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## **The Power of a Name: Reclaiming Heritage in Freedmen's Town, Houston, Texas**

**By Carol McDavid**

**This paper was presented by Dr. McDavid at the Annual Meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology, January, 2006, Sacramento, California.**

### *Introduction*

**Today, I will approach the idea of the political economy of freedom by looking at how a particular "freedom narrative" was enacted when previously enslaved people created *Freedmantown*, in Houston, Texas, and how this narrative continued as the founders' descendants (lineal and cultural) occupied,, renamed and reclaimed the physical space in which the contemporary *Freedmen's Town* still exists. I will also examine how these processes occurred despite and because of racist public policies and gentrification pressures which have, over the past 67 years, systematically attempted to erase Freedmen's Town from the map of Houston. Finally, I hope to begin to account for the contested, overlapping, multivalent ways that multiple stakeholders, including our archaeology project and its sponsors, have participated in and intersected with this "freedom narrative."**

**Freedmen's Town is an economically disadvantaged but historically rich urban African American neighborhood where, for the past several years, my co-director David Bruner and I have directed a volunteer-based historical archaeology project. We do this under the sponsorship of the Yates Museum, a house museum and preservation organization. We conduct field schools for two local universities, do mitigation and research archaeology on various Freedmen's Town sites, and implement a variety of public archaeology activities. We *hope* to create a collaborative, contextual, reciprocal, mutually empowered project which is *community based*, not just *community placed* (Ervin 2000). At this point the jury is still out as to whether that will be possible.**

### *Historical Overview*

**First, some historical context. After the Civil War, and in some cases before the war ended, Freedmen's Towns -- known by different variants, including *Freedmantown*, *Freedman's Town*, and *Free Man's Town* -- began to appear across the South. Some of these were built as havens for escaped enslaved people, such as the one in Mitchelville, South Carolina. More often they were founded by people immigrating from rural to urban areas after the Civil War. Although I have found examples of several, from Texas to Mississippi to Kansas to South Carolina (perhaps most notably the one in Dallas now being investigated by Maria Franklin, Jim Davidson, Jamie Brandon, and others) to my knowledge Houston's *Freedman's Town* is only remaining freedman's community in the United States which is still occupied by descendants of the original founders. Although endangered, in every sense of the word, *what local residents define* as *Freedman's Town* is still an extant community**

with a strong sense of its own history. It was founded by previously enslaved people immediately after the Civil War [House, ND #1959; Maxwell, 1997 #1996; Wintz, 1990 #1761; Wintz, 2002 #1258]. Some of these founders already lived in Houston, but most flowed in from surrounding plantations, entering the city by way of the old San Felipe Road, and settling in the swampy Buffalo Bayou bottom land just west of central Houston. One historian, Louise Passey Maxwell, has made the case that one of the main reasons they chose this *particular* area to settle was because they were able, for a variety of reasons, to buy property there, and thus to create a black community, free from white surveillance. In any case, by the 1870's, black property owners comprised the majority of residents of Freedmantown (Maxwell 1997: 149).

Freedmantown was located within a larger political and geographical unit called Fourth Ward, which had been established in 1839 and included other black and mixed neighborhoods to the south and east of San Felipe Road, the road which abutted Freedmantown. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Fourth Ward, including Freedmantown, was the center of black cultural, educational, and professional life in Houston, notable for the number of important black institutions it housed (Wintz 1990). It is where Houston's first black lawyers, printers, judges, doctors, ministers and teachers owned homes, lived, and worked, and it became known as the "mother ward" of black Houston (Wintz 2002). The desire for self-determination which drove the creation of the original community -- the freedom to live where one likes, and with whom one wants to live -- still exists today.

In 1938 most of the *houses* in the original Freedmantown settlement disappeared entirely, when, through eminent domain, the city took the land to build a thousand-unit housing project for low income white people called "San Felipe Courts." Despite protests to city hall and the federal government that this project would dislocate hundreds of people from one of the city's most important black neighborhoods, the government went ahead with the project (Beeth and Wintz 1992). But this was not the end of Freedmantown.

According to oral history, what was originally *mapped* as "Freedmantown" (and there is one map with that name), by then, simply expanded to include the area just south and east of the original settlement (House 2005) -- that is, part of the larger Fourth Ward. Although we have not yet been able to track individual people through census and land records, it does seem likely that many of those who were displaced from their original homes in 1938 would simply have moved to the other side of San Felipe, because it was where so many important churches, schools, and businesses had already been built. In any case, over time the original name fell into disuse (Maxwell 1997), and people began referring to the neighborhood as simply "Fourth Ward."

Over the middle part of the 20th century, Fourth Ward became vulnerable to expansion pressures from the central business district (Beeth and Wintz 1992); large parts of it are now under downtown skyscrapers. The part of the Ward that is now known as Freedmen's Town is the area just south of the original settlement, and is now a designated National Historic District. I'd like to tell that story by jumping forward a few years, to examine

contemporary hopes for the area, and to consider how our archaeology project might intersect with those hopes.

*From Freedmantown to the Freedmen's Town Historic District*

When Gladys House, a fifth generation descendant of the community's founders, was 14 years old, in the 1960's, she started to attend meetings having to do with the future of her community. These meetings represented the City of Houston's early efforts to begin "urban renewal" in the inner city. As she put it,

"I would attend the community meetings [and hear] the bad attitude of the elected officials [about my neighborhood] . . . so I began to talk to some of the elders . . . and . . . to do . . . oral interviews . . . . There was nothing in the library, the whole library, on Freedmen's Town, so I began to do more research . . . [to] try and start putting something on paper about the history of Freedmen's Town."

These meetings changed her life, and House began to unearth the history of her neighborhood. She learned about what had happened at San Felipe Courts with the eminent domain action. She learned about the many early black leaders who had built the community. As she was learning, she was watching her historic community slowly being erased. So, she decided to apply for a National Register designation for what she then began referring to as "Freedmen's Town" (I'm not quite sure why she changed the name, but have been told by another community activist that it was because a more "grammatical" name was wanted (Johnson 2005); and that a distinction wanted to be made with the original settlement). Despite continued pressure from the city and from developers to prevent the application from being successful -- including sending people around to threaten elderly residents that the designation would prevent them from ever selling their property -- in January of 1984 the Texas Historical Commission unanimously approved it. At the same time, House established the Freedman's Town Association. One of her earliest and most difficult fights was to get the local press, and others, to refer to the name of the area as "Freedmen's Town", instead of "Fourth Ward." She had to force the city to post any signage at all, even after the designation was made, and was only able to get two official state markers installed a few weeks ago, having had to raise the money for those herself. House knew that claiming the name was a vital part of reclaiming the neighborhood.

At about the same time that House was starting to work on the Register designation, in 1980 a man named Lenwood Johnson moved to the public housing project at San Felipe Courts -- by then they were allowing African Americans to live there. He, too, became interested in the history of the land upon which his home sat. He too decided to organize his community to obtain a National Register listing, this time for San Felipe Courts, which was known by then as Allen Parkway Village. He enlisted the aid of several community professionals, and, despite the resistance of the Housing Authority which owned the project, that designation too was awarded, in 1987. Johnson formed a group called "The Unity," which is now known as the "Free Man's Neighborhood Association." He told me that rather than working under the auspices of the Freedmen's Town Association, his group wanted to unite the people who lived in what was now "Freedmen's Town" and the

citizens of Allen Parkway Village, which was located over the original settlement. Johnson and his group wanted not only to preserve the physical structures in the project -- which were in themselves an important example of early modernist architecture -- but also to implement an ambitious, resident-led management plan. They got a lot of support, even for a time from the Director of HUD, but over time -- this is a very long story, and I cannot do it justice here -- the City and Housing Authority prevailed and in the mid-1990's, most of the project was bulldozed and a new mix of low income and affordable housing was built. The important thing for today's purposes is to point out that acquiring the National Register designation for San Felipe Courts was seen by Johnson and others as a way to, in effect, reclaim the original Freedmantown and to reconnect it to the adjacent area that Gladys House had gotten designated as "Freedmen's Town."

So, in the late 1980's and early 90's, hopes were high within the community that these designations would generate funds to drive a full scale preservation effort. However, the City refused to work with either Johnson or House (in fact exploiting their many differences whenever possible) and refused to lend any support to the grant applications which the designations would have enhanced. A number of internal reports and planning maps created by the Housing Authority and the City during this period have emerged, through the work of various reporters and activists, and it is clear that complete erasure was *always* the stated intent of the developer-friendly city government and the various agencies which colluded with it.

During the same period, pastors of the local churches were claiming their own stakes in the future of Freedmen's Town. Some wanted to preserve the historical character of the community, and allied themselves with House or Johnson. Some wanted to promote their own property development schemes, and destroyed plenty of historic houses in the process. Recently some of the more historically minded have formed the "Pastoral Leadership Coalition," in an effort to preserve several historic churches. Other stakeholders have also emerged, including the residents of the new housing in the community. I recently learned that some of these newcomers were told, by the outsider groups selling them their homes, that that they should avoid associating with the existing (black) community groups, and instead should form their own neighborhood associations. Another stakeholder is the Yates Museum, our sponsor, which is buying property in order to preserve it. Developers and city planners who want to "redevelop" Freedmen's Town into a yuppie village are stakeholders too, and most deny the racism and classism which underpins their efforts -- as one developer said to a newspaper recently, "why shouldn't a black dentist want a nice, new neighborhood too"? And I can't forget that we, the archaeologists, are stakeholders too. We are building our careers on the backs of the community, and this talk is one example of that.

In short, it is within this unstable, contested, strife-filled and sometimes downright nasty political and social terrain that we are trying to do "community archaeology". Over the past year or so, we are a little closer to the goals I stated earlier, and I think that this is for two reasons. First, we now have a better understanding of the community -- of, as Leone Potter and Shackel put it years ago, its "interests and conflicts," and the historical and contemporary dynamics I've just described. The second reason is going to seem almost

heretical, I suspect. We've started to understand that our work having meaning to the community has little to do with how we include them in the work itself -- that is, how we formulate research questions, analyze results, and so on. Sure, it's great when it happens, and we *will* keep trying, but the reality is that people have their own lives to lead. Mutually empowered collaborative research takes a huge amount of time -- for everyone. While we -- the archaeologists -- may be willing to devote these chunks of time, this is because we see this as our "job" (Stoecker 1997). The stakeholders we work with may not have that luxury, or, even, desire.

So, how does this relate back to the topic today? How can the idea of freedom, as expressed in terms of self reliance, self-determination, and independence, intersect with how we do archaeology in Freedmen's town? We can turn to the community's own words for some clues -- here are some excerpts from several interviews with House, Johnson, and other community members:

"[In the past] . . . [the community was] . . . prominent, progressive. And we didn't have to go to the Caucasians for anything; we were self-sustaining . . . . "We could get anything we needed . . . we didn't have to rely on anyone outside, we had our own doctors, lawyers, schools, and stores . . . . People were genuine and did all they could do to help . . . they wanted to get to the finish line together. You talk about a village raising? Well, everybody . . . helped you to raise your children . . . the whole community worked together . . . It was like a big village, and we all supported one another . . . we had a nurturing neighborhood . . . . We just took what we had and shared it . . . it brings joy and happiness, when you can do that. That's what we had in this neighborhood . . . .

When they speak of what they want for their community in the future, the same ideas emerge, in a different form. As House put it:

I [want to] bring back all of the former grassroots residents of Freedmen's Town . . . and all of them would be welcomed back in the community . . . . We would open our businesses up out here again, so that we could be an independent community . . . and our people would be in power . . . this would be a community of being in charge of itself . . . .

These expressions of freedom and independence in Freedmen's Town are the cultural and spiritual descendants of the original spirit which created the original community of Freedmantown. So, not long ago I asked both House and Johnson how they saw our work - - what they saw *it* doing for *them* -- in order to better understand how their freedom narrative could intersect with our archaeology project. It surprised me to learn that they didn't really expect our work to aid *directly* in achieving the goals that they expressed above. Nor did they want to participate in our research. Both expressed enthusiastic support for archaeology, but their enthusiasm was for three things.

First, they want the new information that archaeology can offer about the past -- especially when this information can counter negative ethnic and class stereotypes in the larger Houston community.

Second and equally important, they like the legitimization that our work, done by people with fancy PhD's and so on, confers on their own efforts to convince *others* that their community is worth saving. That is, they use our work strategically, when they see the need. For example, House told me how she had put a report we had given her, about one of her properties we had investigated, on the desk of a city planner, to show that "an authority" thought that her neighborhood was important enough to study, and save. The specific content of our report was less important than the fact that we had done the work and written up the report.

Third, they are enthusiastic (if a bit surprised) about our ongoing efforts to talk to *white* people about African American archaeology, as well my own recent activism when speaking to white audiences about white privilege. While they are happy when we want to involve community people, especially kids, in our project, they are just as happy for us to bring students and volunteers in from the outside, most of whom are white. They know that this will create support for their own agendas, as well as more respect for their neighborhood. It does, too -- I recently accidentally encountered a blog where a previous student said his experience doing archaeology in Freedmen's Town had been "life changing." House, Johnson, and others see clearly that our work can be used for their purposes, both directly and indirectly.

But in terms of being full "research partners," we have found that most of the time, community members are far too busy with their own fights to help us do what they see as our jobs. But they *do* want us to do those jobs. They *do* want us to share what we learn, as long as we do so with respect for existing community narratives, oral history accounts, as well as their own policy and programming goals. The latter has been challenging at times, because our sponsor is a preservation-first organization, and within the community, other needs sometimes trump preservation, and negotiating a pathway between the two has occasionally been difficult. But for the most part community people are happy for us to do, as one put it, "our own thing," in terms of how we organize and conduct archaeological research. They are also pleased to provide interpretation assistance when asked, as well as feedback to insure that we are presenting our findings sensitively. In short, with their help, we are learning to walk a thin line -- to offer our skills, resources and information to them to use for their own agendas, while at the same time pursuing the research questions we are interested in. We are learning that, given transparency and openness, these are not mutually exclusive activities.

### *Political economy and gentrification*

Today I've spoken mostly about local contexts, but larger ones are important to consider briefly as I close. Gentrification and historic preservation efforts in Freedmen's Town, Houston are part of the larger political economy of 21st century Texas. They are connected to national, even global issues surrounding urban policy, historic consciousness, racism, classism, systematic erasure and displacement. In Houston, as is true elsewhere, the proximity of the neighborhood to the downtown area lends urgency to the problem. I am not all sure that one small archaeology project can have a substantive role to play in resisting these larger forces.

But we can take the time and energy to truly understand how the communities we work with construct their own narratives, and how they find meaning in their own histories -- that is, we can be what most of us in this room were trained to be in the first place, anthropologists. How many times have any of us done intensive, systematic ethnographic research since we started to specialize in archaeology? We can use our work to enhance community agendas (in the case described here, to support self-determination and independence) but only if we know what those agendas are, what they sprang from, and what they hope to accomplish. This type of *contemporary context research* should not be something nice that we only do if we happen to have the time and budget for it -- it should be mainstreamed into our projects and seen as a normative and necessary part of archaeological research. The topic raised by today's session planners has allowed me to see the Freedmen's Town community, and its agendas, through a different sort of lens, and my awareness of, and sensitivity to, the community is enhanced because of it.

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