# “Know Austin, Love Austin”: Rosewood Neighborhood Park”

Austin is known for its green spaces, especially its parks. More than we tend to be aware of, each of these parks has a story of how it came to be. Rosewood Park in East Austin has an especially complex and rich history unfamiliar to many who visit it.

To speak about Rosewood Park, we can't start at the park's founding in 1929. We must look back further. Let's say June 19, 1865—the date that Colonel Granger arrived in Galveston to pronounce the emancipation of the more than 200,000 enslaved Africans and their descendants in the state of Texas. Today, nationally, we refer to this historic date Juneteenth. It is the date when the last official decree went out to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863.

Some may argue that the tardiness of this decree to arrive in Texas was because of the state’s far away distance from the rest of the country and the upheaval of the Civil War. The delay of the news of freedom for enslaved African people has more to do with the resistance than any other factor. Instead, history indicates the purposeful resistance of the enslaving population and their supporters to relinquish the system of race-based enslavement they so much depended on.

But, oh what a day. Oh what a day it must have been! Imagine hearing for the first time that you are free to go and do as you please after a lifetime of enslavement. Oh what a day!

Many of these people left. They shed the condition of enslavement and the title of slave and set out to be the humans and people that had always known themselves to be. They came from far and from near.

James Jackson, a formerly enslaved African man in Bastrop County, recounted in his narratives on slavery and its end. “Me and my brother, we started walkin’ to Austin. In Austin we finds our mother, she was working for Judge Paschal.” Mr. Jackson and his brother were like the millions of African people around the Americas when their freedom was declared—they went to become their own people in the societies and countries they had built.

Since that date, established in 1865, Black people in the city of Austin have commemorated and celebrated the day they were liberated from bondage. Emancipation Park was born.



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Some records say that Juneteenth was first officially celebrated in the capital city in 1867, organized by the Freedmen's Bureau and celebrated at Wheeler's Grove, now called Eastwoods Park.

However, later, in 1905 formerly enslaved African persons Thomas J. White and his wife, Maddie B. Haywood, founded the Travis County Emancipation Celebration Association and, two years later, they pooled enough community resources to purchase five acres of land on Rosewood Avenue and Chicon and named it Emancipation Park. They believed that Black people should celebrate Juneteenth on Black-owned land. It was their own piece of freedom. It was their own piece of property.

Emancipation Park lasted for over 20 years until the City of Austin seized the privately-held land through a process called "eminent domain" and constructed the first federally-funded housing projects named Rosewood Courts, which still occupy the space today.

To comply with the city-enacted mandate, enforced by the "Separate but Equal" doctrine of U.S. law, the Negro District was created in East Austin, east of East Avenue, which is present-day I-35. The Negro District would house all of the segregated facilities within the city, including a park—a park that we now know as Rosewood Park.

From that point on, the limited resources that the city would invest and put into Black recreation, leisure, and services went into Rosewood Park. But despite all of the violence that created Rosewood Park for the Black population, Black people in Austin still made it their own. Juneteenth celebrations continued at the park and they still continue until this very day at Rosewood.

The Doris Miller Auditorium was built in 1942 by the Civilian Conservation Corps and named after African-American Pearl Harbor war hero Doris "Dorie" Miller, where they hosted dances and other events. If you take a peek at the photos taken during this time, it reveals a pure joy on the faces of the many young people who were there. Free from the hatred, the violence, and the denial of their persons by the larger society in which they lived in. I can only imagine the comforts of their parents, sending them to these dances and only worrying about the general nature of teenagers. Instead of worrying, "Will they make it back home alive tonight?"

It was their own. A place where they could be Black in a green space. Or would it be better to say a Black space? This was the only official green space in the city where Black people could legally access and enjoy. They had their own swimming pool, their own bandstand, sports fields, and tennis courts. It was a place where they could be their own people and sometimes resist whenever they needed to.



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I often tell people if it wasn't for the sport of tennis and racism, I wouldn't be here today because on those same tennis courts in Rosewood Park, that's where my parents met.

My father, a Black young man from the Republic of Panama and a student on a tennis scholarship at nearby Huston-Tillotson College, was charged with reinvigorating the tennis program for the neighborhood youth. And one of those neighborhood youths happened to be my mother, a young Black woman whose family had been in the area before Texas was even a part of the United States, when it was still a part of Mexico in the early 1830s.

It was on those same tennis courts, my mother went on to join the Top Spin Racquet Club with a group of Black women that the Austin American-Statesman felt necessary to write about in 1977 with the title, "Blacks take to the courts." In this article, these Black women explained they competed to shatter two myths. They wanted to prove that, number one, Blacks can organize and, number two, Blacks can play tennis.

For them along with the thousands of other Black people in Austin, Rosewood Park was a place to have fun and to be their authentic selves. But within that, it was also a place where they were able to see the larger society and see how it also viewed them. And they could, at the very least, they could resist some of the racialized tropes and stereotypes projected upon their persons.

From their perspective, and I mean mine as well, the footsteps of our enslaved ancestors that were not content with the celebration and the commemoration of their freedom and humanity to be defined by someone else were to be followed. They organized. They took the matter into their own hands. They bought Emancipation Park. They celebrated Juneteenth. And they used it until it was "legislated" to be seized from them. When Rosewood Park came to be, they owned Rosewood Park. We still own Rosewood Park.

As the area drastically changes, we will see what becomes of Rosewood Park. But the one thing that is for sure, the one thing that cannot be seized by a governing body or be priced out by the market are the memories of the people such as the ones who fought to even have Rosewood Park. There's no price tag on the place that made you who you are.

> "They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
> but the LORD was my support.
> He brought me out into a broad place;
> he rescued me, because he delighted in me." (Psalm 18:18-19 ESV)



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Innate within every person is the longing for connection—to be known and received in the context of loving relationships. This is so because we were created both to know and be known by our God and for relationships of peace and love with one another. This is evidenced in contemporary studies ranging from the importance of eye contact in early childhood development to the positive impact of psychological safety in workplaces. Mere eye contact and touch, or lack thereof, exponentially encourage or hinder development in infants. In an extensive study on high-performing teams, psychological safety—the extent to which members of a team at work feel safe to express themselves without what's being said used against them in some way—was found to be the single most important factor for high-performing teams. Each of us longs for communities where our stories, from pains to victories, can be expressed, received, and affirmed. It's one of the primary means by which we were created to know the presence of God Himself.

As you consider the history of Rosewood Park, consider the provision of grace this was to the Black community for decades. In the broader community, these men and women endured dehumanizing racial slurs, racist tropes, rejection before understanding, and cultural preferences were deemed inferior. Implied and explicit racism was acceptable and practiced. In their own communities in spaces like this one, they enjoyed understanding and security to express themselves. They recreated, celebrated birthdays, prayed before meals, vented their frustrations, dreamt for better tomorrows—they were free to express their humanity.  What a refuge of grace.

Surely, God is near to the broken-hearted and the contrite at heart. Surely, God hears the voices of the voiceless, the disparaged, and the marginalized.

As we turn to prayer, I invite you now to call to mind all the ways God is both a Refuge, Security for the weak, and Healer, Restorer of all brokenness. Call to mind particular passages. Isaiah 53:5. Psalm 71:3. Psalm 147:3. Hosea 6:1. Call to mind the ways this has been true in your own life and give Him thanks. Do that now.

Now call to mind the history, story, and anecdotes you received from Javier. Lament the injustices then, their lingering effects now, and the ways those are still unaddressed today. Ask God to give wisdom, particularly for our leaders in positions of power in our church, in workplaces across our city, and in government toward repentance and justice where it's due in the eyes of God. Ask God to help our church toward a reality where we can truly shine forth His manifold wisdom in our diverse but unified oneness.

To close, call to mind brothers and sisters—specifically of color—who still carry the weight of navigating spaces to be safely known. From their neighborhoods and workplaces, to our church. Spend time


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praying for them by name. If you are a person of color, take this space now to take whatever is burdening you before God. Know that He hears you, that you are loved by Him, and by our church. That you are being prayed for and that the leaders of this church are available to hear your story and be a resource however we might.



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