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San Antonio, Texas

April 1, 2010



## Prince Hall Masons attend historical commemoration of 19th Century Black Legislators of Texas

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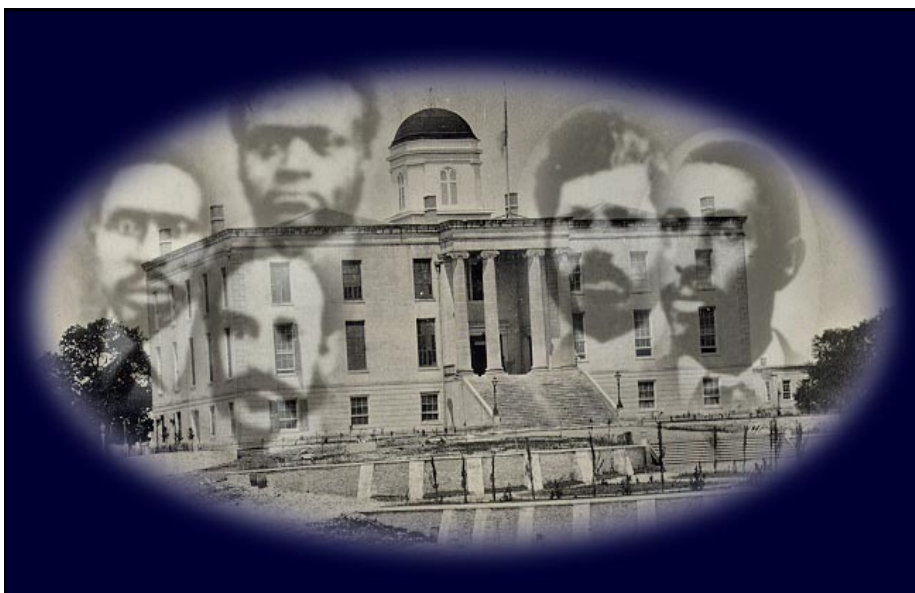
*MWPHGL of Texas*

**AUSTIN** — Men in black suits donning Masonic regalia, white gloves and aprons along with state senators, house representatives, families and friends gathered together on a beautiful sunny morning at the Texas State Cemetery, March 30. Their purpose was not to mourn the departure of a loved one or provide condolences, it was to honor and commemorate 52 African American men who served in the Texas Legislature and as Constitution Convention Delegates during the 19th Century, 1868 - 1900.

The ceremony began with the Bexar County Buffalo Soldiers of San Antonio, marching on and posting the Colors which consisted of the U.S. and Texas State Flags.

The unveiling was an effort that was started 12 years ago by Larry A. Thomas, the monument's project director, whose vision was to have a monument to remember the forgotten, to reconnect a disconnect, and to relight an historical path that once blazed before the men that were honored.

Thomas was not alone in his vision; it took others like Harry Bradley of the Texas State Cemetery, Representatives Dawnna Dukes, Dennis Bonnen, Senator Rodney Ellis and project commit-



*Pictured from Lt. to Rt.: Walter M. Burton, George Thompson Ruby, Allen W. Wilder, John Mitchell and Nathan H. Haller. These and 47 other Black Legislators and Constitutional Convention Delegates of Texas were honored at the Texas State Cemetery March 30 on the 140th Anniversary of the end of Reconstruction. Photo courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives.*

tee members to see Thomas' vision come to fruition.

Scott Sayers, Chairman of the Texas State Cemetery Committee spoke regarding the cemetery.

“Every aspect of Texas culture and history is represented at the cemetery; this is the final resting place of heroes of the Texas revolution, for signing of the Texas Declaration of Independence, for governors, legislators, judges, Texas Rangers, educators, writers and even athletes.”

“This cemetery today is so proud to honor the 19th Century Black Legislators who will now be celebrated right alongside

Stephen F. Austin, Governor James P. Henderson, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan and others,” said Sayers.

Sayers went on to say that 19th Century Texas Black Legislators were the early civil rights pioneers often times overlooked in our history books but they were just as courageous as today's civil rights leaders.

Dr. Alwyn Barr, Professor Emeritus of History at Texas Tech University informed those present that today was the 140th Anniversary of the official end of Reconstruction. He provided a brief history lesson.



*The Honorable Joe Straus, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives attended the historic event and addressed those in the audience.*

“The significance of March 30, 1870 becomes clear when we compare the status and roles of African Americans in Texas on that date with their status and roles five years earlier at the end of the Civil War. In 1865, Union victory over the Confederacy allowed Black Texans to throw off the bonds of slavery yet they found themselves with few legal rights to control their economic-political perception status in 1865.”

Barr continued, “In the months following, African Americans in Texas and across the South appealed to the U.S. Congress for greater equality and sometimes that was a dangerous thing to do in those days, Congress responded in 1867 with the Reconstruction Act that required new state constitutions in Texas and other southern states and granted civil rights and voting rights to African Americans for the first time that opened the way for nine black

leaders in Texas to win elections as delegates to a new constitutional convention that met in 1868 and in 1869. Those black delegates worked to authorize through the new Texas Constitution a state public school system that would include black as well as white students for the first time.”

The Honorable Joe Straus, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives attended the historic event and addressed those in the audience.

“It is fitting that we are gathered on a crucial day on the history of the 15th Amendment which was ratified on Feb. 3, 1870. It was not until March 30th that the secretary of state issued a proclamation certifying ratification by the states. So today, 140 year later, we remember these 52 men for their service to our state as they take their rightful place in history to be honored for generations to come.”

“As I reflect upon their service two words come to mind, courage

and sacrifice, each one of these men overcame the shameful legacy of slavery to become farmers, businessmen, teachers, ministers, and they served our state courageously under the most difficult circumstances, they sacrificed time with their family, their businesses, their safety and they stood for their beliefs and leaving a legacy of leadership that enriches our lives today. The members of the Texas Legislators join me in honoring the service of these men. Standing here in this solemn and historic place, I know that this monument is long overdue, now it proudly stands as a reminder of the past and a marker for future generations.”

The Honorable Dawnna Dukes of the Texas House of Representatives provided House sponsorship and brought to the forefront the awareness that these men deserved. When the project director asked for support, Dukes led the effort to help secure funding to make the commemoration possible.

“When Larry came to me a few years ago concerning a monument for the cemetery it really seemed like a no brainer, but one had to question why did it take so much effort to have these brave men recognized,” said Dukes.

According to Dukes, one of the men honored today was Edward Patton, who in 1890 was the last African American to be elected to the Texas State Legislature, who stood up in 1891 and argued against the Poll Tax, in 1893 the Tax was approved and in 1892 the county sheriff fired a shot at Patton in order to deter him from reelection. Patton had to leave the state of Texas in fear of his life.

“Patton left behind a wife and

two children and one of his children bared him a granddaughter and some 100 years later in 1965 when civil rights were taken up in America, it was finally made possible that African Americans would be able to vote again without a Poll Tax and that woman knew that by having the ability to organize African Americans in 5th Ward Houston she would have the chance of becoming the first African American to serve in the Senate, and even though the picture of Patton may be in the bottom of the Capitol, the picture of his granddaughter, Barbara Jordan is in the Texas Senate. This is a very special day.”

Another champion in the efforts



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*Senator Rodney Ellis*

to recognize these men is the Honorable Rodney Ellis of the State Senate, who over the years voiced his support and stayed in close contact with the project director on the progress on finding support for the monument.

“It’s always good to see you all in a graveyard and I always look forward to visiting, I don’t want to stay,” said Ellis jokingly.

“I think it is important to note that when this graveyard was established obviously people of color could not be buried in this great cemetery as others, now we all have a spot, I picked mine, I’ll be right over on Confederate Hill because we all have learned that

regardless on which side of the war you were on, the right side won. I look forward to resting there but before I rest I hope that there are a lot of young people that will fill my shoes and the shoes of these fine Black Legislators.”

Ellis thanked the project director for standing fast and pushing him and others to get this done. He also exclaimed his satisfaction to see that many descendants were able to make it to Austin for the commemoration.

Announcement of the unveiling was conducted by the Honorable Wilbert M. Curtis, Grand Master of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas and Jurisdiction, who gave orders to the Grand Marshal, to demand order for the unveiling of the monument. Grand Master Curtis then gave orders to the Right Worshipful Grand Senior Warden.

“Having accepted the invitation to assist in unveiling of the monu-

ment commemorating the 19th Century Texas Black Legislators, we have assembled the Craft for that purpose and it is my wish and



*The Grand Marshal delivers Grand Master Wilbert M. Curtis’ order at the historic event.*

my will that the Brothers give their attention and assistance in the work to be done. Please communicate this order to the Right Worshipful Grand Junior Warden and he to the Brethren present that having due and timely notice thereof they may govern themselves accordingly.”

His orders were relayed and obeyed.

Descendants of the 52 men honored took their places in front of the monument with anticipation of its unveiling. A representative of each family assisted in the august event, one such person was Brother Danny M. Pryor of Sunny-side, TX, who is a descendent of Sen. Walter Moses Burton.

Burton, who was born into slavery circa 1829 in North Carolina, served in the 14th -17th State Legislatures.

“It is a great feeling having a family member recognized in such a fashion,” said Bro. Pryor, 48, who is a member of Lone Star



Lodge No. 85. “This was only a small piece of what Blacks have accomplished.”

Larry A. Thomas, project director of the 19th Century Texas Black Legislators Monument Project received a standing ovation after the unveiling.

“This was 12 years in the mak-

ing. Something that God has led me to do,” said Thomas.

Thomas remarked about the importance of research.

“Take the time to do the homework; this applies to adults as well as students. I encourage all to visit the Forever Free Exhibit in the State Capitol. There are six families of the 52 men we honor here today; there is still much research to be done.”

Thomas said that the project was not without criticism.

“The monument looks good, it turned out great. There was a lot of support from people for this project and there were some who did not. Some asked why not do it in February during Black History Month, but it had to be today for today has significance. It is the 140th Anniversary of the end of Reconstruction.

The last speaker of the day was the Honorable Frank D. Jackson, Mayor of the City of Prairie View, who also serves as the Worshipful Grand Historian for the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas.



*Project Director Larry A. Thomas delivers mementos to Bro. Danny M. Pryor and other descendents after the unveiling of the 19th Century Black Legislators and Constitutional Delegates monument at the Texas State Cemetery.*

Mayor Jackson provided an historical account of when Stephen F. Austin came into Texas to take up a land grant. When doing so Austin lobbied the Mexican Government to bring in Negro slaves into Texas. Austin said that without the Negro Texas would fail as an enterprise. He was granted that concession.

Jackson said that one of the incentives for the first original 300 settlers were for each Negro slave they brought into Texas they would receive an additional 80 acres of land. One such person accumulated over 44,000 acres of land by bringing in 110 enslaved African men, women, and children and that person's descendants accumulated land as well. Some of these slaved men are honored here today."

"Looking back into Texas history, there was a man name Norris Wright Cuney who after being born on a plantation and going to Freemason-ran school for Negro boys in Pittsburgh, and after the



*Richard Allen, one of the 52 men honored, served as the 2nd Grand Master of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas.*



*The Honorable Frank D. Jackson, Mayor of the City of Prairie View, who also serves as the Grand Historian for the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas, provided remarks towards the conclusion of the ceremony.*

war came back into Texas, started what we now know as a very quiet revolution. It was Cuney that met with a gentleman by the name of William D. Matthews, who made Cuney a Deputy Grand Master of the State of Kansas. There was also Richard Allen, an honoree today, who was Cuney's District Deputy Grand Master and those gentlemen formed and became the first two Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of Prince Hall Masons of the State of Texas. It was in those lodge halls that many of these men formed policies and found security because it was a very hostile region then, they used those enduring institutions to grow, and it was in those lodge halls, that we find men like William H. Holland, who is known as the father of Prairie View."

"It was men like Holland and another Freemason by the name of Walter Burton who served in the Texas Senate to get legislation

carried to create Alta Vista College for Colored Youths."

Jackson, who is serving his 4th term as mayor continued.

"We honor those men here today because we stand on their shoulders. We would be remised if we did not say to the people of Texas that we have a great legacy here in Texas and we understand that after that war, the great question became what now do we do with these newly freed people, how do you transition them from being slaves to being wage earners. And in part that question was one that all have asked because the Civil War had turn mood from a battlefield with troops into the classroom. So education then became that technique for social control and became the new battlefield. Prairie View University was created to answer that question."

"These men dared to take a chance, dared to start public edu-



*Freemasons of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas and Jurisdiction traveled from all parts of Texas to honor and pay tribute to 52 Nineteenth Century Black Legislators and Constitutional Convention Delegates of Texas who served from 1868—1900.*

because of the work of Sen. Burton.”  
 “Prince Hall Masons help to add depth to this historic event and occasion. We were behind the scenes working the communities getting people to the polls to vote that were afraid. We helped them to save their money and build schools, churches and businesses. We raised money to help send their children to college during a time when most family members signed their names with an X. What you see today is only a small reflection of the enormous entity that Prince Hall Masonry was during this era. Millions of African Americans trusted Masons to be men of honor that would serve and protect them even when they were abandoned by the Government. Today we made an installment on our story.”

Information on the Forever Free

Exhibit, which displays the 19th Century Black Legislators and Constitutional Convention Delegates of Texas, can be found at [www.tsl.state.tx.us/exhibits/forever/index.html](http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/exhibits/forever/index.html).

Information on the Forever Free



*This article is a representation of my personal observations and opinions and does not imply endorsement by any Masonic, federal or private organization. For any comments, I can be contacted at [parmermasonictraveler@hotmail.com](mailto:parmermasonictraveler@hotmail.com).*