



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Tarleton Helping Preserve Stephenville's Historic Mount Olive Cemetery

STEPHENVILLE, Texas — Among the trees and autumn leaves lies some of Stephenville's richest history — a century's worth — and Tarleton State University is partnering with community leaders to preserve it.

Just before the railroad tracks on College Farm Road, at the once flourishing St. John's Baptist Church, a small graveyard with a big story lies quietly, surely unopposed to a little attention. The dirt road leading into Mount Olive Cemetery (established 1922) is dotted with 250 known African American graves and another 90 unmarked.

At year's end 2021, a team from the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University used ground-penetrating radar to locate all gravesites in the cemetery. Now Tarleton has joined the city of Stephenville and the Cross Timbers Fine Arts Council to properly acknowledge unmarked burials with a stone inscribed "unknown."

That's just the beginning.

Dr. Deborah Liles and the students in her fall class are collecting written and oral accounts and combing local archives to chronicle 100 years of Black life in Erath County. Tarleton's W.K. Gordon Endowed Chair in Texas History, Dr. Liles serves on the board of several historical associations statewide and is known for her award-winning work on women, slavery, local communities and ranching.

The team's research will be published, with proceeds donated to the Mount Olive Cemetery Association for continued upkeep.

"Mount Olive is a sacred place," said Stephenville Mayor Doug Svien. "Our collaboration with Tarleton is about uplifting the achievements of African Americans. We are one city, one county, with a responsibility to our forebears. That's a good thing to remember, and Tarleton is right there helping us do it."

Tarleton President James Hurley said this kind of "meaningful human endeavor" binds a university to its surroundings. "Let us never be only books and classrooms," he said. "Let Tarleton herald and honor its neighbors. What a wonderful project."

The Stephenville City Council will hear an update at its October meeting Tuesday, Oct. 11.

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Dr. Liles: “It is paramount that we share the history of Mount Olive Cemetery and collect the stories of the people and their community. They are the threads in the tapestry of an authentic American narrative.”

Christine Newton, Executive Director of the Cross Timbers Fine Arts Council, concurs. “Nothing gives better insight into a people’s culture than the way they are memorialized. With these stories, we hope to bring in the living community to learn about the families associated with Mount Olive and to better understand our heritage of place.”

Many of the burials were relocated from Stephenville’s West End Cemetery, which dates to 1856. Wallace Howell was the first person to be buried in Mount Olive, on May 5, 1922. A family plot for the Edwards family marks a mother, father and their children. The last of the Edwards clan to be buried there was Gertrude Chandler Hicks in 1981.

Directional and entry signs soon will point the way to the cemetery, now barely noticeable from the roadway. Dr. Liles and her spring class will create a stained-glass mural to honor those interred, and a community-wide unveiling — complete with new burial markers — is planned for late 2023.

The project is registered with the Black Cemetery Network, an organization committed to identifying and preserving African American burial sites.

For more information, contact Tarleton’s Division of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and International Programs at 254-968-0506.