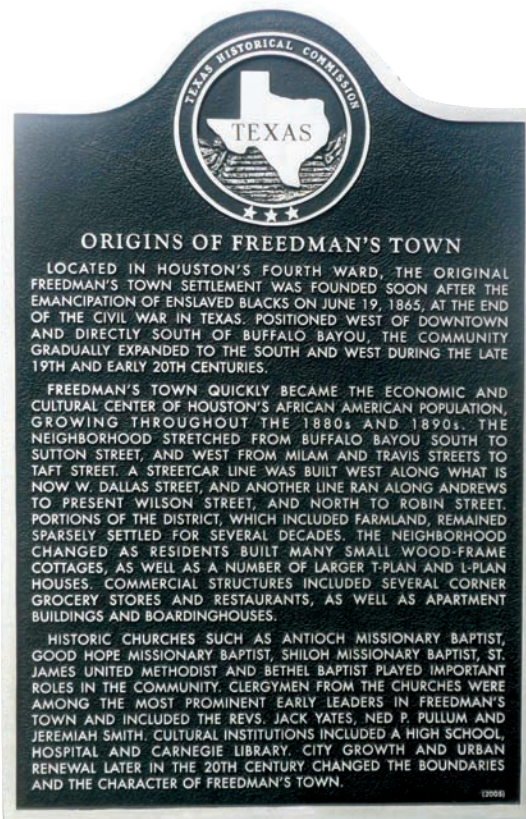


# FREEDMEN'S TOWN, TEXAS: A LESSON IN THE FAILURE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION

By Tomiko Meeks

The struggle to preserve the history of Freedmen's Town in Houston, Texas, is entangled in the questionable systems of urban renewal and development, which inevitably work to displace many of the poor African American residents from the community. For nearly forty years, African Americans have been systematically forced from their neighborhood to make room for new construction as more people move back into the city. Freedmen's Town, because of its recognition as a "Historic District," on the National Register of Historic Places, should be immune to such actions. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Political figures, community groups, developers, the legal system, and preservation projects have all failed on varying levels to protect the historical value and integrity of Freedmen's Town.

Freedmen's Town has a long and distinctive history, worthy of preservation, that reaches back into late nineteenth century Houston. With the Civil War over and with the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, freed slaves came to Houston and took decisive measures to assert and protect their freedom. Although other ethnic groups lived in Freedmen's town, it holds prominence as the first independent Black neighborhood in Houston. In January 1866, only seven months after slaves became free in Texas, "a group of freed slaves organized the first African American Baptist Church in Houston, Texas." The congregation held some of their earliest services on Buffalo Bayou in a "Brush Arbor." They later moved to "Baptist Hill" located at Rusk and Bagby. In 1868, the congregation purchased property on Clay, reportedly "some of the first property owned by Black Houstonians." Reverend Jack Yates became the first official pastor of Antioch. Yates urged Blacks to buy land and build homes. Yates also founded Houston College in 1885, where he taught Blacks homebuilding skills, such as masonry and carpentry. The college evolved into Texas Southern University. The Gregory Institute opened its doors in 1870 under orders of the Texas Legislature to educate African American students and in 1876 became a part of Houston Independent School District. Other instrumental Black institutions, such as the Carnegie Colored Library, were also located in Freedmen's



*The marker at Dallas and Heiner streets commemorates the once bustling Freedmen's Town, much of which has been destroyed despite its designation as a Historic District.* Photo courtesy of author.

Town before its demolition to make way for I-45 in 1959.

The original boundaries of Freedmen's Town according to 1875 plat maps included twenty-eight blocks inside of Fourth Ward on the southern banks of Buffalo Bayou, north of San Felipe Road, and west of the city's center. Soon Freedmen's Town became the center of opportunity and advancement for freed slaves. The community played a critical role in the Black experience in Houston, known throughout Houston's African American community as the "mother ward." By 1915, over four hundred Black owned businesses existed in Freedmen's Town. The presence of these institutions gave the community stability and tells the story of newfound opportunities for land and homeownership among Blacks. In 1920, Freedmen's Town represented one-third of Houston's population approximately eighty-five thousand people. The commercial strip, an area along West Dallas, housed jazz clubs, eateries, and other businesses. The National Register of Historic Places lists several night clubs, beauty shops, and the Rainbow



*Nine former slaves organized Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, Houston's first African American Baptist Church, in 1866. The sanctuary shown in the above picture was originally one-story and designed by church member Richard Allen.*

Photo courtesy of author.



*Reverend Jack Yates, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, stands in the center of the group posed in front of the “Little School,” circa 1880s. To the right of Rev. Yates wearing a white shirt and dark jacket, is Rutherford B. H. Yates who founded Yates Printing Company in the 1920s.*

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Theater as places that contributed to the area’s status as the “Harlem of the South.”

Just as quickly as Freedmen’s Town blossomed into a sustainable community, various factors contributed to its decline. In the mid 1930s, city and federally funded re-development programs targeted the area. The programs fractured the once stable and thriving community and continued on a trajectory that displaced Black residents of Freedmen’s Town. In 1937, eminent domain laws, which give government agencies the power to take private property for public use, provided a new way for government agencies to extract land from Blacks.

Between 1939 and 1942, the Federal Housing Administration built San Felipe Courts, an all white public housing project for World War II veterans, in the heart of Freedmen’s Town. Eminent domain laws allowed the Housing Authority to appropriate over thirty-seven acres, covering more than one-quarter of the land in Freedmen’s Town—marking a long history of moves to take land away from Blacks. During the excavation of the housing project site, 928 bodies were dug up and re-interred in a white cemetery, with little regard for the historical significance of the site. This episode in Freedmen’s Town’s history indicated that preserving this particular history did not concern the City of Houston. The mistakes carried over into the late 1950s when 40,000 residents were uprooted for the construction of the Pierce Elevated section of Interstate 45.

In 1966, with the passage of the National Historic

Preservation Act (NHPA), a glimmer of hope came for residents of Freedmen’s Town. Its mission of reuse and rehabilitation transformed many urban and rural spaces into economically viable historic districts. The act established the basic mechanics for historic preservation and community redevelopment. Houston, like other U.S. cities, recognized the need to protect historic neighborhoods. In her article “Historic Preservation in Houston ... A History?” Minnette Boesel states, “the city responded in the same fashion as other cities and established non-profit organizations dedicated to preserving history.” The city was, however, at the proverbial back of the line in passing a city ordinance that empowered the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission to identify, preserve, and protect historic districts and landmarks.

By the late 1970s, the City of Houston vied for more land in hopes of providing living space for citizens who worked in the downtown area. The prime target: Freedmen’s Town. Situated between Downtown, Montrose, and River Oaks, city planners developed a master plan for Freedmen’s Town that included demolishing dilapidated homes, razing Allen Parkway Village, and selling properties to developers and transforming the once thriving Black neighborhood into another upscale neighborhood. The factors of downtown development and Black flight made Freedmen’s Town excellent fodder for redevelopment sans historic preservation. During his tenure, Mayor Fred Hofheinz described Freedmen’s Town as a “living coffin” justifying redevelop-



*Bar-B-Q restaurant circa 1950s, located at 407 Dallas St.*

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

ment based on his claim that “people are moving out of the area” and “it would be unintelligent for us to put the area at the top of our lists of priorities.” By 1984, it became clear to residents that gentrification had become an unavoidable reality, diminishing the cultural and historical unity within the community.

In 1978, Antioch Missionary Baptist Church fought a battle for its very existence—demonstrating the desire of residents to preserve their community. The Cullen Center pressured the church to sell them the land. The church’s congregation refused and fought to protect its historical legacy. They applied and received historic designation on the National Register of Historic Places, the first property in Freedmen’s Town to receive the designation.

Five years after Freedmen’s Town initial petition for historic designation, the National Park Service (NPS) designated a forty-block area of Fourth Ward as a National Historic District. The boundaries of the area included West Dallas Street to the North, Valentine Street to the South, Genessee Street to the West, and Victor Street to the East. Ideally the designation of Freedmen’s Town as a historic district should have changed the terms by which the city dealt with the predominantly Black community. Residents could work toward rehabilitating historic buildings, and the entire district would become eligible for federal funding. Unfortunately, the city had no interest in obtaining federal monies that would help maintain the history of the neighborhood.

In 1995, seventeen years after Antioch received the first historic site designation in Freedmen’s Town, it seemed the city finally understood the importance of historic preservation. The Houston City Council adopted two ordinances to protect historic structures. The first ordinance gave the city limited authority over the modification of historic struc-

tures. The second provided tax breaks to property owners who restored historic buildings

The important question to be answered is why preservation failed in Freedmen’s Town. Mistakes started in the late 1930s and early 1940s and continued through the last half of the twentieth century. Developers and city planners played their part, expanding the boundaries of downtown Houston further into Freedmen’s Town, theoretically believing they were removing blight and giving residents a better Houston. In order for historic preservation to work and benefit all involved, city government, developers, citizens, and community organizations should, at the very least, understand the importance of preservation and how it affects the stability of the city as a whole.

In other cities across the United States, the appropriate uses of the National Historic Preservation Act are touted as great successes in our nation. However, in Freedmen’s Town, the use of historic preservation has shifted between protecting the cultural heritage of freed slaves and stopping gentrification. Groups, many pursuing agendas which have little to do with the spirit of historic preservation, banded together pursuing legal provisions largely incremental or symbolic in nature, while historic buildings were systematically felled by bulldozers. In their wake, luxury living accommodations, new restaurants, parking lots, and other structures that are devoid of historical significance continued to be built. The lesson: without strong preservation ordinances in place, the destruction of valuable historical landmarks will continue and once they are gone, they will not miraculously return. [QR](#)

**Tomiko Meeks** is a master’s student in public history at the University of Houston and graduate assistant for the Energy Management and Policy Group (EMAP).