

ABSTRACT OUTLINING THE NEED FOR AN EMANCIPATION NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

From Galveston to Houston, TX

An Emancipation National Historic Trail has the power to restore some loss of historical and cultural memory for African Americans not only in Texas but the world. African Americans, particularly black Texans, have the only culture that has not been documented for consumption and of which there is the least inventory left in the world. Through a systematic process of elimination and miseducation much of what remains of the historical memory of African Americans has been lost and is in need of resurrection and revival, restoration and preservation and this Historic Trail has the power to revitalize memory, and restore dignity to the disenfranchised. This Emancipation Historic Trail has the power to memorialize the memory of the formerly enslaved people with dignity and contribute to a better understanding of the deep seated causes of slavery.

Two UNESCO Slave Route Project designations corroborate the significance of the Emancipation Trail:

- 1) Galveston's *Middle Passage Marker* accepted by Galveston Historical Foundation for exhibition;
- 2) Freedmen's Town Sites awarded "Site of Memory" Associated to the UNESCO Slave Route Project, March 2019, including Antioch Missionary Baptist Church; African American Library at the Gregory School; Olivewood Cemetery; and Emancipation Park.

The March 16, 2019 Preservation Texas announcement of the 16 most endangered historic places includes six Texas listings: Houston, Dallas, Laredo, the Panhandle, and the Rio Grande border.

Significantly:

"three wards in Houston have suffered in recent decades from extensive demolitions, architecturally inappropriate redevelopment, and gentrification. Only a handful of historic structures remain in the National Register-listed Freedman's Town which once contained hundreds of listed buildings. Emancipation Avenue, recently renamed to celebrate the community's important post-Civil War history, has suffered a similar fate, with only a small number of structures remaining where a thriving African American community once lived, worked and organized for their political, economic and social equality. According to Carl Davis,

“It’s important that we reclaim and capture our rich history of these Emancipation Freedom Colonies and tell our stories of the struggle and accomplishments.”¹

Museums are being created around the world for educating audiences about the stories of African Americans. Yet Texas is not considered a slave state, while the fertile soil of the Brazos Colorado River Valley was not only the biggest contributor to King Cotton, but a “sugar bowl,” second only to Louisiana. Slave labor’s contributions helped produced the most powerful country in the world. In less than 50 years an empire for slavery arose in Texas resulting in a quarter million freedmen following the Civil War.

Two major factors are virtually unknown:

- 1) An Underground Railroad from Texas to Mexico during slavery;²
- 2) And the last battle of the Civil War that was fought on May 13, 1865 at Palmito Ranch, less than 20 miles north of the Rio Grande Mexican border, including 16,000 United States Colored Troops.

Black Texans including Mickey Leland, Bessie Coleman, Jack Johnson, Scott Joplin, and Beyonce’ have made contributions to politics, sports, aviation, entertainment, performing and visual arts that continue to inspire popular culture worldwide. For example, at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, England from whose harbors sailed some 4894 voyages into the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, there is a space, the Dock Traffic Office that has been converted and renamed in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. From these and other voyages ship captains sold an estimated 12.5 million enslaved Africans at auction to buyers in the New World. The Emancipation National Historic Trail will promulgate these heroic stories to the more than 17.5 million visitors in 2015 and 3.5 million foreign travelers that came to Houston in 2017.

Houston is the third largest city in the United States, with the most ethnically diverse population who speak over 145 languages. 16.9% of Houston’s population are African Americans. At the close of the Civil War, African descendants were close to 30% of the Texas population, giving them the voting power

¹ *Preservation Texas*, Evan Thompson, Executive Director, 2018.

² Sean M. Kelley, *Los Brazos De Dios: A Plantation Society in the Texas Borderlands, 1821 – 1865*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1966.

to elect Black legislative representatives, including Senators Matthew Gaines and George T. Ruby, Representative Richard Allen of Houston, and Norris Wright Cuney, a Collector of Customs in Galveston and participant in State and National Republican Party politics. The Jaybird-Woodpecker War of Fort Bend County, the rise of the Democratic Party and other vigilante justice ended the era of Black Legislators in Texas.³ The Lone Star Cotton Jammers were the first all black union for better wages and working conditions at the port of Galveston. Where did all this historical memory go? Like the Millican and Slocum Massacres, the lynching of Jesse Washington in Waco, and Jessie McGuire Dent's crusade for equal pay for school teachers in Galveston, these Texas stories are pregnant with integrity. Texas' 530 Rosenwald schools and their teachers educated numerous blacks; made and maintained culture in a way lost to integration. The *Emancipation National Historical Trail* presents an optimum opportunity to share these historical narratives.

Galveston boasted many 'firsts': the first colored high school, first AME and Baptist churches,⁴ and first library for colored residents. Houston's main Third Ward artery was changed from East Broadway to Dowling Street, honoring Confederate veteran Richard "Dick" Dowling. The street's name was changed to Emancipation Avenue in 2017 to add exuberance to the newly restored Emancipation Park, a 10-acre property purchased by four black leaders in 1872 for the purpose of celebrating Juneteenth: Rev. John Henry "Jack" Yates, Pastor of Antioch Baptist Church; Richard Allen, a contractor who built the first bridge across Buffalo Bayou; Rev. Elias Dibble, the first ordained Methodist minister in Texas; and Richard Brock, an educator for whom a school was named.

Reconstruction after the Civil War brought far-reaching changes to Houston. A wave of migrants entered the city after the war. Between 1860 and 1870, Houston's black population increased from approximately 2,000 to 6,500, including freed slaves who came to Houston seeking separation from their former owners, an alternative to agricultural labor, and information about long lost relatives.⁵

In Texas, the largest southern state, where there were some 250,000 emancipated freedmen, there is not one museum dedicated to the interpretation of Black Texas history and culture. Yet the Brazos Colorado River Valley was home to an empire for slavery that by June 19, 1865 when Union General

³ Merline Pitre, *Through Many Dangers, Toils and Snares: Black Leadership in Texas, 1868-1898*

⁴⁴ Clyde McQueen, *Black Churches of Texas*, Texas A&M Press, 2000.

⁵ Scott L. Stabler, "Free Men Come to Houston: Blacks during Reconstruction," *Houston Chronicle* Feb. 10, 2016.

Gordon Granger read General Order No. 3 of the Emancipation Proclamation at the Osterman Building off from Pier 21 in Galveston, African descendants were not only approximately 30% of the population but had been kept enslaved two and one half years past President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to the states in rebellion, that was due to become effective January 1, 1863. Yes, an Emancipation National Historic Trail from Galveston to Houston is a must.

Historical Context

Beginning with Stephen F. Austin's colonization of Mexico in the 1820s, the Mexican government outlawed slavery. After 1833 Austin declared consistently that "Texas must be a slave state."⁶ And, by 1840 there were some 11,000 enslaved. By 1860 that population grew to 182,566. By the time a quarter of one million souls (250,000) were emancipated on June 19, 1865 the Texas government was bankrupt and in political and social disorder due to the absence of governmental control, as it was "still the arena of the Civil War," and contained "the dark corner of the Confederacy."⁷ Beginning in 1866 the Ku Klux Klan and like-minded paramilitary organizations formed that instituted the politics of fear that coincided with the eleventh Texas Legislature which passed Black Codes insisting that "Freedmen remain hewers of wood and drawers of water."⁸

Postwar, the Galveston-Houston area faced the dual challenges of adjusting to the defeat of the Confederacy and to the end of slavery. As word of emancipation spread, many of the freedmen set out on foot for Houston from neighboring plantations. One observer at the time noted: "They travel mostly on foot, bearing heavy burdens of clothing, blankets, etc., on their heads—a long and weary journey, they arrive tired, foot sore, and hungry." Travel could be dangerous and many kept to the woods rather than public thoroughfares. Upon arrival in Houston, they found an openly hostile city unprepared for their presence. Cut loose from their former lives as forced agricultural labor without basic political or human rights, they faced the daunting task of building new lives as free citizens.⁹

⁶ The Handbook of Texas, Texas State Historical Association, Stephen Fuller Austin.

⁷ Kenneth Wayne Howell, Editor, *Still the Arena of the Civil War: Violence and Turmoil in Reconstruction Texas, 1865-1874*, 2012; B. P. Gallaway, Editor, *Texas: The Dark Corner of the Confederacy*, 1994.

⁸ James M. Smallwood, *Time of Hope, Time of Despair*, Kennekat Press, Washington, New York, London, 1981.

⁹ Scott L. Stabler, "Free Men Come to Houston: Blacks during Reconstruction," *Houston Chronicle* Feb. 10, 2016.

Cultural Transformation

Reconstruction raised highly contested issues touching all phases of life in the South. Often submerged under the volatile politics of Reconstruction was a fundamental question facing the nation: what should be done to give the former slaves at least a fighting chance to become equal participants in the life of the nation? In Houston as throughout much of the South, the federal government addressed this question for a time by using the Freedmen's Bureau to establish schools for the freedmen, help secure their voting rights, and locate missing relatives. Until the national politics of "reconciliation" and "redemption" ended these federal programs in the 1870s, they made a measure of progress in helping freedmen begin to make the fundamental transformation from slavery to freedom.¹⁰ The process from slavery to self-sufficiency is a story central to the Emancipation National Historical Trail. *The Emancipation Trail* will restore integrity and respect to the resilience of those humans who flocked from Galveston Island and area plantations to Houston in droves for opportunities to rehabilitate their lives in a swamp infested area called *Freedmen's Town*.¹¹

Social Benefits

Blacks began celebrating Juneteenth, the holiday that heralded their freedom, the next year, on June 19, 1866. Under the leadership of Houston's Richard Allen, Jack Yates, Richard Brock and Elias Dibble, the freedmen and women worked together to purchase 10+ acres of land for the purpose of bringing together freedmen in the communities of fourth ward, fifth ward, and third ward in one place— *Emancipation Park*. This was the first public park in Texas, pre-dating Houston Parks and Recreation. The 2017 completion of a \$33 million dollar restoration makes both *Emancipation Park* and the *Freedmen's Town Historic District* crown jewels for the interpretation of Texas history via an Emancipation National Historical Trail. Juneteenth is recognized and celebrated around the world.

Blacks built homes, churches and schools and set out to educate themselves. They became contractors, like Richard Allen, lawyers and doctors, like Dr. B. J. Covington, and real estate brokers like John Brown Bell who personally financed the taxes for Emancipation Park. Alta Vista Plantation in Waller County became the 1876 land grant college (initiated by Senator Matthew Gaines), that is now Prairie View A&M University, from which Malinda Mullin Mitchell graduated in 1911. Years later Texas Southern

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

University was established by the Fiftieth Texas Legislature on March 3, 1947, in Houston. Originally named Texas State University for Negroes, for the first time, a program of study comparable to that available to white Texans was considered. Black resistance and determination is documented in the establishment of over 400 freedom colonies expressing land ownership and entrepreneurial determination. This is the story deserving of applause, in opposition to a legacy of slavery, and this story will be the central theme of the Emancipation Trail whose distance is 51 miles from Galveston to Houston's Freedmen's Town and Emancipation Park.

For social life Galveston blacks flocked to West beach, a segregated area where families held reunions, fishing parties, and other social gatherings. The longshoremen of the area heralded economic opportunity for the community and also held social gatherings. By 1900, Galveston was the economic center for all of Texas until the 1900 Great Storm that moved commercial capitalists to dredge the Galveston bay 50 miles west to Houston, making Houston the new center for commerce.

Significant Historical Markers

- 1) Galveston Middle Passage Marker – Galveston Historical Foundation, at Museum on Pier 21
- 2) *Reedy Chapel AME Church on a lot purchased in 1848 as a worship site for black slaves - Galveston
- 3) *1867 Settlement Community Historic District, only Reconstruction Era African American Community in Galveston County – Texas City, Texas
- 4) Ancient Order of Pilgrims, established by Henry Cohen Hardy, a Jamaican who sensed the need for burial insurance and real estate loans, headquarters office building was at 1100 Bagby – Houston Texas
- 5) Grand Court Order of Calanthe was a female fraternal benefit society from 1870s to 1930s providing sick benefits and life insurance organized by Susan H. Norris at 2411 Emancipation Avenue – Houston

*Listed on the National Register for Historic Places

Economic Benefits for an Emancipation Trail

The potential value of an *Emancipation National Historic Trail from Galveston to Houston* has an unprecedented marketable value to heritage tourism for the following reasons:¹²

- Houston is the third largest city in the United States, with the most ethnically diverse population in the United States where over 145 languages are spoken;
- African Americans are 16.9% of Houston’s population;
- More than 17.5 million visitors in 2015 and 3.5 million foreign travelers came to Houston in 2017;
- Houston has 18 sister-city relationships promoting business opportunities across five continents: Asia, Europe, Americas, Africa, and Australia;
- Fifteen foreign governments maintain trade and commercial offices here and the city has 35 active foreign chambers of commerce and trade associations;
- Houston is the energy capital of the world with international tourism to the world’s largest medical center and the largest port on the Gulf Coast is in Houston
- Bush Intercontinental Airport offers non-stop service to more than 70 international destinations, and Hobby Airport serves more than 55 destinations;
- There are more than 80,000 hotel rooms in Houston, 8,000 downtown, and the tourism industry supports 123,000 jobs.

*The Emancipation National Historic Trail is 51 miles commencing from Reedy Chapel AME Church from Broadway onto the Old Galveston Road, Texas Hwy 3, which is mostly parallel to and finally connects with Interstate 45 north into Houston.

Naomi Mitchell Carrier, M.Ed. is a consummate educator, historian, performing artist and author with a background in Black Music, Texas History, and heritage tourism. She has used her gifts to educate in the public arena, at festivals, in museums, at schools and universities, libraries and historic sites, with exhibits, musicals, black history classes, workshops, and heritage tours. Carrier began her career as an educator in 1979 as a classroom teacher; has been a principal, and is currently a professor at Houston Community College. Naomi is the founder and Executive Director of TCAALH (The Texas Center for African American Living History; and is also Executive

¹² Visithoustntexas.com

Director for CLLP (Convict Leasing and Labor Project), seeking to memorialize the SugarLand 95. Her education includes the University of North Texas, St. Thomas University, Houston, Harvard Graduate School of Education; and she was a Rice University Scholar in Residence for her research on Reconstruction Era Texas. Carrier's most important achievements are *I Am Annie Mae, the Musical*, premiered at St. Edward's University, Austin, TX; *Go Down, Old Hannah: The Living History for African American Living History* published by the University of Texas Press in 2010; and the restoration of her grandfather, Marshall Mitchell's 1913 church into the **Mitchell Museum** in 2017, during the 100th year of her family's ownership of land in Lavaca County, TX.

<http://tcaalh.org>

<http://godownoldhannah.com>

<http://pvarstworkshop.org>

<http://cllptx.org>