



Photos by Sarah Schu

Graves are sheltered by a branch of the colossal tree that stands in one corner of Averett Family Cemetery. In the background, the flight path for Lowe Army Heliport is visible. Averett Family Cemetery, the oldest of Fort Rucker's cemeteries, is situated just off Lowe Field Road adjacent to the heliport's south fence.

Fort Rucker cemeteries link to a distant past

By Sarah Schuchard
Army Flier Staff Writer

Anyone passing through Fort Rucker's Ozark Gate espies Beulah Cemetery, a small, fenced-in final resting place nestled in the trees alongside Andrews Avenue. Headstones of all shapes and sizes sprinkle the neatly mowed grass inside, and while some look as pristine as if they had been installed yesterday, many are dark and worn with age.

Beulah Cemetery has undoubtedly piqued the interest of Soldiers and family members who've called Fort Rucker home over the years, but probably very few have actually stopped to get a closer look and read the explanatory sign posted nearby.

"Cemetery on site of primitive Baptist church," it reads. "Only cemetery on the installation that is still used."

The brief words arouse more curiosity. How primitive was this Baptist church and who worshiped there? If this is the only cemetery on post where people are still being buried, there must be other cemeteries here no longer in use. Where are they and what are their stories?

A common history

Nearly 200 years ago, pioneer families began moving into the southeast corner of Alabama including what is now Dale County, according to Val McGee's historical account "The Origins of Fort Rucker."

In August 1814, General Andrew Jackson and his Tennessee militia had defeated the Creek Indians in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend to win the Creek War. As a condition of the Treaty of Fort Jackson, the Creek chiefs were forced to give the U.S. almost all the lands in the lower parts of Georgia and Alabama.

The settlement of Dale County and the Wiregrass thereafter occurred in a "democratic pattern," as McGee described it, because there was no government planning or organization.

"Small farmers came in, staked a claim to only such lands as they could hope to clear, tend and pay for, and there were essentially no speculators claiming and buying up thousands of acres (as happened in South Georgia where even today there are many plantations with tens of thousands of acres on contiguous land)," he wrote. "Most of these Wiregrass settlers were yeomen farmers who owned no slaves and who brought few assets other than their farm implements and animals."

Yet McGee indicated there were exceptions. For example, in the 1830s and 40s, a community called Westville sprung up in the county. Located on the west side of Claybank Creek approximately two miles west of Lake Tholocco, Westville became home to the prominent Edwards, Mizell, White, Mobley, Matthews, Martin, Goff, Chalker and Byrd families.

And in the years leading up to the Civil War, two wealthy planters built up large plantations in Westville. Judge Cincinnatus D. Crittenden of Shellman, Ga., and Isaac Ardis of Pike County, Ala., owned at least 100 slaves each.

Buried in the four cemeteries on Fort Rucker – Beulah, Averett, Byrd and Clayhill – are the descendants of these early Dale County residents who made their living off the land.

Beulah Cemetery

Beulah Cemetery served the congregation of the Old Beulah Primitive Baptist Church, constructed in the mid-nineteenth century approximately seven miles west of Ozark on what is now Andrews Avenue, according to an article by Meredith Keller that appeared in the Feb. 13, 1975 issue of the "Army Flier."

The article includes a photo of the church's record book, dated 1860. The first entry in the book is May 10 of that year – the beginning of regular services for the congregation. Minutes from the church's business meetings were recorded in the book until Dec. 7, 1924.

Around this time, Keller indicates that "for reasons unknown, the congregation transferred its letters of membership to other churches in the area and abandoned the old building." Keller cites local sources as saying the church's frame structure had come into such disrepair that the first occupants of Camp Rucker removed it.

There are more than 90 marked graves inside Beulah Cemetery. The earliest marked grave is that of Costiller Traweek, who died Oct. 11, 1870, and the most recent is that of Archie Mack Turner, who died June 30, 2000. Several headstones are accompanied by Civil War, World War I and World War II veteran markers.

Averett Family Cemetery

Averett Family Cemetery occupies a wooded area just south of Lowe Army Heliport off Lowe Field Road. Passersby can see it from the road if they look closely enough, but a narrow dirt road running parallel to the heliport's fencing leads right to it.

According to Keller's article, the homestead farm that Phillip McCarty and his family established in February 1843 expanded to include the entire area of what is now the heliport and its surrounding areas.

"Two daughters of the McCarty family, Georgia Ann and Safronia, married Annias and Marion Averett from North Carolina," Keller related. "These marriages created a permanent bond between the two pioneer families and their descendants."

Fifty-three graves in Averett Family Cemetery have legible biographical information. The cemetery is the oldest of the four on Fort Rucker, since the earliest marked grave dates to 1854 – Annias Averett, Jr., was born Sept. 2, 1854 and died the same day. The grave of Annie M. Lee, who died Nov. 27, 1940, is the most recent one marked. As is the case at Beulah Cemetery, several of the men buried here fought for the Confederate States Army during the Civil War.

Byrd Family Cemetery

Perched atop a hill on the road leading north from Lake Tholocco's West Beach, Byrd Family Cemetery is the smallest of the four plots.

In the 1820s, the Byrd and Johnson families moved from Johnston County, N.C., to Dale County, Keller details in her article. One of the sons of Bright and Gracey Byrd – the earliest Byrds to live here – married into the Johnson family and established a homestead near the lake. This farmer, Acrel Byrd, is buried in the cemetery along with his wife Bartilla and seven others.

John C. Byrd, Acrel's infant grandson, is the cemetery's earliest marked grave. He died June 21, 1871.

Clayhill Cemetery

Situated deep in the woods just south of Highway 27, northwest of Lake Tholocco, Clayhill Cemetery is in the former Westville community.

It's the most remote of Fort Rucker's cemeteries and arguably the most interesting historically speaking. Clayhill is the resting place for the former slaves of wealthy Westville planters Crittenden, Ardis and others, according to Tim Edwards, curator of the U.S. Army Aviation Museum and a historian of the local area.

Before the Civil War, the slaves attended church with their



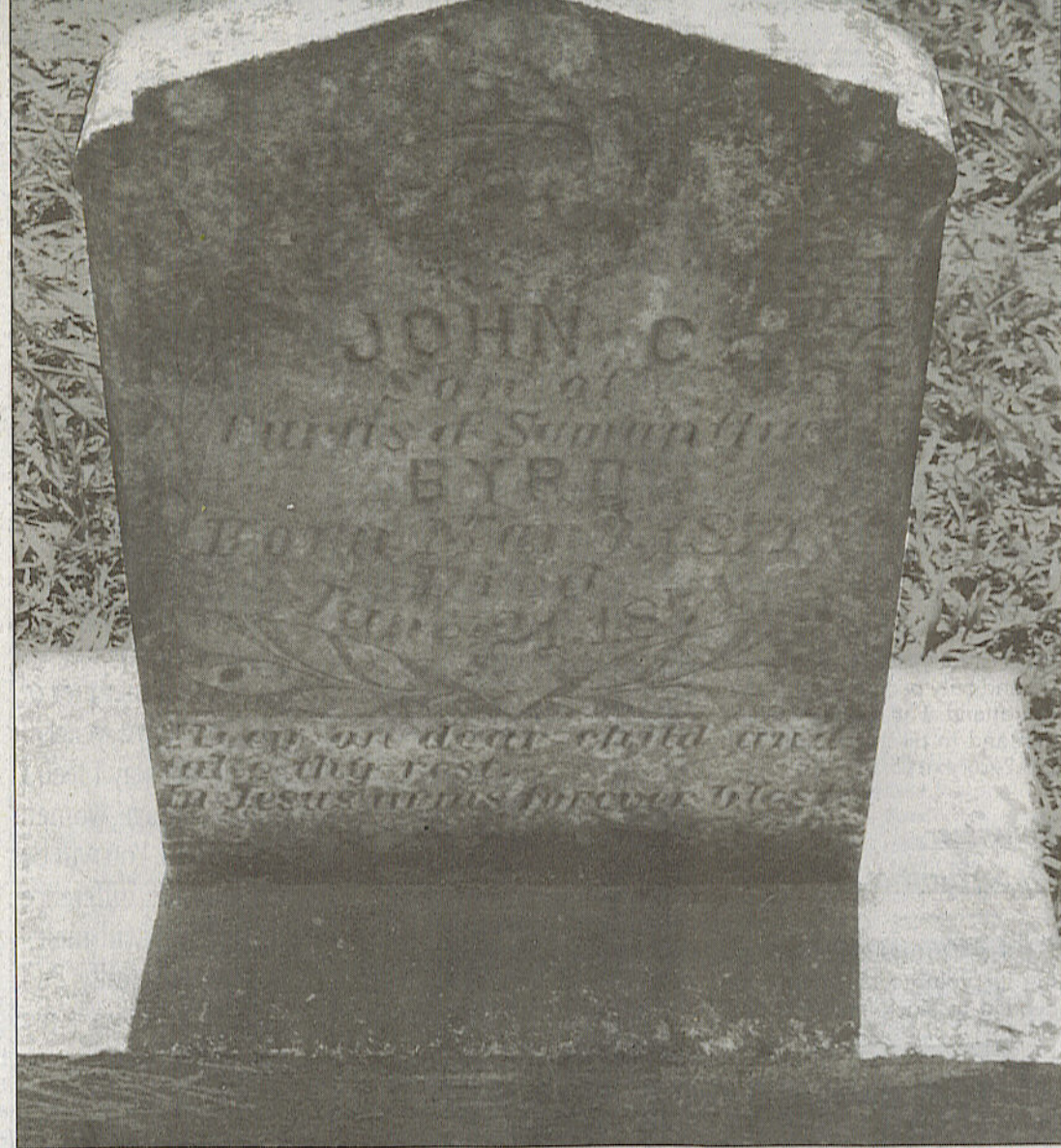
Though Beulah Cemetery is the newest of the cemeteries, many headstones located there are dark and worn with age. The earliest marked grave is that of Costiller Traweek, who died Oct. 11, 1870.

slave masters. After the war, slave masters allowed the emancipated slaves to build a church of their own, Edwards clarified.

In 1865, the emancipated slaves built Clayhill Church and later established a cemetery adjacent to it. The circuit-riding preachers that rode to Claybank Church, a nearby white Methodist church, also rode to Clayhill to give sermons.

"They called it Clayhill because when it rained, that hill was really like clay, or like what I call soap stone – just wet and slick as glass," Edwards explained.

Services were held here until 1885, when then pastor Fete Ardis moved the church to the outskirts of Ozark "by wagon, board by board," as Edwards described. The church became the St. Paul African Methodist Church, and it still thrives today. Edwards himself is a long-time church member.

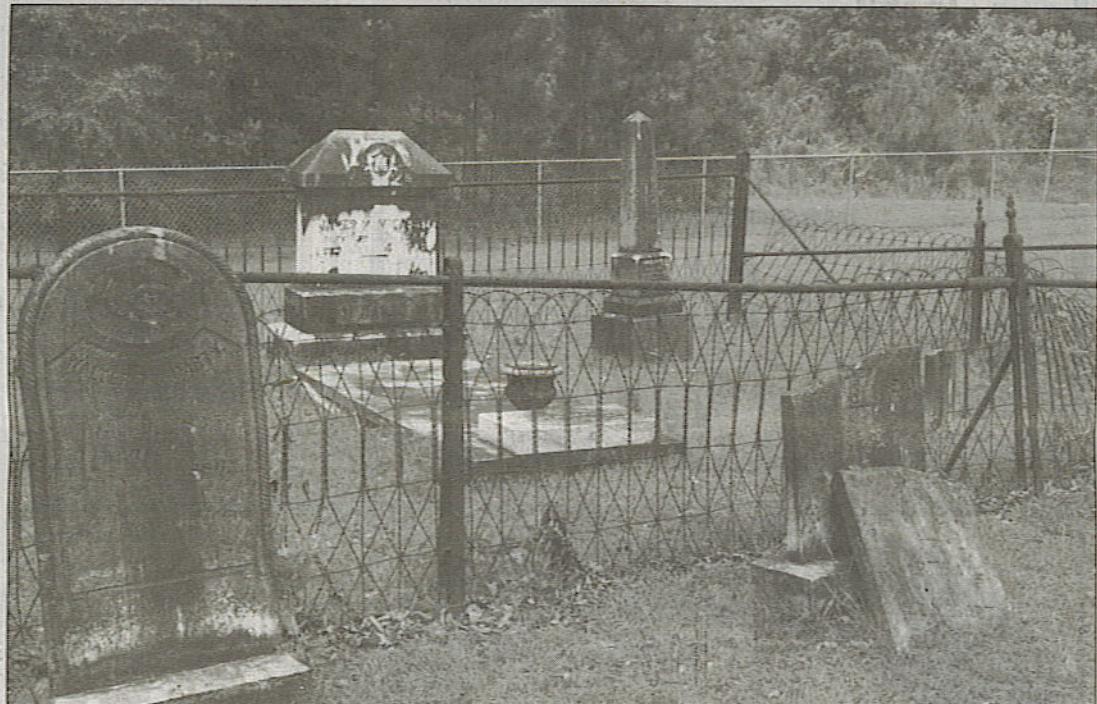


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John C. Byrd is Byrd Family Cemetery's earliest marked grave. He died June 21, 1871. Byrd's grave is one of just eight marked graves in the cemetery, which is just west of Lake Tholocco.



The grave of Moses Dawkins rests inside its original wooden fence at Clayhill Cemetery, located deep in the woods just south of Highway 27. The cemetery was established by former slaves near what was once the site of their church. In 1885, the church was moved to the outskirts of Ozark, but the cemetery remained.



Members of the McCarty family are buried at Averett Family Cemetery in and around an old-fashioned metal fence. In 1843, Phillip McCarty and his family established their homestead farm in Dale County, and it eventually grew to include what is now Lowe Army Heliport.



Beulah Cemetery is the most visible of the cemeteries because of its location on Andrews Avenue. The cemetery has more than 90 graves, and people are still being buried there today.

When the church relocated, the cemetery remained, and parishioners were buried there until 1920, Edwards noted. Many parishioners had adopted the family names of their former owners, so names like Ardis and Matthews appear on headstones.

Though there are 64 graves in the cemetery, only 15 have legible biographical information. The earliest marked grave is that of Otter Terry, who died May 20, 1885.

A link to the past

of living off the land, the Dale County farmers trying to survive during the Great Depression of the 1930s made the difficult but necessary decision to sell their land to the U.S. government for what would become Camp Rucker.

"The reason Fort Rucker is here is because this area was stressed economically and the farmers were about to lose their shirts trying to make a living out here," said DeLarie Parmer, chief of the natural resources branch of the Department of Public Works

them a place to work instead of trying to farm," he added.

At that time, the government transferred a number of cemeteries from the land because they interfered with future training areas, according to Parmer.

"There were some that were going to be in what is now the impact area, up in the ranges where (Soldiers) do firing and ordnance explodes, so they were moved to keep the graves from being destroyed," Parmer said.

To date, the former cemetery



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A link to the past

As Fort Rucker's 50th anniversary approaches, it is more important than ever to reflect on the installation's past, a past inextricably linked to the early settlers and their descendants laid to rest in the cemeteries here.

After more than 100 years

of living off the land, the Dale County farmers trying to survive during the Great Depression of the 1930s made the difficult but necessary decision to sell their land to the U.S. government for what would become Camp Rucker.

"The reason Fort Rucker is here is because this area was stressed economically and the farmers were about to lose their shirts trying to make a living out here," said DeLarie Parmer, chief of the natural resources branch of the Department of Public Works. "The soil was so poor - highly erodable and dry and sandy."

By purchasing and acquiring the land that is today Fort Rucker, the government "relieved the farmers by taking them off of that old, poor land they were trying to work, and the post itself gave

them a place to work instead of trying to farm," he added.

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"There were some that were going to be in what is now the impact area, up in the ranges where (Soldiers) do firing and ordnance explodes, so they were moved to keep the graves from being destroyed," Parmer said.

Today, the four cemeteries that remain on Fort Rucker serve as constant reminders of what came before - a past we should never forget.

(Editor's note: All cemetery inventory information was taken from the most recent cultural resource survey of Fort Rucker, conducted in 1984.)