

RIVERSIDE HOSPITAL Continued from Front Page



Elected officials and descendants of Riverside’s founding physicians hold a replica of the original bronze dedication plaque during the Riverside Hospital Restoration & Expansion ribbon cutting in Third Ward.

There is a particular kind of grace that belongs only to things built against the odds — buildings that absorbed the weight of a people’s need, endured long after the systems that failed them crumbled, and somehow, impossibly, returned.

On Saturday, February 28, 2026, in the final hours of Black History Month, hundreds gathered at 3204 Ennis Street in Houston’s Third Ward. Community members, children, and even those born in the hospital before its original closing gathered to celebrate the return of a place that brought hope and healing to many Black Houstonians before the end of segregation.

Before a Single Scalpel Was Lifted

To understand why February 28th mattered, you have to go back to a Houston that most people in this city will never know — one that existed before the Texas Medical Center, before the research towers and cancer institutes, before Houston became home to the largest medical complex in the world.

In 1918, a coalition of Black physicians — R.O. Roett, Charles Jackson, B.J. Covington, Henry E. Lee, and F.F. Stone — made a collective appeal. They needed a hospital. Not a hospital with a segregated ward tucked in the back. Not a place where Black doctors were barred from admitting their own patients. A real hospital. One that belonged to the community that needed it most.

Joseph S. Cullinan, a wealthy Texas oilman and philanthropist, answered that call — donating \$80,000.00 to erect a fifty-bed facility. Construction began in 1925. The City of Houston donated the land, and furnishings were secured from a local army facility. The dedication of the Houston Negro Hospital was held on June 19, 1926.

Juneteenth. That date was not incidental. A hospital dedicated to Black health, unveiled on the most sacred day in Black American liberation — that is a statement about what healing means and who deserves it. Though construction was not yet complete, the ceremony went forward as planned. A bronze tablet cast by the Tiffany Company was unveiled at the entrance, memorializing Cullinan’s son, Lieutenant John Halm Cullinan, who died at 36 after returning from service in France during World War I. The hospital was officially opened in July 1927.

The Houston Negro Hospital became the first nonprofit hospital for Black patients in Houston — a place where well-trained Black physicians could practice without having to petition for access to the “Black Wards” of white-controlled institutions. It also housed the first nursing school in the city dedicated to training Black nurses. The entire early staff was Black. The first Board of Directors was composed of local Black businessmen, supported by an advisory council of prominent white Houstonians.

This was the coalition that made the impossible possible: Black physicians who refused to accept a city that would let their patients suffer, a philanthropist who crossed the color line with both resources and intention, and a community in Third Ward that would carry this institution on its back through every decade that followed.

A Century of Service – and Survival

The early years were not without struggle. Few patients came at first. The Nursing School, which opened in 1931, had to close temporarily — not for lack of students, but for lack of patients. Financial hardship threatened the institution during the Depression. A political effort to shut the hospital down entirely was met with fierce resistance from community leaders who refused to let it go.

Their determination paid off. By 1937, occupancy climbed to 46 percent. Community Chest funds stabilized the operation. When J.S. Cullinan died that same year, he left a \$524,000 trust for the hospital’s maintenance — a final act of investment from the man who had started it all.

The hospital expanded in 1961, adding 70 beds and changing its name to Riverside General Hospital. The original Houston Negro Hospital building and its Nursing School were designated as Historical Monuments and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Over the following decades, Riverside evolved to meet its community’s shifting needs — pioneering substance abuse treatment as a medical discipline as early as 1972, long before that approach became standard practice across the country.

By the time Riverside’s doors eventually closed, it had served generations of Third Ward families. People were born there, recovered there, and sent their loved ones there when there was nowhere else to turn.

Walking Through the History of Riverside

Before the ceremony began, the first floor of the Riverside building had been transformed into something few in attendance were prepared for.

Framed photographs and historical documents lined the walls, tracing the full arc of the hospital’s existence — from early construction records and original program documentation to photographs of the physicians and nurses who worked those halls across every decade. There was documentation of the Cullinan and Drake family histories, the partnerships and the sacrifices that built this place, and kept it standing. And in one particularly striking display: original forms for the

hospital’s membership program — sold to families for six dollars a year, offering free hospitalization for a limited number of days. It may have been among the first prepaid systems of medical care in the Houston metropolitan area, years before the concept had a name, before the program ended in 1938.

To move through that exhibition was to feel the full weight of what this building held — not history in the abstract, but names, faces, handwriting, and evidence. The intention behind every display was unmistakable: to honor not just the building, but every person who built



State Representative Ron Reynolds, Consul General Sheikh Tamador Al Thani, Constable Smokie Phillips and Commissioner Rodney Ellis at the Riverside Hospital ribbon cutting.

it, sustained it, and believed in it when belief required courage.

The Families Who Carried It

Among those on the program, one voice captured the personal stakes of the day more than any policy brief or press release could.

Carlton Houston — historian, descendant, and the man who has spent years reconstructing this story — took the stage and walked the crowd through the history of Riverside with the authority that only comes from blood memory. His grandparents, Dr. William M. Drake and Nurse Inez Taylor Drake, were among the hospital’s most devoted early practitioners. They did not merely work at Riverside — they poured their lives into it. Dr. Drake labored in those rooms until his death in 1948, giving himself fully to the mission of healing his community, quite literally until the end. Nurse Inez Taylor Drake stood beside him through it all, part of the same unbroken thread of care.

Carlton is preparing to bring their story — and the full, largely untold history of the Houston Negro Hospital — to a wider audience. His book, *Houston Negro Hospital: The Untold Legacy of Riverside General* is releasing in May 2026 and is available for pre-order now through Kindred Stories Houston.

Also present at the ceremony were replicas of the original Tiffany bronze plaque that once marked the hospital’s entrance — the original has been missing for decades. The replicas moved through the hands of Commissioner Rodney Ellis, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, and family members of the original physicians and donors. The image of that plaque held by those people — a hundred years of mission, passed between the hands of the descendants and the decision-makers — said everything that a podium speech could not.

\$200 Million and a Promise Kept

Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis — who was himself born at what was then the Houston Negro Hospital — has led the revitalization effort with the kind of commitment that is simultaneously personal and public. The total investment for the Riverside campus is \$200 million. Phase Two is projected for completion in 2028, according to County Engineer Dr. Milton Rahman, who outlined the scope of the restoration for the assembled crowd. Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo also spoke to the significance of what this revival represents within the county’s broader commitment to health equity.

When complete, the revitalized Riverside Hospital will provide Harris County Public Health services including dental care, immunizations, and behavioral health referrals. These are not the headline-grabbing specialties. They are the foundational care that holds a community together — the quiet infrastructure of dignity.

The Longest Arc

Houston is home to the Texas Medical Center. More than 60 institutions. Tens of thousands of employees. Patients who travel from every corner of the world to receive care within a few square miles of the Gulf Coast. It is, by every measure, one of the most extraordinary concentrations of medical excellence on earth.

But none of that existed in 1918, when Dr. Covington, Dr. Roett, and their colleagues needed a place to practice. None of it was there when a Black family in Third Ward needed a physician who could actually admit their loved one. None of it stood on Juneteenth 1926, when a crowd gathered on Ennis Street to dedicate something that had never existed in this city before.

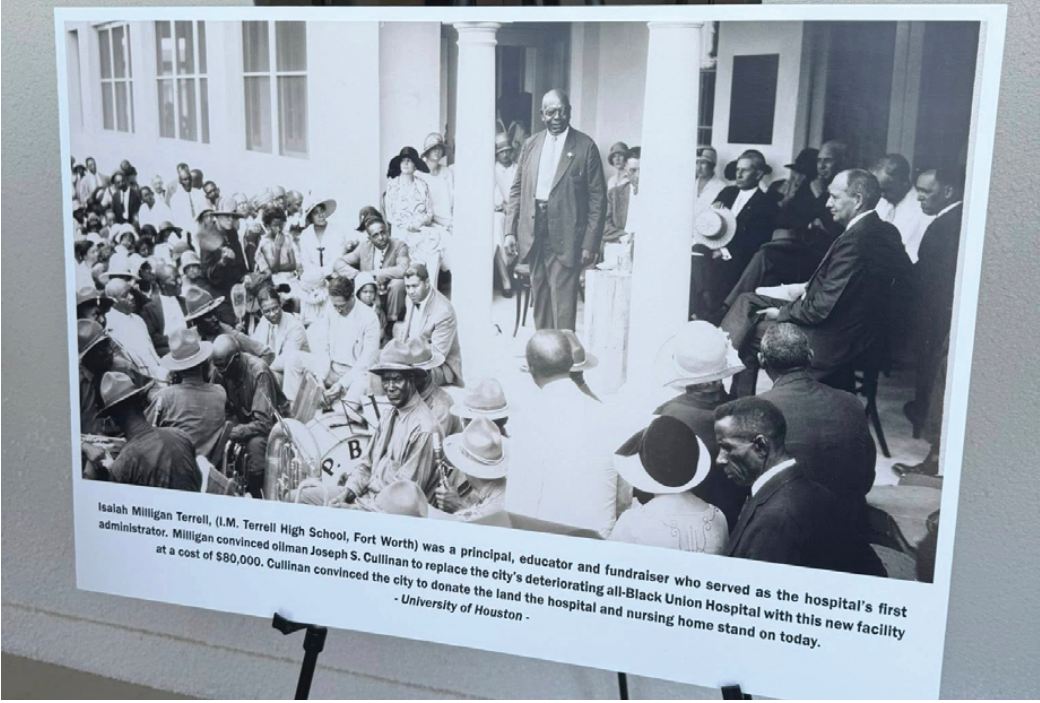
That building was there. Built by a coalition that refused to accept suffering as inevitable. Sustained by a community that would not let it fall. And now, with a \$200 million investment and a Phase Two on the horizon, it is being restored — not as a monument to the past, but as a living, functioning place of care.

Dr. William M. Drake operated in those rooms until he had nothing left to give. Nurse Inez Taylor Drake stood beside him through it all. Their grandson stood on that stage on February 28th and carried their names into the next century.

That is what it looks like when a community refuses to let its history disappear. That is what it looks like when healing has always been the culture.

The Riverside Hospital campus is located at 3204 Ennis Street, Houston, TX 77004.

Carlton Houston’s book, *Houston Negro Hospital: The Untold Legacy of Riverside General*, is available for pre-order at Kindred Stories Houston.



A historic photograph of educator and fundraiser Isaiah Milligan Terrell, who helped secure funding and land for the original Houston Negro Hospital in the 1920s, featured in the Riverside exhibit.

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REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Request for Proposal – Houston-Galveston Area Council – Public Services – Medium and Heavy Trucks, Truck Bodies, and Trailers – HT07-26

H-GAC is soliciting responses for selecting qualified manufacturers, dealers and distributors of Medium and Heavy Trucks, Truck Bodies, and Trailers and to make these types of products available to Customers of the HGACBuy Cooperative Purchasing Program under blanket type contracts.

To view the solicitation documents, visit <https://www.h-gac.com/procurement> or [ESBD \(txsmartbuy.com\)](https://www.esbd.com)

Response Deadline: April 9, 2026 @ 12:00 P.M. CT



Descendant Carlton Houston speaks during the Riverside Hospital Restoration & Expansion ceremony, reflecting on his grandparents’ legacy and the century-long history of the Houston Negro Hospital.