

Introduction

The Old Canaan Cemetery Bioarchaeology Project began in 2018 at the request of the Canaan Missionary Baptist Church community located in Marshall, Texas. The community established a church and cemetery in approximately 1870, amidst its member's homes, farms, and orchards. Due to Jim Crow-era violence and intimidation, the church was moved about one mile from the cemetery in 1938. Cemetery records have been lost and the community was prohibited from visiting. In 2018, the church community contacted the Texas Historical Commission to inquire about archaeological documentation of the cemetery and the THC connected them with Texas Tech. Our goal is to collaborate with the church community to provide answers to their questions about the cemetery size and who is buried there using archaeological, bioarchaeological, and historical data.



Team

Faculty: Dr. Anna Novotny

Students: Kaitlin Murphy, Meg McCollum, Chloe Pruitt, Nathaniel Asquith, Meredith Miller, Jalia Williams

Student Voice

"I know that in doing this project, I will have helped a community gain further insight into an area of their past that they knew very little about. It has affirmed that archaeology can be important work for both the past and present, and will continue to be important for communities that have little knowledge about their past. This project has set in my mind that I will continue to do archaeological work and I hope to help people like I did here."
-- Kaitlin Murphy



Faculty Voice

"Archaeological excavations frequently focus on ancient history and unfamiliar cultures, a distance in time and space that creates detachment from the past. Getting to know the descendants of those buried in the cemetery, during the excavations and at Sunday services, was transformational for the students. It challenged their relationship to the past as "ancient history" as well as informing how they think about the impact of past events on people in the present."

-- Dr. Anna Novotny

Transformative Experiences

Impacts/Results

The ultimate goal of the project was to help the descendant community, who was denied access to the cemetery for nearly 80 years, answer questions about the lives of their ancestors.

- Recognized the presence of non-native plants in the cemetery, likely planted by mourners almost 100 years ago.
- Prioritized methods that were the least destructive to each grave.
- Collected small samples of bone for DNA analysis and hundreds of soil samples for environmental DNA analyses.
- Hope to connect the living to their ancestors using genetic genealogy techniques and to learn more about the health of the cemetery community.