

**Timeline of a recent fight to save
Freedmen's Town
2014-2018**

Provided to the National Resources Committee
Hearing on H.R. 434, Emancipation National Historic
Trail Act
April 2, 2019



Historic Bricks from Freedmen's Town Restored

Freedmen's Town historic bricks put back in place

By: Adam Bennett

Published: March 9, 2018

<https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/neighborhood/freedmens-town-historic-bricks-put-back-in-place/285-527240621>

Residents in Houston's Freedman's Town neighborhood near downtown spent Friday celebrating the re-installation of their historic bricks.

More than 3,600 bricks, laid more than a century ago by freed former slaves and their descendants, were accidentally damaged by city contractors in November 2016.

Friday was a day some residents told KHOU they fought for and never gave up hope they would see.

"It's wonderful!" said a resident who identified herself as Mrs. Arthur Teal-Brown. "It's great. It was a long time coming, but it came. Thank you, Jesus!"

Gladys House-El, a lifelong Freedmen's Town resident, has been fighting for years to preserve the bricks.

"I feel good because our ancestors are all around us," said House-El. "(The bricks have) just been neglected for decade after decade." Those bricks were laid in 1907 in what was then the hub of Houston's African-American community after descendants of freed slaves petitioned City Council.

"Malaria was a big deal back then, and people were definitely getting sick, and they just wanted to have a way to get people back and forth," said R.W. McKinney, who gives tours of historic

Houston sites with his company, Mister McKinney's Historic Houston, and was at Friday's dedications. "When I do tours, I bring people from all over the country. When they visit Houston, they want to see Freedmen's town. They want to see our past and our history."

In November 2016, city contractors went past their limits on a drainage project at Andrews Street and Genesee Street, damaging the bricks at that intersection.

"It's just been never ending by the city," said House-El. "This wasn't the first time."

After cleaning, cataloguing and storing the bricks, and after delays caused by Harvey and other weather-related issues, crews began re-installing the bricks on Feb. 28.

"I'm glad we're doing it," Mayor Sylvester Turner said on that day. "I'm glad it's getting done in the month of February during Black History Month."

Turner also said that day that the city is seeking to establish a cultural historic district for the area. Freedmen's Town has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1985.

Residents hope Friday's milestone lays the foundation to preserve a key piece of a neighborhood founded and settled by those who were freed after the Civil War.

"We're going to go block per block to restore the bricks," said House-E

Historic Bricks Laid By Ex-Slaves In Houston Reinstalled, At Freedmen's Town

Houston Public Media

<https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/2018/03/01/270570/historic-bricks-laid-by-ex-slaves-in-houston-reinstalled-at-freedmens-town/>

By: Associated Press

March 1, 2018

“We will continue to work with the community to preserve this important historical neighborhood,” Mayor Turner said, in the statement “Thousands of bricks laid by ex-slaves at Freedmen’s Town in Houston are being returned to the historic spot after removal in 2016 for storm drain work.”

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner says city crews on Wednesday began re-installation of road bricks in the neighborhood that in the 1860s became home to former slaves. In a statement, Turner’s office said the re-installation of historic bricks in Freedmen’s Town at the corner of Andrews and Genesee is a significant milestone reached before the end of Black History Month.

“We will continue to work with the community to preserve this important historical neighborhood,” Mayor Turner said, in the statement. “The bricks were originally laid down by freed slaves more than 100 years ago. I am pleased we could start this project before the end of February.”

In November of 2016, a City contractor mistakenly removed bricks, while working on a drainage project.

Preservationist raised concerns about possible damage to the more than 3,600 bricks. In a statement, Turner’s office said, “An archeologist will be on site at all times to oversee everything and prepare a final report documenting all work.”

The re-installation of the bricks was originally scheduled to be completed by the end of December, but Hurricane Harvey and other weather-related issues pushed the completion date back.

Freedmen's Town could receive United Nations cultural designation

By: Cindy George

Oct. 29, 2017

For all the years the historic bricks of Freedmen's Town in Fourth Ward were questioned, devalued and disturbed, a new international spotlight is bringing a renewed appreciation for the strenuous efforts to validate, treasure and preserve them.

UNESCO – the Paris-based cultural arm of the United Nations – is considering Freedmen's Town for its Slave Route Project, which is a registry created in 1994 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of historically significant sites that tell the global story of the trade in human labor.

Jane Landers, the U.S. envoy for the Slave Route Project, spent three days last week in the Houston area learning about Freedmen's Town and other sites that can be combined for a nomination.

"It's a project to memorialize sites around the world where slaves had an impact. Africans that were torn from their homes and transported across the Middle Passage to sites all over the world were dispersed, but created unique communities often wherever they went. The slave route is to acknowledge that and to mark it," Landers said. "My job is to find places like this that deserve to be preserved and memorialized and to help people make a nomination."

Landers was invited by Catherine Roberts, co-founder of the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum in Freedmen's Town. International designation has been a city goal since at least early 2016 when Mayor Sylvester Turner's post-election transition team's quality of life committee recommended that his office "announce initial

support of the application to designate Freedmen's Town a UNESCO World Heritage Site" and to determine its feasibility and impact "as a tourist destination and historic landmark."

Houston architect Daimian Hines has described Freedmen's Town as potentially the "largest linear architectural footprint still preserved in America" of black urban life during the post-slavery Reconstruction era.

Landers, a scholar of Africans in the Atlantic World, is the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt professor of history at Vanderbilt University in Nashville where she also directs a digital archive of sources for slave societies. Two years ago, she joined the UNESCO Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Slave Route.

During a tour Thursday led by Debra Blacklock-Sloan, a Freedmen's Town historian who serves on the Harris County Historical Commission, Landers discovered a community with many surviving elements despite new multi-rise buildings, townhouses and other gentrification.

"I had never seen anything like the brick streets that I saw here," she said.

Oral history records that bricks were laid in accordance with West African traditions – connecting residents with their ancestral roots – atop significant trinkets and icons as well as in certain patterns.

Those pavers provide the patchwork for Freedmen's Town up-from-slavery story of people starting from scratch on Buffalo Bayou and building a striving community full of crafts people, homes and institutions that lifted its members to success through entrepreneurship and education.

Landers said she was impressed by the documentation of Freedmen's Town, particularly the archaeology and Texas Historical Commission markers. She said the case for the proposal has been made through decades of preservation work. Now, that effort and evidence needs to be packaged.

"There is certainly enough research and history here that it should have a tremendous reception," she said. "If it were just a place where you knew there once were slaves who became free, there are those all over the South. You have to have all the research and the investment and the community that this has to make it a viable project."

Texas has only one World Heritage Site among two dozen in the United States. The San Antonio Missions, including The Alamo, were designated in 2015 after a decade of persistence by preservationists and officials.

UNESCO received its first U.S. nomination for the Slave Route Project last month: Fort Negley Park in Nashville. The Civil War-era Union installation built by black people including runaway slaves, free individuals and conscripted laborers is considered significant in the history of global enslavement.

Landers also visited Emancipation Park and other sites in Third Ward. She stopped by Olivewood Cemetery – incorporated in 1875 and one of the city's oldest burial grounds – where pivotal black leaders of post-Emancipation Houston and their families were laid to rest for the next 100 years.

She also traveled to the Levi Jordan Plantation near Brazoria, which has a remaining main house that was built by slave labor in the mid-1800s, and where archeological work has located evidence of vibrant life at the sites of long-gone quarters where people in bondage created a community.

Hines, the architect, said many cities have a site or a cemetery in isolation, but dozens of elements in Freedmen's Town and greater Houston express the "urbanization of free people who created an economic and cultural powerhouse" from the late 1880s into the 20th century.

There are descendants of original families who live in the area today and potential for tourist kiosks, micro-museums and other installations – in addition to what remains – to attract international social tourism.

"Wealth was built in a very short time despite Jim Crow, segregation and hate. ... That's value to UNESCO," Hines said. "This is a jewel. We have something nobody else has."

The Fight to Save Freedmen's Town

Wrong bricks replaced in Houston's historic Freedmen's Town

By Andy Cerota

May 01, 2017

<https://www.click2houston.com/news/wrong-bricks-replaced-in-houstons-historic-freedmens-town>

HOUSTON - Contractors hired by the city of Houston were hard at work in Houston's historic 4th Ward on Monday. They were supposed to be reinstalling the thousands of historic Freedmen's Town bricks originally laid by slaves that construction crews mistakenly tore up in November.

But community leaders said there was a big problem: The contractors were installing the wrong bricks.

"The contractor is bringing those bricks from Kansas City, rather than the ones that were taken from here," Gladys House-El said. House-El, the head of the Community Development Corporation for Freedmen's Town, says her preservation specialist was on-site and brought the issue to her attention.

When we contacted Mayor Turner's office, a spokesperson told us the street was being restored with historic bricks only.

But less than two hours later, the contractor was told to stop working.

"They are historic bricks that were removed. The protocol was to have the bricks certified by archeologists. If those bricks that are being installed are non-historical bricks, then we made a mistake. We will pick those bricks up and replace them with historical bricks. If they are Kansas City bricks, then they are not certified,"

Keith Wade, Mayor Turner's senior advisor, told Channel 2 by phone. "The city and the contractor keep dropping the ball when the mayor has said, 'Don't do this that way, do it like we have all come together and agreed it should be done.'"

The city sent a letter to Channel 2:

"In an effort to ensure preservation protocols, the Freedmen's Town brick re-installment has been temporarily suspended. All of the replacement bricks laid today have been removed, re-palletized and transported from the site. The sand was also removed. Going forward, we will follow the procedure indicated below:

- **STEP 1:** *Our contractor will accumulate bricks from various sources to bring to the site.*
- **STEP 2:**
- **A.** *The Project archaeologist, who is an outside independent consultant, will examine these bricks and identify those which meet approval for placement. He will approve only the bricks that match the historic nature, look, size, etc. of the original bricks.*
- **B.** *The archaeologist-approved bricks will be shown to the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition before they are reinstalled."*

Mayor stops construction to save Freedmen's Town bricks

By Deborah Wrigley and Jeff Ehling

November 21st, 2016

<https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/community-demands-timetable-for-preservation-of-freedmens-town-bricks/285-511180334>

HOUSTON (KTRK) -- Preservationists are calling the destruction of bricks in Historic Freedmen's Town devastating.

Some are gathering on Andrews Street, angry about what happened this morning. And it is easy to see why. The street is ripped up, the bricks damaged, and many taken away. This was not supposed to happen and now those who are fighting to preserve the Freedmen's Town bricks are demanding answers.

Caught on camera, work crews ripping up portions of Andrews Street and in the process demolishing over 100 years of history by demolishing a large section of the bricks laid down by the ancestors of freed slaves.

Gladys House-El, a Freedmen's Town resident, said, "I just jumped up got dressed and ran out and started filming the site and started telling them, 'Look you need to stop because you are in violation of federal as well as state law.'

House-El made the excavator operator stop digging up the street. She said, "They were just tearing it up with the bulldozer." According to the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition, any time work is being done that encompasses the bricks special care is to be taken, including onsite archaeologists to preserve the bricks. That did not happen here. The coalition's Dorris Ellis-Johnson met with contractors doing the work on nearby Genesee Street and was

told the project is on hold until city officials can figure out why this happened.

Ellis-Johnson said, "No further action will take place on this brick, this area and we've got to figure out how we going to restore."

The original work was being done on Genesee Street, then spilled over to Andrews Street for drainage improvements, but the crew was not supposed to touch the bricks.

Mayor Sylvester Turner, who is in Mexico City for the Texans game, tweeted that the "work was done without my authorization. This should not have happened."

The construction project is to replace aging water and sewer lines in the area, where new homes have replaced many of those that once housed prominent African American families in Houston's 19th and early 20th centuries.

Those who live in modern townhomes are not opposed to the upgrades. Felix Cisneros said he's now on his third car because of the roads. "Enough is enough," he said. "I've been here since 2002 and I've been paying a lot of money and I want my streets fixed.

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee made a detour from her annual turkey giveaway to see the rubble at the end of Andrews Street. "I support infrastructure improvement, but I also support historic preservation," she said. Some of the bricks removed today were said to have been loaded into a dump truck. "We need to be like Sherlock Holmes and get them returned."

There has been no comment yet from the contractor. Late this afternoon, Houston's Public Works Department was still preparing a news release on the incident.

Former Houston City Attorney Ben Hall has been contacted by Freedman's Town advocates, and is expected to request an injunction against further work in the area until the bricks issue is resolved.

Community demands timetable for preservation of Freedmen's Town bricks

By: Michelle Choi

Published: January 24, 2018

<https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/community-demands-timetable-for-preservation-of-freedmens-town-bricks/285-511180334>

It's been more than a year since the city removed historic bricks in Freedmen's Town.

The bricks were put down by freed slaves more than 100 years ago. Now local activists and community members are upset the city isn't moving fast enough on a promise to preserve what's left, fix what's already been torn out and return what's been taken out.

Located in Houston's Fourth Ward, in the last two years, those living in Freedmen's Town say more than 7,000 of these historic bricks have been removed by the city. They say the once beautiful Andrews Street is now full of pot holes and held together with cement.

It's a problem they say is not going away.

Local activists have since been asking the city to return the bricks and fix the roads, wanting to put back the historic bricks where they came from.

It's a project the city says they've been working on. But longtime resident and activist Gladys House-El says no real action has been taken, and her community is tired of waiting.

"We are concerned no specific date by the mayor has been given to us to return Freedmen's Town's sacred bricks," House-El said. "It's no excuse for the constant delays of returning our bricks. They should have never been removed."

It's work and bricks Mayor Sylvester Turner says would have been put back and completed by this past December. But major setbacks, like Harvey and the cold blast, have pushed back the date.

Mayor Turner says several of his community committees are working hard to pave their way back.

His office released this statement Wednesday:

“The project was originally scheduled to be completed by the end of December, but Harvey and other weather-related issues pushed the completion date back. We have a couple of community committees that are working diligently on this project. They generally meet once a month, with the next meeting scheduled for the second week in February.

The project is scheduled to be substantially complete within the next month. Houston Public Works wants nothing more than to finish this project for the community. Houston Public Works promises to continue to work with the leaders of Freedmen's town to make sure needs are met both as a community, in preserving this important historical neighborhood and also a strong infrastructure to protect the health, safety and comfort of all residents.”

Freedmen's Town activists stand their ground over historic bricks

By Samantha Ehlinger

June 23, 2014

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Freedmen-s-Town-activists-stand-their-ground-over-5573974.php>

Deandre Gafford, 18, rides over bricks that were put in over 100 years ago in historic Freedmen's Town.

Community leader, Lenwood Johnson, says the brick streets in Freedmen's Town need to stay intact because the patterns form a story. Activists want a public works project to avoid disturbing the bricks.

In the small neighborhood called Freedmen's Town on the west edge of downtown, there are two cherished narrow brick roads riddled with bumps, cracks and concrete patches from decades of use.

Most in the Fourth Ward community know the lore - that freed slaves and descendants first laid the bricks on the streets 100 years ago.

Now most agree the roads need repairs, but residents and preservationists worry a recently approved city plan to remove the bricks to fix piping underneath will ruin the original streets, a key element of Freedmen's Town designation as a National Historic District. Some activists also say the process to approve the project violated federal laws intended to preserve national historic districts.

"I'm appalled that the mayor wants to disturb those bricks like that," resident Terrance Williams said.

More than 100 years ago, Fourth Ward residents paid \$1 per brick to have the streets paved in front of their houses, said Catherine Roberts, co-founder of the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum in Freedmen's Town, and a major force for the area's conservation.

Not only are the bricks themselves significant, but the patterns they form tell a story. The designs at some intersections can be traced back to African crossroads - which pointed the way to safe houses for the black community - or religious traditions of the Yoruba people of West Africa.

"This is an in-the-ground cultural resource," Roberts said. "You don't take them out."

Their inability to stop construction has made the community feel powerless - a community once considered the heartbeat of black Houston. Doctors, lawyers, dentists and ministers populated the area until the 1920s, when the Third and Fifth wards became more popular.

Little by little, residents moved out, and by 1980 the area of 17,000 had dwindled to 4,400. Its 530 historic buildings listed in 1984 have been reduced to fewer than 30.

After decades of discussion and planning to install new utilities in the neighborhood, City Council approved a \$5 million plan this month to repave portions of Andrews and Wilson streets. Work is scheduled to start by early August, said Mike Cordova, project manager for the city.

Water and sewer pipes will be replaced, and then the salvageable bricks - estimated to be just one-third of those there now - will be cleaned and put back, but likely not in their original designs.

Texas Department of Transportation architect Mario Sanchez said the bricks will be regrouped at intersections rather than in their original locations. "It was determined infeasible to re-install them in their original locations, specifically because there would be a lack of continuity based on the number of salvageable bricks," Sanchez wrote in the email to the Houston Chronicle.

That's heartbreaking news to residents and historians, who believed that years ago they had reached a solution on upgrading the Freedmen's Town streets. They pleaded with the city to tunnel underneath the bricks instead of moving them, and in 2007 former Mayor Bill White reached an agreement with U.S. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee to do just that.

City officials now say the streets are too narrow for tunneling, and construction costs could quadruple.

"It just wasn't a practical way to move forward," said council member Ellen Cohen, whose district includes Freedmen's Town. Violations alleged Michael Nixon, a cultural resources lawyer and consultant, is trying to put the brakes on the revised plan. Nixon heard about the local restoration plan from another preservationist, and after visiting Freedmen's Town, decided to conduct a yearlong study into the project.

Because the streets are in a National Historic District and it's a federally funded project, the plans must go through a review process to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act.

The Texas Department of Transportation, Houston's Public Works Department and Texas Historical Commission must all be involved, as well as community members.

Nixon said the project violates sections No. 106 and No. 110 of the preservation act because the various groups did not communicate

during each step of the process to make decisions together. He is raising the concern with the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

"They've put their ability to get federal funding in jeopardy," Nixon said. "This is a big deal. This is a serious matter."

Nixon said TxDOT "short-circuited" recent discussions with the Texas Historical Commission, creating a ripple effect of miscommunication with other agencies involved.

In a 2013 letter obtained by Nixon through the Freedom of Information Act, a TxDOT architect sought approval from the Texas Historical Commission for changes to construction plans. This approval is required for federally funded projects like Freedmen's Town.

TxDOT's Sanchez wrote in the letter that TxDOT was using the document as a marker of resuming discussions of the project with the historical commission - discussions required by law.

The letter outlined major changes in engineering plans, including regrouping the bricks in select areas instead of returning them to their original places.

Sanchez wrote there would be "no adverse effect" on the bricks, and asked the historic commission to approve the new plans, which it did. The project went forward.

Historical commission officials said they were unsure if anyone in their office received notification of the major engineering changes. They said different employees were involved in various stages of the years long project.

This letter, however, was not enough to qualify as the "dynamic discussion" between everyone involved that the law requires, Nixon said.

And the public was not made aware of the changed construction plan until the decision was already made by TxDOT and the historic commission to remove the bricks, Nixon said.

Activists were emailed at midnight that a plan without their recommendations was being voted on by City Council at 9 a.m. June 11, Roberts said.

Roberts said they couldn't attend the meeting to protest the plan because of the short notice.

Department of Public Works spokesman Alvin Wright said community members had not expressed objections to the recent construction plans. He said the city was unaware of how it could be violating the National Historic Preservation Act, but officials would vet any claims presented to them.

Community members vowed to continue their preservation effort. "Those streets mean so much to us," said Darrell Patterson, president of the Freedmen's Town Association. "It's ordinary people doing extraordinary things, and people should be proud of that."

Historic Freedmen's Town Bricks Again Ripped up Despite City's Instructions

By: Meagan Flynn

January 10, 2017

<https://www.houstonpress.com/news/houston-road-construction-extends-carmageddon-11267860>

For Dorris Ellis Robinson, president of the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition, approaching the ripped-up historic bricks Saturday felt like approaching a burial.

"It was like there was a death," she said. "I said, 'Okay, Lord, I've got to get myself together so I will be able to discuss this.'"

It was the second time in a little over a month that a construction crew had damaged or outright destroyed the Freedmen's Town bricks, hand-laid more than 100 years ago by freed slaves and their descendants. This time it was a plumbing crew on Andrews Street near Valentine, according to the Department of Public Works, and last time it was a drainage crew at the other end of Andrews.

Each time, the contractor did not have permission to dig into the bricks. And each time, Dorris Ellis Robinson found herself running to city officials, ready to discuss what went wrong — and why city contractors can't seem to respect the rich history embedded in the streets of one of the oldest African-American communities in the country.

"Until the people decide that it is of value, it's going to continue to be a struggle," she said.

"Mayor [Sylvester] Turner has spoken to the issue strongly, but I still think the people have to come to recognize that this piece of land is of importance and it should not be destroyed."

Ellis and the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition have been petitioning City Council to recognize the importance and value of the Freedmen's Town history since 2014 — the year Ellis literally lay down in a pile of bricks — a hole, rather — to stop another construction crew from destroying yet more history. The coalition took the contractors and the city to court, after City Council under former Mayor Annise Parker's administration voted to continue a sewage project despite the outcry from the preservationists.

The group won a temporary injunction blocking further construction, yet the injunction expired in August after a judge dismissed the lawsuit.

Since then, however, Ellis says, Mayor Turner has shown an unmatched commitment to ensuring the survival of Freedmen's Town historic sites and the bricks compared to past administrations.

In December, shortly after a drainage crew disturbed roughly 200 bricks on Andrews Street at Genesee, Turner held a press conference at the site of the rubble and laid out a plan to restore the bricks, even hiring archaeologists and other supervisors to oversee the restoration project. The removed bricks — salvaged by residents who ran out of their homes to stop the construction workers from digging any further — had been cataloged and cleaned in the meantime.

Turner also pledged to gather a group of stakeholders who will work with the city to create a cultural district in Freedmen's Town similar to those in places such as Savannah, Georgia, and Wilmington, Delaware, where historic cobblestone streets are a cornerstone of the neighborhood.

"Though there have been many changes in this area, there is no reason in the midst of the new why we cannot preserve the old, the history, and, even in our own way, bring it back to life," Turner said then. "Many of the bricks were damaged, but the soul of the people who live here, that spirit has not been damaged."

Pastor Pervis Hall, who leads Fellowship Church in Freedmen's Town, said that the mayor has so far stuck to his promise — but negligence on the part of city contractors is a separate issue. Hall was one of the first people to make it to the site Saturday after receiving word about the construction. The crew allowed him to view the permit issued by the city — yet Hall said he quickly noticed that the city had specified to the contractor to work only on the sidewalk, not on the bricks, which the City of Houston confirmed in a statement to the *Press*.

The city plans to send out an investigator to assess what went wrong this time and why instructions were not followed. The contractor will also be issued a ticket; the city wrote in its statement. "Moving forward," city spokespeople wrote, "Mayor Turner has ordered that anyone doing work in this area be contacted by the City and informed of what they can and cannot do."

Ellis said that the persistence of Freedmen's Town's original dwellers to work with the city is what has inspired her not to quit fighting for the bricks. While the city refused to help the former slaves and their children pave the foundation of their community, the townspeople finally convinced City Council to at least give them permission to do it on their own, so the story goes. "That's one of the reasons I don't give up," she said. "If they did it, why can't we keep on using their model to work with this group of City Council members, to work to preserve and protect them?"

Neighborhood Founded by Freed Slaves Rallies to Save Its Brick Roads

Allison Meier

January 30, 2015

<https://hyperallergic.com/178604/neighborhood-founded-by-freed-slaves-rallies-to-save-its-brick-roads/>

Century-old brick streets in a historically black neighborhood in Houston, Texas, are under threat of demolition, the culmination of a years-long debate over the preservation of Freedmen's Town.

The planned removal of the bricks was temporarily halted last week by a judge's 14-day restraining order, and at a hearing today another judge ordered the city and preservationists to enter mediation to resolve the dispute.

Houston officials want to remove the bricks to revamp infrastructure for utilities, but the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition argues that there are non-invasive ways to make improvements, without the removal of the bricks. The roots of the neighborhood go back to 1866, when hundreds of freed slaves arrived, constructed their own homes, and paved their own streets without support from the city. Now part of Houston's Fourth Ward, the old brick roads are uneven and much of the old architecture has been torn down.

Janice Evans, spokeswoman for Houston Mayor Annise Parker, told the Courthouse News Service that the restoration project calls for putting the bricks back in place after the repairs and will "leave the streets in a more stable state and better able to handle the load they must carry in the 21st century."

In the same article, however, the preservation group's lawsuit is cited as explaining that the bricks were "uniquely laid in a distinct African pattern known as a Yoruba pattern," therefore a move could disrupt their inherent design, as well as their historical value.

In a statement on its Facebook page, the Freedmen's Town Preservation Coalition calls on the City of Houston "to use preservative rather than restorative methods when revamping historic Andrews and Wilson Streets in Freedman's Town/Fourth Ward, including putting the new infrastructure under sidewalk easements and following UNESCO preservation practices for repairing the streets.

Brick roads across the United States are vanishing, paved over and demolished in the need for sturdier construction. But the bricks are just the tip of a bigger issue in Houston: Freedmen's Town itself is rapidly disappearing. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, when the area was named as a historic district by the National Register of Historic Places in 1984, it had 530 historical structures in a 40-block radius; it now has fewer than 30.

The new construction of gentrification has filled the vacancies. So, even as the roads might seem like a minor issue in the face of the upkeep of utilities, there's a reason they're drawing passionate protests like one in November, where people laid down in the streets: the neighborhood has a physical history that's rapidly disappearing.

