

Jack Merrifield, Our 1870 Neighbor

by Jim Barnes

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John “Jack” Merrifield -- 1792-1873

The little cemetery at the southeast corner of Hampton and Jefferson is a well known Oak Cliff landmark. A granite tombstone marks the burial of John (“Jack”) Merrifield. During the years when the Stevens family opened their farm (where our Stevens Park Estates neighborhood is located today) the Merrifields were their southern neighbors. At one time or another John Merrifield owned all the land in a rectangle one-half mile wide, starting from where the swings in Annie L. Stevens Children’s Park are today, running south 1½ miles to Clarendon.

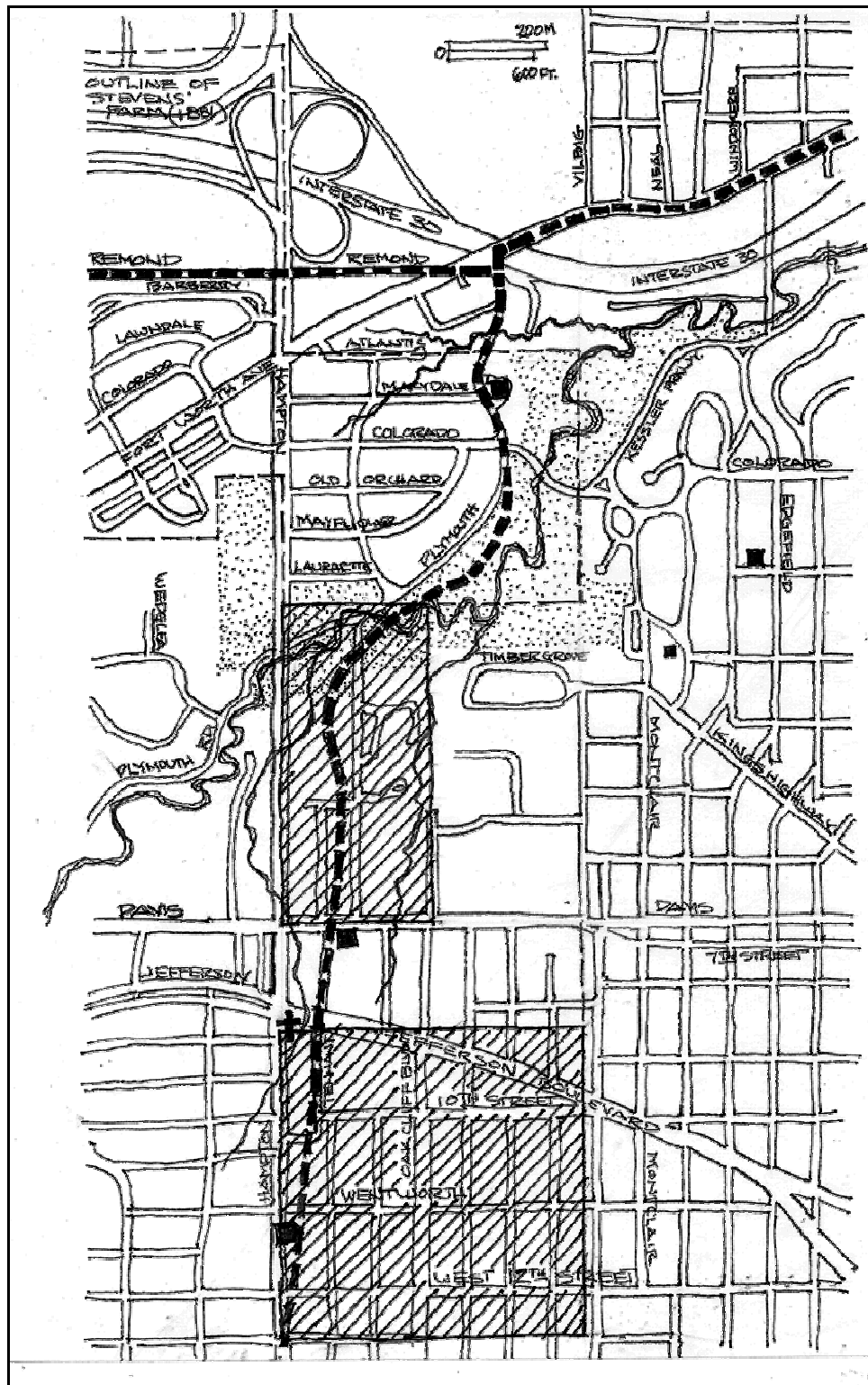
Jack Merrifield arrived in Texas sometime around the end 1850, after free land in our vicinity had all been taken. One newspaper story from the 1920s asserts that he operated the first livery stable in the infant village of Dallas. In 1851 he bought the ½ square mile now occupied by Sunset High School, south of modern Davis, and he lived there the remainder of his life. In 1858, William and Mary Myers, the original claimants to the square mile including our neighborhood, lost the southwest ¼ of their “section” in debt foreclosure. Bouncing through probate and bankruptcy cases, title to the property was again auctioned in 1868, where it sold for \$5 (yes, 3 1/8 cents per acre). A year later the empty 160 acre tract was sold to Jack Merrifield for \$400. So, Jack Merrifield was southern neighbor to John and Mary Stevens, when they bought their farm in 1870.

When the Stevens arrived here, John Merrifield was already seventy-seven years old. He had been born in Kentucky on the 29th of December 1792. His mother, Rachel Boone, was a first cousin once removed of Daniel Boone, the legendary frontiersman. During the War of 1812 John Merrifield served in the army of Andrew Jackson. He fought the Battle of New Orleans. His brother came to Texas during its Revolution and was killed at Goliad. John had been married twice and had sired 13 children before he followed his older sons in their migration to North Texas. He was a farmer and a stockman. His second wife, Elizabeth, died here in 1869. John married a third time. Unlike the college-educated Stevens', John and Harriet Merrifield signed deeds simply with their "mark". John Merrifield suddenly "dropped dead" in front of his log cabin on the 21st of July 1873.

The Merrifield cabin was (evidently) located at the east edge of modern Hampton, just south of Wentworth. Today, standing in the parking lot between "Wash World" and "Hollywood Video", it's hard to imagine Jack Merrifield's cabin near the crest of the ridge -- long views extending west out across vast prairies. The family recalls that Jack's cabin was already there when he bought the property, but that he had expanded it into a three room home for his family. It was torn down in 1938 and as late as 1963 the piled logs were reportedly rotting nearby.

The straight line of Hampton Road wasn't extended north from this hilltop for half a century after John Merrifield died. The north-south road the pioneers used fit more comfortably to the natural terrain. It can only be traced today in fragments of Plymouth Road and Tennant Street. This earlier County road was variously called "Cedar Hill Road", "Wheatland Road", and "Rush Chapel Road". Rush Chapel was a small Methodist-Episcopal (South) church built on the southeast corner of modern Davis and Tennant. Both the Stevens and Merrifields were Methodists. The position of the Merrifield property and the alignment of the old road lead me to believe that the original tombstones of Merrifield Cemetery probably faced east. The cemetery was heavily vandalized in 1939 and my guess is that during its restoration, including the acquisition of the granite double headstone for "Jack" and his second wife Elizabeth, the orientation was reversed to face the new Hampton Road on the west.

Nobody really knows how many burials are in Merrifield Cemetery. There are rumors of graves covered by adjacent houses. It's nearly impossible to disprove any of the many yarns about this conspicuous landmark, but some are more "likely" than others. For many years the cemetery was tended by two elderly Merrifield descendants who lovingly cut weeds and placed flowers on the grave of "Richard" Merrifield. Unfortunately exhaustive modern genealogical research fails to find any family member with that name. Another tale is that a lone Indian warrior, killed in battle far away, was brought back to the Merrifield Cemetery for burial. There was almost no Indian warfare in Dallas County; though there is one report of a Settler scalping an Indian he had killed. Another story reports burial of family slaves in a special section of the cemetery. Slavery was relatively rare in Dallas County, and John Merrifield held no slaves in the 1860 Census. The Merrifield family repeats a story that a traveler, James Smith, passing through on his way to California, was overcome by his tuberculosis, given shelter in the Merrifield's cabin until he died, and buried in their cemetery. Plausible-- yet my research couldn't confirm. But old newspaper accounts exactly corroborate at least part of perhaps the best old story. In 1868, twenty-three year old Benjamin Merrifield (John and Elizabeth's son) was traveling down a country road one December evening with a female companion when they passed a beautiful glade of trees. That would be "a nice place in which to be buried", he lightly remarked. Within a week, he was shot dead at Reunion in a fight over a girl, and his body was buried in the spot he had admired-- our Merrifield Cemetery.



Map showing the land holdings of Jack Merrifield at the time of his death in 1873 -- all superimposed on the modern street grid of 2007. The ancient *Ridge Route* had evolved into *Wheatland Road* (also called *Cedar Hill Road* or *Rush Chapel Road*). Rush Chapel Methodist Church was at modern *Davis*. In 1811 the Stevens built their home at modern *Middlebrook Place*. Jack Merrifield's cabin was along modern *Hampton*, just south of *Wentworth*. The Merrifield family cemetery was located at what is now the corner of *Hampton* and *Jefferson*.