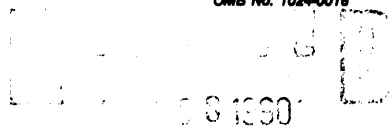


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name The Sculptures of Dionicio Rodriguez at Memorial Park Cemetery  
other names/site number N/A

### 2. Location

street & number 5668 Poplar Avenue N/A not for publication  
city, town Memphis N/A vicinity  
state Tennessee code TN county Shelby code 157 zip code 38119

### 3. Classification

#### Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

#### Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

#### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> buildings
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Herbert T. Dyer 11/5/90  
Signature of certifying official Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Date  
Tennessee Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

### 5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Carol Shovel 1-31-91  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Recreation and Culture: Work of Art  

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Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Recreation and Culture: Work of Art  

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)N/A  

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Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concretewalls Concrete  

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roof Concreteother Concrete  

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Describe present and historic physical appearance.

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**SUMMARY DESCRIPTION**

The sculptures created by Dionicio Rodriguez at Memorial Park in Memphis are grouped together in a linear area bounded by cemetery roads within the park-like landscaped area of the cemetery. Constructed of tinted reinforced concrete, the collection is among the artist's most ambitious and eclectic work. Built into the side of a hill, the most prominent sculptures include the Pool of Hebron, Cave of Machpelah, God's Garden, Abraham's Oak and the underground crystal grotto. The latter sculpture extends underground and features the only known paintings by Rodriguez. Other sculptures within the nine acre nominated area include bridges, benches, tree stumps, Annie Laurie's Chair, and the Fountain of Youth, all of which were constructed during an eight year span.

**ELABORATION**

Rodriguez' sculptures at Memorial Park are located in the gently rolling landscape of the cemetery in an area that is centrally positioned and roughly runs north and south. At the southern portion of this area is a median island at the intersection of two drives on which the Fountain of Youth is located. Across the drive to the north is a pergola, under which Annie Laurie's Chair is positioned. This piece was the sculptor's first at the cemetery. At the north end of the pergola is a wishing well, beyond which is a landscaped garden area known as Ferdinand IV Sunken Garden. Directly north of the garden is an area where the majority of sculptures are concentrated alongside a embankment known as Cave Hill. It is here that the Pool of Hebron, Cave of Machpelah, God's Garden and the Crystal Shrine Grotto are built into the hillside. Freestanding bridges, benches, toadstools and stumps are scattered

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Art  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Period of Significance

1935-1943  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Dates

N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person  
N/A  
\_\_\_\_\_

Architect/Builder  
Rodriguez, Dionicio  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis possesses one of the finest collections of sculptures executed by the Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez. Hired in 1935 by E. Clovis Hinds, the innovative and farsighted owner and developer of Memphis' first memorial park, Rodriguez worked at this site over a period of approximately eight years, during which time he produced some of his most varied and ambitious work. Conceived by Hinds as "a perpetual garden of promise," Memorial Park remains today a beautiful park-like setting, the focal point of which is Rodriguez' reinforced concrete sculptures depicting biblical and legendary subjects that attract hundreds of visitors each year.

The nominated area is eligible under criterion C for its artistic significance as one of Dionicio Rodriguez' most significant undertakings. Rodriguez has national importance as a twentieth-century Mexican-American sculptor, who though working in a folk tradition, exceeded the skill and creativity of his contemporaries. Though his work is known to exist in seven states, only Memorial Park and the T.R. Pugh Memorial Park in North Little Rock, Arkansas (NR listed 1986), possess such extensive and creative sculptures. Due to the continued patronage of E. Clovis Hinds, Memorial Park is important as the site where Rodriguez returned more often than any other, each time to expand upon his fanciful environment, going beyond his typical commissions of isolated sculptures in an unintegrated setting. Several of the Memphis pieces are unique and the grotto is the largest and most ambitious of Rodriguez' commissions. Though the majority of Rodriguez' work for Hinds was executed in the 1930s, the period of significance extends to 1943, as it was in that year that the grotto was completed.

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA  
 preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested  
 previously listed in the National Register  
 previously determined eligible by the National Register  
 designated a National Historic Landmark  
 recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_  
 recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

State historic preservation office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency  
 Local government  
 University  
 Other

Specify repository:

Julie L. Vosmik  
505 N. Blvd. #17, Richmond, VA 23220

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property 9 acres

UTM References

A 16 238080 3888660  
Zone Easting Northing  
C \_\_\_\_\_

B \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing  
D \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Germantown, TN

Verbal Boundary Description

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes all sculptures by Dionicio Rodriguez located within Memorial Park Cemetery. The nominated area is linear in shape and is bounded by cemetery drives on all sides. The boundary includes sufficient land to protect the historic setting of the nominated area and excludes surrounding areas containing non-contributing resources and lacking sculptures by Rodriguez.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Julie L. Vosmik, Architectural Historian  
organization N/A date May 1990  
street & number 505 N. Blvd. #17 telephone (804) 358-5838  
city or town Richmond state VA zip code 23220

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Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

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LEGAL OWNER OF PROPERTY

**Memorial Park, Inc.  
c/o Mrs. Katherine Hinds Smyth  
President  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, TN 38119**

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The Sculptures of Dionicio Rodriquez at  
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## Category of Property

Because the site contains a number of sculptures that are not freestanding but instead are integrated and difficult to count, the nominated area has been counted as one contributing site.

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within this area. A canal extends north to the sales office building which possesses a dormer of "thatch" roofing executed by Rodriguez in concrete.

The sculptures represent a romantic and eclectic variety of subjects, ranging from Biblical to legendary. Hinds scrapbook and papers reveal some of the sources of his inspiration and include written explanations of each subject. These stories were used for advertising purposes and brochures. No longer extant, painted signs positioned in proximity to the major pieces originally bore excerpts from these writings, aiding the visitor to understand their meaning. Several flat marble slabs inscribed with the names of the sculptures are found throughout the cemetery.

In describing his own work, Rodriguez wrote in 1935 that "It doesn't take much material and gives wonderful results."<sup>1</sup> His sculptures were all constructed of reinforced concrete. Large pieces such as the rock formations of God's Garden and the grotto have footings. The general form of the pieces was made using reinforcing bar, rod, mesh, screen, wire and rubble, held together with a rough coat of concrete containing aggregate. The various metal materials that provided structure were tied together with wire rather than welded. This rough form, frequently executed by assistants, was allowed to dry before Rodriguez applied the surface coat of smooth cement. In sculpting the surface, he used handmade tools and table utensils.

Once the surface coat had dried, it was tinted using chemical reagents. These mixtures, the recipes for which are unknown, were applied with a brush and worked into the cement with utensils. Once the chemicals were applied, the sculptures were hosed with water. The chemicals constituting the tints were "copperas, sulfuric acid, iron oxide, salt peter, and some lamp black to sometimes darken his colors."<sup>2</sup> Rodriguez was very secretive regarding his techniques and would share the information with no one, including his assistants. The tints were usually mixed in gallon jars that were broken when emptied. It is quite possible that Hinds knew the nature of the colorings, for he wrote inquiring of Rodriguez' desire to have colors ordered during the sculptor's absence from Memphis. Correspondance between the sculptor and Hinds suggests that there was a problem with the colors fading. In 1939 Hinds wrote "You know I want you to personally go over all your old work with good colors

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so it will hold and look good."<sup>3</sup> A letter two years later indicates that fading was still a problem, "... as expressed in enclosed copy of letter, I feel we should deduct not less than \$50.00 for repainting of the old work faded out so soon."<sup>4</sup>

The first sculpture at the cemetery was Annie Laurie's Chair, executed in 1935 and named for the subject of the famous Scottish song of the same name. A rough sketch by Hinds on a piece of ledger paper indicates that for this first piece the sculptor was provided specific instructions. This sculpture faces west and is located under the pergola that consists of wood members supported by fieldstone columns. A stone restroom building is located nearby, outside of which are located two urns. The chair represents the legendary wishing chair of Annie Laurie of Maxwellton Castle, Scotland. Constructed of concrete, the chair appears to be made of stone and bears the inscription "This historic wishing chair fabricated by- Senor Rodriguez of Mexico City. Also inscribed is the verse

Dressed in our best and all alone,  
We sit within the Wishing Chair  
Which bodes success for everyone  
Exchanging fond caresses there

Hinds scrapbook reveals two possible sources of inspiration for this sculpture- a photo of a "Wishing Seat" researched and designed by Paul P. Cret for Whitemarsh Memorial Park and a photo of a rose-covered pergola in Tombstone, Arizona.

At the north end of the pergola is a stone wishing well with an iron support for a bucket. This represents the story of the Old Oaken Bucket, written by Samuel Woodworth and popularized in verse.

Directly south and occupying a median island is the Fountain of Youth, a sculpture depicting a legendary fountain in St. Augustine, Florida, sought by Ponce de Leon. The fountain is covered by a thatched roof supported by four tree trunks. An oval glazed tile scene of ships on the ocean is inset above the fountain and

"Ponce de Leon's  
Fountain of Youth  
1513 St. Augustine, Fla."

is inscribed. A wooden cross projects from the roof peak and the floor is stone. An "Open Sesame" sign hangs from wrought iron



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straps from the roof. A stone retaining wall creates a planter within the median island.

Extending north from the wishing well is a lower area with planting beds inspired by Ferdinand IV's eighteenth century sunken gardens located near Naples. Concrete fountains are located in the centers of the rectangular beds. Separating the sunken garden from the pool to the north is a field stone auto bridge.

The Broken Tree Bench is located across the drive to the east at the southwest corner of the Highland section. The bench consists of a single tree trunk, bent to provide a seating area and backrest. As described by Hinds, the sculptor

pictured centuries ago a cloudburst caused a great wall of water to surge down this valley, followed by a violent wind storm that blew down this hickory tree, and when the tree struck another tree, the upper part was broken and thrown back with such force that the limbs were driven into the ground- the woodman's axe then shaped up the ruins into a rustic log seat.

Across the bridge from the sunken garden is the Pool of Hebron in the land of Canaan, an ambitious sculpture that is built into the hillside and creates a pool around which are rocky outcroppings and the Cave of Machpelah. Toadstools, boulders and trees project from the rocky hillside. A fountain in the center of the pool resembles a fountain sculpted by Rodriguez for Dr. Arrutia in San Antonio. This pool represents a supply of water for Jerusalem provided by King Solomon in Hebron, approximately twenty miles from Jerusalem. Hebron was the home of Abraham and it is there that his family's place of burial, the Cave of Machpelah, was located. Beside the pool to the west, a stone building is embedded in the hillside representing this cave. Rope-tied barrel planters flank the iron-gated entrance to the cave. Inside the walls are stone and floor appears to be paved. A Greek scene is depicted in tile on the west wall. The north and south walls appear to have vaults built into them and the roof structure is exposed. Within the cave is a sculpture of the "unique oak tree coffin", an artifact discovered in Denmark in the 1930s and believed to have been the burial remains of a Dane warrior chief.

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The rocky outcroppings of the pool continue north and connect to the exterior form of the crystal shrine grotto, at the top of which are tall rock formations, trees and crystals embedded in the concrete. Stairs sculpted in the hillside lead from the area below to the hillside above and access doors in the tall rock formations inspired by the Garden of the Gods in Boulder, Colorado.

Rodriguez worked on the grotto over a period of several years. He and Hinds traveled to Arkansas to locate crystals that were shipped to Memphis from Diamond Cave in Jasper. The grotto entrance is reached by a concrete path to the north of the pool of Hebron. Double wooden doors resembling a photo in Hinds' scrapbook consist of three rough hewn planks fastened by square headed nails and wrought strap hinges lead to the subterranean grotto. The walls and the ceiling of the grotto are embedded with crushed crystals and glass and projecting pieces of crystal and colored glass. The space is supported by two large freestanding columns. Stalactites hang from the ceiling. The floor appears to be made of hardened molten stone. Originally plans called for a stream to flow through the grotto, but this was never executed. Directly to the left of the entrance is a built-in guestbook shelf that is supported by stalactites. Hanging from the south wall is a painting by Marie Rembrandt in 1939 depicting the Good Samaritan.

Ten niches depicting Christ's journey on earth from birth to resurrection fill the grotto. A number of these have background scenes painted by Rodriguez and contain figures sculpted by Memphis artists.

The Nativity- This scene illustrates the manger, built of horizontal pegged log walls pegged into flanking upright tree trunk supports. There is a railing of tree branches, an exposed truss roof with thatch covering and a quartz skylight.

Jesus in the Temple- This scene contains sculptures by Marie Craig dating from 1939. The floor is scored to resemble stone and the wall depicts a column-supported temple with three windows, through which a village is visible in the background. The temple wall is scored to resemble stone and is embedded with colored glass. The railing is embedded with quartz.

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The Sermon on the Mount- This niche contains sculptures by David Day executed in 1979. The wall is painted with a landscape of large trees, blue sky and white clouds.

The Raising of Jairus' Daughter- Stone figures by David Day date from 1980. The background painting consists of three arched windows with colored glass in the arches, wind-blown curtains, stone walls and a geometric border-patterned carpet.

The Transfiguration- This is a small niche without any background painting. Wood and stone sculptures by David Day illustrate the scene.

Zacchaeus Up a Tree- This scene does not have a painted background. The space is occupied by a wood sculpture by David Day.

The Last Supper- A large wooden sculpture by David Day stands before a landscape scene painted on the rear wall.

Christ in Gethsemane- The figure of Christ was sculpted by Luther Hampton in 1972. A freestanding tree of concrete has its upper branches embedded in the wall. The background scene is of a village with cypress trees and white flowers.

The Crucifixion- The wall is painted with a landscape scene with a stratified blue sky above three crosses on a hill overlooking a village. The scene includes cypress and palms and the steps and parapet of a building in the foreground.

The Resurrection- Background scene illustrates village and three crosses in distant tree. Christ and angel figures sculpted by David Day.

Abraham's Oak was among the earliest pieces sculpted and resembles similar sculptures in San Antonio, Texas, and North Little Rock, Arkansas. This work stands within an area surrounded by a stone retaining wall to north of the Pool of Hebron. It possesses two curved hewn interior seats and has a ceiling height of approximately nine feet. The inspiration for this piece was the story of an oak named for Abraham located in a garden near the cave

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of Machpelah outside Jerusalem. The interior of this sculpture, because it has been protected from the weather, retains more of its original tinting.

God's Garden, inspired by the Garden of the God's in Colorado is formed by rock towers and outcroppings that encircle a small garden. Three steps separate the garden from the area in front of the grotto. Planters are located in some of the rock outcroppings and at the east edge of the garden is a bench sculpted to resemble a disintegrating bench of Mexican tile. An irregularly curved gravel path winds along the perimeter.

Extending north along the drive is a canal which is crossed by three bridges. The rustic foot bridge depicts a black locust tree that has blown across a stream. It appears to be pegged together and has a pegged plank floor. A planter and bench are incorporated into the structure. Another foot bridge features a railing of upright trunk supports with curved branch railings. It has a floor constructed of three planks. The north rail is a fallen tree with a carved seat. The covered bridge has built-in planters on each side and at the top and has two benches inside. Adz marks are visible on the bench seats and there are knotholes in the ceiling. There are two small seats on the west end facing the hillside.

The narrow stone-lined canal continues north to a stone auto bridge, to the northeast of which is the sales office, a building of fieldstone surrounded on three sides by a brick wall. The dormer that faces south as concrete roof covering resembling thatch that was sculpted by Rodriguez. This structure was built by Fred Andrews and dates from the late twenties.

The nominated area possesses a high degree of integrity, as there are no visual intrusions or non-contributing structures within the boundaries. Non-historic additions to the nominated area are limited to the grotto sculptures by David Day. The physical integrity of Rodriguez' sculptures varies, but overall is quite high. There has been a minimum of vandalism and no major damage from vehicular traffic. As with all of Rodriguez' sculptures, much of the colorful tinting has been lost due to exposure to the weather. The interior of Abraham's Oak and the grotto still retain the majority of their coloring. Several pieces possess small areas where the cement has cracked and/or spalled, in some cases exposing the metal reinforcing elements. The cemetery and the sculptures contained within it have been consistently and sensitively maintained.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dionicio Rodriguez. Letter to E. Clovis Hinds. 1935.

<sup>2</sup>Stanley H. Schmidt. "The Concrete Art of Dionicio Rodriguez."  
Date unknown. 2 pgs.

<sup>3</sup>E. Clovis Hinds. Letter to Dionicio Rodriguez.

<sup>4</sup>E. Clovis Hinds. Letter to Dionicio Rodriguez.

<sup>5</sup>E. Clovis Hinds. "The Broken Tree Bench." Undated.

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Memorial Park Cemetery**ELABORATION**

Memorial Park Cemetery is located in eastern Memphis at the corner of Poplar Avenue and Yates Road. Begun in 1924 by E. Clovis Hinds, it originally consisted of fifty-four acres and was the first memorial-plan cemetery in the Memphis area. An undated Chamber of Commerce advertisement written by Hinds described that the site was "selected after very careful survey, and taking into account of the growth of the city, the trend of population and requirements for burial property covering the immediate future." The ad goes on to predict that "... in a very few years, Memphis will have surrounded this new Memorial Park."<sup>2</sup>

As described by Hinds in an early ad, "Memphis Memorial Park is to be the most beautiful park type cemetery in the Mississippi Valley, filled with flowers, fountains, beautiful drives, well-kept grass and things suggestive of life rather than death."<sup>3</sup> Substantially complete by 1938, the property features gently rolling terrain enhanced by landscaping and a linear cluster of Rodriguez' work located at the approximate center of the site. Soon after purchasing the land, Hinds employed the landscape architect John Noyes, an associate of George E. Kessler of St. Louis. Walls, bridges and buildings of Arkansas field stone are found throughout the cemetery. The majority of these were executed by Fred T. Andrews, a highly skilled local stonemason.

Born in Guntown, Mississippi in 1868, Elliot Clovis Hinds lived most of his life in North Mississippi where he had been a merchant, cotton buyer and founder of an insurance company, the Cotton States Life Insurance Company in 1910. In 1916 he moved from Tupelo, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee. Between 1916 and 1924 he traveled widely, particularly in the West. During his travels he met Hubert Eaton of Forest Lawn Cemetery in California who was apparently influential in Hinds' decision to develop a cemetery in Memphis. When Hinds had the opportunity to sell his insurance company in 1924, he embarked upon the creation of Memphis' first park cemetery.

The personal scrapbook of Hinds reveals a great deal about his personality and his vision for his cemetery, which in one ad he referred to as "one of the seven wonders of the New World."<sup>4</sup> The book and many files are filled with hundreds of clippings obtained from magazines and his travels. Hinds appreciated the value of good advertising, and his papers contain many ads he wrote. Hinds was

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an avid reader and loved to tell stories and his papers are full of inspirational writings, proverbs and anecdotes. His own writings reveal him to be very religious, patriotic and extremely fond of children.

Of particular interest are several magazine articles that address the enhancement of cemeteries. One of these, published in The American Cemetery in 1934, the year before Rodriguez was hired, promotes the idea of a cemetery as an attraction. "Two factors make a cemetery famous or important... historical interest or exceptional shrines of beauty. The average person is decidedly not enticed by the idea of visiting a burial place, as such... How different it is when landscape art and sculpture transform the cemetery into an inspiring shrine."<sup>5</sup> An article in the same periodical the following year describes sculpture as "the most intelligible of all the arts... Sculpture is the only Fine Art which can be successfully and permanently used in the cemetery."<sup>6</sup>

It is not known how Hinds and Rodriguez became acquainted. Postcards of the sculptor's work in Arkansas are found in Hind's scrapbook and suggest that as a likely connection. Correspondance reveals that Hinds knew of Rodriguez' work in Arkansas and considered hiring him for a year or more before finally having him come to Memphis. He was hired to execute a single piece and it is not known whether this was intended as a test of the sculptor's skill or because Hind's plans had not yet fully developed.

Described during his lifetime as a "naturalistic" artist, Dionicio Rodriguez was a Mexican folk sculptor whose outdoor works in tinted reinforced concrete cleverly imitated forms found in nature, notably, trees and stone masses. Most often his sculptures depicted fallen or decaying trees that functioned as footbridges, shelters and benches. Typically his works were commissioned for landscaped settings such as parks, gardens and cemeteries.

Acquiring information about this artist and his techniques is difficult, as Rodriguez spoke little if any English, nor did he produce any sketches. He traveled from place to place, relying on friends or family as interpreters and translators of correspondance. He never had children, and few people who knew him are still living.

It is known that Rodriguez was born in 1891 in Toluca, Mexico, approximately sixty miles from Mexico City. Information regarding his childhood is sketchy, but there is nothing to indicate it

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included much education. As a boy of fifteen he began working in a foundry. The following year he was employed by an Italian artist by the name of Robles Hill who specialized in producing imitation rocks, caverns, ruins and ancient buildings. Though unconfirmed, some of Rodriguez' early work reputedly exists in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City. With experience and a letter of introduction from Robles Hill, Rodriguez arrived in Laredo, Texas, apparently influenced in moving by the political situation in his native country.

Though the reason for his eventual move to San Antonio is not known, it is very likely that he was encouraged by Dr. Auraliano Urrutia, a Mexican physician and early client residing in San Antonio. It was Dr. Urrutia who introduced Rodriguez to Charles Baumberger, Sr. of the Alamo Cement Company around 1925, for whom he did quite a bit of work during the late 1920s. Rodriguez was fortunate to have several clients who took an interest in his welfare and success in the States. The highest concentration of Rodriguez' work is in San Antonio, where for several years he was associated with the Alamo Cement Company. Mr. Baumberger, president of the company, commissioned a number of jobs, including several at the company headquarters.

Rodriguez worked in a rustic tradition learned in Mexico, and while not the only folk artist of the period producing rustic concrete sculptures, he was clearly the most skilled. Though the origin of this folk tradition is not known, it has been suggested by Maximo Cortes, a friend and assistant of Rodriguez', that it originated in Europe. Concrete sculpted to imitate wood is called "rustico" or "el trabajo rustico" (rustic work) in Mexico. So convincing are Rodriguez' imitations of nature, observers unfamiliar with his work frequently mistake it as being real or petrified. Rodriguez' sculptures are known to exist in seven states, with Tennessee, Texas and Arkansas possessing the finest and most representative collections.

Working in the United States from circa 1925 to 1950, Rodriguez was the most talented and convincing sculptor producing this type of work in the country. When he first arrived in Texas there was already an established tradition and interest in rustic landscape features that dated back to the mid-nineteenth century. Illustrations found in late nineteenth century handbooks are very similar to several of the imitation wood pieces by Rodriguez. Using concrete instead of wood, he departed somewhat from this established tradition. Although Rodriguez can not be credited with



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discovering something totally new and different, he achieved a level of skill and creativity unequalled by his peers. The variety of sculptures produced was far greater than that of other folk artists. A genius in the medium of concrete, he was able to control and manipulate the surfaces of his pieces, achieving astounding accuracy and detail.

Rodriguez' methodology, which was based on tradition learned in Mexico, differed from the practices promoted in contemporary journals. As publications of the period demonstrate, most concrete landscape features were made with molds. A 1917 publication How To Make Concrete Garden Furniture and Accessories doesn't even mention or refer to the technique employed by Rodriguez.

By 1932 Rodriguez was working for Justin Matthews in North Little Rock, Arkansas. They enjoyed an amicable working relationship that continued over a period of years. Located at seven sites within the state, Rodriguez' Arkansas sculptures were executed between 1933-39, the years of his greatest success.

A significant event in Rodriguez' career was making the acquaintance of E. Clovis Hinds. An early letter to Rodriguez reveals Hinds' familiarity with the work commissioned by Matthews. Fortunately, the correspondence between Hinds and the artist exists and vividly portrays the special friendship and mutual regard that developed between the two men. During an eight year period, Hinds commissioned many sculptures with Biblical and legendary themes to add interest to the grounds of his cemetery, Memorial Park. This mutually beneficial association had a profound influence on the artist's personal and professional life. It was at Memorial Park that the artist executed some of his best work and was introduced to new sources of inspiration.

In a letter from Rodriguez to Hinds, it is apparent that the two men had an agreement that the artist would work only for Hinds or the City while in Memphis. While such an arrangement appears to have been acceptable to the artist, his letter expresses concern regarding potential competition. "I can't do any Extra kind of work in this Town; only for you with exemption [sic.] of the City. The same please don't let any bodye [sic.] else try to perform or practice any of my Artistical Work." It is possible that Rodriguez executed some work for the Memphis Zoo, though this has not been documented. He is also credited with a sculpture of a sea lion balancing a ball that was in front of the Davis White Spot Restaurant at White Station and Poplar Avenue prior to its

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demolition. This attribution seems unlikely, both because of the subject and its apparent violation of the agreement between Rodriguez and Hinds.

Rodriguez' success in the States was greatly influenced by the fact that his sculptures were unlike those of any other artist. Though he is not known to have experienced any serious competition, he took care to insure that none developed. He was very secretive regarding his techniques and materials and while working is known to have mixed and stored his materials in a tent or in the trunk of his car. John Richmond of Memphis recalls that "Rodriguez had a tent in which he mixed his colors. he used gallon jugs, and when he had emptied one, he broke it. He was very secretive and would not let anyone see the names on these jars."<sup>8</sup>

From what little is known, it seems Rodriguez was rarely employed for more than several months consecutively. Winter weather interfered with this work, as did his chronic poor health and the unpredictability of commissions. Described as a "stumpy little brown man from Mexico," Rodriguez suffered from diabetes and was frequently ill. Both Justin Matthews and Hinds were concerned about the artist's health, corresponding between themselves on the subject and seeking the advice of medical professionals. In several of his letters to Hinds, Rodriguez relates his intention to visit San Antonio or Mexico City, purportedly for his health. His occasional visits to Mexico City usually took place during the winter months, when his health would benefit from a more temperate climate and when the cold weather prevented satisfactory sculpting with cement outdoors. He traveled from place to place by car, frequently accompanied by his niece and nephew. Several of his letters refer to "helpers" that he would engage as assistants. While working in Memphis, Rodriguez was assisted by Buster Buggs, an employ at the cemetery.

Hinds took a benevolent interest in Rodriguez. The generous cemetery owner was instrumental in obtaining jobs for the artist, introducing other cemetery owners to the Mexican's work. In a letter written in 1936, Hinds advised Rodriguez that he "had another inquiry from a cemetery friend about your work. No special hurry- I will tell you about it when I see you again."<sup>10</sup> In a letter dated the following year, the sculptor was cautioned to "Take good care of yourself so you can do your best work as a sample for all the cemetery owners to see when we have the National Cemetery Convention in Memphis."<sup>11</sup> Hinds may have been referring

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to the Southern Cemetery Association Convention that was held in Memphis in June of 1937 and included a visit to Memorial Park.

Hinds also assisted the sculptor with his finances, frequently administering Rodriguez' funds when the artist was away from Memphis. Many of the letters between the two men are concerned with deposits and withdrawals, as well as Rodriguez' frequent requests for money.

The existing correspondance between Rodriguez and Hinds reveals the sculptor's conscientious nature, as well as the pride he took in his work. In a letter to Hinds the artist wrote "I will be very glad to work for you and will do my very best to your satisfaction and within two weeks you can see how fast and efficient.[sic.] I do my work, then you can compare the price with the product..."<sup>12</sup> In several letters Hinds requests that Rodriguez come to Memphis to repair work that had deteriorated. For this the sculptor would work at a reduced rate.

Rodriguez sometimes worked on a contractual basis, but usually was paid hourly or weekly. In 1935 he wrote Hinds the following, "About my wages, I have received no less than \$75.00 per week, clear, this includes my helper."<sup>13</sup> In a letter dated August 24, 1939, the artist wrote, "if the job is by contract or by day I do the work just as good because I always try to do the best of my ability."<sup>14</sup>

Rodriguez worked for Hinds into the early 1940s, most probably leaving Memphis for the last time in 1943. By this time the work had been more or less completed and the two men may have had a difference of opinion. Hinds became ill in 1947 and died in 1949. Residing in San Antonio until his death in 1955, the artist was ill in the advanced stage of diabetes. It is not known how much he worked the last decade of his life.

Since its completion, Memorial Park Cemetery has fulfilled the dreams of Hinds who envisioned it as a special place of tranquil beauty for all the public to enjoy.

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Memorial Park Cemetery

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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Harkins. Metropolis of the American Nile: Memphis and Shelby County. p. 199.

<sup>2</sup>Memphis Chamber of Commerce Ad, date and publication unknown.

<sup>3</sup>Ad, date and publication unknown.

<sup>4</sup>Ad, date and publication unknown, Memorial Park box 2, file 4.

<sup>5</sup>American Cemetery, vol. IV, no. 7, July 1934, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup>American Cemetery, September 1935, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Dionicio Rodriguez. Letter to E. Clovis Hinds. January 11, 1938.

<sup>8</sup>John Richmond, Personal Interview with Katherine Hinds Smythe and Dale Anthony, March 25, 1983.

<sup>9</sup>Eldon Roarck. "Strolling with Eldon Roarck," Commercial Appeal, Memphis, TN, June 20, 1935.

<sup>10</sup>E. Clovis Hinds. Letter to Dionicio Rodriguez. July 21, 1936.

<sup>11</sup>E. Clovis Hinds. Letter to Dionicio Rodriguez. September 24, 1937.

<sup>12</sup>Dionicio Rodriguez. Letter to E. Clovis Hinds. January 7, 1935.

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Memorial Park Cemetery

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13 Dionicio Rodriguez. Letter to E. Clovis Hinds. Date  
unknown.

14 Dionicio Rodriguez. Letter to E. Clovis Hinds. August 24,  
1939.

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Memorial Park Cemetery

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Schmidt, Stanley H. "The Concrete Art of Dionicio Rodriguez."  
2 pgs. Date Unknown.

Schmidt, Stanley H. Personal Interview, September 1986.

\*Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted by Julie Vosmik.

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1990

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 1 The Sculptures of Dionicio Rodriquez at  
Memorial Park Cemetery

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### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Beginning at the northwest corner of the section known as Fountain Square of the Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery, proceed northeast, to include the median island containing the sculpture known as the "Fountain of Youth." Proceed north along the east curblineline of the road, to include that portion of the Highland section within a twenty-five foot radius of the sculpture known as "Broken Tree Bench." Continuing along the east curblineline of the road to a point fifty feet north of the structure known as the Sales Building, proceed west to the east boundary of section D. Then proceed south, then southwest along the east boundaries of sections D, L, J and I to the northeast corner of section H. Then proceed south to point of origin.

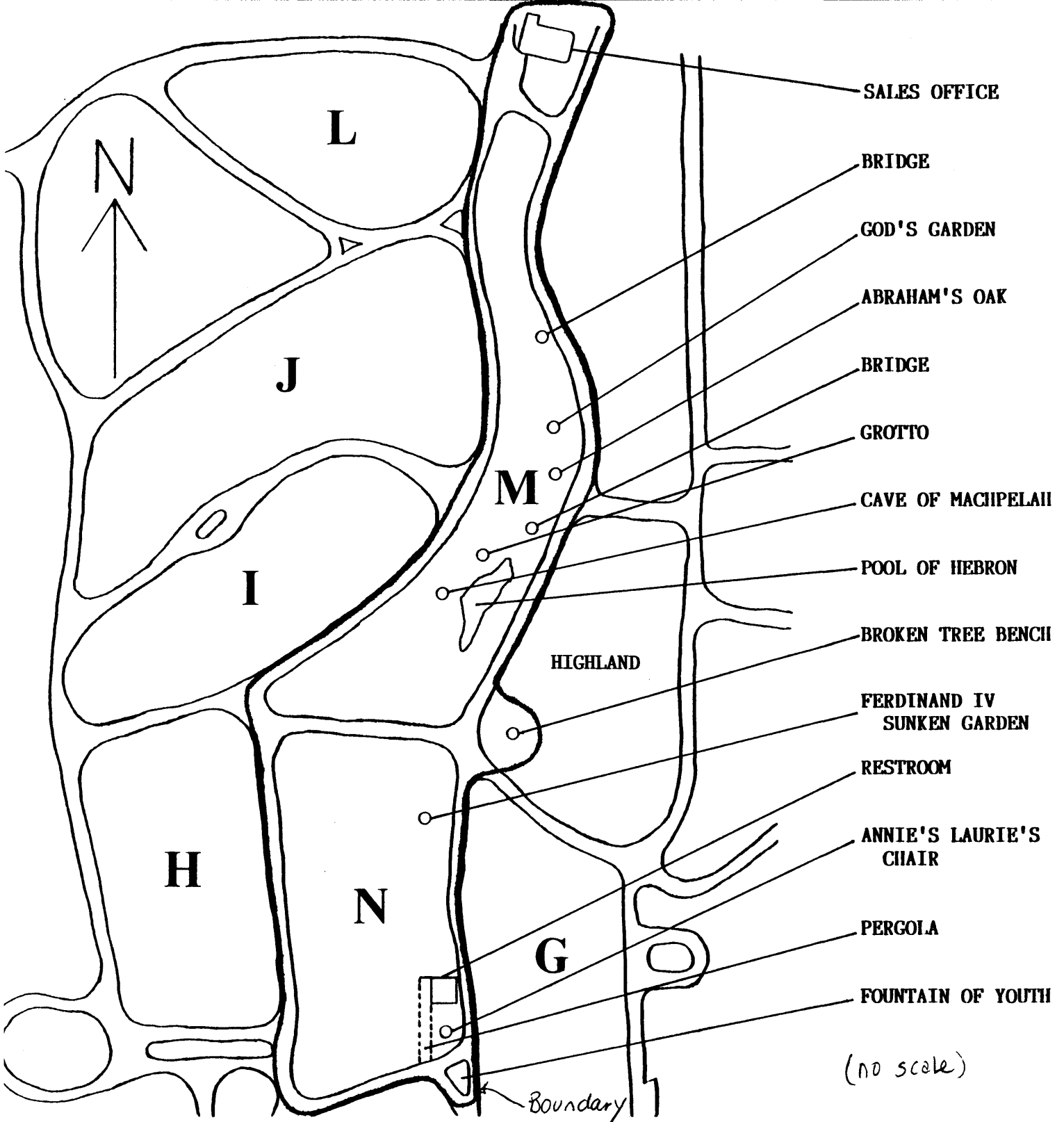


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### PHOTO IDENTIFICATIONS

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Pool of Hebron, facing northwest  
1 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN.  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Broken Tree Bench, facing northeast  
2 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Cave of Machpelah, facing west  
3 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of rustic foot bridge, facing northwest  
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Continuation Sheet**

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Memorial Park Cemetery

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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Pool of Hebron, facing south  
5 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of tree, facing west  
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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., Tennessee  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of rock formation, facing west  
7 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of rock formation, facing west  
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Section number Photos Page 3 The Sculptures of Dionicio Rodriquez at  
Memorial Park Cemetery

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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of entrance to grotto, facing west  
9 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Fountain of Youth, facing southwest  
10 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Annie Laurie's Chair, facing northeast  
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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of pergola and well, facing north  
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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of bridge, facing southwest  
13 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of covered tree bridge, facing northwest  
14 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: Clay Smythe  
Date: April 1990  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of covered tree bridge, facing west  
15 of 18

Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: unknown  
Date: unknown- circa 1935  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of Dionicio Rodriguez beside sculpture  
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Memorial Park Cemetery

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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: unknown  
Date: unknown- circa 1935  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of E. Clovis Hinds and Katherine Smythe at Memorial Park  
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Memorial Park Cemetery  
5668 Poplar Avenue  
Memphis, Shelby Co., TN  
Photo by: unknown  
Date: unknown- circa 1935  
Negative: Tennessee Historical Commission  
Nashville, TN  
View of E. Clovis Hinds at rustic foot bridge  
18 of 18