

Wren Cemetery - A Historic African American Family Graveyard - Part I

By John Benedict

Have you ever wondered if there were enslaved African-Americans and their slave owners living in Kendall County before the Civil War? The answer is, yes! After all, Texas was a confederate state during the civil war—the majority of Texans supported slavery and many owned enslaved African-Americans.¹ Now you may be wondering, “What happened to these enslaved folks when they were set free?” Or maybe, “What was an enslaved person’s life like here before and after the civil war?” In this article I will discuss the history of the Wren Cemetery—an African-American cemetery—and how it came to be here only 3 miles from Boerne.² In future articles I will discuss what happened to the enslaved and where their descendants are today.

The Wren Cemetery is named after Alex and Charlotte Wren (or Wrenn) who once owned the property where the cemetery is located. Alex Wren (1838-1924) was a teenager when he arrived about 1852 in Curry’s Creek, Texas, just 15 miles NE of Boerne.³ He along with at least 19 other enslaved folks, including his parents, Ben and Kitty, and 7 siblings, arrived with their owner, Methodist Parson Daniel Rawles (or Rawls) and his family.⁴ Rawls and his party bought land and settled on Curry’s Creek to farm and ranch.

Several years after the Civil War, Alex and his new bride, Charlotte Manning, homesteaded a 160-acre piece of land just 3 mi. north of Boerne. They raised their 18 children there. Other former enslaved African Americans acquired tracts of land adjacent to Wren forming a community or colony and raised their families. These “Freedom Colonies” were common across the South following June 19, 1865 when all enslaved African Americans were freed—there were at least 4 Freedom colonies in Kendall County.⁵

After the Civil War former enslaved African Americans numbered around 4 million across the USA, and at least 89 were freed here in Kendall County.¹ The total



Descendants of Wren Family, Gloria Thompson (left) and May Herndon (right), at the Cemetery entrance.

¹ Campbell, Randolph B. 1989. *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1864*. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA.

² Wren (Wrenn) Cemetery. <http://www.txgenwebcounties.org/kendall/cwrenn.htm>

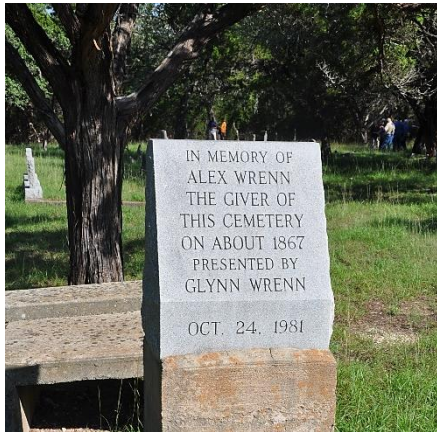
³ Jonas, Donna Doring. 2012. *Kendalia: A History of the Settlement 1847-1957*. Volumes 1 & 2. Self-published.

⁴ Harwell, Hal. 2018. *Wrenn--First Families of Kendall County*. Texas. Genealogical Society of Kendall County, Family History Place, Boerne, TX.

⁵ Dr. Andrea Roberts. 2019. *The Texas Freedom Colonies Project Atlas & Study*. Schweninger, L. (2007). *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (review). *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38(2), 302-303. The MIT Press.

population of Kendall County was estimated at 1,100 in 1864.⁶ Surprisingly, slaves composed about 8% of the Kendall County population. Of the counties adjoining Kendall, Bexar county had the largest number of slaves, 1,193.

As was typical of the 1800's, when a family member passed away, they were quickly buried on the family property, and over time this practice resulted in a family cemetery.⁷ There are at least 100 known family cemeteries in Kendall County.⁸ We all want to keep our deceased loved ones close, where we can visit their memory and final resting place—graves matter to us all!



Dedication Memorial to Alex Wren for the gift of the cemetery.

Alex and Charlotte Wren set aside 2 acres on their 160-acre homestead for a Wren Family Cemetery, and a roadway from Spring Creek Road to the cemetery.⁹ The Wren Cemetery is a family cemetery with approximately 122 burials of family members, most of whom are related to one another by birth or marriage. The family members are Alex and Charlotte, Alex Wren's siblings, many of Alex and Charlotte Wren's 18 children and more than 50 grandchildren, and their spouses and children. And possibly other relatives and close friends.

Family members buried here bear the family names of Benson, Blair, Brown, Buirst, Butler, City, Clark, Davis, Dilworth, Edmondson, Eggleston, Ferrell, Hemphill, Hillyer, Holmes, Houston, McClure, Meadows, Norman, Raybon, Smith, Spears, Street, Thomas, Warren, Washington, White, Wilburn, Wilson, Williams, and Wren.

Surprisingly Alex's mother and father, Kitty and Ben, are not buried here rather they are buried in a family cemetery in what was the Wasp Creek African American Colony about 10 miles north west of the Wren Cemetery.

In 1924 shortly after the death of her husband, Alex Wren, Charlotte sold their 160-acre homestead but set aside the 2.44 acres containing the cemetery and the road leading to it.¹⁰ She then deeded the 2.44 acres to the Boerne Colored Cemetery Association to oversee the cemetery.¹¹ In 1989 a caretaker was appointed who has lived on the property ever since.



Graves of Alex and Charlotte Wren. Visited by Virgil Hardin and May Herndon, descendants of Alex and Charlotte, and County Judge Darrel Lux (L to R).

⁶ Personal communication, with Bryden Moon, 2019.

⁷ Jordan, Terry G. 1982. *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

⁸ Boerne Area Historical Preservation Society, 1983. *GONE—BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: A Survey of Cemeteries in Boerne and Surrounding Areas*. Vol. I; p.95-96. Self-published.

⁹ Harwell, Hal. 2018. Wren--First Families of Kendall County. Texas. Genealogical Society of Kendall County, Family History Place, Boerne, TX. Harwell, Hal. 2018. Wren Family Tree. Ancestry.com.

¹⁰ Deed Records, Kendall County Clerk, Volume 41 Pgs.7-18.

¹¹ Deed Records, Kendall County Clerk, Volume 41 Pgs. 184-185.

When I visited the Wren Cemetery in 2018, only 68 of the 122 identified grave sites had gravestones or markers identifying who was buried there.¹² The gravestones range from very elaborate polished granite to simple metal funeral-home markers. The oldest clearly marked burial is Peter Wren's, born 1865 died 1899. He was Alex and Charlotte's first born. The most recent is Jewel Benson, born 1920 died 1999. There are several hand carved limestone tombstones with footstones that are possibly older.

The Wren Cemetery has been recorded with the county clerk's office and the Texas Historical Commission as a Historic Texas Cemetery. A historic marker is being developed to tell the story of this cemetery.

Since the emancipation of enslaved African Americans our memory of their past lives has become abstract and forgotten. By memorializing, respecting, and preserving this cemetery, we give humanity and dignity to those who are buried here. Hopefully this contributes to the healing, understanding and reconciliation of our societies past injustice to African Americans.

¹² Benedict, John H. 2018. Texas Historical Commission, Wren Cemetery Nomination as a Historic Texas Cemetery.