

STORIES ALONG THE LINE: Local History on METRO's New Southeast Light Rail

By Lindsay Scovil Dove

In many ways, Houston is a marriage of opposites – beautiful green space and booming refineries; growing trees and expanding concrete; sprawling suburbs and concentrated neighborhoods; pride in its heritage and a drive for progress.

History and progress have come together in a new Houston project, the Southeast Corridor of the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County's (METRO) light rail system set to open in 2014. The ten stations along the route, connecting to downtown through the EaDo/Stadium stop near BBVA Compass Stadium and ending at the Palm Center Transit Center, will inform riders about the history of Africans and African Americans in Houston and Texas.

The stations along the route, many in Houston's predominantly African American neighborhoods, highlight eight different themes in black history: pioneer, community, emancipate, educate, contribute, protect, dream, and empower. Each station's mural, which envelops the rider waiting on the platform, is designed to evoke a feeling of protection through both the West African belief in the written words' protective power and the physical windscreen that the mural provides for the visitors. All of these things come together to tell the history of "ordinary people doing extraordinary things."¹

PIONEER (1528-1865)²

The journey along the Southeast Line of the METRO rail begins at the Leeland / Third Ward station just outside of downtown. The mural at the southbound platform, Pioneer, tells the history of Texas slavery. The first African known to arrive in the area, a man named Esteban from Morocco, found himself marooned near Galveston with other survivors of a shipwreck in 1528. In 1689 Sebastian Rodriguez Brito, born in Angola, lived among the earliest settlers in El Paso in West Texas. One hundred years later, blacks and mulattos made up fifteen percent of the province's population.

Mexico abolished slavery when it controlled Texas. This drew free blacks from the United States to the area along with the other American settlers in the early nineteenth century. As the slaveholding settlers fought for an independent republic of Texas with legalized slavery in the 1830s, many blacks sided with Mexico and attempted to escape behind the Mexican army's lines.

Slavery became legal again in 1836 when the Republic of Texas won its independence from Mexico and continued after Texas became a state in 1845. The institution grew rapidly, reaching a quarter of a million slaves by the conclusion of the Civil War. Slavery ended in Texas on June 19, 1865, Juneteenth, with the reading of the



The Southeast Line of METRO's light rail will run from the Leeland / Third Ward station east of downtown to the Palm Center station just inside the 610 South Loop and will move travelers through the Third Ward and Southeast Houston. This map shows the artwork designs for the windcreens at each station.

Photo courtesy of Carroll Parrott Blue.

Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, Texas, by Major General Gordon Granger. This opened the way for free African Americans to resettle in the location of their choice, and many chose Houston.³

EMANCIPATE (1863-1898)

Picking up the light rail from the Leeland station, travelers head south across Interstate 45 and next arrive at the Elgin / Third Ward station. Here, riders learn about Reconstruction in Texas and the role of Norris Wright Cuney. After the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, the slow and difficult process of integration of the newly freed African Americans into general society began.

Norris Wright Cuney was born in 1846 near Hempstead, Texas. His father was a white planter, and his mother was a slave. After the Civil War, he settled in Galveston and became interested in politics and studied law. There he became the president of the

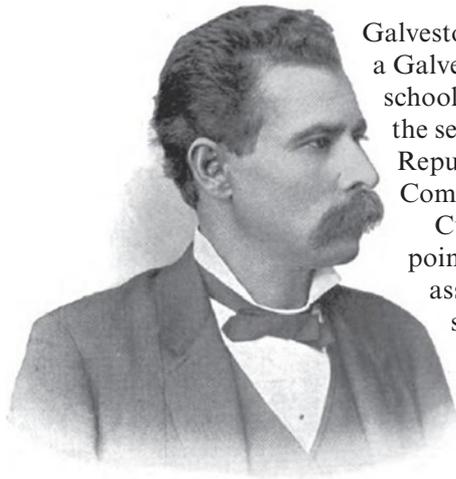
*The installed mural at the Palm Center Transit Center tells of women's importance in the fight for racial equality in Houston.
Photo by Hall Puckett courtesy of Sara Kellner.*



M PURPLE LINE Theater District

EMPOWER





Norris Wright Cuney, the son of a southern planter and a slave, fought for the rights of African Americans in Texas after Emancipation. His role as Texas national committeeman of the Republican Party beginning in 1886 was the most prestigious political role held by a southern black man in the 1800s.

Galveston Union League, a Galveston County school director, and the secretary of the Republican Executive Committee in Texas.

Cuney's appointment to first assistant to the sergeant-at-arms of the Twelfth Legislature in 1870 allowed him to act as a delegate to the Republican National Convention for the next twenty years. His most influential

position, however, was as Texas national committeeman of the Republican Party. In these roles, Cuney fought for the rights of his fellow African Americans. He helped organize the Screwmen's Benevolent Association, a group of black dockworkers, and provided tools for their jobs. Norris Wright Cuney exhibited the important role played by many African Americans in Texas during Reconstruction, causing one historian to refer to this time period as the "Cuney Era."⁴

EDUCATE (1865-2004)

Heading south along Scott Street, the Robertson Stadium/UH/TSU station is the next stop on METRO-Rail's Southeast Line. Here, nestled between the University of Houston and Texas Southern University, riders learn about Houston's African American educators.

Most notable was John Henry "Jack" Yates. Born as a slave in Virginia, he learned to read from his owner's children, an opportunity rarely afforded to slaves. After the Civil War ended, Yates moved his family to Houston where education and religion remained important to him. He became an ordained minister and preached at Antioch Baptist Church in downtown. Yates's service to the African American community included erecting schools, helping to coordinate assistance from the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Bureau, and the creation of the Freedmen's Academy, which educated black teachers. In 1885 Yates also assisted with the opening of Houston College.

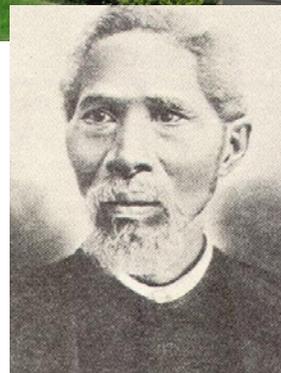
A number of other schools opened to serve the growing black community. Booker T. Washington High School and Jack Yates High School honored both national and local champions of education. The Mabel Wesley Elementary School was named for another local educator who rose from being the daughter of slaves to become

a school principal. Her son, Carter Wesley, became an influential civic leader in his own right.

By the late twentieth century a number of African Americans from the Third Ward had become leading educators. Dr. Roderick Paige worked at Texas Southern University and was elected to Houston Independent School District's (HISD) Board of Education in 1989 before becoming the district's superintendent five years later. In 2001 Paige became the U.S. Secretary of Education. In 1990 Dr. Marguerite Ross Barnett became the first African American president of the University of Houston and the first black female to hold such a role in the United States. Finally, the Lonnie E. Smith Neighborhood Library, located between the University of Houston and Texas Southern University, honors a black activist most well-known as the plaintiff in *Smith v. Allwright*, the Supreme Court case that ended the white primary and allowed black voters to participate in the democratic process.⁵

PROTECT (1865-1918)

Back on the light rail, riders follow along the southern edge of UH to arrive at the southbound platform of the



Jack Yates began construction on his home in 1870 and completed it ten years later. Originally built at 1318 Andrews Street in Houston's Freedmen's Town, it can be visited and toured at The Heritage Society in Sam Houston Park in downtown Houston.

Photo courtesy of The Heritage Society.



Camp Logan served as a training facility for World War I soldiers. Located mostly within what is Memorial Park today, a historical marker commemorating the camp and the rebellion in 1917 can be seen east of the park near the intersection of Arnot and Haskell Streets.

UH South/University Oaks station. The windscreens here tell the story of writer “Emmett J. Scott and the Camp Logan Mutiny of 1917.”

After the Civil War, the black population in Houston grew rapidly. By 1910 one in three Houstonians was African American. The transition from slavery to freedom, however, remained difficult in the Jim Crow South. In this era of segregation, lynchings, beatings, and other acts of cruelty were common. Writer Emmett Jay Scott, born in Houston in 1873, committed himself to fighting this culture. Scott wrote for the *Houston Daily Post* before starting the *Texas Freeman*, the “first black newspaper west of the Mississippi.”

The newspaper and Scott caught the eye of Booker T. Washington who convinced Scott to leave Texas to become his personal secretary. This national position allowed Scott to continue his fight to uplift African Americans. Even while away, Scott continued to help his native Houston by writing a history that focused on his community called *Houston’s Red Book* and by helping establish the Colored Carnegie Library.

Then in the summer of 1917, Scott received a letter from a relative talking about the “hot time in the old town last night.” The “hot time” the relative referenced was the Camp Logan rebellion. The construction of Camp Logan, located where Memorial Park stands today, was guarded by African American troops, who were not well received in Houston. In response to increasing police brutality, over 100 troops armed themselves and marched into the Fourth Ward. When the disturbance ended, four blacks and sixteen whites had died. The U.S. Army indicted 118 soldiers and found 110 of them guilty. Sixty-three were sentenced to life in prison, and nineteen were hung for their roles in the rebellion.

The Camp Logan incident and Emmett J. Scott’s

attempts to uplift the black community exemplify the different ways African American Houstonians “fought the good fight” after the Civil War and into the early twentieth century.⁶

DREAM (1954-1968)

Crossing south through MacGregor Park, the METRORail’s next stop is the MacGregor Park/Martin Luther King Jr. station. This platform celebrates the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and Houstonian Reverend William Lawson in the local civil rights movement.

Although King had been a leader in the civil rights movement since the mid-1950s, by 1967 his popularity had begun to decline as he started speaking out against the Vietnam War—both the monetary cost and the injustices against human rights. King felt the civil rights and the anti-war movements needed to work together, but many did not respond well to this suggestion and King’s supporters and donors dropped off.

On October 16, 1967, King was scheduled to speak at the Sam Houston Coliseum in downtown as a part of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s “Poor People’s Campaign.” Despite an all-star lineup including Harry Belafonte and Aretha Franklin, only 500 people trickled into the 5,000 capacity Coliseum.

Houston’s African American preachers also failed to support King during his 1967 visit to the city. No pulpit was opened for the famous orator. Only one local minister reached out in support, Rev. William Alexander Lawson. The founder of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church just south of the University of Houston and Texas Southern University, Lawson was also one of the founders of the Afro-American Studies Program at UH. He fought Jim Crow racism and served the city through a community center, job assistance, voter registration, and more. As Martin Luther King Jr. rallied for equality and civil rights on a national level, Rev. Lawson helped organize the local movement to remove the injustices of Jim Crow and usher in a better future.⁷

EMPOWER (1900-2000)

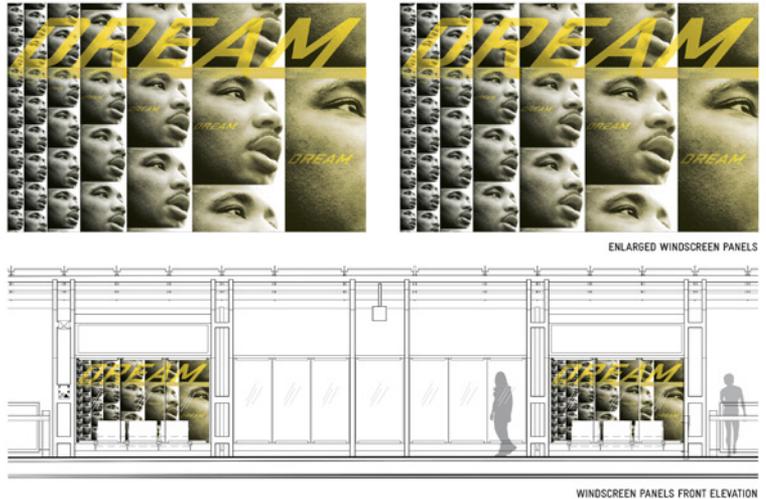
The Southeast Line ends at the Palm Center Transit Center. Here the light rail riders learn about the important role that Houston women played in the local civil rights movement. Three women are highlighted in the text on the panel: Lulu Belle White, Hattie Mae White, and Barbara Charlene Jordan.

Lulu Belle White was born in 1900 and dedicated much of her life to encouraging strong African American representation within local and state government. She believed that community involvement in government would help people commit to the greater cause. White promoted political education, black candidates, and voter registration.

Hattie Mae White followed the encouragement of Lulu Belle White and became the first African American elected to office in Texas since Reconstruction. She began her community involvement when she was elected to the YWCA Metropolitan Board of Directors in 1942. In

DREAM

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



This designer's drawing of the windscreen at the MacGregor Park/Martin Luther King Jr. station shows how the mural honoring Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement in Houston will be presented to METRO travelers. Photo courtesy of Carroll Parrott Blue.



Southeast Transit Line Black Houston History Project director Carroll Parrott Blue poses with Martin Luther King III in front of the portrait of his father, Martin Luther King Jr. at the MacGregor Park/Martin Luther King Jr. station. Photo courtesy of Ray Carrington III.

1956 White spoke about inequality in the school system; encouraged to do more, she ran for and was elected to the HISD Board. Her surprise election was the product of a community effort, marking a turn in the greater community's commitment to African American political involvement.

Rising through the ranks of local politics and serving under Harris County's judge, Barbara Charlene Jordan was the first African American elected to the Texas State Senate in over eighty years. In 1972, she became the first African American in Congress from Texas. A cham-

pion of the working class, the disabled, racial minorities, and women, Jordan is perhaps most well-known for her speech during the Watergate scandal in 1974 in which she declared, "My faith in the Constitution is whole. It is complete."⁸

Also featured on the panel is an article on Christia Adair, who championed the civil rights cause as a leader in the local NAACP. As a young woman in South Texas, she worked for women's suffrage, only to find that black women were still excluded from Texas primary elections. She later became one of the first black women to vote in a Democratic primary after the Supreme Court struck down Texas's white primary in 1944. As executive secretary of the Houston NAACP for twelve years, she and others desegregated the Houston airport, public libraries, city buses,

and department store dressing rooms. Despite official harassment, Adair and others rebuilt the Houston NAACP chapter, which grew to 10,000 members.⁹

CONTRIBUTE (1930-1939)

Heading back towards downtown from the Palm Center station, riders will see two additional panels on the return that complete their historical journey. The first is at the UH South/University Oaks station where the northbound platform tells of R. R. Grovey and the Hall of Negro Life of the 1930s.

The 1930s saw an increase in community awareness and a fight for black rights. Many African Americans living at the time descended from slaves but had not been slaves themselves, yet they lived in the deeply segregated world of Jim Crow laws. The term “New Negro” began to be used to describe this new generation of blacks that had never lived in bondage.

Houstonian Richard Randolph Grovey embraced the ideology of the New Negro movement: “economic independence, cultural consciousness, and prudent constructionism.” Grovey led the group Houston New Negroes and encouraged others to defend their rights. The group brought the lawsuit *Grovey v. Townsend* to protest exclusion of blacks in Democratic primary elections, but the Supreme Court upheld the exclusion, claiming the party was a private institution. The state’s racist primary election practice was not overturned for another nine years with *Smith v. Allwright*, as noted on the Educate panel.

In 1936 in conjunction with others in the state, the Houston New Negroes helped create the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial in Dallas. The Hall debunked many stereotypes about African Americans and celebrated the work the community had accomplished since emancipation. Paintings, essays, books, photographs, and more were on display at the Hall and included works by W. E. B. DuBois, Harriet Tubman, and Booker T. Washington, among others.

The exhibit welcomed over 400,000 visitors during the six-month long Centennial celebration. For many black Houstonians, the New Negro movement along with the success of the Hall of Negro Life inspired and strengthened the civil rights movement in the city.¹⁰

COMMUNITY (1840-2010)

The final stop is back at the Leeland/Third Ward station. The windscreens on the northbound platform reflect on the history of the Third Ward. Houston’s ward system

was developed in 1840, just four years after the city was founded. After emancipation, free blacks found themselves relegated to specific areas within the wards. Many African Americans chose to live in the Third Ward, and as whites moved out of the area, the black population surged.

The Third Ward became a city within the city. Black-owned businesses, restaurants, nightclubs, and housing lined the main thoroughfare, Dowling Street. Emancipation Park offered a place for families to gather to celebrate, meet, and play. The Eldorado Club, next to the park, hosted renowned entertainers like Cab Calloway, jazz musicians, and big bands.

The nearby Franklin Beauty School and Tyler Barber College trained many African Americans in the beauty and barber professions. Black physicians practiced in the Third Ward, and the Riverside General Hospital, previously called the Houston Negro Hospital, served the area.

The community also built a number of churches in the Third Ward. Trinity United Methodist Church, the oldest black church in Houston, was founded prior to the Civil War. Wesley Chapel AME Church and St. John Missionary Baptist Church, built in 1875 and 1889 respectively, are still important congregations in the Third Ward today.

Schools played a vital role in the development of the Third Ward. Jack Yates High School, the second black high school in Houston, originally acted as the meeting place for classes of the Houston Junior College for Negroes, which later became Texas Southern University.

Some of these structures still exist today, but many have been demolished. The city within a city has almost disappeared, but a strong sense of community and pride remains with the residents of the Third Ward.¹¹



The stations along the Southeast Line demonstrate the possibilities of public history — that is history presented outside the walls of academia. Here noted African American history scholars provide an overview of Houston’s black community going back five centuries, and, incorporating the vision of Carroll Parrott Blue and The Dawn Project, METRO has made it accessible to everyone who steps onto the Southeast Line. These murals will teach new generations of Houstonians and visitors about the remarkable history of African Americans living in the city and state who impacted the equal rights movement nationally. To those who took part in the modern historical events such as the civil rights movement, it will serve as a reminder that their contributions are part of this legacy. From Esteban’s arrival in the sixteenth century through today, this history is full of stories of “ordinary people doing extraordinary things.”

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Performers entertain a crowd at Emancipation Park in the Third Ward, circa 1970. The park has been used since its creation as a place to gather, celebrate, and remember.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.