

Coker Cemetery

I. CONTEXT

The Coker Cemetery was established in 1857 out of a land grant from the Republic of Texas to John “Jack” Coker. Coker came from South Carolina to Texas in 1834 and fought in the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. Coker Cemetery is located in northern San Antonio on North Loop Road behind Coker United Methodist Church. The cemetery was part of a rural community known as Coker Community.¹ Today the area is part of the City of San Antonio and is a much developed suburban community adjacent to the airport. Operated by the Coker Cemetery Association, a 501(c)(13) not for profit corporation, the cemetery is the site of two Texas Historical Markers—John “Jack” Coker and Jefferson Davis Smith—and three Texas Ranger markers—Zachary Taylor Autry, Ransom Capps, and Samuel C. Jones.² The early citizens of Coker Community that are buried in Coker Cemetery represent a rich history of early Bexar County and made an invaluable contribution to the development of the Republic of Texas and the State of Texas.

II. OVERVIEW

What would become known as Coker Community in Bexar County, Texas, about ten miles to the north of downtown San Antonio on the Salado Creek, was originally a grant of land consisting of one-third league, that was given to John Coker, a bachelor from South Carolina, by the Republic of Texas. Sometime after John had taken up residence on his grant, he wrote to his brothers in Alabama, Joseph and James, inviting them to come to Texas and help him settle the land.³

Joseph and James arrived in Cherokee County, Texas, about 1846. While there Joseph’s wife, Malinda (Brown) Coker, died on November 3, 1853, and is buried in the old Jacksonville City Cemetery. A memorial marker was placed on the grave in 1990 by the Coker Cemetery Association. In about 1854 John’s brother, Joseph, arrived with his family consisting of the latter’s sons, James Harrison (with wife Sarah Jane Gann), Leonard T. and Neill Brown Coker; and his sons-in-law: Amos D. Jones (Jane Maria) and Carroll Rogers (Eliza Caroline). Joseph Coker also brought his unmarried daughters: Nancy Virginia, Sarah Pamela, Malinda Winneford, and Amanda Emily.

James Coker, brother of John and Joseph, stayed with his large family in Cherokee County. Joseph joined John and settled on the banks of the Salado Creek bringing into existence Coker Community and eventually Coker Methodist Church, Coker School, and Coker Cemetery. Upon the

death of John Coker, his land was divided between Joseph and James Coker as recorded January 14, 1865.⁴ James Coker sold off parcels of the land he inherited to family members disposing of all his holdings in the Coker Settlement

In 1836, John Coker fought at the Battle of San Jacinto where General Santa Anna of Mexico was defeated avenging the great loss at the Alamo. Y.P. Alsbury recorded the story in a letter to the Honorable Jesse Grimes in San Antonio in 1857. It was then printed in the 1861 edition of the Texas Almanac, pages 55-58. The story's highlights are as follows:

On the morning of the twenty-first of April, 1836, Capt. Karnes' cavalry company, commonly called Deaf Smith's Spy Company, were drawn up, in line, on the edge of General Houston's position. As well as I can recollect, we were between thirty and forty strong. The Mexican cavalry, whom we fought the evening before, at that moment were drawn up, in line, on the south of our position, about six hundred yards distant. I think they were from sixty to eighty strong... While sitting in our saddles, **John Coker**, my left file-leader, made the following remark, and the suggestions following:

"Boys, before many hours, we will have one of the damnedest, bloodiest fights that ever was fought, and I believe it would be a good plan to go and burn that bridge, so as not only to impede the advance of reinforcements [*sic*] to the enemy, but it will cut off all chance of retreat of either party."⁵

The story goes on to say General Sam Houston approved the plan and Deaf Smith returned to his group and asked for six volunteers. John Coker was one of the volunteers to proceed to burn Vince's Bridge at San Jacinto. For his participation in the battle of San Jacinto, John Coker received a land grant from the Republic of Texas. On April 9, 1968, the state of Texas Historical Committee approved the request and inscription for a plaque for John "Jack" Coker. There is also a document in the Texas State Archives Library in which John Coker applied for reimbursement for his horse that was shot during the Battle of San Jacinto, implying that he was in the final charge against the Mexican Army.⁶

In the early days, this community was a prairie with a few live oak trees scattered here and there. Because water was scarce and nobody had a well, the Coker residents kept barrels around

their houses to catch rainwater. When there was not enough rain, they hauled water from San Pedro Springs, which was a day's journey.

Tragedy fell on the Coker family on September 24, 1857, when Loucious Monroe Coker, six year old son of James Harrison and Sarah Jane Coker, died from a rattlesnake bite. Loucious's grandfather, Joseph Coker, offered to put the grave on his property. A high knoll near the Salado Creek was selected for little Loucious's grave. Amos Dickens Jones was asked to chisel a large limestone headstone. The headstone is still standing today and is the largest monument in the cemetery. Four years later on January 4, 1861, John "Jack" Coker, hero of the Battle of San Jacinto, died and was buried on the property which would become Coker Cemetery.⁷ This became the second grave on the property that Joseph Coker had set aside as a graveyard for the Coker family.

October 8, 1870, was a proud day for Coker Community. At the annual fair in San Antonio put on by the Agricultural Stock Raising and Industrial Association of Western Texas, Neill Coker rode 60 miles in under three hours on horseback to win the inaugural race. The race was held at the track on the fairgrounds at San Pedro Springs and was still in the news fifty-four years later when it appeared in the San Antonio Express in "Cattle Clatter".⁸

On October 6, 1873, a three acre tract of land was formally conveyed to trustees James Harrison Coker, Amos Dickens Jones, and Wm. Sabin for use as "a neighborhood church, School-house, and Grave-Yard." The land was part of a 201 acre tract that Joseph Coker conveyed to his sons, Neill B. and L.T. Coker at this time.⁹

One of the most important events of the Coker community was the establishment of a church. The strong desire of the community to gather on Sundays for worship was felt by many. At first they met in homes, then later in groves of trees and under grass arbors. As the community grew, a schoolhouse was built and the families used it for a place of worship on Sundays. One morning in 1883 James Harrison Coker (eldest son of Joseph Coker) and his son were at Higgins Water Hole (located near present-day Winston Churchill High School) with their herd of cattle.

While they were filling their water barrels and allowing the cattle to drink, Amos Jones rode up very excited and called out to his brother-in-law, "Have you heard the latest news? We were visited by a young preacher name of Arthur Rector. He suggested our community be included on his circuit and he asked for support. He would like to hold all-day meeting once a month".¹⁰

Thus the people of Coker Community found their first minister and planted the seed for Coker Methodist Church. On September 19, 1885, papers were drawn up by James Harrison Coker organizing the Methodist Episcopal Church South for Salado Society, of the San Antonio District, West Texas Conference.¹¹

In the early 1930's, Mrs. Clara Shannon Miller saw the need for a water well for the cemetery. Mrs. Miller spent many hours raising funds for this purpose by soliciting donations and serving meals. She accomplished her task and a water well was drilled in 1933 and was used until the late 1990's.¹²

In the late depression years, about 1938, a man named "Tex" Sullivan came to the cemetery and asked the trustees, D.T. Harrison, Edward Kelley and Luther Townsend, for permission to hunt rattlesnakes on the cemetery grounds. Without hesitation he was given permission. For a year, Mr. Sullivan lived in a tent on cemetery grounds and caught rattlesnakes which were sold to the snake garden near Brackenridge Park in San Antonio.¹³

On September 15, 1967, the Coker Cemetery Association received a certificate of non-profit incorporation from the State of Texas, formally separating from the church. The first officers of the association were the following: Royce Jones, Luther Townsend, and Ray Williams, who all also served on the church board that time. At the first meeting of the cemetery Board of Trustees on September 14, 1967, By-Laws were adopted that stated:

In view of the limited number of burial sites remaining available in said Coker Cemetery, any new grave sites shall be limited to only blood kin of the families of the original Coker settlers and their descendents.¹⁴

On May 6, 1973, two additional trustees were added to the current three. This made five trustees. The additional trustees were Sidney Autry and Arthur Nagel. On April 27, 1980, four new trustees, Carl Coker, Clarence Gerfers Jr., Gary Nagel, and James Williams, were elected to the board. This brought the total number of trustees to eight.¹⁵

On October 22, 1983, the Coker Cemetery Association conducted a tour of twelve of the graves of early settlers and members of the Coker Community. Those honored were: Henry H. Wallace, James Marion Coker, Vivian Lee Jones, Bertha Coker Jones, Clara Greene Gordon, Fannie May Coker DeKunder, Amos Dickens Jones, Neill Brown Coker, James Harrison Coker,

Joseph Coker, John “Jack” Coker, and Zachary Taylor Autry. Tours of the cemetery have been given through the years, most recently on October 5, 2008, which commemorated the 125th anniversary of the founding of Coker United Methodist Church.

A historical marker was dedicated on Saturday, July 23, 1994, to commemorate Jefferson Davis Smith who was kidnapped at the age of nine years by Indians.¹⁶ The incident occurred on Sunday, March 3, 1869. While out herding sheep, Jeff and his brother Clint were captured by Indians.¹⁷ Jeff was later sold to Apache Chief Geronimo. He was eventually rescued and returned to his family. Years later, when Geronimo was captured, he was brought through San Antonio, under guard, and Jeff went to see him. In Jeff’s words: “The old fellow recognized me instantly, and called me by name, and I had a long talk with him.”¹⁸ At the dedication event, local dignitary Henry Guerra was the featured speaker. For the more than two hundred people who attended, this recognition event was a highlight for Coker Cemetery.

In 1998, Coker Cemetery Association began publishing semi-annual histories of Coker Community, researched and written by Coker historian, Bob Battaglia. These histories along with other information about the cemetery have been available on the cemetery’s website, www.CokerCemetery.com, since it was launched in late 2006.

The Coker Cemetery Association board has now grown to eleven members: Clarence A. Gerfers, Jr., President; Homer Olsen, Vice President; Bob Battaglia, Secretary/Historian; David Schneider, Treasurer; V. Royce Jones, President Emeritus; Arthur Nagel, Vice President Emeritus; and Trustees Sid Autry, Carl Coker, James Coker, Tom DeKunder, and Tex Tomasini.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Coker Cemetery is significant to the history of the Coker Community, early Bexar County and to the City of San Antonio. The cemetery’s history is reflective of the early development of San Antonio and Bexar County. Its graves provide a reliable record of Texas history and the Texas Revolution. The cemetery was established in 1857 out of a land grant from the Republic of Texas to John “Jack” Coker who came from South Carolina to Texas in 1834 and fought in the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. Land for this cemetery was donated by John’s brother, Joseph Coker, with the first burial in 1857. It is also the burial site of John “Jack” Coker, a member of ‘Deaf Smith’s Spy Company’ who burned down Vince’s Bridge at the beginning of the Battle of San Jacinto, and was so honored with a Texas Historical Marker. The cemetery is also the site of a

Texas Historical Marker for Jefferson Davis Smith and three Texas Ranger Markers for Zachary Taylor Autry, Ransom Capps and Samuel C. Jones. Coker Cemetery still exists today as an active cemetery. An official Texas Historical Marker for the Coker Cemetery would provide important historical information concerning early Texas, the Texas Revolution, and early Bexar County.

IV. DOCUMENTATION

¹ Nancy K. DeKunder Bittner, *They Came to America, A Saga of the DeKunder, Schulmeier, Ackerman, Coker, Hatch, and Gann Families*, 1980.

² The Historical Committee of Coker United Methodist Church, "God's Work We Carry On": A History of Coker United Methodist Church (The Watercress Press, San Antonio, 1994), 263

³ Stanfield, Jeanette, "The Cultural Development of Coker Community" (Thesis presented to the faculty of the graduate school of Southwest Texas State Teachers College, 1942), 1.

⁴ Bexar County Deed Book 2, No. 1, 312-313.

⁵ The Texas Almanac, 1861, 55-58.

⁶ Coker Cemetery History Notes, Bob Battaglia.

⁷ Coker Cemetery Association Progress Report 1857-1995, submitted on April 9, 1995 by V. Royce Jones, president Coker Cemetery Association.

⁸ San Antonio Express, February 9, 1925, 14.

⁹ Bexar County Deed Book X, No. 1, 405-406.

¹⁰ The Historical Committee of Coker United Methodist Church, 4-5.

¹¹ The Historical Committee of Coker United Methodist Church, 6.

¹² Coker Cemetery Association Progress Report 1857-1995, 1.

¹³ Coker Cemetery Association Progress Report 1857-1995, 1.

¹⁴ Coker Cemetery Association records.

¹⁵ Coker Cemetery Association Progress Report 1857-1995, 2.

¹⁶ A.J. Sowell, *Early Settlers and Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas* (Austin, Texas: Ben C. Jones & Co., Printers, 1900; reprinted Abilene, Texas: State House Press, 1986), 753.

¹⁷ J. Marvin Hunter, *The Boy Captives* (San Angelo, Texas: Anchor Publishing Company, 1986 edition), 28.

¹⁸ Hunter, 205.