

# Seeing Frost Town from the bottom up: Using Archeology and Archives to Reconstruct a Forgotten Houston Neighborhood

By Jason W. Barrett, Douglas K. Boyd, and Louis F. Aulbach

Houston is a dynamic city with an amazing history. The stories written about its past, however, generally focus on the important people and big events that transformed the wilderness along Buffalo Bayou into a modern metropolis. The Allen brothers, steamship and railroad commerce, cotton and petroleum production, and space exploration are a few of the important chapters that define Houston and its contributions to U.S. and world history, but these stories view history from a top-down perspective. Alternative views that look at Houston history from a bottom-up perspective are equally important, though harder to find. Examining history from various perspectives, including those of the working-class people who helped build and shape the city, requires plowing through dusty archives and online databases, compiling information from seldom-used public records, and even digging into the ground beneath the city streets.

The demolition, removal, and rebuilding of an old roadway north of downtown Houston by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is providing archeologists and historians an opportunity to intensively investigate one of Houston's earliest urban neighborhoods from the bottom up. Triggered by state and federal laws protecting cultural resources, TxDOT initiated a major effort to conduct archeological excavations in the eight-block area once known as Frost Town, recovering remnants of the community and discovering a lost part of Houston's heritage using archeology, historical records, and oral history. This multidisciplinary approach is revealing amazing details about the evolution of this forgotten residential community, located just a half mile east of Allen's Landing. The people who resided in Frost Town were common working-class folks whose contributions proved vital to the development of modern Houston. Although seldom told, their stories represent an important part of our shared heritage.

## Brief History of Early Frost Town

Houston owes its existence to Buffalo Bayou and steamship transportation. Allen's Landing, at the confluence of White Oak and Buffalo Bayous, became the turning basin and loading dock for steamship commerce soon after the city's founding. From there, many paddle-wheel steamers transported a wide variety of materials into and out of the newly formed Republic of Texas.

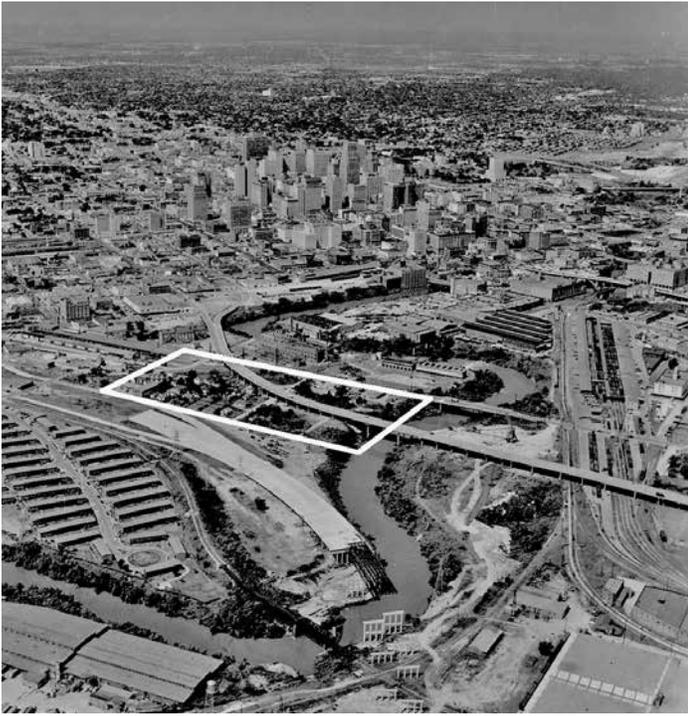
The area that became Frost Town is situated within a prominent horseshoe bend of Buffalo Bayou about one-half mile downstream from Allen's Landing. A Republic of Texas Army veteran, Jonathan Benson Frost brought his family and built a house and a blacksmith shop on a small parcel of land adjacent to Buffalo Bayou in 1836. By 1837, Jonathan had purchased fifteen acres around his home from



A section of the 1869 "City of Houston" map by W. E. Wood shows the eight-block Frost Town area with railroad tracks curving across the southern end. Located along the south bank of Buffalo Bayou, the cemetery (Block H) was apparently washed away by the 1880s or 1890, a victim of natural erosion and stream migration exacerbated by channel straightening and widening done by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Photo courtesy of Houston Area Digital Archives, Houston Public Library.

brothers Augustus and John Kirby Allen. Frost only lived in Frost Town for a short time, however; dying of cholera in September 1837, he was one of the first interments in what became the Frost Town Cemetery. After Jonathan's death, his brother Samuel M. Frost, also a Republic of Texas Army veteran, took over his estate. In June 1838, Samuel laid out



Looking southwest, Frost Town is outlined near the construction site of the Highway 59 Bridge over Buffalo Bayou in November 1957. Photo courtesy of Texas Department of Transportation.

an eight-block area for the Frost Town subdivision and began to actively promote and sell lots in the community. One of the earliest known written references to the subdivision is an advertisement for four city lots in “Frost Town” that appeared in the September 25, 1839 issue of the *Texas Telegraph and Register*, and the first illustration of the community appears on a map of Houston published that same year.

Starting in late 1839 and continuing through the 1840s, Germans began settling in the Frost Town area, with about seventy-five German families and single men living in and around there by the late 1840s. German colonists, passing through Houston and headed for the interior of Texas, often found friends and relatives in Frost Town and, instead of continuing on, chose to remain in the settlement. They blended easily with several Irish families who also came to establish a community on the elevated and well-drained curve of Buffalo Bayou. But what brought Germans to Texas and Houston and why in such large numbers, compared to those from other countries?

Europe, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, experienced profound social changes. The decline of the guild system and the rise of industrialization and free trade laws created an economic crisis among the artisans and the handicraft industries. High population density and the scarcity of arable lands caused unrest and diminished opportunities for the agricultural communities while the potato famine that ravaged Ireland also struck the continent of Europe, including Germany. Popular unrest brought the specter of revolution, and when the German state governments sought to bolster their armies, many Germans immigrated to escape the military draft.

During the 1840s, therefore, the flow of Germans into

Texas surged with the attractive prospect of escaping European society’s social barriers. They perceived Texas as a land of total freedom where one could live independently and have a better life. German writers inspired an overwhelming spirit of adventure and curiosity about Texas. A. Korduel wrote in his 1846 book that “there was a paradise on earth named Texas.” And, to top it off, many German communities granted financial support to those wishing to emigrate.

Each immigrant who settled in Frost Town had a unique story, and it is possible to generalize too broadly. Nevertheless, the Germans who settled in Frost Town had a well-deserved reputation as an industrious, hardworking, frugal, and civic-minded people. Many of them were skilled tradesmen, craftsmen, and working-class laborers who went about their business and became the unheralded fabric of the city.

### Frost Town Through Time

The first major change for Frost Town came along with a new form of transportation—the railroad. The Galveston, Houston, & Henderson Railroad reached the area in 1853, and by 1865 the Galveston & Houston Junction Railroad (G&HJ) built the first railroad bridge across Buffalo Bayou. The G&HJ railroad tracks cut across the southern end of Frost Town, and this effectively separated Frost Town from downtown Houston, only a few blocks away. The tracks became a physical and perceptual barrier, separating the wealthy commercial district from the working-class neighborhood. The railroad also set in motion two trends that continued over the next century—the industrialization of the surrounding area and the socioeconomic decline of the Frost Town neighborhood.

As often happens in large cities, the ethnicity of the community changed over time in response to local conditions and broader historical events. After the Civil War, African American freedmen began moving into Houston and other urban centers hoping to find steady work, and many settled in Frost Town. After the revolution in Mexico during the 1910s, thousands of Mexicans migrated northward in search of jobs, and many came to Houston. By the 1940s, the old Frost Town community, which was relatively inexpensive compared to other areas, was predominantly Hispanic and known as *El Barrio del Alacrán* (Scorpion neighborhood). Because of its proximity to industrial and transportation facilities providing good jobs—cotton compresses, iron works, ice houses, the MK&T Railroad terminal, and steamship loading docks along the bayou—Frost Town offered urban laborers a logistically advantageous spot to settle.

The ultimate demise of the neighborhood began in the mid-1950s when most of the residences were demolished to clear right-of-way for construction of the original Elysian Viaduct Bridge. Houston experienced rapid economic growth and urbanization throughout the decade, and the viaduct connected the downtown business district with the growing industrial sector north of the bayou. A few families continued to live in small, scattered clusters of houses for the next few decades, with the last house removed in the 1990s.



*Houstonian Sergio Garcia examines an artifact during a visit to the Frost Town archeological dig in August 2016. Born in 1931, Garcia grew up in a house at 10 Spruce Street in El Barrio del Alacrán. A month later authors Aulbach and Boyd conducted a videotaped interview with Mr. Garcia, who provided valuable information and fascinating stories about growing up there.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

## TxDOT and the Elysian Viaduct Bridge Replacement Project

The TxDOT project to reconstruct the Elysian Viaduct Bridge from Brooks to Commerce Street that is currently underway was initiated to improve safety by replacing the aging structure, and to enhance connectivity and mobility in an area experiencing rapid development and population growth. Designed to modern safety standards, the new structure will be somewhat wider and feature a sidewalk between Runnels and Ruiz Streets to accommodate pedestrian use.

As part of the environmental process for this project, TxDOT initiated archeological investigations at the site of Frost Town, where no traces of Houston's earliest neighborhood remain above the ground. Below the surface, however, archeologists are discovering fascinating new information about the city's early history.

## The Frost Town Archeological Project (FTAP)

The first archeological survey of Frost Town was conducted in 2004 by Prewitt and Associates, Inc. (PAI) and its archeologists who discovered dozens of intact features and artifacts associated with the former community. Based on these findings, TxDOT and the Texas Historical Commission agreed in 2005 that the site was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and that it met the state's criteria for designation as a State Antiquities Landmark. The road project then stalled out for nearly a decade but resumed in 2015 when TxDOT again contracted with PAI to conduct additional investigations.

In 2016, TxDOT and PAI launched a large-scale data recovery effort that included both mechanical trenching and hand excavations. Archeologists focused on identifying intact cultural features and activity areas, of which the majority are associated with residential households. Discoveries to date include: brick, wood, and concrete-block house piers; a brick chimney base; vertical lightning ground rods; brick sidewalks; post holes and posts; concrete structure floors; underground cisterns; buried utilities (steel water lines, ceramic, cast iron, and concrete sewer lines); brick-lined storm sewer lines; pet burials; and probable privy pits filled with trash. Analysis of these cultural features and

identification of the thousands of recovered artifacts is currently underway. A second phase of archeological fieldwork will follow demolition of the bridge and will focus on excavating areas that were inaccessible with the bridge in place.

Accompanying the field investigations, PAI is completing targeted archival research focused on individual blocks, lots, households, and occupants of the old Frost Town community. This research involves writing building site histories using the data compiled from a variety of sources, including U.S. Census records, ad valorem tax records, city directories, and Houston city records. Archives such as these are often scattered among numerous repositories throughout Texas and tracking them down can be as thrilling a discovery as the rarest of artifacts. Once compiled, these building site histories will enable archeologists to better interpret the many architectural and domestic features recorded in their excavations, providing much needed context for the material culture recovered across dozens of individual households.

One important FTAP component is that TxDOT has a cooperative agreement with the Houston Archeological Society (HAS) that allows HAS members to participate in the archeological investigations as part of the agency's public outreach program. In 2016, HAS members volunteered almost 300 hours of personnel time on 26 days over a five-month period, with some 49 members participating. They helped screen artifact-rich deposits that were machine-excavated from selected areas, resulting in the recovery of many thousands of important artifacts.

## What Can We Learn from the Archeology and Archival Records?

Although more field investigations are still to come, the FTAP has already gathered information on 865 archeological features, taken more than 5,000 photographs to document the findings, recovered more than 75,000 artifacts, and compiled detailed property and occupant histories on dozens of individual building locations depicted on various



*Houston Archeological Society members screen excavated fill to recover Frost Town artifacts. The 1950s Elysian Viaduct Bridge can be seen on the right and the roof of Minute Maid Park is in the background.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.



*These photographs show an unusual feature being excavated at the Frost Town site. The image at left of a large wooden barrel, buried to serve as a water cistern, shows the exterior of the barrel with vertical wooden slats and horizontal iron barrel hoops to hold it together. The interior and exterior of the barrel were coated with tar to make it watertight. About 5.5 feet wide and at least 4 feet deep, it held at least 680 gallons of water. The photo at right shows the feature with part of the barrel wall and half of the fill removed. The barrel was filled with layers of trash and sediment, and the diagnostic artifacts were manufactured between 1898 and 1925, suggesting the cistern was abandoned and filled soon after 1925.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

historical maps. So what do we hope to learn from these mountains of information?

U.S. Census records for Frost Town show that its history can be divided into three major occupational episodes—the German Period from ca. 1830s to 1890, the African American Period from 1890 to 1920, and the Mexican/Hispanic Period from 1920 through the 1950s. These demographic periods are a convenient way to organize the archival and archeological information for comparative analyses. Within each period archival data will be used to create a snapshot of the community and to explore the similarities and differences in character observed among individual households. Houston city directories and ad valorem tax records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide specific, idiosyncratic information on household residents. For example, tax records provide property value data that is useful for comparing relative household wealth, while city directories provide information on people’s jobs and the businesses that existed in and near the neighborhood.

Once archeologists complete their field investigations, they will examine artifacts linked to specific households and city blocks, and compare the household and block assemblages

within time periods and between time periods. This will enable us to document social and economic changes that occurred in Frost Town over time, and link those changes to broader historical events that impacted the community and Houston. When the archival records and archeological evidence are combined, we will be able to provide some of the first detailed descriptions of the Frost Town community as it evolved from the 1830s to the mid 1950s.

### **Buried Bottle Alignments—A Nineteenth-Century German Decorative Tradition**

Archeological features are an assemblage of elements representing the remnants of human activity. Their interpretive meaning derives from composition and context. Two features found at Frost Town have been classified as “buried bottle alignments,” and they provide a good example of what can be learned from archeological features that are carefully excavated and have good historical contexts. These bottle alignments consist of numerous glass and ceramic bottles in linear arrangements, with the bottles spaced only a few inches apart and buried upside-down so that only the bottom half of each bottle protruded above the ground.

The best preserved of the two features, associated with a house located in the western half of Block F, was initially

found in 2015 during slow mechanical stripping using a large track hoe with a five-foot-wide bucket. When the first upside-down bottle was hit, the machine work stopped, and archeologists switched to careful hand excavations and began uncovering a long line of glass and ceramic bottles. Archeologists returned in 2016 to fully excavate this line of buried upside-down bottles over a linear distance of about 25 feet. The bottles formed two lines in an L-shaped pattern. One end of the bottle line tied into an alignment of hand-molded bricks, with each one laid out stretcher (lengthways) with their ends touching. This brick alignment also formed an L-shape and tied back into the other end of the bottle alignment. The brick and bottle lines formed a slightly lopsided square enclosure measuring 12.5 x 12.5 feet. The enclosure was found alongside a row of brick pier pads that marked the outer edge of a house built in the 1880s. Based on the building's location and orientation within the city block, the bottle and brick enclosure was located in the yard behind the house.

Archeologists recovered forty complete or broken-in-place bottles from the feature. A few sections of the bottle alignment had been displaced by later water and sewer line installations, and another eight to ten bottles were found in disturbed sediments nearby. Ceramic bottles that once contained ale dominate the assemblage, along with several glass bottles that once held wine, liquor, and beer, and a few large ceramic mineral water bottles. Each bottle is technologically and stylistically typical of glass and ceramic containers from the 1880s to ca. 1900, but the most diagnostic of these are:

- Two aqua glass bottles with the embossed markings "ORIGINAL BUDWEISER" and the "CCC" logo. This bottle contained Budweiser beer made by C. Conrad and Company of St. Louis, Missouri, between 1876 and 1883.
- One ceramic mineral water bottle with the stamped logo and markings: KRONTHALER MINERAL QUELLEN / AUGUST THIEMANN / [illegible]. This bottle held mineral water from the Kronthal Springs in Germany that was shipped to America sometime after the Kronthal Company was created in 1875.
- Three ceramic mineral water bottles with the stamped logo and markings: APOLLINARIS BRUNNEN / GEORG KREUZBERG / AHRWEILER / RHEINPREUSSEN. They contained mineral water from the Apollinaris Spring discovered by Georg Kreuzberg in 1852 and were shipped to America sometime in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

*Archeologists recovered these fourteen glass and ceramic bottles from one segment of buried bottle alignment Feature 573. These include four glass bottles (2 liquor, 1 wine, and 1 beer) and ten ceramic bottles (5 large mineral water or seltzer bottles and 5 two-toned, stoneware ale bottles). Many of these bottles have diagnostic markings indicating the products they contained, the companies that made the products and where.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.



*A clear glass medicine bottle with embossed label: "I. LEWYN / GERMAN PHARMACIST / HOUSTON, TEX." Isadore Lewyn, a German-born pharmacist, owned and operated the Lewyn Drug Store in downtown Houston. In 1916 he wrote a short pharmacy journal article indicating that he placed placards in his store informing his clients he spoke German and Spanish. This artifact provides evidence that some of the German Frost Town residents did business at Lewyn's.*

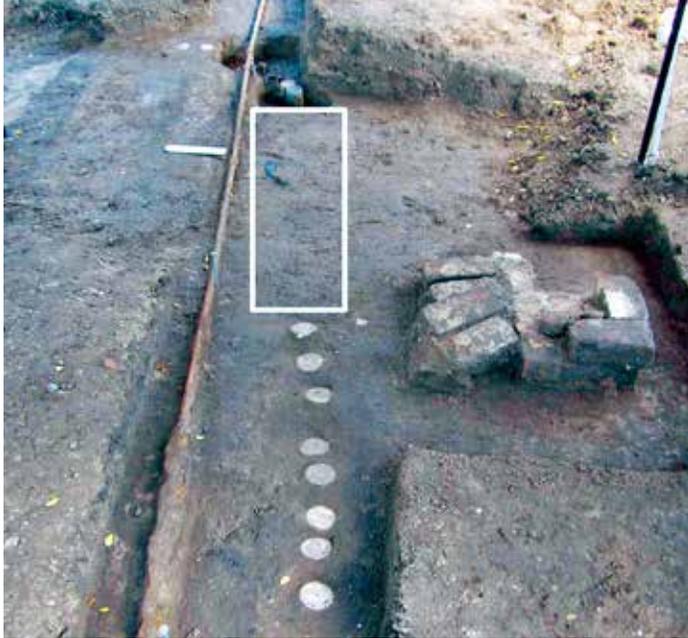
Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

- Two ceramic ale bottles with stamped circular logo and markings: "PORT DUNDAS POTTERY" and "GLASGOW." Founded in 1816, Port Dundas Pottery produced these two-tone, salt-glaze bottles sometime after 1856. Probably containing beer, they were shipped from Scotland to America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.
- Two ceramic ale bottles with stamped oval logo and markings: "GROSVENOR" and "GLASGOW." These two-tone, salt-glaze bottles produced by Bridgeton Pottery owned by Frederick Grosvenor from 1869 to 1899 probably contained beer that was shipped from Scotland to America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Based on archeological evidence and archival research, the Frost Town buried bottle alignments appear to represent ornamental yard art, often used to form the borders of walkways and flower gardens. Both Frost Town bottle features were identified in the yard areas of nineteenth-century German immigrant households, and the authors know of only one other similar archeological feature documented anywhere in Texas and it was also found in Houston. It was excavated in the 1990s about four blocks away from Frost Town in the yard area of another German immigrant household, located where Minute Maid Park now sits.

It is no coincidence that all three of the known examples of buried bottle alignments that have been archeologically investigated in Texas are associated with German households, which have a strong ethnic tradition in Texas. The practice originated in the early 1800s but continued well into the twentieth century. We have now collected numerous oral histories in which people recall seeing buried bottles used as garden borders at households occupied by their





*The section of the buried bottle alignment Feature 573, as seen in 2016, shows inverted bottles in a long line with a curve at the end. The white box shows where fourteen bottles were removed in 2015. To the right of the bottle line is a house pier constructed of hand-molded bricks, which is in a line of other house piers from a nineteenth-century house occupied by a German immigrant family. Someone buried an iron pipe water line running parallel to the back wall of the house years later disturbing the bottle line.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

German ancestors in more than a dozen Texas counties.

The buried bottle alignments at Frost Town provide new data for archeologists to consider with respect to these unusual features. We still have much to learn about the Old World origins of this tradition, how long it endured among immigrant communities in the Americas, and the circumstances of its ultimate demise.

### Continued Research at Frost Town

The use of large excavation machines to carefully strip away deposits and expose large areas has proven to be a very effective means of finding features at the Frost Town site, as evident by the number and diversity of features uncovered so far. This work will continue as the FTAP moves into the next phase following bridge demolition. As with any large archeological project, the hard work for the FTAP research team will begin once all of the artifacts and data have been extracted from the ground. Analysis of archeological data is a slow and meticulous process, and the researchers will face many challenges as they prioritize their research questions and decide how best to study the many Frost Town features and artifacts to efficiently and effectively address those questions.

Another challenge will be how to best utilize the historical documents and artifacts to tell the Frost Town story from the bottom up, thus revealing the evolution of the community from the various perspectives of the common folks who lived and labored there over one and a half centuries. Our ultimate goal is the creation of a revised and more comprehensive history of early Houston, telling Frost Town's story to a contemporary audience, many with little previous knowledge of or connection to the city and its history. The telling is likely to assume varying formats, from technical reports and professional journal articles, to documentary

films, popular books, magazine articles, public lectures, school curriculum, museum displays, and social media postings. Ultimately, we will measure the project's success by whether or not the average Houstonian driving along the new Elysian roadway is aware of the amazing history that happened right there on the banks of Buffalo Bayou. Rather than being a forgotten part of the city's history, the contributions made by Frost Town's working-class residents to the growth of modern Houston deserve recognition. Frost Town was one of Houston's first residential communities, and its history encapsulates the city's diverse heritage as well as its complex social and economic evolution.



*Many Frost Town houses were removed when these railroad tracks were built around 1926 as part of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas (MK&T or Katy) Railroad Terminal in Frost Town Block D, and archeologists found intact remains of those houses below the tracks. The large boards in the red-flagged area near the center mark the locations of two underground metal storage tanks that held some form of liquid petroleum, probably a fuel or lubricant for railroad cars.*

Photo courtesy of Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

**Louis F. Aulbach** is a native Houstonian, historian, author, and publisher. Among his many publications, *Buffalo Bayou, An Echo of Houston's Wilderness Beginnings* delves into the history along Houston's most famous stream. He has written on Camp Logan and produced best-selling guides to West Texas rivers. He has served on the Harris County Historical Commission and is a member of the Texas Historical Commission's Archeological Stewardship Network.

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