicas of its flour mill, town hall, high school, grain silos, and others.

With the funds raised, the Society hopes to establish an historical museum that also has room for community activities. The Society preserves the hallmarks of Prosper’s by-gone times, which encourages the town to reflect on the past as well as the challenges it faces in the future.

Discover secrets of the past

The Denton Dig It! Archeology Fair is Saturday, October 28th

By Abbie Beck

Have you ever wanted to be an archeologist?

Here’s your chance! Explore the fascinating and fun field of archeology—FREE—at the Denton County Historical Park, 9am to 1pm, with demonstrations, displays, and activities exploring the rich history of Texas archeology.

Last year the Fair had mock excavations, stone tool fabrication, working blacksmiths, earthen oven cooking, rock art demonstrations. With help from archeologists, the North Texas Archaeology Society and archeology firms, there’ll be even more fun this year.

Come out and celebrate Texas Archeology Month with us!
Hands-on history in Roanoke

By Katie Neumann

At 114 Oak Street, the town’s oldest “dark brick” commercial building is now the Roanoke Visitor Center and Museum. More than a century ago, when Roanoke was a cow town, the structure housed the Silver Spur Saloon.

A dubious door

“When it first opened, it was the saloon on this (first) floor, and the second floor had seven rooms and it was the brothel,” said Kelli Thomerson, the Museum’s curator.

Local legend has it that an adjacent bank had a secret connecting door, allowing guests to discreetly enter the brothel from the bank. The door remains in the museum. Other uses for the building included a hotel, dance hall, pool hall, hardware store, grocery, doctor’s office and café. “Eventually though, it was boarded up and abandoned...instead of tearing it down, the owners gave it to the city,” noted Thomerson.

A Swede for the Sneads

The building was erected in 1886 by Swedish stone mason Lawrence Olsen for the local Snead brothers – Robert M. and Burrell S. Snead. Near the Center’s front door is the original wood panel engraved with the Sneads’ names and the year of construction. This is just one of the many artifacts donated by Roanoke residents including the Medlin family.

The Medlins played a significant role in the founding of the city. The Charles and Lewis Medlin families first settled around Denton Creek circa 1847. Susceptible to flooding, the settlement was relocated to the present Roanoke.

Houston and scavenger hunts

Among the prized Museum possessions are land grants signed by Texas Governor Sam Houston. “What makes them historically so special is because they were probably the last legislative acts he did before he was kicked out of office,” Thomerson said.

With scavenger hunts, games, and vintage items, museum manager Stacey Lotz, has created an atmosphere where guests can interact with history.

Frequent scavenger hunts have distributed clue sheets with partial images of locations on Oak Street. Guests must correctly identify each place and take verifying photos to win. At the front desk, guests also have the chance to win a prize if they correctly guess the amount of old shotgun shells in a jar.

A hands-on-history activity that fascinates and excites children is the telephone switchboard, an interactive display of a telephone from the early 1900s. Also at hand is a box of antique household items. Young and old alike are challenged to guess the names and uses for these “ancient” objects laid out to be held and scrutinized.

“You see people come in who remember these things,” Lotz said. “It creates this interaciveness because it’s more than just the reading or us talking to them; it’s more fun.”
Lewisville Lake offers boating, fishing, water sports, beaches, wildlife and nature trails. Nearly 75 years ago, the Elm Fork Tributary of the Trinity River was dammed and filled to create the reservoir lake. At that time hundreds of residents were displaced for the dam’s construction. Dozens of farmsteads were abandoned as was Ritter’s Lake, a farming settlement, according to The Dallas Morning News.

The area’s first reservoir was Lake Dallas financed by the City of Dallas, according to the Army Corps of Engineers which owns and manages Lewisville Lake. Finished in 1927, the Garza Dam was named for the nearby town of Garza, which is now the town of Lake Dallas.

**Downtown Dallas is saved**

In 1957 Lewisville Lake was created when the Garza-Little Elm and Lake Dallas Reservoirs merged, according to the Texas Water Development Board. Rob Jordan, current Lake Manager for the Army Corps of Engineers, explained the Lake was built to protect Dallas, “There was flooding that occurred in the Trinity River, and basically, the Dam protects downtown Dallas from being flooded.”

If the Dam ever broke, more than 400,000 people would be in harm’s way, according to the Dallas Morning News.

Jordan listed the Corps duties beyond flood control. “Our secondary mission is the recreation component. We have campgrounds, day-use parks and access points to the Lake,” he said.

“Our third mission is environmental stewardship and natural resources. We use different management techniques, whether it be prescribed fire, wildlife food plots or certain vegetation clearing,” Jordan said.

In a Lewisville Oral History “Lewisville Dam and Fish Hatchery” author LaJuana Hale interviewed people about the Lewisville Dam construction and area residents forced to move. One of those uprooted, Margie Pockrus, spoke to Hale. The Federal government claimed eminent domain over her land.

**Troubled waters: Submerged by Lewisville Lake**

*By Nolan Wilkinson*

We watched the Lewisville Dam being built from scratch,” Pockrus said. “I didn’t know that many people there, but I’m sure a lot of them were upset just like we were … they set a certain price for our land, and we could take this or else we wouldn’t get anything and that was it.”

Jewel Hasten told of her displacement. “Just right there where we lived were 20 families,” Hasten said. “Some of them didn’t live on the land, but they owned the land. It was devastating.” Hasten refused the government’s initial offer of $56 an acre for her 115-acre farm. “We contested it in Denton, and we got $6,000 more than what they offered us. Back then in the late 1940’s it was a lot of money,” she said.

**Bright spot**

Pockrus said the government at least did one thing right.

“They moved McCurley’s Cemetery as well. I appreciated that the government did that,” she said. McCurley Cemetery would have been flooded were it not moved by the government. Ritter Cemetery was also moved, but whereas McCurley was reinterred far from the lakeshore, Ritter Cemetery lies in the forest next to the Dam.

Former Ritter Lake resident, Gerald Slater, spoke at the Ritter Cemetery’s 150th anniversary. “This is all that’s left of Ritter right here,” Slater said to the Dallas Morning News. “The rest of it is gone, or under the dam or under water.”

For those forced off their lands, living or dead, the advent of Lewisville Lake became troubled waters.
The History of Wilson Cemetery

Excerpts from the marker application narrative to the Texas Historical Commission

One of the older cemeteries in Denton County can be found 2.5 miles down a county road northwest of Aubrey. During the mid-1800s, pioneer families had their own cemeteries, a necessity because of the severe conditions they had to deal with in the wilderness. Family members lost their lives when creeks were too high to cross during the rains, diseases broke out, and women succumbed giving birth at home without doctors. The family would often go to the highest part of their land to pick a spot, possibly under a grove of trees, to bury their lost loved ones.

The first burial in Wilson Cemetery is Mildred M. Wilson, the one-year-old daughter of Jeremiah H. and Melinda Wilson, who passed in 1866. It was also important to Jeremiah Wilson and his sons, who fought in the Confederate War, for all veterans to have a burial place after the war. The Cemetery deed set aside a section of the Cemetery just for veterans.

Not much has changed in the area around Wilson Cemetery since that first burial. The site has cedar trees, bois d’arc trees, oak trees, and prairie grass. You find the redbud tree by the first gate blooming in the spring, and over by the graves irises, bluebonnets, and Indian paintbrush.

The Wilson Cemetery has been well cared for and loved over the past 150 years. The monuments have been preserved and stand straight in their place; some of the graves were marked by sandstone rocks. Today some of those rocks are still in place, but the occupants’ names are unknown, while some of the red sandstones were replaced with small monuments when the names were identified.

Kenneth Wilson and the Aubrey Historical Society submitted the application for the Historic Texas Cemetery marker.

Conservation Dos and Don’ts Trivia

By Alexandra Younger

① True or False: Anyone can walk into a cemetery and clean head stones and trim plants.

② How do you report an abandoned or unknown cemetery?

A. Call the Sheriff
B. Post it on Facebook
C. Report it to your representative councilman or councilwoman
D. File notice of the cemetery with the county clerk of the county in which the cemetery is located and concurrently mail notice to the landowner on record in the county appraisal district not later than the 10th day after the date of discovery.

③ To properly clean a headstone that is in good condition (not crumbling or with a delicate surface), what is the appropriate cleaning agent?

A. Dish detergent
B. A non-ionic soap and water
C. Bleach solution
D. Sandpaper

④ When repairing a headstone, what method is considered obsolete or incorrect?

A. The application of cement, harmful chemicals, or sealants
B. The use of metal bolts or braces
C. Sinking stones into concrete
D. Sandblasting or an excessive force of water
E. All of the above

Answer: E) All of the above

Keep a record of the cleaning and do not perform in excess of 12-month intervals.

Water is the most important ingredient and best solution of the cleaning agents are not available. Note: peppers are not available. When safe cleaning agents are not available. Note: peppers are not available. water.

Answer: B) A non-ionic soap and water.

Answer: D) File notice of the cemetery with the county clerk of the county.

Answer: C) File notice of the cemetery with the county clerk of the county.

Answer: False if you want to volunteer to clean head stones or help maintain a cemetery. Start with Rocks or graves?

Photos by Gary Hayden
Cemetery conservation: a workshop for the dead

By Austin Folkertsma

As part of May Conservation Month, The Denton County Office of History and Culture held a cemetery conservation workshop.

Senior archeologist Christopher Goodmaster and Principal Investigator Alexandra Younger, both from Integrated Environmental Solutions, led the workshop. Goodmaster has been working with the Texas Historical Commission’s Cemetery Preservation Program for several years. For this event he condensed his three-day workshop into three hours.

Goodmaster explained cemetery regulatory factors, motives and methods for protection, and ways to study burial grounds.

Unknown save for a grave

Conservation saves the cultural significance of cemeteries from those interned; both the famous and the common. The history of their communities and vicinities rest beside them.

“For some of these folks, their grave is really the only thing that we know about them,” Goodmaster noted. “Not all of us are important, significant people.”

For towns that have disappeared, cemeteries may be the last vestige of them.

Quakertown is an example. In the early 1920s, it was the African American community dispersed from its proximity to the Denton Court House and the woman’s college.

“Quakertown is no longer here,” Goodmaster said. “A cemetery is all that is left that has any record that they ever existed on the landscape.”

Even unmarked cemeteries are important.

“Many folks had wooden monuments or maybe just a fieldstone as their monument...Then there are Native Americans buried all across the area. Where?”

Cemetery like a classic car

“Before you restore a classic car, you have to understand something about that car, what it is, how it was built and what you might need to do to restore it and the same principles apply to restoring a cemetery,” Goodmaster reflected. “It’s [cemetery conservation] not a complex, mechanical thing, but you still have to understand what kinds of monuments we are dealing with — what kinds of stones we are dealing with because there’s different ways to fix different types of stones with corresponding research.”

“When you commit to the care of a cemetery, it’s a long-term thing. It’s not a one and done type of thing,” Goodmaster stated. “It’s not your good deed for the year.”

Well-intentioned but...

If volunteers want to clean headstones, do they know the proper tools and cleaning techniques?

Goodmaster observed, “I have seen the best of intentioned cemetery clean-up efforts deal more damage.”

“People see a cemetery and they think, ‘If we’re going to clean up that cemetery, we’re going to need a lawnmower.’ Well no, you might want to step back and actually understand what it is you’re doing, because a lot of these graves are probably unmarked and headstones are going to be damaged or maybe not in their original locations.”

He recalled an incident when headstones were sprayed with white paint for visibility.

“That is a terrible idea for a lot of reasons!” adding the act might amount to vandalism.

Goodmaster has also seen lawn irrigation systems in cemeteries. “They’re spraying water against these old headstones that frankly were not designed to handle that.”

Which side of the fence are you?

The conservation process begins with obtaining landowners’ access permission to the site since most cemeteries in Texas are on private land. Also some graveyard fences were erected long after they were abandoned.

“A lot of folks that didn’t have monuments are already outside of those fences,” Goodmaster said. “When you see a fence around a cemetery, that’s not an accurate depiction of the actual boundary of that cemetery because a lot of times cemeteries were abandoned for 20, 30, 50 years before a fence was ever even put up.”

Other considerations are landscape designs along with headstone, monument, and mausoleum architecture.

An inventory of the site is necessary.

“That’s where we go through, and we report the location, the type, the inscription, and the condition of each headstone,” Goodmaster explained.

“That’s where we actually fix the headstones,” the archeologist said. “Many people find it respectful to restore and clean these monuments.”