

# Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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## **SITE OF 1918 FIRE VICTIMS' GRAVES TO BE MEMORIALIZED APRIL 13 Memorial Stone to be Dedicated at 2 p.m. Ceremony in Norman**

For nearly 100 years, the final resting places of 39 people who died in a 1918 ward fire at Griffin Memorial Hospital have been left largely forgotten, buried in an unmarked site at the corner of North Porter and Rock Creek Road in the IOOF Cemetery.

But 97 years to the day after that fatal blaze, representatives of the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and GMH staff, along with mental health advocates, clergy and other community members will make sure they are forgotten no longer. A memorial service is planned for Monday, April 13, 2 p.m. at 1913 N. Porter Ave., the northeast corner of the IOOF Cemetery in Norman, where a stone will be placed in their memory.

Terri White, ODMHSAS commissioner, will speak, and the names of all 39 buried in the cemetery will be read. Carol Kellison, retired GMH staff member active in preserving the cemetery's history, will provide introductions, and Lauren Hunter, executive assistant also instrumental in the project, will read the names, with a member of the clergy providing closing remarks.

In what is considered the largest fatality fire in Oklahoma history, most of the 40 adolescent boys and young men who perished April 13, 1918, were hastily buried and the area was not marked.

At the time of burial, a local newspaper reported the fire victims' plot was believed to be approximately 13 feet by 16 feet in size. A number of efforts have been made over the years to locate the grave site and erect a monument or headstone to remember the persons who died in the fire. ODMHSAS, Deputy Chief Jim Bailey of the Norman Fire Department, the Oklahoma Archeological Survey (OAS), Andy Rieger of *The Norman Transcript* and others have been involved in the search over several years.

Using ground-penetrating radar, Dr. Scott Hammerstedt, lead archeologist with the OAS, determined the location with a high degree of certainty in early 2014 through a collaborative project between the department and OAS.

Family members or anyone else interested in attending, or needing more information, can call Lauren Hunter at 405-573-6600.

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