

Sowers Cemetery History

Edmund D. Sowers arrived in Texas from Illinois in 1856 and claimed 32 acres of good land with available spring water in the Parsons headright, or land grant. The area is now in West Irving near Pioneer Dr. and Beltline Roads.

The Parsons land grant is a rectangle of land extending east/west about 2 miles and north/south about 1 ½ miles with the cemetery on the north edge of the north side.

Edmund Sowers was the owner of a store in the Sowers community and the town was sometimes called Sowers Store. Along with the store, it had two physicians, and eventually a school that was established in 1881.

Before the civil war began in 1861, there was a once per week mail stop at the Sowers store on the Dallas to Birdville route. It was discontinued for several years during the war. Birdville's original name was Ft. Bird and was the earliest settlement in Tarrant Co. Birdville is just north of Ft. Worth and close to Hurst and North Richland Hills. It was annexed into Haltom City in 1990.

After the civil war ended in 1865, Mr. Sowers reestablished a post office and served as postmaster for the Sowers area before it passed to H.N. Lucas. The mail route was then Dallas to Grapevine serving Sowers and Estelle. Estelle being just east of present day DFW airport near the Dallas and Tarrant county line.

According to the Sowers Cemetery Historical marker, the earliest interments on the Parsons land grant were in 1868, marked only with stones and on a section of the cemetery that years later would be known as Beulahland Memorial Park. These graves were believed to be of a woman and her daughter who befell an unknown tragic death.

To challenge the Historical Marker's earliest interments, a broken and buried headstone was uncovered and restored in 2022 of Henry Ewalt who died November 1, 1865, at 8 days old. Henry Ewalt was the son of Noah Spears Ewalt and Mary Jane Johnson Ewalt and was the nephew to early pioneer William Haley. The 1865 Henry Ewalt marker is the oldest documented burial within the Irving city limits.

Also, the family of Catherine Caster Hawes Worthington added a modern-day marker indicating her death date as 1867. Her original fieldstone marker shows only had her initials 'CW' scratched onto it. Catherine is buried in the same northwest section of the cemetery as Henry Ewalt.

To add to the lore, a newspaper article from 1964 sites a man with the surname Applewhite as the earliest interment. The article specifically mentions the Applewhite grave as one of the motivations for Sower's adjacent property donation in 1874. It should be noted, however, that there is no official account of an Applewhite burial in cemetery records.

Regardless of the history of these earliest graves, on August 14, 1874, Mr. Sowers honored existing gravesites by donating land for school, church and cemetery purposes. The portion for the cemetery being south and adjacent to the earliest gravesites where the church and school

were designated to the west of the cemetery. He gave free cemetery plots to members of the community.

County land records reveal that the owner of the original burial property was probably S.S. Connor and not Sevier Smalley as indicated on the historical marker. The records obtained from the State for the historical marker application did not dispute this newly discovered fact. The earliest county land records indicate that Sevier Smalley did not yet live in the state and was not of an age to own property in 1868. County records further reveal that Sevier Smalley did not purchase the property until 1891 from Pete and Lidia Faucher.

With 1865 being the earliest estimated date of a cemetery on these grounds, as far as historical perspective, the founders of the City of Irving, Otis Brown and J.O. Schulze, had not been born yet and would not arrive in the area for another 37 years.

It is interesting to note why settlers were coming to this part of North Texas. The civil war ended in 1865. Many southerners who had been hurt financially during the war came to the area to rebuild their lives. North Texas farm land meant opportunity. Dallas county continued to grow during the Reconstruction years, which did not have the added burden of many areas of the South with major rebuilding.

The first school was built in 1881 and occupied the west half of the property that Mr. Sowers donated in 1874. After several iterations and additions to the school, the wooden structure was devastated by fire in 1960. This land just west of the current cemetery is now owned by Irving Independent School District, who absorbed the Sowers School District in 1956.

Oddly enough, the Irving ISD is indicated as legal owner of 2.1 acres of today's cemetery which includes the original Sowers property donation inherited by virtue of the IISD taking over the Sowers School.

The current structure houses administrative offices and the Transportation Logistics Center. A church was never built. But it was common for the school to be used by church groups. This property has been in continuous use or ownership of a school district since 1881.

By 1884 the town had a population of seventy-five and several businesses including a church/school, doctor, blacksmith, druggist and two steam gristmill-cotton gins.

In 1899, For \$1, Edmund Sowers donated a second piece of adjacent property east of the first dedicated cemetery property to increase the cemetery size.

In 1926, one of the founders of Irving, Otis Brown, donates the eastern most portion of the cemetery. Officially known as the Otis Brown Addition to Sowers Cemetery, it operated as a separate cemetery under the name Sunset Memorial Park. To this day it causes confusion on sites like findagrave.com because obituaries and death certificates make reference to Sunset Memorial Park and not Sowers. The operation of Sunset Memorial Park was turned over to the Sowers Association in 1966.

A corporation called Beulahland Memorial Park purchased a 5.556 acre piece of property in 1934 that included the original 1860's burial property. The intention may have been to commercially expand the cemetery which obviously never materialized. Regardless, the small

original burial area became land-locked between the Sowers Cemetery, a 1950's housing development to the north and Irving ISD property acquisition on the west.

Sometime after 1937 Sowers Road and Lively Street were joined resulting in one east west road. It was referred to as Sowers Road on the west side of Irving and Lively Street on the east side. In 1937 Lively Street was the northernmost city limit of Irving.

Sowers Road/Lively Street were renamed to Pioneer Drive in the 1960's. The name Pioneer is a nod to the two early pioneers E. D. Sowers and M. C. Lively.

A small portion of Sowers Road still exists south of Pioneer Drive and just west of O'Connor. A short stretch of Lively Street still exists between Delaware Street and Britain Road north of Downtown Irving.

The first Historical Marker in the city of Irving was placed in Sowers Cemetery in 1973.

Today, Sowers has over 1300 interments on 4.6 acres of property.

Documents indicate that the Sowers Cemetery Association was formed in 1961. After a prolific and active 20 years, the Association was all but disbanded in 1980 and was almost dormant until about 2012 when a few involved realized financial sustainability had declined along with deteriorating conditions at the cemetery.

Today the Association is working to get recognized as a Historic Texas Cemetery designation, 501(c)(13) status and find revenue to sustain care of the cemetery into the future.

Although it is certain there are many unoccupied grave sites, the Cemetery Association has incomplete records of grave sales and is seeking any information from the public that may have cemetery records.

Therefore, a big focus is to identify new grave sites and use old fashioned revenue sources like garage sales, fundraisers, cemetery tours, donations from community members and descendants, to cover annual maintenance and save for capital improvements.

We are always open to local clubs, groups and associations to volunteer at the cemetery for maintenance and projects.

Sowers is the oldest, largest and most visible Community Cemetery in Irving. It is located at 3101 W. Pioneer Rd. Irving 75061.

For more information visit our FaceBook page Sowers Cemetery Association or visit our website www.sowerscemetery.org. Donations and correspondence can also be sent to our mailing address at 3101 W. Pioneer Dr. #1007, Irving, TX 75061.

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