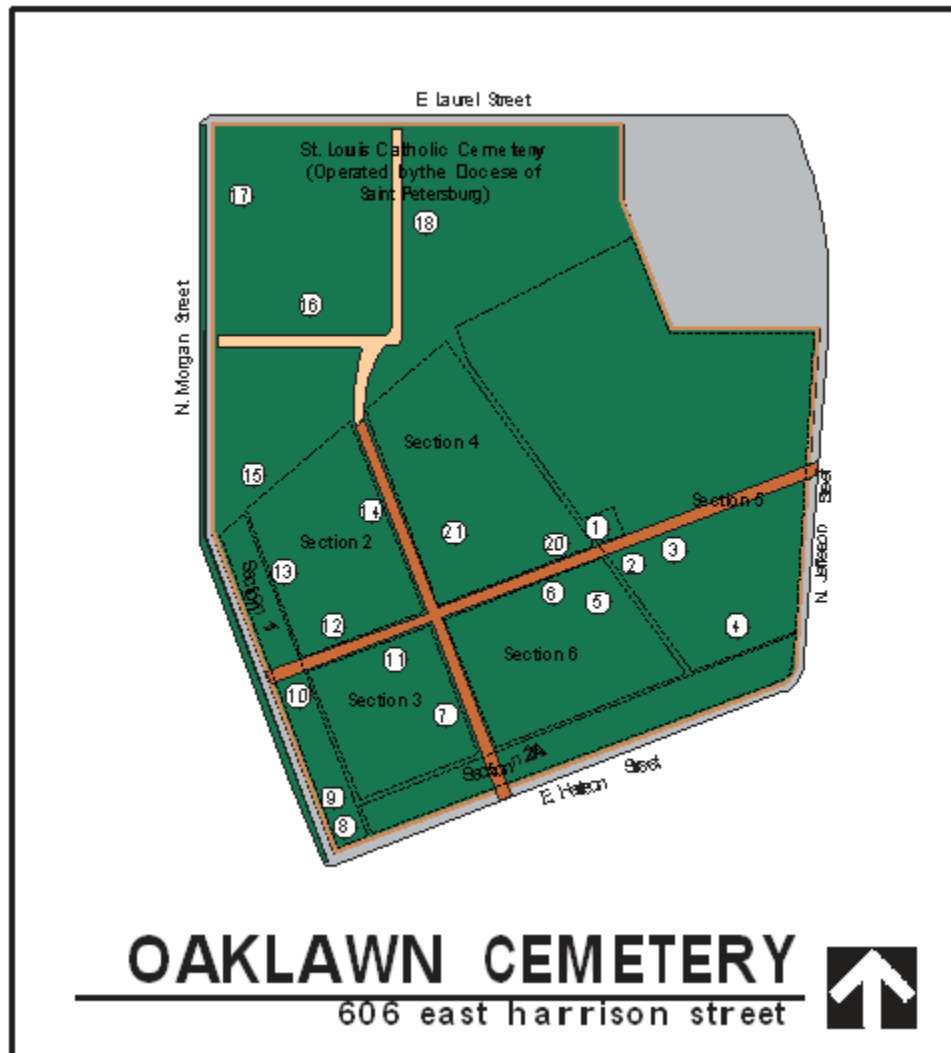


# Self Guided Walking Tour of Oaklawn Cemetery

Oaklawn Cemetery was created in 1850, when Tampa was a struggling town of around 500 persons. In the minutes of the Alachua County Commissioners meeting, Oaklawn was designated as a public burying ground for “white and slave, rich and poor.” Originally, most of the grave markers were wood (usually carved cypress), since stone for memorials necessitated an expensive combination of sail, steamship, and wagon transportation. (Tampa had no rail service until 1884.) Wood markers were destroyed by fire, rot, and storms, leaving many graves without durable markers. Additionally, the original plat of the cemetery was misplaced after the Civil War, and the locations and identities of many early interments were lost.

At Oaklawn are buried many of Tampa’s pioneer families, thirteen mayors of the City, one Florida Governor, two Florida Supreme Court Justices, and the framers of five State Constitutions. A portion of the cemetery was set aside for slaves and “marginal” persons (such as pirates), and public monies were designated to bury indigents.



Please refrain from touching grave markers, making rubbings or stepping inside the plat enclosures lest the spirits of Oaklawn Cemetery haunt you forever.

**1. The Sexton House.** The word “Sexton” is derived from the Latin word “sacristanus” which means, “someone who looks after the sacred objects”. The Sexton House, originally known as the Pavilion or Gazebo, was constructed in 1910 to store tools and equipment caretakers for the Cemetery.



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**2. James C. Field.** James Cooley Field, a commercial photographer, was drawn to the Tampa climate in hope of a cure for his wife, Nannie's, tuberculosis. Unfortunately, Nannie was lost to the disease and daughter Alice Maud followed her in death not long afterwards. Field's name (or that of his company, Field & Morast) appears on most early photographs of Tampa. In 1897, Field sold out to his partner and moved to Six Mile Creek, where he operated a saloon. He was arrested for selling liquor without a license in 1899, proving he was a better photographer than a publican.



**3. Krause Family.** Henry Krause, of German descent, was a blacksmith and later a principal in Krause & Wagner, an iron steel foundry. The company was responsible for much of the decorative iron work in Tampa: fences, gates, burial plot enclosures, balconies.



**4. James T. Magbee.** J.T. Magbee had an illustrious career. He was an attorney (one of the first in Tampa), a Florida State Constitutional Convention delegate, a Florida State Senator, an early newspaper publisher and a judge of the Circuit Court. He was also a "scalawag," (the name given to persons who changed affiliations from the South to the North just after the Civil war) and a public drunk. During one spree, locals spread molasses and cornmeal on the judge's unconscious form where it lay in a city street. Night-roaming pigs ate of the sweet mixture – along with the judge's clothes.



**5. John P. Wall.** Born near Jasper, Florida, John P. Wall served as a Confederate Army surgeon during the Civil War. He moved to Tampa in 1869 and, shortly thereafter, lost his wife and infant daughter to yellow fever. This began Wall's lifelong campaign to find the cause of the disease. He was one of the first medical researchers to surmise – correctly – that the bite of the aedes aegypti mosquito was the disease vector, a conclusion that was largely ignored at the time. Wall served as Tampa mayor, editor of The Sunland Tribune newspaper, President of the Florida Medical Association, a State Representative, and founded both the Tampa Board of Trade and the Florida Board of health.



**6. Charles Wall.** Son of civic leader and prominent physician John P. Wall, Charlie Wall took a turn toward the dark side at an early age. As a teen and young adult, he immersed himself in Ft. Brooke City, a shantytown of gambling, drugs, and bawdyhouses on the site of the former military post. By the 1920s, Wall was a gangster of stature, running the bolita (illegal lottery) racket locally until he was displaced by the Sicilian Mafia. Wall survived several mob "hits" but was finally murdered at home in 1955.

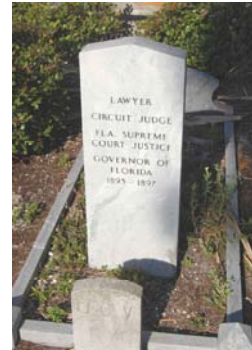


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**7. John T. Lesley Family.** John T. Lesley was a pioneer cattleman, an Indian fighter, and a Captain in the Confederate Army. He formed his own volunteer company, the “Sunny South Guards,” in 1860. Later, he became a state senator. Son William T. Lesley was Sheriff and a member of the 1885 Constitutional Convention. The union of the Lesley and Brown families (John T. was married to William T. Brown’s daughter, Margaret) produced one of the most powerful local dynasties in politics, business and agriculture. Theodore Lesley, John’s son, was County Historian and an ardent preservationist of local records.



**8. Henry Laurens Mitchell.** Thomas and Elizabeth Starns Mitchell had 9 children. Among them was Henry, a promising young attorney who later served as the 15<sup>th</sup> Governor of the State of Florida from 1892 to 1896. Mitchell is the only State Governor buried at Oaklawn.



**9. Joseph B. Lancaster.** Joseph Lancaster was Tampa’s first mayor. He was also a judge, sitting on the Florida Supreme Court in 1851, and Speaker of the Florida House in 1843-47. A persistent mystery surrounds the grave of this prominent early Tampan. While local records, Masonic accounts and a headstone confirm that Lancaster was buried in Oaklawn in 1856, a memorial stone for the judge also exists in the old city cemetery in Jacksonville, Florida. Some wags have suggested that an astute politician like Judge Lancaster would have had no difficulty lying in two places at once.



**10. Wall Family.** Founder Perry G. Wall was a probate judge and postmaster of Tampa. Thrice married, he had nine children. Son William W. was a veteran of the Civil War and a prominent local merchant. Grandson Perry G. Wall, II was mayor (1923-28) and founder of the Knight and Wall Company.



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**11. William and Nancy Ashley.** By far the most celebrated – and one of the most curious- of the interments at Oaklawn, William and Nancy Ashley are buried in a common grave. William Ashley was a prominent white civic leader, serving as City Clerk. Nancy, the African – American servant who bore his surname, was also William’s longtime companion and, it was presumed, his wife outside the law. Following instructions left to William’s executor John Jackson (another prominent white Tampan), the Ashley grave was opened to receive Nancy upon her death and, “to commemorate their fidelity in each other,” a headstone was erected.



**12. James Gettis.** When Pennsylvanian James Gettis arrived in Tampa in 1848 he doubled the local lawyer population. Gettis, a member of the controversial “Know Nothing” party, was active and vocal in politics. He was city councilman, a state representative and a judge, as well as tireless promoter of Tampa’s development. Gettis, along with other influential locals, made several abortive attempts to establish rail service to the city in the years before the Civil War.



**13. James McKay Sr.** Few pioneers had so profound an impact on Tampa as did James McKay, Sr. and his family. James, Sr. came with wife Matilda from Scotland to the area in 1848. He operated commercial sailing and steam vessels, and was a blockade runner during the Civil War. McKay was also Mayor of Tampa.



**14. Samuel Friebele.** Christopher Friebele and younger brother Samuel were German immigrants and pioneer Tampa merchants. Samuel Friebele (who died at age 38 in 1849) was originally buried at Ft. Brooke’s civilian burying ground and was one of the first interments at the “new” municipal cemetery of Oaklawn. Samuels’s epitaph exemplifies the nineteenth century view of death as a preamble to reunion in the hereafter: “Now, as no better we can do, we love each other for sake of you, and trust in God to meet you again, in Heaven together to remain.”



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**15. Hooker Family.** William B. Hooker was one of many who gained land grants in the Tampa area through the 1842 Armed Occupation Act. A successful cattleman, Hooker established a beef business that stayed in family hands for generations. Hooker was also captain of a volunteer regiment to protect settlers from Indian attack and, as vice-mayor of Tampa, headed efforts to eradicate the lawlessness and vice that plagued the early settlement.



**16. Ghira Family.** Many Italian immigrants to Tampa prospered in the merchant trades. Dominic Ghira and wife Domenica Masters had both mercantile and shipping interests. Among their six children was daughter Josephine, who wed prominent architect Alfred H. Parslow.



**17. Pons Family.** Emilio Pons, a pioneer cigar manufacturer, was the head of a distinguished Spanish family in Tampa. The earliest Tampa Latinos (the name given to Spaniards, Italians and Cubans) were buried at Oaklawn, but after the 1886 founding of Ybor City, immigrant mutual aid societies created ethnic cemeteries. The majority of the immigrant populace's dead are found in those.



**18. Vicente Martinez Ybor.** Born in Valencia, Spain, V.M. Ybor went to Cuba as a young man where he worked his way from stock clerk to cigar manufacturer by age 40. Noting that Tampa had steamship and rail lines by 1885, Ybor and a consortium of Cuban "cigar barons" planned to evade heavy Spanish taxes on the tobacco trade by moving it to Florida. Ybor purchased 44 acres of land two miles from the still-struggling city of Tampa and created a planned urban development to produce cigars. Home to thousands of immigrant workers, the town – named Ybor City- was the economic mainstay of the Tampa Bay area for many decades. A naturalized U.S citizen at his death, Ybor was intended for burial in Havana, but time, family wishes and politics intervened. Ybor remains at Oaklawn, along with one of his grandsons.



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**19. James McKay, Jr.** James, Jr. organized the family's maritime activities into the Mallory Line and was the civilian contractor responsible for loading troops and materials onto ships for the Spanish- American War. Like his father, James was also a mayor of the City of Tampa.



**20. Ft. Brooke, Mass Grave.** There are two mass graves at Oaklawn Cemetery. Both are in the Northeast Section. One, adjacent to the Sexton Cottage, contains the remains of 102 settlers and soldiers that were originally interred at Ft. Brooke, the U.S Army fort near the mouth of the Hillsborough River that was the first European settlement in the area. Founded in 1824, Ft. Brooke was abandoned as a military post in 1832, by which time the settlement of Tampa had taken root.



**Yellow Fever, Mass Grave.** The second mass grave contains an undetermined number of yellow fever victims. Tampa, like many Southern coastal towns and cities, was seasonally assailed by this often-fatal form of tropical hemorrhagic fever, known throughout the South as “yellow jack,” or “bilious fever.” Tampa had five outbreaks between 1850 and 1905. The worst was 1887-1888 and – not knowing the cause of the illness – locals hastily buried victims en masse, hoping to stem contagion. Ironically a local doctor, John P. Wall (also buried at Oaklawn), was correct in suggesting that yellow fever was spread by the bite of the aedes aegypti mosquito, but he was widely disbelieved.

**The Rural Cemetery.** Cemeteries like Oaklawn exemplify the mid-nineteenth century movement to “domesticate” death. The severe and invariably religious views on death and the afterlife that were held in the country's colonial period softened by the early nineteenth century to views that stressed heavenly bliss, familial reunion in Heaven and the feelings of the bereaved. Cemeteries, traditionally either family plots or crowded church graveyards, gave way to carefully designed public burying grounds where landscaping, paved pathways, statuary, and grave markers all supported the image of the afterlife as a restful garden. Oaklawn is an early example of this trend, called the “rural cemetery.”



**Grave Art.** The “domestication of death” that characterized 19<sup>th</sup> Century attitudes toward death and the afterlife is visible in Oaklawn's memorial statuary and grave art. Some typical motifs are:

- The broken column, suggesting a life cutoff;
- Recumbent lambs, especially on children's graves, symbolizing innocence;
- The draped urn, referencing both ancient burial practices and the veil between life and the afterlife;
- The sheaf of wheat, denoting a fruitful life and/or the harvest of souls;
- The rose, frequently seen on women's graves, expressing purity and fragility;
- The weeping willow, a marker of immortal life;
- Ivy Vines, representing immortality and fidelity;
- Fraternal emblems or mottos, indicating the decedent's

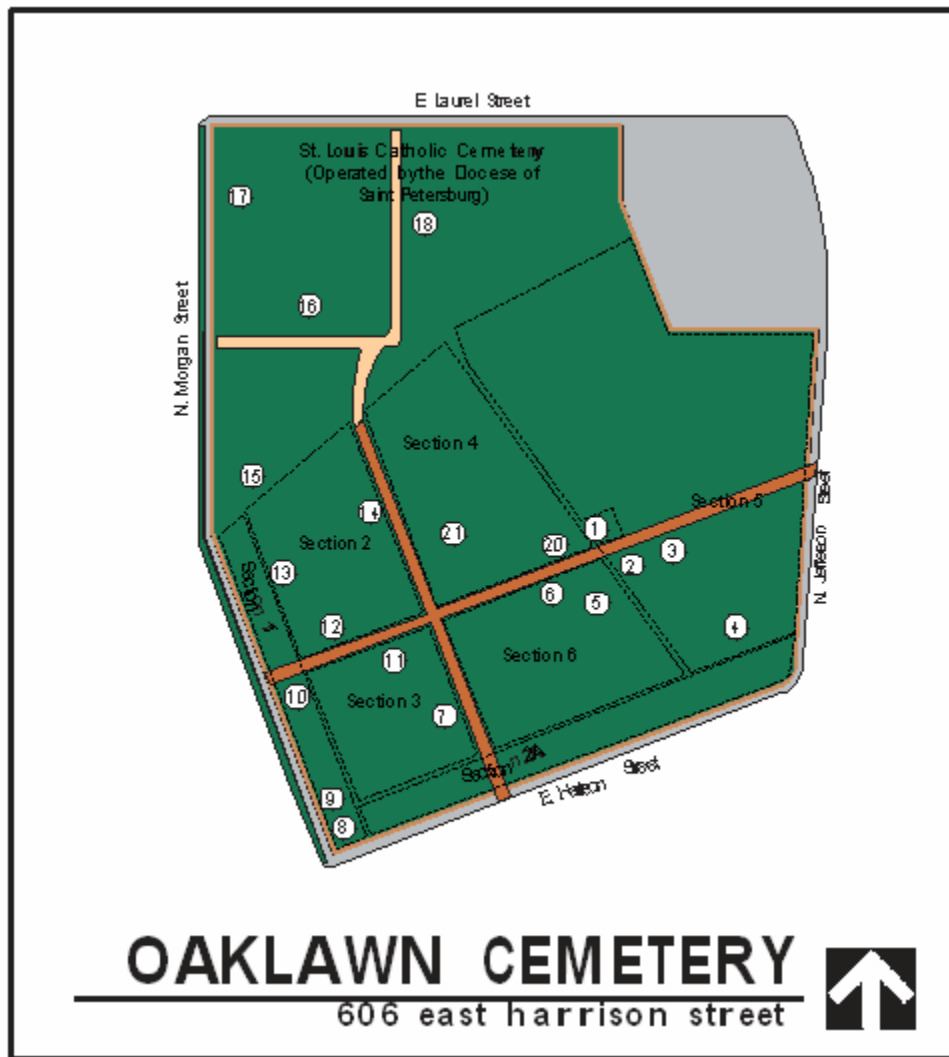


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membership in Freemasonry, Woodmen of the World, Elks, or the American Legion.

### **Vaults, cradle graves, memorial plantings, and decorative enclosures.**

Square or domed vaults (raised monuments) are often misinterpreted as above ground burials. In fact, the interment is below ground, but the raised monument is a counter-measure against the grave's sinking in Florida's soft soil. Cradle graves do not, as is popularly assumed, mark the interments only of children. These crib-like stone or masonry forms contained seasonal flower beds. Memorial plantings were common in rural cemeteries. Popular trees and plants such as cedar, oak, ivy, and myrtle were installed at gravesites by survivors; some endure to the present day. Decorative enclosures are a charming feature of Oaklawn and were very common in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Made of ironwork, stone, or masonry these enclosed a single grave or, more commonly, a family plot.



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