In 2018, lead artist Danny Asberry El with Craig Carter, Zink, Jeff, and Joshua created the first mural commemorating the history of Independence Heights, located on Whole Foods at the North Loop and Yale.

All photos courtesy of Independence Heights Redevelopment Council unless otherwise noted.

Preserving History: The Importance of Independence Heights

By Angel Salas

For years, I drove the same route from my house near Beltway 8 and T. C. Jester to my job at the corner of Yale and Aurora Street, looking at the old houses and enjoying the original feel of the neighborhood while driving down Yale toward Loop 610. I remember the first time I saw the sign that read "Independence Heights: Historic Houston Community." It piqued my curiosity, and that interest stayed with me. As the years went by, townhomes that reigned on the other side of the 610 Loop began creeping into the historic neighborhood. As the landscape changed and the old houses began to disappear, the area looked less and less like a historic community. Despite that change, Independence Heights has a rich history that is important to the history of Houston and this country.

In 1905, A. A. Wright founded the Wright Land Company and began selling residential lots to African Americans at low interest rates. The first deeds for the area were recorded in 1908. At the time, African Americans had few opportunities to obtain a home loan, and when they did get loans, banks often charged outrageous interest rates.[1] The plot of land that became known as Independence Heights was originally bounded by 30th Street on the south, 40th Street on the north, Yale Street on the west, and Airline Drive on the east. Independence Heights grew rapidly as the affordable land and ability to escape Houston's crowded wards attracted African Americans to the neighborhood.

During the early years, land prices in Independence Heights were affordable in comparison to land prices in other areas. The entirety of Independence Heights's land addition was $41,098. Estella Ray, who bought her land plot in September 1910, paid $125 for it. Future Independence Heights mayor O. L. Hubbard and his wife paid $250 for two plots of land. In comparison, M. J. and Eunice B. Godfrey paid $2,250 for a lot in the Russell and Upham subdivision, and Ida E. Nichols, who also bought from the Wright Land Company, paid $325 for her plot in Highland Acres Homes.[2]

Home ownership offered African Americans a chance to build wealth for themselves and their families. In a country that emphasizes the importance of property ownership, owning a home offered African Americans a tangible representation of their rights as U.S. citizens. Just like their counterparts in the white community, African Americans hoped to build enough wealth to have something they could

Built around 1910, the home of Andrew and Polly Carroll on East 32nd Street is a protected landmark and has remained in the family for over a century. A farmer, and a minister, the formerly enslaved Andrew and the Carroll family helped establish the community's first church, New Hope Baptist, ran the Co-op General Store, owned a barbecue stand, a beauty shop, and barbershop.

pass along to future generations. Though many forces worked against them, they kept pushing to attain the life they deserved and wanted.

Many of the first settlers in Independence Heights were the children of formerly enslaved people who understood the importance of creating a supportive place for African Americans. One of these children was O. L. Hubbard, who became the second mayor of Independence Heights. Hubbard provides a perfect example of how African Americans sought to improve their positions even when city policies worked against them. His formerly enslaved parents instilled in him and his siblings the significance of getting an education, so he attended Prairie View Normal and Industrial College and received a degree in primary education. He eventually moved to Independence Heights with his wife Ella Kyle in 1911 because he felt Houston offered African Americans some freedom in creating their own prosperity within their communities.

In the early years, before annexation, Independence Heights had a rural landscape to it, being somewhat removed from the city. This is illustrated by an ad in the *Houston Chronicle* from December 8, 1911, in which the Wright Land Co. in Independence Heights was searching for cows it had lost. The ad described them as a brown Jersey cow, and a yearling heifer, or young female cow that has not had calves. In addition, the ad offered a reward to anyone who had information that could lead to their recovery. The ad remained in the newspaper for four days, but nothing mentioned if the cows were ever recovered.[3]

Even before Independence Heights became its own city, it had a voice in decisions regarding infrastructure planned around the area. A committee from Independence Heights was involved in talks about the construction of a bridge over Little White Oak Bayou. Committees from other neighborhoods in the city were also involved, such as Woodland Heights, and neighborhoods on the Northside. Members of the neighborhood were also involved in the Sunset Heights Civic Club, which represented the best interests of the families in the areas. In 1912, members of neighborhoods around Independence Heights, Sunset Heights, and the Heights met to discuss the potential influx of saloons and concerns that the establishments would pose a threat to the schools and their children.[4] Independence Heights residents involved themselves in the issues affecting them and civically participated to ensure they maintained a good quality of life.

A newspaper article from December 11, 1914, reported the first rumbles of Independence Heights's intentions to incorporate. The election was held on January 16, 1915, at the Independence Heights School house, with O. L. Hubbard, and G. O. Burgess presiding over it as judges.[5]

On January 17, 1915, with a population of about 600 people, Independence Heights incorporated, becoming the state's first African American city at a time when African Americans owning their own spaces could be interpreted as an act of defiance against racist institutions. The people elected George O. Burgess, a lawyer, as their first mayor. Mayor O. L. Hubbard followed, serving from 1919 to 1925, and Arthur L. McCullough became the final mayor, serving from 1925 to 1928.[6] The following year, Independence Heights agreed to be annexed by the City of Houston in hopes of improving the community's residential services.

Living away from the heart of the city provided African Americans some peace of mind as violence against African Americans in Houston increased. Texas has a long history of

The original voting house was erected under precinct judge John Gray, a stalwart in making sure every household voted. Civic life was important to Independence Heights residents who understood that power when they voted to incorporate on January 17, 1915. Now Salem Missionary Baptist Church on East 33rd Street, Independence Heights is working with the church to get a protected landmark status and restore the building.

discrimination and segregation towards African American people, by both law and custom, to prevent white and black individuals from interacting. In 1922, the City of Houston passed an ordinance that prevented African Americans and white people from living with one another. Miscegenation laws at the state level demonstrated the racist fears harbored by many white individuals.[7]

Although African Americans constantly faced obstacles, they also found ways to uplift themselves and create success within their communities. The incorporation of Independence Heights provides just one example in which they took charge and created their own space in a city that excluded them. For example, they created their own festivities with the Juneteenth parade and the De-Ro-Loc festival, which was in response to their exclusion from the annual Not-su-oh agricultural festival. African American professionals and business owners established successful business districts in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards. African Americans also created their own local sports teams, like the Black Buffaloes baseball team, since professional sports remained segregated across the country.[8]

As Houston sought to attain more land, it looked to the north. In September 1929 a city engineer investigated these areas to evaluate their merits for annexation. Although the mayor at the time, Walter Embree Monteith, wanted to take in large, populated areas, he had to be certain the city could provide the required resources and improvements. Some city officials were adamant about the annexation of Independence Heights, while others had concerns about whether the economic burden was worth the risk.[9] Ultimately, city officials decided it was, and the City of Houston annexed Independence Heights on December 26, 1929.

As Independence Heights grew as a neighborhood, its priorities became more apparent. The community continued to thrive on social interaction, church meetings, sports teams, supporting the area schools, and fostering a place where everyone knew each other.

Residents quickly made it known how important churches were to them. Some of the first land granted by the A. A. Wright Land Company to the Independence Heights area was for three churches: Green Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. Paul Colored Episcopal Church, and New Hope Missionary Baptist Church. The Independence Heights community and African American communities around the country have used churches as a foundation around which to organize and emphasized their value. A former resident of Independence Heights and executive director of the Independence Heights Redevelopment Council, Tanya Debose, described how involved people were in the churches around them, saying, "The center of life in the community, especially in the African American community is the church." She explained that many residents attended church-related events throughout the week, whether it was choir practice, Bible study, or prayer meetings, because the church was deeply embedded in the residents' everyday lives.[10]

The Independence Heights parks represented key gathering places. The original city had two parks, Independence Heights Park and McCullough Park, which provided residents with multiple forms of recreational activities. People enjoyed the swimming pool, tennis courts, baseball field, and basketball courts available in Independence Heights Park. The swimming pool was extremely popular in the Houston heat, and Debose recalled the lifeguard who lived in the neighborhood taught

One of two parks in the area, Independence Heights Park remains a staple in the community and is a gathering place for the young and old alike.

Mrs. Booker's kindergarten met in a one-room schoolhouse. Susie Horton Booker received her teaching certificate at Prairie View State Normal College before relocating to Independence Heights in 1910.

them to swim when she was growing up. Basketball, another favorite recreational activity, enabled older community members to encourage young people to get involved in three-on-three tournaments to preserve the traditions and camaraderie for generations to come. Independence Heights is also home to two baseball teams, the Houston Crush and the Independence Heights Eagles. Many of the sports activities began with the area's original residents and have been passed down across the generations for almost a hundred years.

The schools in Independence Heights contributed to the community's history. Mrs. Booker's Kindergarten became the area's first school, consisting of a single room space with Mrs. Booker at the helm. This small school could not keep up with the population growth, however. Seeing this, the community rallied together, and with help from the county, they created a slightly bigger school to accommodate the new children. The first teacher at the school was actually O. L. Hubbard, who also served as the school's principal.[12]

As the area continued to expand, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) opened Burrus Elementary in 1928, which sits on 33rd Street and continues to serve the families in the community.[13] As the neighborhood children grew older and continued their education, however, they did not receive the same opportunities as their white counterparts.

The city had only one high school for African American children, Colored High School (later renamed Booker T. Washington High School), until 1926. Houston's population grew by almost 200,000 people in the 1920s, requiring HISD to construct Jack Yates (1926) and Phillis Wheatley (1927) High Schools for African American students in Third and Fifth Wards respectively. Booker T. Washington High School moved from the Fourth Ward to Independence Heights in 1959.[14]

Like other high schools in predominately African American areas, Booker T. Washington became interwoven into the Independence Heights community. Although Debose did not attend Booker T. Washington, she asserts, "You couldn't tell me I didn't attend Booker T. Washington" because, like many in the community, she felt deeply connected to the school. She remembers the double header football games played between Booker T., Wheatley, Kashmere, and Yates High Schools, and people waiting in line for the shuttle buses that took them to the Astrodome where the teams played.[15]

The Booker T. Washington band also played a prominent role in the school and community spirit. The band director marched the band through the streets of the neighborhood, and residents could hear them every evening as part of Independence Heights' sonic fabric – meaning the way that a culture, group, or area can be understood through sound and music. Though time has passed, the Booker T. Washington band remains deeply involved in the community and still marches through the neighborhood on the way to play at community gatherings.[16]

Businesses also played a critical role in Independence Heights, with Main Street as its hub. Debose recalls a dairy mart where many people went for burgers, fries, and ice cream. She referred to it as just a "dairy mart" because no one from the neighborhood could remember the actual name. Hodges' Shoe Shop was a spot where kids could buy Chick-O-Sticks, Pixie Sticks, peanut butter logs, and other candy in between attending different church gatherings. Sometimes kids would even spend a little of their church offering to buy a couple of pieces of candy at the shoe shop. Other hotspots included the barbershops in the area. Jackson's Barbershop, which still exists today, has a relationship to the churches in the area because initially the barbershop hired mostly ministers who held Bible lessons in the shop. Jackson's Barbershop also served as a gathering place during the civil rights era, including for people who participated in the sit-ins. The businesses in Independence Heights played a substantial part in bringing people together and offering meeting places to community members.

Originally established as Colored High School in Fourth Ward, Booker T. Washinton High School moved to Independence Heights in 1959. The Baby Ocean of Soul Marching Band is a key part of the community spirit and pride. Photo courtesy of 2C2K Photography, Flickr.

Though the Independence Heights neighborhood prided itself on self-sustainability and aimed to provide its residents with all they needed, things began to change in the mid twentieth century. Northline Mall opened nearby in 1963,

Mayor Sylvester Turner and Councilwoman Karla Cisneros paid tribute to Mr. Johnny Jackson and the Jackson's Barbershop family with a Mayoral Proclamation on November 22, 2023. The barbershop has stood on the corner of North Main and 35th for sixty-eight years. Shown left to right: Tanya Debose, Johnny Jackson, and Mayor Turner with community members Photo courtesy of Tanya Debose.

and Debose recalls people in the community enjoying the Moonlight Madness sales there. Some community members worked outside Independence Heights, such as in the nearby Heights neighborhood. Most interactions with surrounding neighborhoods entailed business transactions and did not involve socializing. Besides working or shopping in other neighborhoods, Debose felt most residents generally stayed in Independence Heights.[17]

Debose also remembered the Barbecue Inn, which has stood on the corner of Yale and Crosstimbers since 1946. As a young girl, she saw many people from outside the community traveled there to eat, including white people, which made her wonder who owned such a successful restaurant. Walking by the Barbecue Inn, she noticed it was as though she had stepped back in time because the kitchen staff was all people of color, and the servers were white. She could not believe how odd the sight seemed.

The historical significance of Independence Heights must be valued and preserved, especially given that people of color are still fighting to be treated equally. This is not an easy task, as government policies such as urban renewal, which overwhelmingly target communities of color, can destroy these communities under the guise of making cities more visually appealing. Urban renewal was federally funded from 1949 to 1974 and gave states money to revitalize certain blighted areas. Urban renewal caused the displacement of some 1.2 million Americans. This project overwhelmingly affected people of color and while African Americans made up only 13 percent of the total population in the United States in 1960, they made up at minimum 55 percent of the displaced population.[19]

Other issues such as gentrification also impede minority communities from keeping the houses that have been passed down to them from one generation to the next. Gentrification usually occurs under the guise of making improvements and usually in communities of color. Often this displaces the long-time residents who can no longer afford to live in the gentrified area, which has increased property taxes and other expenses.

Minority communities in this country have always struggled to document their history, and recently teaching about this diverse history has become more endangered in schools. The history of Independence Heights is not only the story of an African American community, but it also chronicles a place of historical significance in Houston and Texas. It left me asking why I, as a person in my late twenties who went through the Houston school system, had never learned about Independence Heights. If children are not taught the history, we risk the erasure of yet another part of the African American community in this country.

In June 2023, the African American Heritage Fund awarded Independence Heights a $100,000 grant to curb the massive increase in gentrification of the neighborhood. Debose plans to use the funds to create the Independence Heights Conservancy, which can then take action to preserve Independence Heights's history and educate individuals about its significance. Most immediately, the grant will be used to develop a staff for the conservancy, which will promptly begin working to add to the list of historic landmark designations in the neighborhood.[20]

As I made the trek from my house to my job in the Heights, I began to take detours throughout the Independence Heights neighborhood. Going by the houses, I imagined what the neighborhood looked like years ago, smiling at the knowledge I now possessed about the area and knowing I have a part to play in ensuring that the story of Independence Heights lives on. HH

Angel Marie Salas is a recent University of Houston graduate and a Houstonian, born and raised. She loves to discuss the history of her beloved city and is constantly looking for ways to preserve it.

Burgess Hall, named for Independence Heights's first mayor, was a centerpiece of the community's early business and government. It is shown here in 2018 before being demolished.