



# Dawson Lunnon Cemetery: “The future is nothing without the past”

By Aaron P. Goffney

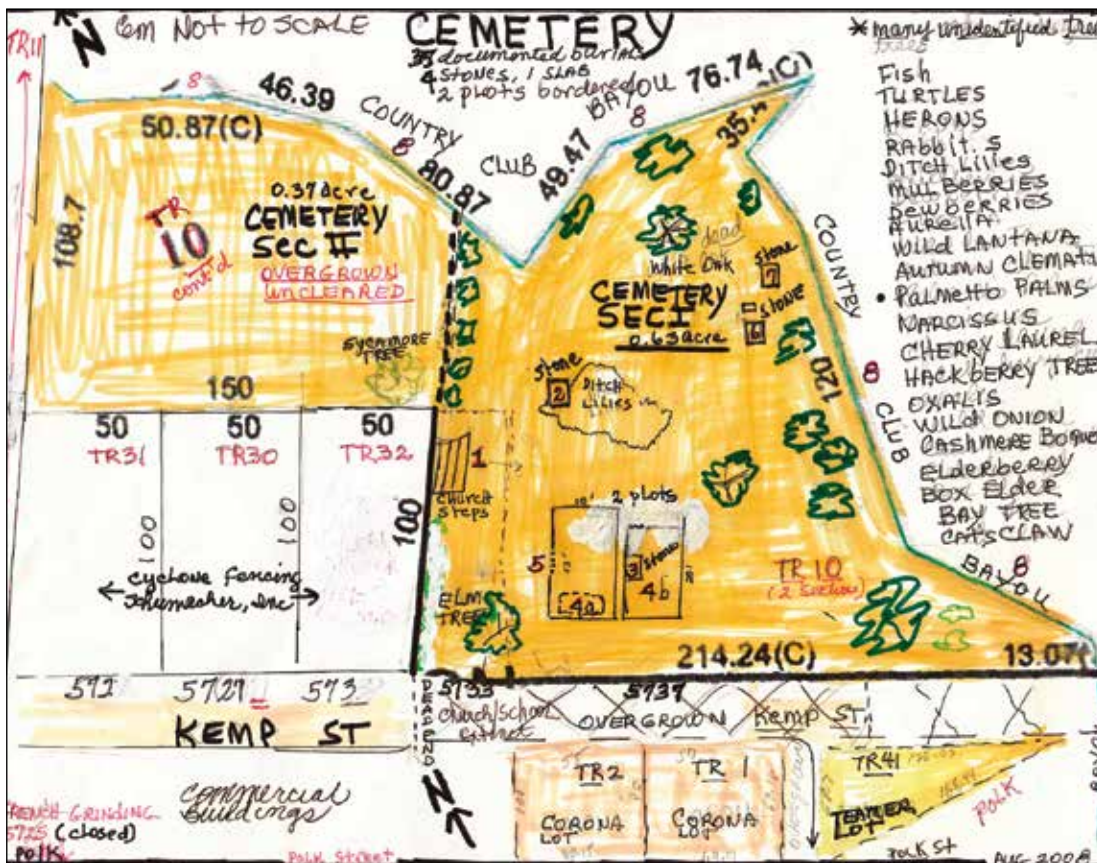
Nestled in the middle of an industrial neighborhood where many awake to the vigorous hustle and bustle of everyday life lies an area where thirty-five, and possibly many more, black Houstonians share their final resting place. Situated by a bayou that is lined with trash and home to squirrels, birds, rabbits, snakes, and herons, this African American cemetery holds the stories of its inhabitants' migration to Texas along with their dreams, challenges, successes, and tragedies.

When Texas was a Republic, slave-owners from neighboring states came to the area to take advantage of the opportunities Texas had to offer. According to Texas law, “all free white persons” who lived in the Republic for six months, intended to stay permanently, and swore allegiance to Texas could enjoy “all the privileges of citizenship,” which included owning slaves.<sup>1</sup> After the Civil War, an influx of newly freed slaves and emigrants moved west. States such as Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas all share stories of freedmen and their families who traveled to Houston seeking job opportunities and a new way of life.

The lives of the people buried in the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery steer you through a timeline of the common toils and tensions most black families endured during the eras of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement. Virginia Hancock, researcher and advocate for preserving this historical site, assured me as we chatted and sipped our coffee that this story would be a good one. She explained that it has been hard for her to get people interested in this magnificent piece of history. Neither whites nor blacks seem to “feel a real response to this historical location like many school and volunteer groups,” she said. Yet employees at the nearby LyondellBasell Refinery and members of the Lawyers Against Waste Committee of the Houston Bar Association came to help clear the land, plant trees, and remove weeds. Virginia added, “Because of the perception of industrial and commercial businesses in the East End, they may not feel that the area is worth the trip.”<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1931, Virginia Hancock grew up in the East End near the Houston Ship Channel. At age ten, her family moved to the edge of the venerable Houston Country Club, a golf course built in 1908 and now Gus Wortham Park.





This map, drawn by Virginia Hancock, gives descriptive detail of the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery as it stood in the early 1900s. Section I of the map is the only part of the cemetery that is visible today. The front part of Section II was sold, and the back part is overgrown with trees and high grass.

All photos courtesy of Virginia Hancock.

Hancock developed an interest in the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery as she pondered who occupied the land before her parents purchased it.

While tracing the land records back to the original owners, Virginia came across an interesting story that included an East End landowner named Rufus Cage, the Lunnon family, and E. F. Simms, a Spindletop oil man. As Virginia extended her research, she discovered how all of these people were interconnected through the ownership of the land, where they lived and worked. Even though her interest has focused on the Lunnons, she explains they all depended upon one another: “The leaders, the people with the money and the power, made the choices to develop, but it would have been hard to accomplish their visions without the Lunnons and other families coming through from other neighborhood communities who did the work in the trenches and were very important to each other. They were maids for various homes, provided laundry services, and worked [in] the community’s filling stations.”<sup>3</sup>

Hancock focused her research during the early 2000s on the Lunnon family’s connection to Rufus Cage, names she knew from the land records. After a friend came with his machete to cut back the overgrown cemetery, which had become “a jungle,” Virginia found additional graves. She has since located thirty-five documented dead buried there, including eleven with visible markers, although she believes there are possibly many more.

According to Texas law during the Republic years, “all persons of color who were slaves for life” prior to coming to

Texas and were still held in bondage remained slaves in Texas. During slavery, many African Americans traveled with their owners, lived on their land, and raised families. This increased the number of slaves, created stability, and lessened slave rebellions.<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1840s agents of the Adelsverein (Society of Noblemen) encouraged German immigrants to participate in the slavery system and, as a result, saw their communities flourish. Plantations located along the lower Brazos and Colorado Rivers, such as Fort Bend and Wharton Counties, experienced great success. While many German emigrants advocated for slavery to culturally assimilate, others wanted to confront the volatile issue and campaigned for a slave-free zone.<sup>5</sup>

Rufus Cage Sr. (1826-1906), a Harvard graduate, landowner, developer, and respected businessman, moved to Houston around 1850. Residing in Houston’s Third Ward, his son Rufus Cage Jr. (1853-1918) served as the Houston School Board president. In 1894 the district established a school in his honor that still stands today at 1417 Telephone Road. The Cage family donated land for the original one-room, wood-frame schoolhouse called the Eastwood School (also Kirby School). The current structure opened in 1910, but Cage closed it between 1914 and 1925 to house families in the agricultural community.

A mulatto, Mike Lunnon was born in 1830 in either Mississippi or Tennessee and moved to Houston in the 1850s presumably with the Cage family. In 1870, Lunnon purchased seven and a half acres of land on Yates Gully (Michaux Gully) in the Luke Moore Survey from Cage for \$200. Lunnon’s household consisted of his wife Margarette Clyberg Lunnon and their seven children, three sons and four daughters, born between 1859 and 1877. In 1891, Lunnon bought eleven more acres in the Samuel Williams Survey from Col. John Thomas Brady. On these



Margarette Lunnon and her husband Mike traveled to Texas in 1850 with Rufus Cage.





*Mt. Gilead students dressed as flowers at a May fete, circa 1920s. They are standing outside the church-school building facing the cemetery.*

lands, the family resided, held church services, and attended elementary school, which met in the Mt. Gilead Missionary Baptist Church. The family continued to grow as two of Lunnon's daughters married the Williams brothers, Frank and Charles, and both had several children.

When Mike Lunnon died in 1906, he left a will that, when probated in 1909, gave all of his property valued at \$5,000 debt-free to his wife, an impressive accomplishment for a black man who could not read or write. It was also admirable that an African American man in that era had competed in the capitalist society and owned property, which equated to power in the eyes of many.

The Lunnons had created a foundation that allowed a black family to thrive during Reconstruction—an era that, for the first time, offered African Americans the opportunity to control their own destiny and fulfill their Constitutional right to pursue the American dream. Mike Lunnon was part of the first generation after slavery came to an end that bequeathed an estate to his family. Jack Yates, a respected leader among Houston's population of newly freed slaves, thought the road to prosperity and peaceful coexistence between the races required blacks to live in separate—but not distant—communities.<sup>6</sup> Although Reconstruction was intended to provide this space and an opportunity to succeed, it did not last.

In 1911, the land in the Samuel Williams Survey was plotted and recorded as the Lunnon Tract. In 1913, developers and lawyers had Margarette Lunnon, Mike Lunnon's wife, declared incompetent in efforts to gain the land. In 1914, the first son of Mike Lunnon, Dawson Lunnon (1859-1935), transferred part of the Lunnon Tract to the Mt. Gilead Missionary Baptist Church for \$100 to four trustees: Aaron Harris, Charlie Williams (husband of Eula Lunnon), John McDonald, and Thomas Hodge. Although the church no longer exists on the street, it is still listed at 5733 Kemp Street on various online genealogy publications such as Ancestry.com. Virginia explains that part of Kemp Street has disappeared. According to the City of Houston's Public Works Department, it is not feasible or cost effective to replace it. The church and the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery were bordered by the Country Club Bayou, which crosses Polk Street and Yates Gully, standing a short distance from the former Houston Country Club. The absence of Kemp Street makes it difficult to find the cemetery.<sup>7</sup>

By 1916, after a six-year court battle over ownership of the land, the Yates Gully land became the site of Robertson's Transfer and is now a METRO Bus Operating Facility. Plots continued to disappear in 1923 when the City of Houston bought more land in a quit-claim deed. This purchase covered areas east of Hughes Street (formerly called Baker Street), in addition to ten more acres of the Luke Moore League.

The East End community, of which the Lunnons were a part, continued to play a supporting role in early Houston's entrepreneurial efforts associated with cotton, the Houston Ship Channel and port, railroads, refineries, and businesses that helped propel Houston's growth. For example, many of the men in the East End neighborhood worked at Hughes Tool Company. Known for his patented roller cutter that improved oil drilling, Howard Hughes Sr. provided many jobs for Houston's unskilled workers until the company suffered financial losses during the Great Depression from 1929 to 1933.<sup>8</sup> When E. F. Simms bought 210 acres from the Lunnons and others, the African American women in the community worked as laundresses and cleaners in private households and as maids in his estate, frequented by notable Houstonians. The E. F. Simms estate was later sold to Jamail Properties and is now a Fiesta Supermarket surrounded by apartments.

As a consequence, the Lunnon Tract was wedged in the center of profound transformations, later absorbed by new infrastructure and an influx of families drawn by the jobs in Houston's thriving East End. The community had a grocery store, a barbeque place, a church, a public school, and a motorcycle shop run by Fred Williams, son of Frank and Anna Lunnon Williams. Unfortunately, Frank Williams



*Cemetery caretaker Virginia Hancock explains that lilies not only beautify the cemetery but also represent those who rest there. When community members could not afford headstones, they planted lilies as markers. Possibly dating back a hundred years, these lilies leave one to wonder how many similarly marked graves were lost over time. Despite repeated efforts to divide and transplant the lilies, they seem to only flourish at the cemetery.*





*Virginia Hancock, shown with Paul Washington who has helped her clear the cemetery land, serves as custodian of the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery. Her hard work and dedication have yielded a new awareness of the land's historical relevance. Willie Williams was the last to be buried in the family plot, laid to rest in 1953. The "S" was placed upside down in the African tradition to heighten the deceased's chance of entering heaven.*

was murdered in 1914 at the segregated Harrisburg Road Bar. Virginia noted that this hate crime left his wife Annie Lunnon with seven young children to raise.<sup>9</sup>

Hughes Tool Company became a centerpiece for racial discrimination during the Great Depression and the 1960s civil rights movement. Unions such as the International Association of Machinists (IAM) excluded blacks from membership because in the minds of many white employees, admitting them was tantamount to giving African Americans equal status in the union.<sup>10</sup>

Dawson Lunnon Cemetery as a final resting place provided a sanctuary for the Lunnon family and their descen-

dants. Mother Margarette Lunnon died at age eighty-five in 1915 and was buried in the cemetery, followed in later years by Cecelia Theresa Yates, Dawson and Henry Lunnon, and others. The Williams family was buried in their own plot up the hill near the former church site.

A University of Texas graduate and school nurse, Virginia Hancock retired in 1989. She has used her pension to maintain the cemetery property and regularly watered the plants until an irrigation system was installed. Hancock's passion derives from the interconnection she sees between the generations of people who lived in and transformed her community. Now eighty-four, she continues to be the catalyst in the preservation and upkeep of the Dawson Lunnon Cemetery. The community activist has motivated companies and organizations such as LyondellBasell, the Houston Bar Association, Trees for Houston, Keep Houston Beautiful, East End Management District, University of Houston, Harris County probationers, METRO, and various school groups to clean up and improve the property.

Virginia's goal is to find an organization that can take over the project when she is no longer able. Her selfless acts in preserving this "little jewel," as she calls the cemetery, are imperative to the city's historical memory of life and death in a segregated world.

In August 2009, the Texas Historical Commission certified Dawson Lunnon Cemetery as a Historic Texas Cemetery. The cemetery is important because it gives Houstonians insight into their broad past. History is the study of the past and how it relates to people. Who are these people? What did they mean to their community, to society?

The cemetery connects African American history to present black culture. The Lunnons' Mt. Gilead Baptist Church and the surrounding community came to its demise during integration, when blacks moved out of their segregated areas. From 1914 to 1970 this community was livable, viable,

and self-contained. Today industrial businesses disrupt the area's historical essence where houses were burned or torn down. Extreme makeovers are ongoing, such as the new METRORail routes that travel from Magnolia Park through the historic East End and onto other business locations.

While integration of the East End gave its residents an opportunity to gain a sense

of mutual understanding of their cultural differences, it also led to the dismantling of the autonomous black community. Virginia Hancock highlights the importance of Houstonians cherishing and understanding how this small community helped contribute to the formation of Houston. She remains a true advocate of the phrase "the future is nothing without the past" and has invited others to share in her conviction.

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