

Restoration begins on forgotten African American cemetery



Volunteer cleanup days began in late October and will continue every other weekend through December before resuming next year. (Photo courtesy Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project)

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NAMES OF THE DEAD

Thirty-eight individuals are known to be buried in the Conroe Community Cemetery. Here are a few.

LUTHER JAMES DORSEY (1850-1939)
The only known Buffalo Soldier buried in Montgomery County

JONAR JONES (1877-1942)
A laborer in a lumber mill who lived in Conroe for 17 years

MITTIE CAMPBELL TURNER (1875-1933)
Opened the first school for African American students in Conroe

JAMES CHARLES PITTS (1876-1966)
Principal of a high school for black students in Jefferson, Texas

(Eva Vigh, Kaitlin Schmidt, Community Impact Newspaper)

In 2011, Jon Edens was working at the Oakwood Cemetery on North 10th Street in Conroe when something caught his eye, he said. In the wooded area just across the cemetery's fence he saw another grave. He hopped across the fence to take a closer look, and then he saw another grave, and another.

After doing some research, Edens said he realized he had stumbled across a forgotten historical site. Informally known as the Conroe Community Cemetery, it is the burial ground of many African Americans, some of whom were influential community leaders.

"I decided it needed to be cleaned up and restored," Edens said.

Eight years later, Edens said he is "finally" able to begin restoration through the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project, a nonprofit that he created in order to facilitate work on the cemetery. The organization began volunteer cleanup days in late October and will continue every other weekend through December before resuming next year, Edens said.

The goal is to complete restoration in March and then be recognized by the state as a historic cemetery.

In addition to cleaning and restoring the headstones, the CCCRP works to identify and contact the living descendants of those buried in or who owned the cemetery.

According to the CCRP's website, the last owner of the property, Henry J. Runge, died in 1922 without a spouse or any children, so Edens said he needed to locate and contact the owner's legal heirs to obtain permission to clean up the cemetery.

"Everyone has been very excited," he said. "[They] had no idea of the cemetery or that they owned the property."

The oldest confirmed burial is 1892—an infant with the last name Armstrong—and there are 38 known burials that were documented during a 1978 survey of the cemetery, according to CCCRP. The last known burial is James Charles Pitts, who was buried in 1966, according to the CCCRP.

Edens said he was able to contact Pitts' grandson, who lives in Georgia. He also spoke to the granddaughter of Luther James Dorsey, the only known Buffalo Soldier, or African American soldier who fought in the Civil War, to be buried in Montgomery County.

Edens said many of the markers and headstones have been damaged, destroyed or stolen, making it difficult to identify those buried.

Adding to the disarray, Edens said there are no official records of the Conroe Community Cemetery except for a "notice of cemetery" filed in 2014. The only known document that possibly mentions the cemetery is a deed from Runge in 1898, which vaguely refers to "a cemetery," according to the CCCRP.

The last cleanup of the cemetery prior to recent efforts was in the early 1980s, according to the CCCRP.

Edens said he hopes the nonprofit, which relies on donations, can offer tours to visitors once restoration efforts are complete.

"When we are done, we are hoping it will look more like a park," he said.