

HISTORY OF BRAINERD MISSION CEMETERY

Text Compiled from 2003 National Park Service Update of National Register of Historic Places

Source: National Register of Historic Places – Brainerd Mission Cemetery

Significant Dates: 1817 – Mission and cemetery founded
 1838 – Mission closed due to removal of Cherokees
 1924 – First commemorative marker erected
 1933 – Cemetery Restoration

Chattanooga's Sacred Acre

Brainerd Mission Cemetery (dubbed Chattanooga's sacred acre by the owners) is located in Chattanooga, Hamilton County, Tennessee, USA, surrounded by commercial development and asphalt parking lots adjacent to the 5700 block of Brainerd Road. This ancient one-acre burial ground is situated within a cluster of mature oak trees and is surrounded by a stone wall with two wrought-iron gates. Since 1933 it has been privately owned and maintained by local chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR).

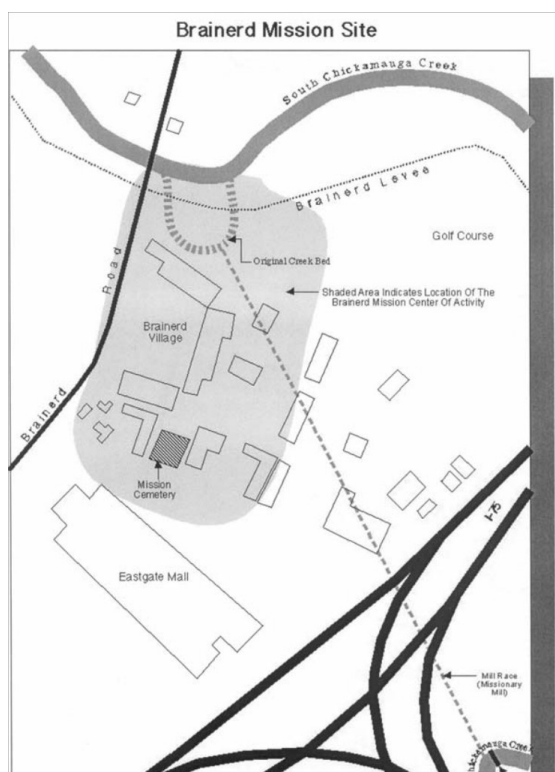


The history of the cemetery began in 1817 when the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions established Chickamaugah Mission on 25 acres formerly owned by Scottish trader John McDonald. The area in which they settled was located near the northwest boundary of the Cherokee Nation across the creek from a large Cherokee settlement. In 1818 the Board renamed their mission in memory of revered New England missionary David Brainerd (1718-1747).

The missionaries were tasked with establishing relations with the Cherokee. They were to teach agricultural skills, to educate and civilize the Cherokee, and to introduce the Christian faith and culture, thereby preparing the Cherokee to integrate peaceably with the westward

movement of the white settlers. Brainerd quickly became the leading mission in the Cherokee Nation, boasting forty-four male students and thirty-one females within the first year, and was recognized as a national model for the boarding school approach that dominated white attempts to educate Native Americans for most of the nineteenth century. The mission grounds featured a schoolhouse, mission house, gristmill, sawmill, orchard, barn, dormitories, farm fields, and a cemetery. By mid-1820, the mission operated several other outposts in Tennessee and Georgia. The missionaries at Brainerd Mission, with the aid of the United States Government, erected and maintained forty buildings, serving hundreds of students in the twenty-one years before the removal of the Indians in 1838. Sadly, a one-acre cemetery is now the only visible landmark evidence that the prosperous Brainerd Mission existed.

A mission journal notes the first burial taking place on January 11, 1818, although the cemetery site is believed to date to the founding of the original mission in 1817. No gravestone remains to



mark this first known burial. The cemetery is known to contain the nineteenth century remains of New England-based missionaries, their children, Cherokee students, and perhaps area slaves. A cluster of gravestones organized in two neat rows near the center of the cemetery represents the remaining original markers, with several bronze interpretive plaques having been added in the early twentieth century.

Brainerd Mission Cemetery is on what would have been the southwest portion of the complex. Bird's Mill Road/Chattanooga-Graysville Pike (now Brainerd Road/Lee Highway), a major early roadway, passed on the north side of the mission connecting the Cherokee Agency at present-day Charleston, Tennessee, to Ross's Landing along the Tennessee River at present-day Chattanooga. With the mission farm fields between the cemetery and roadway, the burial ground was visible to travelers along this route. Hundreds of Cherokee

from John Bell's detachment passed over this road during the Trail of Tears removal of the Cherokee in 1838.

The area surrounding the former mission site remained rural in character into mid-1920, in part because Missionary Ridge served as a geographical boundary, discouraging eastward development from Chattanooga. The City of Chattanooga annexed this area east of Missionary Ridge in 1929 and Brainerd Road experienced significant development. A major commercial complex developed on the former mission grounds, leaving the cemetery as the only extant property associated with the mission.

The current cemetery boundaries date to September 26, 1933, when Henry H. and Dorothy D. Hampton deeded the overgrown cemetery land to local chapters of DAR/SAR. Unsure of the cemetery boundaries, they agreed upon the current approximately one-acre border. Some historians have speculated that the original cemetery boundaries were considerably greater because this cemetery was used continuously for twenty-one years and occasionally after the mission closed in 1838.

At the request of the DAR in 1933, a Chattanooga-based architect designed the cemetery's Colonial Revival landscape. A Georgian-styled geometric pattern of boxwoods, trees, paths, and



cemetery furniture was installed in and around the remaining original tombstones. That same year volunteers using donated supplies constructed a stone wall with vertical capstones to enclose and protect the cemetery. This wall stands two to three feet tall and features a double-door Colonial Revival-styled wrought iron gate entrance that is centrally located within the northwest wall. The left gate pillar features a bronze plaque that reads, "Cemetery of Brainerd Mission 1817-1838. Remove not the ancient landmark which thy fathers have set.

Proverbs 22:28." A similar bronze tablet on the right gate pillar reads, "Preserved by Chickamauga, Nancy Ward, Judge David Campbell, and John Ross Chapters, D.A.R.; John Sevier Chapter, S.A.R.; Judge Howell Tatum Chapter, C.A.R.; Dr. Henry Hampton; Darden and Frederick Hampton, November 1, 1933." This design of 1933 remains largely intact.

Historically, a driveway from nearby Brainerd Road led to the primary entrance. Presently, however, this entrance is only accessible by a sidewalk leading from the side entrance, and is used only during commemorative ceremonies. Inside the primary entrance, historic boxwoods, line a path into the cemetery's center to several bronze interpretive markers erected circa 1930-1940. These markers recognize the history of the Brainerd Mission, the missionaries, and notable Cherokee Reverend Stephen Foreman.

The regularly-used side entrance is located at the southwestern corner of the rock wall. Outside this entrance stands a five foot tall, rough-cut granite marker acknowledging the site of the former Brainerd Mission. Originally placed alongside Brainerd Road, this marker was moved to the cemetery entrance in 2001 because of increased development and traffic. Inside the walls, paths lined with mondo (monkey) grass, a common tufted ground cover that grows as high as sixteen inches, lead along the sides of the cemetery.

Since the 1933 restoration, the patriotic societies have erected a number of commemorative markers honoring the nineteenth century missionaries and Cherokee and their own exceptional twentieth-century members. These monuments, interspersed throughout the central portion of the property, include marble benches and markers of varying sizes and three flagpoles,

displaying the flags of the United States of America, the State of Tennessee, the Cherokee Nation (based in Oklahoma) and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation (based in North Carolina).

Several clusters of unmarked gravestones, numbering about sixty, also date to 1933. These stones, donated by a local businessman, are not associated with specific burials, but rather were placed near burial depressions during the cemetery restoration to provide a graveyard aesthetic.

The Brainerd Mission Cemetery was originally placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, securing its place in national history. The Tennessee Historical Commission also placed a state historical marker at the edge of the property. The National Park Service certified the cemetery in June 2003 as a site on the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, which the patriotic societies recognize and celebrate during their annual flag-raising ceremony. Since 2002, Cherokee Indians have participated in the commemorative services.

Outside the Cemetery Walls

Concerned about the encroachment of development, the Daughters lobbied local and state officials to provide funds for the preservation of the Brainerd Mission site outside the cemetery confines. The Hampton family still owned the farmland surrounding the cemetery. The Tennessee Historical Commission met on April 24, 1944, and authorized a committee to purchase from one to ten acres at the site of the former Brainerd Mission at a cost of \$1,000 per acre. The Governor of the State of Tennessee authorized the use of state funds to help recreate the old mission.

Following the authorization, an option was obtained on the property. Plans for the project included restoration of exact replicas of the mission buildings. Since the appropriations only provided money to purchase the site, restoration funds had to be raised through donations. In an effort to raise funds for the project, several people organized to form Brainerd Mission Foundation, a non-profit organization interested in the reconstruction, development, and maintenance of the historic Brainerd Mission. The project was to take place after World War II, but never happened. Reasons for abandoning the project are somewhat unclear. However, the governor lost his 1944 bid for re-election and the new governor re-evaluated state appropriations. During this review period, the Hampton family withdrew their land from the project and the new governor reallocated the funds. This push to develop the former mission site as a historic tourist attraction represented one of the last major efforts to reclaim the old mission, although talk of the project briefly resurfaced in 1955 when the former mission land was publicly listed for sale.

Amid their setbacks, the DAR/SAR continued honoring Brainerd Mission through projects at the cemetery and fundraisers, soliciting help wherever possible. In 1950 they successfully lobbied county officials to accept the short driveway leading past the cemetery and curving back into Lee Highway as a county road, to be improved and maintained at public expense.



Throughout the years, despite increased commercial development outside the cemetery walls, the efforts of the patriotic societies diligently protected their sacred acre and assured that the Brainerd Mission Cemetery property retained its historic integrity as a nineteenth century cemetery and an early twentieth-century commemorative property.



