



St Louis Cemetery

Historic Declaration Dedication

27-Jun-24 @ 12 Noon

<u>Order</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Name</u>
I.	Opening Prayer	Dr. Tim Owens
II.	Opening Remarks and Welcome to Attendees	John "JW" Mitchell
III	Recognition Of Distinguished Guest	Vanessa Burzynski
IV	Remarks From Guest	Various
V	Historic Reading of St Louis Cemetary as submitted to State	Dr. Patrick Gilbert
VI	What Historic Declaration Means	Dr. Patrick Gilbert
VII	Official Reading of Historic Declaration	Dr. Patrick Gilbert
VIII	Closing Words	John "JW" Mitchell
IX	Closing Prayer	<u>Barbara Mitchell</u>
X	Refreshments Served	-----

Note: Visit to St Louis Cemetery to install State Marker and Medallion if weather permits

Acknowledgements: Dr. Patrick Gilbert, Vanessa Burzynski, Dr. Tim Owens, John Ray Maxwell, Christina Stover, Marker Chair, Kathy Wells, Finner Mitchell,III, John "JW" Mitchell, Stanley Gilbert

Contact Nos.: Dr. Patrick Gilbert (979) 277-8147
pat2man@yahoo.com

John Mitchell(JW) (713) 854-4072
johnwmitch@sbcglobal.net

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

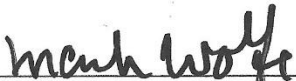
CERTIFIES THAT

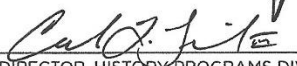
**ST. LOUIS CEMETERY
GRIMES COUNTY**

IS RECORDED AS A

HISTORIC TEXAS CEMETERY

2022


EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR


DIRECTOR, HISTORY PROGRAMS DIVISION



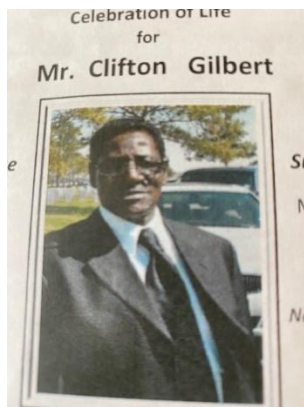
TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION 
REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

Bell, Clifton **b. 02 Sep 1915** **d. 23 Jan 1959**
Bell, Matilda **b. 1836** **d. 22 Jun 1926**
Bell, Mattie J. **b. 19 Apr 1915** **d. 22 Jun 1966**
Ethel, James S. **b. 1904** **d. 1945**
Gibbs, Johnnie LaNell **b. 26 Dec 1951** **d. 27 Oct 1958**

The young brother Sunny Nash, writer/motivational speaker and author of Houston Chronicle Texas Magazine article – “A Mission for Doll”

Gilbert, Clifton **b. 29 Jun 1950** **d. 21 Mar 2021**

Clifton is one of the first blacks to attend Iola School due to the “Civil Rights Act of 1965”. He was also one of 2 first blacks to play 8th Grade football in Iola school district. They went undefeated that year. Cliftons passion/legacy was to make sure those gone to be with the Lord are buried in a well maintained memorial/resting place. Up until the time he passed he instilled in his sons Stanley and Patrick the compassion continue his legacy.



Gilbert, Effie V. **b. 13 Mar 1900** **d. 20 Mar 1969**

Effie was the sister of Emmitt James and mother of Johnnie Gilbert. She was a very vocal and compassionate woman who would not accept the explanation, “that’s just the way it is”, she stood up for the black community of Iola. The authorities in Iola knew when Miss Effie called them about a problem in the community it wasn’t to complain, but to hold them accountable for making things right by the black community. She was a stern and outspoken lady.



Gilbert, Glenn R. b. 11 Oct 1922 d. 04 Sep 1965 World War II

Gilbert, Johnnie b. 20 Aug 1927 d. 29 Feb 2016

Johnnie was probably the first licensed black beautician in Iola. She was Clifton Gilberts mother. She was also the devoted director of vacation bible school for many years at St Louis Missionary Baptist Church.



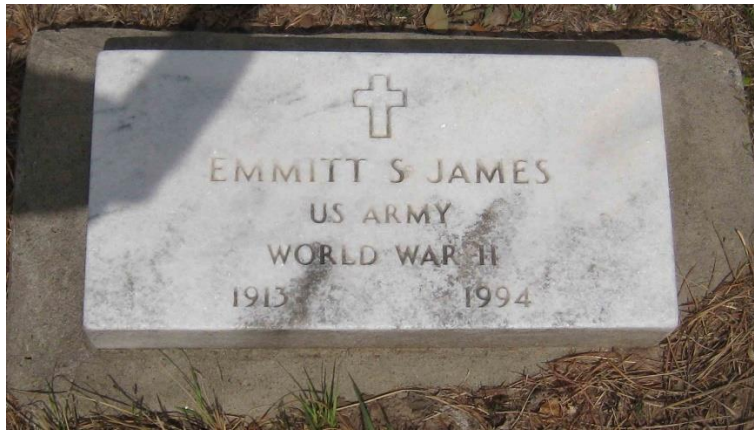
Hains, Florance Rogers d. 20 Mar 1930 Dau of Richard Rogers and Grace Campbell; age 43

Hurst, Virginia b. 11 Mar 1886 d. 19 Jul 1944

James, Bethea b. 31 Jul 1877 d. 13 Nov 1966

James, Emmitt S. b. 1913 d. 1994 World War II

Emmitt was a very intelligent religious man who loved wrestling. He took frequent bus trips to the Houston Coliseum to see live wrestling. Taught Adult Sunday school at Iola - St Louis Missionary Baptist Church and was the head deacon of the church. He was Clifton Gilberts uncle.



James, Wilson b. 19 Dec 1903 d. 27 Mar 1967
Kezie, Leroy b. 07 Apr 1925 d. 21 Aug 1940
Lofton, Birdie Marie, "Doll" b. 21 Jun 1941 d. 15 Jun 1954



Aka "Doll", was the theme of the article in the Houston Chronicle titled, "A MISSION FOR DOLL" - attached. This article reveals some of the struggles black families endured just to get their children an education, and the fact that Birdie Marie's death motivated families to not give up, or give in when the local black school was defunded by school district because of her death.

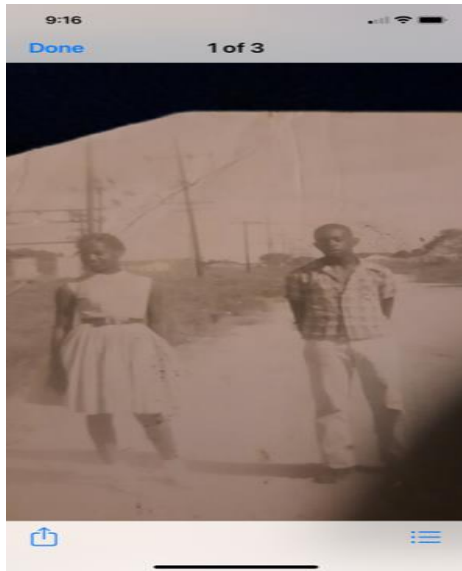
McKeiver, Jerry b. 1811 d. 26 Jun 1895
Mitchell, Edward b. 13 Aug 1897 d. unknown U.S. Army
Mitchell, Emmitt Leon b. 23 Nov 1948 d. 03 Sep 1965

Emmitt was the first black to play high school football for Iola School District. Unfortunately Emmitt died from accident sustained from football before his 17th birthday and completion of his senior year at Iola. The previous year Emmitt was a member of the PVIL(Prairie View Interscholastic

League) "B" school state basketball champs – Carter G. Woodson Dragons of Normangee Texas. The head football coach of the Iola Bulldogs, Richard Dudley, was proud to have such an accomplished athlete join his team, regardless of some reluctance of the community to have their first black. After Emmitt's death, coach Dudley, had the entire Iola football team, dressed in their jersey's, attend the funeral as a demonstration of solidarity and respect. Probably the first time any of Emmitt's white teammates ever set foot in a black church. Emmitt's sister was the first black girl to play on Iola girls basketball team.



Emmitt Mitchell and the Carter G Woodson Dragons PVIL state champs of 1965.
Picture of Brenda and Emmitt below



Mitchell, Finner, Jr. **b. 20 Jan 1915** **d. 21 May 1982** **World War II**

Finner, aka "Chin'e", was another outstanding man of the community and served as deacon and treasury of the St Louis Missionary Baptist Church. Other deacons were Emmitt James and Elbert "Sonny" Moore. These three men were the voices of the black community when it came issues relative to elections, church matters, and helping individuals during times of need. He was the local mechanic for the whole community, regardless of color. When you called him for help, regardless of time, he would come.





Mitchell, Ocelia b. **1916** d. **1987**
 Ocelia is the wife of Finner, mother of "Doll", and Emmitt.

Moore, Drucilla b. **20 Nov 1916** d. **27 Dec 1953**

Moore, Elbert b. **17 Aug 1907** d. **09 Jul 1975**



Moore, John b. **15 Mar 1877** d. **19 Feb 1960**
Moore, Laura b. **24 Dec 1886** d. **22 Jan 1943**
Parnell, Danel b. **08 Jan 1928** d. **19 May 1928** Son of
Charlie Parnell and Elberta Lee
Parnell, John Elbers b. **10 Dec 1928** d. **28 Jul 1929** Son of
Charley Parnell and Albeta Lee
Phillips, Bennie Calvin b. **25 Jun 1929** d. **24 Jul 1929**
Rice, Earline L. b. **30 Jun 1939** d. **19 Feb**

Rodgers, Annie Bell Walker b. **3 Jan 1914** d. **25 Oct 1943**
Rodgers, George b. **1894** d. **1978**

George Rogers was the caretaker of the Willard Yeager ranch in Iola. A real black cowboy who could move a herd of cattle from one grazing pasture to another with just his cutting horse "Trixie" and two dogs one of which only had 3 legs. Finner and Ocelia Mitchell through their caring hearts would take him in to their already crowded home and care for him during times of sickness.



Rodgers, Gladys "Doc" b. 1937 d. 1989
Rodgers, John Richard "Doc" b. 01 Mar 1939 d. 27 Oct 2006

Rodgers, Lillian b. Aug 1900 d. 26 Jan 1941

Lillian was George Rogers wife.

Rodgers, Melba J. b. 1937 d. 1989

Rodgers, Richard "Uncle Rich" b. ? d. ?

Rodgers, Richard b. 15 Jan 1866 d. 29 Oct 1958

Rodgers, Richard, Jr. d. 23 Sep 1930 Son of Richard

Rodgers, Sr. and Grace Campbell; age about 45

Sample, William b. marker says 1800? d. 18 Nov 1936

Shannon, Ella b. 1863 d. 1947

Shannon, Toney b. 19 Jan 1856 d. 18 Mar 1952

Shaw, Johnnie May b. 1910 d. 2000

Short, Rev. Freddie C. b. 25 Jun 1930 d. 29 Mar 2005

Taylor, Charlie b. 01 Apr 1869 d. 29 Apr 1936

Turner, Emily b. 1886 d. 06 Dec 1993

Walker, Edna b. 14 Sep 1898 d. 08 Feb 1945 Death

certificate lists her name as Edna Wiley and died in 1943

Walker, Francis b. 15 Sep 1881 d. 20 May 1966

Walker, John b. 1869 d. 28 Sep 1958

Webb, Fannie b. 16 Mar 1892 d. 31 Jan 1963

Webb, George b. ? d. 22 May 1955 Age 81

Webb, John H. b. 23 Oct 1914 d. 15 May 1964 Cpl. Gas

Supply Co.

Webb, Robert E. b. 25 Mar 1892 d. 09 Feb 1966 World
 War I

History of St. Louis Cemetery

The historic St. Louis Cemetery has been in existence for over 100 years. It is not known how the cemetery was established or by whom. Though it has been identified by other names, MacCedar Cemetery, Howard Cemetery, and Iola Cemetery, the name that has been used the most is St. Louis Cemetery.

It is an African American Cemetery located on County Road 103 in Iola, Texas. The cemetery's name is derived from the fact that the cemetery was associated with the now defunct St. Louis Missionary Baptist Church in Iola. With the exception of a few artifacts, nothing from the church remains.

From 2020 to 2022, extensive research was conducted in an attempt to determine how the cemetery began, its connection with the church, as well as property ownership. Unfortunately, that search returned few results. Available documentation indicates that the earliest burials took place in the 1890's (Find a Grave, 2009; Maxwell, 2002). Those who are buried at St. Louis are former enslaved persons, military veterans, local civil rights icons, local religious leaders, and servants of the community. Many had an association with the St. Louis Missionary Baptist Church. It is estimated that over 70 graves are in the cemetery. Though no maintenance association is in existence, the cemetery is still in use today.

Military Veterans

Several veterans are interred in the cemetery with the first recorded one being in 1920. They served in World War I, World War II, and Vietnam.

Local Civil Rights Icons

Iola ISD was once a segregated school district. The school for the Black students was a two-room structure located next to the St. Louis Baptist Church on Hillsboro Street which is now

the city's dump. In June 1954, a young Black girl named Birdie Lofton, known to her loved ones as "Doll," passed away after an illness. She was 12 years old.

Her death meant that Iola ISD no longer had to educate its black students because the Black school had one fewer student than was necessary to have a quorum. As a result, the Black school closed forever and all of the remaining Black students were forced to attend neighboring school districts. Later, the Black school building was sold and used to store hay.

Only after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 did Iola ISD integrate. The article "A Mission Completed for Doll" describes what happened (Nash, 1990). The cemetery is the final resting place for several individuals who made contributions in the field of civil rights in Iola.

- Birdie Marie Lofton (1941 – 1954) – Her unfortunate passing meant that Iola ISD closed the Black School forever.
- Clifton Gilbert (1950 – 2021) – When Iola ISD integrated, he was one of the first two Black students to attend Iola Junior High School.
- Effie V. Gilbert (1900 – 1969) – An outspoken advocate for equality who held the local officials accountable for their actions.
- Emmitt Leon Mitchell (1948 – 1965) – The first Black student to play football for Iola High School. He passed away due to a sports-related injury, and the entire football team attended his funeral at St. Louis. That was the first time many of his teammates attended a Black church.

Local Religious Leaders

The cemetery is affiliated with the now defunct St. Louis Baptist Church which was a Black church. Records indicate that St. Louis Baptist Church was in existence since the 1890's until it closed in the 1980s. In the church's later years, the deacon board consisted of Emmitt James, Finner

Mitchell, Jr., and Elbert Moore. These three were the voices of the Black community when it came to elections, church matters, and helping individuals during their time of need. Below are several notable local religious leaders.

- Johnnie Gilbert (1927 – 2016) – She directed the Vacation Bible School for years and is believed to have been the first Black licensed beautician in Iola.
- Emmitt James (1913 – 1994) – The last remaining deacon of the church before it closed
- Edward Mitchell (1879 – 1974) – Served as Associate Pastor of St. Louis Baptist Church
- Finner Mitchell, Jr. (1915 – 1982) – Deacon and treasurer. He was also the local mechanic.
- Elbert “Sonny” Moore (1907 – 1975) – Deacon
- Rev. Freddie Short (Shaw) (1930 – 2005) – Rev. Shaw was the last pastor of St. Louis Baptist Church

Servants in the Community

Resting in St. Louis are others who impacted their community in various ways, from agriculture to healthcare.

- James Gibbs (d. 1928) – He owned in excess of 300 acres of land making him one of the largest Black land owners in Iola.
- Ocelia Gibbs Lofton Mitchell (1916 – 1987) – The daughter of James Gibbs, she was a domestic worker and later a nurse aid at Madisonville Hospital. Since Iola did not have anyone else trained in this field, she was often called upon to provide care to those in the community.
- George Rogers (1894 – 1978) – A real Black cowboy who was the caretaker of the Willard Yeager Ranch in Iola. He could move a heard of cattle from one grazing pasture to another with just his cutting horse, “Trixie,” and two dogs – one of which only had 3 legs.

For over a century the St. Louis Cemetery has been in existence. It is a Black Cemetery that is the final resting place for veterans, local civil rights leaders, local religious leaders, and local community servants. The cemetery is still in use and received the Texas Historical Commission's Historic Texas Cemetery designation in 2022.

A mission completed for Doll

BY: SUNNY NASH – JULY 15 1990

The Texas Magazine – Houston Chronicle

In the 1950s and '60s Iola, Texas, had **a** one-pump filling station and **a** general store. There were no fast foods, no slow foods, no foods to go, no foods to stay, no exotic foods.

On some Saturday mornings the Mitchell family piled into an old car, little ones sitting on the big ones' laps. Uncle Finner drove them into Bryan to shop. Aunt Celia had to estimate her children's clothes sizes. They couldn't try clothes on **for** fit, touch any merchandise, return items **for** exchange or refund, use public restrooms or eat in cafes. On Sunday mornings, the Mitchells and their neighbors went to St. Louis Baptist Church, located on the property with Iola's two-room school **for** colored. Sunday church was followed by box lunches on makeshift tables under churchyard shade trees. Women arranged food and fanned flies from the fried chicken. From their lunch play time kids were worn out and fell into silent slumber on rear pews long before the pastor preached his evening sermon from the pulpit.

By 1953, the only black children in Iola were my cousins, the Mitchells - Earlene, Charles, Berta Marie, Freddie Mae, Emmitt Leon, Brenda Kaye, Finner Jr. and J.W. - and two other cousins, Woodrow and Clifton. Only Earlene, Charles, Berta Marie, Freddie Mae and Woodrow were school age. The loss of one student would close Iola's colored school. One Saturday in June 1954 before my fifth birthday, Aunt Celia left 13-year-old Berta Marie at our house. She didn't feel like shopping. When Berta Marie lay across our grandmother's bed in the living room, it was clear why everyone called her **Doll**. Hardly blinking her long black lashes, **Doll's** huge eyes stared at the wilted flowers on the cracked wallpaper beside the bed until her family returned. By Monday, **Doll** was ill. The closest doctor who would treat her was in Navasota. Uncle Finner begged **a** day off from his job at the filling station. The doctor said he found nothing. Back home, **Doll** worsened. Over **a** two-week period, Aunt Celia and Uncle Finner took her back several times. Finally, the doctor admitted **Doll** into the hospital. Before her examination, **Doll** asked her father to take her home. She said her bellyache had gone away.

After the doctor examined **Doll**, he told Aunt Celia and Uncle Finner that **Doll's** problem was her appendix. Uncle Finner held Aunt Celia off the doctor, who confessed that although he believed it was too late to save **Doll's** life, he would perform surgery, anyway. Hoping **for a** miracle, the weary couple agreed. To everyone's astonishment, **Doll** came out of surgery alive. In her room, she whispered to her mother that all she wanted was sleep. Aunt Celia watched **Doll** fall asleep **for** the last time. **For** weeks, Aunt Celia wept, moaning sometimes in her sleep. Her intense pain was caused by more than grief. Believing the doctor had neglected **Doll**, the whole family was bitter. By the middle of August, however, the Mitchell children had to face their new plight. **Doll's** death released Iola School District from obligation to educate its black community. Officials advised the teacher to find **a** new position, and they closed the school forever. Aunt Celia and Uncle Finner visited nearby towns. The poorly financed

Richards School **for** colored accepted the children. Roof and walls leaked. Light and ventilation were inadequate. Teacher quality was questionable. Out-of-date textbooks were discarded property of white schools. And there was no public transportation. Uncle Finner bought an old car hull, rebuilt an engine and taught Charles and Earlene to drive. Always uneasy about her children's safety since she lost **Doll**, Aunt Celia worried . Wringing her hands, she peeked through the porch screen periodically and watched Uncle Finner work on the car until the children's dreaded first day of school in Richards. Accepting her children's new routine with great apprehension, Aunt Celia cried **after** they left and fretted until they returned.

On chilly school mornings, Earlene helped Aunt Celia make oatmeal and biscuits. Freddie Mae helped pack sack lunches. Charles was by his father's side checking tires and oil. Woodrow met them out front and they were on the highway before first light. They traveled 60 miles **a** day round trip in rain, fog or ice and almost always in darkness. **For** most of the school year, night still rested on the Iola school when the Mitchell children passed on their way to the Richards school **for** colored. Night already rested on the Iola school when my cousins passed on their way home from Richards. With their right to an education threatened by their sister's death, my cousins made going to school **a mission for Doll**.

Earlene graduated in 1957, Charles in 1958. Woodrow took over driving. By then, the rest of the Mitchell children and Clifton were in school. When I had vacation days, I went to school with them. My school was the lowest quality Bryan offered, but it was better than the school my cousins attended in Richards. Because of something to do with taxes in 1961, they changed from Richards to Normangee, which did not provide an improvement in schools. When Woodrow moved away in 1962, Freddie Mae became driver until she graduated in May 1964.

In June 1964, Iola officials visited Aunt Celia and Uncle Finner. In light of civil rights developments, they invited Emmett Leon, Brenda Kaye, Finner Jr. and J.W. to attend school in Iola. After 10 years of out-of-town schools, Uncle Finner and Aunt Celia accepted, but not without reservation. Aunt Celia's fears that her children would be mistreated were somewhat arrested when Iola teachers and students seemed to be making **a** sincere effort to welcome the children. Brenda Kaye, Finner Jr. and J. W. graduated from Iola High School. Otis Leon attended, but died in 1965 from an injury he suffered while playing football at the school.

Like **Doll**, Emmitt Leon and many others had been eulogized at St. Louis Baptist Church next to the closed colored school. Earlene's wedding in 1959 and many others had been held there. Family reunions had enlivened the property annually until 1976. Friends and relatives said so long to Uncle Finner there in 1982. By the time Aunt Celia died in 1987, however, government had assumed management of the school and church grounds, where the history of Iola's black community lay. Today the property has been established as the city's garbage dump.

Doll's death compelled her sisters and brothers to finish school. Although the Mitchells boast no war heroes or superstars, diplomats or millionaires, among them there are no dropouts, an extraordinary achievement in **a** time when the world did not care.