

LIFE AFTER DEATH: HOW OLIVEWOOD'S CEMETERY RECORDS
RESURRECT THE HISTORY OF HOUSTON'S BLACK COMMUNITY

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by
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ABSTRACT

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Cemeteries contribute to the tapestry of a community's social history. Olivewood, the oldest incorporated African American cemetery in Houston, tells the stories of courage, struggle, joys, and the sorrows that contribute to the community's collective memory. The memorial itself, as well as the lives of those interred in Olivewood also offer insight into the quality of their lives. The records collected by Descendants of Olivewood, Inc., the official guardians of Olivewood Cemetery, offer valuable information that can begin to answer questions about not only death, but also life. These records, many of which remain unpublished, help paint a picture of the community that founded and maintained this historic cemetery, as well as provide insight into the lives that these men, women, and children led.

This study uses the information gleaned from the cemetery's records to add to the existing historiography regarding the quality of life of the African American community in Houston during the Great Depression. A time of struggle for many, due to the socioeconomic, sociocultural, and political dynamics of the era, the Great Depression particularly burdened black Americans. This thesis takes an in-depth look at the records available through the cemetery as well as other primary sources to look at a microcosm of Houston's Black community and the quality of the lives they led. Moreover, by looking at the cemetery itself—the markers, headstones, and even its layout—one can see the impact of religious belief on their society. This thesis merges statistics with the broader human aspect to draw conclusions regarding longevity, disease, healthcare, labor,

education, business development, family, and the building of the African American community in Houston. The Great Depression was a time of enormous tragedy and socioeconomic instability that impacted impoverished Blacks to a greater degree than their counterparts of the racial majority, due to the special challenges they faced during this time of Jim Crow segregation and racial exclusion. However, this thesis shows that despite the crisis, Blacks in Houston enjoyed a greater quality of life than might be expected under the circumstances. Those interred in Olivewood fought to the end, and they can still tell their tale, long after their deaths.

KEY WORDS: Great Depression, Houston, Harris County, Texas, Olivewood Cemetery, Black, African american, Cemetery, Healthcare, Education, Labor, Business development, Community building, Community agency or agency, Public history, Social history

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Chapter I

Introduction

Schallie Davis was a man who, like so many millions of others, left hardly a mark in the annals of history. Davis, a young father and husband, worked as a railroad baggage handler or redcap porter with the H. B. Terminal Co. when the Great Depression hit the country in the fall of 1929. A veteran of World War I and a native Texan, he resided in Houston for most of his life. He lived with his wife, Ellouise, who was almost ten years Schallie's junior. Together with their two small children, the Davis family lived in a rented home at 2719 Dowling Street in Houston's Third Ward.¹ Although public sources record Schallie Davis's exact date of birth as officially unknown, available records list 1896 as his probable birthdate.²

The family faced numerous challenges, as did most impoverished African-American families in the early twentieth century. Neither he nor his wife had been able to attend school, although both could read and write.³ Moreover, they lived in a southern city during a historically intense period of institutionalized segregation. But so did many others. What makes the life of Schallie Davis worthy of notice to anyone outside of his family and immediate descendants? Davis is representative of the thousands of people whose day-to-day lives, although not well documented, weave the fabric of the history of his community.

1. Manuscript Census of the United States: Harris County, Texas, 1930, Bureau of the Census, Series T626, Sheet No. 6B, from Ancestry.com, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

2. Schallie Davis, Texas Death Certificates, 1903-1982. May 13, 1931, certificate number 23913, registrar's number, 1321, Texas State Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, from Ancestry.com, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

3. Davis, Texas Death Certificates, 1903-1982.

The economic downturn of the 1930s impacted people at all levels of society in the United States, but for African Americans, such as the Davis family, a number of dynamics made this economic calamity particularly trying. Racial bigotry in the workforce ensured that unemployed Blacks were often bypassed for work.⁴ Those fortunate enough to have employment often performed the same labor for lower wages than their White counterparts. These circumstances sometimes forced African Americans to take jobs they might not otherwise have taken, or prompted them to migrate in search of employment. For Ellouise Davis, these difficult realities would turn even more bitter when her husband died suddenly of a stroke at the young age of thirty-five.⁵ When the family laid to rest husband and father Schallie Davis in Olivewood Cemetery not long following his passing, the memory of his life would begin to fade with the passage of time. His burial site, therefore, provides the final link between the world of the living and their memories of the deceased. Thus, cemeteries have lasting significance for people across generations of time. For Black communities in the American South, cemeteries have held a special significance for those of African descent and their close loved-ones.

4. In the work entitled *Black History and Black Identity*, historian W. D. Wright contends that Black, rather than black, should be used when defining people of African descent in the United States. According to Wright, professional African Americans have favored capitalization of the first letter of the word when describing African Americans of the United States, as it designates ethnicity and culture, whereas black denotes race and color. Moreover, in Western society, mainstream sentiment generally, although not exclusively, associates negatively with the term black. Therefore, in an attempt to challenge these negative associations, this thesis uses the capital B when describing the ethnicities represented in the race of people of African descent. However, this thesis does not argue that the use of the lowercase b, more commonly found in academic works, is necessarily incorrect, but it will be used in this thesis only when denoting race and color or when quoting those who used the lowercase b in the original source text. Furthermore, to maintain consistency in the argument and avoid controversy, the word White will also be used in a similar fashion when defining people of European descent. See W. D. Wright, *Black History and Black Identity: A Call for a New Historiography* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 7–22; and Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 297-298.

5. Davis, Texas Death Certificates, 1903-1982.

Final resting places became a form of community memory for later generations seeking information about their past.

Olivewood Cemetery, where the young Schallie Davis was interred, is the oldest incorporated African American cemetery in Houston. Although there are burial sites in the Houston area that are arguably older, Olivewood holds the distinction of being the first cemetery in Houston to be formed by Black shareholders in at a time when people of color were not often viewed in the wider White community as capable business owners. Incorporated in November 1875, Olivewood served as a gathering place and burial ground for almost one hundred years. Unfortunately, it became defunct as an active burial site during the second half of the twentieth century when newly-opened, white-owned businesses blocked the public's access to Olivewood's grounds. Without proper ingress and egress, the ravages of weather, vandalism, overgrowth, and erosion eventually engulfed it.⁶ At the same time, desegregation and community exodus no doubt discouraged younger family members from interring loved ones in burial sites such as Olivewood, since segregated memorials were no longer required. Nonetheless underneath the vegetation and neglect of Olivewood Cemetery lies evidence of thousands of Texans who, like Davis, lived, died, and contributed to the tapestry of Houston's history. Their stories tell of courage, struggle, joys, and the sorrows that contribute to a community's collective memory.⁷

6. "About Olivewood Cemetery," Descendants of Olivewood: The Official Website of Historic Olivewood Cemetery, Houston, Texas, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.descendantsofolivewood.org/about-olivewood/>.

7. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Olivewood Cemetery" (by Debra Blacklock-Sloan), accessed October 21, 2017, <http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/leo10>; and Lisa Mouton, "Forgotten, But Not Gone: The Symbols of Historic Olivewood Cemetery," *Journal of History and Culture* 1, no. 5 (Winter 2014): 63–65, <https://www.pvamu.edu/tiphc/wp-content/uploads/sites/107/jhc-winter-2014-vol-1-5.pdf>.

Burial sites play a crucial role in the preservation of social history. Both cemeteries and graveyards (the former generally being a larger burial ground and not associated with a church, whereas the latter is generally smaller and church-affiliated) function as purveyors of ethnic and racial traditions as well as guardians of local customs. Designers generally plan cemeteries to meet the needs of the living more so than those of the deceased, thus they play a key role in preserving the history of a society. Social, grassroots history as a field of study has been defined in multiple ways by historians. Yet at its core, it tells the story of common people and the impact that their day-to-day choices make on the trajectory of their community. It has been said that history turns on small hinges, and so do peoples' lives. Social history is a means to uncover those "small hinges" and find significance in the otherwise mundane. Past events can increase understanding of the current characteristics of a community through the study of grassroots history. The present-day conditions of a community build upon the history of ordinary people, such as Schallie Davis, who lived, died, and left their final mark in the soil of Olivewood Cemetery.

An examination of this public historical entity allows an opportunity to study particular aspects of community and social history. A study of the deaths of these common, everyday people offers insight into the quality of their lives. Were there many in this era who, like Davis, died young? What type of healthcare met the needs of African American Houstonians at that time? What type of world did they leave behind? What quality of education would Davis's two young children have had? When Schallie Davis married Ellouise Winkfield in 1926, what kind of odds would they have had to beat for

their children to have even survived childbirth?⁸ Tucked away on a bend of White Oak Bayou, in a once-abandoned cemetery, lies matter of cultural, historical, and genealogical significance. Olivewood Cemetery offers much insight into the construction of the historical narrative and helps answer some of these questions. With regard to social history in Houston, there is a wealth of information, some of which has been studied by historians in great detail. Traditionally Olivewood has been disregarded or ignored in the study of Houston's past, yet this thesis will attempt to show the significance of what historians can learn about the life of a community from their cemeteries.

Olivewood provides great insight into the quality of life in Houston's Black community over a very volatile and changing century. From horse-drawn wagons to the Chevrolet Corvair, from bustles to bell bottoms, American society experienced a great deal of change between 1875 and the late 1960s, when the last burial occurred in Olivewood. The stories of how Houstonians lived during these changing eras are etched between the lines of headstones and in the sacred markers created to honor the dead.

This thesis contends that cemeteries play a vital role in shaping the historical narrative of a society. One can learn a great deal about the quality of life of a community through a study of how that community remembers its dead, as well as through the records they leave behind in connection with the deceased. Olivewood Cemetery is no exception. Drawing on both published and unpublished Olivewood records, this thesis narrows the scope of the research to the Great Depression, examining specifically the African-American community. Vital statistics also play a significant role in documenting

8. Shelly Davis and Ellouise Winkinfield, FHL Film Number 25255, Texas, County Marriage Index, 1837-1977, from Ancestry.com, accessed October 21, 2018, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=60183&h=2399926&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=sbO74&_phstart=successSource.

the quality of life within a subset of a given community, and this thesis therefore studies these records also.

This work concentrates on the 1930-1942 period, since the political and economic circumstances of that era surfaced as a catalyst for sociocultural change—change that affected the African-American community in Houston. When a wavering stock market finally crashed on that fateful autumn day in 1929, some Texans were worried; however, most Houstonians were still quite optimistic. Only when the Depression worsened throughout the United States did Texans fully come to terms with the harsh realities of the calamity.⁹ Historians can, in part, trace the impact of these events on Houston's Black neighborhoods and families through the records of the burial grounds. Surprisingly, the source material shows that contrary to what one would expect, the quality of life for Black Houstonians did not decline in a manner consistent with the economic trends of society. Despite great hardships, Black Houston in the 1930s was a community of survivors.

Chapter Two of this thesis examines the literature of Black Houston, cemeteries, the public health of African Americans in the 1930s, and the Great Depression. Scholarly monographs and periodicals, unpublished manuscripts, government records, and other materials will contribute to the research supporting this thesis. This historiographical review begins by looking at early local history pioneers who documented the public history of Black Houston. Loved ones even buried some of these public historians, particularly Black writers and educators, in Olivewood. This will transition to a review of modern professional scholarship. The latter part of this review will restrict itself

9. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Great Depression" (by Ben H. Proctor), Texas State Historical Association, accessed December 3, 2017, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/npg01>.

principally to scholarship regarding healthcare and mortality within the Black community, as well as works centered on the Great Depression in Houston. Most troubling, however, is that contemporary sources have largely ignored the history of cemeteries in the city and their role in documenting this community.

The third chapter will serve as a brief history of Olivewood Cemetery. Although a church never owned the cemetery, its original founders were pillars of Houston's Methodist community. Olivewood experienced its heyday in the early twentieth century, but over time gradually declined until it ultimately ceased functioning as an active burial ground during the 1960s.

After a discussion of the founding of Olivewood Cemetery, this chapter will address some of the symbology present in the burial ground. The religious connections of these symbols show influence from both Christianity and African traditions. Olivewood provides unique insight into the melding of multiple worldviews and the impact this amalgamation had on Houston's Black community. This thesis then moves from discussing the cemetery's origins to discussing factors that affected Blacks who made Olivewood their final resting place to a discussion of the memorial itself.

Chapter Three concludes with a brief look at the cemetery today. When construction surrounding the cemetery during the mid-twentieth century reduced access to the cemetery, it resulted in the discontinuation of burials and Olivewood soon fell into disrepair. Occasional restoration efforts thereafter yielded few results. Yet, during the early twenty-first century, preservation efforts have resumed. In conjunction with these preservation efforts, research has produced a number of findings of significance. These

findings, some of which remain unpublished, will serve as a key resource for the fifth chapter of this thesis.¹⁰

Chapter Four provides the context of the Great Depression and the impact it had on Black America generally. Historians have expounded on the causes, triggers, and impact of the Great Depression in great detail. This thesis will only address those issues insofar as is necessary to set the stage for an understanding of the value of this work's contribution to the historical narrative. The goal of this thesis is not to provide an exhaustive study of the background of the Great Depression, but rather to show what can be learned about the quality of life within the Black community in Houston during the Depression. Building on the research of other historians, this chapter will examine some of the primary public concerns during this era, focusing on public health, education, and labor. Certainly, there were other areas of concern besides those abovementioned, but they lie outside the scope of this work.

This chapter will also address the role of community building and the role various groups and organizations played in providing aid during the Great Depression. How did local organizations respond to the crisis? What do sources reveal about education, labor, and business development in the Black community during the Great Depression? These topics will be addressed in the latter part of the fourth chapter.

10. Descendants of Olivewood, "Olivewood Cemetery Burial Database, Houston, Texas," Unpublished database, last modified February 2018, Microsoft Excel file. Descendants of Olivewood have documented the names and vital statistics of over 1,600 former Houston residents who now call Olivewood their final resting place. The database includes the following information: name, birthdate, birthplace, death date, *Find a Grave* number, occupation, marital status, hospital, age at time of death, notes on notable interments, listings of slaves in Houston, Harris County, Richmond, and Fort Bend, as well as population statistics for the Houston area. Part of this database has been published at www.descendantsofolivewood.org. These records corroborate the existence of thousands of Olivewood Houstonians—all African American—who lived and died in Houston, Texas. Thus, these records represent the foundation of the author's thesis.

Chapter Five analyzes different aspects of community life based on both the published and unpublished records of Olivewood Cemetery. Some aspects investigated include healthcare, longevity, infant mortality, causes of death (including disease), education, labor, family life, and community building. Death certificates, headstones, mortuary records, and obituaries all provide interesting insights into the lives of the men, women, and children interred in this eight-acre burial ground. From heart disease to menopause, there is a wide variety of causes of death recorded in Olivewood. One young child even died from eating Easter eggs. The intricacies and details of the lives of these people shed light on the overarching theme of this work through an analysis of these findings. They illustrate that despite great hardship, the Black population that utilized this cemetery experienced a greater quality of life than would be expected considering their circumstances.

Furthermore, this work deconstructs the effects of the Great Depression on the Black community at-large in light of these cemetery findings. How did this economic crisis socially and culturally influence those who are now interred in Olivewood? What conclusions can be drawn about the greater society based on the population sample found in Olivewood? Chapter Five answers these questions through references to the information gleaned from the cemetery's records.

Finally, this thesis will culminate by drawing conclusions about what cemeteries can teach about communities. Cemetery records help complete the picture of Black life in Houston during the Depression, and much can be learned about life by studying how the living honor their dead. These records show that Black Houstonians maintained a much higher quality of life than might be expected during an era so fraught with difficulties.

Thus, Olivewood certainly helps contribute to the creation of a more complete portrait of Houston's history.

Additionally, the conclusion of this thesis will offer suggestions for further research. Olivewood is often compared to Glenwood Cemetery, a white cemetery founded in 1871 less than a mile and a half away. Although both are located in nearly the same geographical area and were founded within a few years of each other, the differences between the two cemeteries are readily apparent. Researchers could learn a great deal by comparing Olivewood and Glenwood cemeteries, including their foundations through the present day. A comparison of Olivewood Cemetery to similar memorials in other areas of the country, or a comparative study of the quality of life between regions, varying demographic areas, and cities would prove insightful. Although this thesis will focus only on Blacks in Houston during the Great Depression, this study could launch a plethora of further research from the "small hinges" of Olivewood Cemetery.

Chapter II

The Historiography of Blacks in Houston

From the time the first black man, Estevanico, landed on Galveston Island in 1528, people of African descent have played a vital role in Texas history. Moreover, as their numbers have increased, so has their influence. Over the centuries they have affected farming, ranching, medicine, and other industries as well as influenced political activism, music, art, education, and more. According to a 1792 census conducted by the Spanish government in Texas, there were only 34 Negroes and 414 mulattoes living in Texas. Those numbers increased as Texas went from Spanish control to Mexican, and then became an independent republic. By the state's first United States census in 1850, 397 free Negroes, six of whom lived in Houston, and over 58,000 slaves resided in the state, with 527 of them in the Bayou City. On the eve of the Civil War only a decade later, 182,000 African Americans lived in Texas, with over 1,000 residing in Houston. Then over the next forty years, that number continued to increase. By 1900, the number of Black residents in Houston surpassed 14,000 and Houston had become the second largest city in Texas. The oil boom, the spread of reliable transportation centers, and burgeoning manufacturing all spurred unprecedented economic growth. These factors, along with the growth of a dependable labor force due to rural-to-urban migration to Houston during the early twentieth century, transformed the secondary city into a major regional center. Therefore, by the beginning of the Great Depression, Houston had become the largest city in Texas. The Black populace numbered 63,337 and represented

almost 22 percent of the city's total population and almost 58 percent of all Blacks residing in Texas cities in 1930.¹

With such a significant number of urban Black Texans living in Houston, a social-history study focused on the African-American subpopulation in this locale will certainly make an important contribution to the historical narrative. Thus, a study of Houston's history has proved a topic of interest for researchers and students, as has the examination of its cultural diversity and the sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors that influenced the city. Unfortunately, throughout most of Texas history, White academic circles widely dismissed Black history as unworthy of legitimate consideration. By the early twentieth century, however, as African-American intellectuals recognized the Black historical experience, the contributions of this community to Texas history began to appear more often in academic and non-academic publications. By the second half of the twentieth century, academics of color increasingly discussed the contributions of African Americans in history, political science, education, art, music, etc.

From the era of early modern historians through the present time, several works have contributed to the literature of Black Texas history. With few exceptions, the first generations of writers did not hold PhDs in history; nevertheless, these contemporaries living in the state in the first half of the twentieth century published important works that made significant contributions to Texas history. As educators, social workers, and journalists, these first writers documented the African-American experience in Texas.

1. *Handbook of Texas Online*, "Census and Census Records," Texas State Historical Association, accessed January 14, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ulc01>; Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals By Race, 1790 to 1990, and By Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States" (Unpublished paper, U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, Washington, D. C.).

While they rarely challenged White supremacy directly, they did bolster the contributions of Black Texans, largely by acknowledging their role in history and contemporary life.

Ira B. Bryant, Jr., a social studies teacher at Phillis Wheatley High School and later a high school principal and instructor at the Houston College for Negroes (later Texas Southern University), as well as the author of *The Development of Houston Negro Schools* (1935), wrote in 1936 that “the Negro can justly claim definite and important contributions to the cultural, political, industrial, commercial, religious and educational achievements in Texas,” and that “history is incomplete if the past and present accomplishments of Texas Negroes are omitted.”² African Americans since the early twentieth century kept Black history alive through their writings and teachings. One of the first important studies of the Bayou City’s African-American community, *The Red Book of Houston*, published in 1915, is an early tribute to prominent Black Houstonians and their achievements a half century after the dissolution of slavery.³ It touches on the significant task of recording the Black history that Bryant describes. Even though these first writers did not earn doctorate degrees in history, they did produce public history. Their works highlighted the Black experience as public history, even if the authors themselves did not consider their works historical, and these early pioneers laid the groundwork for future studies on the topic. Loved ones even buried in Olivewood some of the first chroniclers, such as attorney J. Vance Lewis and Reverend Wade Hampton Logan, which makes their contributions even

2. Ira B. Bryant, Jr., *The Texas Negro Under Six Flags* (Houston: Houston College for Negroes, 1936), 4; Ira B. Bryant, Jr., *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools* (Houston: Informer Pub. Co., 1935); and Ira B. Bryant, Jr., “Vocational Education in Negro High Schools in Texas,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1949): 9-15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2966434>.

3. *The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston’s Colored Population* (Houston: Sotex Publishing Company, 1915).

more apropos to this work.⁴ This chapter will serve as a historiographical review of some of the significant works related to the Black community in Houston, or in Texas generally.

Only a limited number of academic works published prior to the 1930s about Black Texas would be considered Black Studies by today's standards. Even fewer focused on Black Texans specifically. Texas historians, mostly White and biased when it came to race, saw African Americans as inferior. For example, Charles William Ramsdell's 1910 publication *Reconstruction in Texas* examines the politics and economics of Texas from 1865 to 1874, yet he overlooks the role of African Americans during this time, even taking an anti-black point of view.⁵ The anti-black perspective would serve as the dominant scholarly perspective of the history profession for the next half century.

Blacks nevertheless found ways to challenge the prevailing perspective on paper. A fairer account of African Americans came from Black authors, such as educator H. T. Kealing, who wrote *History of African Methodism in Texas* (1885).⁶ Writing shortly after the conclusion of Reconstruction, Kealing presented African-descent Texans as diverse, hopeful members of humanity. His early work, therefore, created an impetus of pride and fascination among African Americans as the first generation of post-Civil War Blacks grew to adulthood. These women and men felt it imperative to celebrate African-American agency as a counterattack to White racism. For this generation, positive works

4. An interesting account of Lewis's life can be found in his autobiography: J. Vance Lewis, *Out of the Ditch: A True Story of an Ex-Slave*. (Houston: Rein & Sons, 1910).

5. Charles William Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas* (New York: Columbia University, 1910).

6. Hightower T. Kealing, *History of African Methodism in Texas* (Waco: C.F. Blanks Publisher, 1885).

served as one of the most notable ways of speaking out against structural racism and its overwhelming effects on the race. Works such as this inspired numerous other contemporary publications in the early and middle twentieth century.

Yet ultimately, academic analyses of Black history prior to or during the Great Depression remained limited to a handful of scholarly works, one of the most famous being *Black Reconstruction*, published by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in 1935.⁷ Political writings, in many ways influenced by Du Bois, grew. The fight over the eradication of the White Primary in Texas especially galvanized a new generation of African Americans committed to the idea of racial equality. These New Negroes, women and men who prized themselves on advancing the cause of civil rights across the United States and around the world, especially made their presence known in Houston.

Thus, in the realm of politics, writings that deconstructed the history of Black disfranchisement in Texas took on a new poignancy as the fight against the White primary took center stage in Texas. Alabama native and attorney J. Alston Atkins detailed the early part of this fight in his 1932 book, *The Texas Negro and His Political Rights: A History of the Fight of the Negro to Enter the Democratic Primaries of Texas*.⁸ In a series of legal cases from 1927 through 1944, Black activists challenged the legality of the Democratic Party's all-white primary system in Texas. Atkins, who worked in Houston with fellow lawyers Carter Wesley and James Nabrit, Jr., was one of the attorneys who argued the *Grovey v. Townsend* (1935) case before the U.S. Supreme

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935).

8. J. Alston Atkins, *The Texas Negro and His Political Rights: A History of the Fight of the Negro to Enter the Democratic Primaries of Texas* (Houston: Webster Publishing Company, 1932).

Court. This puts Atkins in a unique position to tell the story from an insider's perspective, even though the *Grovey* decision was not favorable to his argument.⁹ Writer John Mason Brewer wrote another early work on political struggles of Black Texans from Reconstruction to contemporary times, *Negro Legislators of Texas and Their Descendants* (1935).¹⁰ Brewer, a Texas native, folklorist, teacher, and interpreter of languages, provides a broad overview of the political contributions of Black legislators and the status of their descendants in Texas. Consequently, early studies examining politics opened the door for an expanded investigation of the topic in more recent years. For example, Alwyn Barr's 1971 monograph *From Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876-1906* looks at early Texas politics during the era of Reconstruction until the turn-the-twentieth century.¹¹

Additionally, regional histories became more common from the 1900s to the 1940s. W. A. Redwine's *Brief History of the Negro in Five Counties* (1901) is an early example of this type of work, studies that would later include such offerings as Brewer's *An Historical Outline of the Negro in Travis County* (1940) and Walter F. Cotton's *History of Negroes of Limestone County from 1860-1939* (1939).¹² Andrew Forest Muir's article in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, entitled "The Free Negro in

9. Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 20-24.

10. John Mason Brewer, *Negro Legislators of Texas and Their Descendants: A History of the Negro in Texas Politics from Reconstruction to Disfranchisement* (Dallas: Mathis Publishing Co., 1935), VII.

11. Alwyn Barr, *From Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876-1906* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

12. W.A. Redwine, *Brief History of the Negro in Five Counties* (Tyler, Texas: N. P., 1901); and John Mason Brewer, ed., *An Historical Outline of the Negro in Travis County* (Austin: Samuel Huston College, 1940); and Walter F. Cotton, *History of Negroes of Limestone County from 1860-1939* (Mexico, Texas: J.A. Chatman and S.M. Merriwether, 1939).

Harris County, Texas,” (1943) also provides an interesting look at Black history from a regional perspective.¹³

Researchers of the 1930s and 1940s also recorded the social history of Black Texans. National Urban League social worker Jesse O. Thomas gives an account of African American contributions to the celebration of the Texas Centennial in *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (1938), and Andrew Webster Jackson’s *A Sure Foundation and a Sketch of Negro Life in Texas* (1940) unlocks a treasure trove of biographical information.¹⁴ A great deal of attention was also paid to the study of education among Blacks in the post-Emancipation era. W. E. B. DuBois’s 1935 speech at what was then Prairie View State College (now Prairie View A. & M. University), first published in a 2017 article by Phillip Luke Sinitiere, comments on education, labor, and business development among Blacks in Texas.¹⁵ Notable educator Ira B. Bryant, Jr. wrote *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools* in 1935 and published an insightful article on vocational studies less than fifteen years later in the *Journal of Negro Education*.¹⁶ His earlier published work highlights the extant disparity between Black and White education in Texas. Additionally, William Riley Davis published his *The*

13. Andrew Forest Muir, “The Free Negro in Harris County, Texas,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (January 1943): 214-238, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30237405>.

14. Jesse O. Thomas, *Negro Participation in the Texas Centennial Exposition* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1938); and A.W. Jackson, *A Sure Foundation: A Sketch of Negro Life in Texas* (Houston: A.W. Jackson, 1940).

15. Phillip Luke Sinitiere, “Outline of Report on Economic Condition of Negroes in the State of Texas:’ W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1935 Speech at Prairie View State College,” *Phylon* 54, no. 1 (Summer 2017), 3-24, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.shsu.edu/stable/pdf/90011261.pdf?refreqid=search%3Aec37bd5dcfd734f242e6a4ad5217f3c>.

16. Ira Bryant Jr., *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools*; and Ira B. Bryant, Jr., “Vocational Education in Negro High Schools in Texas,” 9-15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2966434>.

Development and Present Status of Negro Education in East Texas (1934) based on his thesis from Columbia's Teacher's College.¹⁷

Again, many of these early writers laid the groundwork for the more extensive, modern studies of these same historical issues. Arguably, the increased emphasis on the study of Black history during the 1930s and 1940s, the era of the New Negro Movement, contributed to the growing community consciousness that helped catalyze the Civil Rights Movement by the 1950s and 1960s, along with the scholarship of those academics writing during this important era. This movement in turn opened the door for a wider acceptance of Black Studies in previously established academic circles.

Along with the work of folklorist John Mason Brewer and other contemporaries, the University of Texas's first fulltime African-American faculty member, sociologist Henry A. Bullock, and pioneering Prairie View A&M University historian George Woolfolk published scholarly studies in the postwar era that redefined Texas historiography, sociology, and African-American studies.¹⁸ Bullock, who mostly published contemporary sociological studies, also produced award-winning documentaries, and helped Texas Southern University students desegregate downtown and Third-Ward Houston restaurants, groceries, and other businesses in the 1960s. In many ways he built on the earlier works of educator Ira B. Bryant. Bullock documented the sociological and economic problems that retarded African-American progress while remaining vigilant about acknowledging the roots of these challenges—structural racism.

17. William R. Davis, *The Development and Present Status of Negro Education in East Texas* (New York: Columbia University, 1934).

18. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Bullock, Henry Allen" (by Naomi W. Ledé), Texas State Historical Association, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbu20>; and *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Woolfolk, George Ruble" (by Randolph B. Campbell), Texas State Historical Association, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fwo63>.

More importantly, he did so during the pivotal 1950s and 1960s during the Modern Civil Rights Movement and era of massive resistance. Some of Bullock's works include *Profile of Houston's Negro Business Enterprises: A Survey and Directory of Their Attitude* (1962) and *A History of Negro Education in the South* (1967).¹⁹ A University of Wisconsin-trained historian as well as a classmate of famed scholar Kenneth Stampp, George R. Woolfolk published multiple monographs on slavery and Texas Blacks—*Cotton Regency: The Northern Merchants and Reconstruction, 1865–1880* (1958, reprinted in 1979); *Prairie View: A Study in Public Conscience, 1878–1946* (1962); and *The Free Negro in Texas, 1800–1860: A Study in Cultural Compromise* (1976).²⁰ He too commented in contemporary studies about the Modern Civil Rights Movement and the future of race relations. As Bullock and Woolfolk continued to publish well into the 1970s, they and their predecessors smoothed the intellectual path for a new generation of scholars, both Black and White.

Synthesis studies, a more modern development in the historiography of Texas, provide valuable synopses of a variety of topics. In 1971, Alwyn Barr wrote *Black Texans: A History of Negroes in Texas*, which he later republished in an updated version to include information through 1995.²¹ The first synthesis study on Black Texas, this work spurred new scholarship. Barr, at the time a professor of history at Texas Tech

19. Henry Allen Bullock, *Profile of Houston's Negro Business Enterprises: A Survey and Directory of Their Attitude* (Houston: Negro Chamber of Commerce, 1962); and Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

20. George R. Woolfolk, *The Cotton Regency: The Northern Merchants and Reconstruction, 1865–1880* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958); George R. Woolfolk, *Prairie View: A Study in Public Conscience, 1878–1946* (New York: Pageant Press, 1962); and George R. Woolfolk, *The Free Negro in Texas, 1800–1860: A Study in Cultural Compromise* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1976).

21. Alwyn Barr, *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528-1995* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

University, not only inspired generations of scholarly writings, but trained dozens of scholars in African American, Mexican American, and American Indian history. One of his students, Bruce Glasrud, has written and edited dozens of scholarly works in Black Texas history. Glasrud and James Smallwood edited *The African American Experience in Texas: An Anthology* (2007), a study that provides a very useful overview of both nineteenth and twentieth century topics. Influenced heavily by the Modern Civil Rights Movement and Black Power struggle, these younger authors placed the historical experiences of Blacks at the forefront of their writings and teachings, as these historians also taught some of the first classes in Black Studies on White-dominant college campuses.²²

Also influenced by the national events of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, the scholarship of Black scholars came alive too. Some of the most engaging works of this generation of scholars have come from women historians. Darlene Clark Hine's *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* originally published in 1979; and Merline Pitre's *Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares: Black Leadership in Texas, 1870-1890*, 1986, and *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957*, 1999, both give valuable insights into the history of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction politics and disfranchisement in Texas and the fight against the all-white primary in the twentieth century.²³ Hine's book discusses the long Civil Rights Movement in Texas, focusing particularly on the struggle to mobilize, techniques used,

22. Bruce A. Glasrud and James Smallwood, eds., *The African American Experience in Texas: An Anthology* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007).

23. Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas*, new edition with essays from Darlene Clark Hine, Stephen F. Lawson, and Merline Pitre (Millwood: KTO Press, 2003); and Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010).

setbacks, triumphs, and the ultimate success that came with the destruction of the White primary in Texas. Pitre's work centers on the instrumental role of women as an organizational force in this struggle, with a particular focus on Lulu Belle Madison White's contributions to the cause. These works not only celebrate the Black experience in the Lone Star State, but also confirm the unique contributions of women of color as historical actors and as the guardians of history. Merline Pitre's scholarship framed the rise of Black Texas women's history and in many ways influenced the later works of Darlene Clark Hine and other scholars.

The first serious study devoted specifically to the history of Black Houston, however, came on the scene in 1980 as a dissertation. James M. SoRelle wrote, "'The Darker Side of Heaven': The Black Community in Houston, 1917-1945" (1980), a synthesis of Houston's twentieth-century Black community.²⁴ From the Houston Riot through World War II, SoRelle emphasized the importance of poverty, instability, structural racism, and imaginative community agency. Historian Cary D. Wintz authored an insightful, although brief, overview titled *Blacks in Houston* in 1982.²⁵ A decade later, Wintz and fellow Texas Southern University historian Howard O. Beeth edited the important volume, *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (1992).²⁶ The chapters in the work range from slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow analyses to the city's Black economy, and studies of the Long Civil Rights movement, raising important questions and motivating a new generation of Texas historians.

24. James M. SoRelle's *The Darker Side of Heaven: The African American Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945* is an eagerly awaited work in progress, based on his 1980 Ph.D. dissertation of the same title.

25. Cary D. Wintz, *Blacks in Houston* (Houston: National Center for the Humanities, 1982).

26. Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992).

Influenced by these earlier writings, including those written by mentors and professors, a new generation of scholars have published a variety of works on the Black experience. An analysis of the growth of the African American community in Houston and the social issues they faced, including those related to politics, have more frequently made their way into the historiography during the last few decades. Brian Behnken's *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (2011) differentiates between the civil rights struggles of Blacks and Mexican Americans in Texas.²⁷ Another groundbreaking work, Wesley G. Phelps' *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics and Grassroots Activists in Houston* (2014) discusses Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty and how it sparked an expansion of democracy at the local level in Houston.²⁸ Max Krochmal's *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (2016), an award-winning work that addresses labor organizing, political mobilization, and community agency across racial and ethnic lines, begins in the 1930s and makes the case for interracial organizing efforts during the Great Depression and rise of the modern working-class labor movement.²⁹ In all these instances, new scholarship has cultivated nuanced stories and discussions surrounding race, racism, race relations, and the future of racial justice.

In more recent years, closer examinations of migration to Houston have emerged in the historiography. Bernadette Pruitt's *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* discusses the process of community

27. Brian Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

28. Wesley G. Phelps, *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics and Grassroots Activists in Houston* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

29. Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

building and the challenges that accompanied living in a segregated city, particularly with respect to the experiences of Black migrants to Houston in the early twentieth century.³⁰

Tyina Steptoe builds on this work in her 2015 *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City*.³¹ Migrations significantly impacted all aspects of Houston's twentieth-century community.

Scholars have especially assessed more critically Black education, health, and other issues in Houston and Texas. Henry Allen Bullock's *A History of Negro Education in the South* (1967) builds on an earlier journal article and traces the development of education for Blacks from 1619 through the mid-1960s.³² Building on such works, William H. Kellar in *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (1999) became the first scholarly attempt to address comprehensively the desegregation of the Houston Independent School District, a process that, not surprisingly, took decades to complete.³³ Scholars have also addressed the desegregation of higher education for African Americans. Michael Heintze's *Private Black Colleges in Texas* (1985), and more recently Amilcar Shabazz's award-winning *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (2004) tackle this issue.³⁴

30. Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013).

31. Tyina L. Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

32. Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South*. The earlier journal article referenced can be found in the *Journal of Negro Education*: Henry Allen Bullock, "The Availability of Education in the Texas Negro Separate School," *The Journal of Negro Education* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1947): 425-432, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2966351>.

33. William Henry Kellar, *Make Haste Slowly: Moderates, Conservatives, and School Desegregation in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

34. Michael R. Heintze, *Private Black Colleges in Texas, 1865-1954* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985); and Amilcar Shabazz, *Advancing Democracy: African Americans and the Struggle for Access and Equity in Higher Education in Texas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Dr. H. E. Lee's article in *The Red Book of Houston* (1915) offers an early look at healthcare in Houston's Black community.³⁵ Later works build on his discussion of disease, mortality, birthrate, and the factors that negatively impact health within the African American population. Andrea Stone's 2016 offering *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature* highlights the role of physical and mental health as a part of the development of selfhood among Blacks, and Suzanne Terrell's *This Other Kind of Doctors: Traditional Medical Systems in Black Neighborhoods in Austin, Texas* (1990) discusses the role of urban doctors in treating Black patients.³⁶ More recently, John M. Hoberman's *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (2012) contends that the treatment of Black patients differs due to the racially motivated thinking and behaviors of American doctors.³⁷

Scholarly works on the Great Depression abound. Economists, historians, sociologists, and political scientists each provide unique perspectives on the defining characteristics of the 1930s, including causes of the Great Depression, how it impacted the economy and society, as well as the resulting political changes. Award-winning historian Robert S. McElvaine's *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (1984, reprinted in 2009) and economist Peter Temin's *Lessons from the Great Depression* (1989) are representative of the hundreds of books written about our ever-changing understanding of the defining nature of the Great Depression in America's history.³⁸

35. *The Red Book of Houston*, 148-151.

36. Andrea Stone, *Black Well-Being: Health and Selfhood in Antebellum Black Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016); and Suzanne Terrell, *This Other Kind of Doctors: Traditional Medical Systems in Black Neighborhoods in Austin, Texas* (New York: AMS Press, 1990).

37. John M. Hoberman, *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

38. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); and Peter Temin, *Lessons from the Great Depression* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

More recently, the first half of historian David M. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize winning *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (1999) focuses on the suffering of the people during the Depression, as well as efforts to counteract this distress, including Roosevelt's New Deal.³⁹

Books such as Pruitt's *The Other Great Migration* and works published by James SoRelle also provide more specific understanding of Houston's African American community during the Great Depression.⁴⁰ Writers such as Bullock not only examined issues related to education, but also business, as discussed in his 1962 *Profile of Houston's Negro Business Enterprises*.⁴¹ The connection between labor issues, segregation, and the push for civil rights is further explored in works such as Ernest Obadele-Starks's *Black Unionism in the Industrial South* (2000), Michael Botson's *Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company* (2005), and Dwight Watson's *Race and the Houston Police Department* (2005).⁴² These books and others provide a wealth of information regarding a variety of businesses in Houston and the Black community's relationship to those businesses, especially during the economic crisis of the 1930s.

One aspect of Black history in need of further research is cemeteries in Houston, particularly those that date from the era of Jim Crow. Publications on this topic generally have been limited to pamphlets for tourists and the occasional mention in travel guides,

39. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

40. James M. SoRelle's *The Darker Side of Heaven: The African American Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945* is an eagerly awaited work in progress, based on his 1980 Ph.D. dissertation of the same title.

41. Bullock, *Profile of Houston's Negro Business Enterprises*.

42. Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000); and Michael R. Botson, Jr. *Labor, Civil Rights, and the Hughes Tool Company* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); and Dwight Watson, *Race and the Houston Police Department, 1930-1990: A Change Did Come* (College Station: Texas A. & M. University Press, 2005).

with academic scholarship being found primarily in theses and dissertations. One notable exception is *Texas Graveyards*, by Terry G. Jordan. Jordan presents not only the stories of those interred in graveyards, but also examines the distinctive ethnic or racial practices associated with burial customs. However, the general lack of publications on Black cemeteries in Houston in the historical literature implies a need for further scholarship on this subject, which gap this thesis hopes to help fill.⁴³

43. Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

CHAPTER III

Olivewood Cemetery and its Symbolism

Tucked away in a once overlooked area of the city, near a bend in White Oak Bayou, lies Olivewood Cemetery. Occasionally designated historically as Hollow Wood or Hollywood due to errors made by cartographers or recorders, Olivewood was founded in an area bordering the historic First and Sixth Wards, near a stop on the Houston & Texas Central rail line known as Chaney Junction.¹ In burial grounds throughout the country one can find the words “gone but not forgotten” engraved alongside the names of loved ones. But in the case of Olivewood it might more appropriately read “forgotten, but not gone.” Olivewood has passed through multiple cycles of abandonment and recovery since its founding, yet the cemetery continues to hold historical significance. To understand the value of the records Olivewood provides, one must understand the history of the memorial itself.

1. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., “Olivewood Cemetery” (by Debra Blacklock-Sloan), accessed October 21, 2017, <http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/leo10>.

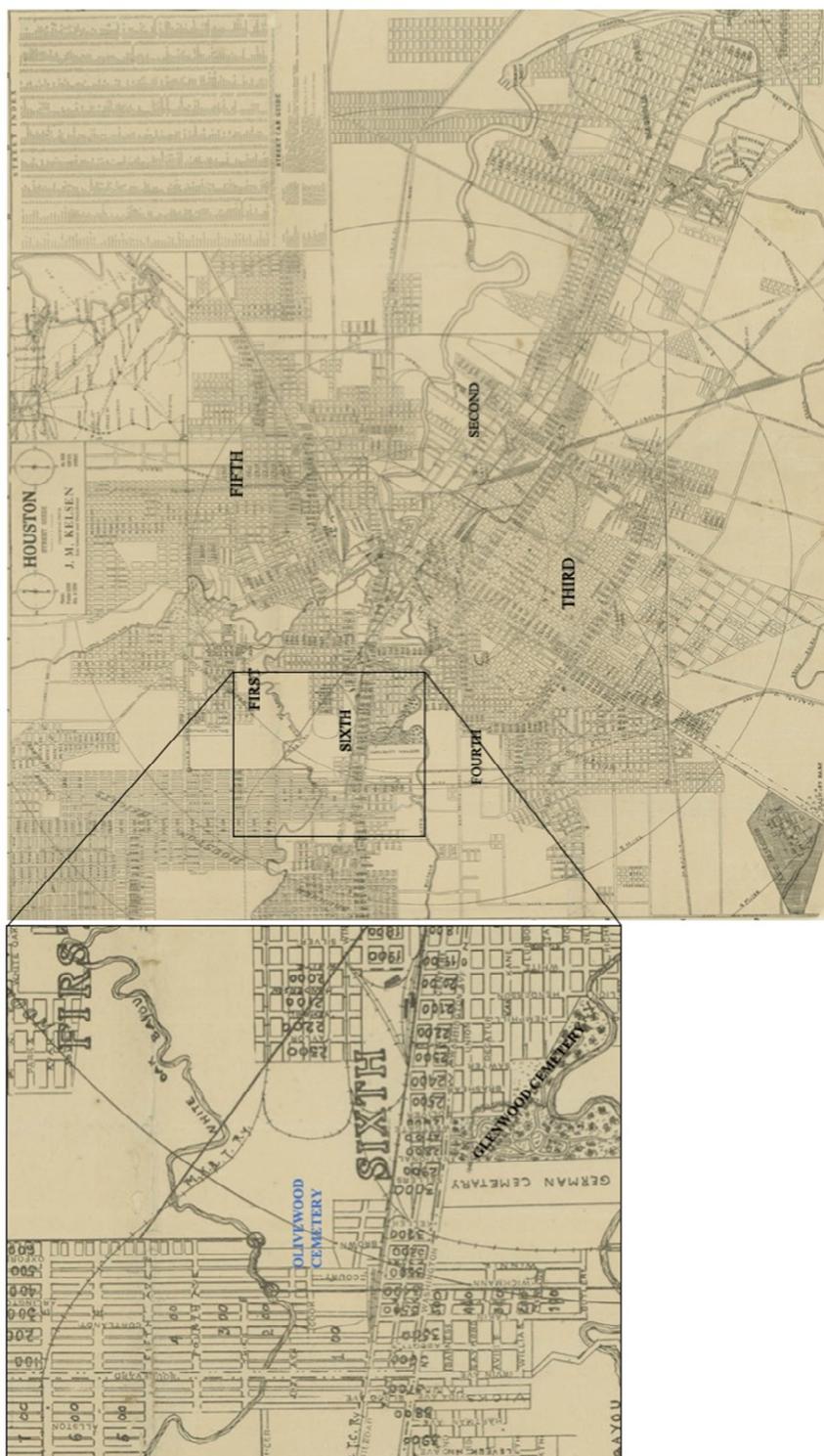


Figure 1. Map showing the location of Olivewood Cemetery in relation to the Ward boundaries of Houston, Texas, from a 1913 Houston Street Guide. (Courtesy Rootsweb.com, Public Domain)

The Founding of Olivewood Cemetery

Officially founded in 1875, Olivewood is the oldest incorporated Black cemetery in Houston. The original founders were pillars of Houston's Black Methodist community, though the Church itself did not own the cemetery, nor was adherence to Methodism a requirement for burial. Developers, mostly former slaves, chartered The Olive Wood Cemetery Association in April 1874 for the "purpose to acquire or purchase grounds to make such enclosures, improvements, and adornments [sic], avenues &c [sic] on said grounds and to erect such buildings as may be necessary to carry out the objects of the association."² Members of the Association sold shares of stock and were soon successful in acquiring land by purchasing a parcel from Sarah Slocomb, widow of John R. Slocomb, and her two children, in November 1875.³ Stockholders directed the affairs of the Cemetery Association, annually assessing a fee of \$2.00 per lot for maintenance.⁴

While the cemetery officially opened ten years after Emancipation at the end of the Civil War, oral tradition suggests that Houstonians used the site for burials prior to Emancipation as well. Olivewood's location itself provides the greatest clue to support this belief. According to 1870 census data, most Black Houstonians lived in the Third and Fourth Wards, accounting for 65 percent of the Black population. A mere seven percent

2. Olive Wood Cemetery Charter, 23 April 1874, Harris County, Texas, Deed Records Vol. 22, 444. County Clerk's Office, Houston, Texas.

3. John R. Slocomb married Sarah Dalton on December 8, 1849. Unfortunately, little else is recorded about them or life together, only that their children were named Harrison and Elizabeth and that Sarah was widowed by the time she sold land for the purpose of creating Olivewood Cemetery. According to the Deed of Sale, John Slocomb bought the land from John Behring, who got it from J.W. Brashear in November 1846. See John R. Slocomb and Sarah Dalton, FHL Film Number 25221, Texas, County Marriage Index, 1837-1965, from Ancestry.com, accessed October 31, 2018, https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=60183&h=80552&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=sbO77&_phstart=success Source; and Deed of Sale from Mrs. Sarah Slocomb, et al to Olive Wood Cemetery Co., 1 November 1875 (filed 10 December 1875), Harris County, Texas, Deed Records Vol. 15, 250-251. County Clerk's Office, Houston, Texas.

4. Deed of Sale from Mrs. Sarah Slocomb, 1 November 1875.

lived in the First Ward.⁵ Furthermore, Olivewood is located three miles from the original site of what is now Trinity United Methodist Church, the church to which many of Olivewood's original founders belonged. Why would the corporation's shareholders select a site so distant from their church and community? The answer may possibly be attributed to the presence of an African Cemetery located near what is now Olivewood. Unfortunately, no extant sources provide solid evidence of the existence of this African Cemetery, which is known only through anecdotal references and oral tradition.⁶

Despite its inconvenient location, Olivewood grew during the early twentieth century. The majority of the 1,636 burials documented in Olivewood's records occurred between 1915 and 1930 (see figure 3). Prior to that, Olivewood only recorded 292 interments; afterward just 331.⁷ The era of the Great Migration clearly coincided with Olivewood's golden era. Yet evidence suggests that Olivewood Cemetery, originally intended for a little over four hundred burials, actually holds four or five thousand interments throughout the estimated eight acres of cemetery property. Archaeologists regrettably have no way of recognizing many of the dead on the grounds and Descendants of Olivewood, Inc., the current guardians of the cemetery, possess record of less than 1,700 of the total number. Not all the burials in the cemetery are honored with headstones. In fact, most do not have any discernible markers and some of those buried disappeared into White Oak Bayou due to extensive soil erosion and disrepair. What

5. Francis A. Walker, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1872), 272.

6. Cecelia Goad Ottenweller, "Olivewood Cemetery: Houston's First Incorporated African American Cemetery" (Unpublished manuscript, December 2, 2004), 13; and Trevia Wooster Beverly, *At Rest: A Historical Directory of Harris County, Texas Cemeteries (1822-2009) with Funeral Home and Monument Company Listings and including Burial Customs and other Interesting Facts, Third Edition* (Houston: Tejas Publications and Research, 2009), 55.

7. Cemetery Records, Descendants of Olivewood.

remains in the cemetery, however, provides fascinating insights into the community that built it.

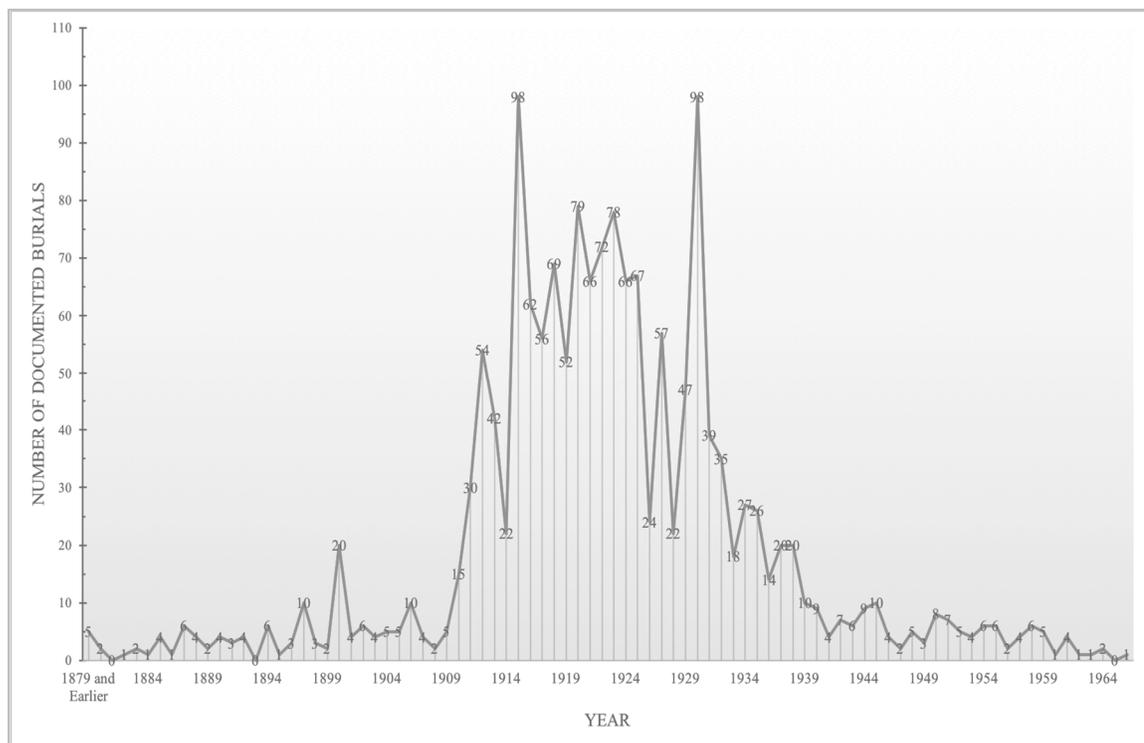


Figure 3. Documented deaths by year, those interred in Olivewood Cemetery. Deaths without a documented year are not included. (Courtesy *Descendants of Olivewood, Houston Texas, Unpublished database*)

Several of Houston's notable Black leaders have final resting places in Olivewood. Reverend Elias Dibble, the first minister of what is now Trinity United Methodist Church, the city's first Black congregation and African-American Methodist congregation, as well as one of the original stockholders, has been at the cemetery since his death in 1885.⁸ Kentucky native and former slave Richard Brock, who also served as

8. "A History of Trinity United Methodist Church." *Trinity United Methodist Church*, accessed June 27, 2014, <http://www.tumchouston.org/119597>; and *Descendants of Olivewood*, "Olivewood Map, April 1877," Private collection.

the city's first African-American alderman and helped establish Emancipation Park, rests at Olivewood as well. Other prominent African Americans who are buried in Olivewood include Reverend Wade Hampton Logan, a presiding elder for the Navasota and Marshall Districts of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and his wife, Alice Logan, who was the Dean of Women at Wiley College. Recent research indicates that Lucy F. Farrow, a key player in the founding of Pentecostalism, also rests there.⁹ Several of Houston's educators have homes in Olivewood Cemetery, including Charles H. Atherton, the first principal of Houston Colored High School (now known as Booker T. Washington High School) and later Dean at Prairie View Normal and Industrial College (today Prairie View A. & M. University). Mathematics teacher and administrator James D. Ryan, one of Atherton's successors as principal, also rests in Olivewood.¹⁰

Located less than a mile and a half away from Olivewood and incorporated in 1871, the white-owned Glenwood Cemetery is known as the final home of the city's most prominent nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century elite.¹¹ Hence, some compare Olivewood to Glenwood Cemetery. Although located in the same geographical vicinity and founded within a few years of one other, observers easily recognize the apparent dissimilarities between the two cemeteries. Glenwood has been cared for perpetually, while Olivewood has experienced considerable neglect over the decades. Glenwood continues to bury its dead and the city's leading elite remain attached to the cemetery; whereas, Blacks lost interest in Olivewood as a burial site in the mid-twentieth century, in

9. Thora Qaddumi, "Refugee Scout's Eagle Project captures 'Spirit of Houston,'" *Descendants of Olivewood*, <http://www.descendantsofolivewood.org/2018/07/refugee-scouts-eagle-project-captures-spirit-of-houston/>.

10. Patricia Smith Prather and Bob Lee, eds., *Texas Trailblazer Series* (Houston: Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association, 2000).

11. "About Glenwood: History," *Glenwood Cemetery, Houston, Texas*, accessed February 4, 2018, <http://www.glenwoodcemetery.org/about/>.

large part due to the decision made by White business owners to block the cemetery's opening. These differences provide researchers and observers with a stark visual representation of the disparities between the Black and White communities in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Undoubtedly, these disparities, which originated upon the founding of the institutions in the wake of Reconstruction and the nascent emancipated Black community, continued well into the twentieth century, and contributed to the dramatic impact the Great Depression had on Houston's African American population.¹²

Like many nineteenth-century burial sites created after 1831, the design of cemeteries such as Glenwood and Olivewood catered to the living as much as it served the deceased.¹³ After all, graveyards "reflect the customs, beliefs, handicrafts, and social structure of the survivors."¹⁴ Frequently cemeteries were the only accessible green spaces in rapidly growing cities. Thus, loved ones used them for family gatherings and Sunday picnics, although the use of cemeteries as parks has since fallen out of fashion.¹⁵ With the innovations in transportation that have facilitated the expansion of cities and growth of suburbs since the 1920s, increased accessibility to green space has rendered unnecessary the custom of cemeteries doubling as public parks. Thus, this general use of cemeteries as

12. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Olivewood Cemetery" (by Debra Blacklock-Sloan), accessed October 21, 2017, <http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/leo10>.

13. In 1831, Mount Auburn Cemetery was established in Watertown and Cambridge, Massachusetts. As the first landscaped, rural ("garden") cemetery in the United States, its success inspired the creation of similar landscaped cemeteries and ultimately launched the American parks movement. See "Mount Auburn Cemetery," *National Park Service: U.S. Department of the Interior*, accessed October 31, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/massachusetts_conservation/mount_auburn.html.

14. Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), chap. 1, loc. 66, Kindle.

15. Rebecca Greenfield, "Our First Public Parks: The Forgotten History of Cemeteries," *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/03/our-first-public-parks-the-forgotten-history-of-cemeteries/71818/>.

gathering places merged with the more specific celebration of Decoration Days—a rural southern tradition in which days were set aside for the church community to clean and care for the cemetery grounds, usually held annually in May.¹⁶ Olivewood even advertised “the first general observance of National Decoration day by the colored citizens of Houston” in the *Houston Daily Post* in 1898.¹⁷ Yet, in the twentieth century, as more cemeteries began to hire workers to do the routine maintenance and migration moved younger generations away from the towns and communities of their deceased ancestors, occurrences of local community upkeep of cemeteries has lessened. Decoration Days came to be viewed more as a social event in which putting flowers on graves played just one small part. By the mid-twentieth century, the concept of Decoration Days merged with the celebration of Memorial Day. Some areas, particularly those in the rural South, still honor decoration days, although it is more frequently commemorated as a family event rather than celebrated by entire communities. Indisputably, this general loss of interest in cemeteries among community members contributes to some of the patterns of neglect Olivewood experienced during recent decades.¹⁸

Olivewood’s struggle for survival over the years parallels the collective strives of the community that built it, and the individual struggles of those who rest there.

Olivewood is the final resting place of men and women who were leaders in Houston’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American society, including teachers, doctors,

16. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, loc. 451-480, Kindle; and Stephen Douglas Wilson and Myriah Snyder, “Decoration Day: A Memorable Tradition,” *Baptist Press*, May 25, 2016, <http://www.bpnews.net/37911/decoration-day-a-memorable-tradition>.

17. “Observance by Colored People,” *Houston Daily Post*, May 18, 1898, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph82891/m1/8/zoom/?q=Olivewood&resolution=1.925985696&lat=6232.6468913829485&lon=2919.0339278312613>.

18. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, loc. 451-480, Kindle; and Stephen Wilson and Snyder, “Decoration Day: A Memorable Tradition.”

ministers, dentists, lawyers, and veterans. But alongside these more renowned Houstonians are thousands of laborers, domestics, students, and children whose more modest achievements have been lost from memory over time. Many of the mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters buried there once lived as the men and women who transitioned Houston's African-American community from slavery to freedom, as well as navigated it through life in the Jim Crow-era South. From former slaves to community leaders, Olivewood proves that death equalizes all.¹⁹

The Symbols of Olivewood

Olivewood was founded during an era in U.S. history when the color line between Blacks and Whites became more firmly drawn. On one side of that line, a vibrant Black culture flourished, but rarely, if ever, did that culture cross social barriers and become acceptable or even known to the more dominant White society. Only in a limited number of public spaces were Black Americans truly able to express themselves in ways that drew upon the fading memories of their African heritage. Their cemeteries were one such place. Within the gates of these cemeteries, oppressed people of African descent found outlets for publicly expressing their cultural heritage. Olivewood is one such cemetery. What it symbolizes holds particular value, as it tells a story of the hardship, survival, and triumph that weaves its threads through the historical narrative of Houston's Black community. Olivewood Cemetery, the memorial itself, symbolizes community, renewal, and of hope amidst struggle.

According to the Olivewood Cemetery historical marker, "The original 444 family plots, comprising over 5,000 burial spaces were laid out along an elliptical drive.

19. Cemetery Records, Descendants of Olivewood.

The burial ground contains several hundred marked graves in addition to an unknown number of unmarked graves.” These unmarked graves are just as significant as those with headstones. Perhaps they did not always lack distinguishing features. In some cases, they may yet be marked, only the symbols used to identify these final resting places are not those most Westerners are accustomed to seeing.²⁰

Some symbols present in Olivewood’s burial grounds that show religious connections with influence from both Christianity and African traditions. Olivewood offers a unique insight into the melding of multiple worldviews and the impact this amalgamation had on Houston’s Black community. Even though most of those interred in Olivewood never set foot in Africa and had whole-heartedly adopted Christianity, many of the customs and traditions their ancestors clung to survived the African Diaspora and were reinterpreted as they were passed down through the ages. It is evident from the symbols in Olivewood that these African ideas and beliefs were engrained in the collective consciousness of those who were burying their dead there by the late nineteenth-century.

The Kongo Cosmogram—a diagrammatic depiction of beliefs related to creation, life, and death common to peoples ranging from Angola to Nigeria—can help explain some of the creeds that made their way to the New World and have manifested themselves in Olivewood Cemetery.²¹ The central feature of the Kongo Cosmogram is a crux quadrata (colloquially known as a square or Greek cross), which marks “a sacred

20. “Historical Marker Dedication,” Descendants of Olivewood: The Official Website of Historic Olivewood Cemetery, Houston, Texas, accessed October 31, 2018, <http://www.descendantsofolivewood.org/2009/04/historical-marker-dedication/>.

21. David Bruner, “Symbols for the Living: Synthesis, Invention, and Resistance in 19th to 20th Century Mortuary Practices from Montgomery and Harris County, Texas” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2007), 214.

point on which a person stands to make an oath, on the ground of the dead and under all-seeing God.”²² The horizontal line of this cross divides the world of the living from that of the dead. Many saw this spirit world as inverted, underneath the world of the living, connected to each other by water. The points of the cross symbolize the four positions of the sun, the cardinal directions, and how these points correspond to the cyclical moments of man’s never-ending existence as his spirit is continually reincarnated. Although the Kongo cross had nothing to do with the Christian sign of the crucifixion, the similarities between the two made the compulsory assimilation of West African peoples more palatable, after they had been forcibly relocated to the Americas.²³

22. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), chap. 2, loc. 1539, Kindle.

23. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, loc. 1553, Kindle; and "Cemetery Symbolism," South Carolina Department of Archives and History: State Historic Preservation Office, accessed June 27, 2014, <https://shpo.sc.gov/tech/Pages/Cemsymbol.aspx>.

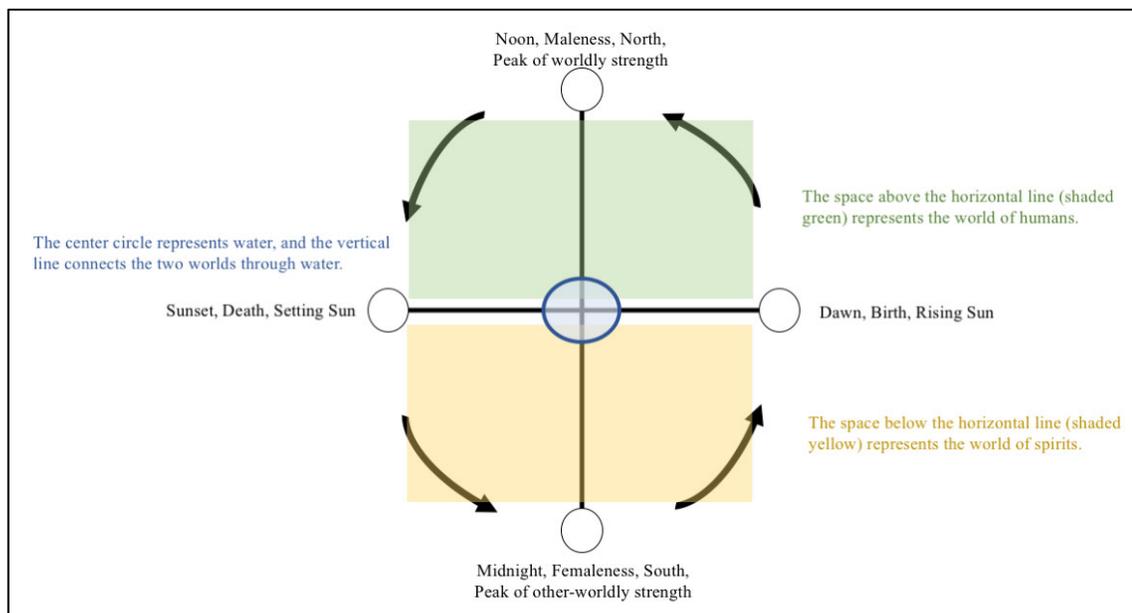


Figure 4. One variation of the Kongo cosmogram. This drawing was created based on the information provided in chapter two of Robert Thompson's work *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. Additional variations of the cosmogram can be viewed in figure 6.7 of Bruner's dissertation, "Symbols for the Living." (Courtesy of author)

The influence of Kongo art and religion in the Western hemisphere can most often be seen in four forms of expression: the marks of the cosmogram (especially on the ground), medicine, graves, and the use of trees, including branches and roots.²⁴ The West African cultural and religious beliefs in an afterlife in a world of spirits especially manifests itself in Olivewood Cemetery. For instance, a comparison of Olivewood's plot layout (as shown in figure 4.1) and the Kongo cosmogram (as shown in figure 4.2) reveals a similarity in shape. Olivewood is laid out with its primary entrance on the south and its secondary entrance on the west, representing the height of other-worldly strength and death as an entrance to the spirit world respectively. Moreover, Olivewood's position near water may be more than mere coincidence. If the Kongo cosmogram was

24. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, loc. 1539, Kindle.

superimposed over the Olivewood plot layout, the vertical line representing the connection between the world of humans and the world of spirits would begin at White Oak Bayou. While there is not any conclusive evidence that the Olive Wood Cemetery Association considered these symbols when they purchased the land from the widow Slocomb, perhaps those who first used this location for slave burials had this symbolism in mind.

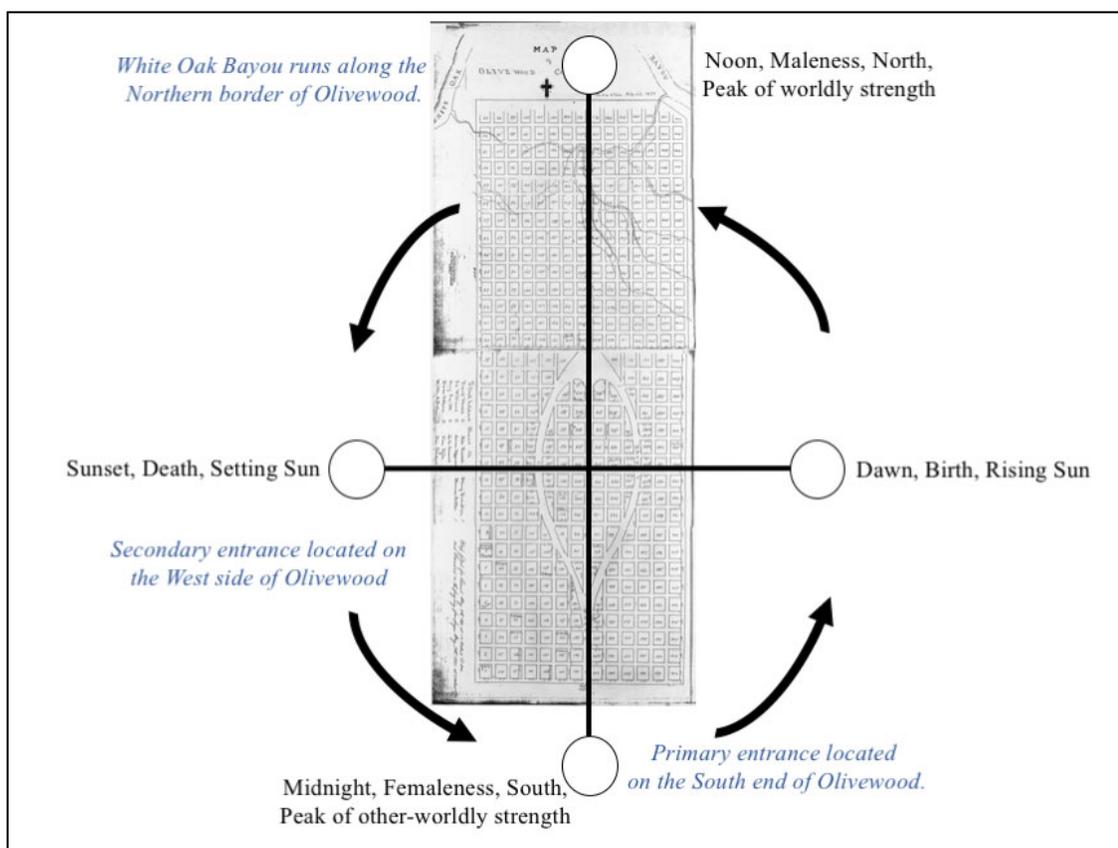


Figure 5. The Kongo Cosmogram superimposed on the 1877 Olivewood map. (Courtesy Descendants of Olivewood, Houston Texas, Unpublished database)

Furthermore, in the Kongo belief system, graves were an important tool for communicating with the world of the spirits and views on medicine and healing phenomena were also sometimes associated with burial sites. Many graves were marked

with the personal belongings of the departed.²⁵ These grave goods were often the last objects used or touched by the deceased, as those objects created a link with the dead because they contained traces of the spirit.²⁶ Also among these grave goods can be found a type of charm known as nkisi (plural: minkisi), believed to “effect healing and other phenomena.” Minkisi containers could include objects such as shells, bags, statuettes, and ceramic vessels. Within the containers could be found a type of medicine believed to direct the spirit in the afterlife.²⁷

Evidence of the tradition of grave goods can be found in Olivewood, although over time many of them have been misplaced, lost, damaged, or stolen. Loved ones, however, sometimes turned upside down or broke some of these personal goods from the outset. Upside down items represented the inversion of the spirit world.²⁸ Goods were broken to release the spirit of the item, such that it could be of use to its owner in the afterlife. In Central and Western Africa, “pottery was broken at the grave site, possibly to symbolize the shattered life, and the custom seems to have survived intact in America.”²⁹ In Olivewood, this practice continued even after Emancipation.

Another symbol common to African American cemeteries is that of objects related to water. Due to the belief that the worlds of the living and the dead were connected by water, objects such as seashells, vases, pitchers, and similar containers held special significance.³⁰ Pipes were also sometimes used as grave markers as a way to

25. "Cemetery Symbolism."

26. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, loc. 1935, Kindle.

27. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, loc 1686, Kindle.

28. "Cemetery Symbolism."

29. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards*, loc. 378 Kindle.

30. "Cemetery Symbolism."

form a connection with the deceased. Upright pipes served as a way to deliver messages to the dead, and to carry water, “the preeminent signifier of spirit.”³¹



Figure 6. Upright pipes were used to designate burial sites, although it is uncertain who might be interred at this location in Olivewood Cemetery. (Courtesy of author)

Trees planted on graves are also symbolic, as their roots literally travel to the Spirit world. As the tree characterizes the Spirit, when the tree thrives, all is well with the departed.³² Moreover, trees can live longer than humans, signifying that death is not the end of a loved one. One example of this in Olivewood is marking graves with slabs that have a cut-out designed for plant life. Furthermore, the cut-out is often a diamond shape, corresponding to the Kongo cosmogram. Even when the ancient symbolism of trees has

31. Bruner, “Symbols for the Living: Synthesis, 233.

32. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, loc. 1985, Kindle.

long been forgotten, many living descendants of those buried in Olivewood still remember the location of their ancestors' interments relative to the location of specific trees.



Figure 7. Seashell grave marker at the grave of Dr. Timothy Van B. Overton (1869-1949) in Olivewood Cemetery. Water-related markers were sometimes used as a reference to the belief that the worlds of the living and the dead were connected by water. *(Courtesy of author)*



Figure 8. Backward writing on the grave of Will A. Harris (1876-1930) in Olivewood Cemetery. Backward writing represents the inverted nature of the spirit world. *(Courtesy of author)*



Figure 9. A line of containers designed for holding water, a signifier of spirit, on the east side of Olivewood Cemetery. *(Courtesy of author)*



Figure 10. Grave slab with a diamond-shaped cut-out for plant life, Olivewood Cemetery. *(Courtesy of author)*

Many of the unmarked graves in Olivewood today may have been marked at some point in one of the ways previously described. Unfortunately, many of these broken objects and other markings were misinterpreted as garbage and disregarded, taking with them a little piece of the African cultural heritage of the community. On the other hand, what does remain gives us a starting point “for understanding one possible dimension to symbol systems that have multivalent levels of historical antecedents and re-created meanings.”³³

33. Bruner, “Symbols for the Living,” 216.

Olivewood's Decline and its Twenty-first Century Revival

As Olivewood began to reach capacity, its heyday of the early twentieth century declined. In addition to diminishing space for interments, construction in the areas surrounding the cemetery during the mid-twentieth century led to the loss of ingress and egress. In the 1940s, The Schumacher Company and Grocers' Supply, owned by White businessmen, built new structures in such a way as to block the traditional entrance to Olivewood.³⁴ At first, loved ones contended with this loss of access by carrying the remains of the deceased long distances around the local business, in a desperate attempt to continue to bury kin together. Sadly, this proved too difficult a task to sustain. Furthermore, in July 1958, Olivewood's Board of Directors sold two parcels of cemetery land to the Harris County Flood Control District for the sum of \$1,032.00.³⁵ While the precise purpose remains unclear, this transaction may have resulted from outside pressures, or from an attempt by the directors to secure funds to maintain the cemetery. Regardless of the reason for the sale, Olivewood continued to wane and ultimately ceased to be an active burial ground after the last recorded interment in 1966. Cemetery upkeep gradually declined, and Olivewood fell into disrepair soon thereafter.³⁶

Alas, occasional clean-up efforts throughout the succeeding three decades never resulted in consistent, long-lasting results. Moreover, gentrification in the area has made the property surrounding Olivewood highly desirable, which negatively affects the cemetery as the community who built it can no longer afford to live near it, and those

34. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "Olivewood Cemetery" (by Debra Blacklock-Sloan), accessed October 21, 2017, <http://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/leo10>.

35. Deed of Sale from Olivewood Cemetery to Harris County Flood Control District, 24 April 1958 (filed 23 July 1958), Harris County, Texas, Descendants of Olivewood Files, Houston, Texas.

36. Burial Records, Descendants of Olivewood. The last burial was that of Theresa Bates Holdman, who passed away on January 16, 1966. A native of Navasota, Texas, at the time of her death Holdman lived on Wichman Street, which runs parallel to Olivewood Cemetery.

who move into the area are less likely to feel concern for a historic site unconnected to their own family history. Olivewood was once so secluded that only those who specifically went looking for it, or those who were dreadfully lost, ever stumbled upon it. Now, most of the homes that bordered the cemetery during the 1920s and 1930s no longer exist. Some new construction and businesses replaced the more historic structures, but Olivewood is more exposed now than ever.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, during the early twenty-first century, serious preservation efforts resumed. Descendants of Olivewood, Inc. is a non-profit organization dedicated to combatting the negative forces that can accompany gentrification and preserving Olivewood Cemetery. This organization was awarded guardianship over the cemetery in a landmark case in 2008 in the 11th Judicial District Court in Harris County, Texas, and now faces the task of trying to restore the cemetery while preserving its history and physical integrity.³⁷ Descendants of Olivewood seeks to accomplish this task by relying on the work of dedicated volunteers. In conjunction with these preservation efforts, research has produced several discoveries of significance. Chapter 5 analyzes and summarizes these findings and presents conclusions.

Consequently, Olivewood continues to persevere despite challenges. Every spring dozens of lilies, amaryllis, and other flowers come into full bloom. Some of these flowers are descended from the same bulbs that were planted to mark graves over a hundred years ago. These flowers, like the community that planted them, have weathered

37. Brenda Sapino Jeffreys, "Ground Control: In a Texas First, Nonprofits Vie to Become Guardians of Historic Houston Cemetery," *Texas Lawyer*, December 1, 2008, <https://www.law.com/almID/1202426366707/?slreturn=20180924235111>. This case was the first-ever contested suit in Texas seeking statutory custodianship of a historic cemetery resulting in a successful petition and the granting of custodianship.

storms of all kinds yet continue to bloom as a symbol of hope and renewal. Houston's Black community today builds upon the inspiring legacy of these residents of the 1930s, who buried their dead and yet still hoped for better tomorrows.



Figure 11. Bright flowers in bloom against a dreary landscape, Olivewood Cemetery. Plants and trees were sometimes used to mark graves. These lilies are most likely descended from bulbs planted in the nineteenth or early twentieth century and have protected status within the cemetery. *(Courtesy of author)*

CHAPTER IV

The Great Depression in Houston

In the early part of the twentieth century, Houston was a thriving and diverse city. Several Houstonians experienced economic success as the city grew and prospered, even several African Americans who had to combat racial segregation to realize these achievements. The growth of churches, elementary and secondary schools, hospitals, businesses, fraternal organizations, public transportation, newspapers, rising home ownership, and a regional economy on its way to becoming a national oil-refining and petrochemical capital all serve as indications that Houston flourished as a Texas city. Consumer markets especially expanded because of World War I and the urban center's burgeoning economy in the 1920s, and even among Black Houstonians as a new class of "gentility" began to form.¹

In 1927, a local African American dentist and musician, Charles B. Johnson, known locally as the Singing Dentist, wrote an homage to Houston's prosperity:

I love to sing about my old home town.
 I made my mind up just to settle down.
 I live in Houston, the best town in the world;
 I'm going to build a home for me and my girl.
 Some folks are moving east and some move west,
 But I am going to stay where I like best,
 Where prosperity
 Grows so merrily
 In this grand old Southern town.

Houston is marching along,
 Houston is singing a song
 About a ship channel that she's got down there;
 The ships are coming in from everywhere.
 Aeroplanes, buses, and trains every day,

1. Kaitlyn Sisk, "Consumption in Freedman's Town: Navigating a Post-emancipation World through Material Goods," 2014, accessed August 22, 2018, <http://freedmantownarchaeology.rice.edu/Sisk%20exhibit/index.html>.

They are running every which way.
 Welcome to H-O-U-S-T-O-N!
 Houston is a grand old town.²

Johnson's tribute to the bustling early twentieth century city later became Houston's Bicentennial song. Johnson, who is believed to be buried in Olivewood, was the first band director at Yates High School and the patriarch of a very musically-inclined family.³ Dr. Johnson's son Conrad, Sr., later became Kashmere High School's well-known band director. As his grandson Conrad Johnson, Jr. noted, "we're all byproducts of the music."⁴ And so it is that the individual lives and choices of so many people influence each other, building Houston's grassroots history. This thesis contends that social, grassroots history is the story of common people impacting the trajectory of their local neighborhoods and societies. It is the sum-total of the individual and collective experiences of a population, which creates something akin to music and forms the heart and soul of a community. The Johnson family contributed to the formation of this music.

Conrad Jr.'s maternal ancestral line also featured prominently in Houston's social history and helps add to this music. His mother Birdie was raised as the daughter of Caucious Wilson—also buried in Olivewood and one of Houston's first Black pharmacists. As well, Caucious's brother, Edward O. Wilson, Sr., helped purchase the Third Ward property that ultimately became Emancipation Park. Caucious and Edward

2. Dr. C. B. Johnson, "Houston is a Grand Ole Town," recorded unknown, Houston, Texas, LH-15307, Tap Records, L-0025, <https://www.discogs.com/Black-Rain-Sparkplugs-Houston-Is-A-Grand-Old-Town/release/6677231>; and Charles B. Johnson, "*H-O-U-S-T-O-N is a Grand Old Town*" (Houston: J.C. Barolet Music, 1927).

3. Ira B. Bryant, Jr., *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools* (Houston: Informer Pub. Co., 1935), 112.

4. Charles Wilson, personal interview with author, Houston, Texas, August 7, 2014, in the possession of author; Ronald Johnson, personal interview with author, Houston, Texas, August 7, 2014, in the possession of author; and Conrad O. Johnson, Jr.; personal interview with author, Houston, Texas, August 7, 2014, in the possession of author.

were among several children born to Frank Wilson and Amy Kyle, Texas natives born prior to Emancipation.⁵ Despite Frank and Amy's humble beginnings, generations of their descendants achieved great success in Houston both professionally and as local pioneers of Methodism.⁶

Edward O. Wilson, Sr. and his wife Madge Pearl Brown Wilson were both born around the time of Olivewood's founding. Although neither of them had much opportunity for formal schooling, they managed to provide for a large family thanks to Edward's job as a Pullman porter. In August 1927, the Wilsons gave a promissory note to purchase land on Stuart Street, for which they fully paid in July 1932. In August 1933 they made a deal with a contractor, W. E. Bartley, for \$1,050.00 for

[R]epair and remodel entire house according to the plans and specifications thereof, building on a second story containing four rooms...re-papering entire house, repainting inside and outside with two coats of paint, building sidewalks totaling 200 feet by 4 feet and other improvements all according to the plans and specifications."⁷

It would seem that at least in the early days of the Great Depression, the Wilsons were still doing quite well financially. Still, the mechanic's lien that was placed on their property almost immediately tells a different story. Unfortunately, in November 1933, Edward and Madge Wilson sold their property for a total of ten dollars to Orrin H.

5. Wilson, interview; Ronald Johnson, interview; and Conrad O. Johnson, Jr, interview. Information used from these interviews to trace the history of the Johnson and Wilson families was corroborated using Olivewood Cemetery records, census records, and death certificates.

6. Thelma Scott Bryant, *Pioneer Families of Houston: As Remembered by Thelma Scott Bryant* (Houston: T. S. Bryant, 1991), 14.

7. Deed of Trust from Edward O. Wilson and wife Madge Wilson to Orrin H. Bonney; and Texas Abstract of Title to Lots 1 and 2 in Block 5 of "Fairmont Addition" out of the subdivision of the Jas. Holman Ten Acre Lot No. thirty-six (36) in the City of Houston on the S. S. B. B. in Harris County, Texas, Harris County, 3 November 1933, Harris County, Texas, Record no. 718389, County Record Volume 216, 728.

Bonney, a Houston lawyer with Mathes and Bonney.⁸ This property transfer was a payment on “one certain promissory note in the principal sum of \$1050.00 dated November 5, 1933 payable to the order of Blanche T. Thompson, guardian of the estate of Mary Elsie Criner, minor...”⁹ Just four years later their adult daughter Amy died of post-operative shock after an appendectomy.¹⁰ But notwithstanding these struggles, the Wilsons persevered. Either Mrs. Thompson or her young ward Mary showed generosity to the Wilsons, despite the home transfer. At the time of Madge’s death, she was still living in the home at 2102 Stuart Street, just a few blocks from Emancipation Park. Madge, like her daughter Amy, is now buried in Olivewood. She rests alongside her husband Edward, with a weathered, hand-written cement stone marking her grave.¹¹

The Wilson and Johnson families represent just two of the many African American families who contributed to the building of Houston. They became “byproducts of the music” as they both adapted to and changed the circumstances around them. Through their experiences and those of their neighbors in the wider community, we get a glimpse of how the Great Depression affected Blacks in Houston. Relying on local history sources, this chapter examines the role the Great Depression played in Black Houston and the ways in which Olivewood Cemetery documents this difficult period.

8. J. C. Schwarz, ed., *Who's Who in Law*, Volume 1, (New York: n.p., 1937), 599, https://books.google.com/books?id=iI8jAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA599&lpg=PA599&dq=orrin+h+bonney+1933+houston&source=bl&ots=6iuJ_LYUG8&sig=rG5FA26WYwIwuzhPzaQW7v_pcqM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjA4LqXoJ7dAhWJ5IMKHGXGfCSgQ6AEwA3oECACQAQ#v=onepage&q=orrin%20percent20h%20percent20bonney%20percent201933%20percent20houston&f=true.

9. Deed of Trust from Edward O. Wilson and wife Madge Wilson to Orrin H. Bonney, 5 November 1933, (filed 6 November 1933), Harris County, Texas, Record no. 593113.

10. Amy Stewart, Texas death certificate index, 1903-1982, No. 36467, Texas State Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Standard Certificate of Death no. 2408, (1937), from Ancestry.com, accessed September 3, 2018, <https://www.ancestry.com>.

11. Madge Pearl Wilson, Texas State Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Standard Certificate of Death no. 60843, (1954), from Ancestry.com, accessed September 3, 2018; and Cemetery Records, Descendants of Olivewood.

Numerous historians have analyzed the causes of the Great Depression. Most agree that the economic crisis triggered by the 1929 stock market crash resulted from a combination of factors that brewed under the surface for many years, although academics continue to debate the specifics of those factors. Internal migration of Blacks out of the South during the 1920s served as one portentous indicator of trouble—a sign of a collapsing agricultural system.¹² American businesses and the laissez-faire lack of oversight under which they were permitted to operate created an income disparity and an unstable foundation for the economy. Furthermore, international economic forces such as tariffs and post-World War I lending practices may have also contributed to the widespread nature of the collapse.¹³ Some observers, such as economist Peter Temin, argue that the Great Depression “was preceded and followed by deflationary shocks to the economy in which monetary conditions played a prominent part...”¹⁴ But regardless of the specific causes to which any individual historian subscribes, all would most likely agree that the economic crisis of the 1930s signaled a defining moment in U. S. history.

Once the Great Depression became a reality and as it steadily deepened over the years, the negative impact proved widespread. Black urban-dwellers began to feel the economic downturn as early as the mid-1920s when thousands of them lost jobs as “casualties of a technological age” in which many low-skilled workers became unemployed.¹⁵ But after the stock market crash, when more businesses closed and banks failed, this directly impacted even the Black middle class that had been growing during

12. John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, Ninth Edition (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 2011), 418. Kindle.

13. Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 34, 38.

14. Peter Temin, “Notes on the Causes of the Great Depression,” in *The Great Depression Revisited*, ed. Karl Brunner (Boston: Kluwer- Nijhoff Publishing, 1981), 115.

15. Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 419. Kindle.

the previous decade. In January 1931, economists measured the unemployment rate in ten different cities, both in the North and the South. Black male unemployment in those cities combined soared to almost 41 percent, while White male unemployment stood 13 percentage points lower, at just over 27 percent. Among Black females in the same survey areas, unemployment surpassed 43 percent, whereas White female unemployment neared 27 percentage points lower, at almost 17 percent.¹⁶ By late 1937, just over 25 percent of Black males and 32 percent of Black females in the United States sought work or on relief. The percentages of White workers of either gender in these situations were significantly lower.¹⁷ Moreover, urban African Americans were among the hardest hit. As rural Blacks moved into the cities seeking work, competition for jobs further intensified. Thus, movements such as Jobs-for Negroes, which began in St. Louis and soon spread to other major U.S. cities, directly responded to the disparity between black and white employment in local businesses. In some cities, picketing and boycotts put pressure on white-owned businesses to engage in more equitable hiring practices. In 1935, frustrations over growing poverty and racial tension even led to a deadly riot in Harlem, New York.¹⁸

Houstonians, due to their city's booming economy, remained optimistic at first, but that changed as the economic devastation reached home. Throughout the 1920s, urban Blacks in Texas as a group experienced some upward mobility. But when the

16. William A. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired? Unemployment and Urban Black Workers During the Great Depression," *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2 (June 1992): 417, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2123118?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Volume 2, General Report, Unemployment by Occupation April 1930, with Returns from the Special Census of Unemployment January 1931* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1932), 370-373.

17. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired," 419; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Volume 2, General Report, Unemployment by Occupation*, 370-373.

18. Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 421. Kindle.

economy plummeted, it spelled disaster for this decade-long growth. In Texas, black unemployment went from 4 percent in 1930 to almost nine percent by 1933. In Houston, the unemployment problem began even before the stock market crash, especially as Mexican immigrants “led several employers to replace black laborers with Mexicans because this latter group would work for lower wages.”¹⁹ By September 1931, the Mayor’s Unemployment Committee reported that Blacks represented over two-thirds of the city’s unemployed.²⁰ The *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman* lamented that “Negroes [were] losing out in many of the places where they formerly held sway,” and that “white men and white women... [were] replacing Negroes in the jobs that were once thought to belong to the latter as a sort of traditional divine right.”²¹ Along with a decline in employment rates, Black home ownership in Houston dropped from 31 percent in 1930 to 22 percent in 1940. Moreover, as late as 1940 nearly one-fourth of Black-occupied housing units in Houston lacked running water.²²

As the crisis continued, more and more people looked outward for assistance. At the highest levels of the federal government, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his supporters in congress championed the New Deal legislation, which resulted in the creation of dozens of policies and agencies to provide recovery, reform, and relief for the American people. The federal government raised its relief spending from 2 percent in 1932 to 79 percent within two years, and agencies such as the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA)

19. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’”130.

20. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 133.

21. “Negroes Losing Out,” *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*, December 26, 1931.

22. Wintz, *Blacks in Houston*, 19.

offered jobs or in-kind [direct] assistance to millions of unemployed Americans.²³ The Harris County Social Services files show that many Houstonians of different races sought relief from such agencies. Chapter Five will assess these records in greater detail. An examination of overall national trends shows that public relief efforts did have a positive effect on many areas of society. Unfortunately, systemic racism and biases against Black entry into occupations common to African-descent Texans meant that the group frequently received lower wages and smaller benefits than did their White counterparts.²⁴

The political impact of the government's attempts to correct the effects of the Great Depression are worthy of some examination. The New Deal could have "jeopardized the traditional sources of power in local government and reoriented southern urbanities away from city halls toward the nation's capital."²⁵ In many major southern cities, however, local government response to the crisis paralleled the way other cities throughout the nation responded—essentially the southern status quo remained intact. Texas remained a one-party state, and "Roosevelt kept hands off local politics as solidly Democratic administrations returned healthy voting majorities at election time."²⁶ In most large southern cities, while New Deal programs may have exerted some influence by providing channels for government relief, it rarely changed the course of local politics.

In Houston, long-time mayor Oscar F. Holcombe continued to serve local commercial interests, so throughout the mid-1930s it was business as usual. In fact, one FERA representative noted that when it came to administering aid, the relationship

23. Price V. Fishback, Michael R. Haines, and Shawn Kantor, "Births, Deaths, and New Deal Relief during the Great Depression," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 89, no. 1 (February 2007): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40043070>.

24. Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 429. Kindle.

25. Roger Biles, "The Urban South in the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (Feb. 1990): 76, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2210665?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

26. Biles, "The Urban South in the Great Depression," 78.

between local/state and the federal government was “parasitic.” The local leadership allowed for federal assistance but did little to provide aid themselves. In 1935-1936, nearly 80 percent of funding for relief programs in Houston came from federal sources.²⁷

Three of the major areas of concern during this era included public health, education, and labor. Thus, these concerns became the primary focus of investigative inquiry and targeted relief efforts during the depression. For example, a period of economic decline such as the Great Depression could have resulted in rising infant mortality, declining fertility, and increased non-infant death rates. Infant mortality, however, stopped falling only temporarily before resuming its downward trend. Economists Price Fishback, Michael R. Haines, and Shawn Kantor explained that “the non-infant death rate stayed on trend through the early 1930s,” and with regard to the general fertility rate, it “fell below trend in the early 1930s before leveling out in the late 1930s.”²⁸ They argued that a greater social safety net and the growth of the family planning movement throughout the thirties contributed to these trends. The plethora of New Deal programs and the relief they made available certainly contributed to the growth of this safety net, upon which many came to rely.²⁹ Reporter Lillian Johnson went so far as to argue that one of these New Deal programs, the creation of nutrition centers “for the benefit of colored infants, babies and children,” was one of the “most beneficial projects ever to touch Negro life in Houston.”³⁰

27. Biles, “The Urban South in the Great Depression,” 84, 87.

28. Fishback, Haines, and Kantor, “Births, Deaths, and New Deal Relief during the Great Depression,” 13.

29. Fishback, Haines, and Kantor, “Births, Deaths, and New Deal Relief during the Great Depression,” 12-13.

30. Lillian Johnson, “Health of Negro Children is Aided by ‘New Deal’ Centers,” *Houston Informer and the Texas Freeman*, September 16, 1933.

Schools and colleges in Texas also had to adapt to the changing economic climate of the 1930s. A 1935 article published in the *Galveston Sentinel* claimed that “it is against the tradition of the south [sic] to pay Negro teachers and White teachers on the same wage basis and that wherever a double educational system is maintained, in almost every instance the salaries of the Negro teachers are less.”³¹ This proved to be the case in Texas. Yet during the Great Depression, Black teachers suffered a much greater pay cut than their White counterparts.³² On top of disparate salaries, Texas educators also contended with shortened school terms, reduced wages, and curtailed construction and building repair.³³ In 1935, the Houston school board planned five new White schools, but made no plans to address the needs for more black schools.³⁴

In response to such discrimination, Black teachers throughout the South remained generally conciliatory at first, but moved toward collective action as the Great Depression persisted, beginning with the late 1930s. It took some time for Texas to catch on to this activist momentum. In Houston, many Black teachers remained especially reluctant to press for equal pay, preferring not to bite the hand that fed them. *The Informer* reported that in Houston “teachers themselves have shown no interest in getting equalization of pay,” despite urging from the outside.³⁵ Consequently, they took no direct action until 1943, after a bid for parity in Dallas proved successful.³⁶ By 1948, Black teachers in

31. “Kentucky Negroes are Fighting School Code: Double Wage Scale Would Provide Less Pay for Negro Teachers,” *The Galveston Sentinel*, April 19, 1935, 2.

32. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 88-90.

33. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes and the Current Depression,” 14

34. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 85.

35. “Bronze Governor Initiates Drive to Equalize Salaries,” *The Informer*, March 8, 1941.

36. “Dallas Teachers’ Pay Win Spurs Activity,” *The Informer and Texas Freeman*, March 6, 1943; and SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 89-91.

almost every southern state had sued local school boards over the issue of pay inequality.³⁷

Besides health and education, studies on labor also showed the effects of a depressed economy. According to the *Houston Informer*, a 1933 survey by the NRA showed that over half of Houston's unemployed at that time were Black.³⁸ The statistics on unemployment, however, only tell part of the story. Economist William A. Sundstrom proposed three explanations for this higher unemployment of Black workers. First, even without discrimination, African Americans would have suffered disproportionately due to a disparate presence of unskilled or less-educated laborers in the work force. Secondly, labor-market discrimination resulted in equally qualified black workers being the last hired and the first fired. Finally, Sundstrom contends that "New Deal labor policies had an adverse impact on the employment opportunities of less skilled workers, including Blacks."³⁹ For example, the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) required that employers "comply with the maximum hours of labor, minimum rates of pay, and other conditions of employment, approved or prescribed by the President."⁴⁰ Hence, when employers, already predisposed to racially discriminatory employment practices, were faced with hiring either a black or a white worker with a mandatorily equal wage for either, they would choose the white employee.

37. Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 310.

38. "The Problem of Relief," *The Houston Informer and the Texas Freeman*, September 16, 1933.

39. Sundstrom, "Last Hired, First Fired?" 420-422

40. "An Act to encourage national industrial recovery, to foster fair competition, and to provide for the construction of certain useful public works, and for other purposes," June 16, 1933, Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1996, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=66&page=transcript>.

While many Black Americans received benefits through relief programs, such programs designed to promote employment proved less successful. At the annual conference on African American education at Prairie View State College in 1935, Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois argued that “the hope of the economic salvation of the Negro” was the “emphasis of the organization of consumers.”⁴¹ Moreover he argued that education through formal school was limited in its ability to solve the crises of the day, but that a more Marxist focus on the economic foundation would ameliorate the situation. In historian Phillip Luke Sinitiere’s comments on Du Bois’s speech, he noted that “the minimal spending power of a small Black bourgeois kept the retailers’ budgets in the red,” and it was therefore difficult to compete with White retailers.⁴² But despite the limitations inherent in the system, some Black Texans did successfully break through racial and economic barriers to become businessmen, successful professionals, or skilled craftsmen. Still, they frequently found themselves relegated to providing services only within the separate Black community.⁴³

Due to frustration over worsening conditions, a political structure often unresponsive to the needs of African Americans, social and economic disparity, and the racism that fed it, “a new burst of organizational and protest activity by black Texans developed in the 1930s.”⁴⁴ During this era, political activism among African Americans in Texas more often took the form of publications and lawsuits rather than the more aggressive approaches characteristic of the 1960s. A statewide NAACP organization formed in 1937. Activists C.F. Richardson and Carter Wesley used their Houston-based

41. Sinitiere, “Outline of Report on Economic Condition of Negroes in the State of Texas,” 19.

42. Sinitiere, “Outline of Report on Economic Condition of Negroes in the State of Texas,” 9.

43. Barr, *Black Texans*, 172.

44. Barr, *Black Texans*, 146-147.

newspapers *The Defender* and *The Informer*, respectively, to express their views on the issues of the day. From support of their preferred political candidates to a call for more Black police officers as a method of crime prevention in segregated neighborhoods, *The Informer* never shied from expressing an opinion.⁴⁵ Additionally, lawsuits such as the 1935 Supreme Court case *Grovey v. Townsend* challenged the all-white primary in Texas and brought voting inequalities to the forefront. Nevertheless, Whites often carried out acts of violence, or least more aggressive tactics on occasion. For example, union activity, common in southern cities in the 1930s, often resulted in fierce conflicts. The International Longshoremen's Association called for a strike more than once during the 1930s, and over the years the Houston Ship Channel was sometimes the site of gunfights and intense violence between such strikers and strikebreakers, which only occasionally resolved themselves in favor of the protesters.⁴⁶ But overall, even the opinionated *Houston Informer* observed in 1930 that Blacks were fortunate to live in a city like Houston where "the mob spirit" was not "rampant."⁴⁷

The difficulties that arose during the Depression impacted Black Houstonians in ways that caused them to look inward to their self-contained communities for help. Local relief agencies in Houston were often a source of discrimination toward the very people they promised to aid. The city even segregated bread and soup lines.⁴⁸ Assistance offered through New Deal agencies provided *some* relief, but even those programs often administered locally by agents seemed more prone to the same racist attitudes that

45. "Negroes to Hold Statewide Rally for Dem Nominee," *The Galveston Sentinel*, October 15, 1932, 1; and SoRelle, "The Darker Side of 'Heaven,'" 72.

46. Biles, "The Urban South in the Great Depression," 92.

47. SoRelle, "The Darker Side of 'Heaven,'" 30, 78.

48. SoRelle, "The Darker Side of 'Heaven,'" 136.

plagued so much of the rest of society. *The Informer* argued that “Houston Negroes need to learn that in times like these, they must carry as much of their own load as possible,” and even proposed that the Black community adopt as their 1934 New Year’s resolutions that they only spend their money “where it is invited and appreciated.”⁴⁹ Thus, Blacks often relied on their own institutions, avoiding the outside White community when possible.⁵⁰

Consequently, the community building that had occurred prior to the 1930s proved to be of even greater importance during this time of crisis as local organizations responded to people’s cries for help. Prior to the depression, social welfare agencies such as the Texas Negro Business and Laboring Men’s Association served as an employment agency for Black Houstonians. They also sponsored “efficiency and aid clubs” to help improve employer-employee relations and to “help colored workers to hold their jobs by studying and becoming more efficient on their jobs.”⁵¹ Unfortunately, as the dire economic situation worsened, even these types of groups struggled to aid family, friends, church members, neighbors, etc.

In Houston, churches and fraternal organizations played a pivotal role in providing relief during the Great Depression. By 1930, there was one clergyman to every 370 African Americans in Texas and over 3,900 Black churches.⁵² In addition to performing their main function as spiritual guides, churches served as opinion leaders and civic organizers as well as provided service and support. Fraternal lodges were so active

49. James M. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven’: The Black Community in Houston, Texas, 1917-1945 (PhD diss., Kent State University, 1980), 137; and “For the New Year,” *The Houston Informer and the Texas Freeman*, December 30, 1933.

50. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 26.

51. “Labor Clubs in Houston Will Be Organized,” *Houston Informer*, December 27, 1930.

52. Bryant, Jr., *The Texas Negro Under Six Flags*, 13.

that “the *Houston Informer* called Houston the black fraternal headquarters of Texas.”⁵³ Often the only means their members had for securing death and burial benefits, many of these groups unfortunately went bankrupt during the economic downturn.⁵⁴

Ultimately it took World War II to shock the economy and the nation out of the Great Depression. The jobs and sense of purpose that the war created set the nation on a different track. But despite the hardships that Blacks endured during the Depression, some good came from it. Black Houstonians gained the courage to seek out political victories in the fight against discrimination, such as the *Smith v. Allwright* case. The population grew, and in many cases the community bonded in their efforts to alleviate suffering. In A. W. Jackson’s Depression-era book *A Sure Foundation*, he noted that “Life is made up of success and failure and those who are successful must build their own ladder in whatever place or position of prominence one has attained.”⁵⁵ The African American population of Houston built such ladders, even in the midst of great hardship. In that building effort, they added another verse to the music that forms the community’s history and created the means from which the entire population could climb toward the future.

53. SoRelle, “The Darker Side of ‘Heaven,’” 25.

54. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 105-106.

55. Jackson, *A Sure Foundation*, 6.

CHAPTER V

Cemetery Record Findings and Community Building in Black Texas

How one enters this life and how one leaves it are like bookends to the events that happen in between those times. It is the collection of events that happens in the middle that concerns most historians. The assessment provided in this chapter will investigate the latter bookend as it concerns a subset of one population during a specific period, namely, illness and death within the African-American community in Houston, Texas, during the Great Depression. By analyzing the end of a person's life, one can find out more about the quality of the life that individual lived. Thus, this chapter will use both published and unpublished sources related to death to analyze several aspects of community life such as healthcare, longevity, infant mortality, causes of death (including disease and murder), labor, and education. This chapter also examines the role of family and community building on individuals, including the deceased. The data presented shows that contrary to what might be expected, Blacks in Houston during the Great Depression did not experience a decline in quality of life commensurate with the declining economy. Greater hardships they certainly faced, but the Olivewood records show that these challenges did not necessarily result in an increased death or infant mortality rate.

Historic Olivewood Cemetery, as the oldest incorporated African-American cemetery in Houston, has an extensive database detailing those buried there. From heart disease to menopause, a wide variety of illnesses and diseases precipitated recorded deaths in Olivewood. The records of Olivewood Cemetery provide some fascinating insight, and they serve well as a representative sample of the larger population. Although a work in progress, the database may never be entirely complete due to irreversible losses

of information. Yet it does provide birth and death dates, causes of death, and interesting personal information for over one thousand and six hundred individuals. Death certificates, headstones, vital statistics, and obituaries all provide understanding of the lives of the men, women, and children interred in this eight-acre burial ground.

Likewise, the files of social services organizations and the records gleaned from hospitals add to our understanding of life and death for Black Americans from 1930 to 1942. The Harris County Social Services Files expanded considerably throughout the Great Depression, thus providing background information for numerous families. From an examination of these records one can extrapolate information regarding the quality of life led by those who applied, at least peripherally. Using the sample population of those buried in Olivewood, researchers can use statistical data to draw comparisons to the larger population. The information garnered from these sources sheds light on the overall quality of life of the community and exposes how the economic crisis—the Great Depression—impacted Black Houstonians.

The records for historic Olivewood Cemetery consist of a partially-published Excel file, a database of all known and documented persons buried in Olivewood. An analysis of these files, first sorted by death year, yields 323 records of individuals with a recorded death year from 1930 through 1942. Ten of those records, however, were deemed unreliable due to inconsistencies or potential inaccuracies. Thus, the final sample analyzed for the purpose of this research includes the records of 313 persons who died during the Great Depression and were buried in Olivewood.¹

1. Descendants of Olivewood, “Olivewood Cemetery Burial Database, Houston, Texas,” Unpublished database, last modified February 2018, Microsoft Excel file.

Causes of Death and Infant Mortality

Sadly, of the 313 individuals included in the Olivewood representative sample, 28 of them were under two-years-old. However, it was interesting to note that if one could survive the first year of life, chances of surviving childhood were quite good. Only seventeen children or teens in this sample passed away between the ages of three through seventeen. Thus, where infant deaths represent 9 percent of the files examined, childhood deaths represent only 5 percent. Of the infant deaths, natural and neonatal causes were the most common, which includes premature and stillborn births. The second most common cause of infant deaths was pneumonia, accounting for seven of the burials examined. Gender does not appear to have a significant effect on infant mortality in the Olivewood sample. When the sex of the deceased was known, eleven females and twelve male infants died in their first year of life.

The wide variety of causes of death among the children studied was indeed eye-opening. Very little similarity existed among the seventeen persons who fell into this age category. Two died of pneumonia and two of kidney disease, but all others had a unique cause of death. Among others, some causes included accidental lye poisoning, burns, meningitis, stroke, intestinal disorder, anemia, post-operative shock, and appendicitis. Two of the most touching were the records of Beatrice Maxey and Herman Bledsoe, who passed away in 1930 and 1935 respectively. Young Beatrice died of eclampsia in childbirth just shy of her fifteenth birthday. Five-year-old Herman passed away just three days after Easter after contracting ptomaine poisoning he got from eating Easter eggs.

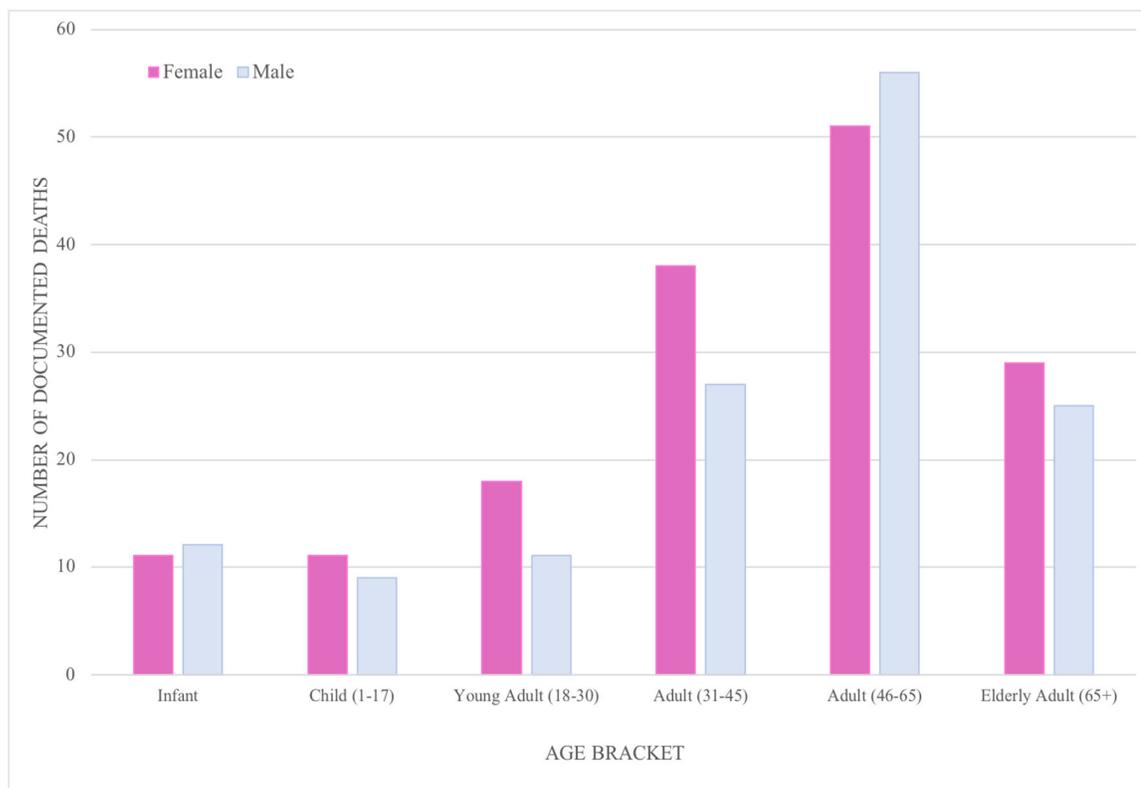


Figure 12. Deaths by Gender and Age, 1930-1942, based on the Olivewood Cemetery representative sample. (Courtesy *Descendants of Olivewood, Houston Texas, Unpublished database*)

Among those who passed away between the ages of 18 and 29, conditions of the lungs were by far the most common cause of death, which accounts for 55 percent of the records for this age group. Heart conditions were a distant second most common cause of death, as there were only two instances in this sample for this age group. Overall this age group seemed to be quite healthy, or at least any illnesses they had were not terminal.

Forty-four of the deaths in this sample happened to those in their thirties. Kidney disease and heart disease were once again very common causes of death, accounting for 27 percent of the individuals studied in this age group. Tuberculosis and pneumonia also continued to commonly cause death. Two records, however, stood out from the rest.

Moran Harris, a paper hanger, burned to death on April 6, 1930. Regrettably, none of the

records publicly available indicate whether this death occurred in relation to his occupation, but his grieving mother passed just five years later. The most intriguing record among this age group was that of Wesley Clark, a thirty-year-old laborer who accidentally died in 1935 by drowning while being baptized. It can only be supposed that if his family had the same inclination toward religion that Clark did, they received some comfort from the timing of his passing, despite the tragedy of it.

Those who died between the ages of forty and forty-nine accounted for 17 percent of the records examined. Cancer became listed as a cause of death for the first time among this age group. Three women in this age group passed of this dreaded disease. Diabetes also appeared as a cause of death for the first time. The most touching record in this age group was that of Emile Matthews, a laborer who died of heat exhaustion in July 1936. Incidentally, that was the summer of the great North American heat wave, during which time record high temperatures caused suffering across the nation. Nearly a century later, many of those record temperatures have yet to be surpassed.²

Among the 106 files of those who died in their fifties or sixties, the most common causes of death were heart disease, kidney disease, strokes, intestinal disorders, conditions of the lungs, influenza, and other natural causes. These continued to be the most common causes of death for the remaining 43 records, which comprised those who were age seventy or older. Malaria and senility were reported in these older age brackets also.

Sadly, malnutrition, usually linked with Pellagra, was also the reported cause of death for four individuals, ranging in age from twenty-five to fifty-six. Pellagra, a disease

2. Martha White, "Summer Heat Wave of 1936," *The 1996 Old Farmer's Almanac* (Dublin, NH: Yankee Publishing, Inc., 2018), <https://www.almanac.com/extra/summer-heat-wave-1936>.

due to a niacin deficiency, commonly existed among the poor in the South. Not until 1937 did doctors discover the cause and cure for this condition.³ Interestingly, three of those four persons who had malnutrition listed as their cause of death passed away in 1930, very early in the Great Depression. One might expect instances of malnutrition to occur more frequently as the economic crisis persisted, but instead it appears that the number of burials in Olivewood overall decreased as the Great Depression continued. This decrease may be due in part to reduced availability of space within the cemetery as well as encroachment by neighboring businesses preventing adequate ingress and egress.

Moreover, it was surprising how few of the records indicated accident as the cause of death. Accidents accounted for only two percent of the persons analyzed and homicide only accounted for slightly less than two percent of deaths. Five of the deaths from the Olivewood sample were listed as homicides, but only one of those records listed the perpetrator. Haywood Collins shot dead Willie Mae Stanhope, a forty-one-year-old widow, in March 1935. The other gunshot victims in this sample included Ora Fitch (d. 1933), a longshoreman who died at age twenty-seven; Norris Ransom (d. 1934), a thirty-six-year-old railroad porter; Rufus Blunt (d. 1930), a widower who passed away at Jefferson Davis Hospital at age fifty-five; and Peter C. Chester (d. 1933), a laborer tragically killed just a few months before his sixtieth birthday. In summary, the top seven most common causes of death among all age groups were: heart disease (16 percent), stroke (11 percent), kidney disease (9 percent), pneumonia (9 percent), natural causes (9 percent), tuberculosis (7 percent), and intestinal diseases (5 percent).

3. "Medical Definition of Pellagra," Medicinenet, accessed February 18, 2018, <https://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=4821>.

Table 1. Deaths by Age Group, 1930-1942, Olivewood Cemetery

Age Group	Number of Deaths Documented	Percentage of the Sample	Most Common Causes of Death
0-2	28	8.9	Neonatal causes [premature and stillborn births] (7), Natural causes (4), Pneumonia (4)
3-17	17	5.4	Pneumonia (2), Kidney disease (2)
18-29	20	6.4	Tuberculosis / Pulmonic Phthisis (8), Pneumonia (3)
30-39	44	14.1	Heart disease (8), Pneumonia (5), Tuberculosis (4), Kidney disease (4)
40-49	55	17.6	Heart disease (13), Natural causes (6), Stroke/ Apoplexy (6)
50-59	67	21.4	Stroke (11), Natural causes (9), Heart disease (7)
60-69	39	12.5	Kidney disease (8), Heart disease (8), Stroke (7)
70-79	34	10.9	Heart disease (9), Kidney disease (6), Stroke (4)
80+	9	2.9	Heart disease (2), Intestinal disorders (2)

Source: Descendants of Olivewood, “Olivewood Cemetery Burial Database, Houston, Texas,” Unpublished database, last modified February 2018, Microsoft Excel file.

Healthcare

Another aspect of the Olivewood database worthy of analysis is the information it provides on access to hospitals. Of the 313 files studied, only 55 of the individuals passed away in a hospital. Seven individuals passed in Hermann Hospital and another seven in Houston Negro Hospital. Three deaths occurred at the Houston Tuberculosis Hospital and three railroad workers passed away at the Southern Pacific facility. Harris County Homes and Harris County Insane Ward each account for a single individual. But the most commonly listed location by far was Jefferson Davis Hospital, accounting for the remaining 60 percent of the records.

City Hospital, the first of its kind in Houston, opened in 1838, just two years after

the creation of the first City Cemetery.⁴ However, the growth of the city and the accompanying needs quickly outpaced what the cemetery and hospital could handle. By 1839, City Hospital announced they would only serve those who had lived in Houston for at least six months, and a second municipal cemetery opened in 1840. Over the next few decades, a Charity Hospital formed, and the city established Houston Infirmary across from Glenwood Cemetery. In 1890 the Pest House, a smallpox hospital, opened in a virtually abandoned city cemetery. Then, in the closing days of 1924, the Jefferson Davis Hospital opened, amid great protests, on top of the graveyard that had once been the second City Cemetery.⁵ Thus, life and death in Houston have long been intertwined as Houston's cemeteries and its hospitals have grown up together. It is fitting, then, that today Olivewood Cemetery is bordered on the east by a Memorial Hermann Convenient Care Center.

Yet despite the continuing growth of both hospitals and cemeteries, African Americans in Houston did not necessarily have equal access to these services. While charitable facilities or centers designed for the indigent may have cared for Blacks, hospital care in Houston, like the rest of the South, remained segregated. Around 1897 a trained nurse founded a hospital specifically for Houston's Black population.⁶ In 1910, a group of African American physicians established Union Hospital on Andrews Street.⁷

4. Trevia Wooster Beverly, *At Rest: A Historical Directory of Harris County, Texas Cemeteries (1822-2009) with Funeral Home and Monument Company Listings and including Burial Customs and other Interesting Facts, Third Edition* (Houston: Tejas Publications and Research, 2009), 175, 179.

5. Beverly, *At Rest*, 179-181.

6. "Women in Texas History: Timeline," Ruthe Winegarten Memorial Foundation for Texas Women's History, accessed July 25, 2018, <https://www.womenintexashistory.org/timeline/>.

7. Kaitlyn Sisk, "History," Consumption in Freedman's Town, 2014, accessed August 22, 2018, <http://freedmantownarchaeology.rice.edu/Siskexhibit/history.html>.

The Feagan Hospital was located on Providence Street and still operated as of 1915.⁸ Hermann Hospital opened in 1924 and carried the distinction of treating its Black patients with decency.⁹ Then in 1925, the city established Houston Negro Hospital, founded by influential oilman Joseph S. Cullinan. According to his granddaughter, Cullinan “built it because he had a black employee who couldn’t get in any other hospital and he made it a requirement that the hospital be staffed by Negro doctors.”¹⁰ According to contemporary accounts, the new hospital was received by some with much gratitude:

“After so beautiefull [sic] and as impressive a ceremony at the dedication of the hospital the newspaper accounts seemed so flat. They, of course, could never carry the message of appreciation on the faces of every negro in the throng. If you could have heard them when they seemed to really lift there [sic] voices and sing from there [sic] very souls, then you would have realized their gratitude.”¹¹

Not everyone shared the excitement felt by the founders, especially among those who would avail themselves of the hospital’s services. By July 1933, Negro Hospital lacked insurance due to insufficient funding and they were transferring Black patients from other facilities just to keep it running.¹² Ultimately Houston Negro Hospital survived, eventually changing its name to Riverside General Hospital. The original Jefferson Davis Hospital, on the other hand, closed its doors in 1938.¹³

8. *The Red Book of Houston: A Compendium of Social, Professional, Educational and Industrial Interests of Houston’s Colored Population* (Houston: Sotex Publishing Company, 1915), 169.

9. Bernadette Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), 132-133.

10. Beverly, *At Rest*, 181. Some evidence also suggests that Cullinan opened the hospital in his son’s honor, who died in World War I.

11. “Letter from Janie to Joseph S. Cullinan,” June 21, 1926, in *Joseph S. Cullinan Papers Collection, Houston Negro Hospital Digital Collection*, accessed July 25, 2018, <https://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/hnh/item/947>.

12. “Letter from J. Y. Powell to Mr. Cullinan,” July 26, 1933 in *Joseph S. Cullinan Papers Collection, Houston Negro Hospital Digital Collection*, accessed July 25, 2018, <https://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/hnh/item/1182>; and “Letter from J. Y. Powell to J. S. Cullinan,” July 6, 1933 in *Joseph S. Cullinan Papers Collection, Houston Negro Hospital Digital Collection*, accessed October 7, 2017, <https://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/hnh/item/1041>.

13. Tony Fremantle, “Old Jeff Davis Hospital Gets Long-term Protection,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 24, 2013, accessed July 25, 2018,

In addition to the Olivewood files, another valuable source of information regarding healthcare is the Harris County Social Service files, which includes client case files gleaned from the Harris County Records Center. Most of these files come either from face sheets for the State Department of Public Welfare or case records of families referred to the Works Progress Administration. An analysis of these records yielded a sample of 32 of the most pertinent files to use as a sample for this research. The health information provided in these records included documentation of disabilities, chronic illnesses, and deaths.¹⁴

An examination of the health information in the Social Services files listed 22 percent of households as having all adults present in good health. Four households had good health with a postscript such as “blind but good health,” or “widowed but good health.” Five households had no health information listed, although there was clearly a designated area on the form for this information. Thus, fifty percent of records sampled had some indicator for adult health problems. Seven of those had death listed as the health indicator and two were unclear.

Of the adult health issues indicated in the Social Services Records sample, the most common was issues related specifically to female health, which appeared in three different records. Menopause, pregnancy, and unspecified female trouble were all considered disabilities of note. Moreover, one file listed heart trouble as the cause of

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/columnists/chronicles/article/Old-Jeff-Davis-Hospital-gets-long-term-protection-5008444.php>. A new hospital, also called Jefferson Davis, opened in 1939. After that, the old building gradually declined. Due to its controversial location atop an old cemetery and its dilapidated condition, it continues to have a reputation for being haunted, although the building now holds protected status.

14. Social Service Department Client Case Files, Harris County Records Center, Harris County, Texas. Harris County subsequently transferred this Collection to the Harris County Archives, Harris County Criminal Justice Center. Houston, Texas.

death for another woman, while another had her legs amputated, and rheumatism was another health issue noted for women in this sample. In the Olivewood records, it seemed that although female-specific complaints certainly occurred, they did not often result in death, at least during the time period studied. Only four percent of the females in the Olivewood sample were listed with female-specific causes of death.

Moreover, only two men from the Social Services sample were listed as being in poor health, yet it was more common for the man to be deceased than the woman. Olivewood's records, on the other hand, indicate more female deaths overall during this time period. However, among the deceased of widowed status, in 73 percent of cases the man died first. Among those of married status, in 53 percent of cases it was the man who had passed. Thus, the general trend appears to be aligned between the Olivewood and Social Services samples.

An analysis of death and disability among the children in the Social Services Records shows 44 percent of households with all children in good health. This is a much higher rate of overall good health than the adults, although poor health among adults might be expected among social services records, as poor health would be a contributing factor to the need for welfare services. Seven of the households that had children had no health status indicated, although there was an area of the form designated for this purpose. Two households listed child health information unclearly. Thus, only four households had any health indicators listed for their children: sick, afflicted, crippled, and asthma. Within the Olivewood sample, children under the age of 18 also represented a

smaller percentage of those interred, only comprising about 14 percent of the entire sample.¹⁵

Labor

In a 1961 journal article on public health, Dr. Edward G. Stockwell observed that occupation is a crucial factor in determining one's socioeconomic status and therefore quality of life. "The work a man does, the conditions under which his work is done, and the wages he receives for it determine in great measure the circumstances of his life...A man's occupation is, therefore, one of the potent factors deciding the state of his health and fixing the length of his life."¹⁶ A 1934 study, the first of its kind in the United States, showed a correlation between occupational class differences and mortality rates—the death rate of unskilled persons was nearly twice as high as persons in professional occupations.¹⁷

While the Great Depression negatively impacted most Americans, institutionalized racism added an additional layer of difficulty for Black Houstonians. It affected all areas of life, including the types of jobs African Americans could hold, the wages they were paid, and the working conditions endured. Black Houstonians who were employed in this era often performed unskilled labor in professions that were considered inferior.

The Social Services records provide insight on employment information during the Great Depression, including the types of jobs the applicants held, wages earned, and

15. Client Case Files, Harris County, Texas; and Cemetery Records, Descendants of Olivewood.

16. Edward G. Stockwell, "Socioeconomic Status and Mortality in the United States: Review of the Literature," *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)* 76, no. 12 (December 1961): 1081, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4591378>.

17. Stockwell, "Socioeconomic Status and Mortality," 1081.

occasionally information regarding debts owed. As is also the case with Olivewood records, many were common laborers or domestics. Among those interred at Olivewood, those who labored as domestics comprised 44 percent of those women whose occupations were recorded. This represents an even larger percentage than those who were listed as housewives or whose jobs involved housekeeping, signifying a need for additional income in an era when many considered the care of their own family in the home a woman's primary employment. However, as historian Bernadette Pruitt points out, despite the stigma that was attached to the field of domestic labor, these women "believed their limited employment options did at least assist their families in the midst of adversity."¹⁸

Among the men with listed occupations in the Olivewood records, laborers represented 37 percent of the sample. Moreover, men had a much wider variety of types of jobs as compared to women. Unfortunately, despite the wider variety of occupations available to Black men, especially in the city, men often could not sustain their families on their income alone. Although the percentage of females in Houston's workforce decreased between 1920 and 1940, among African American females that percentage increased. Women represented 38 percent of Houston's African American workers in 1920, but that number rose to 43 percent by 1940.¹⁹

Although most Black Houstonians performed unskilled labor, a variety of other professions existed, and within the Olivewood sample are those whose professions required a great deal of skill and education. In the Olivewood sample we find Sam Wilson (d. 1930), who was the proprietor of his own barber shop and a pillar in the

18. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 236.

19. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 233.

community.²⁰ We also find Alice Dunn Logan and James Ryan, both renowned educators who died in 1940. The former served as the Dean of Women at Wiley college and the latter was the first principal of Yates High School in Houston.

20. *The Red Book of Houston*, 84, 165.

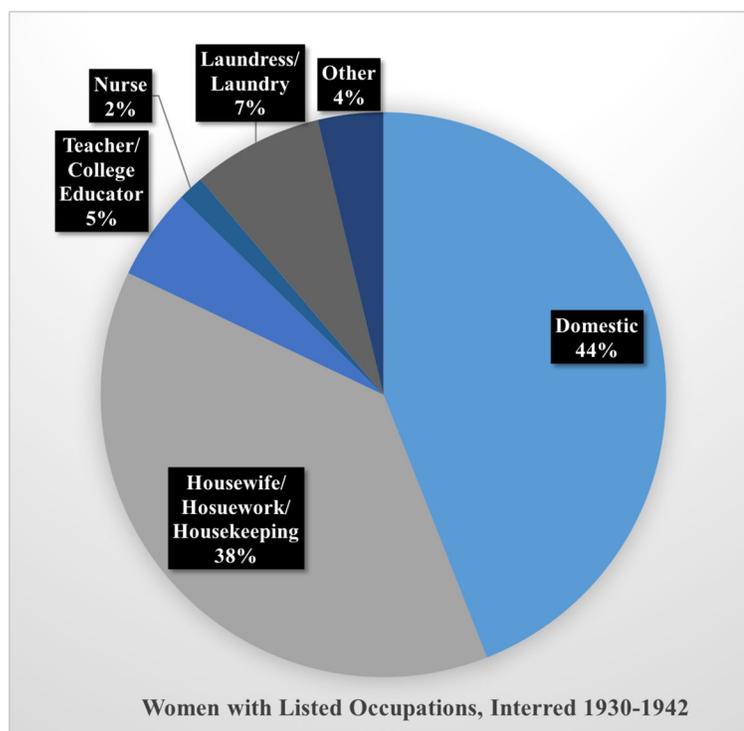
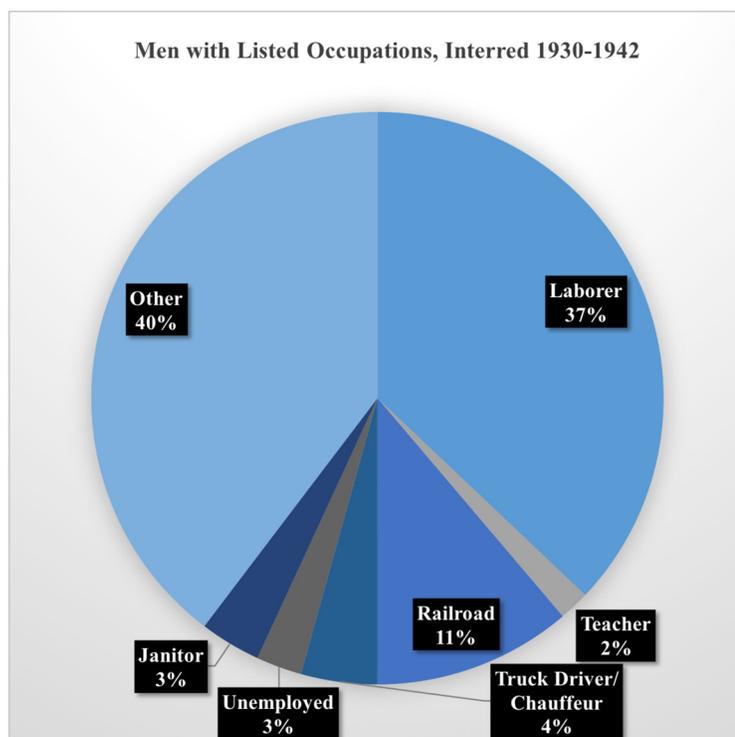


Figure 13. Graphs showing occupations of adults interred in Olivewood, 1930-1942, based on the Olivewood Cemetery representative sample. (Courtesy Descendants of Olivewood, Houston Texas, Unpublished database)

Education

Emmett J. Scott, executive secretary to Booker T. Washington and Houston native, wrote that “Education is the means through which...the Negro people are to be prepared to meet...changing conditions and survive” the challenges of life.²¹ Of those included in the Olivewood samples, three percent of the interred were employed in the field of education and two percent were students. Additionally, the lives of many others reflected the importance of the education about which Scott wrote. Clearly education was important to the community in general.

In November 1932, a questionnaire was sent to State Departments of Education and to public schools in dozens of U.S. cities, inquiring about the specific effect “the depression had upon the program of Negro Education” in their cities and states.²² Replies from fifteen states and forty-seven cities were published in the *Journal of Negro Education*. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive and optimistic. When examining the responses, however, it should be noted that of the states that responded were southern states where segregated schools were the norm. Moreover, it is unclear whether those responding were Black or White officials, which would certainly affect their perceptions, as this was a subjective, non-qualitative study. Although most of the fifteen states that responded acknowledged that budgets were reduced and school construction had slowed or stopped, they also reported an encouraging outlook for the future.

21. *The Red Book of Houston*, 5.

22. N.C. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes and the Current Depression,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 2, no. 1 (1933): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2292214>.

When asked about the comparative effect of the Depression upon Negro and White schools, the overwhelming majority of states reported that the suffering was equal, including Texas. Only three states reported that Negro schools suffered more (Louisiana, Missouri, and Arkansas), and two states claimed that Negro schools suffered less (Georgia and Mississippi). Twelve out of fifteen of these states reported higher enrollment and attendance, and 93 percent of those surveyed reported good or excellent morale among teachers. All the states who offered a response to the question regarding effect upon instruction indicated that quality of teaching had not suffered; in many instances it had increased. As Texas put it, “Appears to be no let down in the quality of instruction. Teachers willing to bear their share of sacrificing.”²³

According to the reports made by individual cities in this survey, responses were generally in line with those made by the states—morale was up, enrollment increased, especially in the upper grades, and both Black and White schools suffered equally. However, it is important to note that Black and White schools in these areas did not necessarily have equal funding and support *prior* to the Depression; therefore, even though it is reported that the Depression affected both Black and White schools equally, Black schools would have still been in an inferior position when compared to White schools. In Houston, the specific effect of the Depression was an increased size of classes, with the comparative effect upon Negro and White schools being equal. Furthermore, it was noted that the Depression affected Black education in Texas by necessitating “shorter school terms, reduced teachers’ salaries, curtailment in teaching supplies and equipment, a marked slowing down in the construction of school buildings

23. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes,” 7.

and repair work, an increase in teaching load, an increase in enrollment, and an *improved understanding as to the values and purposes of education.*”²⁴ Despite the overall optimism conveyed by Houston ISD officials, discriminatory practices lurked beneath their report, including disparity of funding in segregated schools and required Black schools to use of a “modified form” of the curriculum used in the White schools.²⁵ Yet Houston school administrators noted that the Negro teaching force had “gone ahead faithfully and courageously,” with a partial loss in effectiveness of instruction, although “not in [the] same ratio as reductions.”²⁶

Family and Community Building

From both the Olivewood and Social Services records, one can extrapolate information regarding family and community building during the Great Depression. An analysis of the cross section of family structures present in the Social Services sample showed that nine of the 32 households had only one adult present, including those who were single, divorced, or widowed. All other households had two adults present, the vast majority of which were a man and woman living together. It was not always clear whether they were legally married. Other living arrangements included one household with adult siblings living together, one mother/ adult daughter family, and a household with two friends living together. In the Olivewood sample, of the 255 individuals aged sixteen or older with a reported marital status, 119 were married (47 percent), 30 were single (12 percent), 99 were widowed (40 percent), and only 7 were divorced (3 percent).

24. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes,” 14. Italics included in the original.

25. Ira B. Bryant, Jr., *The Development of the Houston Negro Schools* (Houston: Informer Pub. Co., 1935), 79.

26. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes,” 13.

Bearing in mind that these are self-reported status statements and not all of these marriages can necessarily be confirmed with legal documentation, these numbers still indicate a strong desire to build traditional families. Moreover, the report on children present in the Social Services sample further corroborates this assessment—less than 13 percent of households had no children present, and nearly one-third had four children or more.

Building families in the era of Jim Crow was not always easy, especially when love crossed racial barriers. Jane Davis Sasser died in January 1931. A fifty-seven-year-old widow, she worked as a domestic until heart disease claimed her life. Now buried in Olivewood Cemetery, Jane's life proves an intriguing puzzle. The 1895 Houston City Directory lists Jane as a servant living in the home of Berry B. Sasser, a White Confederate veteran and bartender.²⁷ In the 1900 census, she is listed under her maiden name but her status has upgraded from servant to boarder in Sasser's home. Jane was the only person of color among thirteen boarders. By the 1910 census, however, she is again listed as Jane Sasser, living in the home of Berry B. Sasser, but he is listed as a widower while she is listed as single, although her relationship to him is denoted "wife."²⁸ When

27. *Houston, Texas, City Directory, 1895*, from Ancestry.com, accessed July 25, 2018, 299-300, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/2469/4799238?pid=381859292&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%201%2026dbid%202469%2026h%20381859292%2026tid%2026pid%2026usePUB%20true%26_phsrc%20cOj15%26_phstart%20successSource&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=cOj15&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true#?imageId=4799237

28. 1910 U.S. Census, Harris County, Texas, Population Schedule, Houston, sheet no. 4B, digital image, Ancestry.com, accessed July 25, 2018, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/7884/4449746_00833?pid=28126593&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%201%2026dbid%207884%2026h%2028126593%2026tid%2026pid%2026usePUB%20true%26_phsrc%20cOj6%26_phstart%20successSource&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=cOj6&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true

Berry passed away in 1912, his death certificate labels him single, and he was buried in Glenwood, a prominent White cemetery.²⁹ When Jane passed away, she was acknowledged as the wife of Berry Bryant Sasser, although she was buried in a segregated grave in Olivewood.³⁰ Their son Berry, who preceded them in death, also rests in Olivewood. Although the author was unable to find an official marriage certificate, as would be expected for an interracial relationship in that era, it seems clear that there was a mutual understanding between Jane and Berry that equated to marriage. But despite their efforts to build a family together, the rules of segregation that so often impeded their relationship in life ultimately prevented them from being united as a family even in their final resting places. One can only hope that they were able to find support within their relationship, even if it proved difficult to find it in the outside world.

In addition to finding strength within families, a wider process of community building also helped to alleviate some of the public's concerns during the crisis of the 1930s. Despite the role that racial segregation continued to play in Houston during this era, within their own neighborhoods, Black Houstonians experienced some control over their own lives. "Working-class families typically lived in white, one-room shotgun

29. B. B. Sasser, Texas State Board of Health, Standard Certificate of Death no. 1027, (1912), from Ancestry.com, accessed August 18, 2018, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/2272/40394_b061793-01346?pid=22159121&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%20percent3D1%20percent26dbid%20percent3D2272%20percent26h%20percent3D22159121%20percent26tid%20percent3D%20percent26pid%20percent3D%20percent26usePUB%20percent3Dtrue%20percent26_phsrc%20percent3DcOj7%20percent26_phstart%20percent3DsuccessSource&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=cOj7&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true

30. Jane Sasser, Texas State Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Standard Certificate of Death no. 803, (1931), from Ancestry.com, accessed August 18, 2018, https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/2272/40394_b062012-02417?pid=22169312&backurl=https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv%20percent3D1%20percent26dbid%20percent3D2272%20percent26h%20percent3D22169312%20percent26tid%20percent3D%20percent26pid%20percent3D%20percent26usePUB%20percent3Dtrue%20percent26_phsrc%20percent3DcOj11%20percent26_phstart%20percent3DsuccessSource&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=cOj11&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true

houses,” and Houston’s ward system made the city feel more like a collection of small towns.³¹ However, as was the case with other racial and ethnic groups, Houston’s African American population also developed class delineations within neighborhoods. Yet the unique challenges faced by Blacks at this time prompted these communities to bind together in ways they otherwise might not have.³² “The congregations, fraternal societies, clubs, and friendships” provided a “semblance of serenity and stability.”³³

Community agency proved to be a significant self-help method during the difficult 1930s. Moreover, the importance of religion and politics as a uniting influence for the African American population cannot be overstated. As relationships among citizens grew, a deepened sense of community fostered political activism. This form of activism, combined with a strong sense of individualism and self-sufficiency, strengthened the Black community in Houston. Furthermore, the role of churches and charitable societies cannot be overlooked. The ninety-five African American congregations within the city provided organization and a common motivation for action.³⁴ This sense of united purpose spiraled back into the neighborhoods, thus creating a perpetual well of strength from which members of the community could draw to ease the difficulties of life during the Great Depression. This sense of community, which can be seen in the way the deceased are honored in places such as Olivewood Cemetery, may have contributed to the greater-than-expected quality of life led by this subpopulation of Houstonians.

31. Tyina Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 29.

32. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 66.

33. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 12.

34. Pruitt, *The Other Great Migration*, 111.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

Throughout the Great Depression, thousands of Black Houstonians lived ordinary, day-to-day lives, without fanfare. Despite a lack of specific documentation for so many of them, the legacy of these individuals and families appear in the communities they built, in their determination to survive through crisis, and how they helped shape Houston's social history. Olivewood Cemetery helps to complete our understanding of the community, their struggles, and their triumphs. The layout of the burial ground itself shows how the African ancestry of the interred continued to influence them over the decades and centuries, and the records gathered through Olivewood help create a snapshot of daily life in the community.

Several historical events or trends can be traced through the richness of the Olivewood archives. For instance, of the over two thousand Texans who died in the 1918-1919 influenza epidemic, loved ones buried handful of them in Olivewood.¹ Research shows that June through September of 1917 was a bad time for typhoid malaria. Olivewood records corroborate significant migration patterns, especially those of the First Great Migration, and track to some degree how these migrations originated from eastern Texas and outside the state. The profound effects of the African Diaspora surface as a handful of those interred were either born in Africa themselves, or are the children of persons brought to the United States from Africa. An as this thesis has shown, a study of

1. Craig Hlavaty, "How did the worldwide influenza epidemic 100 years ago impact Houston?," *Houston Chronicle*, January 17, 2018, accessed September 22, 2018, <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/worldwide-influenza-epidemic-100-years-ago-Houston-12498843.php#photo-14891673>.

the Olivewood records also shows that despite the difficulties presented by the Great Depression, Black Houstonians were survivors. They defied the odds.

Although the economic downturn increased unemployment and resulted in bank and business failures across the nation, it did not necessarily result in increased mortality or a decline in overall health. In 1929, unemployment in the United States hovered at a low three percent. However, at its height in 1933, unemployment soared to almost 25 percent.² Yet life expectancy also rose from fifty-seven to sixty-three-years-old nationwide.³ In Olivewood observers saw a similar trend in that the overall number of burials decreased sharply during the 1930s as compared to the previous decade. Moreover, the greatest decline occurred in the number of children under the age of two. The percentage of deaths for infants and children in this age category dropped from 22 percent in the 1920s to 10 percent in the 1930s. While decreasingly available space for interments in Olivewood contributes to some of this decline, it is important to note that this is consistent with national trends for this same time period.⁴

2. Stanley Lebergott, "Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900-1954," in *The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment: A Conference of the Universities—National Bureau Committee for Economic Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 215.

3. José A. Tapia Granados and Ana V. Diez Roux, "Life and Death During the Great Depression," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 106, no. 41 (October 2009): 17291, <http://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0904491106>.

4. Tapia Granados and Diez Roux, "Life and Death During the Great Depression," 17290.

Table 2. Crude Death Rates in Selected States, 1930-1939

	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
National Unemployment Rate (percentage)	8.9	15.9	24.9	23.6	21.7	20.1	17.0	14.3	19.0	17.2
Texas				9.9	9.9	10.1	10.7	10.5	9.6	9.5
Louisiana	11.7	11.0	10.7	10.5	10.4	10.5	11.4	10.9	10.7	10.5
Alabama	11.5	10.6	10.3	10.0	10.7	10.3	11.1	11.0	10.5	10.0
Mississippi	12.0	11.0	10.0	10.5	10.5	10.2	11.5	11.3	10.6	10.4
Oklahoma	8.2	7.8	8.0	8.5	8.9	8.8	9.8	9.1	8.6	8.7
Arkansas	10.2	9.6	8.8	9.0	8.9	8.5	9.7	9.6	8.8	8.5
Tennessee	11.5	10.8	10.6	10.3	10.9	10.8	11.7	10.8	10.4	10.0
California	11.6	11.6	11.5	11.4	11.2	11.7	12.0	12.3	11.5	11.4
Michigan	10.7	10.2	10.4	10.2	10.5	10.6	11.2	10.8	10.0	10.1
Massachusetts	11.6	11.5	11.6	11.9	11.7	11.5	11.8	11.8	11.2	11.6
New York	11.7	11.7	11.4	11.4	11.3	11.2	11.5	11.5	10.9	11.1

Sources: Forrest E. Linder and Robert D. Grove, *Vital Statistics Rates in the United States, 1900-1940* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1947), 96, 124; and Stanley Lebergott, "Annual Estimates of Unemployment in the United States, 1900-1954," in *The Measurement and Behavior of Unemployment: A Conference of the Universities—National Bureau Committee for Economic Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 215.

Note: The national unemployment rate is listed as a percentage of the civilian labor force. The numbers represent deaths per 1000 population. Texas was not admitted to the national birth or death registration system until 1933. An overall comparison of death rates to unemployment shows that economic downturn generally results in lower death rates, especially in southern states.

Table 3. Deaths by Age Group and Decade, Olivewood Cemetery

Age Group	1920-1929		1930-1939		1940-1949	
	Number of Deaths Documented	Percentage of the Sample	Number of Deaths Documented	Percentage of the Sample	Number of Deaths Documented	Percentage of the Sample
0-2	118	21.6	30	10.2	3	5.7
3-17	25	4.6	15	5.1	1	1.9
18-29	51	9.3	20	6.8	2	3.8
30-39	57	10.4	44	15.0	4	7.5
40-49	97	17.7	55	18.7	6	11.3
50-59	85	15.5	67	22.8	6	11.3
60-69	50	9.1	39	13.3	16	30.2
70-79	38	6.9	34	11.6	11	20.8
80+	25	4.6	9	3.1	4	7.5

Source: Descendants of Olivewood, “Olivewood Cemetery Burial Database, Houston, Texas,” Unpublished database, last modified February 2018, Microsoft Excel file.

In addition to matters of health and mortality, the cemetery records also provide insight into how labor and education contributed to the quality of life of the community. Despite the challenges presented by lack of funding and racial discrimination, Black schools in Houston continued to press forward “faithfully and courageously,” with increasing enrollments during the 1930s.⁵ Families laid to rest in Olivewood numerous teachers, principals, and college instructors, and civic leaders ultimately named several Houston-area schools for these educators. Moreover, of the 275 adults (age eighteen or older) who died between 1930 and 1942 and buried in Olivewood, only five were specifically listed as unemployed. Seventeen of these records had no occupations listed. This may mean they were unemployed, or it could have been an oversight. Furthermore,

5. N.C. Newbold, “The Public Education of Negroes and the Current Depression,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 2, no. 1 (1933): 13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2292214>.

those who did have occupations listed may have been unemployed, as surviving relatives may have preferred to record the deceased life's work rather than their temporary, negative employment status. But taken at face value and in the absence of further information, it appears that the community that buried in Olivewood had a much lower than average unemployment rate.

Additionally, the information in Olivewood's records indicates that family life was central to the community. Marriage rates were considerably higher than divorce rates, and the loving messages carved on headstones show the importance of familial bonds. Family life was central to community building, and a strong community provided essential support during this time of crisis.

The research presented in this work is only the beginning of what could be gleaned from a study of cemeteries, and from Olivewood specifically. For example, a comparative study of Olivewood and its white counterpart, Glenwood Cemetery, may provide additional insights into the quality of life of Houstonians during the era of Jim Crow. A comparison of Olivewood to similar cemeteries in other areas of the country would also prove an intriguing investigation. What was the quality of life of Blacks in Houston versus those in other cities of the South prior to integration? What was the quality of life of Blacks in the South versus those in the North? What could we learn from comparing Blacks in rural areas to those in cities, and how did the quality of life of Blacks in Houston contrast with that of other minority groups during the same time period?



Figure 14. Glenwood Cemetery (above) and Olivewood (below). Viewing the two cemeteries side by side, at the same point in time, makes the contrast between them apparent. *(Courtesy of author)*

In addition to these proposed comparative studies, further research could help answer other questions about health, education, and labor in Houston's African American community during the Great Depression. What was the health status of those who applied for welfare versus those who did not? Was there a link between certain diseases and certain professions? Further research might also yield insight into a possible connection between income, education, and the status of one's health during times of economic crisis. Although this thesis only focused on a small subset of Houston's population during a very specific era in history, a great deal could be learned about quality of life based on research originating within the gates of cemeteries.

Over the years, Olivewood itself has managed to survive, despite the ravages of time. Near its old Court Street entrance stands a marker placed by the Texas Historical Commission. It notes that "pivotal leaders of Houston's post-Emancipation African American community" are interred in Olivewood, and that the cemetery serves "as a testament to the foresight and perseverance of the[se] cemetery founders."⁶ Persevering is a most fitting way to describe both the cemetery itself as well as Houston's Black community during the Great Depression. Against all odds, they found ways to press forward and even thrive. Thus, both Olivewood itself and the community that built it are proof that there indeed can be life after death.

6. "Historical Marker Dedication," Descendants of Olivewood: The Official Website of Historic Olivewood Cemetery, Houston, Texas, accessed October 31, 2018, <http://www.descendantsofolivewood.org/2009/04/historical-marker-dedication/>.

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Bachelor of Arts (April 2003) in History, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Instructional Coach, Bryan ISD, July 2015 – present. Responsibilities include: writing curriculum and assessments, designing and presenting professional development, coaching instructors on teaching methodology, and working with students in small groups.

History Teacher, Cypress Fairbanks ISD, Aldine ISD, and North Houston High School for Business, August 2004- June 2015. Responsibilities include: Designing and teaching lessons, managing the classroom, assessing student data.

PUBLICATIONS

Mouton, Lisa and Descendants of Olivewood. *Historic Olivewood Cemetery*. Trade book, 2016.

Mouton, Lisa. “Forgotten, But Not Gone: The Symbols of Historic Olivewood Cemetery.” *Journal of History and Culture* 1, no. 5 (Winter 2014): 63–65.

PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

Mouton, Lisa M. *The Role of Public History in the Preservation of Houston, Texas*. Annual Conference of the National Council for Black Studies, Houston, Texas, March 2017.

Mouton, Lisa M. *Early Settlement in Texas: 1779-1835*. The Heritage Society at Sam Houston Park: The Best Little Workshop in Texas, Houston, Texas, June 2016.

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ACADEMIC AWARDS

Professional Specialist of the Year, Stephen F. Austin Middle School, Bryan, Texas, 2017.

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