

Tech's Buried History: Burntstand Cemetery

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On a normal sunny day, the northeast corner of Tennessee Tech University's campus serves as a place for music majors to practice playing their instruments without much distraction and enjoy the weather while doing so. With brick paths and flowerbeds, several types of plants, and a few trees, the field beside the Bryan Fine Arts Building at the corner of North Dixie Avenue and 12th Street provides a lovely, peaceful atmosphere for those who want to escape from the crowds. While music students stop there to rest, however, they may not know that many have rested there before right underneath their feet. First purchased by Tech in 1930, this area of land formerly known as Burnt Stand¹ was home to Burntstand Cemetery.

By the 1960s, though peaceful as always, Burntstand Cemetery had become something not much short of a jungle. Photos from the time show all varieties of overgrown vines, bushes, trees, and the like, nothing like the open field it is today.² The cemetery had been abandoned and neglected except for those who would visit their deceased relatives on occasion (if they could even find their relatives' gravestones amidst the brush). President Everett Derryberry took interest in this and decided the land could be put to better use. In February 1966, Derryberry called Leonard Crawford into his office to discuss the possibility of moving this cemetery.³ Crawford, a former math teacher and high school basketball coach, served as Director of Field Services under Derryberry and was possibly the first student recruiter at any higher education institution in the State of Tennessee. Crawford was very well-respected by the student body and

¹ *President's Papers*, RG 9, Box 268, Folder 10 (1938, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

² *Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 2 (1967-69, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

³ Leonard Crawford, "Relocation of the Burntstand Cemetery" draft (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, 1969, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

trusted by the administration⁴, which is probably why Derryberry chose him for the task of moving Burntstand Cemetery. “This sounds like a dead subject to me,” Crawford said, “but if you will not rush me I will accept this challenge.”

The first person Crawford knew to consult was the Reservoir Manager of Center Hill Lake, W. C. O’Neal. Crawford called O’Neal seeking information about relocating cemeteries located within reservoir areas. O’Neal referred him to Jordan Antle, Chief, Real Estate Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Nashville, who had just relocated 96 cemeteries located within the J. Percy Priest Reservoir. In Crawford’s words, “Mr. Antle went the ‘second mile’” by providing Crawford with a list of exactly the steps he would need to take to secure the relocation of Burntstand. The first of those steps was to conduct a survey of the burial grounds and make a map of them, including who is buried where.⁵ Antle sent stacks of maps and advertisements to Crawford from the Percy Priest relocation project to use as a prototype for this process.⁶

Another step Antle listed was to obtain permission to move the graves from the State Board of Health. The next meeting Crawford had was with Mary Baird of the Tennessee Department of Public Health on June, 30, 1966, in Nashville. Baird was the Director of Vital Statistics for the Department. She suggested that he “check the deed, make a plot, and secure a general permit from the state to move the cemetery.” Two days later he made a visit to the Register’s Office in the Putnam County Courthouse to see if a deed was on file for Burntstand. Though there was no deed on file, he was told that he was not the only one who had been there

⁴ Megan Atkinson, “Crawford History from Centennial,” (email to Tyler Carr, February 28, 2017).

⁵ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

⁶ *Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 3, Folder 2 (1966, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

checking on it lately.⁷ Several of the Rittenberry family were buried at Burntstand,⁸ and two of their relatives, Lucille Lindsey and Mrs. B. M. Ramsey, had come in a few days earlier concerned about bulldozer activity in or near the cemetery. Needless to say, the Rittenberry family was going to be a hard sell for Crawford when it came to moving their deceased. He also inquired of the Register's Office about a plot of the Tennessee Tech land, which they also did not have.⁹

Crawford originally estimated that there would be seventy-five to one hundred graves located within the cemetery,¹⁰ but upon surveying the burial grounds as suggested by Jordan Antle, Tech's Engineering Department was able to locate and map 166 graves. Of the 166 graves found, only 43 could be identified. Crawford turned to the Department of Public Health once again to see if they could locate death certificates for these people. Continuing to follow Antle's advice, this would allow Crawford to contact the next of kin for each of the deceased persons. Only twenty-one certificates could be located, and for fifteen of the forty-three identified individuals, no records could be found at all.

Locating and interviewing the next of kin for each identified person proved to be the most difficult part of the entire process for Crawford. Advertisements were put in papers to find the next of kin for these deceased, and Crawford had to talk to other relatives as well to see who might be the next of kin. This is where his "people skills" came most in handy. In his report on

⁷ Crawford, "Relocation" draft.

⁸ Rittenberry Family Consent and Authorization for relocation of deceased relatives to Shipley Cemetery (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, September 19, 1968, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

⁹ Crawford, "Relocation" draft.

¹⁰ Jordan Antle, letter to Leonard Crawford (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1, March 30, 1966, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

the relocation of Burntstand, Crawford devotes an entire paragraph to these interviews. Though reactions were mixed, he believed that in every case, “the next of kin were satisfied to know that their loved ones are now resting in cemeteries where people care.” By mutual consent from these next of kin, Crawford was able to obtain the permission that was needed to move all the “known” graves.¹¹ Correspondence between Crawford and Tech’s Business Manager William Jones indicates that Tech reached out to the various funeral homes for quotations on the prices of reintering the graves. The two lowest bidders had near identical bids of \$105 and \$106 per grave, so Crawford suggested that they just let the families decide on the funeral home to be used to reinter their loved ones¹² and which cemetery to relocate them to.¹³

Under the condition that the list of deceased persons be forward to them, the Department of Public Health finally granted Tennessee Tech blanket authority in the moving of the bodies from Burntstand Cemetery on August 25, 1967,¹⁴ but that was not the end of the process. After permission was obtained from the Department of Public Health, Tech had to see if they needed a court order to move the “unknown” bodies.¹⁵ In order to do this, there needed to be some physical evidence that Tech held a deed to the property. Tech was able to obtain a document from the family of Jere Whitson, the original owner of the deed to the property, stating that the original deed had been misplaced and that this document was to have the same authority as the

¹¹ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

¹² Leonard Crawford, memorandum to William Jones with funeral home quotations enclosed (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1, October 23, 1967, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

¹³ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

¹⁴ Mary Baird, letter to Leonard Crawford (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1, August 25, 1967, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

¹⁵ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

original. It maintained that Tech had full authority to do as they saw fit with the property.¹⁶ This ensured that the title to the property did not need to be defended in court and that Attorney General George McCanless could send the case to the next round of the process. He suggested a “court order with subsequent publication of notice for four weeks” for anyone who might object to come forward.¹⁷ These notices were published in the *Putnam County Herald*,¹⁸ the local newspaper now known as *Herald-Citizen*. McCanless appointed Attorney Jared Maddux to move on Tech’s behalf.¹⁹

According to Jordan Antle, if someone objected to Tech moving the bodies, they could simply go to court and have the property condemned.²⁰ This is also what Attorney Jared Maddux suggested as the safest option because it would eliminate the possibility of “legislative antagonism” should a legislative act be requested instead to move the cemetery.²¹ Tech followed their advice, and on February 8, 1969, the final decree was made by Judge Scott Camp of the Putnam County Chancery Court that Burntstand Cemetery was “unsuitable for use as a proper resting place for the dead.”²²

¹⁶ Replacement Jere Whitson Deed (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, 1968, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

¹⁷ Record of conversation with Attorney General George McCanless (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, November 4, 1968, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

¹⁸ “Public Notices,” *Putnam County Herald* (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, November 22, 1968, Recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

¹⁹ Record of conversation with George McCanless.

²⁰ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

²¹ Jared Maddux, Burntstand Cemetery Memorandum Brief to Leonard Crawford (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1, April 3, 1967, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

²² Burntstand Cemetery Final Decree, Putnam County Chancery Court (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 1, February 8, 1969, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

A deal was made with Hooper & Huddleston Funeral Home, Inc. to disinter, remove, and reinter all the unknown bodies from Burntstand Cemetery to nearby Shipley Cemetery, and a trust fund was set up for the Shipley Cemetery Board of Trustees for \$3,500 for the care of the cemetery. All this amounted to a grand total of \$31,200.²³ Crawford said that the most aggravating part of the whole process was dealing with the Rittenberry family. After “much maneuvering,” as he puts it, Tech purchased a one hundred square foot plot of land adjoining Shipley Cemetery, where the Rittenberry relatives along with the unknowns were reinterred, as well as fifty spaces reserved for the Rittenberry descendants.²⁴ To complicate things further, the five Rittenberry relatives to be reinterred there had already been reinterred in the Old Shipley Cemetery, so Tech paid out an additional \$525 to Hooper and Huddleston to have them moved again.²⁵

The reinterment process was completed on May 5, 1969. By the time it was all said and done, two hundred eleven bodies had been moved, including 141 who were unknown.²⁶ Bodies had been moved to a total of eight cemeteries scattered across the Upper Cumberland.²⁷ Since then, the Burntstand Cemetery grounds have been cleaned up and made into the peaceful park-like area that they are today. What became of Leonard Crawford, the man behind it all? Tragically, he passed away in a car accident on his way to Nashville just three months after the

²³ Invoice from Hooper & Huddleston Funeral Home, Inc. (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, May 20, 1969, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

²⁴ Crawford, “Relocation” draft.

²⁵ Invoice from Hooper & Huddleston.

²⁶ Leonard Crawford, memorandum to President Everett Derryberry (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, May 5, 1969, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

²⁷ Cemetery File with list of cemeteries and prices of graves (*Burntstand Cemetery Collection*, Box 1, Folder 2, 1969, recovered from Tennessee Tech University Archives).

completion of the Burntstand project. He was so missed by the student body that they decided to dedicate their yearbook to him that year. His legacy continues to live on through the many contributions he made and programs he brought to Tech.²⁸ One can still find his name on Crawford Hall, and the quiet space that his Burntstand project helped to create is a tranquil reminder of his love for Tennessee Tech and its students.

²⁸ Megan Atkinson email.

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