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 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 visitors. East Commerce Street at Monumental is the best starting point to appreciate what the district offers and how they evolved.

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 Pecan Grove Hill as the 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 1940s, and by 1946, the area totaled over 103 acres with 31 separate cemeteries. At that time local residents petitioned the city to also further expansion of the cemeteries, and the district has since remained unchanged in size. Residential neighborhood developed and expanded in the surrounding area during early part of the 20th century. In former times, a main road, now called “Commerce Lane,” ran along the east 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 styles to rustic folk art. The district is notable for the wide variety of those interested. All works of life from mayor to commoner to side by side. Daring 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 Monument is City Cemetery No. 1 and the Alma Masonic Cemetery, both established in 1853 and the oldest cemeteries within the district. Alma Masonic Cemetery was the first fraternal order cemetery established on the Eastside. Not many others would develop over the following decades. One of the most prominent graves in the mausoleum is of Clara Griswold, 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 John West. In her death in 1977, she was buried according to her wishes wearing a rose nightgown and seated at the wheel of her 1964 Ferrari. The simple headstone at her resting place bears the unique burial below.

City Cemetery No. 1 boasts the names of early German pioneer families such as Gros (of Gros National Bank), Menger (of the Menger Hotel), and Frey (of First National Bank). The main entrance gate is in Cemetery No. 1. Rising E. Commerce Street is flanked by limestone columns with curving rails. The cemetery features several mausoleums, faux bois style fencing, obelisk markers, and stone statuary and monuments.

North on Monumental at Rose Honda is the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery established in 1885. Across the street and enclosed by a limestone wall is another holding 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 Fort and Army cemeteries across Texas. The cemetery also contains the graves of more than 350 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 remains of San Antonio’s Kelly Field (later Kelly Air Force Base).

Further east on Franklin Hills past Pecan Grove is City Cemetery No. 6, the Confederate Cemetery and City Cemetery No. 8, with numerous gravestones at the 400 block on E. Commerce Street. Established in 1993, City Cemetery No. 6 features the gravestones of Robert H. H. Hyneman, who designed San Antonio’s world renowned Alamo 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 Pecan Grove and N. Palmetto of the beautifully landscaped and maintained Aquiles Acton Jewell Cemetery and Emily Park Hawn Cemetery. A prominent grave on the is the Jewell family mausoleum, founders of the former Jockey’s Department Store in San Antonio.

Both of Commerce Street may still encounter in 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 boundaries. Although not differentiated, the African American cemeteries are located at the eastern side of the cemetery and include the Grand Union Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery, San Antonio Lodge No. 1, Cemetery, United Brothers of Friendship Cemetery, St. Elmo Lodge No. 33, Cemetery, Republican Masonic Lodge Cemetery, and St. Peter’s Catholic Cemetery.

Further south are St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery, St. John’s and Emmanuel German Lutheran Cemeteries, and Harrodsburg San Cemetery. St. Mary’s Cemetery features several notable structures and is the burial site of Adolfo de la Garza, 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 cemeteries, join the City at the Office of Historic Preservation on Saturday, October 29th at 10:30 am. Runners and walkers at all skill levels are invited to participate. Registration is $15 and includes a refreshment stop. Contact the Office of Historic Preservation at (210) 207-7974 or online at www.sanantonio.gov/historic to register.