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This Juneteenth, Houston Activists Are Shining a Light on the City's Black History

Digging deep for suppressed history, local activists are creating spaces where visitors can immerse themselves in key elements of the African American story.

BY PHOEBE GIBSON

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Also known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day, [Juneteenth](#) is celebrated in commemoration of June 19, 1865, when the end of slavery was finally proclaimed in Texas by Major General Gordon Granger. Although the Civil War had ended that April, Confederate troops in Texas continued fighting until mid-May, Annette Gordon-Reed recounts in her book, *On Juneteenth*. Following emancipation, newly freed slaves journeyed north from [Galveston](#) to the banks of Houston's Buffalo Bayou, where they established thriving communities where Black businesses and Black families flourished.

What many don't know, however, is how central the [city of Houston](#) became to the history of those communities—as well as what we celebrate on June 19 to this day. That may well change, however, thanks to the initiatives of several preservation-minded groups that work with three significant areas of the city: Freedmen's Town, Emancipation Park, and the neighborhood of Independence Heights, as well as their place on the Emancipation National Historic Trail, a path currently undergoing review for establishment by the National Parks Service that traces the migration of emancipated slaves in Texas.

“People should know that what you know about American culture, a great bit of it came from Houston, and you have no idea because the credit has not been given because the stories have not been told,” says Zion Escobar, executive director of the [Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy](#). “That is what we are doing together.”

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[Heights Redevelopment Council](#), a nonprofit that seeks to strengthen the community through a

combination of preservation and revitalization efforts. “You can visit these spaces where you can see what these people actually did.”

Standing at the intersection of Andrews and Wilson Streets in the heart of Freedmen’s Town feels like stepping back in time, with handcrafted red brick streets dating to the 1800s and historic shotgun homes lining some of the narrow neighborhood roads. From this central spot, once the unofficial town square of the community, landmarks like the [Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum](#) and the J. Vance Lewis House are just steps away.



The state-of-the-art community center at Emancipation Park [Mark Herboth](#)

In all, the Freedmen’s Town Historic District totals about forty blocks, only a portion of the original community that once had upward of 400 Black businesses and in the 1920s was home

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Freedmen's Town east of the interstate. Parishioners still worship in the church's original handmade pews.

Known as the Mother Ward of Black Houston, Freedmen's Town's residents and activists went on to establish community strongholds like [Emancipation Park](#) in the city's Third Ward, and Independence Heights, a neighborhood north of Interstate 610 that was the first Black city to be chartered in Texas. These Black enclaves "affected the entire trajectory of the city of Houston," Escobar says. The legacies of these three spaces are naturally interconnected, as residents "mov[ed] fluidly throughout these communities," she says.

Emancipation Park's 10 acres were purchased and established in 1872 by four of Freedmen's Town's community leaders as a gathering place to host Juneteenth celebrations. Emancipation Park has since transformed from an open field with a single pavilion to an art-filled space featuring architecture from Philip Freelon of the Smithsonian's [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), indoor and outdoors spaces for community building and gathering, and state-of-the-art recreational facilities. A [self-guided audio and GPS tour](#) walks visitors through the park's 19 points of interest.

Despite the challenges wrought by destructive development and gentrification, these former cornerstones of a burgeoning Black community post-Emancipation are experiencing a revival of story and structure as activist groups and leaders retell the story of freedom through the histories of their respective spaces.

In Freedmen's Town, for instance, the weekly Saturday farmers market at 1108 Victor Street channels the communal, giving spirit of the neighborhood's founders (Freedmen's Town's home-grown network of goods and services was the original "Buy Black," Escobar says). Hopping on a bike tour, scheduled every fourth Saturday after the farmers market, will take you across Freedmen's Town to sites like the [African American Library at the Gregory School](#), the first public school for African Americans in Houston; the Freedmen's Town Labyrinth, lined with red bricks from the century-old church that once stood at the site; and Beth Israel Cemetery, the oldest Jewish cemetery in Texas. Self-guided tours are easily done any time, thanks to Freedmen's Town's central location and the historical markers scattered throughout the community. For a deeper dive into the neighborhood, Freedmen's Town resident and activist

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A “Black Towns Matter” mural in Independence Heights, the first city incorporated by African Americans in Texas. [Elizabeth Conley](#)

The story of freedom finds its roots in Freedmen’s Town and the communities born from it, and Juneteenth is “the one time where we’re activating in a visible and coordinated way,” Escobar says. All sites are available to explore year-round—but [Juneteenth offers a robust schedule](#) for virtual and in-person storytelling, learning, and celebration.

For Lucy Bremond of the Emancipation Park Conservancy, which focuses on preservation efforts of the park itself, the story of Juneteenth is one of community and connection. “People right out of slavery used their ingenuity to complement each other, to pool their resources together,” she says. Emancipation Park, one of the oldest parks in Texas, was born after founding community members worked together to raise \$1,000 for the park land. “To me, that is just so profound to think about,” says Bremond.

The current phase of revitalization and engagement has activists digging deep into past records

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“We’re at a stage now where I can say African Americans are now owning their history,” she says. “We’re no longer turning our heads to it, believing what was written in the history books. We’re digging it up, we’re understanding and learning about our ancestors and their contributions,” Debose continues. “We’re not just allowing others to tell our story now—we want to tell our own story.”

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