

# The Turkey Day Classic, Houston's Biggest Football Rivalry

By Aman Washington and Justin Thompson



*Dr. Thurman W. Robins's painting Thanksgiving Turkey Day Classic commemorates the game's legacy. The Jack Yates Lions of Third Ward are in crimson and gold, and the Phillis Wheatley Wildcats of Fifth Ward are wearing purple and white. Photo courtesy of Dr. Thurman W. Robins.*

One of the largest and most diverse cities in the nation, Houston was once a place separated by race. Today when thinking about Houston's Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards, where many African Americans settled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many people may overlook the contributions these wards made to the fabric of Houston's history—particularly as labels used to support gentrification come to mind, such as poverty, minorities, and a waste of valuable land. Although historically African Americans dealt with discriminatory laws and treatment, they made the best of what they were given, usually the worst of the worst, and made something beautiful of it. Such is the case with the Turkey Day Classic.

The annual Thanksgiving Turkey Day Classic football game is one of America's most interesting stories of community building and agency, but few people today know about it. At one time the talk of Houston, the annual football game between rivals Jack Yates High School of the Third Ward and Phillis Wheatley High School of the Fifth Ward

has a rich history that stems from the growth of predominantly Black neighborhoods during Reconstruction, the Great Migration, and the post-World War II era.

We had the pleasure of interviewing five graduates from Jack Yates High School and eight graduates of Phillis Wheatley High School to learn about the Turkey Day Classic era, their schools, and their communities. Deloris Johnson, a 1958 graduate of Yates, and Loretta Thompson Williams, a 1959 graduate of Wheatley, orchestrated the interviews so that we could speak to people with various roles in the Classic. Yates Lions Samuel Taylor and Rev. Donald Dickson were former standout football players, Dr. Thurman Robins played in the band, Ms. Johnson was the captain of the J. D. Ryan Kadettes drum corps, named for Yates's first principal, and Thelma Robins Gould was the Kadettes' captain. Wheatley Wildcats Edwin Bay and Ralph Jones played on teams that competed in the Classic, Betty Taylor-Thompson was a cheerleader, and Algenita Davis was on the drill team. Willie Jordan, Ralph





*As the Turkey Day Classic gained popularity into the 1960s, the crowd became so dense with fans from both sides as well as unbiased spectators that some had to watch the game from the track surrounding the field. This game in 1957 ended with Yates taking the victory 12-6.*

*All photos courtesy of Yates and Wheatley High Schools unless otherwise noted.*

Buggs, Peggy Stratton-Sales, and Ms. Thompson Williams were students who took part in the game's festivities.

When we met, both groups filled the room with a sense of family and pride. Each interview began with warm smiles and hugs and swiftly became walks down memory lane. The most prominent theme in the discussions was their overwhelming pride to have attended Jack Yates and Phillis Wheatley High Schools, to have grown up in Houston's Third and Fifth Wards, and to have participated in the great Turkey Day Classic.

## A HISTORY OF THE SCHOOLS

After slavery was abolished in Texas in 1865, many former slaves from areas surrounding Houston, other parts of Texas, and Louisiana migrated to Houston, many on foot, in search of opportunity. Many Blacks settled in what became known as Freedman's Town, one of the first independent Black communities in Houston, located in Fourth Ward.<sup>2</sup> Although African Americans were segregated and lacked the same opportunities as Whites, Fourth Ward quickly became the epicenter of Black prosperity. In 1893, Booker T. Washington High School opened there as Houston's first Black high school.

With the expansion of Jim Crow laws in the South at the

*“Oh! What a glorious time!  
What a magnificent happening  
for the community. The [Turkey  
Day] Classic was rich with  
pageantry, glamour, splendor,  
and entertainment.”*

— Thurman W. Robins, Ed. D.<sup>1</sup>

turn of the twentieth century, African Americans took part in the Great Migration to escape oppression, but not all went to the North, Midwest, or West Coast. Tens of thousands found their way to Houston between 1900 and 1930, increasing the city's Black population from 14,608 to 63,337. Third and Fifth Wards, in turn, developed their own thriving business districts. With this increase

in population, the school district opened Jack Yates High School in 1926 and Phillis Wheatley one year later.<sup>3</sup>

Segregation limited the ways Blacks and Whites could interact, including in sports. Consequently, Black schools established the Texas Interscholastic League for Colored Schools, later the Prairie View Interscholastic League, in the 1920s, which provided a format for the schools to play one another. Phillis Wheatley and Booker T. Washington played the first Turkey Day Game in 1927, and for a few years the three Black Houston high schools had set games on selected holidays. Yates and Wheatley played on Armistice Day, Wheatley and Washington on Thanksgiving Day, then Washington and Yates on Christmas Day.<sup>4</sup>

This trend continued until 1940 when the league created districts and a playoff system to determine a state champion, effectively eliminating the Washington versus Yates Christmas Day game. Starting at that time,





*The Yates High School drill team the Ryan Kadettes was named for the school's first principal, J. D. Ryan. Deloris Johnson, far left, and Thelma Robins (now Gould), top right, participated in the interviews for this article.*



*Captains from Wheatley and Yates shaking hands at the coin toss of another legendary Turkey Day Game.*

the Thanksgiving Day game alternated between Yates, Washington, and Wheatley. Dr. Thurman Robins attributes the three schools' play style to the game's transcendent popularity, stating, "[The] teams employed a wide open offensive style of play with backs spinning, a wide variety of end runs and laterals, reverses, use of the forward pass."<sup>5</sup> Although many people attended the Thanksgiving game, nothing compared to the crowds who came out to watch the Yates and Wheatley matchup. Everyone could see the budding rivalry growing between the two schools so the Houston Independent School District (HISD) sought to capitalize. In 1946, after a brief period of rotating the game, HISD decided to make Yates and Wheatley the permanent Turkey Day Game competitors, intensifying the rivalry between the two schools.

The first game between the Jack Yates Lions and the Phillis Wheatley Wildcats was held in 1927 at Barr's Field

with about 1,000 people in attendance. The two young schools duked it out in front of the large crowd and Yates came away with the first victory, 20-6.<sup>6</sup> In 1948, two years after HISD designated their game the Thanksgiving Day rivalry, the schools played their third Turkey Day Game at the Public School Stadium (later Jeppesen and then Robertson Stadium in Third Ward) in front of nearly 17,500 fans, a huge crowd. Yates alumnus Samuel Taylor describes the crowd, saying, "The fans were so loud, [and] the stadium was so loud!"<sup>7</sup>

By its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s the Turkey Day Classic attracted over 20,000 people on a regular basis. The largest recorded crowds turned out in the early 1960s, with a whopping 40,000-plus fans attending in 1961, and 37,000 fans cheering on their teams in 1962. Only one other high school football game drew a crowd of that capacity, a one-time all-star game held in Chicago. People knew that to see the Turkey Day Game you had to get in line at the box office early. "Coming from Fifth Ward, you had to leave home early that morning if you wanted to get a seat in the classic," Dr. Robins recalls. He tells the story of Wheatley's basketball coach Jackie Carr taking his aunt, who came from out of town, to the game. After she insisted they go, Carr told her, "We'll have to leave early." Robins continues, "[B]y the time she got dressed and all it was after 12 o'clock ... [and] it was halftime before they got in the stadium. They didn't get a chance to see the game, much of the game, because they left too late," thus emphasizing the game's overwhelming popularity and the importance of punctuality to get a seat.<sup>8</sup>

## TRADITIONS

The Turkey Day Game evolved into Turkey Day Week for both schools, with numerous school events planned before the game. The early morning Thanksgiving Day breakfasts and parades before the game created some of the fondest





*The Wheatley Wildcat cheerleaders had a busy week leading up to the Turkey Day Game. Their preparations included ensuring every aspect of their uniform was in pristine condition. Betty Taylor (now Taylor-Thompson), one of the Wheatley interview participants, is center front.*

memories for people who lived during the Turkey Day Classic era. The breakfast included a feast, lots of cheering, and the crowning of Miss Alumna, while the parade included the school marching bands, floats, and fine convertible cars, among other things.

The week leading up to the Turkey Day Game for Phillis Wheatley and Jack Yates, as well as their surrounding communities, was nothing short of fantastic. Alumni from both schools traveled from afar to take part in the fun of another Turkey Day Classic. The entire week was filled with anticipation that culminated at each school's respective pep rallies, featuring hundreds of boisterous students yelling at fever pitch along with cheerleaders leading chants, and their bands providing tunes. Each team's head coach and captains gave speeches that ignited the crowd, fueling loyalty and pride that overflowed into game day.

At Wheatley High School starting in 1950, the school hosted a Thanksgiving Day Breakfast feast that continued until the schools stopped playing on the holiday. This breakfast began at 7:00 a.m., celebrated the crowning of Miss Alumna with guest appearances from famous alumni, and was featured on Houston's local radio station KCOH. Music from records added to the atmosphere, and "the aroma of freshly cooked eggs, grits, crispy bacon, and hot buttered biscuits filled the nostrils."<sup>9</sup> Intermittent cheers and yelling kept the atmosphere upbeat in between remarks from the principal, student body president, alumni president, and Miss Alumna herself. After the breakfast, enthusiasm and spirits of the students and alumni were heightened as many moved on to spectate or participate in the parade.<sup>10</sup>

Both schools had huge parades on Thanksgiving Day along streets lined with Black-owned businesses. Yates's parade traveled down Third Ward's Dowling Street, and Wheatley's parade navigated down Lyons Avenue in Fifth Ward. The Yates parade featured the marching band,



*Miss Yates, Aurelia Arceneaux, the Queen of Lionland, waves to the crowd of over 25,000 at Jeppesen Stadium.*

cheerleaders, the Ryan Kadettes drill team, the majorettes, beautiful floats, and Miss Yates and her court in fine cars. The Wheatley parade included the Wildcat marching band, their majorettes, the Purple and White Squadron drill team, stunning floats, and Miss Wheatley and her court. Notable faculty and staff, as well as outstanding members of the community and excited on-lookers, turned out for both schools. "The Yates Parade would go down Dowling. And everybody would get their outfits on. Wheatley would go down Lyons Avenue [in] convertible purple cars," Willie Johnson recalled.<sup>11</sup>

The Turkey Day Game became the highlight of each year, not only for the Black community, but for all of Houston. More than the average sporting event, it devel-





*Wheatley's drill team, The Purple and White Squadron, was named in honor of the school's colors.*

oped into a big social gathering. People saved all year to buy beautiful and handsome outfits for the game. Yates and Wheatley alumni alike remember that planning outfits started long before football season. It was so important that "...[the students] had been planning what they were going to wear from one year to the next and putting it in layaway," according to Thelma Robins Gould. Willie Johnson of Wheatley said, "They would save money the whole year to buy a big outfit."<sup>12</sup> It was equal to, if not better than, one's Sunday best. Some Yates graduates even remember their outfits for the Turkey Day Game being more important than their Easter outfits.

At halftime of every game, the two schools' marching bands, corps, majorettes, and drill teams went head to head in a battle of their own, mirroring the rivalry between the football teams. One of the highlights of this great halftime show was the crowning of Miss Yates and Miss Wheatley. Each school tried to outdo the other during the crowning with the best cars for the queen and her court. One of the most memorable halftime shows occurred during the 1958 Turkey Day Game. Miss Yates, Carolyn Wilkins (now

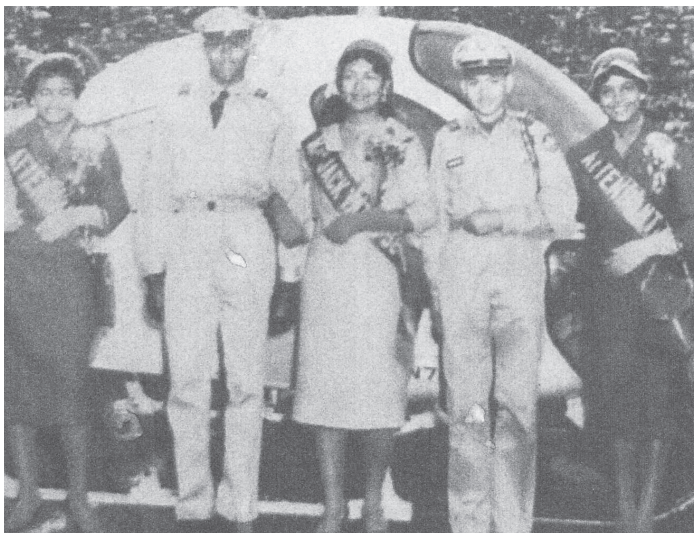
Wilkins-Greene), along with her two attendants made an unprecedented entrance, flying down in a helicopter. Dr. Wilkins-Greene describes the excitement upon landing, "I was kind of like Alice in Wonderland, it was quite a moment when we stepped out, even Wheatley[']s side] erupted!" Willie Johnson typifies Wheatley's reaction, saying, "I would have to confess when Carolyn Wilkins from Yates came out in a helicopter, we threw in the flag. We threw in the white flag."<sup>14</sup> Needless to say Yates won that year's halftime competition and that exhibition still is and forever will be the talk of the town.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT

These rivalries were so popular because they extended beyond the schools and into the communities. It cannot be overstated how very proud each of the respective communities were and how hard they worked to make their community and their school the best. Ralph Buggs, Wheatley Class of 1959 explains, "The other thing about the game, it wasn't a game between two teams. It was a game [between] the neighborhood[s]." This spirit was passed along to everyone and was especially taught in the classroom. Former Yates football players recall neighbors and other members of the community saying things like, "If y'all don't win today don't bother coming home." This game meant a lot to the community.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to the 1950s Houston was heavily segregated. The Yates group explains that Blacks could not cross Cullen Street that runs between the stadium where they played the game and the University of Houston. Many of the standard conveniences found at White football games were not afforded to Blacks, such as an ambulance waiting outside the stadium for precautionary measures. Nonetheless, Collins Funeral Home, owned by a parent of students at Jack Yates High School, provided an ambulance at the game.<sup>16</sup> Speaking to the unity of the neighborhood, Mr. Collins took it upon himself to be ready to take care of any injured players if needed.

The immense number of people who came to watch Yates play Wheatley generated a significant amount of revenue for HISD; however, the vast majority of the money went to



*In 1958 Carolyn Wilkins of Yates and her court made their entrance by helicopter. No entrance before or after that created such a stir.*

the White schools instead. The Yates and Wheatley game was so popular, in fact, that even White Houstonians came to watch the two Black schools play, but true to Jim Crow customs, the races were separated at the game. Thurman Robins remembers, “They had a reserved section for whites. At every game. And the reserved sections were some of the best seats in the house, like the fifty yard [line], for whites.”<sup>17</sup> The Black schools, including Yates and Wheatley, received secondhand jerseys, uniforms, football pads, and books, rarely seeing any revenue from these games. Even with these unfair circumstances that could be a setup for failure, students and athletes at Yates and Wheatley persevered and produced some of the best students and athletes (in the classroom and on the field) in Houston and the nation.

*“If you went to Yates you didn’t wear purple and white, and if you went to Wheatley you didn’t wear crimson and gold. Nor would you be caught in Fifth Ward wearing crimson and gold, and you dare not be in Third Ward and wear purple and white...”*

— Deloris Johnson<sup>13</sup>

The spirit of resilience and determination is one thing that can be taken from reading *Requiem for a Classic: Thanksgiving Turkey Day Classic* and from the interviews with graduates of both schools. The leadership at Yates and Wheatley insisted on academic excellence and failure was not an option. Thelma Robins Gould humbly declares, “I felt after coming from Jack Yates, I felt that I could compete anywhere I went.” This sentiment, which her classmates shared, was affirmed when Gould became one of the first African American exchange students to attend Muskingum University in New Concord, Ohio. No matter how tall the task or how great the obstacle, they felt they were equipped to get through it. Dr. Betty Taylor-Thompson speaks to the uniqueness of her studies, affirming, “There is no education like [the one] we got at Phillis Wheatley Senior High School.”<sup>18</sup>

The segregation of schools was not entirely a story of hard times and oppression. Houston’s Turkey Day Classic demonstrates the strength of the Black community and its ability to produce greatness despite segregation.

## END OF AN ERA

Two factors contributed to the demise of the Turkey Day Classic. The first occurred when Yates opened its new building in 1958 and HISD spitefully moved Wheatley’s Principal John E. Codwell to Yates to replace Principal William Holland. Following his twenty-one years at Yates, seventeen of them as principal, Holland was demoted to



*To the dismay of the Wheatley and Yates communities, Dr. John E. Codwell, was transferred from Wheatley to Yates in 1958.*



*Punished for his outspokenness, William S. Holland was demoted from principal at Yates to Ryan Middle School when the new Yates High School building opened in 1958.*

principal of Ryan Middle School due to his outspokenness for his students. This change severely impacted both the Third and Fifth Ward communities, creating an unstable leadership situation at Wheatley and causing unrest at Yates, as some students threatened to go on strike. Some hoisted signs after Codwell’s appointment that read, “No Holland, No School.” Rev. Donald Dickson, explained, “It killed the school spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

The second factor that ultimately brought an end to the tradition was the integration of public schools in the mid-1960s. After integration, the Prairie View Interscholastic League schools became part of the University Interscholastic League (UIL), which took over scheduling. The UIL required regular season games end before Thanksgiving, thereby eliminating the Classic.<sup>20</sup> Integration also brought changes to the neighborhoods as people and businesses moved to areas of town previously closed to them. Although Yates and Wheatley still play each other, the rivalry has never been the same.

In 1970 the University of Houston purchased Jeppesen Stadium and hosted many home games there before demolishing it in 2012 to make way for a new stadium.<sup>21</sup> As development and gentrification change the face of the area around the university, many residents of Houston’s Third Ward are watching the remnants and history of their once vibrant community disappear forever. Likewise, in Fifth Ward, the once thriving business district at Lyons and Jensen stands largely vacant, leaving only a memory of what once was. Although the two high schools have both moved from their original locations, the memories and stories of the great Turkey Day Classic games between the Jack Yates Lions and the Phillis Wheatley Wildcats will always be cherished by those who had the pleasure of being part of this great era.

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