

Jack Yates High School and Third Ward: Changing Together



By Antonio Lopez and Andres Rios

The original Jack Yates campus, located at 2610 Elgin, was the second Black high school in Houston. The school became a pillar of the community and a beacon of education in the Third Ward. The school has been home to notable alumni, from musicians and artists to activists and politicians.

Photo courtesy of the Sloane Collection.

A pillar of the Third Ward community, Jack Yates High School has a rich history that spans a century. Its namesake, Reverend John Henry “Jack” Yates, a formerly enslaved man, rose to prominence in Houston in the late 1860s by promoting community betterment through education and faith. Yates High School’s history reflects a similar story of challenges, resilience, and triumph.¹ From its founding in 1926, through segregation and beyond, Yates has undergone tremendous change.

Houston’s industrial growth at the turn of the twentieth century offered African Americans a chance to escape the exploitation of sharecropping and other agricultural labor that had contributed to the economic stagnation of the first post-emancipation generation. The city’s Black population increased from 19,894 in 1900 to 33,960 by 1920, with many of the new arrivals seeking economic opportunities. As the number of migrants and their families grew, their children required an education.²

Houston, like many southern cities, was segregated. Those wielding political power limited opportunities for many African Americans by restricting funding for school buildings, books, and equipment. Thus, few schools fully addressed the students’ needs, even though enrollment at all grade levels steadily rose between 1910 and 1930. In 1910 Houston had 3,565 Black students enrolled; by 1920 the number reached 6,520 and, in 1930, 12,419.³

Houston schools saw some improvement in the 1920s, including in Black schools. In 1924, Houstonians voted to make their school district independent of city government and subsequently hired a new superintendent, Dr. Edison E. Oberholtzer (1924–1945). In 1925, the district announced plans to build a new high school in the Third Ward for African American students. Two locations were proposed, one on Elgin Street and the other on Dowling Street (now Emancipation Avenue). HISD appropriated \$70,000 from a \$3 million bond for the construction of the new school; nevertheless, *The Informer* newspaper argued the funding should be ten times that amount to reflect the size of the Black community. The district then proposed a \$4 million bond, allocating \$500,000 to build schools and upgrade seventeen others in the Black community.⁴ This included Jack Yates High School, which opened in 1926, and Phillis Wheatley High School, which opened in Fifth Ward in 1927.

Separate but Equal

The “separate but equal” restrictions legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and Jim Crow laws cemented the divide between the White and Black populations. White schools had better infrastructure and more resources allocated to them, while Black schools were often overcrowded, lacked equipment and books, and had inferior facilities and less funding. The original Yates campus was

much smaller compared to White schools like Milby or Reagan (now Heights), built at the same time.⁵

The original campus lacked sports facilities such as a football field where the team could practice, and Yates played its games in West End Park and Buffalo Stadium, until 1942 when HISD opened Public School Stadium (later renamed Jeppesen and then Robertson Stadium). Separate but equal also affected the curriculum. HISD schools offered its students college prep courses or vocational training; however, these opportunities were limited in Black schools.⁶

Funding and pay differences between Black and White schools and staff were stark. White teachers earned twice as much as Black educators despite having less training. These disparities stemmed from racial bias in state and local funding. Local officials provided minimal resources for Black schools, neglecting the community's request for equitable facilities. Occasionally, officials built new schools or updated aging facilities in Black neighborhoods, but these efforts were largely ineffective and aimed to appease the community's loud criticism.⁷



The founding faculty of Yates played an instrumental role in establishing the school as the academic benison that the Third Ward community needed for its youth.

Photo courtesy of 1991 Reunion Program, African American History Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Yates High School's First Twenty-five Years

Jack Yates Senior High School opened its doors on February 8, 1926, becoming Houston's second high school for African Americans. Opening the school with about 600 students and seventeen teachers, HISD built Yates to alleviate overcrowding at Houston Colored High School in the Fourth Ward. Located at 2610 Elgin, the two-story building had approximately thirty classrooms, a boys' gymnasium on

the first floor and a sewing room and library on the second floor. However, the completed building was smaller than the original plans, which also included a tennis court and a large track field. In 1927, the *Houston Informer* reported on the first commencement in which one of Jack Yates's granddaughters presented a portrait of Yates to the school and another sang, in keeping with his legacy.⁸

James D. Ryan, an 1890 graduate of Prairie View A&M and an advocate for education, served as Yates's first principal until his death in 1940. Under Ryan, with the cooperation of Wiley and Prairie View colleges, Yates hosted the first summer school for Black teachers. The school faced funding issues from the start, yet Ryan sought solutions within the Black community rather than confronting White peers, administrators, or city officials about reform. Beloved by his students, "Professor Jimmie" used his own funds to supplement programs, teacher salaries, school supplies, and the salaries of skilled instructors. His dedication helped establish music departments, athletic teams, and foreign language programs such as Latin, Greek, French, and German in Black schools, leading many students to have successful careers in education and the arts. After Ryan's passing, HISD promoted Yates's assistant principal William S. Holland to principal,



The district chose the principal at Houston Colored High School, James D. Ryan, as Yates's first principal. His advocacy and resilience pushed the school forward, establishing its reputation in the community.

Photo courtesy of *The Lion Yearbook*, 1941.

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Long known for its persistence in showing up for the community, Yates summer school offerings enabled students to expand their academic skills and give them an advanced start when the regular session commenced.

Photo courtesy of *The Informer* and the Portal to Texas History.



Yates moved to 3703 Sampson in 1958, which was a much needed improvement at the time. The building remained in use for sixty years.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

who became an outspoken advocate for the students and school improvements.⁹

Under Holland, Yates High School continued to offer a wide range of courses, with core classes like reading, writing, math, science, and history, but also vocational training like sewing and cooking for girls, and technical training like welding, construction, plumbing, and auto mechanics for boys. Yates provided summer school classes to elementary and high school students, offering remedial classes, known as “drill courses,” and “advanced work” for a tuition fee. From 1927 to 1947, the campus hosted night classes for the Houston Colored Junior College (1927-1934) and Houston College for Negroes (1934-1947), later renamed Texas Southern University.¹⁰ This early leadership helped to build a stronger community for Houston’s Black families, honoring the school’s namesake, who spent his life trying to lift others through education.

Integration Challenges

By the 1950s, more than 2,000 students attended Yates. Since the school’s designers intended it to accommodate 1,600 students, the Southern Association of Secondary Schools attempted to revoke the school’s accreditation, but Holland stalled the process until the new facility opened later that year. The new building, erected at 3703 Sampson, stood about a mile from the original campus and inbetween the University of Houston and Texas Southern University. Holland secured upgrades for the new campus, including chemistry labs and an auto mechanic building, but he never got to enjoy the fruits of his labor.¹¹

Many believed HISD punished Holland for his outspokenness when the school board brought in Dr. John Codwell, from archrival Phillis Wheatley High School in Fifth Ward, to serve as principal at the new Yates High School. HISD essentially demoted Holland, who remained at the old building, which had been repurposed as James D. Ryan Junior High School. Despite community protests from families in Third and Fifth Wards, HISD refused to change the assignments.¹²

But the community would not be silenced entirely. Although they could not get Holland reinstated at Yates, or Codwell at Wheatley, they elected Hattie Mae White to the Board of Education in 1958, the first African American to break the color line of the previously all-White school board.

Ryan Middle School met the educational needs of Third Ward youths until 2013, when HISD voted to close the school due to its low enrollment. The district converted it to the Baylor College of Medicine Academy at Ryan, a magnet school aimed at preparing students for admission to DeBakey High School for the Health Professions. Many community members opposed the closure, and the NAACP urged the district to improve the school, which had seen its library closed and classes in the arts and foreign language studies eliminated. The loss of these facilities contributed to the steady decrease in enrollment, which, in turn, affected HISD’s willingness to fund the school under its enrollment-based funding model. These changes, along with the growth of charter schools and Houston’s shifting demographics, led to the closure of Ryan Middle School. The community was upset, given the school’s long history in Third Ward and that the closure forced parents to move their children to schools outside the neighborhood.¹³



In 1966, the final year of the PVIL, Yates won the 1966 4A Football State Championship. Coach Patterson, Principal Alexander, Captain Blai, and Co-captain Stevenson show off the trophy.

Photo courtesy of the African American History Research Center, RGD0006-1966-4397-02.

Ryan Middle School was not the only school to face these survival challenges, especially those that were directly affected by the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Houston ISD did not begin desegregating until the matter was forced upon the district in 1956 by Judge Ben C. Connally's decision in the *Ross v. HISD* case. Despite this victory, Connally had not provided a cohesive plan for desegregating the school district, which reluctant school leaders and residents used to their full advantage. It took until 1960 to see real progress, when Houstonians voted two to one against desegregation. In response, J. W. Edgar, the Texas State Commissioner of Education, withheld \$5 million in funds from HISD.¹⁴

This started the desegregation process in Houston, but the gears of change grind slowly. HISD integrated one grade level per year, starting with the first grade, which frustrated the Black community seeking full desegregation. In 1965, around 9,000 students from Houston's Black high schools protested the slow pace of progress. The founder of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and a civic leader, Reverend William Lawson, played a significant role in integrating the district, and under his leadership, boycotts ensued. Students withheld their attendance while roughly 2,000 students, parents, and faculty marched sixty-two blocks to HISD headquarters, "where they were met by barbed wire, padlocked fences and police." HISD did not fully desegregate until 1984, following the settlement of *Ross v. HISD*.¹⁵

Effects of Integration on the Community

Some Houstonians believe integration slowly killed the dynamics and culture of Yates and Third Ward's Black community. Alumni Deloris Johnson attributed student success to the support of the school's teachers and principal Holland: "[They encourage[d] the students, let them know what they could become, what they could achieve ... when you have that kind of encouragement you can't help but want to do something."¹⁶ Students that grew up after integration, on the other hand, did not experience the same type of community cohesion and support that arose during Jim Crow. Living under segregationist policy necessitated strong support networks against a system that set them up for failure.

Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL), which was responsible for games like the Turkey Day Classic, dissolved and merged with the historically White-serving University Interscholastic League. Since all district games had to be completed by the second week of November, the classic Yates versus Wheatley game was no longer possible. With that, the Turkey Day game ceased to exist, and decades-long traditions surrounding it became a thing of the past. However, the game did not disappear forever. Donald Dickson, a former Yates football player who participated in the Classic and director of HISD's Barnett Stadium, hosted one last game in



Yates's athletic programs have been popular since the school's founding. The school has a strong football and basketball program, which was ranked number one in the nation by USA Today in March 2010.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

the 1990s that brought back the old players, with band and drill members.¹⁷ Decades later, this game still drew a significant crowd to Robertson Stadium.

In addition to the loss of beloved school traditions, Black-owned businesses and restaurants began to vanish, replaced by corporate chains and franchises. Reflecting on the gentrification of his neighborhood, Yates alumnus Sammie Taylor reminisced, "We had our own cafés, our own barbecue places, our own chicken place, but when all this McDonald's started coming into our neighborhoods, they killed our community ... [they] killed all our Black businesses."¹⁸

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 also encouraged some middle to upper-class residents to move to the suburbs for better opportunities, especially high-achieving students and teachers seeking additional resources. HISD diverted financial resources to its magnet programs in the 1970s, leaving schools like Yates in the dust. Although these programs were intended to increase integration, they neglected pre-existing programs in predominantly Black and Brown schools.¹⁹

1980 to the Present

The 1990s marked changes in Yates's leadership, who took dramatic steps to stop declining enrollment, which had decreased from 2,700 in 1985 to just 1,900 in 1991. When George W. Bush was elected as governor of Texas in 1994, he ushered in a new focus on education accountability. When HISD's new superintendent, Rod Paige, investigated Yates High School, the principal reported that many Yates-zoned students were transferring or attending magnet schools elsewhere. During this time, nearly half of Yates' faculty were replaced by teachers from Teach For America, who held proper teaching certifications but were not a good fit for the well-established culture at Yates. What was meant to be a move



Yates broadcast journalism program, which began in 1978, had a full functioning onsite studio.

Photo courtesy of the African American Research Center, RGD0006N-1979-2838-5A.

to shake up Yates and stop declining enrollment removed familiar faces and multigenerational relationships between students, parents, and the prior staff. By losing teachers with over twenty years of experience, some of whom taught their students' parents, that community history and trust was lost. Nonetheless, staff members who remained and alumni have continued to regard the school positively. Coach Clarence McKinney, class of 1988, returned to Yates in the mid-2000s to take over the football team and teach, saying, "I went into education to give back. Where better to give back than to a child who was just like me, fifteen, twenty years ago?"²⁰

In 2013, Houston ISD began planning to remodel the Sampson campus, utilizing a \$30 million federal grant and an additional \$749,000 from HISD to support Yates feeder pattern schools in the neighborhood. Construction was completed in 2018, with the total cost of the renovation reaching \$65 million. A grand celebration marked the start of the 2018-19 school year, with halls filled with music and cheers. About twenty alumni gathered at the school's main entrance, chanting school songs. The new campus consists of a three-story building with core learning centers, a one-story performance wing with an auditorium, fine arts and JROTC spaces, a gymnasium and athletics area, and an extensive dining commons with floor-to-ceiling windows.²¹ The building can accommodate 1,300 to 1,500 students with room to grow.

Resolving earlier issues, the renovation showcased two magnet programs offered at Jack Yates High: the School of Communications and the Maritime Academy, both offering industry certifications as Adobe Creative associates upon course completion. The School of Communications includes courses in audio/video production and graphic design, where production students learn design skills for advanced radio, film, and television. Graphic designers learn graphic and animation design techniques for online and print delivery. Yates's communications program is the oldest in HISD, with its photography program dating back to 1950 and its broadcasting journalism program beginning in 1978. In the

Maritime Program, students learn materials handling and port logistics, earning credentials as a logistics associate. The Port of Houston's Maritime Education Program works closely with high schools and universities to educate and train students in the maritime industry.²²

The Texans, the NFL Foundation, and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) pledged \$450,000 in 2021 to renovate and resurface Yates's football field, with the Texans also donating their artificial surface from NRG Stadium.²³

Progress has been made in the reinvestment of Yates over the past few years. In 2014, HISD committed to spending over \$1 million on the campus and its feeder pattern schools.²⁴ Ted Irving, magnet program coordinator, emphasized the importance of having quality courses that will set Yates students up for success upon graduation. "It's the same rule we've all grown up with in the Black community, meaning you've got to be ten times better than your competition. That's the goal here."²⁵ This idea has been echoed by principals at Yates and teachers since the school's inception.

Yates has experienced a transformation and reemerged as a premier Third Ward school, home to a variety of advanced programs that serve to nurture neighborhood youth. Yates has aided the community, and the community has the opportunity to continue aiding Yates. Volunteers can lend assistance to the school's feeder campuses, and employers are encouraged to host field trips and job shadowing for students.²⁶ High-quality education, combined with attention to detail regarding local industry demands has been a conscious effort to ensure that this historically underserved community has resources close to home that will allow them to spend time gaining career experience in the neighborhood that raised them. **HH**

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Jack Yates High School as it stands today. The campus is one of forty schools that has been renovated and upgraded through HISD's 2012 bond program.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.