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Volunteers uncover Conroe historic black cemetery's forgotten graves

By Meagan Ellsworth, Staff writer Updated 10:59 am CDT, Tuesday, October 15, 2019



IMAGE 1 OF 10

Volunteer Pam Ready pulls branches and vines out of a tree during a restoration project Saturday, October 12, 2019 at the Conroe Community Cemetery.

Volunteers yanked, pulled, cut and trimmed down trees, vines and underbrush in an overgrown and neglected historic black cemetery where rusty railroad pieces, broken pitchers, and toppled tombstones mark forgotten graves dating back to at least 1892.

Just off Texas 105, the overrun, small 3.5-acre Conroe Community Cemetery resting on 10th Street looks distinctly different across the fence line from the large, clean and kept predominantly white Oakwood Cemetery neighboring it.

Here, it takes a hike through an almost-national forest like environment to find the late African Americans, now hidden within it. Some of those names engraved in stone include Montgomery County's only confirmed Buffalo Soldier, Luther James Dorsey, significant educators such as Mittie J. Campbell who is credited with opening the first school for black students in Conroe as its principal; and, others like Eliza Evans with the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor.



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FEEDBACK

Starting at the roadside last Saturday morning, the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project cleared at least 100 feet of a nearly 500-foot wall of nature that has consumed it over the years, as part of Jon Edens' mission that began in 2011 to save and reestablish the cemetery.

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"I want us to be able to give a name back to these people," board member Pam Ready said as she hauled away tree limbs. "They deserve our respect for being a part of the community and right now most people don't even know they exist. This is a way to give them back a voice and to respect them and their families."

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Recognized as the leading educator of African American students by the state of Texas in 1942, James C. Pitts, was the last known burial at the cemetery in 1966. Board treasurer John Meredith said in the past the property was sold and belongs to the heirs of Henry Runge, who the organization is making an effort to contact. In the meantime, he shared the history and stories behind people who rest in the cemetery, including those whose history may have been lost to society.

The organization is working with professionals, a search and rescue group, and the University of Houston to clear and preserve, bring out cadaver dogs, and ground penetrating radar. Over the next three years, the group hopes to clean up the cemetery with the public's help, as well as place a new sign, fence, and historical marker.

"Our intention is to reset every headstone out here, but right now we are just trying to find the burials," said Meredith, who also hopes to host a fundraiser to support the restoration effort.

Some trees, plants, and objects will be kept due to burial practices.

"They used something that was near and dear to that person to mark that grave," Meredith said. "... We have to be extremely careful. The main plant we see out here is the Gardenia plant that marks graves. Almost every time I find graves we have seen an association with a Gardenia plant."

Nearly one month ago, volunteer Wendy Packer said she picked up over 100 bottles and cans in about three hours one morning. While picking up trash on Saturday, which she said was much less than before, she made a surprising discovery, a piece of pottery that may be a grave marker. The piece will be documented.

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"I almost picked it up as trash, then I turned it over and saw a little pattern on it, so that was pretty exciting," Packer said.

Later in the day, Meredith reported that another gravestone for 20 year old woman named Maud Gilder, that had never been seen before, was discovered by a volunteer and their grandmother.

"I had walked by there probably 30 times and had never seen it," Meredith said.

More than anything, the board's parliamentarian, Faye Jones, wants the community to know they are welcome to get involved. The organization plans to come out every two weeks, weather permitting, until Dec. 7 and to continue in January with a goal to have the cemetery cleaned up by March.

"This is a community effort," Jones said. "It's important because it's your history "We never want to forget the ones who laid a foundation for us."

Volunteers must be over 18 and must go through training before they can participate. The resoration group meets at the Conroe Central Library at 6 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month. Meredith encouraged checking Facebook and the website at cccrp.org to confirm meeting locations and for upcoming events.

People interested in being involved with this nonprofit project, as donors or as volunteers or as members, should contact project leaders at cccrp.org@gmail.com.

More information about the group's purpose and goals can also be found there.

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