

Rosemary Stewart Minard

By Rosemary Minard
Photographs by Jack Lewis

Romantic remnant of a vanished town

WAVERLY CEMETERY

Even on still days, a breeze sweeps softly across this lonely knoll, whispering through the ancient oaks and cedars, stirring the wild grasses and tangled strands of Spanish moss. In spring, wild phlox and blue-bonnets bring new life in this refuge for the dead.

Grayed and weathered tombstones, massive and sunk into the soil or tall and slim and tilted with time, watch over their dead. Here lie the men and women and children of Waverly, a town once thriving and now disappeared. Only a beautiful hilltop cemetery remains, relic of a world and a way of life long since vanished.

Waverly had its beginnings in the early 1850s when a group of

planters, mostly from Alabama, brought their families and their slaves to establish cotton plantations in what is now the southeastern corner of Walker County.

They came on horseback, in buggies, carriages, and wagons, and the journey was often perilous. In 1852 cholera struck a party of planters and their slaves, about 300 in all, as they passed through New Orleans. Four of the leaders and 40 slaves died on the road. Two fluted columns, cast with tops broken off to symbolize an unfinished life, stand in the cemetery as memorials to two of the young planters who perished.

Despite such hardships, Waverly soon became a thriving community. The planters built imposing homes

All that remains of Waverly today is the old cemetery, a place that reflects the glory of the town when it flourished in the 1850s as a center of finance, farming, education, and culture.

Rosemary Minard, a Houston free-lance writer, has just had her second children's book, Long Meg, published by Pantheon.





An overcast spring morning makes a perfect setting when you're visiting the old Waverly cemetery in southeast Texas.

in the antebellum style, laid out a town with a business district, and named streets. Soon it became a college town. Its Male and Female Academies, together known as the Waverly Institute, drew boarding pupils from miles away. By 1856 Waverly was the social, educational, and cultural center of the area. For a few brief years it was, for the lucky ones in the planter aristocracy, a world of musical evenings and fancy dress balls, of starched petticoats and strolls on the veranda, of Sunday dinners that went on for hours, and of visits to neighbors that lasted for days. Waverly was a world as romantic and as rooted in the past as the Walter Scott novel from which it took its name.

The affluence and taste of Waverly's citizens are apparent in the size and style of the monuments they erected to the memory of their loved ones. Obelisks, columns, and pillars, outsized tablets delicately inscribed, graceful urns, and stately crosses on monumental bases—all speak of a community that prized substance and beauty and had little use for ostentation.

Emmett Niederhofer, an old man now, was seven years old when the Sewall monument, the largest in the cemetery, arrived at the New Waverly train station back in 1912. Yet he remembers clearly the ordeal of hauling it to the Waverly cemetery.

"It was so heavy," he recalls,



“that it took an eight-wheel log wagon and 23 yokes of oxen to pull it. The road was muddy and washed out from heavy rains, and every time they came to a creek, they had to ford it because the wooden bridges wouldn’t have held up under the weight. So they’d go as far as they could in a day, then camp for the night and start up again the next morning. Took them three weeks to make the eight-mile trip to the cemetery.”

The Sewall monument also serves as a reminder that though the town of Waverly is gone, the descendants of many of its settlers became important citizens elsewhere. Campbell Sewall, son of the man memorialized, was a prominent Houstonian of the early 1900s and is himself memorialized by Rice University’s Sewall Hall, given by his wife to complete the university’s quadrangle.

Though many of the Waverly monuments recall long lives passed in comfort and wealth, others remind us that life in the second half of the 19th Century was still



H. M. and Elizabeth Elmore’s son was only one year and nine months old when he died in 1854. See text right above.

precarious, especially for the very young. Numerous graves of infants and children may be distinguished by the figure of a lamb on the headstone. The oldest marker, one of the most beautiful, is for a child

who died in 1854. An angel carrying an infant hovers above a garland of flowers. On the shield beneath, a sentimental Victorian verse commemorates the dead child:

*The lovely bud so young and fair
Cut down by early doom
Just comes to show how sweet
a flower
In Paradise might bloom.*

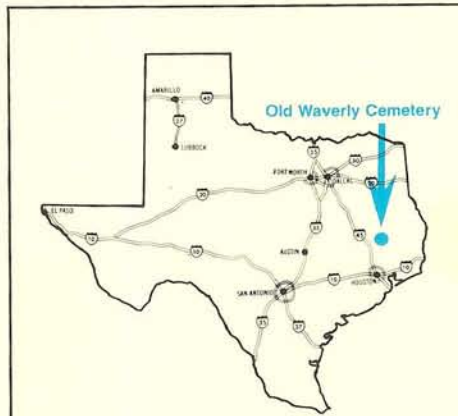
Based on slavery, Waverly was perhaps doomed before it ever began. When the slaves were freed at the end of the Civil War, a mere 12 years after Waverly’s founding, there was no longer enough labor to work the plantations. A plan to use immigrant labor failed, and, moreover, the land had been worn out by careless use.

The railroad, though, finally sealed the fate of Waverly. Ironically, the community, which valued education and culture, was not farsighted enough to envision the impact the newfangled railroad would have on its economic future. In 1870 several of its citizens refused to sell right of way through the town to the Houston and Great Northern Railroad Company. Consequently, the track was laid eight miles to the west. A new town, New Waverly, sprang up around the station, and the decline of Waverly began.

Today, the stores and the Male and Female Academies are gone. Streets have given way to the encroaching forest. One by one, the elegant antebellum homes burned or collapsed from decay. All that remains of this once prosperous community is its beautiful cemetery on a windswept knoll. Maintained and still used by descendants of Waverly’s settlers, the cemetery is an unbroken link to a fleeting and almost forgotten moment in Texas’ past. ❏



A monument to Mary Elizabeth, consort of A. J. Thompson and daughter of John and Lucy Tabb.



When . . . Where . . . How

Take Interstate 45 north from Conroe (about 60 miles north of Houston) or south from Huntsville. Exit east on Texas 150 at New Waverly, drive 6.8 miles to the old Waverly Cemetery historical marker sign, and turn left. The cemetery is about 200 yards past this intersection on the left.