

Houston's Own Historical Forested Wetlands: The Spring Creek Greenway

By Jennifer Lorenz

My first recollections of Houston were always visual, looking up from the back area of our family van where my parents had pulled out the back seat so my brothers and I could lay on blankets (no seatbelts required back then). During our frequent trips from our home in San Antonio to visit my grandparents on Crosstimbers off of I-45, I always knew we were getting into Houston when I would see the billboards on I-10 popping up and passing above my head with more frequency.

For close to forty years of my life, my vision of Houston was predominantly concrete and billboards and spaghetti-bowl freeway intersections. The little interaction I had with the “bayou” system also included concrete—the rounded-out culvert ditches in front of my grandma’s house where we splashed around after rainstorms. I remember that horse-play as great fun but not the slathering of calamine lotion for the itchy bites that followed those “swims” in the run-off.

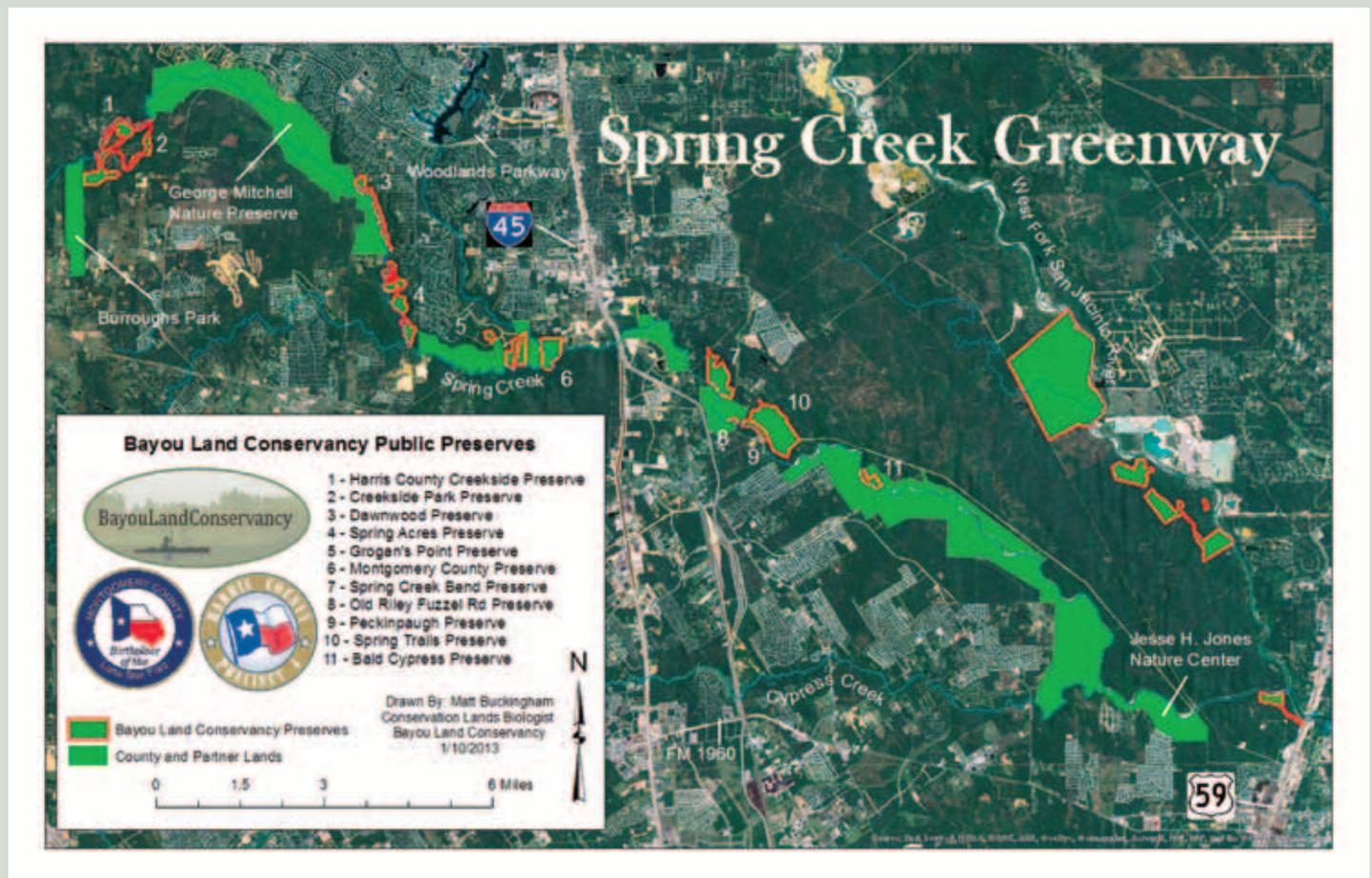
Fourteen years ago, my husband’s new job brought us back here. And while I did come a bit reluctantly (okay, there was some kicking and screaming) to the home city of my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents—back to the “concrete jungle”—I can now say how wrong I was

about Houston. I am thankful and proud that, every day, I get to work on the longest, contiguous urban forested corridor in the nation—the Spring Creek Greenway—right here in “concrete” Houston.

History of the Spring Creek Greenway

This major green corridor, now close to 75% complete, will ultimately be thirty-three miles long and over 12,000 acres. Spring Creek comprises the liquid border between Montgomery and Harris Counties. Between northern Harris County’s Precinct 4, which includes Tomball and Humble, and Montgomery County’s Precinct 3, which includes The Woodlands, this area represents one of the most densely populated areas in the country—yet it still provides habitat for gray foxes, bald eagles, salamanders, and centuries-old palmettos, sycamores, and bald cypress.

The methodical preservation of this greenway actually began on another nearby bayou system, Cypress Creek. Early in his tenure, Harris County Judge Jon Lindsay (1975 - 1995), a resident of northern Harris County, started putting together bits and pieces of properties along the floodway of Cypress Creek, which became the Cypress





Paddlers enjoy quarterly canoe / kayak trips of Bayou Land Conservancy on Spring Creek, passing white sand beaches and centuries-old trees.
Photo by Jennifer Lorenz.

All images courtesy of Bayou Land Conservancy.

Creek Parks Project. “Working with the Harris County Flood Control District,” recalled Lindsay, “we were able to take advantage of the new guidelines for floodplains that came out in late 1975 and early 1976. We took advantage of that reduction in value of those floodways and bought out some tracts and then also had others donated to us.” Giving some credit to his assistant, Judy Overby-Bell, Lindsay said they organized early donors and sellers including Rice University, Mischer Development, and what was then Humble Oil.¹

One of Lindsay’s biggest and earliest successes was expanding Mercer Park on Cypress Creek; but rather than

stopping with Cypress Creek, he moved projects further north and west onto Spring Creek when he had the opportunity. “Houston Endowment gave us the money to buy what is now Jesse Jones Nature Center [just west of 59]. And then we took the opportunity to apply for a grant from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and they helped us buy what is now Burroughs Park,” said Lindsay.² He worked to expand Meyer Park on Cypress Creek and then began focusing on Spring Creek where he directed Overby-Bell to write grants and spend park bond money to purchase as many contiguous acres as possible of the floodway and floodplain of this northern Houston region.



The purported “Springs of Santa Rosa.” In the middle of the photo are sensitive ferns and the top and top right are woodferns around this clear seepage area located directly northward across Spring Creek from Jones Nature Center. Photo by Robert Collins.

Montgomery County’s entry to the Greenway

January 22, 2002, marked Montgomery County’s Precinct 3 official “entry” into the Spring Creek Greenway, although The Woodlands Development Company had been (and still is) setting aside vast portions of their floodway and floodplain along Spring Creek for years. On this date, Montgomery County Precinct 3 Commissioner Ed Chance signed an agreement to permanently set aside land with Bayou Land Conservancy (then Legacy Land Trust). Understanding the need to guard against development of the creek’s floodway and floodplain in order to protect his constituents’ homes and businesses, Chance agreed to the first conservation easement with a county in the state of Texas: the 71.43 acre Montgomery County Preserve. Today, hundreds of acres make up the partnership between the county and Bayou Land Conservancy that grew from this first conservation easement.

For many years, Bayou Land Conservancy was the only federal U. S. Army Corps of Engineers-approved wetland mitigation In-Lieu Fee program holder in the state. The organization has moved millions of dollars to Montgomery County to purchase development rights that provide in-perpetuity protection of major portions of the Spring Creek Greenway. These preserves will never be commercially developed—ever—but may include low-impact pervious surface hike and bike and equestrian trails. In addition, they have provided much-needed funding to protect connecting

puzzle pieces between Montgomery County purchases of floodway along this corridor.

Although Bayou Land Conservancy is based in northwest Harris County, the organization has predominantly worked for fifteen years on the northern side of Spring Creek. Commissioner Jerry Eversole explained the reason for that years ago, “It doesn’t do much good paddling down the creek to just look at one side of the creek.”³ Since Montgomery County has never had a formal parks department, park land needed to be purchased on the northern side of the creek to match what took place on the southern side in Harris County.

As a result of the foresight of Judge Lindsay, the greenway connectivity pursued by Commissioner Eversole and The Woodlands Development Company, and the support of Commissioner Chance and Bayou Land Conservancy, the Spring Creek Greenway will be enjoyed in perpetuity for generations to come.

Thankfully, Harris County Commissioner for Precinct 4, Jack Cagle, continues to rank the Greenway as a high priority for his administration, seeing it as “a river of enormous importance.”⁴ The new Montgomery County Precinct 3 Commissioner James Noack has expressed his keen interest and desire to continue his precinct’s involvement “especially for hiking and equestrian use.” For the many creatures that inhabit this border between the two counties, their connected, viable habitat will remain for years to come.⁵

Early History of the Spring Creek Region

The Spring Creek area has a fascinating history. At its juncture with the San Jacinto River lay the tribe of Canos, an Orcoquisa tribe (others later spelled this Akokisa) made up of two villages on the Montgomery side of Spring Creek directly across from the modern site of Jesse Jones Nature Center, the 300-acre Harris County Precinct 4 Park. The Orcoquisa were, and still remain, one of the most unknown



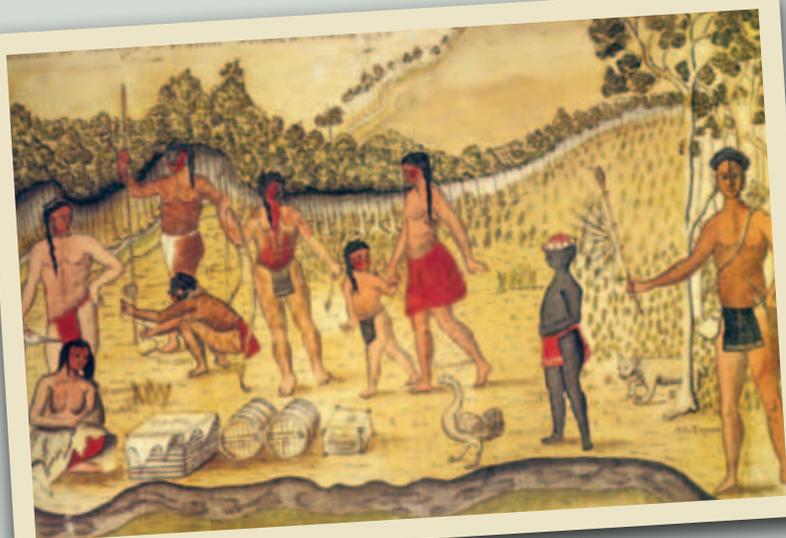
Evidence of earlier residents, the sharpened tool and red ochre pottery pieces were excavated on June 27, 2002, within a power line easement very close to what are considered to be the “Springs of Santa Rosa.” These items are held at the Jesse Jones Nature Center.
Photo by Matt Buckingham.

of native tribes within North America. The first southeast Texas tribe contacted by Cabeza de Vaca in 1728, it had no other documented contact with the outside world, except passing French traders, until 1746. That same year, Spain entered this area, specifically Joaquin de Orobio Bazterra, who was searching for French infiltrators there.⁶ Orobio stayed with the Orcoquisa at a place he named Puesto de San Rafael.⁷

The Spanish again contacted the Akokisa (Orcoquisa) in September of 1756. Bernardo de Miranda, lieutenant governor of Texas, met with chief “Antonio el Gordo” at his Akokisa “Rancheria,” on a heavy flowing stream, that was ten leagues west of the San Jacinto and one league east of the junction of another stream. El Gordo’s village, on a stream named Santa Rosa del Alcazar, was called Arroyo de Santa Rosa. In his report to Governor Barrios, Miranda stated that the two springs of Santa Rosa del Alcazar and the surrounding area met all the requirements for water, fields, and pastures needed to sustain a settlement.⁸

Harris County educational programmer for Jones Nature Center, Monte Parks works just across the creek from this site, which might be the “Springs of Santa Rosa.” He teaches Spring Creek history to children and adults of the Houston region and gets folks out onto the creek in canoes, kayaks, and pontoon boats. While archeological digs have not been done at the site, Parks says, “two histories specifically mention the site as being approximately a mile from the confluence of Spring and Cypress Creek and approximately a mile from the confluence of the west fork of the San Jacinto River and Spring Creek.”⁹

Parks and other Harris County officials, including Commissioner Cagle, believe that this area across from Jones Nature Center is the site. “Looking at Spring



Indians of Several Nations, New Orleans (1735) by French artist Alexander de Batz depicts four Illinois warriors, their women, and a child; a black slave and one Akokisa warrior (far right) stand in the foreground. The painting depicts the French alliance with the Akokisa against France’s enemy, the Natchez tribe. It represents one of the few eyewitness depictions of the Akokisas’ appearance.

Creek,” said Parks, “this is the only high point on the creek. It’s very fertile ground behind this bluff and if I were a Native American, this is exactly where I would put my village – next to these clear flowing springs with a regular temperature.”

The site clearly has a number of ferns, a great indicator of seepage areas, says Bayou Land Conservancy conservation lands biologist Matt Buckingham who has studied natural spring areas throughout the country. Harris County Precinct 4 parks director Dennis Johnston believes the area might be across the creek from “his side” because the village tribe would have benefited from the prevailing southeast winds, and the higher elevation provided a better vantage point to watch the comings and goings of traders along the creek.

Johnston is not completely sure the formal “springs” were solely based on the other side. “I’ve seen many arrowheads and clay middens on the Harris County side, and there are much larger natural pond areas on this side of the creek,” Johnston explains. He conjectures that quite a bit of movement possibly occurred between the two areas, particularly when the residents could so easily walk across the creek when the water was low.¹⁰

David Martin, who has lived in Spring in Montgomery County for years and belongs to the Sons of the Republic of Texas (one of the “Original 300”), has visited the Montgomery County site. Martin noted that Robert S. Weddele’s *The French Thorn* references the springs and the original French and Spanish explorers of the area. He agrees with Johnston that no definitive answer on the location exists at this time. Martin, a lecturer at local colleges and schools, agrees that the area has a rich history.¹¹

Natural History of the Greenway

In my thirteen years working with Bayou Land Conservancy, landowners have granted me access to some amazing privately- and publicly-owned lands in the Houston region. Exceptional biologists and naturalists who specialize in various areas, including mushrooms, birds, amphibians,



Smallmouth salamanders are sensitive to pollution and poor water quality. That they persist in the seasonally flooded wetlands adjacent to Spring Creek is a testament to the quality of its waters.

Photo by Matt Buckingham.



Luna moths are one of the largest moth species in North America and can be found around their necessary host plant species, sweetgum trees, along the Spring Creek Greenway. Males can be identified by their feathery antennae, which help them pick up female chemical cues.

Photo by Matt Buckingham.

insects, flowering plants, and even soil types, have joined me on these site visits. Many of these people serve on our advisory board, and our staff refers to them as our “Star Team.”

For more than twenty years, my work has taken me to some incredible places, including one of the most famous forested areas—Walden Pond, which many know from Henry David Thoreau’s writings. The trees around that pond, however, have been cut many times since then. While still a wonderful area today, you are not seeing the same trees that Thoreau wrote about in the mid-nineteenth century, but trees that are sixty to eighty years old.

Contrast that with the forested floodway lands of Spring Creek that Bayou Land Conservancy and our county partners protect. As I walk there, I get goose bumps thinking about these massive trees, knowing that I am standing in the shade of the same trees the Spanish and French explorers encountered. Perhaps one of these same towering bald cypress provided respite for an Orcoquiza child after swimming in the creek. How lucky we are to have centuries-old trees in this corridor in Houston, Texas, in a landscape of historic beauty and significance. We need more people to know about it—to experience it—and to learn to love it and write about it like Carmine Stahl, our own Thoreau. He helped me understand that the Houston region is NOT just a concrete jungle; rather, it holds more biodiversity than many places across the country. This quickly rang true as I verified more than forty different tree species on a single twenty-acre piece of land along the Spring Creek Greenway. 🌱

Jennifer Lorenz is a native Texan and the executive director of Bayou Land Conservancy, a nationally Accredited Land Trust, which has permanently protected more than 10,000 acres in the Houston region. She is a certified Texas Master Naturalist (and yes, now loves Houston).

I will always hold dear the time that I spent with Harris County parks naturalist Carmine Stahl before he retired and moved out of state. The author of one of my favorite field identification books, *Trees of Texas: An Easy Guide to Leaf Identification*, Stahl was the pre-eminent naturalist of the Spring Creek area. His quiet voice and slow, lumbering gait belied his immense excitement at the myriad wonders of the flora and fauna that he happily shared. Listening to him explain with touch, sight, and smell (and years of experience) why particular bald cypresses were clearly more than 400 years old was like taking lessons from a “Jedi” naturalist. His incredible knowledge and love of the area’s flora and fauna changed me as I learned about lands that became Bayou Land Conservancy preserves. Stahl wrote many details about the ecosystems of Jones Nature Center and the adjacent northeast Harris County area. Some excerpts from that natural history follow.¹²

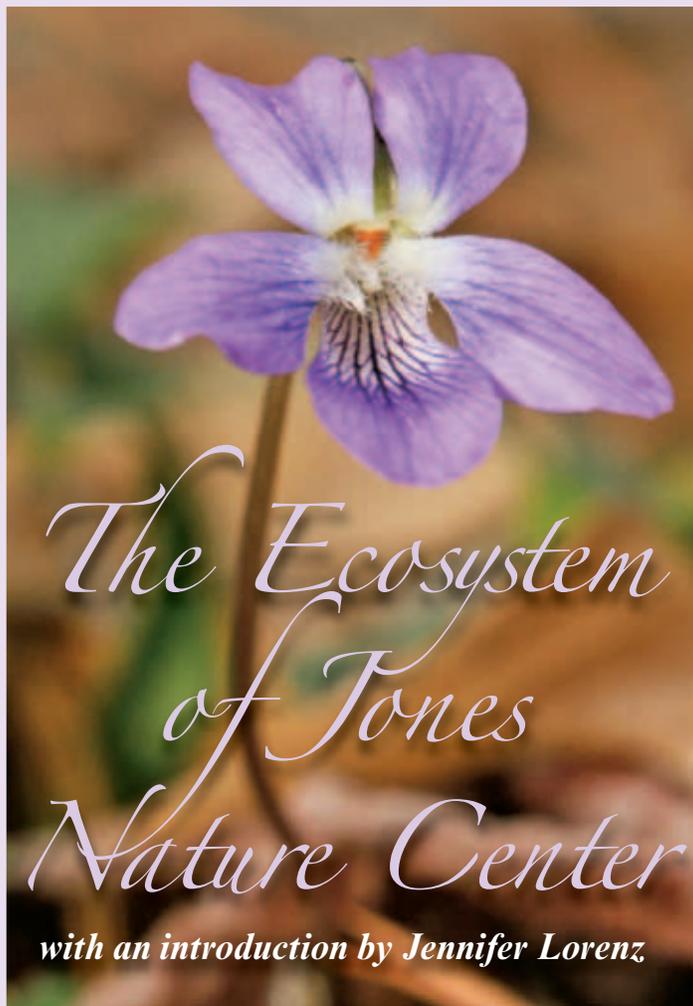
In and above the floodplains a mixed pine-hardwood forest dominates. Northern and Eastern Harris County, in fact, represent the southwestern-most extension of the great southern pine forest that begins at the Atlantic coast. A number of Microsystems exist within the area, giving rise to a rich and diverse flora.

The forest is dominated by Loblolly Pine (*Pinus taeda*). This fast growing tree overtops the rest of the canopy layer and is the most visible tall tree year-around. The only other native pine, Shortleaf (*Pinus echinata*), occurs in scattered spots on the higher and drier slopes. Both of these trees can attain heights of 100 feet or more . . .

Century-old Magnolias are a striking feature of these woods in their large bronze-green leaves and fragrant white flowers. Their ancient trunks are often hollow, providing homes for various forest creatures.

“Cypress Ponds” are an important feature of the floodplain forest. Paralleling the streams in a general west-to-east drainage, some of these hold water even through drought periods and are rich in aquatic life. Fish of many kinds, frog, turtles, aquatic insects, freshwater shrimp and clams inhabit the ponds. This attracts herons, egrets, wood ducks and other waterfowl. Raccoons patrol the edges at night seeking a crawfish, frog or clam for a meal.

The Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) once threatened by DDT and other pesticides, is increasing in the area and is frequently seen in its feet-first dive on fish in Spring Creek. Many other bird species are found throughout the woodlands. One very special small bird, the Swainson’s Warbler (*Lymnolthlypis swainsonii*), draws birders from many countries of the world to Jones Park. This bird makes its nest



A harbinger of spring, the common blue violet is a frequent site on the floor of diverse, healthy forests including Spring Creek from late February to early April.
Photo by Matt Buckingham.

in thick, tangled vines and canebrakes, a habitat found within the park and adjacent woods. It is extremely hard to find in other areas, and birders wishing to add it to their “life lists” come to the park to see it.

In fall, multitudes of migrant songbirds converge on the forest, fattening and preparing for their long trip southward across the Gulf of Mexico to the tropics. In spring the woods again afford rest, refuge and food after the 600 miles non-stop trip across the Gulf.

One of the chief characteristics of this forest is the vine that everywhere climbs the trees and droop from their branches to give a jungle-life effect. Among the chief species are Pepper Vine (*Ampelopsis arborescens*), Alabama Supplejack (*Berchemia scandens*), Trumpet Creeper (*Bignonia radicans*), Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), Cross Vine (*Bignonia capreolata*), Muscadine Grape (*Vitis rotundifolia*), and River-bank

Grape (*Vitis cordifolia*). The grapes provide food for a multitude of birds and mammals, and most of the other vines also have seeds that are attractive to birds.

The ubiquitous Poison Ivy (*Rhus toxicodendron*) runs over the ground and climbs trees with big, hairy vines. Humans are the only creatures sensitive to the plant, and it is an extremely valuable wildlife food. Deer and rabbits browse the foliage, and more than 70 species of birds depend on the small yellow berries in the winter. It also provides some of the most colorful fall foliage in the woods. . . .

This rich biome of plant and animal life should be preserved for itself and for human enjoyment, education and research. Its proximity to a major city makes it singularly valuable and special. ♻️