

HISTORIC WILLIS

The Willis Cemetery - A Link to the Past

By Olivia Wise



When Richard S. Willis donated land for a right-of-way for the Houston and Great Northern Railroad in 1870, the town of Willis was established. Land was donated by families for a cemetery. The current site was most likely already the location of some graves. Through the years more land was donated and some purchased in order to expand the Willis Cemetery.

The tombstones and markers can't speak, but they do tell stories to those who take the time to read them. The earliest readable date on a headstone is that of a member of Dr. Isaiah and Nancy Henry Harlan's family who died in 1844. Among others buried at Willis Cemetery are early Willis settlers, at least 36 known Confederate soldiers, veterans of World War I and II, veterans of more recent wars, people of prominence in the history of Willis, people who immigrated from other countries and made their way to Texas to settle and raise their families and many other loved ones. Every grave holds a story.

The Willis cemetery was recently one of the featured sites on the Montgomery County Historical Commission's History Road Rally. Young and old had a great time following clues to uncover some of the history of Willis and Danville. The Captain Thomas Wesley Smith family mausoleum (sometimes referred to as the Smith/Crawford mausoleum) was the focus of some of the historical information sought on the road rally. There will be a special ceremony in April to honor Captain Smith who served in Terry's Texas Rangers, was a county sheriff, prominent tobacco grower and cigar factory owner and built the Willis Opera House in the 1880s.

There have been several special ceremonies performed at the cemetery by such organizations as The Sons of Confederate Veterans and Ladies of the Society Order of Confederate Rose, Granbury's Texas Brigade, United Daughters of the Confederacy, Children of the Confederacy, and Sons of the Republic of Texas assisted by family members. Those performing the ceremonies wear re-enactment costumes and have swords and rifles. The ladies wear black dresses from that period in history and are veiled in black.

The most recent ceremony (March 5, 2016) was in honor and memory of Confederate soldier Private Francis Marion (Frank) Elam. A new grave marker at the site gives an account of his military experience.

There was a ceremony in 2012 to dedicate a Confederate memorial marker in memory of Hiram Little, William M. Little and Oscar F. Little, who served in the Confederate Army and are buried in the Willis Cemetery.

Other outstanding early settlers, Dr. E.J. Arnold and his wife, Rhoda Ann Warner are buried at the Willis Cemetery. They were

both from old New England families. Dr. Arnold came to Texas in 1836. He practiced medicine in Washington and Montgomery. Dr. Arnold's wife was buried in Willis and he was originally buried in Montgomery, but in 1880 his body was disinterred to be buried beside his wife in Willis. Their last home is now located at Fernland in Montgomery.

There is currently an Eagle Scout project in progress at the Admiral Sykes' family gravesite. Scout Maxwell Granger is working on his Eagle Scout Certification. (More information later when the project is completed.)

It is the hope of the Willis Cemetery Association that as more and more families embrace their family histories and become interested in genealogy and the preserving of their histories, that they will share their website information with others by way of the cemetery website.

The Willis American Legion Post and Auxiliary place flags on graves of veterans in honor of their service at special times each year. The American Legion Auxiliary have made special wreaths at Christmas time and placed them on graves of veterans, in 2015, Congressman Kevin Brady and Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Wayne Mack, participated in a special ceremony and assisted with the laying of wreaths.

The Willis Masonic Lodge has honored masons who have passed away by placing a masonic symbol on their headstones.

The cemetery has been fenced and cared for using interest from CD's and donations. All available funds are used on upkeep. Those who oversee the care of the cemetery receive no salary or compensation for their time or service. All through the early years of Willis, families gathered periodically and worked together to clean family grave sites. As the years have passed, it seems some families have become too busy, or are physically unable, some have moved away, and in some cases there are no longer any living relatives, and so the special care that was once given to family burial sites, in many instances, has been neglected. In 2008, the last Saturday in April was designated as an annual volunteer clean-up day. Turn-outs for this yearly event have ranged from one person to several dozen dedicated workers. One year there were as many as 80 people working, some even came from out of state to help. Those who have volunteered have cleaned around headstones and borders, helped with mowing, weed eating, and hauling away debris, cutting limbs and trimming bushes, etc. Volunteers have made new friends, shared family stories and made genealogical discoveries.

The Willis Cemetery Association looks forward to welcoming volunteers this year on April 30. If it rains it will be on May 7. It's a special way to honor our ancestors and those who were an important part of early Willis history. Bring your yard tools and come join us. You are welcome to come and stay as long as you like.

For more information, go to www.williscemetery.com. Donations in memory of a family member or friend or for the Maintenance Endowment Fund can be mailed to Willis Cemetery Association, Inc., c/o Mel Paddock, 314 Harris Blvd., Conroe, Texas 77301.

Editor's Note: We are so thankful for this contribution from Olivia Wise. The information shared here is invaluable for the preservation of Willis' history. We appreciate Olivia's dedication to Willis history and willingness to share it with the community through Ten Ninety Seven.