

Building on Intellectual Foundations: Creating the African American Library at the Gregory School

By Ela Miljkovic



On September 2, 2002, a group of city officials and Houston's then-mayor, Lee P. Brown, solidified the fate of an abandoned brick building at 1300 Victor Street in Freedmen's Town, an area listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Through a significant restoration effort, Fourth Ward's late-1920s-era African American elementary school, vacant since 1984, was to become a dual-purpose cultural center and research institute. The decision marked just over two years since the city's acquisition of the structure from the Houston Independent School District (HISD) on May 10, 2000, and three decades as a documented place of interest on the city's radar. Indeed, as Mayor Brown acknowledged in 2003, such drawn-out beginnings foreshadowed a "long-standing project" and an equally lengthy reconstructive process. The structure's ramshackle exterior — its faded whitewashed walls, boarded windows, and disintegrating roof — and decaying interior at the time of purchase corroborated his sentiment. Further "delayed progress," the mayor added, awaited developers "because of [the building's] historical significance."¹

THE SEARCH FOR A PERMANENT HOME

Before becoming Houston's African American Library at the Gregory School, one of approximately five public African American libraries in the United States preserving, celebrating, and promoting black culture and history, the building was home to Houston's first African American public elementary school for nearly six decades.² Founded in 1870, the Gregory Institute represented an unprecedented community effort at combating post-Civil War racial and educational oppression. Originally labeled an elementary school, the institute welcomed all age groups, uniting residents young and old through education. In doing so, the Gregory Institute played an important role in the success of Freedmen's Town, a small settlement of the first one thousand freed slaves after the Civil War's end, now Houston's oldest established African American neighborhood.

The school received its name from Edgar M. Gregory, a Union officer and assistant commissioner for the Freedmen's Bureau, a federally created organization that assisted freed slaves post-Civil War with acquiring land and other civil protections. Following the Texas Legislature's 1870 decision to create public schools for African Americans, Gregory donated land for the construction of the Gregory Institute, a wooden, two-story edifice situated on Jefferson Avenue between Smith and Louisiana Streets. Shortly afterwards in 1876, the school officially entered the Houston public school system. By that time, many of the schools established by the Freedmen's Bureau had been closed, sending extra students and teachers to the Gregory Institute. An unparalleled accomplishment, the Gregory

The Gregory School as it looked in the early 2000s, prior to the city's restoration efforts. Boarded windows and a faded whitewashed brick exterior signaled years of neglect.

All photos courtesy of The African American Library at the Gregory School, Houston Public Library, RG.0008.PH001.

School stood tall for almost two decades as a place where African Americans of all ages learned basic literacy and arithmetic skills, giving them the tools to participate in the workforce or open businesses.³

In 1893 a destructive storm abruptly interrupted the school's tenure on Jefferson Avenue. Severe damages to the building forced Gregory students to relocate to Colored High School on West Dallas Street, now known as Booker T. Washington High School, while builders repaired the affected areas. What was predicted to be a brief respite turned into a ten-year postponement after the building's condition was deemed beyond repair. In 1903 the Gregory School opened its doors anew, earnestly welcoming a fresh generation of young scholars, this time at its present-day location between Cleveland and Victor Streets.⁴ Structural challenges plagued the second building as well, leading to the construction of an entirely different multi-building complex — larger and sturdier than before — in 1926.



The Gregory School in 1903.

“Architecturally austere” and “minimally ornamented,” the third and permanent home for the elementary school was designed by Hedrick & Gottlieb, a prominent architectural firm whose work peppers the streets of downtown Houston to this day. For its part, the Gregory School was one of three educational institutions located in low-income African American neighborhoods that received modifications or expansions in the 1920s.⁵ Such enhancements occurred in response to swelling public school enrollment numbers, urban population growth, and a building boom that caused rapid development of nearby areas such as Downtown. The Fourth Ward, too, was bustling with activity during the 1920s and 1930s. Businesses started by original Freedmen's Town settlers were well established by the early twentieth century; churches were highly frequented, bringing neighbors together; and schools had cemented their position as dynamic learning institutions that bred informed and ambitious citizens.

Fondly remembered by many alumni, the Gregory School was, in one way or another, a part of daily life in Fourth Ward. Martha Whiting, a pupil from 1919 to 1923, recalls her teachers' generosity, stating that parents “trusted teachers with their children” and teachers “would keep [children] until [parents] got there and picked them up...” Teachers

often cared for children outside of regular school hours and, “If it was cold,” Whiting explains, teachers took children “in and kept them.”⁶ For others like alumna Hardy Anderson, who experienced the school in the 1940s, mentioning the Gregory conjures up memories of recreation. “When I started school,” Anderson comments, “wow... some days we would come to school barefooted because you can do that then, right, that was a lot of fun.” Echoing Whiting, Anderson emphasizes the close-knit bond between the school and the community: “...most of those folks that taught at the Gregory lived in the neighborhood...my biology teacher was a block down from here, it was quite [an] interesting neighborhood at that time; we were all cluttered in one area...”⁷ For alumna Geraldine Wooten, attending Gregory Elementary during the mid-1930s and early 1940s was part of her family legacy. She explains, “I was the tenth of my mother's eleven children. All of us attended Gregory beginning with the first grade...to the fifth grade.”⁸

Still others such as Bennie Jackson, a student during the 1940s, call on the valuable education they received: “...this was a beautiful school at that time. I had many friends and we actually learned how to read and write downstairs, in that first room down there.” Besides reinforcing basic reading, writing, and math skills, the Gregory also encouraged creativity through art. “I remember we had to draw that tree [still standing] and I found out that I had an ability to draw...we had a great education here,” Jackson remarks.

Not all lessons were educational, however. James “Bo” Humphrey, a graduate of the class of 1944 reveals that, “The experience I had here, I will never forget...before school started the boys would play ball in the grass and the bell would ring. We would all line up — we were very regimented — we would line up downstairs outside of the building and our teacher would play the piano. We would say the pledge of allegiance and march to our different rooms.”⁹ The ability of the Gregory to be at once a source of innocent entertainment and a place guided by rules is apparent to the school's former students. Jackson also calls to mind a particular incident in which teachers and administrators did not hesitate to dole out punishment: “Well, I was called in [to the principal's office] one time because of a fight after school and I was involved in it and we were disciplined for that very severely.” “But,” she ribs, “that was the only time I was in to see her.”¹⁰

These vivid memories serve as voices from an institution no longer in existence and a community no longer connected as it once was. Gregory Elementary School was formally decommissioned in 1984. Its teachers and remaining student body were consolidated with Lincoln Elementary. Today the Gregory's heritage as an elementary school lives on through the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center, which continues to service the children of Fourth Ward. The exodus of students, teachers, and administrators in the 1980s, however, left the Gregory building bare and uncared for, quickly becoming a forgotten relic.

THE SLOW ROAD TO RESTORATION¹¹

Even before the school's closing, the City of Houston pinpointed the Gregory School as a potential center to honor Houston's rich African American history and culture.



After years of neglect, restoration of the 1926 structure began in late 2008. Power washing the exterior to reveal the original brick surface was a top priority. Structural damage to the building is visible on the top-left corner. Also apparent is the dismal condition of the interior.

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During the 1970s Mayor Jim McConn's administration attempted to purchase the school, an effort that resurfaced in the 1980s when the city approached HISD once more to acquire the school for a museum-like facility to house community services and cultural events.¹² In 2000 the city secured the complex using a \$1 million federal grant allocated for an affordable museum.¹³ While projected funding for the sizeable restoration project was large, the trick was locating that funding. Early renovation estimates totaled \$5 million with possible funding sources from library bonds, federal grants, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. The project obtained an economic development initiative grant of \$997,800 from Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson as a starting point.¹⁴ The annual cost to the facility, however, was estimated to run \$1,392,796 out of the Houston Public Library System's (HPL) general fund budget.¹⁵ Funding in hand and in progress, attention turned to design and construction.

Mayor Brown's 2002 mission statement for the building articulated that it would serve as a culturally oriented research facility geared towards enhancing understandings of the African American experience. It would "provid[e] archival, cultural, and related services essential for studying the culture and history of people of African American descent in Houston, Texas, historic Freedmen's Town, and Southwest Texas." Its primary role was to serve as an "information resource to the general public and the research community [to] build a sense of community pride" through the display of cultural and historical material in exhibits, special events, seminars, meetings, and conferences.¹⁶ This emphasis on local and community history, explicit since the project's beginnings, was a distinguishing feature compared to other museums in the area.

While on paper such a proposal seemed entirely feasible, site visits to the building suggested otherwise. Beginning in March 2003 the engineering firm WP & Associates, Architects, Engineers, Planners Inc. conducted structural investigations of the area, concluding that the building was in unsafe condition. Separated mortar had caused cracks on the exterior brick walls, the roof and flooring had deteriorated, and the building's concrete panels were sagging severely. Multiple reports analyzing the complex's structural integrity suggested a substantial facelift if the former elementary school was to fulfill plans for a contemporary cultural center.

Although the 2003 planning documents showed real concern for keeping all three buildings and conforming to developers' goals, the firm ultimately recommended renovating only the main building and demolishing the two 1950s- and 1960s-era surrounding structures (formerly a cafeteria and two-story classroom building) as their salvage would have been too costly.¹⁷ Illustrating the length of time it can take for a governmental project of this sort to proceed and the neglect of the building, two years passed until work started on the interior. The renovation effort was halted due to existing hazardous material, structural defects, and severe pest conditions that raised health and safety concerns. Such pressing matters required resolution before work recommenced.¹⁸

While WP & Associates assessed the durability of the structure in 2003, Walker Architects created a two-pronged program for "promoting and preserving the rich history and culture of African Americans in Freedmen's Town."¹⁹ The first involved finding "key people in the fine arts community...to advise on the layout and scope."²⁰ Walker identified several facilities of interest but worked most closely with Howard Dodson of New York's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. From site visits to the Schomburg, Walker suggested that Houston's new African American cultural center fill its space with galleries and exhibits and its library archives commit to processing and storage.²¹

The second element in Walker's design plan was influenced by the community — the Freedmen's Town Association, residents of the area, local pastors wanting to participate in the "uplift of Fourth Ward," and former Gregory School teachers. Developers organized focus group meetings and interviews with representatives of the African American community for input on collections requirements and "best use" of the library.²² These forums were well attended and not without controversy.²³ Positive feedback included: "Restoration would keep the community that attended Gregory to feel a continued connection to the landmark...[the acknowledgement of] a portion of your history enhances future generations."²⁴

Negative comments expressed unease that the meetings ignored community fears. Community members advocated saving the entire site, believing that demolishing the two buildings failed to protect the unique heritage of the neighborhood. They voiced concern that changing the entrance location and adding the proposed glass facade addition to the red brick school structure would fundamentally alter the building's character. The architect's reasoning for the glass



Completion of the African American Library at the Gregory School in 2009 reflected the main goal of city planners: maintaining the structural integrity of the original building. The glass facade serves as the entrance to the front lobby.

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facade reflected both space concerns and regulations imposed by the Texas Historical Commission (THC). To begin with, the original building lacked space for a gallery room and a lobby area. Furthermore, since 1995, the school had been designated a state archaeological landmark. With that classification, renovations had to be approved by the THC.²⁵ Their requirements mandated that additions could not mimic the style of the original building, but must differentiate the “old from the new.”²⁶ The contemporary glass and metal facade met both concerns. Thus, by the end of Mayor Brown’s administration, the developers had reached a consensus on both the exterior and interior design of the building.

In 2005 a second administration and new architects took over the project with continued enthusiasm and a corresponding appreciation. Mayor Bill White described a vision for the site as a one-of-a-kind institution because of its location in a “space significant to the African American community.”²⁷ A unique aspect of the center would be its inclusion under the umbrella and direction of HPL. The library would be the third major research institution in HPL’s Special Collections Division after the Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research and the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC). These special collections libraries are all centrally situated near downtown Houston, located within a few miles of each other, and were envisioned to provide exceptional and easy access to extensive resources for researchers and scholars.

Aside from completing the renovation, the next major challenge was to populate the library’s collections. Initially exhibits and collections were to be developed from HMRC materials and other agencies. Nevertheless, in staying true to its founding principal of celebrating the community, the African American Library began collecting items from residents in early 2008. The city commissioned Patricia Smith Prather, co-founder of the Texas Trailblazer

Preservation Association, to locate artifacts for inclusion in the collections. Prather accomplished her mission by walking the neighborhood, knocking on doors, and visiting homes, churches, and businesses in the black community. Literally going through residents’ “clutter,” Prather said that “people have history in their homes, but they just don’t know it. It is uncollected history.” Among her early collection items was a pew from Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, Houston’s first African American Baptist church.²⁸ Prather’s participatory approach to the collection of material artifacts has followed the library into its current-day operations, which rely on community members to contribute personal or family

mementos for use in exhibits and to participate in oral history interviews that tell the stories of the African American experience in Houston. This was the last step in a decade-long process to renovate the forgotten school building. The African American Library at the Gregory School debuted on November 14, 2009.

IN THE PRESENT

Tucked into a cluster of row houses, the library’s hefty brick exterior stands quietly but resiliently as a witness to its increasingly gentrified surroundings. Surrounded by multi-level apartment complexes, flashy sports bars, trendy restaurants, and a bustling downtown, the African American Library remains a beacon for a simpler time. As the library’s oral historian Valerie Wade points out, if not for the library, the historical value of the area would be lost. “Residents and visitors,” she adds, “may not even be aware the building is a national historical landmark.” In fact, with the active push in recent years to rename the area “Midtown,” the memory of Freedmen’s Town and Historic Fourth Ward as a socially conceived racial project stands on the brink of extinction.²⁹



The feeling of being in a historic school building is part of the African American Library’s experience, as illustrated by this restored classroom.

As the creation story of the African American Library demonstrates, developers went to great lengths to preserve the building's classical charm. This is not lost on the institution's current staff. On the contrary, the need for authenticity is more pressing in light of the area's changing landscape. To recreate a truthful portrayal of the black experience in Freedmen's Town, Wade, archivist Miguell Ceasar, and the rest of the team encourage Fourth Ward residents to preserve their unique histories through archival donations or oral histories using the library as the primary conduit. In this way, the public shapes the telling of their history while simultaneously creating institutional memory for the organization.

Wade understands the importance of oral communication to the telling of African American history as it was often the only form of preserving black history in the face of extreme barriers on the written word.³⁰ Likewise, adding to the archives is both an engaging process and a contribution to community knowledge. In Ceasar's experience, gathering material for the archives involves considerable community outreach. Working toward collecting manuscripts, photographs, and books, the library hosts "Walk-in Wednesdays," or donor days, during which community members drop off items for donation, and a community scanning project that allows for scanning if the donor prefers to keep original documents.³¹ These are the current foci of the African

American Library, the product of a pioneering institution created 146 years ago. New collaborations, larger projects, and expanded community outreach are all on the agenda for the library.

Recently after segments of the brick streets laid by former slaves around the Gregory School's neighborhood were inadvertently removed by contractors, Mayor Sylvester Turner urged city leaders to designate the area a historic cultural district. "The story of Houston's African American community begins right here in Freedmen's Town. This is where freed slaves came to settle once word of emancipation finally made its way to Texas," Turner said. "It was a neighborhood filled with churches, businesses and homes — a place where residents provided their own services and utilities. There were blacksmiths, doctors, lawyers, teachers and pastors. There was even a vibrant jazz scene and a minor league baseball team. It's such a wonderful story and we are going to tell it."³¹ The African American Library at the Gregory School stands at the heart of that history, relaying that story to all who enter and preserving it for future generations.³²

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The Gregory School's permanent exhibit, along with many of its special exhibits, tell the story of African Americans and African American life in Houston, enlightening visitors and enabling them to understand where Houston's story fits in the larger narrative.