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Eternity in Apalachicola: Prominent citizens repose in Chestnut

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Chestnut Cemetery is the oldest of Apalachicola's existing burial sites, predating 1831.

It lies adjacent to City Square, one of the six original open spaces in the city design, dating back to 1830.

The graveyard is bordered by Eighth Street, Avenues E and F and an ice road that runs beside the Chapman house.

In the original city plan, Avenue F was Cherry Street, and Avenue E was Chestnut Street, from which the cemetery took its name.

The cemetery is said to have been originally associated with Trinity Episcopal Church. This seems implausible, though, since the cemetery predates the church which was founded in 1836 and incorporated in 1837.

The cemetery was not shown in the original city plan, which was drawn in New York in 1834, but it fits neatly into the grid of streets.

It is the only county cemetery with a dedicated state historical marker. Buried here are Thomas Orman and his wife, moved from a burial site at the Orman House. Also, David G. Raney, who constructed the Raney House, as well as many members of his family and Dr. Alvan Wentworth Chapman, author of the "Flora of the Southern United States."

Here, too, lie victims of "Yellow Jack" epidemics that ravaged the Florida coasts from May until November every year.

Resting side-by-side are veterans of both the Union and Confederate armies.

The plot belonging to the Hull family holds R.H. and L.N. Hull, both of whom served with Company B of the 4th Florida Infantry. Next to them lie J.H. and P.R. Hull, both of whom served in Company I of the 4th Missouri Cavalry that took the Union cause to Arkansas.

Seven of the Confederate veterans served with Gen. George Pickett at Gettysburg in the renowned Florida Brigade.

Some residents of Chestnut Cemetery are persons of color. Freed slaves William and Mary Fuller, who owned Apalachicola's finest hotel with Spartan Jenkins, also a freed slave, occupy a prominent plot. Their fine marble headstones are easily visible from US 98, proclaiming to the world that they lie in state with Apalachicola's other founders and community leaders.

The stones tell a story of ethnic diversity in other ways as well with places of birth from half a dozen lands

including Italy, Greece, Ireland and Germany.

There are also a number of seafarers resting here, including captains of schooners and stern wheel-driven riverboats. There is a memorial to a Rob Roy Rice who was buried at sea.

At least three markers tell of drownings, two at West Pass. One particularly touching stone is a double marker Louisa Bruni, 9 and Frank Messina, 8 both of whom drowned on June 29, 1887.

Like Snow Hill and Magnolia, an inordinate number of the graves at Chestnut, about one in three, are small and hold infants under the age of six.

An unnamed photographer has created a virtual Chestnut Cemetery online showing the most legible markers. The collection of photographs can be found at <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gnut/oldcity.html>.

The municipal library also has a valuable tool for genealogists and history buffs.

In 1962, Mrs. Rose Marie Lovett transcribed a group of burial permit stubs found in the home of her husband Patrick's grandfather, former City Clerk Patrick J. Lovett.

The notebook contains 502 entries dating from 1856 to 1885. About half a dozen refer to the "new cemetery" which would be the graveyard formerly located at Lafayette Park. The rest relate to Chestnut.

Chestnut's ghosts frequent the neighborhood

Houses adjacent to the cemetery are said to have ghostly inhabitants.

Coombs House Inn across the street has been certified as haunted by the Big Bend Ghost Trackers, and Chapman House on the corner of 6th St. and Avenue E, is reputed to shelter the spirit of the great scientist whose earthly remains lie next door.

Olivier Monod said when he used the Chapman house as offices for Anchor Realty, his employees were reluctant to work there alone at night.

The Ghost Trackers also visited this venue and claim they encountered Dr. Chapman in the sitting room reclining on a Victorian divan.

Monod said ghost hunters told him they spoke to Chapman who told them there was a treasure hidden there.

Monod said his current residence; the Montgomery House, is also haunted. The mysterious mansion was built by a local department store owner who left Apalachicola with his wife after the stock market crash of 1929, never to be seen again. The furniture and even the couple's clothing remained and the family kept the house in good repair.

Monod said he was told that, shortly after World War II, three men attempted to burglarize the house and were stopped by an African-American man dressed in white livery with a bulging eye. He said in addition to the man in white, a small girl, a little dog and a white man are said to linger in Montgomery.

Apalachicola native Lydell Robinson tells the following story of her experiences, which she described as beyond belief.

"I should have known better," she said. "When I was a little girl, we never traveled that road at night because of that haunted house. You could see bats flying over the house. They had a problem with bats. My mom used to say that was a house where a black man got hanged. She said the big tree in the yard

would bleed when it rains.”

Robinson came to the house five years ago to work as a nanny. “I always felt like someone was watching,” she said, and believes the children sensed the spirit.

The daughter, then a baby, held conversations with something at nap time. “I would take her up to bed and turn on the baby monitor. I’d be sitting downstairs and I’d think I’d hear her talking to someone and I’d hear somebody hushing her. When I went up to see what was going on, she was sound asleep.”

The little boy was disturbed more than once at nap time as well. “I would hear him scream and I’d run upstairs. He’d be pointing at the wall screaming ‘Nanny, man!’ I’d take him downstairs to sit on my lap and he’d point to the door and scream.”

At around six months Robinson was getting ready to quit until a priest came and blessed Montgomery House. She said that helped for a short while. “I wanted the job but I didn’t want to have to deal with that,” she said. Robinson said she saw a pair of statues in the living room move on more than one occasion.

Things escalated further when the ghost began to touch her. On many occasions, she even felt his hands on her. “I would be sitting downstairs and something would make me feel very drowsy, then, I would feel him touch me. It reached the point where I carried a Bible with me all the time. I didn’t want to sleep but I had to. I’d fall asleep with my arms folded across the Bible on my chest and he would move them.”

Robinson said another woman who came to the house to work was touched as well. She was upstairs cleaning a bathroom on her hands and knees when something tried to push her face into the toilet. Robinson said the cleaner ran down the stairs screaming and demanding to know who else was in the house.

Finally, Robinson left her job after two years. She felt as if she had lost her mind, until her replacement began to have strange experiences too.

The new nanny began to feel ghostly hands. Once, when she brought her young daughter to work, the child told her that she had seen a wounded man in one of the mirrors.

Do ghosts still harass the tenants of Montgomery House?

Monod said no. He said he has never seen or felt anything unusual. “I feel more at home in that house than anyplace I have ever lived,” he said.

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