

Big Shoal Cemetery

Big Shoal Cemetery lies on a bend in Pleasant Valley Road at North Jackson. Years ago the cemetery had fallen victim to vandals, weather and neglect, but has since been adapted by the city. Today the cemetery is part of the greater Big Shoal Heritage area. A previous index of the cemetery listed more than 150 burials. Today, many of the stones are lost or broken, but those that remain record the lives of many of the areas prominent citizens.

Around 1823, the Big Shoal Baptist Church was formed by a group of early settlers to the Clay County area. After its formation, Benjamin Sampson and John Hightower each deeded adjoining one-acre parcels of land to the Trustees of the Big Shoal Baptist Church in 1826 and 1833 respectively. These parcels were to be used for a church, school and cemetery. The deeds for the parcels given the church were not recorded at the time of conveyance, but the transfers were evident in later land sales. Today, the cemetery lies on the parcel deeded by John Hightower, who later sold his land to Jonathan Atkins.

In 1859 a quiet title action was brought in the Clay County, Missouri court by the Trustees for the Big Shoal Baptist Church involving these one-acre parcels. The trustees listed in the action were Jonathan Atkins, William Nall and Joshua Gotcher. The court determined the legal owners of the parcels were the Trustees of the Big Shoal Baptist Church and the deeds were then recorded. Although very popular in its day, the Big Shoal Baptist Church ceased functioning in the 1930s and the association to which it

belonged was dissolved sometime thereafter. The land where the cemetery lies never changed ownership, even after the demise of the church.

Big Shoal Cemetery became the final resting place for many highly regarded pioneers who helped shape the community. Many lived in close proximity to the church and cemetery while others had homesteads farther away, but were prominent members of the church.

Jonathan and Mary Atkins came to Clay County from Kentucky and had their home directly north of the cemetery. Along with his son William H., Jonathan operated the firm Atkins & Sons that ran a steam saw mill. Jonathan was a trustee for the Big Shoal Baptist Church and his parents; **John and Francis Atkins** are listed as charter members. Jonathan died in 1866 of cholera and Mary died in 1878. They are buried within view of their old homestead, which still stands and has been recently added to the National Register of Historic Places. A number of their children are also buried here, among them, **William H. Atkins**. William Atkins was a judge, elected twice to a seat on the bench in Clay County. His funeral was conducted by Elder F.V. Loos and is said to have been one of the largest ever held at the church.

John E. Bender came to this area and purchased land north of the cemetery sometime in the 1880s, near where the present Happy Rock Park is located. **Michael Dresslaer** originally owned this land, whose son **Anderson** is buried at Big Shoal. John Bender's headstone deems him the founder of the Acme Springs. In 1885, it is reported in the Liberty Tribune that he is the sole proprietor of the Acme Springs, located within the community of Acme, which is known to have had a school, general store, a post office

and a hotel. He was referred to as the local bachelor and did not marry until the age of 51 in 1895. His wife was 29 years his junior. John Bender died in 1916.

William Nall came to Clay County in 1832 and purchased land in the Maple Park area. William and **Mourning Nall** eventually owned around 900 acres of land and built a large home which still stands today at Northeast 53rd and North Cambridge. The Nalls also gave land for the Greenwood School, which was situated, in the area of today's Claycomo City Park. William Nall was a southern sympathizer during the Civil War and his financial losses were great during this time. Even so, he continued to be prosperous and he and his wife raised a family of seven children on their large farm. William Nall was a member of the Big Shoal Baptist Church for more than 50 years and served as trustee. He died in 1882 and Mourning followed in 1886.

Daniel Hughes came to Clay County in 1824 and entered land in the area of Happy Rock Park on the west side of Antioch Road. Here, he and his wife **Elizabeth Hughes** built a log cabin using wood cut from the land. This cabin was very substantial and was added onto and modernized through three generations of ownership. When the land was sold out of the family, the cabin, encased in the existing home, was moved to Shoal Creek Living History Museum at Hodge Park. Daniel was a cabinet and coffin maker by trade. He was a member of the Big Shoal Baptist Church and served on the building committee. He and his wife Elizabeth had 10 children who grew to be prominent citizens of the area. The oldest, George Hughes, taught in local schools for 40 years and was the second school county commissioner. The youngest son, Daniel, operated a drug store in Liberty. Daniel and Elizabeth Hughes are both buried at Big Shoal, as are several of their children.

There are many other notable citizens buried at Big Shoal. Unfortunately, information is limited regarding many. A few that should be mentioned are **Richard Barnes** who served under General Harrison in the War of 1812; **Thomas Hamilton** who was killed during the Civil War; **James Thomas Price** who served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War; and **John B. Reese**, a veteran teacher of the Big Shoal School which stood just south of the cemetery.

Despite the toll that time has taken on the cemetery, it still stands, stubborn and proud, a true testament to those early pioneers that came and shaped our land.
