

Forgotten cemetery uncovered in Conroe

By Chelsea Edwards | Published 5 hours ago | Conroe | FOX 26 Houston

Team working to restore historic cemetery in Conroe

Volunteers are restoring a forgotten cemetery that was uncovered in Conroe.

CONROE, Texas - From the Oakwood Cemetery in Montgomery County, a break in the chain-link fence leads to hidden ruins.

John Meredith of Conroe points out the opening, telling the story of Jon Edens' discovery in 2011.

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"He looks across the fence here and sees Dora Armstrong's grave," he says, pointing out the crumbling, moss-covered headstone, a portal to a graveyard once called the "No Name Cemetery".

Meredith walks to the end of the cemetery gate on 10th Street. "You stand here and see the contrast," he says.

Next door to the manicured gravesites of Oakwood, nearly three-and-a-half acres of segregated black graves dating back to the 1890s are overgrown and

overlooked.

"[It's] forty years of nature taking its course," says Meredith, crossing back into the "no name cemetery" where one headstone leans a few yards from another that has completely toppled over.

An injury has kept Edens at home, but Meredith walks in his place. He's a board member of the nonprofit started to restore the gravesite, the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project.

The group has tracked down distant relatives of the last known owner of the property. For many, it was the first time they heard about the gravesite.

After years of meeting and gathering the appropriate documents and permissions, cleanup finally began in the fall of 2019.

"Right now our motto is do no harm," says Meredith.

"We're trying to clear, find as many graves as we can out here. We flag them when we find them."

A group of young volunteers are using hand saws to cut down the small trees that have grown over the graves.

It's a delicate process of clearing brush without tearing out what black families would historically use as grave markers - from plants to train tracks.

"This was probably a guy who worked on the railroad out here, and this is probably how they marked his grave," says Meredith pointing out a railroad tie standing upright as if it grew straight from the earth.

The caretakers believe that garbage dumped in the area may be hiding the gravesites of lost loved ones. Things that may be mistaken for trash are getting a second look.

"This was actually some type of a grave object that was marking the grave we feel like," Meredith points out a broken rose-colored glass pitcher pushed into the dirt. "Probably some lady's favorite pitcher to serve lemonade."

Headstones make others easier to find. Luther Dorsey was the only known buffalo soldier buried in Montgomery County. Although his tombstone sits somewhat upright, it's covered in the shadows of overgrown trees and their falling leaves.

"It's sad to see - this is what his grave looks like," adds Meredith.

Meredith heads a few steps away to the grave of Little Luceil Drake who died in 1901, less than a month after she was born.

"It says, 'Gone to be with Jesus' on the headstone," reads Meredith. "It tugs at your heart strings," he adds.

The group believes the site's last headcount and possibly the last cleanup, happened in 1978.

Back then, 46 graves were numbered. The incoming team has found 28 so far, and the discoveries continue.

"I'd probably walked past this thirty times and never seen it," Meredith points out a fallen headstone. "A young man found it and just lit up!"

The group's goal is to complete clearing and tagging by March 2020, then use radar and cadaver dogs to find any remaining graves, hoping to dig up the histories of the forgotten while renewing their place of rest.

The African-American Burial Grounds Network Act was introduced to United States Congress in 2019 to help find and preserve slave and segregated cemeteries.

The Montgomery County gravesite has been renamed the Conroe Community Cemetery, and the restoration work is being done through volunteers and donations. Visit <https://cccrp.org/> to find out how you can get involved.

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