

The Origin of the Mendenhall Cemetery

To better understand the origin of the Mendenhall Cemetery, knowledge of the history of Mendenhall and its development from the village of Edna to the present city is necessary.

The village of Edna, later to become the city of Mendenhall, was settled sometime before 1872. It was located south of where the railroad tracks are located today (South Main Street, east and west sides) and near Sellers Creek. It had a church, a hotel and several businesses. After the Gulf & Ship Island Railroad completed a rail line from Gulfport to Mendenhall, the name of Edna was changed to Mendenhall in 1901. The town was named Mendenhall as a tribute to the Honorable Thomas L. Mendenhall, a well-known and highly respected man of that day who lived in Westville where he practiced law. He never lived in Mendenhall and is buried in the Westville Cemetery.

Gulf & Ship Island Railroad Completed through Edna

After the railroad had been completed through Edna (later named Mendenhall), many people in the county thought that this was the opportunity to move the Simpson County seat from Westville. With many hard feelings, threats and much litigation, the citizens of the county voted to move the county seat to Edna in 1900. The main reason the Simpson County seat was moved from Westville to Edna was due to the new railroad being located in Edna. The railroad bypassed Westville, the county seat. The railroad brought the first growth to Edna. Without a railroad a town like Westville, in time, would simply fade away. The fact that two courthouses had previously burned in Westville was another large factor in this decision to move the county seat. Also, Mendenhall was a more desirable location since it was centrally located in the county. Since there was no courthouse to move to in Mendenhall, the county seat was housed in a two story building on the corner of Main Street and Maud Avenue on the east side of the street until a new courthouse could be completed. It was said that the building had no doors or windows at the time. The First Baptist Church of Mendenhall held services on the second floor of that building until their church was completed. The new courthouse was completed in 1907 and was occupied by the county offices at that time.

The Honorable Albert Q. May Donated the Old May Family Cemetery to the Town of Mendenhall in 1923

The Mendenhall Cemetery is sometimes thought to be a young cemetery, when in reality, it has been in use for at least 145 years. It served as the May family cemetery for nearly 61 years and then as a public cemetery jointly owned by the City of Mendenhall and the people who owned burial sites in the cemetery for 80 years. This joint ownership of the cemetery property and federal law would eventually become a problem to those interested in the upkeep of the cemetery.

It is thought that in the early 1860's the family of Judge William May (1814-1893) established the May family cemetery which is located on the east side of the present day Mendenhall Cemetery bordered by Cemetery Street. This date is confirmed by the fact that the present cemetery burial records show that Elizabeth May was the first person buried there in 1863. Others could

have been buried there before that date, but there are no burial markers to certify it. This was 43 years before the county seat was moved from Westville to Mendenhall. In later years, the honorable Albert Q. May (1855-1922), son of Judge William May became owner of the family property which included the May family cemetery.

The Honorable Albert Q. May, a well-known and beloved citizen of the community, was most responsible for the establishment of the Mendenhall Cemetery. It is apparent that he recognized the need for a community cemetery in Mendenhall since Mendenhall did not have a cemetery at that time. Records on file at the Simpson County Chancery Clerk's Office show that in 1923 the family of the Honorable Albert Q. May, who died in 1922, acted upon his will to donate two acres of land to the town of Mendenhall to be used as a cemetery. Mr. May's donated land included the May family cemetery plot and adjoining property which was to be used as a future cemetery for community residents. The May cemetery would eventually become the Mendenhall Cemetery as it is known today. It had been established for over 43 years, and therefore, included a fairly large number of graves, mostly from the May family. However, there were non-family members buried there as well. The burial list for the Mendenhall Cemetery that was completed recently shows that most of those buried there were members of the May family and others were citizens of Edna and later Mendenhall as well as the adjoining communities. In fact, the people of Edna and Mendenhall were permitted to be buried in the May cemetery prior to Mr. May's donating land to Mendenhall for a cemetery in 1923. Today, the section of the Mendenhall Cemetery that was the original May cemetery is saturated with graves of families from throughout the area.

After Mr. May donated the cemetery property to the town of Mendenhall, the people living in the community that wanted to be buried in the cemetery could do so without having to pay for the burial site. They would simply mark off the area they wanted for their family burial site by using iron rods, concrete posts, rocks or concrete borders and their claim to that site was generally respected by others. It was done more on the order of "first come, first served" principal. This system of selecting burial sites in the Mendenhall Cemetery remained in effect as long as there were vacant burial sites available. In some instances, it is still being done that way today. There are numerous burial sites that have been marked off for years in the three older sections with no burial markers and no one really knows who has a claim on these sites, or if someone is already buried there. Occasionally, a person comes to the cemetery and finds a spot that appears vacant and sets corner markers without knowing who might already be buried there. Unfortunately, this situation cannot be stopped since the City of Mendenhall is the owner of the property and likely does not want to get involved in a litigious process. The Board of Directors of the Cemetery Association has no authority to take any action in this type situation. The "old cemetery" where the burial sites have always been free to the public is comprised of Sections A, B, and C. These sections are owned by the City of Mendenhall. (An aerial photo of the Mendenhall Cemetery showing all nine sections is included in this history.)

It should be noted that Mr. Albert Q. May had a long record of service to the people of Simpson County and the State of Mississippi. He was selected Sheriff and Tax Collector of Simpson County at the age of 21, served two years, and then was elected Circuit Clerk and Chancery Clerk of the county. After that, he was elected Treasurer of the State of Mississippi. It was thought that Mr. May would have easily been elected governor of Mississippi,

but he would not allow his name to be entered as a candidate. It was also thought that his health was a factor in his not running for governor. He moved to Jackson after being elected to state office and lived there for the rest of his life. Mr. Bee King, a long time friend of Mr. May, had this to say about his old friend in 1940, "I first met the Honorable Albert Q. May when I was attending school at Westville. I thought then, as I do now, that he was one of the most cultured, intelligent and refined men it was ever my good fortune to know. I never heard him speak unkindly of anyone and I never heard him use profane or vulgar language." What more could have been said about this great man?

The Need for More Burial Space in the Cemetery Was Fulfilled by Dr. Parham Walker

In the early 1940's, it became obvious that in the coming years the cemetery would become overcrowded and more space would be needed. Dr. Parham Walker, who owned the land joining the cemetery on the west, recognized this need and began to sell burial plots on his adjoining land. This solved the burial site problem for a short time. In the 1960's, Dr. Walker again opened another parcel of his land to sell as burial sites. In later years, he made another parcel available for burial sites. After the death of Dr. Walker in 1968, his remaining property near the cemetery was sold making future expansions complicated.

As a result of the land donation by the Albert Q. May family and the sale of burial plots to individual citizens by Dr. Walker, about half of the old cemetery is owned by the City of Mendenhall and the other half is owned by citizens who purchased plots from Dr. Walker. For many years this double ownership of the cemetery property caused no problem to the City of Mendenhall or to those who owned burial plots in the cemetery. This arrangement was questioned in 1996, and as a result, changes had to be made in the operation of the cemetery.

For many years, the City of Mendenhall had accepted the responsibility for the upkeep of the cemetery using city employees. When this was called to the attention of the Attorney General of the State of Mississippi, it was ruled unlawful for the City of Mendenhall to perform such duties since the City did not own all of the land in the cemetery. As a result the City's responsibility for the upkeep of the cemetery ended. This decision caused concern to the people who had loved ones buried there as well as to those who expected to be buried there. No one knew who would care for the cemetery under these conditions. People volunteered to help with the upkeep of the grounds, but over a long period, this system would have been ineffective. It was thought by many people that city officials reported this matter to the Attorney General's Office in order to free up the laborers that worked at the cemetery to work on other city projects. Others thought it was reported by the laborers themselves in order to get out of working in the cemetery. However, both of these groups may be completely innocent of the accusations. The person or persons, for whatever reason they had, who reported the City's upkeep of the Mendenhall Cemetery to the Attorney General certainly created many issues that still linger today.

Several attempts were undertaken to make it legal for the City to continue its upkeep responsibilities, but a plan could not be worked out. The Attorney General's Office suggested that a committee of elected citizens be given the responsibility to oversee the operations of the cemetery. As

suggested, a committee was duly elected in 1997, and has fulfilled the responsibilities prescribed in the adopted by-laws of what is now known as the Mendenhall Cemeteries Association, Inc. Through its Board of Directors, the Association is responsible for the maintenance and improvement of the Cemetery, establishment of rules and regulations for the Cemetery, and maintaining the, Perpetual Care Fund and the acquisition of additional burial property as needed. The Association Board of Directors consists of nine (9) members elected in staggered terms by the membership of the Association at their annual meeting.

The Need for More Burial Space in the Mendenhall Cemetery was accomplished in 2004

Beginning in the years after 1968, burial spaces in the Mendenhall Cemetery gradually began to show that additional space was needed. Land joining the cemetery was not for sale or not suited for burial sites. Finally, property on the west side of the Mendenhall Cemetery was purchased in the year 2004. After waiting so long to find an appropriate place for this extended cemetery, everyone seemed to be pleased. The new cemetery was named the Mendenhall Cemetery West. It has over 650 burial sites and is open to the public during daylight hours.