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Jon Edens, John Meredith awarded William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award for work on historic Conroe cemetery

Compiled by Sondra Hernandez, Staff writer Published 2:30 pm CDT, Friday, September 11, 2020



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Jon Edens talks about Dora Griffin Armstrong, an African American who lived in the Conroe area in the 1800s at her grave site at Conroe Community Cemetery Thursday, Oct. 14, 2016, in Conroe. Edens, a ... more

This past week it was announced that Jon Edens and John Meredith have both been selected by the Montgomery County Historical Commission for the William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award.

This Distinguished Service Award is presented at the discretion of the Montgomery County Historical Commission to those special individuals, corporations or organizations who have exhibited distinguished leadership, initiative, and dedication in

the preservation of the history of Montgomery County, according to Historical Commission Chairman Larry Foerster.

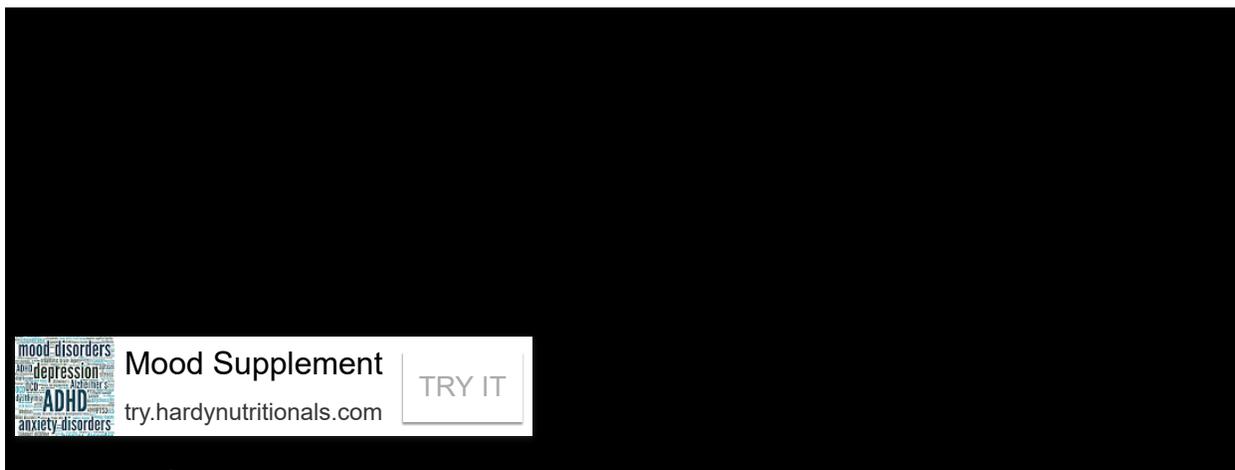
The winner of the award has shown significant accomplishments in the field of historical preservation and research. Such achievements must be notable and have made an important contribution to the preservation and/or advancement of the history of Montgomery County.

According to Foerster, for several years, these remarkable men – Jon Edens and John Meredith, along with the other devoted volunteers of the nonprofit Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project, Inc (“CCCRP”) have tirelessly toiled in the research, preservation and restoration of the previously unknown Conroe Community Cemetery. When first discovered by Jon Edens nine years ago, this forgotten African American cemetery was totally obscured by heavy underbrush along 10th Street in East Conroe, adjacent to the Oakwood Cemetery.

Since 2011, Jon Edens has methodically focused on researching the biographies of those men and women of color who rest on this property. He has discovered such noted individuals as Luther James Dorsey, the only Buffalo Soldier buried in Montgomery County; James C. Pitts, a leading 20th century Texas educator of African American children; Mittie J. Campbell Turner, the principal of the first Conroe public school for African American children – Mittie Campbell High School; and former black slave Dora Griffin Armstrong.

After commencing his genealogical research and locating the owners of the property, Jon Edens organized the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project.





The CCCRP is dedicated to seeing this forgotten piece of history restored and preserved so those who are interred there may once again be honored, and future generations can learn this lost history of Conroe.

The efforts of the members of the CCCRP to honor those emancipated slaves, railroad workers, sawmill workers, educators and housewives in the Conroe Community Cemetery are inspiring.

The organization is composed of numerous individuals of all races who volunteer their time in researching, locating, chronicling, and restoring the old tombstones in this once-forgotten cemetery. The CCCRP's detailed website can be found at <https://cccrp.org/>.



Edens is a retired 36-year paramedic with multiple agencies. He currently works in the field of forensic genealogy assisting law enforcement and medical

examiners in identifying families of unclaimed deceased people, as well as using DNA to identify potential suspects for cold case murders and rapes.

After learning more about the history of Montgomery County he became fascinated with not only the well-known historical facts, but with other less known history. He spends much of his time reading through old newspapers to dig up the little-known facts about this wonderful county. He also previously volunteered as a docent at the Heritage Museum of Montgomery County.

Edens discovered the Conroe Community Cemetery by accident in 2011 and decided to form the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project in order to clean, restore, and preserve the cemetery and preserve the history of those interred there.

While it is difficult to single out only one member of the CCCRP, John Meredith has distinguished himself for his energetic commitment to the project. He has organized the weekend clean-up projects at the cemetery, has participated in extensive research of numerous individuals buried in the cemetery, recruited support, promoted the cemetery, and frequently can be found at the cemetery digging by himself around buried tombstones.

John Meredith's ancestor John Caruthers arrived in Montgomery County in 1830. He worked as a geologist for Kerr-McGee Oil & Gas Corp. for 26 years and Anadarko Petroleum Corp. for three years before retiring.

"Meredith's background in archaeology and geology have been invaluable in this project which is much like an archaeology project," states the nominating document. "Relationships (both spatial and temporal) and trends are keys to understanding in both archaeology and geology. African American burials involve both plants and grave objects which were important in the life of the deceased, so no object, gravestone or plant could be moved or removed without first seeing it as a possible clue to the location of burials."

Meredith ran five cleanup events in fall 2019 and four in spring 2020 before the coronavirus forced restoration work to stop. The cemetery experienced a landmark day in May when a sign was installed at the entrance to the cemetery.

While the coronavirus has slowed progress, Meredith tirelessly continues to visit the cemetery at least twice a week to maintain the progress that has been made, take out small trees, search for new graves and map in the large trees on the property, said Foerster.

"Our Montgomery County Historical Commission believes Jon Edens and John Meredith have contributed significantly to the preservation and advancement of the History of Montgomery County. It is for these reasons that we have enthusiastically selected both for the William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award," Foerster said.

Previous recipients have been Kay Dawes, Sondra Hernandez, Jane Keppler and Jean Smoorenburg.

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