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## Conroe cemetery gets historic designation

**By Sondra Hernandez**  
STAFF WRITER

Over the summer, the Conroe Community Cemetery reached another major milestone in its restoration efforts.

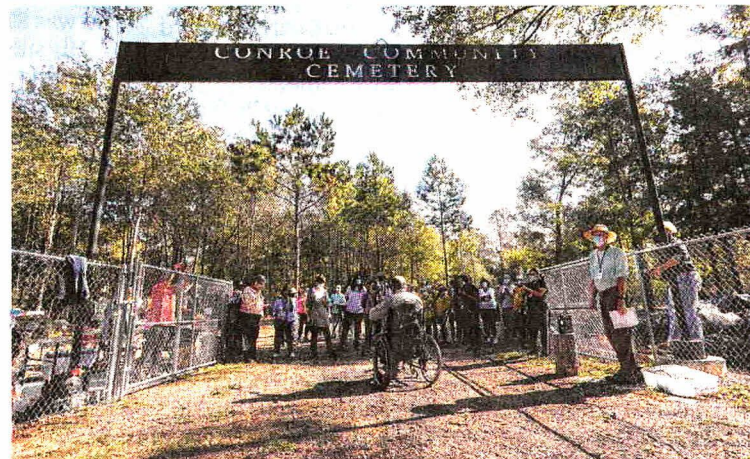
The historic cemetery on 10th Street in Conroe was designated a Historic Texas Cemetery by the Texas Historical Commission.

The distinction means the cemetery has been legally recorded through the THC's Cemetery Preservation Program, an important step in ensuring its preservation.

The designation is reserved for cemeteries that are at least 50 years old and documented through the Historic Texas Cemetery designation process to re-

cord their historic association and significance.

"Cemeteries are important keys in the history of Texas. Designation as a Historic Texas Cemetery helps increase public awareness of these important cultural resources," said Mark Wolfe, executive director of the THC. "Knowledge and education are *Cemetery continues on A5*



Jason Fochtman / Staff photographer

**The Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project has led efforts to restore the site, which dates back to the 1890s.**



Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project

Over the fall, volunteers with the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project will place 150 “unknown” markers at graves in the cemetery.

## CEMETERY

From page A1

among the best ways to guarantee the preservation of a historic cemetery.”

The restoration process is one that started for historian and researcher Jon Edens in the fall of 2016.

The cemetery exists between the Oakwood Cemetery and Old Normal College property. It is said to be one of the oldest burial grounds in Montgomery County, serving as a final resting place for dozens of Black people who settled here during the post-Civil War era.

Edens was transcribing graves at the adjacent Oakwood Cemetery in the fall of 2011 when he saw a grave on the north side of the property fence. He climbed the fence and discovered several graves among the overgrown property.

The Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project was launched and a group of volunteers banded together to clean the property and identify as many graves as possible there.

Mittie J. Campbell, an early educator of Black students, is buried there. As is Montgomery County’s only known Buffalo soldier, Luther J. Dorsey.

The cemetery restoration group has found much success in recent years. Boy Scouts and community groups have spent many hours clearing the property and helping to identify graves.

In May 2020, for the first time in its more than 100-year history, a cemetery sign was installed to designate the entrance to the cemetery.

This latest milestone

comes after Edens completed a 30-page application seeking the historic designation for the cemetery.

According to John Meredith, who came on board early in the project and is a driving force for the effort, the next step is to apply for the actual brass marker in spring 2022.

He said it’s about a year-long process to have the marker made. He doesn’t expect it to be installed at the cemetery until late 2022 or longer.

“We’ll definitely have a big shindig at that point,” he said.

Meredith said this designation is important for the community.

“This is something that will stand out and that the community can be proud of,” he said. “This is the next level up in the process of recognizing the historic significance of this particular cemetery, not only for Conroe and Montgomery County but for the whole state.”

Also this fall, volunteers will work to place “unknown markers” at graves and suspected grave sites.

Meredith said volunteers have identified about 150 burials where they don’t know the names of the people interred there.

They’ve employed multiple techniques and technologies to identify grave sites – some that were never marked well to begin with or time has worn away the original markings.

Some things they look for are shallow depressions or changes in soil coloration. They also use metal detectors, soil coring tools, cadaver dogs, soil testing and more.

Additionally, Robert Stewart with the University of Houston came out

and used ground-penetrating radar on the area. “The results were very encouraging,” Meredith. “We’re using as many lines of evidence as we can.”

A graduate student will continue the work on the survey.

Grave objects are another indicator of a burial.

“When somebody died, family members would take an item that was near and dear to that person – such as a pitcher, plate, glassware, pottery, etc – and they would break those into smaller pieces and put them on the person’s grave. Those pieces along with a shallow depression usually indicate a grave site,” Meredith said.

In their study of the cemetery, Meredith said it’s been seen over and over again where graves are marked by sea shells. He said the shells represent the person’s connection to the sea and ties back to Africa.

“In southern Georgia and Alabama, you’ll find whole graves lined in sea shells. Here we may just find a single oyster shell or sometimes it’s a larger conch shell. It’s all stuff you wouldn’t expect to see in the ground in this area,” he said. “This is really as much an archaeology project as much as it is a restoration project at this point.”

At times, even plants can mark a grave site. Meredith said the ones they see the most are gardenia and yucca plants.

He said there are three levels of burials among the 150 graves – they include 50 where they are certain of the burial, another 50 that are pretty solid and then there’s another 50 that need identification work.

The 150 graves will be

marked with an unknown marker and those will be placed throughout the fall.

The first one was placed in late August at Unknown 19.

According to Meredith, Unknown 19 was a well-defined depression with a wreath stand buried at the head of the grave, and it had a cadaver dog hit. It is just to the east of Jacob Cozier’s grave.

The unknown markers are pillars of stone with lettering and designs on four sides. The pillars sit in the center of a square-slotted concrete base. On Monday night, the Montgomery County Historical Commission approved a grant that would reimburse the restoration group for the cost of the markers.

“It will be a wonderful moment to begin recognizing those whose names we may never know,” Meredith said. “Hopefully even if in 30 years it’s overgrown again, at least there will be a well-defined marker there.”

Upcoming, they hope to start working with graduate students with the University of Houston. They also have a fall cleanup date set for Oct. 9. Then they’ll have a clean up every two weeks after that through mid-December.

For more information, visit

<https://www.facebook.com/cccrp/>. The Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project members will meet at 6 p.m. Sept. 14 at the Montgomery County Memorial Library Central Library, 104 I-45 North, Conroe, TX 77301 in the first-floor large meeting room. New members and the public are welcome.

shernandez  
@hcnonline.com