



CITY|STATE

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Volunteers help uncover forgotten graves in historic black cemetery

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Cody Bahn / Staff photographer

Volunteers Pam Ready and Mathew Whitmire inspect the base of Jacob F. Cozier's headstone during a restoration project Saturday at the Conroe Community Cemetery.

CONROE – Volunteers last Saturday yanked, pulled, cut and trimmed trees, vines and underbrush in a neglected historic black cemetery where rusty railroad pieces, broken pitchers and toppled tombstones mark forgotten graves dating back to at least 1892.

Just off Texas 105, the 3.5-acre Conroe Community Cemetery on 10th Street is an almost forgotten vestige of a bygone era. It stands across a fence line from the large, clean and well kept predominantly white neighboring Oakwood Cemetery.

“The black part went to crap,” said Jon A. Edens, a retired paramedic and geneologist in Conroe who has championed the preservation drive.

“These folks have been forgotten
cemetery continues on A5

CEMETERY

From page A3

ten and the world needs to know their story. I want to clean it up and preserve it for future generations," Edens said this week.

The Conroe cemetery is one of several in the Houston region where efforts are underway to highlight the fate of black burial grounds. In Sugar Land, local officials have been wrestling with what to do with 95 graves of dead Afrocam Americans who were victims of the state's convict leasing system. And in Tamina former slaves are among those buried at the Sweet Rest Cemetery.

To find the African American graves in Conroe, now hidden within the cemetery, requires a hike through a forest-like environment. Some of the names engraved in stone include: Montgomery County's only confirmed Buffalo Soldier, Luther James Dorsey; educators such as Mittie J. Campbell who's credited with opening Conroe's first school for black students; and others like Eliza Evans with the International Order of Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor.

As part of Edens' mission that began in 2011 to save and reestablish the graveyard, the Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project cleared at least 100 feet of a nearly 500-foot wall of



Cody Bahn / Staff photographer

Mathew Whitmire cuts overgrown plant life away from a gravesite during a restoration project at the Conroe Community Cemetery.

nature that has consumed the burial ground over the years.

"I want us to be able to give a name back to these people," board member Pam Ready said as she hauled away tree limbs. "They deserve our respect for being a part of the community and right now most people don't even know they exist. This is a way to give them back a voice and to respect them and their families."

Recognized as the leading educator of African American students by the state of Texas in 1942, James C. Pitts, was the cemetery's last known burial in 1966. Board treasurer John Meredith

said in the past the property was sold and belongs to the heirs of Henry Runge, who the organization is attempting to contact. In the meantime, he shared the history and stories behind people buried in the cemetery, including those whose history may have been lost.

The organization is working with professionals, a search and rescue group, and the University of Houston to clear and preserve the grounds. Cadaver dogs and ground penetrating radar will also be used to aid in the finding of graves. Over the next three years, the group hopes to clean up the cemetery with the pub-

lic's help, as well as place a new sign, fence and historical marker.

"Our intention is to reset every headstone out here, but right now we are just trying to find the burials," said Meredith, who also hopes to host a fundraiser to support the restoration effort.

Some trees, plants and objects will be kept due to burial practices.

"They used something that was near and dear to that person to mark that grave," Meredith said. "We have to be extremely careful. The main plant we see out here is the Gardenia plant that marks graves. Almost every time I find graves we have seen an association with a Gardenia plant."

About a month ago, volunteer Wendy Packer said she picked up over 100 bottles and cans in about three hours one morning. While picking up trash on Saturday, she discovered a piece of pottery that may be a grave marker. The piece will be documented.

"I almost picked it up as trash, then I turned it over and saw a little pattern on it, so that was pretty exciting," Packer said.

Later in the day, Meredith reported that another gravestone for a 20-year-old woman named Maud Gilder was discovered by a volunteer and their grandmother.

"I had walked by there probably 30 times and had never seen it," Meredith said.

More than anything, Faye Jones, the board's parliamentarian, said she wants the community to know they are welcome to become involved in the project. The organization plans to come out every two weeks, weather permitting, until Dec. 7 and to continue in January with a goal to have the cemetery cleaned up by March.

"This is a community effort," Jones said. "It's important because it's your history, we never want to forget the ones who laid a foundation for us."

Volunteers must be over 18 and must go through training before they can participate. The restoration group meets at the Conroe Central Library at 6 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month. Meredith encouraged checking Facebook and the website at cccrp.org to confirm meeting locations and for upcoming events.

People interested in being involved with this nonprofit project, as donors, volunteers or members, should contact project leaders at cccrp.org@gmail.com. More information about the group's purpose and goals can also be found there.