

CLAY SPRINGS CEMETERY FULL OF STORIES

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By MEGAN TROTTER

Hidden in the hills of Overton County, Clay Springs Cemetery sits nestled on land that has belonged to the surrounding families since before the Civil War. It holds families such as the Gibbons, Reids/Reads, Peeks, Langfords, Moores, Webbs, Bennetts, Bilbreys,



Harrises and Dickersons. However family financial support has petered off in the last few years. The pair of men who handle the mowing mostly pay the expense of the gas out of their own pockets.

(Paula Stover looks over the gravestone of Edmond Gibbons, the oldest known burial in Clay Springs Cemetery).

Paula Stover, who helps care for the tombstones, is hoping that more family members will pitch in to maintain the graveyard. She has compiled a list of everyone buried in Clay Springs Cemetery, and has researched the personal histories of most.

“I started getting into genealogy in the mid-80s,” she said. “Once you get started, you’re hooked. I have got filing cabinets of information. There’s all kinds of stories here.”

One such story took place between two men in the early 1900s.

“They say that this man named Billy Moore was as mean as a snake,” Stover said. “A man named Barny Langford said he was going to run for sheriff, and if he was elected, he was going to do something about Billy Moore. Well, Langford got elected, and Moore showed up on his porch and said, ‘I hear you’re looking for me.’ Then Moore shot and killed him on his porch.”

According to Stover’s research, Moore ran off to hide from the law after murdering the sheriff, and ended up in the home of an African-American family.

He threatened to kill everyone in the house if they told anyone he was there, and even raped the daughter, who later gave birth to his child. Eventually Moore was shot and killed as well.

The stories go on. There’s 20-year-old Epps Gibbons, who fought in the Civil War in the freezing rain, then later died of pneumonia at home.

There's also Susanah Reid, whose father owned the land where the Cookeville Performing Arts Center now stands. There is also Edmond Mason (or Masoner — records disagree on which version is correct) who was married to a woman named Margaret. The pair separated later in life.

“I found court records where he was charged with ‘lewdness’ because he was living with another woman. We don’t know where she is buried, but we put Margaret’s stone beside his. I figured I’d let them fight that out amongst themselves,” Stover chuckled. “We just wanted her recognized.”

Wilmoth Moore, who is also buried there, was a Confederate veteran and his was the last funeral held in Clay Springs Church beside the graveyard before the church was torn down.

“My daddy said that they’d already started tearing out the floor, but the old floor joists were there. They laid planks down and put Moore’s casket up front, and then people would walk onto the planks, and then sit down on the floor joists,” Stover said.

Edmond Gibbons is the first known burial in the graveyard in 1862. Stover had found his name listed in documents, but for years had never identified his tombstone.

She figured it must have been one of the 37 people buried there with no tombstone. However, one day the sun was shining just right on a little piece of rock sticking up out of the ground.

She bent down and brushed away some of the soil, then brushed away a little more. She realized it was a tombstone. When she finally uncovered it, she saw the name Edmond Gibbons carved into the sandstone.

“I danced all over this hill, I was so excited,” she said.

Stover also helped locate the tomb belonging to the husband of a woman named Sarah J. Cox. The man had died in battle in Virginia, along with Sarah’s brother.

“Apparently, the women of the family carried on so much that Sarah’s father took an ox cart up there to find their bodies and bring them back,” Stover said.

“When I was told that her husband should be buried beside her, I ran down to the cemetery as soon as the sun came up, and sure enough, there is an unmarked grave beside her.”

A book that gives a complete history of Clay Springs Cemetery and the church is available for \$17. All proceeds from the book will go to the upkeep of the cemetery.

To purchase a book, contact Stover at 931-498-2551.

To donate to the cemetery fund directly, contact Gary and Sherry Webb at 931-823-6279.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>