

At last, Black cemetery gets formal dedication



Photos by Jason Fochtman / Staff photographer

Kenny Nero and his wife, Tonya, look over a fallen headstone during a sign dedication for the Conroe Community Cemetery on Saturday. The mission to save and re-establish the cemetery began in 2011.

Work by volunteers and donors pays off after restoration of grounds in Conroe where nearly 150 people are buried

CONROE – The first known sign in more than 100 years to mark the once-forgotten, historic Black Conroe Community Cemetery has been dedicated.

“In a sense, we are here today because the dead has gotten back up again,” said Brother Jimmy R. Johnson with the Eastside Church of Christ in Conroe before he bowed his head in a prayer of dedication for the sign and those buried there during a ceremony Saturday morning. “Their bodies are still buried in the murky clay of the 1800s, but their spirits and history-making work has been revived and restored.”

The mission to save and re-establish the cemetery began in 2011 and has been led by Jon Edens, president of the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project, who first discovered the cemetery while visiting predominantly white and well-manicured Oakwood Cemetery next door.

Sitting in a wheelchair under the arch of the large, new sign, Edens struggled to hold back his emotion. The genealogist expressed gratitude for the army of volunteers and donors who made good on his vision to honor those buried by cleaning up the cemetery.

“It is beyond anything I even

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thought,” Edens said. “To be able to look all the way back to the graves all the way back here ... I became paralyzed before our first cleaning, so I wasn’t able to come out here. When I first came out and saw the work they had done, I literally fell down crying. It is very emotional to see the progress that they have done here and the honor that we are able to bring these people back.”

The small 3.5-acre cemetery, which belongs to the heirs of Henry Runge, became overrun after it was sold.

It was thought to have 24 marked graves and 17 unknown graves in spring 2019. After brush removal, three cadaver-dog sessions, metal detectors, probes and more, volunteers found 111 unmarked graves and 38 marked graves, including seven not on a list from 1978 when the cemetery was originally cataloged. Some are 200 years old.

On Saturday, it appeared transformed.

CCCRP treasurer John Meredith said it “brings tears to my heart to see how much has been done” in what has felt more like an archaeology project supported with the help of taxpayers’ dollars. The city and county

helped get the entrance paved.

“We will probably never know who those people are, but they deserve the same recognition as some of the higher-profiling people,” Meredith said. “They lived lives that were important, all of their lives were important, and they need to be remembered. We will put markers on all those graves that say unknown, and we will have a little seashell or a gardenia on that marker.”

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.

Others who rest in this cemetery include Montgomery County’s only confirmed Buffalo Soldier, Sgt. Luther James Dorsey; Mittie J. Campbell, who opened the first school for Black students in Conroe; and Eliza Evans with the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor.

The Montgomery County Veterans Memorial Commission will be dedicating the recently completed south bridge in Dorsey’s memory during a Veterans Day ceremony at 11 a.m. Wednesday at the Montgomery County Veterans Memorial Park.

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