On Hallowed Ground

How Dallas’ oldest black church battled the developers, and won. And lost.

BY DAVID DILLON  PUBLISHED IN D MAGAZINE FEBRUARY 1980

On September 2, 1975, while most people were still recovering from the long Labor Day weekend, a small funeral procession crept along Celestial Road in far North Dallas towards the old White Rock Union Graveyard, a small cemetery dating back at least to the Civil War, and probably earlier. The body in the hearse was that of Mrs. Mary Allen, stepmother of Fletcher Allen, carpenter and trustee of the cemetery association. Like many of the blacks in this part of Dallas, Mary Allen had come originally from “up East,” in her case North Carolina instead of Kentucky or Virginia or Tennessee. The Upper White Rock community had started out as a freedman’s town, settled by ex-slaves from the nearby Coit, Caruth, and Obier plantations, as well as migrants from other states, who’d heard about the abundance of cheap land and decent living conditions, at least compared with the Deep South. Fletcher Allen recalls talking to slaves who had hid out on the banks of White Rock Creek for months, living on fish and wild fruit, until their masters got tired of looking for them and went home. Those who stayed on farmed, either for themselves or for others. The Blackland Prairie was ideal for growing cash crops like cotton, corn, wheat, and oats, and by the turn of the century some of the original settlers had large holdings and fat bank accounts.
But by the late forties the farming days played out, and owners had begun selling off their land, first to oil millionaires looking for a country spread where they could relax and run a few head, later to real estate agents and developers. Had anyone in the funeral procession bothered to look off to the west, he might have seen a few surveyor’s flags flapping in the breeze, the first evidence of Prestonwood Mall. Soon all the land between Celestial Road and Belt Line, as well as south to Spring Valley and east to Preston Road, would be scraped clean and replanted in apartments and condominiums and strip shopping centers. Land that could once be had for a milk cow and a few chickens, that had sold for $2 an acre and $1000 a section (640 acres), would go for $2 and $3 a square foot, sometimes more, with no end in sight. A poor dirt farmer with a few acres near a choice intersection could make a killing. And many of them were doing just that.

But the members of the funeral procession weren’t thinking about land prices on that baking September afternoon. They had something more pressing to consider. They weren’t sure that they could get into the cemetery to bury Mrs. Mary Allen.

In the fall of 1969, OKC Corporation, a large oil, cement, and real estate conglomerate headed by Coyce Box, began buying land in the Upper White Rock Creek area, including, it claimed, the three acres known as the White Rock Union Graveyard or the White Rock Colored Graveyard, depending on whom you talked to. In actual fact, OKC’s title insurance policy specifically “excepted” two of these acres, meaning that there was a reasonable chance that they belonged to someone else. But the
opening and closing deals in what proved to be a boom area, OKC chose not to investigate the matter thoroughly. If the land did belong to someone else, the parties would have to come forward on their own to claim it. In the meantime, OKC padlocked all the gates on the fence erected by the cemetery association, claiming that whoever had used the graveyard in the past had abandoned it.

This was news to the Campbells, Kellers, McMamys, Aliens, and other families, black and white, whose ancestors were buried there, and who made regular visits to tend the graves. Not only was the cemetery in use, it was sacred ground, one of the most important links between the community’s past and present. The Old Preston Trail, which in the 1870’s and 1880’s carried thousands of head of cattle north to the Red River and thousands of settlers in covered wagons south to Texas, ran only a few feet from the east gates. In March 1974, the White Rock Union Graveyard Association, made up of representatives from most of the churches in the area, went to court and got a temporary restraining order prohibiting OKC Corporation from cutting off access to the cemetery. For a time, that seemed to settle the matter.

Then early in August 1975, while OKC was still under a restraining’order, Fletcher Allen noticed crews digging post holes for another fence that would completely block access to the east gates of the cemetery. He immediately telephoned his lawyers, George Seay and John McCarthy, who drove out to the site to explain the problem to the foreman. The foreman nodded politely and kept on digging, saying only that they would have to
McCarthy, who eared the attorney, said bluntly, he says, that the company was getting fed up with cemetery associations and legal wrangling and was going ahead with plans to fence every foot of property they owned in the area. Trespassers were dumping rubbish on the land surrounding the cemetery, which would cost thousands of dollars to clean up. If McCarthy’s clients wanted to take OKC to court, they could.

So at 8 a.m. on September 2, 1975, the day of Mary Allen’s funeral, Attorney John McCarthy was in Judge Joe Bailey Humphreys’ office asking for another temporary restraining order against OKC. By 9 a.m. he had it, and by 10:00, an officer of the company had been served. Shortly after noon workmen arrived with cutting tools and began opening a section of Cox fence, so that by the time the hearse carrying the body of Mrs. Mary Allen reached the end of Celestial Road, and began the long, slow climb up the chalk escarpment to the cemetery, a pathway had been opened, just wide enough for the hearse to pass through. Family and friends gathered briefly at the graveside. A few prayers were offered. Dust was scattered over the coffin. By 2:30 on September 2, to the accompaniment of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and the occasional clanking of the cut fence, Mrs. Mary Allen was laid to rest. And a much tougher battle was about to begin.

The most concerned observers of the cemetery fight were the approximately 15 members of nearby White Rock Chapel Church, the oldest black church in North
more imposing congregations, including Mount Ararat, Christian Chapel, and St. Paul’s A.M.E. on Coit Road. As members of the cemetery association, they were naturally concerned about being able to bury their dead, but they were even more concerned about maintaining access to a nondescript, overgrown acre of land just north of the cemetery – the site of their original church. Here the slaves and descendants of slaves had gathered to pray and sing, some, according to local history, traveling from as far away as Palestine. They tied their horses and wagons to one of the large cedars or bois d’arcs nearby and worshipped beneath a small brush arbor. Then in 1884 the trustees purchased the land outright from W.A. Obier, known to community historians only as a “carpetbagging Yankee whose job it was to name all the niggers.” The members erected a crude log church and worshipped in it until sometime in 1918, when a flash flood on White Rock Creek, no rarity then or now, carried off an entire family-husband, wife, several small children. No trace of them was ever found. It was the worst tragedy ever to strike the tiny church, almost a divine rebuke for an act of carelessness. Shortly thereafter S.S. Noel, who owned much of the land around the church and the cemetery, gave the trustees a plot of land at the corner of what is now Celestial and Winwood, where, on safer ground, they erected a tabernacle and a small parsonage.

But the congregation continued to return to the old site for revivals, memorial services, and other special events. While the men tended the graveyard, the women prepared lunch under the cedars. Even though it was separated from the new church by a quarter mile of rock and water, the one acre remained the true spiritual
the pines and the White Rock Chapel Church trustees wanted to keep it that way. If a developer could fence off a cemetery, he could fence off their land as well. Fences were going up everywhere now. The time had come to act.

So, on August 13, 1975, Willie Mae Sowell, Minnie Moody, and J.O. Allen approached Attorney Shirley Levin about representing the church in establishing clear title to the one acre of land. Shirley Levin knew some of the trustees personally, and was also a Dallas history buff, but obviously her strongest claim on their attention then was that she had successfully represented another resident of Celestial Road, Rose Marie Stromberg, in a recent action against OKC.

Mrs. Stromberg looked out her dining room window one morning in the summer of ’75 to see an OKC bulldozer pushing large cedar elms and red oaks into a branch of the creek. Her trees, on her land. She rushed out to complain to the operator, who replied that he couldn’t stop because he was working by the hour. Mrs. Stromberg then called her husband and attorney Levin. A representative of OKC later explained that the company suspected that it didn’t own all that land, but if it had tried to get in touch with the landowners, they would probably have made trouble and caused a delay. So the company just went ahead and bulldozed the trees. When the Strombergs produced a valid deed, however, the matter was resolved quickly: The trees were pulled out of the creek, the land restored, and damages paid. Future disputes wouldn’t be settled so easily.

The trustees of White Rock Chapel Church weren’t
their historic church site would be preserved, and that the pathway from Celestial Road to the cemetery and beyond would remain unobstructed. They produced a deed dated February 25, 1884, and recorded January 19, 1885 in Dallas County, showing that “W.A. Obier and R.A. Obier, his wife, had conveyed to B.F. Turner, Wm. Harris, G.W. Coit, F. Brigham and J. Coit, trustees of White Rock Chappell Church and their successors in office, a lot, tract or parcel of land situated and lying in Dallas County and the State of Texas, on the waters of White Rock Creek, twelve miles northwest from the city of Dallas, and out of the original survey known as the A. Bledsoe Abstract No. 157, and beginning seventy one and three tenths-71 3/10-vrs W, from the N.E. corner of a tract of land deeded to Jack Coit by S.M. & C.W. Scott, thence W. 210 feet, then N. 210 feet, thence E. 210 feet, thence S. 210 feet, to the beginning containing one acre. Conditioned that said land shall be used, kept, maintained, and disposed of as a place of Divine Worship for the use of the ministry and membership of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America.”

The price of the land was $10 cash. “And you can believe they paid it too,” Willie Mae Sowell would later tell the court. “Land wasn’t worth anything much in them days.”

Initially, the case seemed neat and straightforward. OKC Corporation believed that it had bought a parcel of land; the trustees said that it hadn’t and produced a deed to back up their claim. The only real issue seemed to be to resolve the matter as quickly as possible. Willie Mae Sowell was 83, frail, and blind. J.O. Allen was 87 and in failing health. Minnie Moody, though spry and active, was pushing 70. Clearly there was no point in asking for
Interview in the pending litigation between one and the Cemetery Association, a move that would save months of delay and give her clients a good chance for a quick settlement. The court approved the petition.

Between the filing of the suit and the start of court proceedings, OKC made several offers to buy the disputed acre outright. With the cemetery case and this one, costs were getting out of line and their hands were being tied at a time when they needed to be moving quickly. But each time they were rebuffed by the trustees. The land belonged to the church; it wasn’t for sale at any price. A few church members expressed anxiety about taking on a corporation with million of dollars in assets. The odds against winning were high, and the cost even higher. Willie Mae and the other trustees stood firm, offering to pay the court costs out of their own pockets if necessary. OKC had dared them to go to court, and that was what they were going to do—in the words of the deed, to “warrant and forever defend said premises against every person whomsoever.”

On April 29, 1976, eight months after the first chain link fences started rising off Celestial Road, representatives of OKC Corporation and the trustees of White Rock Chapel Church met in Judge Joe Bailey Humphreys’ 44th District Court.

The initial strategy of the plaintiffs was simple: plead the deed. Show not only that it was valid but that the present trustees were the legitimate successors in interest to the trustees named in the deed.
Shirley Levin asked Willie Mae So well, the first witness.

“He was one of the founders of the church, what we call now trustees.”

“Are you related to him in any way?”

“My father’s uncle.”

“And William Harris?”

“He was what we call my foster uncle, my mother’s foster uncle.”

“And G.W. Coit?”

“He was my mother’s uncle.”

“And U.S. Brigham?”

“My mother’s uncle.”

“And what about J. Coit?”

“My mother’s uncle.”

By blood or marriage, Willie Mae Sowell was related to each of the original trustees of White Rock Chapel Church. If the phrase “successors in interest” ever applied to anyone, it applied to her.

“And do you recall attending church services as a young girl?” attorney Levin continued.
“Yes, the old memorial for Reverend Martin, the log church.”

“How old were you?”

“I was about six years old, I reckon.”

“So that would have been about 1897. Do you remember anything else about that particular land?”

“One of the members by the name of Jack Robinson had a tent on this land, in the churchyard near this old building, and he stayed there until he passed on. He and his wife and little daughter lived there . . . . The daughter and I was about the same age. We ran and played a whole lot together.”

“Since that time has the church remained located on that land?”

“The old landmark may be there now. The old logs down there was the ones that was on the ground.”

“Was the land fenced off?”

“I don’t remember. I am sure the old fence was once there. I remember them talking that it grewed into the trees. I went blind for quite a while and haven’t been over there to see anything. But I do know the church women went over there as late as two years ago, and served every Saturday during the summer in succession, served dinner to the cemetery workers. They were clearing off the cemetery . . . and beautifying it.”
“Yes. We would sing a song and pray a prayer before serving the lunch, and did it afterwards. And we would always close our workday with a song and a prayer.”

Willie Mae Sowell would later testify that the church members visited the old site every Memorial Day, to commemorate the important events that had happened there, and that they frequently held sunrise services underneath the cedars, the trees of the Bible. She recalled being carried to meetings on the shoulders of her father and uncles. And could recall that when the creek and its branches came up, as they often did, everyone would have to huddle inside the log church, sometimes for several days, until the waters receded and they could return home. There was no doubt in her mind that this was holy ground, no matter what others might say.

There wasn’t much that Robert Dillard III, attorney for OKC’s title company, could do with this kind of testimony. He had no old people available to rebut Willie Mae, and no way to tap the community memory to produce a different flow of impressions. His best strategy was to probe the deed for irregularities.

“Your attorney has introduced the deed to some property the church was given in 1884,” he said, beginning the cross-examination of Willie Mae. “Did you ever see that deed?”

“I have that deed, yes. I have seen it. I did know it verbal. My daddy passed on and left that deed, and it became so brittle it broke up. And I paid Judge Hurt to get me
During the cross-examination some confusion arose as to whether the 1884 deed referred to the original church site or to the tract of land at the corner of Winwood and Celestial, where the congregation now worships in a small, tottering parsonage that looks like a farm outbuilding. More properly, attorney Dillard was confused. Willie Mae So well was crystal clear.

"Is that the only deed that the church had?" Dillard continued.

"Since we've been into a wrangle, I came to find out some more different ones, but this is the one I go by. B.F. Turner, William Harris, Felix Brigham, Jack and George Coit. They were the founders."

"Does that deed describe the property on which the church had its building?"

"Yes. On the north side it was bound by the water’s edge. That meant the creek."

"The deed says that it is conditioned that this tract ... be used as your church. Do you remember it said that?"

"I don’t think I remember those words. I can’t remember every little thing, but I do remember that it was from the east end or corner of the Jack Coit farm. I knew that is on the deed, and I know Jack Coit, George Coit, Ben Turner, Felix Brigham, and William Harris. I knew they were the founders."
“It said in ’84, didn’t it? That’s when they bought the property. I guess they built the church sometimes after ’84.”

“Sometime after ’84.”

“I’m sure. Yes.”

“When was that log church torn down?”

“I tell you I don’t know. Now sometime from six years old up to eighty-three, that is as far as I can tell you . . . . The old church never was just torn down and moved away, I don’t think. When I seen it and knew it was a log church, a log house, I couldn’t reach the top of it. It was tailed up, but gradually, gradually, gradually . . . . They had beautiful trees around over there and we used to could walk in through there and have nice picnics. Now it’s just different. It’s growed up. Everybody has gotten old. No workhands. But it’s ours—we hope.”

Shirley Levin next called Milton Noel, an Addison engineer and grandson of S.S. Noel, who bought the old Obier plantation and later, after the creek and branches had come up that fateful Sunday in 1918, had given the church land on the north side of the creek for a new tabernacle. S.S. Noel attended the White Rock Chapel Church nearly as often as his own, and used to tell his family that he never felt so close to the Lord as when he worshiped in that little chapel. He was a man of standing in the community, as was his grandson. Milton had seen so many changes in the community that he used the words negro, nigger, and black interchangeably, but he
“And are you familiar with this particular piece of land?” asked Shirley Levin, pointing to a survey map with the disputed acre outlined in black.

Milton Noel answered that he certainly was.

“How long have you been familiar with it?”

“Well, that is going back to the date of my childhood, of course... I am sixty-five years old and I remember... I went over there with my grandfather... when I was about seven years old. That is when I had first recognition of the area.”

“Did you later determine who owned that piece of land?”

“We always recognized in the family that it belonged to the church, as we called it.”

“So your family recognized the ownership in... the White Rock Chapel Church?”

“Fifty years ago I wouldn’t have known what the name was except that it was Alex’s Church, as far as the family was concerned.”

“What is Alex?”

“Alex Thomas was this lady’s [Minnie Moody’s] father. And they lived on the home place as long as I can remember. Grandpa Noel’s place on Noel Road. About the middle of the acreage. Alex was the one who helped
And so it went for the rest of the afternoon, with Milton Noel confirming what Willie Mae Sowell had already told the court. Yes, it was always recognized that a log church once stood on that acre. Yes, it was widely known that the church held memorial services and sunrise services and Easter services on that land. The Easter services were usually the most impressive. And yes, whenever there was talk of selling some of the Noel family acreage around the cemetery, that one acre was always ex-cepted. It was considered sacred, inviolable.

Clearly, what was being established at this point wasn’t merely a chain of title and succession but a solid, interlocking network of shared memories and experiences. In a section of Dallas being rapidly overrun by apartment complexes and tract housing, where many people didn’t stay long enough to find the nearest 7-Eleven, there remained a small community with a past that went back to the days of the Preston Trail and the Emancipation Proclamation and, in the recollections of a few, even earlier. Here was a bedrock of continuity in a sea of change.

That bedrock got a good shaking the following day, when Judge Humphreys, relying on testimony provided by Robert West, Dallas County surveyor, and his son, Due, announced that the property described in the church’s deed and the one-acre tract in litigation were not the same. The first was in the A. Bledsoe Survey, whereas the second, according to West’s field notes, was wholly within the Thomas Garvin survey. In other words, the church’s deed, though undoubtedly valid, was not the deed to the property it was claiming. So much for
This is the sort of problem that anyone involved with land titles in Texas, particularly older titles, comes to expect—and to dread. Nineteenth-century surveys are notoriously inaccurate, more like children’s treasure maps than reliable documents of record. Surveyors often went into the field equipped only with a wheelbarrow and a few balls of string. Natural landmarks were regularly used as reference points. The three-acre White Rock Union Graveyard, for example, was laid out from bois’d’arc to elm, to hickory, to bois d’arc. It was just as common to refer to notched limbs, and bubbling springs, and piles of boulders in the middle of creeks. Which is fine, provided that the spring continues to bubble and the limbs don’t drop off. Once that happens, the situation calls for a Solomon.

This may have been what happened to the church’s deed. When the surrounding area was first surveyed, Dallas was primarily a trading center. No one except a few farmers and people who wanted to make maps much cared what was happening 12 miles to the north of downtown. The county might commission half a dozen surveys of the same area, each one starting from a different reference point, none of which had any particular relation to reference points in the other surveys. Overlaps were inevitable. Small errors made by one surveyor could easily be picked up and perpetuated by others, so that as far as a chain of title was concerned, a small parcel of land could simply disappear, like a coin down a grate. It is possible that the lines of the Bledsoe and Garvin surveys shifted over the years; what was originally in one might somehow have crept over the line into the other. Maps even make references to a third
and carving, though no one could ever say that the Wigginton even existed.

The net impact of these developments was that the defense now had solid grounds for challenging the deed, and the plaintiffs had to shift their pleading to what is known as adverse possession. To claim title by adverse possession, a person or group of persons must occupy a piece of property openly and in clear hostility to the interests of the original owners, for a minimum of 10 years. The “squatter,” so to speak, must hold the land for his own use, exclusive of the use of others, which usually means erecting a fence or some other barrier to keep trespassers out. If these requirements are met, the title reverts to the squatter. The crucial point was to prove open and continuous occupation, which required reconstructing the history of White Rock Chapel Church and its members. All of a sudden the community memory, and what is now fashionably called oral history, had become the first, last, and probably only line of defense for North Texas’ oldest black church.

Willie Mae Sowell had already established a pattern by testifying about her early childhood experiences. The plan now was to build the entire case on that kind of testimony, so that regardless of which parcel of land the deed referred to, there could be no doubt that the members of White Rock Chapel Church had occupied a one-acre site, south of Celestial Road, on the edge of the bubbling waters of White Rock Creek, for the requisite number of years.
church for almost 30 years and now, Mrs. Lee asked what, from here on, would be the critical question in establishing adverse possession. Had the church made open use of the land in question?

Yes. The church members went to the old site for picnics and to serve dinner to the men working in the cemetery up on the hill.

“Did you ever have any other type of worship service?”

“Singing and Praying. We had what you might say a prayer meeting.”

“About how often did you have prayer meetings?”

“Sometimes it was every two weeks, and then again sometimes they go out there and just have a few, and we would have what we used to call class meetings... You talked about the Lord, you see. You discuss your feelings and the church. You have a good religious time.”

And then another crucial question in an adverse possession pleading: “Was there a fence around the church property?”

“Yes, ma’am... It comes down the west side of that land. It was just a three-strand bob wire fence. It came down and wrapped around ash trees, three of them in a bunch.”

“The church located on that site, did it have any particular significance to you?”
course all the top logs was gone. But you can always find them bottom logs. It’s kind of worked in the ground, and if anybody knows about building a log church, they notches them out and jams those logs together... I dug around and there they was. That was the foundation of that old church.”

“Now you went to that site for worship because of the old church. Is that correct?”

“Sure.”

The cross-examination was directed at showing that the congregation had worshipped at a number of sites over the years, that one wasn’t really any more important than the other. J.O. Allen conceded the moving without changing his testimony that the site of the old log church was always a holy site. The words holy and sacred and hallowed turned up more often in the testimony now, like a litany of praise.

Next came Minnie Moody, trustee, church member for nearly 60 years, daughter of Alex Thomas, S. S. Noel’s helper. Like her friend Willie Mae, she remembered visiting the site of the old log church as a child.

“I started following my father around at five or six years old... He told me about that old church site there. I was just following him through, picking wild flowers. A lot of the time in the fall I would get persimmons. I just followed my daddy.”

“Was there a fence around the area?”
because I came through it and lived it in my dress. I can’t forget that fence on the west because I got a switching.”

Like Willie Mae, Minnie Moody remembered attending memorial services and prayer meetings and classes. She’d waded across the branch for camp meetings and served dinner to the cemetery workers. It was as though, where the church was concerned, their lives were one.

“We visit the church site because we want to praise God on the sacred place, and that is the old church site. It’s a sacred place.”

And when towards the end of the second day Willie Mae was recalled to the witness stand, this time to answer questions about church taxes, she used the occasion to deliver one last, resounding testimonial for her relatives, the trustees, the church, and all members, from the present back to its dim beginnings.

“My parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were in the organization of this here log church,” she began, “in the northern part of the county. This particular place was the first church . . . . There wasn’t any church there before they organized this Methodist Church, and they organized it under a brush arbor to protect them from the weather . . . . And then thereafter they bought this site and built this log church. If you will allow me to say my great-grandmother was the first steward sister. That’s what we call them now. I don’t know what they called them in them days in the Methodist Church. My great-grandmother and my grandmother and my mother, they all worshipped over
that was given by him: "I was about four years old, now you didn’t ask me about that but if you let me tell it right now I can think. I would like to tell the whole story as it was."

As far as the plaintiffs were concerned, she already had. That was the whole story. Everything else was a legal technicality. Naturally, OKC’s attorney, Robert Dillard, disagreed. The church had no clear title to the land in question. Everyone agreed about that. The only way its trustees could establish claim was through adverse possession and that, he continued, they had failed to do. The witnesses had testified that much of the activity on the old site was related to the cemetery, and as much social as religious. Mr. Noel had testified that the land was fenced for nearly 100 years, but he had no way of knowing that, or who actually fenced it. It might have been farmers trying to keep their cows in instead of the church trying to keep people out. The point was that nobody really knew.

“All they have ever shown this court,” Mr. Dillard pleaded, “is that at some time back in Mrs. Sowell’s memory and in the memory of her great-grandmother and grandmother... there was an old log church on this site. We have seen a picture of two logs on the ground now. They have not shown that these boundaries were established by anyone other than the owner of the property to the west and... north.... So the boundary lines are fabricated from the projection, and I suppose the thought of how these things ought to be in the mind of Mr. Noel and other folks out there.”
But in the end the court disagreed with Robert E. Miller and OKC Corporation. While recognizing all of the problems with titles and survey lines, Judge Humphreys ruled on February 15, 1977, nearly 10 months after the trial began, that the trustees of White Rock Chapel Church, together with their relatives and friends, had indeed established title by adverse possession, certainly for the minimum period of 10 years (1884-1894), and probably all the way up until 1918, the year of the fatal deluge. What Mr. Noel and others thought should have been was, in the court’s opinion, what actually was.

OKC Corporation appealed Judge Humphreys’ decision, and for a short time it appeared they might win what they’d previously been denied. On July 31, 1978, the Sixth Texas District Court of Civil Appeals in Texarkana reversed the decision of the trial court, mainly on the grounds that in Texas an unincorporated association like the Trustees of White Rock Chapel Church could not hold title to property, and could not therefore sue for title. If allowed to stand, the ruling might have been the ruin of many unincorporated small churches throughout the state.

The trustees immediately filed a motion for a rehearing. On November 14, 1978, the Sixth District Court overturned the July 31 decision and allowed the original ruling in favor of the trustees to stand.

OKC once again filed a motion for rehearing, but this time they were denied. They appealed to the Texas Supreme Court, which on May 30, 1979, more than three years after the original trial, and nearly four years since the action against OKC began, upheld the original
Abner, trustees of White Rock Chapel Church and successors in interest to the original trustees, were finally given title to a 1.012-acre tract of land just north of the old White Rock Union Graveyard, on the waters of White Rock Creek. They had fulfilled the original charge to "warrant and forever defend said premises against every person whomsoever." They had gone to court against a large corporation, over the misgivings of some of their own members, and won. They had kept the faith.

Robert Dillard would later remark that in all his years practicing law he’d never seen a land case like it, and hoped never to see one again. For in spite of the complex analyses of deeds and boundaries, and the thousands of dollars spent on title searches, the case had been won largely on the basis of testimony about caretakers living in tents and buried logs and torn dresses. It was, in the end, a victory for the community memory, at times almost for folklore.

The trial was over, but the drama, as it turned out, was not. There is an epilogue. Records show that on October 16, 1979, the surviving trustees of White Rock Chapel Church, Willie Mae Sowell and Minnie Moody, conveyed to Murray Properties Company, the purchaser of OKC’s land holdings in the area, a small parcel “situated on Celestial Road out of the Thomas Garvin Survey, Abstract No. 524” in short, the site of the original log church. No one involved in the transaction will disclose the selling price, but if one were to multiply the number of square feet in an acre by the average price per square foot of land in the surrounding area, one would arrive at
jump from the two-pall ceremony held in Obier and in Obier, his wife.

To anyone who followed the case over its tortuous three-
year history, this may sound like a sadly ironic coda. But
it is, in this time and place, a nearly inevitable one as
well. Values change, and the values placed on land no
less than any others. For Willie Mae Sowell, Minnie
Moody, J. O. Allen (now deceased), and their friends, the
old church site was hallowed ground, no more for sale
than the Wailing Wall or Mecca. Other people in the
congregation of the White Rock Chapel Church, younger
perhaps, more attuned to the realities of urban life, may
have felt differently. In their opinion, holding on to an
acre of land, soon to be surrounded by apartments and
swimming pools, when someone was eager to buy it and
the profits could be used to improve the existing church,
maybe even build a new one, may have made no sense.
Land is something one sells or trades in order to acquire
something else, one hopes something better. It is a
commodity whose value is determined by the
marketplace and not by sentiment.

There is nothing particularly cynical about this view, or
very unusual. It has been said that the value of land in
the city is secular and always capable of being expressed
in terms of money. The area around Celestial Road is
now city, not country, and newer, urban values appear to
have prevailed.

What has been gained by the sale of the church site is
clear; what has been lost is uncertain. When all the old
trustees are gone, and a clean cement slab covers
the ground where the log church once stood, and there