the EASTSIDE CEMETERIES HISTORIC DISTRICT

by the City of San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation
photos by Juan A. Garcia of Eastlight Photography

In the ghostly spirit of Halloween, why not leave the land of the living for a while and step back into San Antonio's rich past with a tour through the Eastside Cemeteries Historic District. This National Register of Historic Places district on the city's near Eastside includes 31 unique and distinctive cemeteries. Spanning nearly two centuries, the district is the final resting place of many of San Antonio's most famous residents. It's well worth a drive through the district, and a number of the cemeteries are open for walking. East Commerce Street at Monumental is the best starting point to experience the cemeteries as they developed.

The earliest of the cemeteries were established in 1853 on land purchased by the city. The location was inspired in part by the Rural Cemetery Movement of the early 19th century which advocated remote, park-like settings for burial grounds. City officials chose an area known as Powder House Hill on the far eastern edge of town as the site of the new cemetery, establishing what some say is one of the earliest rural cemeteries in Texas. The Eastside Cemeteries reflect the rustic South Texas landscape as opposed to pastoral, bucolic cemeteries found elsewhere in the United States.

The cemeteries expanded greatly during the late 1800s, and by 1904 the area totaled over 103 acres with 31 separate cemeteries. At that time local residents petitioned the city to stop further expansion of the cemeteries, and the district has since remained unchanged in size. Residential neighborhoods developed and expanded in the surrounding area during early part of the 20th century. A former trolley route, nicknamed the "Cemetery Line" for its proximity to the burial grounds, ran along the busy commercial corridor of E. Commerce Street.

The district includes public cemeteries, private cemeteries of fraternal and religious organizations, and military cemeteries. The majority of headstones, monuments, and markers date from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s and range from formal sculpture to rustic folk art. The district is notable for the wide variety

of those interred. All walks of life from mayors to paupers lie side by side. Differing in size, design, character, and feel, each of these distinctive burial grounds offers a unique glimpse into a part of San Antonio's history.

On the north side of E. Commerce Street at Monumental is City Cemetery No. 1 and the Alamo Masonic Cemetery, both established in 1853 and the oldest cemeteries within the district. Alamo Masonic Cemetery was the first fraternal order cemetery established on the Eastside, but many others would develop over the following decades. One of the most prominent graves is the mausoleum of Clara Driscoll, who helped save the Alamo from demolition in the early 1900s. The most unusual burial is that of Sandra West, the widow of Texas oilman Ike West, Jr. Upon her death in 1977, she was buried according to her wishes wearing a lace nightgown and seated at the wheel of her 1964 Ferrari. The simple headstone at her resting site belies the unique burial below.
City Cemetery No. 1 boasts the names of early German pioneer families such as Groos (of Groos National Bank), Menger (of the Menger Hotel), and Frost (of Frost National Bank). The main entrance gate to Cemetery No. 1 along E. Commerce Street is flanked by limestone columns with curving walls. The cemetery features several mausoleums, faux bois style fencing, obelisk markers, and ornate statuary and monuments.

North on Monumental at Paso Hondo is the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery established in 1855. Across the street and enclosed by a limestone wall is a must-see — the San Antonio National Cemetery. Established in 1867 and still an active military cemetery, the National Cemetery includes the re-interred bodies of 19th century soldiers originally buried at forts and Army posts across West Texas. The cemetery also contains the graves of more than 300 Buffalo Soldiers, African-American regiments who served in the Indian Wars in Texas and the Southwest in the mid to late 19th century. One burial of note is that of Lt. George E. Kelly, the namesake of San Antonio's Kelly Field (later Kelly Air Force Base).

Further east on Paso Hondo past Palmetto are City Cemetery No. 6, the Confederate Cemetery, and City Cemetery No. 4 with entrances around the block on E. Commerce Street. Established in 1903, City Cemetery No. 6 features the gravesite of Robert H.H. Hugman, who designed San Antonio's world renowned Riverwalk in the late 1930s. The Confederate Cemetery contains the graves of many Civil War veterans. Cemetery No. 4 includes graves from many private organizations such as the Order of Railroad Conductors and the Fire Department.

Don't miss a glimpse at the far northern end of the district at Potomac and N. Palmetto of the beautifully landscaped and maintained Agudas Achim Jewish Cemetery and Temple Beth-El Hebrew Cemetery. A prominent gravesite is the Joske family mausoleum, founders of the former Joske's Department Store in San Antonio.

South of Commerce Street you will encounter a number of other cemeteries, including City Cemetery No. 3 at S. Palmetto and Montana. Cemetery No. 3 contains several African American cemeteries within its boundary. Although not differentiated, the African American cemeteries are located at the eastern side of the cemetery and include the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery, San Antonio Lodge No. 1 Cemetery, United Brothers of Friendship Cemetery, St. Elmo Lodge No. 25 Cemetery, Beacon Light Masonic Lodge Cemetery, and St. Peter Claver Catholic Cemetery.

Further south are St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, St. John's and Emanuel German Lutheran Cemeteries, and Hermann Sons Cemetery. St. Mary's Cemetery features elaborate statuary and is the burial site of Adina De Zavala who, along with Clara Driscoll, was instrumental in helping to preserve the Alamo in the early 20th century.

If you're interested in a guided tour of the cemetery district, join the City's Office of Historic Preservation on Saturday, October 27th at 9:00 am. Runners and walkers of all skill levels are invited to participate. Registration is $15 and includes a San Antonio "Know Your Place" t-shirt. Contact the Office of Historic Preservation at (210)215-9274 or online at www.sanantonio.gov/historic to register.