



### *Preservationist's Project:*

Marking the unmarked graves of the 19 Tennessee State Penitentiary inmates from 1833

The Nashville City Cemetery is now home to 19, newly produced and installed, red cedar headstones marking a group of Tennessee State Penitentiary inmates who died from a cholera outbreak during the summer of 1833.

These men were buried in individual graves, as opposed to a mass/pit grave, but were likely not the beneficiaries of any extra expense.

If they had markers originally, they were surely wood and not stone. We know that "back in the day," there were quite a few wood markers at the NCC and although we don't have any evidence of what they specifically may have looked like, through research, we found an existing example, both from the mid-19th c., and from the middle-TN(ish) area. From that example, we added a little personalization, and the result is what should be a historically faithful but modern representation of a wood grave marker from era, from this cemetery. We also spent a great deal of time looking at historic fonts of the period and simplified a bit for what would have been appropriate on a wood marker of this type. It is significant that these markers were among the least expensive of the options available, while still marking the grave in some way, and that it would be completely in conflict with such a utilitarian object to have a high-style "church pew end-esque" fancy carving on them, as that's just not what they ever were meant to be.



Once complete, we had to closely examine a location for these new markers. We know that the 19 were buried in the NCC in 1833. We also know that in 1831, the city purchased additional land for the expansion of the cemetery. This first expansion area consists of the sections now divided and known as 28e & 28f. Further, we know that originally, Oak Av. & Central Av. did not connect at their western extents as they do today, and that they once ran straight, and ended at the west edge of the cemetery property. As the sections of 28, bordered by Oak & Central, filled with more formal stone

markers, it is reasonable to expect that the newer sections of 28, south of Central, were added for more "modest" interments. This interpretation is strengthened by the evidence of a holding vault (which we know to have existed) in section 28f. If a family wanted to pay for a fancy stone marker, they likely were also willing to pay for a spot further from the holding vault rather than one close to it. So, all of that is to say, we know these men are there, somewhere, and we are as sure as we can be that they are in these sections, but, we also know there are quite a few other people buried in 28e & 28f, and we do not want to put these markers, errantly, on top of the wrong folks... As the modern road is now relocated and the west end of Central Av. has been allowed to grow over, it was our decision to place the markers in this abandoned section of the road with the understanding that while they are not, directly, marking the prisoners' graves, they are also not erroneously marking somebody else's graves, and the men are close enough that they should have no trouble seeing and appreciating them from wherever they may be.

This project highlights well the philosophical challenge that we as "Preservationists" face at times. It also highlights that "History" is almost never a straight-line clear record of events, so much as a researched, informed, interpretive, curvilinear narrative that connects an assemblage of disassociated crumbs... In the management of the historic Nashville City Cemetery, the Metro Historical Commission must manage the needs of perpetual stewardship of those individuals entrusted to us; must manage the many facets of the site which make it such an important, educational, historic resource; and must actively manage an ongoing program of "improvements" in and about the cemetery property. "History" is not a window, frozen in time, as much as it is a continuum, a constantly flowing river of change, and the greatest challenge of Preservation can be how and to what degree we permit and guide that change. The Metropolitan Historical Commission, in cooperation with the Nashville City Cemetery Association, is very proud of the many many projects which have been done to restore and maintain all that the Nashville City Cemetery represents, and we hope that you will be interested enough to come and visit the cemetery soon! We, all, very much appreciate your support!!!

Fred Zahn

Staff member for the Metropolitan Historical Commission