

DISCOVER HT

Huston-Tillotson University and the Downs Field Legacy

Mission Statement

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Vision Statement

A connected world where diversity of thought matters.

Accreditation Statement

Huston-Tillotson University is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award associate, baccalaureate and masters degrees. Contact the Commission on Colleges at 1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097 or call 404-679-4500 for questions about the accreditation of Huston-Tillotson University.

Overview

Taken from historical records on file at Huston-Tillotson University.

Downs Field

Downs Field is a historic baseball field and stadium located at 2816 E. 12th Street in Austin, Texas, in a historically black neighborhood. It is situated on 10.3 acres to the north of 12th Street, between Boggy Creek and the railroad tracks on the west, and Alexander Avenue on the east. Downs Field was constructed in 1954 on a site that had already been the Austin home of black athletics for nearly 30 years. The site was first used as Samuel Huston College’s baseball stadium where the Austin Black Senators played beginning in the late 1920s, and was later the stadium of the state champion L.C. Anderson High School football team. It has been the one-time home of Hilton Smith and Richard Lane, players who were later inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame and the Pro Football Hall of Fame respectively. Downs Field remains intact and continues to be used by Huston-Tillotson University, a historically black university, and the Austin Metro Baseball League.

Samuel Huston College Stadium

In 1908, nine individuals purchased the western most 8.37 acre parcel of the site and held it in trust for the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the use and benefit of Samuel Huston College, a coeducational college for African Americans that opened under that name in 1900, but whose roots go back to 1876. Samuel Huston College was largely financially supported by local African Americans and northern philanthropists, and it is presumed that these nine individuals were local African-Americans. At least two are known to have been directly involved in the College: R.S. Lovinggood as its President from 1900-1916, and J.W. Frazier as a long-time educator and member of the Board of Trustees. By October 1914, they had satisfied an agreement to make five payments of \$300 each year for five years, and the lien was released. On October 30, 1914, the property was formally given to the Freedman’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the use of Samuel Huston College for \$1.00.

It appears that Samuel Huston College first developed the land with a baseball stadium in 1927. The Kuntz-Sternenberg Lumber Company held a note on the property and may have been responsible for clearing the land and building the stadium. The field was located with home plate at the southwest corner of the parcel, with an L-shaped grandstand flanking

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both sides. It is likely that the Samuel Huston College baseball team played at Samuel Huston Stadium during the field's early years, until the baseball program folded as a cost savings measure in 1932. The Samuel Huston College football team may have played on the site as well.

Samuel Huston Stadium was in steady use by the Austin Black Senators beginning in the summer of 1927. The Austin Black Senators, a semi-professional black counterpart to the all-white Austin Senators baseball team, had formed by spring 1908, and became part of the Texas Negro League in the 1920s. The Austin Black Senators played other Texas Negro League teams at Samuel Huston Stadium and on the road, including Abilene, Beaumont, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, Paris, San Angelo, San Antonio, Waco, and Wichita Falls. In addition to Texas Negro League teams, the Austin Black Senators played black college, barnstorming, and out of state teams.

In 1931, Hilton Smith (1907-1983) played a season with the Austin Black Senators at Samuel Huston Stadium before going on to a 12-season career with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro National League. Smith is considered to have the best sweeping curveball in Negro league history, and was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971. It is possible that Austin-native Willie Wells (1905-1989) and other notable negro league players played at Samuel Huston Stadium, but no solid documentation has yet been discovered.

In 1934, the Austin Black Senators won the "Negro World Series" against House of David of Sioux City at Samuel Huston Stadium. They played the New York Black Yankees, Chicago American Giants, Kansas City Monarchs, Philadelphia Bacharach Giants, and Detroit team at Samuel Huston Stadium the following year. The Austin Black Senators played at Samuel Huston Stadium through the 1930s, drawing large crowds of black and white fans in segregated seating areas.

Anderson Stadium

On December 21, 1938, Samuel Huston College sold the property to Austin Public Schools for \$10,000, and used the proceeds to expand the college and its athletics program. It is likely that the sale was made with an agreement that Samuel Huston College continue to use the park for its athletics program at no charge. At the time, L.C. Anderson High School, the only high school for African Americans in Austin, did not have a baseball program, but did have a football program and no football stadium. Anderson Stadium was likely constructed as an effort to provide "separate but equal" high school football facilities to House Park, which was developed in 1931 and improved in 1939 for the white students of Austin High on land that Colonel E.M. House donated specifically for "white children of Austin under 21 for purposes of recreation."

Anderson Stadium was dedicated on October 20, 1939, with speeches by the Mayor, Superintendent and Board Chairman, as well as W.B. Campbell, Principal of L.C. Anderson High School, and Dr. Connie Yerwood, an alumni of Samuel Huston College and the first black physician named to the Texas Public Health Service. The stadium, located on the east side of Downs Field, had bleacher seating for 1,100 on the east (home) and west sides (visitors), a remodeled restroom, and lights around a 360-foot by 160-foot field. The Cyclone Fence Company erected a seven-foot tall heavy wire fence with three rows of barbed wire around the field at a cost of \$3,559.50, possibly with Works Progress Administration funds. L.C. Anderson High School shared Anderson Stadium with Samuel Huston College and Tillotson College's football programs.

In 1940, L.C. Anderson High became part of the Prairie View Interscholastic League (PVIL), a governing body for extra-curricular activities for African-American high schools in Texas that organized games and championships. In 1942, after an undefeated season, the Anderson Yellow Jackets defeated Gibbon of Paris 40-0 before a standing room crowd for the PVIL State Championship at Anderson Stadium. In the mid-1940s, Richard "Night Train" Lane (1927-2002) played for the L.C. Anderson High football team at Anderson Stadium before going on to a successful professional career. Lane later played for the Detroit Lions and was named the best cornerback of the first 50 years of professional football by the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He was inducted into in 1974 as its first and only Austin native. Anderson Stadium was used until a football stadium was constructed on the campus of the new L.C. Anderson High School, located at 900 Thompson, in 1953.

Downs Field

Downs Field was originally constructed by the City of Austin as an enclosed, lighted field for African-Americans, with grandstand seating for 600, at E. 12th and Springdale Streets, and was dedicated on June 10, 1949. The dedication was attended by members of City Council and representatives from Samuel Huston College and the Parks Department, and a game was played between the Austin Black Pioneers and the Waco Tigers. By this time, major league baseball was integrated, but Austin and its schools and athletics programs were not. Downs Field was likely constructed as a "separate but equal" alternative to Disch Field, which opened in 1947.

Downs Field was used by the Austin Black Pioneers, Samuel Huston College, L.C. Anderson High School, and others until the surrounding area was developed with housing for young Downs Field. With the City-owned Downs Field on prime real estate for a new elementary school, and the school owned Anderson Stadium no longer needed after its new stadium was constructed, the City and School District engaged in a mutually beneficial, no-cost land swap.

In 1954, Downs Field was moved approximately one-and-a-half miles to its current location at a cost of \$10,000, and Sims Elementary was constructed on the field's original location soon after. The field was oriented in the same manner as Samuel Huston Stadium, with home at the southwest corner of the parcel, and a U-shaped grandstand flanking both sides.

At its current location, Downs Field was utilized by L.C. Anderson High School and semi-professional and recreational teams of black residents including the Austin Black Pioneers, and later the Greyhounds, Indians, and Huston-Tillotson University. In September 1956, retired members of the Austin Black Senators returned to the field to play a game against the Austin Palominos at Downs Field. Friends, family, and neighbors would gather to watch games, with DJs spinning 45s between innings and children catching fly balls for ice-cream cone rewards. In 1961, Mabson Field, a little league field, was constructed to the northeast of Downs Field, and named in honor of George Mabson, Director of nearby Rosewood Park from its inception in 1929 until his retirement in 1959.

Downs Field was named in honor of Reverend Karl Downs (1912-1948) who was President of Samuel Huston College at his untimely death. Downs was born in Abilene and spent his teenage years in Waco before his family relocated to Austin where he earned a bachelor's degree from Samuel Huston College. He received graduate degrees from Gammon Theological Seminary in Atlanta and Boston University, and was a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Southern California at the time of his death. Rev. Downs became President of Samuel Huston College in 1943 and, as the youngest college president in the country, doubled the number of buildings on campus, and nearly tripled enrollment. L.C. Anderson High School reinstated its baseball program in 1953. Rev. Downs was also a mentor to Jackie Robinson and recruited him to coach the college's basketball team in the spring of 1945, two years before Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier as a Brooklyn Dodger.

Today, Downs Field is the home field of Huston-Tillotson University and the Austin Metro Baseball League, and appears much the same as it did historically. The original grandstand remains and is composed of wood plank seating and siding on a metal frame, painted green, with a corrugated sheet metal roof. Although the wood planks and roof suffer from deferred maintenance, and some siding planks have become dislodged, the grandstand remains in regular use and could be repaired in-kind. Likewise, the light poles are nearing the end of their useful life and require replacement. A concrete block restroom is located to the west of the field, and is presumed historic. Given its proximity to Boggy Creek, this building frequently floods. A chain-link fence surrounds the field and is locked except during games.

Downs Field has experienced recent improvements that are sympathetic to the historic stadium. In 2010, bullpens and concrete block dugouts were constructed which are of similar design to the restroom. Around the same time, modern batting cages were constructed on the west side of the site, and the parking lot on the southeast side of the site was graveled and ADA parking spots added.

In summary, Downs Field is an intact, historic stadium that represents the history of African-American baseball and athletics in Austin, not only since its construction at East 12th and Alexander in 1954, but beginning in the late 1920s with Samuel Huston Stadium on the same site. Downs Field also represents the self-sufficiency of the African American community and its support of academics and athletics at Samuel Huston College through the purchase of the site in the 1900s and ownership through 1938. Finally, the site represents the period of segregation in Austin, as the construction of both Anderson Stadium and Downs Field were related to the exclusive use of other facilities by white students and residents. For these reasons, it is important to preserve and maintain Downs Field for future generations.

Your assistance is needed for the continued preservation of Downs Field and the continued educational opportunities for student athletes at Huston-Tillotson University. Contributions may be made as follows:

Huston-Tillotson University
Downs-Field Preservation
900 Chicon Street
Austin, TX 78702

Huston-Tillotson University
Intercollegiate Athletics
900 Chicon Street
Austin, Texas 78702

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