

COMB CEMETERIES in the STATES of LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, MISSOURI, NORTH CAROLINA, OKLAHOMA, TEXAS, WEST VIRGINIA & GEORGIA

While Tennessee has by far and away the largest number of comb cemeteries (515 recorded as of Aug. 2022) and extant comb graves (well over 3600), and is almost certainly the origin of the comb grave burial tradition, comb graves are also known from eleven other, mostly Southern, states. During this study comb graves were documented in 69 Alabama cemeteries, and it is known that many more Alabama graveyards feature combs. In Arkansas 11 comb cemeteries were recorded, and seven were found in Kentucky. Data from these cemeteries are presented separately on www.graterutabaga.com The present short webpage compiles what is known of the few comb cemeteries in the states of Louisiana (1), Mississippi (1), Missouri (2), North Carolina (1), Oklahoma (1), Texas (2), West Virginia (2) and Georgia (1).

LOUISIANA—A single traditional graveyard, Old Bellwood Cemetery, in Natchitoches Parish, contains a single comb for a child who perished in 1878. According to Google Maps, Old Bellwood Cem. is located at N Lat 31.4952 W Long 93.1926. The following three images courtesy of John C. Waggoner.



Image courtesy of John C. Waggoner.



Image courtesy of John C. Waggoner.



Image courtesy of John C. Waggoner.

MISSISSIPPI—Pickle Cemetery, in Monroe Co., near the town of Greenwood Springs, has at least four graves covered by sheet metal combs with dates of death ranging from 1946 to 1991. According to Google Maps, Pickle Cem. is located at N Lat 33.9461 W Long 88.2471.



Image courtesy of John C. Waggoner.

It seems likely that Mississippi once had more comb cemeteries, --and perhaps still does—inasmuch as Terry Thornton mentions in his Hill Country Hogs blog (<http://hillcountryhogsblog.blogspot.com/2010/04/grave-shelters.html>) seeing more of this sort of grave cover in his youth.

MISSOURI---Two cemeteries with comb graves are known in the state of Missouri, both not far north of the state line with Arkansas. Though located in Missouri, these two comb cemeteries are part of the same Ozark cultural area as northern Arkansas, in which comb graves were part of the cultural heritage brought by immigrants from Tennessee.

Noel Cem. is located just 3-4 miles north of the Arkansas line in the town of Noel, McDonald Co., near the SW corner of Missouri, at N Lat 36.551037 W Long 94.474023. This cemetery features two comb graves.



Image courtesy of Abby Burnett.

Souder Cem. is located approximately 20 miles north of the Arkansas line, in Ozark Co., at N Lat 36.787217 W Long 92.465650. This cemetery features four or five combs in various states of disrepair.



Image courtesy of Abby Burnett.

NORTH CAROLINA---The only comb grave known east of Tennessee is found in the Old City Cemetery of Raleigh, in Wake Co. According to Google Maps, Old City Cem. is located at N Lat 35.7790 W Long 78.6313. The comb covers the grave of Mary Beasle, who died in 1834, making it an early comb, but younger than the earliest known combs of Tennessee.



Image courtesy of Susan Wiley.

The Beasle comb is unique in that it is made of a weakly foliated granitic rock, which undoubtedly reflects the fact that the sandstone slabs preferred for most comb construction is not available in the Piedmont region of mainly metamorphic rocks.

OKLAHOMA--- Eastern Oklahoma lies within the cultural region of the Upland South (as defined by Dr. Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov in his 2003 book “The Upland South”). At least three comb graves, extant in 2016, are documented by photographs in Old Cache Cem., near Keota, in Haskell Co. The combs seen in the images are very typical combs, and could easily pass for combs in a Tennessee graveyard. The stone slabs have the appearance of being sandstone, though it is difficult to be certain from photographs. At least one of the three combs seen in available images is gable-scribed, which makes it at least slightly atypical. Locally it is believed by some that the comb graves in this cemetery mark the burials of Native Americans; no evidence is known that supports this idea. According to Google Maps, Old Cache Cem. is located at N Lat 35.2532 W Long 94.8216.



Image courtesy of Jerry Smith.

TEXAS—Texas hosts two cemeteries known to feature comb graves. Shiloh Cem. in Denton Co. is home to a single comb, the elegant marble comb grave of Nancy Yeats, who expired in 1910. Very few marble combs are known anywhere (only two of Tennessee’s 3600+ combs are marble), so the Yeats comb is quite unusual. This comb is closed at each end by surprisingly large stones, somewhat reminiscent in size of the “truncated triangle” style of head- and footstones so common in Overton Co., TN. Coincidentally (?), Nancy Yeats was born in Tennessee, though at present nothing is known regarding possible Tennessee connections and traditions she may have cherished. According to Google Maps, Shiloh Cem. is located at N Lat 33.1635 W Long 97.0657.



Image courtesy of Jim Fritze.

The other Texas burial ground to feature comb graves is Walling Cem. in Cooke Co., which has at least two combs made of sheet metal. Of these two combs, one is unusual, inasmuch as it is a matrimonial comb, i.e., a single broad comb covering the graves of a husband and wife, Squire J. Umsted (d. 1917) and Katy Umsted (d. 1916). Only one other example of a matrimonial comb is known (a wide stone comb at Pine Hill Cem., Putnam Co., TN). Interestingly enough, the Umsteds were both originally from Carroll Co., TN. Considering how many “GTT” Tennesseans participated in the settlement of Texas by Anglos, it would not be surprising to find that Texas hosts other comb cemeteries. According to Google Maps, Walling Cem. is located at N Lat 33.4658 W Long 97.0144.



Walling Cem. image borrowed from internet source; Umsted matrimonial comb in background.



Umsted matrimonial comb; image borrowed from internet source.

WEST VIRGINIA---While not everyone thinks of West Virginia as a Southern state, in terms of history and material culture, it is so classified. And West Virginia's Mingo Co. (on the border with Kentucky) is home to two comb cemeteries, one that is well cared for and one that is said to have once feature several combs, but is now an ex-comb cemetery. Newsome Ridge Cemetery lies along the crest of a high ridge and features five relatively recent sheet metal combs, four with dates 1937, 1947, 1948 and 1952. According to Google Maps, Newsome Ridge Cem. is located at N Lat 37.8409 W Long 82.3129.



Four of Newsome Ridge Cemetery's five combs of metal roofing.



Note the decorative end scrolls features on some Newsome Ridge combs.

Below Newsome Ridge down in a deep valley, at the community of Rose Town (aka Cane Branch) is the Rose Cem., which a local informant said formerly had several combs. Sadly, as of 2015 only one comb remained, and it was lying downhill from and out of alignment with the other graves and evidently not above a burial; it seems to have been discarded, and this graveyard must now be classified as an ex-comb cemetery. According to Google Maps, Rose Cem. is located at N Lat 37.8481 W Long 82.3561.

GEORGIA---Comb graves are known from a single cemetery in Georgia: Old Salem Cemetery in western Spalding Co. at N Lat 33.31674 W Long 084.37327. This country graveyard was largely forgotten until rediscovered in 2023 during a land development project. It contains approximately 55 graves, mostly marked with rough, uninscribed fieldstones. However, there are also a number of somewhat crudely constructed box graves and two comb graves. The combs are small (evidently covering children's burials) and a bit primitive. The roughly shaped side slabs are made of foliated metamorphic rock and the combs have neither the gable stones nor fill to support the side slabs. As a consequence of this lack of support, the paired side slabs have spread apart and partially collapsed. Nonetheless, it is clear each pair of side slabs was originally set up in the form of a gable roof, and that these grave covers are legitimate comb graves. What is unclear is whether the person(s) who constructed these graves was aware of comb graves in Tennessee (or elsewhere) and deliberately erecting "combs". These combs are undated, and in fact, little is known about the age of Old Salem Cemetery.



The pair of small combs in Old Salem Cemetery.



Although partly collapsed, the original gable roof form of the Old Salem combs is evident.

To the viewers of this webpage: If you know of other comb cemeteries in these or other states, please send this information to Ric Finch at rfinch@graterutabaga.com so that this data collection can be updated. Thank you!