Historian Eric Walters seeking signs of slaves

HOUSTON (AP) — He was born a slave in Alabama, but Cornelius Matthews died a free Texan.

One of thousands of slaves to outlive the Civil War, Matthews went on to marry in a legal ceremony, father three children and register to vote.

His story was fast disappearing until historian Eric Walthers dredged it out of aging Harris County documents.

With ink fading, mold spreading and memories dying, Walthers is searching for slaves more than a century later.

The quest is exacting, the task daunting, the clues sparse and vague.

"It'll bury me," the University of Houston professor said. "I'll be working on this for the rest of my life."

Walthers heads a coalition of academics, historians and students determined to document each of the estimated 250,000 slaves held in Texas.

He tromps through the wet grass of a long-forgotten cemetery and squats to copy the fading epitaphs into a spiral notebook.

He pores over 19th century wedding licenses and thumbs through yellowing ship logs, absorbed with a historical force Walthers believes many Texans would rather forget.

Throughout the rural South, the remains of slavery linger: Crumbling barracks, historic museums and restored plantations.

Not so in Texas, where slavery was generally short-lived; where the living was rough and farms generally smaller; and where Walthers believes people remain more apt to destroy and rebuild than to preserve.

"There's almost no physical remnant of the slave past in this area," he said. "When we find something, we just go right over it in true Texas fashion."

Unlike many slave descendants, Houston elementary school teacher Naomi Grundy knows a bit about her ancestors.

An enterprising aunt investigated — and concluded that Grundy's great-great-grandmother arrived in Lavaca County when a Virginia cattle rancher named West moved to Texas.

"But we're lucky," she says.

"Most (slave descendants) can only go back to their grandparents. The rest gets lost."

Sold at auction, torn from their children, often illiterate, slaves long have eluded documentation.

Walthers' aim is fairly modest: A biography, just a sentence or two long, will suffice, at least to begin with.

The sketches are pulled from thousands of dusty pages, records locked up in remote courthouses and public libraries.

The 1860 Census. Thick books labeled "Marriages of Free Persons of Color." Works Progress Administration interview transcripts.

The scraps of data are cross-referenced, sent to Walthers and posted on the Internet.

The job of mining records is immense — 100 researchers throughout the state have volunteered to check local documents.

Hate-driven web sites to be studied by Emerson professor

BOSTON (AP) — One shows an image of a slain gay man burning in hell. Another claims the FBI has declared war on white Christians. A third pretends to pay homage to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., then suggests the civil rights leader was a sex fiend, a communist and a "plastic god."

They are radical, hate-driven Internet sites and they are increasing rapidly.

This fall, they also will be the basis for a communications class at Emerson College called Hate.com, which, despite the name, is not connected to any Web site.

Robert Hilliard, an Emerson communications professor, plans to use the sites to examine how radical groups use the Internet to recruit new members.

Hilliard became interested in extremists when he stumbled across a far-right talk radio show, and later wrote a book on the topic with Boston College professor Michael Keith.

"We began to listen and we said, 'Here we were, communications professionals and we didn't know about these people,'" Hilliard said. "People have got to know what these people are saying."

Their book, "Waves of Rancor: Tuning in the Radical Right," was well-received and ended up on President Clinton's summer reading list. Hilliard's says his class will examine how the groups target impressionable youth, how they multiply and how they foment rage. Several students already are enrolled.

More than 300 extremist Web sites are on the Internet today, ranging from neo-Nazi alliances to gay and lesbian haters to Holocaust denials sites, according to the watchdog Southern Poverty Law Center. In 1998, the group counted 254 such Web sites, up from 163 in 1997.

The Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center estimates an even larger presence. It says more than 800 "problematic" sites exist, including those that offer bomb-making instructions.

The administration at Emerson supports the new course.

"As a college of communication, Emerson is committed to developing and disseminating knowledge not only about the processes and techniques of communication, but also about how they are used to influence society," said Emerson President Jacqueline Liebergott.

Experts say extremists are careful not to turn away viewers with upfront, inflammatory statements or epithets. Instead, rock music and games draw in new members gradually. One Neo-Nazi site features bands like RaHoWar, which stands for Racial Holy War.

Others attract viewers with seemingly mainstream articles, but the articles can lead to racist and conspiratorial theories bolstered with passages from the Bible and alternative historians. Hilliard plans to invite some hate site creators to the class, giving them a chance to defend their work.

One site creator said he's open to such challenges.

"I think the media is extremely biased against my point of view and I want to provide an alternative to their news," said Don Black, creator of Stormfront, one of the Web's oldest white nationalist sites.

Hilliard and others emphasize that extremist sites are fully protected by the First Amendment and stress they are not calling for their removal.