



Photos by Yi-Chin Lee/Staff photographer

Pete Matson and sister Tevis Matson meeting relatives they have never previously met after the dedication of a state historical marker to the Conroe Community Cemetery on Saturday. The site is a historic cemetery where many of Conroe's early Black residents are buried. The Matson siblings are descendants of Laura McNeese Henderson, who was born a slave, but was later freed and able to own land.

Historic Black cemetery receives state marker

By Sondra Hernandez
STAFF WRITER

After more than a decade of volunteer work to restore the historic Conroe Community Cemetery, the burial ground for the city's early Black families received historical recognition from the state.

A Texas Historical Commission marker was dedicated at the cemetery on 10th Street in Conroe Saturday before a large gathering of descendants of those buried there. Some family members came from as far away as California and Georgia to honor the burial place of their ancestors that was once an overgrown lot.

Volunteers, historians and elected officials also joined the ceremony.

"As a young man in my 20s I'd come out 30 years ago and clear out as much as I could on the weekends," said James Pitts III, grandson of James Pitts Sr., who is buried there. "To see what you have accomplished here is amazing. I love that you have recaptured our



Descendants of the interred at Conroe Community Cemetery unveil a state historical marker dedicated to the cemetery on Saturday in Conroe. The Conroe Community Cemetery is a historic cemetery where many of Conroe's early Black residents are buried.

history and brought this back to life for all the descendants and the community of Conroe."

The cemetery's history
Laura McNeese Henderson, who lived from 1854 to 1941 and is buried in Conroe Community Cemetery, purchased 40 acres in November 1898 that is now the site of both Conroe Community Cemetery and adjacent Oakwood Cemetery on 10th Street in Conroe.

The first burial in Conroe Community Cemetery was a 9-month-old baby with the last name of Armstrong in May 1892. The final burial was of

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CEMETERY

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James Pitts Sr. in 1966. Pitts was a highly regarded educator.

A list of burials was cataloged by Oveta and Horace Wright in April 1978. Over time the property became overgrown and it was difficult to tell that a hallowed burial ground existed there. Newspaper articles discussing the plight of the cemetery were published in the 1980s and more were published by The Courier writer Tim Wesselman in 1992.

An overgrown discovery

In 2011, Conroe genealogist Jon Edens was transcribing graves across the fence at Oakwood Cemetery when he saw a grave on the north side of the fence of the property.

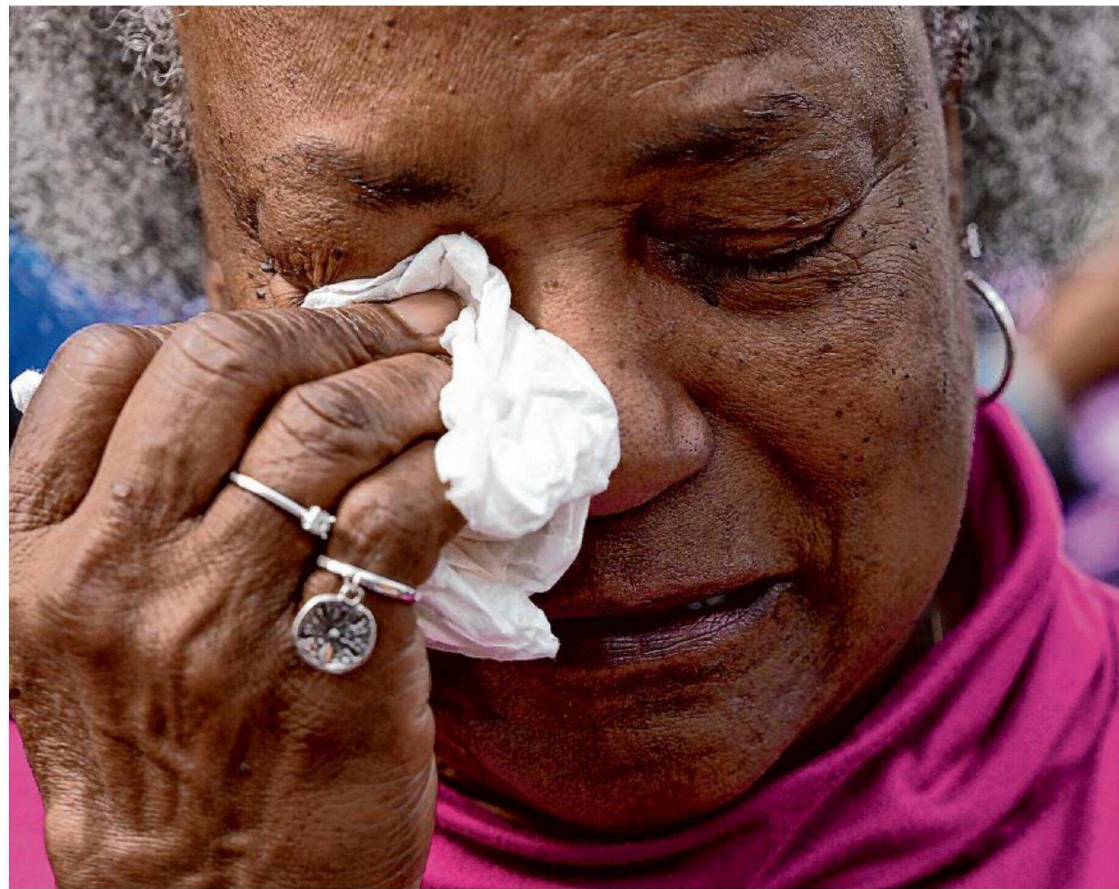
It was the grave of Dora Griffin Armstrong, who lived from 1863 to 1918. An elaborate cement monument was in pieces, a victim of time. As he surveyed the brush Edens found more graves and it became a mission of his to reclaim and clean up the overgrown area.

What the volunteers found was a unique and interesting picture of the lives those buried led and how they were honored in death. Many graves were adorned with pottery, glassware and items dear to the person. Some graves had seashells as a symbol related to their journey across the sea in slavery.

The nonprofit Conroe Community Cemetery Restoration Project began in 2016 to organize the cleanup, restoration and preservation of the cemetery. Cleanup efforts started in 2019 and in May 2020, for the first time in its more than 100-year history, a cemetery entrance sign was installed. Historian John Meredith and other local historians also took up the project.

During the summer of 2021, the Conroe Community Cemetery was designated a Historic Texas Cemetery by the Texas Historical Commission.

The total number of graves is unknown, but as of 2025, 239 have been identified. Some are



Peggy Taylor is emotional when she reads the state historical marker dedicated to the Conroe Community Cemetery, which is a historic cemetery where many of Conroe's early Black residents are buried.

Photos by Yi-Chin Lee/Staff photographer



Descendants leave fresh flowers at Laura McNeese Henderson's grave at the Conroe Community Cemetery.

marked with elaborate family headstones. Others are marked with smaller generic granite stones.

At Saturday's marker dedication, Edens said he had a simple goal of cleaning up the cemetery a bit back in 2011; he never imagined so many years later this project would continue on.

Who is buried there?

Many figures key to Conroe's



Meriel Pitts Hawkins, granddaughter of James Charles Pitts Sr., an early African American educator from Conroe, shares the history of the Conroe Community Cemetery during the state historical marker dedication ceremony Saturday.

early Black community are interred there.

• Jacob Francis Cozier — 1830-1903 — He was a pastor and

teacher at the Union Church, St. James Methodist School in Huntsville. He established the first Freedmen's church outside

"This is a piece of history and history is important. It's important to me and to my family that we are a part of Conroe's history."

*Creisha Lewis Cotton,
great-great granddaughter of
Sgt. Luther James Dorsey*

of Galveston.

• James C. Pitts Sr. — 1876-1966 — In 1900, he was a teacher having graduated from Prairie View State and Normal College. He was a principal of Marion County's school for Black students and worked tirelessly to advance education in the Black community. He was also a minister.

• Mittie J. Campbell — 1875-1933 — Campbell was credited with opening the first school for Black students in Conroe and serving as the school's principal. She left education to become a Montgomery County home demonstration agent. Marking her place in history, Conroe ISD will open a new elementary school named after her in August.

• Sgt. Luther James Dorsey — (Approximate) 1852-1939 — Dorsey is Montgomery County's only known Buffalo soldier serving in Company E of the US Cavalry from 1873 to 1878. He also worked as a carpenter in the community.

Members of the Lewis family, who own Clarence Lewis & Son Mortuary, are Dorsey's Conroe descendants.

Creisha Lewis Cotton, Dorsey's great-great granddaughter, attended Saturday.

She said when she was growing up in Conroe, the cemetery could be accessed but over time it became overgrown.

"I'm assured that he would be happy that someone took an interest and finally started to mobilize," she said. "This is a piece of history and history is important. It's important to me and to my family that we are a part of Conroe's history."