

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Official Texas Historical Markers

The commissioners of the Texas Historical Commission have reviewed and approved your application.

TO: CHC, Marker Chair, Sponsor
RE: 23CE01 -- Taylor and Lucy Dirden Farm
FROM: THC Marker Team
DATE: July 21, 2023

Dear CHC/Sponsor:

Congratulations! The THC Commissioners have reviewed your application and staff will now be proceeding to the inscription. The marker fee is now due, payable and received in our office by 5pm CDT on Friday, September 15, 2023. Please ensure extra time is given when sending payment, as our state mailing system takes a few days longer than expected.

Also, please remember that writing marker inscriptions is a year-long process and we have limited staff resources. For this reason, please do not schedule marker dedications until you have received the marker, in hand.

THC Marker Staff
markers@thc.texas.gov



From Slavery to Farm Legacy

Dirден Family Historical Subject Marker Submission 2023 Narrative History

I. CONTEXT

The Dirден family legacy represents an important and significant milestone in the history of Texas property rights and ownership. We have painstakingly researched our ancestry and discovered that this story begins with Taylor Dirден, as our family tree will show.¹ The subject property, located in Cherokee County, is among the oldest properties in Texas that is still owned by the original family of former slaves. The county, named for the American Indians who lived in the area before being expelled in 1839, was originally formed from land given by Nacogdoches County in 1846.ⁱ

As a teenager, Taylor, and all slaves, experienced the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation, which Abraham Lincoln passed in 1863, freeing all slaves in Alabama and Georgia. Other states were not freed until Union soldiers advanced throughout the country and liberated slaves. The Union's westward advancement did not reach Texas until June 19, 1865, a date now recognized as the Federal Holiday, Juneteenth. The soldiers announced the Civil War had ended and slavery had been abolished in all Union states, including Texas.

This paved the way for our ancestors to establish a homestead in the State and to pass the property on to us, generation by generation. This enduring land has become a treasured family inheritance. We hope it will soon be recognized as a cherished Texas heirloom as well.

II. OVERVIEW

Taylor Dirден was born into slavery in Pike, Alabama, in 1848. His parents' names are unknown, but our research indicate they were originally from Georgia and eventually made their way to Alabama. There are no records that document Taylor's early experiences during this historic period. But from family stories handed down through the generations, we learned he wanted to leave Alabama for Texas after emancipation. He completed his goal in the early 1870s.

¹ See Exhibit 1: "Taylor Dirден Family Tree." Ancestry.com with photographs from the Dirден family archive.

By way of background, Jacksonville was established in 1847, originally named Gum Creek, and a postal office was established in 1848, the year of Taylor's birth. Gum Creek was officially renamed Jacksonville in 1850. At that time, slave ownership was prevalent throughout East Texas and the Jacksonville community participated in this way of life from its inception until it was abolished.

During the early liberation period, land in Texas was a bargain. Landowners in the South began to relocate westward to obtain more land. Former slaves were among the new buyers who were purchasing land. This may have been Taylor's motivation for journeying to Texas, as a young man in his early twenties, who desired to own land and start a family of his own. Unfortunately, we can find no records of his migration to Texas.

Research from Dr. Deborah Burkett, in an article that appeared in the *Jacksonville Daily Progress*, confirms the presence of grave markers in the city cemetery of African American citizens who were living as free citizens prior to 1865. Taylor would have been part of a small community of former African American slaves upon his arrival.

Taylor followed the general path of most former slaves and began working the fields as a farmer. He met Joseph Turney shortly after his arrival and began working his property in the Arnold District of what was considered the downtown center of Jacksonville during that period.

According to the U.S. Federal Slave Schedules², Mr. Turney was a former slave owner who also owned several acres of property throughout East Texas. Since this period was post enslavement, the most common arrangement between former slaves and employers were sharecropping agreements. Sharecroppers were farmers whose landowners provided them with living quarters, and credit for seed, tools, and food. Sharecroppers managed all aspects of the farming and received an agreed share of the value of the crops, minus charges.

Taylor met his wife, Lucy Grimes Dirden, shortly after his arrival to Jacksonville.³ Lucy was also born into slavery in Cherokee County in 1856. Lucy's family welcomed her union with Taylor, and they were married on August 21, 1875.⁴ As a newly married couple, Taylor and Lucy were

² See Exhibit 2: "Federal Census Slave Schedules." Photocopy record from the National Archives and Records Administration, 1850 U.S. Federal Census Slave Schedules.

³ See Exhibit 3: "Lucy Grimes and Taylor Dirden." Photographs from the Dirden family archive.

⁴ See Exhibit 4: "Lucy and Taylor Dirden Marriage Record." Photocopy record provided by FamilySearch access to the Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837–1965.

able to save money from their years of sharecropping for Joseph Turney, and purchased a 22.8-acre parcel of land, which included a small home, from Mr. Turney on May 7, 1880. This is the same parcel of land Taylor began farming when he started his employment with Mr. Turney. The handwritten deed for their land purchase is recorded in Volume M-2, Page 407, of the deed records of Cherokee County Texas.⁵

Two years after the purchase of their property, Lucy and Taylor began their family and welcomed five children between 1882 and 1896. The children, in order, are Will Dirden, George Elisha Dirden, Mary Netta Dirden, John B. Dirden, and Beulah Dirden. The Dirden family sustained themselves as farmers and all the children were involved with farming when they came of age.

Since they were officially landowners now, the family no longer sharecropped for Mr. Turney, but they negotiated a price for the existing home on the property separately and arranged weekly payments until they completed the mortgage.

The fields closest to the home were farming areas for all types of fruits and vegetable crops including tomatoes, peas, corn, okra, peaches, and watermelons.⁶ These crops were sold at local farmers markets to earn monies for their household. The farm also had animals, including cows and horses, which were used in their farming efforts and for slaughter. The family also sold timber from their property which provided them with additional income for living expenses and property taxes.

Despite the Jim Crow laws, which were intended to disenfranchise African Americans, Taylor and Lucy were active in the local Jacksonville area community. Voting was essential to Lucy and Taylor but, unfortunately, they were required to pay a poll tax just to vote. They were often harassed, subjected to demeaning treatment, and they experienced racial intimidation in their hometown, for no other reason than they were African American.

Since it was uncommon for former slaves to own land in such a desired location, there were many attempts by unscrupulous investors and neighbors throughout the years to obtain the subject property, simply because these folks felt the Dirden's did not deserve to be part of their community.⁷ However, our family persevered and never wavered on their pride of ownership.

⁵ See Exhibit 5: "Dirden Property Deed." Cherokee County, Texas, County Tax Assessor-Collector.

⁶ See Exhibit 6: "Lucy and Beulah Dirden." Photograph from the Dirden family archive.

⁷ See Exhibit 7: "Dirden Property Record 2023." Online property search record at Cherokee CAD.

They instilled this quality into all their children. This position continues to be a priority with their descendants and to honor their courage and resolve, the property has never been sold or leased to anyone.

Taylor, Lucy, and their children became lifelong members of Old Sweet Union Baptist Church, one of the oldest Baptist congregations for African Americans in Jacksonville. Neither had a leadership role within the church administration due to their lack of education but they participated in other capacities within the church to help and contribute to their community. We spoke to current members of the church, Mrs. Charlie Mae Esco and Ms. Hallie B. Williams, who are both very knowledgeable about the area's history—and we were amazed to learn that Hallie turned 100 this year!ⁱⁱ

According to all census reports beginning in 1880, neither Taylor nor Lucy possessed a proficient skill set of reading or writing, which makes their fortitude and life journey so remarkable. They raised all their children to be respectful to others and to always follow the Golden Rule. Even with their limited educational abilities, the couple were known as community leaders. They were instrumental in assisting other newly-arriving former slaves who chose Jacksonville as their home. They were also profitable enough with their farming careers to eventually own additional properties in Jacksonville.

The family also experienced tragedy as their son, John, and daughter, Mary Netta, passed away at early ages. John gave his life for his country as an Army soldier in World War I, in Brest, France. Shortly after arriving to the theater of war, John was killed in combat at the age of 24. He never married nor did he have children. John received recognition for his service as his headstone was provided by the United States Army.⁸ Mary Netta passed away from illness in 1929. She was 37 and had four children, Hugo, David Lee, Myrtle, and Obie. They were raised by their father, M.L. Arnwine, and their grandmother, Lucy Dirden, in Jacksonville.

Their son, George Elisha Dirden,⁹ was married twice and had two children. His first daughter, Lucille Dirden Lacy,¹⁰ was born in Hempstead, New York, but due to the sudden death of her mother Bessie, just one year after her birth, George decided to allow her grandmother, Lucy

⁸ See Exhibit 8: "John Bill Dirden Grave Marker." Image sourced from online grave marker records.

⁹ See Exhibit 9: "George Elisha and Bessie Dirden." Photograph from the Dirden family archive.

¹⁰ See Exhibit 10: "Beulah and Lucille Dirden." Photograph from the Dirden family archive.

Dirden, to raise her in Jacksonville. George remarried and, with his second wife, Retha, they welcomed their daughter, Dorothy, in 1928. George and his family made their permanent home in Hempstead, New York, until his death at age 83 in 1971.

Their remaining children, Will and Beulah, did not have any children and lived on the farm until their deaths. Will died in 1954 after suffering from depression for many years. According to an eyewitness account, after the fact, he was seated under his favorite tree and committed suicide with his shotgun while other family members were working in the fields. He was 72 years old at the time of his death.

Beulah died in 1978 from natural causes. She had lived alone on the farm for several years, which did not have running water, electricity, or phone access. Her niece, Wanda Dirden, cared for her for many years after Beulah lost her mobility. During a weekly visit, she found Beulah struggling to breathe and attempted to drive her to the emergency room, but Beulah passed away as Wanda drove. Beulah was 82 years old at the time of her death.

Taylor Dirden died in 1910 at the age of 62 in Jacksonville, Texas, and Lucy Dirden died in 1935 at the age of 79 in Hempstead, New York, after living her later years with her son, George Elisha.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

The Dirden farm has remained in the family until today.¹¹ This significant location has the distinctive designation of being among the oldest properties in the state of Texas that is owned by the original family since they, as former slaves, purchased the property in 1880.ⁱⁱⁱ It's a remarkable achievement that the Dirden family has managed the property for 143 years, along with the support of immediate family and other extended relatives.

The legacy of Taylor and Lucy lives on today. While the Dirden family name is in jeopardy due to a lack of eligible children to carry on the name, their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren have excelled in their lives and careers and continue to give back to their communities. Their descendants have vocations in a wide range of professions, including nursing, construction, law enforcement, military service, ministry, accounting, museum design and art installation, and television production.

¹¹ See Exhibit 11: "Dirden Property Record 2023." Property search record provided by Cherokee CAD.

In honor of our pioneering great, great grandparents, our family will evaluate the best way to celebrate their achievements. One idea is to establish a non-profit organization that could develop plans and build a reconstruction of the original home with an updated design to include an educational gallery space. A series of visual displays, including period-appropriate farming equipment exhibits, photography, and electronic media will juxtapose elements of the Dirden family lifestyle and illustrate how freed slave families began their lives in East Texas after the Emancipation Proclamation.

In our Historical Subject Marker request, we are seeking recognition of the property as having the distinction of being among the oldest properties in the state of Texas and one that has been owned by the original African American family for 143 years since its purchase in May 1880. We also hope this marker will be acknowledged for generations to come as the Dirden family's contribution to the community and city of Jacksonville, Texas.

VI. DOCUMENTATION

Please see the following pages for the various exhibits referenced.

For further information about this submission, please contact:

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Endnotes:

ⁱ Alvarez, Elizabeth Cruce (November 8, 2011). Texas Almanac 2012–2013. Texas A&M University Press.

ⁱⁱ Information obtained from Mrs. Charlie May Esco and Ms. Hallie B. Williams, members of the Old Sweet Union Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Texas.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reference for this data was provided by Kris Morgan from Affiliated Surveyors.

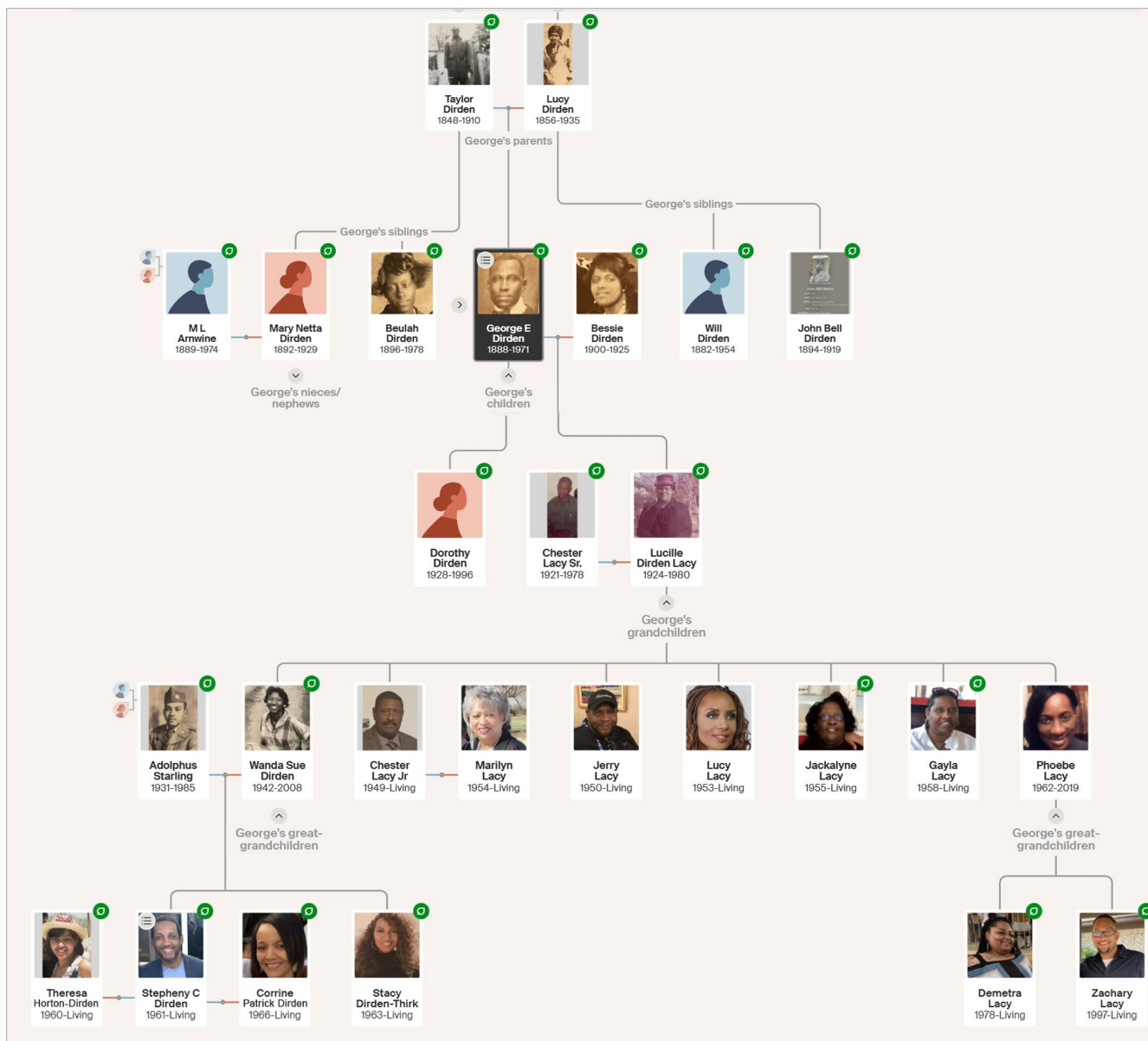


Exhibit 1: Taylor Dirden Family Tree

Reaching back to the birth of Taylor Dirden in 1848, the family tree extends to the current living generation as of 2023.

Family tree record from Ancestry.com with photographs from the Dirden family archive.



NATIONAL
ARCHIVES

Exhibits Page 2



Exhibit 3: Lucy Grimes and Taylor Dirden

Left: Lucy Grimes Dirden (born 1856; died 1935)

Right: Taylor Dirden (born 1848; died 1910)

Photographs from the Dirden family archive.

Cancel
Record Details


Save this record if it matches the person you're looking for.

Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837-1965
Open

This Record

Name	Lucy Grimes
Gender	Female
Marriage Date	12 Aug 1875
Marriage Location	Cherokee, Texas, United States
Husband	Taylor Derden

This collection provided in collaboration with FamilySearch. Images are hosted on www.familysearch.org.

Exhibit 4: Lucy and Taylor Dirden Marriage Record

Lucy Grimes and Taylor Dirden marriage license record with marriage date of August 12, 1875 in Cherokee, Texas.

Photocopy record provided by FamilySearch access to the Texas, U.S., Select County Marriage Index, 1837–1965. (Note spelling as Derden, likely a digital transcription error.)

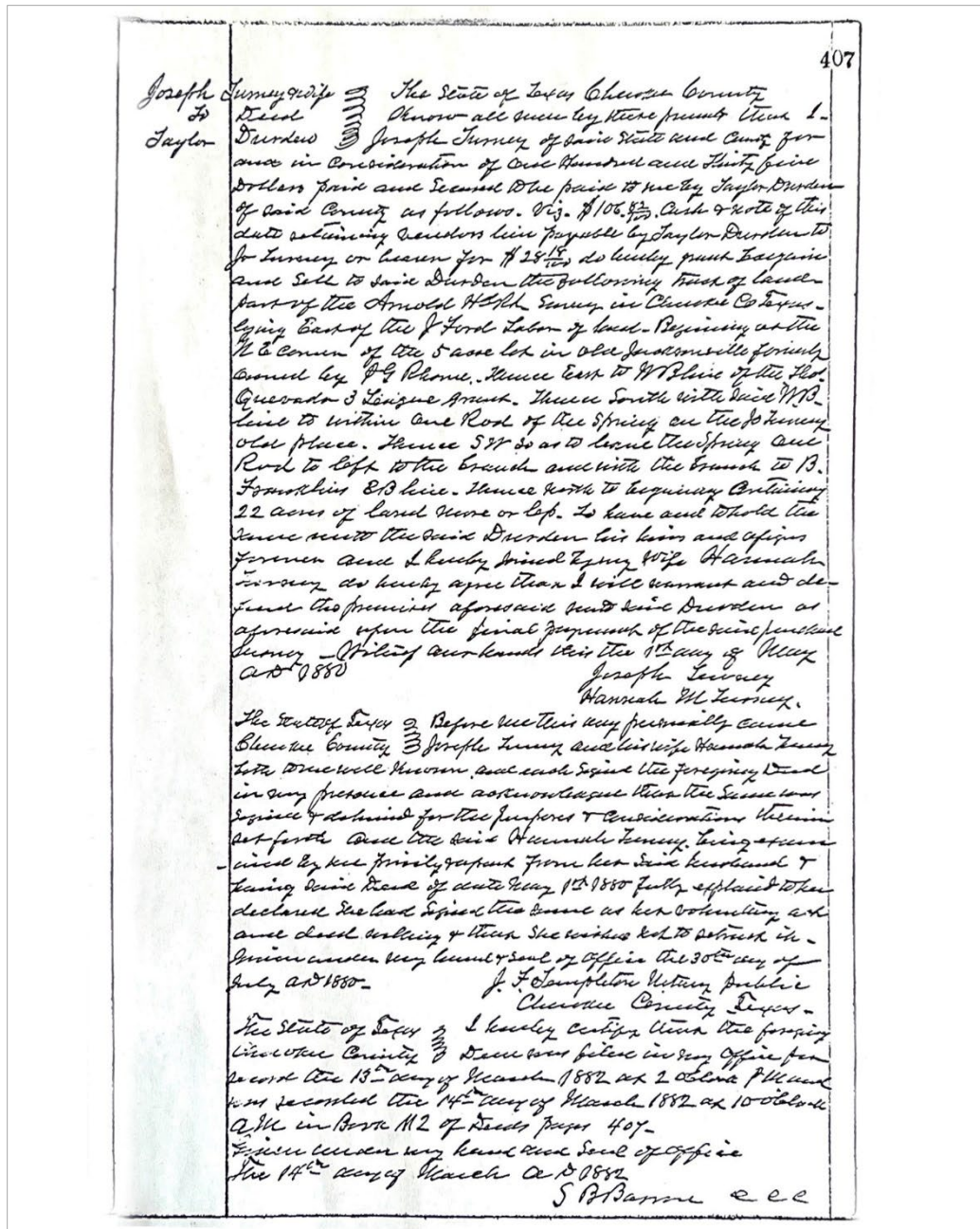


Exhibit 5: Dirden Property Deed

A copy of the original handwritten property deed. The purchase of the farm from Joseph Turney was completed in 1880 and deed was recorded in 1882 in Jacksonville, Texas. The property has remained in the family since then.

Deed copy provided by Cherokee County, Texas, County Tax Assessor-Collector.



Exhibit 6: Lucy and Beulah Dirden

Photograph of Lucy and daughter Beulah working in the fields taken after the death of Taylor Dirden in 1910.

Photograph from the Dirden family archive.

Cherokee CAD
Property Search
Map S

Property Search > 109712000
Tax Year: 2023 - Values not available
New Se

DIRDEN STEPHENY C ETAL for Year 2023

Details
Map
Pay Taxes

Click on a title bar to expand or collapse the information.
Ex

Property

Account

Property ID: 109712000
Geographic ID: 000072-3269A-0001000
Type: Real
Property Use Code:
Property Use Description:
Legal Description: A 72 BLK 3269A TR 1 W ARNOLD F07
Zoning:
Agent Code:

Location

Address:
Neighborhood:
Neighborhood CD:
Mapsc:
Map ID:

Owner

Name: DIRDEN STEPHENY C ETAL
Mailing Address: 15503 PESCADO CIR AUSTIN, TX 78734
Owner ID: 9862015
% Ownership: 100.0000000000%
Exemptions:

Values

Taxing Jurisdiction

Improvement / Building

Land

Roll Value History

Deed History - (Last 3 Deed Transactions)

#	Deed Date	Type	Description	Grantor	Grantee	Volume	Page	Deed Number
1	8/22/2022	HAFF	HEIRSHIP AFFIDAVIT	DIRDEN LUCY EST	DIRDEN STEPHENY C ETAL	2717	660	716399
2	8/22/2022	HAFF	HEIRSHIP AFFIDAVIT			2717	651	716397

Tax Due

Questions Please Call

This year is not certified and ALL values will be represented with "N/A".

Website version: 1.2.2.33
Database last updated on: 2/13/2023 8:38 PM
© N. Harris Computer Co

Exhibit 7: Dirden Property Record 2023

Cherokee CAD property record search result for Subject Property A 72 BLK 3269A TR 1 W ARNOLD F07.

Online property search record provided by Cherokee CAD.



Photo added by [Vivian Smith](#)

John Bill Dirden

BIRTH 1895

DEATH 1919 (aged 23–24)

BURIAL [Jacksonville City Cemetery](#)

Jacksonville, Cherokee County, Texas, USA

PLOT LB0150

MEMORIAL ID 70024644 · [View Source](#)

Exhibit 8: John Bill Dirden Grave Marker

Grave marker of John Bill Dirden, born in 1895 and died in 1919, as seen in the Jacksonville City Cemetery, Jacksonville, Cherokee County, Texas.

Plot number LB0150.

Image sourced from online grave-marker records.



Exhibit 9: George Elijah and Bessie Dirden

George Elijah and Bessie Dirden pictured in New York after George returned home from his service in World War I. They lived in New York until Bessie passed away in 1925.

Photograph from the Dirden family archive, circa 1920.



Exhibit 10: Beulah and Lucille Dirden

After the sudden death of Lucille's mother Bessie, Lucille was sent from New York to live with her Jacksonville family. Her aunt Beulah assumed the responsibility for her upbringing.

Photograph from the Dirden family archive, circa 1924.

