History Made & Preserved in Arts District Houston
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On the last day of 2020’s Black History Month, artist Colby Deal made the finishing touches on his latest mural depicting First Ward resident Cleola Williams. With contributions from Uriel Landeros, the piece stands over fifteen feet tall in Brock Park within Arts District Houston.

“[Williams and I] both value preservation of culture, cultural characteristics that are being erased because they are, right in front of our eyes...” Deal said on deciding upon Williams as the subject of his mural.

In 2007, Randall P. Jones Park was renamed to Richard Brock Park thanks to an effort and petition led by Williams. As a resident of First Ward for over 50 years, Williams felt that the neighborhood needed something to remember Richard Brock (1824-1906) by because of his work to establish and build a community for ex-slaves. According to the Texas Trailblazer Preservation Association of Houston, Brock was a former slave, skilled craftsman, and businessman who bought his freedom and became one of the first African American law makers for Houston and Alderman for First Ward. Amongst many actions and efforts, Brock helped: found St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first church for slave children that was also used to teach newly freed men, women, and children to read; establish Emancipation Park; co-found the first masonic lodge for Black men in Houston; etc.

“...the neighborhood has been my life’s work. I guess because I had five children, and I’ve always wanted the best for them. The more I can do for my neighborhood the better it is and well off for my family. Richard Brock did so much for this community... I’ve always been proud of this neighborhood and the fact we’ve always been diverse... It was his idea...” Williams said in response as to why she felt it was important to honor Brock with a park in First Ward.

Long-time residents of First Ward, both former and current, came to the mural’s unveiling on February 29, some even presenting Williams with bouquets of flowers. For those associated with the history of First Ward, Deal’s mural serves many purposes. “We grew up around this neighborhood... She’s like a mom to us,” former resident Cecil
Robinson said of Williams. “This is a good dedication to her.” 50-year resident Flores Midarivas said: “This [mural] is very important to me because it signifies that we need and deserve respect for this community... This is progress.”

“I really am humbled about [the mural]. I never expected it...” Williams said.

However, the mural also brought concerns of whether it can stay beyond the original permit. “I wish it could stay. We’re just borrowing it for how long? I like it there,” former resident Jerry Long said. “It would be very nice to be given the opportunity to have this mirror forever in this community because we will always use this park,” Midarivas added. For now, the mural will be visible for the rest of 2020.

“It’s really important to lift up our own... Marking this history, the place, the people who’ve been here, who’ve helped Houston become what it is now is really critical,” Director Cultural Affairs Office Deborah McNulty said. “With so many people coming to our city, bringing their own traditions and history, it’s nice to highlight our own and share that history with them.”

Towards the end of the unveiling, members of the community and family of Williams gathered around her for a photo in front of the mural. They broke out into song, harmonizing to Bill Wither’s “Lean on Me.” Behind the gathering, Williams’ long-time home can be seen over a wooden fence.

“It’s hard to feel satisfied as an artist. Once you get something up like this, it’s a good feeling. But the most important part is... all these people, all these different colors, all these different cultures coming together for one purpose,” Deal said. “Reinforcing... togetherness, that solidarity. This is why you do it.”