

Houston's Oldest House Gets a New Life

By Ginger Berni



The exterior of the newly renovated Kellum-Noble House in 2019.

All photos courtesy of The Heritage Society unless otherwise noted.

Those familiar with Houston history may be able to tell you that the oldest house in the city still standing on its original property is the 1847 Kellum-Noble House in Sam Houston Park. Although owned by the City of Houston, The Heritage Society (THS), a non-profit organization, has maintained the home for the past sixty-five years. Recently, THS completed phase two of an ambitious three-phased project to stabilize the building's foundation and address the significant cracks in the brick walls. Its story, however, goes much deeper than the bricks that make up the building.

The narratives used to interpret the house have changed over time, with certain details of its history emphasized, while others were largely ignored. Like many historic house museums, Kellum-Noble featured traditional antique furnishings for a parlor, dining room, office, and bedrooms, while a tour guide explained to visitors the significance of the building. Emphasis was often placed on discussing Sam Houston simply because he knew the original owner, Nathaniel Kellum, and Houston's descendants had donated some of the featured collections. Yet the importance of Zerviah Noble's efforts to educate local Houstonians, first using the house as a private school, then as one of its first public schools, was not communicated through the home's furnishings. Perhaps most importantly, any discussion of the enslaved African Americans owned by the Kellums and the Nobles was noticeably absent — a practice that is not uncommon in historic house museums throughout the country and particularly in the South.



The restored parlor in the Kellum-Noble house, 2019.

In the twentieth century, both national and local trends had a direct impact on the Kellum-Noble House. Advocates of the City Beautiful Movement influenced the mayor to purchase the property to establish the city's first municipal park, Sam Houston Park, in 1899. Supporters like Emma Richardson Cherry pleaded with city leaders to keep the home as part of the park. As Houston grew, its freeways, skyscrapers, and parking lots began to surround and diminish the structure.

At the same time, the nation's preservation movement gained momentum, and a handful of Houstonians saw value in the city's aging historic structures and worked again to save the house from demolition. The Kellum-Noble House was initially preserved in 1954 because it was one of the city's last few "relics" of the mid-nineteenth century, but a deeper look into the home's long history tells a complex story. Thanks to The Heritage Society's nearly \$1.8 million investment, the historic brick home is stabilized, and its story will continue to be told.

The story begins in May of 1837, when William N. Mock purchased an eight-acre tract of land from brothers John Kirby and Augustus Allen, founders of the city of Houston. Following several other transactions, the property was sold with improvements at public auction in March of 1843 to Thomas M. Bagby. Less than a year later, Bagby sold these premises for \$500 to Nathaniel K. Kellum, who had been renting the property. Nathaniel Kellum was born in Virginia, raised in Mississippi, and moved to Houston in 1839 at the age of twenty-seven. An industrious man, he operated a brickyard, lime vats for making mortar and plaster, an iron foundry, a sawmill, and a tannery for leather. Kellum

is credited with the construction of several commercial buildings in Houston. In 1843, he married fifteen-year-old Elmyra Cotton of Mississippi.

After expanding his property to thirteen acres, Kellum began building a spacious, two-story house for his growing family in March of 1847. The building, known today as the Kellum-Noble House, was made of bricks from his own brickyard with clay from nearby Buffalo Bayou. Kellum hired Francis McHugh to oversee construction of his house and paid him \$150 for "brick labor" and \$113 for "plastering same." Antebellum brick operations in Houston, such as Kellum's, commonly employed white brick layers who would oversee slave labor. Nathaniel Kellum himself likely owned some of the enslaved African American men who were filling molds and firing the kiln to create the 35,000 bricks that make up this home. It is difficult to know the names of those who had a hand in constructing Kellum's house due to the way records were kept at that time. He not only bought and sold slaves but also engaged in a common practice in urban areas of "hiring out" or renting slaves on a temporary basis to fulfill his need for labor.

After construction of the home was completed in March of 1848, Kellum and McHugh had a falling out, and McHugh filed a lawsuit against Kellum for unpaid work. Later the next year, Kellum and his family, which included three young sons, Robert, Nathaniel Jr., and Ruthven, moved to Grimes County to open a health resort. He divested himself of many of his assets in Houston, including a twenty-four-year-old slave named Benjamin, and left the property and home in the hands of Benjamin A. Shepherd, a local banker. Although Shepherd actually purchased the property himself on May 10, 1850, he did not live there.

Shepherd sold the Kellum house and land in 1851 to Abram W. Noble, who put up his slaves as collateral for a \$2,000 loan. Their names and estimated ages were recorded as "Frank (36), Willis (26), 'Doc' or Ambrose (28), Mary (22) and her children, Sam (3) and Jake (2 months), and Harriet (14) also a child of Mary." It was not uncommon in business agreements between private individuals to use slaves as security against borrowed money. The details of the loan explain what would happen to the slaves if the Nobles were to default, including having Frank, Willis, and Doc work off some of the debt owed. Although Abram failed to make the agreed upon payments, his wife Zerviah, through her own means, made several payments to Shepherd. In 1860, the Nobles had nine slaves, and at least one separate slave house stood on the property. Five white male laborers also lived on the Noble property, likely providing additional income as boarders who also worked in the brickyard.

The Noble family included Abram's five children by his first marriage and his wife Zerviah's teenage daughter by her first marriage. For several weeks at the start of 1851, the local newspaper ran an advertisement for a new school to be run by "Mrs. Z. M. Noble" and her daughter, "Miss C. A. Kelley." They offered to teach young girls and boys in the



Rarely is the progress of a historic preservation project shown from the inside. These Phase I renovations were completed in 2017. Although the Kellum-Noble House received no damage from Hurricane Harvey that year, it caused a long delay in beginning Phase II of the renovations.



The Noble family in front of their home, circa 1890. Two features differ significantly from the house's twentieth-century appearance: The roof is clad in standing seam metal with a half-round gutter, and the columns are more numerous and configured differently than today. Closer inspection reveals a slightly different balustrade and a different pair of doors on the primary façade upstairs.

Photo courtesy of The Heritage Society Permanent Collection Gift of Barry Moore.

“large, airy and commodious house.” Instruction included “various branches of an English education, with Drawing, Painting, Worsted Embroidery and Music, if required.” Houston had not yet established a public-school system, so children often received their education from private teachers in private homes. Zerviah Noble had come from Connecticut to Texas with her first husband around 1841. Educated at Bacon Academy, she had been a teacher in her home state before moving away.

The Noble marriage was a rocky one. Zerviah filed a writ of injunction in 1862 to prohibit Abram from disposing of any of their community assets. She claimed that it was through her efforts and her widow’s means that they acquired the property. Abram and Zerviah divorced in 1865 after she accused him of having two adulterous relationships. The divorce petition filed by Zerviah lists her separate property as “the Kellum place (valued at \$4000), Negro boy George (\$800), two drays (\$120), a horse and buggy (\$300), and six cows (\$120).” The community property included “interest in the Baker and Thompson sawmill on the San Jacinto River (\$6000), steamboat Experiment and furniture (\$1000), Negro boy John (\$800), furniture and utensils (\$275), cattle stock (\$500), and other personal property (\$500).” Zerviah and her daughter Catherine Kelley retained the house and land, having paid off the debt owed to Shepherd. The final settlement awarded the community property to Abram. He then moved to Kaufman County, married his nephew’s widow and had seven more children. Catherine Kelley married Alexander Szabo in 1860 and gave birth to a daughter, Eloise, in 1862. Sadly, Catherine died in

childbirth in January of 1866 and her infant daughter Kate died about three months later. Zerviah once again took up parenting and raised Eloise herself.

The post-Civil War, Reconstruction government of Texas introduced statewide public education for the first time in 1871, and Zerviah, now divorced, brought her private school into the new system. In the fall of 1872, thirty-six students were enrolled in the school with classes held downstairs while the family lived upstairs. Those first public schools struggled financially and were eventually reorganized after a new state constitution adopted in 1876. Zerviah signed a contract with the superintendent of Public Instruction for the State of Texas to conduct a school in her home. On October 4, 1877, classes opened in fourteen different locations throughout the city, including Zerviah’s residence, now called The Fourth Ward School. She provided first and second grade classes for sixty-three students and a newspaper article stated, “This school house is beautifully situated on Dallas Street with a large playground and other modern school conveniences.” In order to accommodate the larger classes, there were indications that a separate building was erected on the Noble property during these years.

Meanwhile, at least one of the Noble’s former slaves, Doc(k) Noble, continued to live in Houston after emancipation. He married a woman named Eliza, who worked as a domestic servant. By 1870, the couple, who both hailed from Maryland, had three children – Ambrose (6), Rebecca (3) and Benjamin (2). Over the next ten years, they had five additional children, Daniel, William, Ellen, Sarah, and Josephine, and also seemed to be reunited with an older daughter,

Mary, who was disabled, according to the 1880 Federal Census. Houston City Directories from the late 1870s and 1880s show Doc(k) and Ambrose with various employers, including a blacksmith shop and cotton press. Doc(k) and several members of his family are buried in College Memorial Park Cemetery.

Zerviah's only granddaughter, Eloise Szabo, continued in her grandmother's footsteps and became a school teacher and principal. After Zerviah's death in 1894, Eloise and her husband, Otto Witte, continued to live in the Kellum-Noble House. By this time, Houston's population had grown to around 40,000, and social reformers nationwide began to promote an idea known as the City Beautiful Movement. They believed society's problems would be solved by creating more beautified cities that would inspire civic loyalty and improve morality. Houstonians embraced the movement; and, in 1899, under the leadership of Mayor Sam Brashear, the city acquired the Kellum-Noble property to establish its first municipal park. The Wittes sold the property and the home, which was retained as the Parks Department headquarters, for \$14,000.

While in the hands of the Parks Department, the home experienced numerous changes and was used for a variety of purposes. For a brief period, the immediate surroundings housed the city's first zoo. It started somewhat organically when Houstonians began donating animals to populate their new city park. Animals included a pair of wolves named King and Queen, numerous assorted birds and small mammals in cages, an alligator, a few jaguars, and even a bear cub. A zookeeper from the Bronx, Henry McLiver, was hired as the caretaker.

When J. B. Marmion took over as City Parks director, he could not justify the expense of a zoo and convinced Houston City Council to close it down in 1905. A handful



This photograph, showing the enclosed balcony on the back of the house, and its architectural drawing were part of the Historic American Buildings Survey from 1936. During the time the Kellum-Noble House (called the "Shelter House") was surveyed, it served as the Parks Department headquarters.

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, Historic American Buildings Survey, Shelter House, 1936, Houston, Texas.

of animals remained in the pond including swans, ducks, geese, and roughly 1,000 goldfish. According to the Report of the Park Superintendent in 1913, "The old mansion, used as an office, comfort-station, tool house and residence for the park keeper, was overhauled during the fall...the gallery repaired; a new concrete floor was put in the south room, the walls tinted, the woodwork painted and the outside was whitewashed. Flower beds have been made around the old mansion and vines will be used to cover the bare walls during the summer. A new electric lamp was placed on the front gallery where it was much needed."

In 1936, the home was documented for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), a Depression-era program that put to work thousands of unemployed architects, draftsmen, and photographers documenting America's historic buildings. The architectural drawings of Kellum-Noble capture many of the changes made to the building in the early twentieth century. Perhaps most notably, the two-story porch on the back side of the home had been enclosed with clapboard wood siding, and several columns were removed. Only an exterior stair on this enclosed rear porch was recorded and no interior stairs were noted. Yet, according to Zerviah Noble's great-granddaughter, who was born in the house in 1893, there had indeed been a stairway inside the home in the entry hall.

The Kellum-Noble House continued to be used as a storage facility by the Parks Department for many years. As the park system expanded to include more and larger green spaces like Hermann and Memorial Parks, Sam Houston Park became less utilized. Then in 1951 the city developed plans for an elevated freeway loop to encircle the downtown area and further diminish the park. The neglected structure deteriorated, and in 1954 the city announced plans to demolish the Kellum-Noble House. A group of concerned



A bear cub at the zoo at Sam Houston Park, 1903.



Dozens of HAS members worked in coordination with the Texas Historical Commission to uncover artifacts found below and around the Kellum-Noble House.

citizens, who realized its historic value, created the Harris County Heritage and Conservation Society to raise funds for its preservation and restoration. This work was made more difficult after a fire caused extensive damage to the roof and floors on the southwest side of the building. Still, noted architect Harvin Moore worked to return the home to its original state. With no photographs for reference, they used the Historic American Buildings survey drawings along with a basic understanding of nineteenth-century building construction to guide their decision making. Consequently, the stairs remained on the exterior.

Late in 2014, the organization, now called The Heritage Society, began its most significant and costly restoration project to date with the goal of stabilizing the building's foundation. Much of the work, which included masonry repair and replacement of cracked bricks, installation of a central HVAC system, electrical rerouting underground, interior plaster repair, attic insulation, a new roof, interior tie-rods for added support, and installation of ADA ramps, is complete. Long after the 1950s renovations, a photograph of the Kellum-Noble House taken in about 1890 was uncovered, which helped to guide the twenty-first century renovations.

During this project, the floors were carefully taken up and stored and twentieth-century subflooring was removed. With great surprise and delight, artifacts were found in the dirt underneath, and the Houston Archeological Society



Artifacts uncovered during the dig.

(HAS) was notified. Over a two-month period, dozens of HAS members, in coordination with the Texas Historical Commission, worked tirelessly to extract hundreds of items including marbles, porcelain dishware, buttons, bottles, slate tablet fragments, and even an intact inkwell. Many of these artifacts are now on display in the home, along with panels that tell the entire span of the home's history.

THS continues to raise funds to complete the restoration project. The remaining scope of work is based on a recommendation from the structural engineer to replace all existing columns, and the second-floor porch and stairs due to corrosion of the steel framing inside the columns as well as wood rot and termite damage. For now, the oldest house in Houston still on its original property looks better than ever, welcoming the public for tours and special events.¹

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House tours are conducted at The Heritage Society on Tuesdays through Saturdays: 10:00, 11:30, 1:00 and 2:30; Sundays: 1:00, 2:30, and 4:00. Visit www.heritagesociety.org.