COLLEGE MEMORIAL PARK CEMETERY

College Park Cemetery is one of three remaining African-American cemeteries established in Houston in the era of racial segregation. It is located at 3501 West Gray at Dunlavy in the historic Fourth Ward, on Lot 3, Block 48 of the O. Smith Survey in Harris County, Texas. Four thousand, four hundred graves, many of them unmarked or unidentifiable, occupy 5.2 acres.¹

The property's present state of neglect, despite a series of attempts to revitalize it, belies the significant role of College Park in the African-American community. Founded in 1896, the cemetery obtained its name from its location opposite Houston Central College for Negroes on San Felipe, the previous name for the thoroughfare. Because of its situation near earlier slave quarters and Freedmen's Town, some cadavers may already have been buried on the site prior to its inauguration. The oldest identifiable grave marker is dated 1900, the most recent in the 1970s. There remain no conspicuously large or ornate monuments, as befits the modest income neighborhood of which it is now a part.²

College Park Cemetery is a significant segment of the vibrant community which it served and of individual leaders who shared its history. The Fourth Ward dates from the year 1839 when the city of Houston adopted a ward system for its nine square mile area. An electoral district for two aldermen, it stretched from downtown Houston, south of Congress Street and west of Main, to the western city limits. Always a racially mixed area, the ward witnessed the onset of large-scale African-American migration at the close of the Civil War when former slaves established Freedmen's Town on the near west side. Designated a national historical district in 1976, Freedmen's Town acted as the nucleus of a transformed Fourth Ward, since the names became synonymous in common usage. As the population expanded along San Felipe
Road, the Fourth Ward encompassed prominent religious and educational institutions, professional people, entertainment centers, and excellent examples of period architecture. The presence of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, the city's first African-American Baptist church, Gregory Institute, the successor to the Freedmen's Bureau schools, and Booker T. Washington High School, formerly Colored High School and Houston's only black high school until the 1920s, contributed to the designation of the ward as "the Mother Ward" and "Houston's Harlem." In later years famous jazz and blues practitioners B.B. King, Arnett Cobb, and Sam "Lightnin" Hopkins worked the music clubs.3

Among the most influential nineteenth century Fourth Ward leaders, John Henry (Jack) Yates is interred in College Park Cemetery. Born a slave in Gloucester, Virginia, in 1828, Yates lived in Matagorda County, Texas, at the time of his emancipation. After migrating to Houston, Yates worked as a drayman by day and a Baptist preacher by night and on Sundays. Having preached for the Home Missionary Society, Yates was ordained as the first pastor of the aforementioned Antioch church in 1866. He administered the rapid growth of membership and influence of the church until 1891, when the distinguished minister organized Bethel Baptist Church, also in the Fourth Ward. Yates' community work enhanced his stature as a religious leader. He encouraged other former slaves to purchase property by setting the example of becoming a homeowner within five years of his emancipation. His house was moved by the Harris County Heritage Society to Sam Houston Park and Rutherford Yates' residence on Andrews Street has received a historical marker. Under his efforts, Antioch and Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church purchased land for the creation of Financiapation Park, in the Third Ward, as the first recreational ground for black Houstonians. When he failed to relocate Bishop College to his adopted city, Yates co-founded Houston Academy. In commemoration of his
contributions, the Houston Independent School District named a high school for him in 1927, and the Association for the study of Afro-American Life and History dedicated a plaque in his name at Emancipation Park in 1976.4

Other members of the Yates family also attained local recognition. The pastor's immediate family and descendants are described by the compiler of the Yates Manuscript Collection at the Houston Public Library as "distinguish[ing] themselves in the fields of religion, education, and business...[as] numbering among Houston's 'First Families.'" A daughter, Martha, endeared herself to the builders of the new Antioch church by cooking for the bricklayers, carpenters, and laborers during its construction. One son, Willis, owned a small store and perhaps was the first black man in Harris County to own and operate a steam cotton gin. Another son, Rutherford, was a teacher and founder of Yates Printing Company, while son Paul taught at Houston Academy and was a printer with his brother. A daughter, Maria, performed missionary work around the country, and five of Yates' other children also taught school.5

The Red Book of Houston, A Compendium of Social, Professional, Religious, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston's Colored Population, published in 1915, listed a number of prominent African-Americans later buried at College Park. Among them, Joe Haller, whose father N.H. Haller served in the Twenty-third Legislature, managed a barber shop on the city's east side. Frank Kemp was a blacksmith in the near Fourth Ward, Daniel Bingham, a contractor on Cushing Street; Solomon Jones, a west end grocer; Rev. Churchill Fulcher, deacon of Bethel Baptist Church; Annie Hagen, a trained nurse and midwife who came to Houston with only fifty cents in her possession. She organized the city's first nurses' training establishment.6

Distinguished ministers and educators are among the deceased. One of the most prominent Red Book designees, the Rev. Fred Lee Lights rivaled Yates for the affection of the
African-American community. Born in Louisiana in 1859, the youth came to Texas with his father after the Civil War. Ordained a Baptist preacher, Lights pastored a number of central Texas congregations before succeeding Yates at Antioch Baptist Church in 1894. He traveled extensively in his religious calling and held presidencies of the Foreign Mission Convention of Texas, the General Board of Trustees of Missionary and Education Convention, and the Ministers' Alliance of Houston, and served as treasurer of the Old Land Mark Association. Lights was interred in College Park Cemetery in 1928.7

Isiah Milligan Terrell gained recognition as an educator in both Fort Worth and Houston. Terrell and his wife, the former Emma Patterson, were the first African-American teachers incorporated into the Fort Worth public school system. The first superintendent of schools appointed Terrell the school system’s first black principal in the early 1900s. Subsequently, Terrell served as superintendent of the Houston Negro Hospital, resigning in 1928. The Houston Independent School District recognized I.M. Terrell’s educational and civic contributions by naming Terrell Alternative Middle School in his honor.8

The cemetery site lay outside the city limits on April 28, 1896, when H.N. Dodd, president of the College Park Cemetery Company, presented to notary public L. Bryan a true copy of the plat adopted by the company’s board of directors. The document described lots in the seven sections of the property as for sale “by said company, for Cemetery purposes.” A.F. Simpson, a civil engineer, had “surveyed, platted, and staked” the plat in January of that year. Records described the plat from Lot 3 of the subdivision of Lot 48 of the Obedience Smith Survey. A subsequent document described the boundaries:

From a point which is South 88° 56 minutes West 428.09 feet from the City

Engineering Department reference monument rod no. 410-A at the intersection
of Dunlavy and West Dallas Streets; go South 00° 57 minutes East 21.08 feet to an iron rod;

THENCF South 88° 56 minutes West 325 feet to a point for the beginning corner of this tract which is the Northwest corner of Lot 1 and the Northeast corner of Lot 20 of Block 12, Section 1 of College Park Cemetery, as originally platted by instrument appearing in Volume 93, Page 486 of the Deed Records of Harris County, Texas; and, which point is the Northwest corner of that portion of said cemetery canceled pursuant to the judgment dated October 6, 1908 in Cause No. 46,345 in the 11th Judicial District Court of Harris County, Texas being the Northeast corner of this tract;

THENCF continuing South 88° 56 minutes West along the North line of said cemetery as originally dedicated 56 feet, more or less, to a point which is the Northeast corner of Lot 20 of Block 13 of Section 1 of said cemetery as originally dedicated being the beginning corner of this tract to be known as the College Park Perpetual Care Cemetery;

THENCF South along the dividing line of said Block 13 along the East lines of Lots 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13 and 12 of said Block 13 in said Section 1 to a point;

THENCF continuing South in the same direction to a point which intersects the Northeast corner of Lot 23 of Block 1 of Section 5 of said cemetery as originally dedicated;

THENCF continuing South along the East line of said Lot 23 and continuing along the East lines, successively, of lots Lots 24 and 25 of Blocks 2, 3, 4 and
5 of said Section 5, the West lines of Lots 23 and 24 in Blocks 6 and 7 of said
Section 8, 9, 10 and 11 to a point at the Southeast corner of Lot 25 of Block 11
of said Section 5;

THENCE continuing South on a line which will intersect the Northeast
corner of Lot 1, Block 14 of Section 7 of said cemetery as originally dedicated;
and, continuing South along the East lines of Lots 1 to 10, inclusive of said
Block 14 to the Southeast corner of said Lot 10 on the South line of said
cemetery as originally dedicated; or the Southeast corner of this tract;

THENCE West along the South line of Blocks 14 to 23, inclusive of said
Section 7 to a point in the South line of said cemetery, for the Southwest
corner of this tract which point is directly South of the Northwest corner
dedicated; and thence from the said Southwest corner of this tract on the
South line of said cemetery North to the Northwest corner of Lot 22, Block
23 of Section 7;

THENCE East along the North line of Lot 22, Block 23, Section 7 of said
Cemetery as originally dedicated to the Northeast corner of said Lot 22,
which point is also the Northwest corner of Lot 1, Block 23, Section 7 of
said Cemetery;

THENCE in a Northerly direction to the Northwest corner of Lot 22 of
Block 12, Section 4 of said Cemetery as originally dedicated;

THENCE North along the Western boundary of Section 4 of said
Cemetery as originally dedicated to the Northwest corner of Lot 22, Block 1
of Section 4 of said Cemetery as originally dedicated;
THENCE: Fast along the Northern boundary of Section 4 of said Cemetery, as originally dedicated, to a point which is the Northeast corner of Lot 13, Block 1, Section 4 of said Cemetery as originally developed, for a corner.

THENCE North along the western boundary of Lots 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 of Block 5, Section 2 of said Cemetery as originally developed to a point for a corner in the North line of said Cemetery, as originally dedicated, for a corner, which point is the Northwest corner of the tract herein described.

THENCE cast along said North line of said Cemetery to the point of beginning.

The judgment of October 6, 1908, referenced above, resulted from the lawsuit of F.A. Clay, et al. vs. College Park Cemetery. The 11th Judicial District Court of Harris County removed the Fast 325 feet of Lot 3, Block 48 from the plat on the grounds that "The Defendant failed to maintain [it]. . . free of grass, weed, and undergrowth and failed to prevent refuse and garbage from being dumped," thereby becoming a nuisance. More problems lay ahead for the approximately 4.1 acres resting place. Prior to the year 1930, "through error or mistake," numerous bodies were interred within the canceled area, converting it into "a de facto cemetery."

No additional burials took place in that location following the discovery of the problem, but the fate of the unauthorized bodies remained uncertain for the next thirty-eight years. Eventually, on October 1, 1968, the County Court of Harris County, in Cause No. 17,672, ordered the reinterment of the remains in the active cemetery "located West of the West line of the Fast 325 feet of the said Lot 3, block 48." Accordingly, a decision of April 17, 1969, by the 165th Judicial District Court removed exemptions from public improvements assessments and public taxation from that eastern portion as a result of the loss of cemetery status. The court "permanently and
perpetually enjoined" College Park Cemetery, Inc. and its successors "from operating or maintaining any form of cemetery" in the canceled area.\textsuperscript{10}

The state laws which allowed decertification of a neglected cemetery not provided with a perpetual care and endowment fund and the removal of bodies under certain conditions posed a threat to the remainder of College Park Cemetery. The passage of time, city regulations, and the frail economy of the 1930s threatened many cemeteries. City policy forbade municipal upkeep of the cemeteries, necessitating endowments, plot holders, or descendants of the dead to maintain the premises.\textsuperscript{11}

The ensuing years have not been kind to the historic resting place. Economic decline of the area, aging demographics, loss of the earlier community cohesion, and the dimming of collective memory have taken their toll. Between sporadic organized cleanups, the cemetery has languished amid weeds, debris, and vandalization of grave markers. Many stones no longer bear any indication of the deceased. A local news story in 1975 opined, "If the history of a city is recorded on its tombstones, Houston is losing some outstanding chapters among the weeds and trash of its many forgotten cemeteries." Budgetary restraints and possible legal consequences of removing vegetation around a grave without the family's consent stymied city governmental action. Yet, officials acknowledged that city workers had tended Founders Memorial Cemetery, which sheltered Houston cofounder John Kirby Allen, Sam Houston's private secretary, and Mirabeau B. Lamar's mother, among others, and other early cemeteries periodically. Whereas patriotic organizations assumed much of the responsibility for specific sites, no such groups responded for College Park.\textsuperscript{12}

Events of the more recent past have rekindled affection for the site. An aborted attempt to deconsecrate and sell a portion of the cemetery adjoining West Dallas galvanized opposition
from preservationists and descendants of the deceased. A citizens' committee publicized the threat to the integrity of the property, undertook a fundraising and restoration campaign, and sought historical recognition. After becoming pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, Rev. Robert O. Robertson immediately undertook the beautification, restoration, and preservation of the cemetery. Robertson, deacons, trustees, and members of all ages removed the underbrush, mowed the tall grass, straightened tombstones, built sidewalks, and placed white stones and ornate benches along the walkways. A theatrical rendition, "Distant Voices," by acclaimed playwright Celeste Bedford-Walker, played to enthusiastic audiences in 1998. It depicted "a collage of scenes that tell the stories of the lives and deaths of those buried in College Memorial Park Cemetery..." A reviewer proclaimed director Peter Webster's presentation "a vibrant and powerful production," staged appropriately at Houston's Ensemble Theatre, the oldest African American theater in the Southwest.  

An advocate of restoring College Memorial Park Cemetery refuted the dismissal of the century old graveyard as an eyesore. "Actually, this cemetery is to my community as the Founders Park is to the city of Houston," she explained. "This is where all of our founders are buried."
NOTES

1The other two African-American cemeteries in Houston are Olivewood, the first black cemetery in Houston, established in the 1870s, and Evergreen, founded in 1900. Douglas Milburn, Our Ancestors' Graves: Houston's Historic Cemeteries (Houston: Houston Public Library, 1980), 11, 7. The author defines historic cemeteries as "...very old (in Houston terms); ...the resting place of locally prominent persons who contributed significantly to the early development of the city; or...in some way represents an important stage in the growth of the city in its earlier years." Ibid. See also Trevia Wooster Beverly (comp.), At Rest: A Historical Directory of Harris County Cemeteries 1822-1892 (Houston: Tejas Publications and Research, 1993), 27-28. Olivewood Cemetery is owned by Trinity Methodist Church.


and Antioch Baptist Church Collection, MSS 281, Box 1, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; Olee Yates McCullough, Yates, John Henry," New Handbook, vol. 6, 1113. The Rev. Yates was first buried in Olivewood in 1897 and transferred to College Park when the new cemetery became operative.

5Yates Collection, ibid.


7Red Book, 68.


13Bob Tutt, "City Cemetery a Forgotten, Ravaged Elysore," Houston Chronicle, April 2, 1989; David Ellison, "Citizens Seeking Help to Preserve Cemetery," Houston Post, February 20,

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Thompson, Fron and Carolyn James, interview of Billy Sims, Fort Worth Department of Planning and Growth Management.

