

PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT

LANDMARK NAME: Emancipation Park

OWNER: City of Houston

APPLICANT: City of Houston Parks and Recreation Department

LOCATION: 3018 Dowling Street, Houston, Texas 77004

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III

HPO FILE NO: 07PL46

DATE ACCEPTED: 07/30/07

HAHC HEARING DATE: 08/22/07

PC HEARING DATE: 08/30/07

SITE INFORMATION:

A ten-acre parcel described as Lot No. 25 in the James S. Holman Survey, within the limits of the City of Houston, Harris County, Texas, on the south side of Buffalo Bayou and bordered by Hutchins Street, Tuam Avenue, Dowling Street, and Elgin Avenue.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation for Emancipation Park, including the Park Buildings.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY:

Emancipation Park, located in Houston's Third Ward, was originally part of the land granted in 1839 to James S. Holman, who had served as Houston's first mayor.

The parcel was purchased in 1872 by a group of black community leaders for the celebration of Juneteenth (the anniversary of the emancipation of African-Americans in Texas on June 19, 1865), and it was donated to the City of Houston in 1916. For more than twenty years, Emancipation Park was the only public park in Houston open to African-Americans. In 1938-39, the Public Works Administration constructed on the park site a recreation center, swimming pool, and bathhouse, designed by prominent Houston architect William Ward Watkin, on the site. The buildings are important examples of PWA construction in Houston and have been used since their construction for after-school and summer programs for children, community meetings, and classes for youth and adults. Although the Juneteenth celebrations declined in popularity during the middle of the twentieth century, for the past several decades, resurgence in interest has led to annual celebrations at Emancipation Park. The Juneteenth Blues Festival, founded in 1974, was originally staged at the park and has frequently opened there.

The Juneteenth holiday — celebrated for the first time almost 150 years ago at Emancipation Park — has spread beyond Texas and is now celebrated throughout the United States and around the world. Following Texas' example, more than 25 U. S. states have now declared Juneteenth to be an official state holiday. As the site for the original Juneteenth celebration and one of the first parks in America purchased by African-Americans specifically for this event, Emancipation Park remains an important symbol of a turning point in state and national history.

Today, Emancipation Park is part of the proposed Row House District redevelopment plan for the Third Ward. It remains a gathering place for local residents and an important symbol of African-American achievement in Houston. The property qualifies for Landmark and Protected Landmark under Criteria 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 for Protected Landmark Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE:

Emancipation Park is located within Houston's Third Ward, on Lot No. 25 in the survey of land originally granted to James S. Holman. According to a title report prepared in 1912, one-third league of land, or approximately three square miles, in Harris County was deeded by the Republic of Texas to Moseley Baker on June 30, 1845. Holman had transferred a certificate for the land to Baker on June 5, 1839. (Texas, still a Republic at the time of the deed, did not become part of the United States of America until December 29, 1845.)

James Sanders Holman was an agent of Augustus C. and John K. Allen (the founders of Houston) and one of the signers of the original city survey in 1836. Holman became an agent for the Houston Town Company and advertised lots as well as a prospective bank. He served as the first mayor of Houston between August and December 1837. He was awarded land by the Republic of Texas (and later by the state) for his service as a soldier¹ in the 1835 siege of Bexar (San Antonio), the first major campaign of the Texas Revolution.²

In 1840, the Houston city charter divided the city into four wards, each of which elected representatives to the city government. The Third Ward occupied the land roughly south of Congress Avenue and east of Main Street. Although Houston discontinued the ward system for political purposes in 1912, the ward names are still used to denote areas within the city. Third Ward and Fourth Ward (adjacent to Third Ward on the western side of Main Street) historically have been residential, commercial, and cultural centers for Houston's African-American population.

During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, when Texas was governed by Spain and then Mexico, African-Americans made up a substantial portion of the state's population. Many of these black Texans had been born within the state or in Mexico, and most were free. They were employed in a variety of trades and professions; some were businessmen, farmers, and ranchers. Through the early 1800s, Texas was also an attractive destination for runaway slaves from Louisiana and for free blacks from the United States, due to the economic opportunities and lesser racial prejudice that they enjoyed under the Spanish and Mexican governments. However, the opening of Texas' borders to colonists from the United States shifted the balance of the black population as settlers arrived, bringing enslaved African-Americans with them. By the late 1820s, free African-Americans were far outnumbered by those enslaved, and slavery had become commonplace in Texas.³

In 1836, African-Americans, along with Mexican prisoners-of-war, cleared the land for Houston's original town site. Black slaves made up a significant portion of the city's residents; by 1860, more than 1000 slaves — 22% of the city's population — lived in Houston. In the plantation areas around Houston, the number of enslaved African-Americans was even higher, accounting for 49% of the total population of Harris County and surrounding counties. As many as 250,000 African-Americans were enslaved in Texas at that point.⁴

Although President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the freeing of slaves was neither encouraged nor enforced in Texas until June 19, 1865. Opposition to emancipation had been a major factor in Texas' secession from the Union in 1861. Although emancipation in Texas had been declared on January 1, 1863, by A. J. Hamilton, the provisional governor installed by President Andrew Johnson, many white Texans refused to give up their slaves. Hamilton himself conceded that most would only

¹ Handbook of Texas Online, s.v., "HOLMAN, JAMES SANDERS," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/HH/fho38.html> (accessed August 3, 2007).

² Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. "BEXAR, SIEGE OF," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/qeb1.html> (accessed August 8, 2007).

³ Cary D. Wintz. "Blacks in Houston Today," Historic Houston website, <http://www.houstonhistory.com/ethnic/history1blacks.htm>, accessed on July 19, 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

do so under threat of military force. In the summer of 1863, Governor Hamilton was contacted by citizens protesting the continuation of slavery and asking for military aid to force abolition. Hamilton subsequently sent word to President Johnson and the commander of the Union army in Texas, requesting assistance.⁵

That help came in the form of General Gordon Granger, who landed at Galveston on June 19, 1865, with a group of Union soldiers. To the citizens of Galveston, Granger read General Order #3, which stated:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain quietly at their present home and work for wages. They are informed they will not be allowed to collect at military posts and that they will not be supported in idleness either there or elsewhere.”⁶

Over the next few months, plantation owners received and read the order to enslaved African-Americans under their control; most plantation owners accepted emancipation, however reluctantly, and a few granted land to their former slaves.

Although African-Americans were encouraged to continue working on the plantations, albeit now for wages, many rushed into nearby cities in search of better work. In Houston, the black population swelled as hundreds of freed slaves poured into the city from the plantations in neighboring counties. The demand for labor on the old plantations resulted in some freedmen returning to the fields, but many African-Americans remained in the city. The black population in Houston more than tripled — from 1,077 to 3,691 between 1860 and 1870 — and soon made up 39.3% of the total population of the city. Although African-Americans lived in all of the city’s wards, the greatest proportion of the black population was concentrated in the Third Ward, in Freedman’s Town and similar neighborhoods in Fourth Ward, and in the Frost Town area of Second Ward.⁷

Perhaps because they tended to live on the outskirts of the city — where land was less expensive, credit was available, and land speculation was commonplace — some black residents were able to purchase land and build homes within only a few months of emancipation. This continued at a rapid rate, and by the early 1880s, about 25% of the black households in the Third and Fourth Wards were owner-occupied; homeowners were usually skilled workers, shopkeepers, small business owners, teachers, and ministers. These neighborhoods were not entirely segregated, and in some cases white residents (often German and Italian immigrants) and African-Americans lived on the same block or across the street from one another.⁸

While individuals were purchasing land on which to build homes, groups within the black community pooled their resources to obtain property for larger purposes, including the construction of schools and churches and the creation of Emancipation Park. The black population throughout Texas began to celebrate the anniversary of Emancipation in Texas in 1866. The holiday, known as “Juneteenth,” became a festive occasion marked by picnics, games, and public speeches.⁹ In Houston, events were organized in different locations until 1872, when members of local churches — led by politician Richard Allen, Reverend Jack Yates of Antioch Baptist Church,

⁵ Billy D. Ledbetter, “White Texans’ Attitudes toward the Political Equality of Negroes, 1865-1870,” *Phylon*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Third Quarter 1979), 253-255.

⁶ “Juneteenth”, About Texas, Texas State Library website, accessed online at <http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ref/abouttx/holidays.html> on July 19, 2007.

⁷ Wintz, “Blacks in Houston Today.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Juneteenth.”

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and Reverend Elias Dibble of Trinity Methodist Episcopal, all former slaves — raised the funds to secure a piece of property specifically for this purpose.¹⁰

Richard Allen first became well known for his skills as a carpenter and builder; after Emancipation, he went on to become a businessman, politician, and community leader. Allen was one of the first African-Americans to be elected to the Texas legislature, in 1869; he went on to hold a variety of political offices at the state and local levels and became the first African-American to run for state office when he was nominated for the office of lieutenant governor in 1878. Allen served as the superintendent of the Sunday school at Antioch Baptist Church in Houston and was a member of the board of directors of Gregory Institute, Houston's first black secondary school. He was also one of the organizers of the Grand Lodge of Prince Hall Masons in Texas, in 1875.¹¹

The Reverend John Henry (“Jack”) Yates became the first full-time pastor of Antioch Baptist Church (a City of Houston Landmark) in 1869. Under his leadership in 1875, the congregation built the red brick church at 500 Clay where it still stands today. The building was designed by Richard Allen. Yates was a proponent of property ownership who encouraged and helped black Houstonians to purchase homes and start businesses. He also was involved in the founding of Bishop College, the first African-American college in Texas, and the Baptist Academy, which became Houston College, the forerunner to Texas Southern University.¹² Yates purchased land for his own home on Andrews Street in Fourth Ward in 1869¹³ and built the house in 1870; the house, a City of Houston Protected Landmark, was moved to Houston’s Heritage Park in 1994 to save it from demolition.¹⁴

Before the Civil War, Reverend Elias Dibble led a congregation of Houston slaves who had been allowed to construct a small church in the rear of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. After their emancipation, Dibble and the members of his congregation transferred to the main Church. In 1866, they purchased land and constructed the Trinity Episcopal Methodist Church.¹⁵ Dibble also was a member of the Board of Commissioners for the Gregory School in 1870.¹⁶

A 10-acre lot upon which Emancipation Park would be established was purchased for \$800 from Sarah J. Wellborn and Marshall C. Wellborn, the heirs of William Wellborn, on July 10, 1872. Genealogy researchers indicate that General William Wellborn had fought in the Creek Indian War in Georgia and Alabama in 1813-14 and moved to Texas following the death of his second wife. Sarah, his third wife, and Marshall, their son, inherited Wellborn’s property after his death in Houston in 1867, at the age of 75.

The important role played by the churches in this acquisition cannot be overlooked. According to Wintz, “During the period of segregation, black churches and black schools were the most significant and influential institutions in the black community. Almost every black Houstonian was an active member of a black church during the period before World War II ... The oldest black church in the city, Trinity Methodist Episcopal, continued to exert a significant influence in the city... Both Catholic and Protestant churches were social and civic centers as well as houses of worship, and black ministers provided much of the leadership for the

¹⁰ Betty T. Chapman, “Emancipation Park: An early site of Juneteenth celebrations,” *Houston Business Journal*, June 13-19, 1997.

¹¹ Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. “ALLEN, RICHARD,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/fal24.html> (accessed July 23, 2007).

¹² Handbook of Texas Online, s.v. “YATES, JOHN HENRY,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/YY/fya7.html> (accessed July 19, 2007).

¹³ Dr. Howard Jones, *The Red Diary: A Chronological History of Black Americans in Houston and Some Neighboring Harris County Communities – 122 Years Later* (Austin, Texas: Nortex Press), 1991, 34.

¹⁴ Jeff Bray, “Moving: Home of Jack Yates added to Heritage Park,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 4, 1994.

¹⁵ Alwyn Barr, “Black Urban Churches on the Southern Frontier, 1865-1900,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (Autumn, 1997), 369.

¹⁶ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 36.

community.”¹⁷ This was certainly true of the men who led the charge to purchase Emancipation Park, and church members continued to be active in the management of the park for decades.

The deed recording the sale (which spells the sellers’ names as “Wellborn”) notes that the land was sold to Richard Allen, Richard Brock, Frank Keeland, John Sessums, Johnson Rice, Taylor Burke, Daniel Rilley, John Graham, and Tillman Bush “in their capacity as trustees of the Colored People of Harris County known as the Festival Association and their successors in office.”

Richard Brock was a successful businessman with a blacksmith shop on Market Square¹⁸; he also was a member of Trinity M. E. Church and served as a city councilman for Fourth Ward.¹⁹ John Sessums was a carpenter and one of the founding members and a lay minister of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church.²⁰ Taylor Burke was a councilman for First Ward and later a Street Commissioner for the city.²¹ John Graham was a blacksmith, and Tillman Bush was a grocer.²² Daniel Riley was one of the founders of Antioch Baptist Church; he negotiated with the German Baptist Church to secure a place to meet and worship before Antioch’s congregation built their own sanctuary.²³

These black Houstonians were not the only African-Americans purchasing land for their celebrations. During the years following Emancipation, African-Americans across Texas and the South collected money to buy property dedicated to Juneteenth celebrations, as well as Emancipation Days held in honor of the original proclamation of January 1863. In 1872, the same year that Houston’s Emancipation Park was established, African-Americans in Nashville, Tennessee, built an amphitheater and fairgrounds for their celebrations; in Fayette County, Tennessee, a “Colored People’s Emancipation Park” was established. In Mexia, Texas, African-Americans held their celebrations in various locations near the town until 1898, when the Nineteenth of June Organization purchased land (now Booker T. Washington Park) on the banks of the Navasota River.²⁴ An Emancipation Park was also established in Austin, Texas, by educator and artist Mattie B. Haywood White, who along with her husband, Thomas J. White, organized the Travis County Emancipation Celebration Association and led a drive to purchase land for the park in East Austin in 1909.²⁵

Houston’s Colored Emancipation Park Association (CEPA) was chartered on April 28, 1883 as a private corporation for the purpose of “celebrat(ing) the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas, for social enjoyment and mutual improvement, and to decorate and preserve the ground used for the purposes above indicated.” Prior to this action, the group had been an unincorporated body of trustees. The charter further stated that the Association was to be managed by seven directors. The first directors, serving a five-year term, were Robert Fairchilds, Josh W. Watson, Samuel J. Leonard, Hannibal Nohles [Noble], Benjamin F. Clark, Henry Franklin, and Daniel Carview [Carvin].²⁶

¹⁷ Cary D. Wintz, “Early Black Political Involvement,” Historic Houston website, <http://www.houstonhistory.com/erhnic/history2blacks.htm> (accessed July 19, 2007).

¹⁸ Chapman.

¹⁹ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 28, 35.

²⁰ National Register of Historic Places listing, Sessums-James House (3802 Spencer).

²¹ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 37, 39.

²² 1873 Houston City Directory.

²³ Dr. Hunter O. Brooks, *Historical Highlights of Antioch Missionary Baptist Church of Christ, Inc., 1866-1976* (Houston: Antioch Baptist Church), 1976, 1.

²⁴ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "JUNETEENTH," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/JJ/lkj1.html> (accessed July 19, 2007).

²⁵ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "WHITE, MATTIE B. HAYWOOD," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/WW/fwh78.html> (accessed August 8, 2007).

²⁶ Legal documents and letter from the “Colored Emancipation Park Association Matters” folder, Harris Masterson III papers, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library.

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Josh W. Watson was the deacon of Antioch Baptist Church and, along with Rev. Jack Yates, one of the founders of Houston College.²⁷ Watson also was a barber, and operated both a barbershop for men and a separate “ladies tonsorial parlor” (essentially, an early beauty salon), which sold “hair goods.”²⁸ Samuel J. Leonard was a laborer²⁹ and had been a delegate to the Republican Convention in 1875, along with Richard Allen and Richard Brock.³⁰ Hannibal Noble was a policeman, Henry Franklin was a porter, and Benjamin Clark worked for a W. E. Thomas.³¹ Robert Fairchilds was a drayman³² (the driver of a low, heavy cart with no sides, used for hauling goods). Daniel Carvin was a brick mason³³ and was elected trustee of Antioch Baptist Church in 1899.³⁴

According to a May 1913 recounting of the CEPA’s history, written by Atkinson, Graham & Atkinson, which represented the Association, “About the beginning of 1893 some question arose as to the right of the trustees under the charter to hold this property, and to settle this question, a suit was brought against the survivors of the old board of trustees to divest the title out of them and vest it in the corporation so chartered. In this cause a decree was duly entered on February 15, 1893.”³⁵

This matter was in fact brought in April 1892 (not “the beginning of 1893”) to the District Court of Harris County over which Judge Harris Masterson was presiding. The claim was brought by attorney W. P. Hamblen on behalf of the Colored Emancipation Park Association and stated that on or before July 10, 1872, Richard Allen, Richard Brock, Frank Keeland, John Sessums, Johnson Rice, Taylor Burke, Daniel Riley, John Graham, and Tillman Bush were the trustees of “an association of colored people known as the Festival Association” which on that date purchased the land “generally since known as the Emancipation grounds.” The claim further states that successors to the original trustees were elected annually; and that around April 28, 1881, “Richard Fairchild, Josh W. Watson, Samuel J. Leonard, Hannibal Nobles, Benjamin F. Clark, Henry Franklin, & Daniel Cowin were elected.” Then, “in the early part of the year 1883, the said Festival Association, for the better management of said premises and better to promote the interests of those for whose benefit the said premises was held, determined to obtain a charter ... under the name of the Colored Emancipation Park Association, wherein the last named parties were made directors to serve during the term of five years and until their successors were elected.” According to the plaintiffs, the Festival Association had surrendered the property to the CEPA, which had “possessed, managed, and controlled” it ever since. The problem to be resolved, as stated in the claim, was that the surviving original trustees (Allen, Brock, Keeland, Sessums, Riley, and Graham) “now refuse to recognize [the CEPA] as successor to said property, although for a long period of time they recognized and treated the several successors of themselves as having full authority in the premises.”³⁶

The claim was heard by the court on February 15, 1893, at which time Judge Masterson ordered that the property was “divested out of the said defendants and vested in the plaintiffs, the Colored Emancipation Park Association,” thus removing “the cloud upon the title of said Block Twenty Five (25).”³⁷

²⁷ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 49-50.

²⁸ 1893 Houston City Directory.

²⁹ 1893 Houston City Directory.

³⁰ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 44.

³¹ 1893 Houston City Directory

³² 1893 Houston City Directory.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Brooks, *Historical Highlights of Antioch Baptist Church*, 3-4.

³⁵ Harris Masterson III papers.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Harris Masterson III papers.

Such wrangling over the ownership of the park grounds might be interpreted as an attempt to wrest control of the land from a few individuals in order to make it available for public enjoyment, but it appears that Emancipation Park was originally a private facility. In a *Houston Chronicle* article in 1975, elderly residents described how, as children, they had sneaked into the park by climbing over a six-foot privacy fence. The interviewees stated that the park was closed to the public except for a few holidays each year (one of those being Juneteenth).³⁸

During the Juneteenth celebrations, which sometimes lasted two or three days, festival-goers enjoyed barbecues, carnival rides, and dancing. Descriptions of the event frequently mentioned the popularity of strawberry-flavored “red soda water” stands. According to former resident Timothy Burney, “A few Negroes had automobiles and they’d take kids around the race track [which circled the outer edge of the park] for a dime.” The Juneteenth event also included parades from downtown Houston back to the park. Burney said that a Children’s Day at the park featured foot and bicycle races, a greased pig contest, and a greased pole-climbing race. “A couple of years a circus wintered here,” Burney said. “Us kids had a good time packing water for the animals and making a little change.”³⁹

In order to raise the funds needed to make the annual payments on the land, the park trustees solicited contributions from the community. They also sold concessions rights to operators of refreshment stands during the Juneteenth celebrations, and rented the land to carnival operators and the aforementioned circus. Although the Association had expected that the land, as a public park and playground, would be exempt from property taxes, the sales of concession rights and the rental of the land resulted in the park being classified as an income-generating property.⁴⁰

It is not clear when taxes were first assessed upon the park; all located records date from 1912-1913. In 1912, the CEPA received a Franchise Tax “receipt” (invoice) from the State of Texas, showing \$12.50 due on June 20; one week later, the Association paid \$322.50 in taxes to the City of Houston. They were apparently unable to pay the rest of their 1912 taxes, in the amount of \$80.26 (plus \$3.20 interest/penalty) due to Harris County, and \$37.54 (plus \$1.51 interest/penalty) due to the State.⁴¹ At some point in 1913, these county and state taxes were paid by the Texas Town Lot & Improvement Company “in Redemption of the following Real Estate, which was reported delinquent, or sold to the state for taxes for the years designated.”⁴²

Perhaps in an attempt to make their case for tax relief, the original CEPA charter was amended on March 27, 1913, to state that the “purposes and object of this corporation shall be for the support of the benevolent, charitable, and educational undertaking of maintaining a park for the use of the members of this Association ... and to keep the same forever for the benefit of the members of said Association.” Appeals to the City of Houston and to Harris County for tax relief were unsuccessful, however, and the trustees were forced to mortgage the property in order to make the annual payments on the land and to pay property taxes.⁴³

On May 19, 1913, the directors of the CEPA met to consider borrowing money against the park property to make improvements “and also for the purpose of employing additional counsel to protect the title thereto.” Officers present at the meeting were H. M. Freeman (president), A. C. Herald (secretary), O. M. Miller (park

³⁸ Pat Reed. “Emancipation Park Here Has ‘Come a Long Way’,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 21, 1975.

³⁹ Reed.

⁴⁰ Willie Parker Chestnutt, “Recreation and the History of its Development Among Negroes in Houston: An Essay submitted to the Faculty of Houston College for Negroes in Candidacy for Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Science,” Houston, Texas, June 1936.

⁴¹ Harris Masterson III papers.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Harris Masterson III papers.

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manager), Grant Bass, H. J. Mitchell (treasurer), D. Adams, and W. N. Miller.⁴⁴ Henry M. Freeman was a porter; Asa C. Herald was a blacksmith; and Offie M. Miller and Grant Bass were in the “express” (messenger or shipping) business.⁴⁵ The group authorized the president and secretary to borrow up to \$5,000 to be secured by the property. The officers were further authorized to “employ the law firm of Atkinson, Graham, & Atkinson, and the law firm of Masterson & Masterson, as additional counsel to aid Messrs. Wood & Harris in defending the title to its said property.”⁴⁶

Harris Masterson was not only a judge and attorney, but also a land speculator who became wealthy through his investments and the discovery of oil on his properties. Masterson established several land corporations with his brother A. R. Masterson and son Neill T. Masterson, including the Texas Town Lot and Improvement Company and the Houston Town Lot and Improvement Company. These companies bought large tracts of land and divided them into smaller lots, which were often sold to what today would be called the middle and lower class people of Houston. Masterson typically financed the sales so that he would regain the land in case of default.⁴⁷

On May 19, 1913, the CEPA borrowed \$3000, in the form of three \$1000 promissory notes, from Judge Masterson. A contract was drawn up and each promissory note was also executed individually. The notes were to be repaid one, two, and three years from the date of issue, with interest accruing at the rate of 10% annually and payable semi-annually, and providing for 10% attorney’s fees.⁴⁸

One week after securing that loan, on May 26, 1913, the CEPA filed a warranty deed conveying all of its property to the Colored People’s Festival and Emancipation Park Association (CPFPEPA). The park land was sold by the CEPA to the CPFPEPA for \$1.00; the CPFPEPA agreed as part of that transaction to pay \$3,000 to Masterson. The CEPA further resolved to dissolve and to file a certificate of dissolution with the Texas Secretary of State. The transaction was recorded by the Harris County clerk of courts on June 3, 1913.⁴⁹ However, the CEPA seems to have continued on as usual, using its original name, and no other mention is made of the CFPEPA.

The tax situation was not the only problem plaguing the CEPA in May 1913. Legal action was taken by a Judge Gibson on behalf of the Wellborn heirs on the grounds that the property “was granted to a perpetuity and the deed was therefore void.” One of the CEPA’s attorneys, H. N. Atkinson, advised Judge Masterson in a letter dated May 7, 1913, that “I do not think there is anything in his contention, for the reason that the doctrine forbidding perpetuities has no application to charities, and it is well settled that an association of this kind which provides a park for public use is in law a charity.”⁵⁰ As the property did not, in fact, revert to the Wellborns, the matter was either dropped or resolved in favor of the CEPA.

In December 1913, an agreement was drawn up between the CEPA and Harris Masterson (now in the capacity of attorney) and the law firm of Atkinson, Graham & Atkinson, all of whom would represent the CEPA in an action against the City of Houston “to resist the payment of said taxes and to have said property declared free from taxation.” If the action had been successful, the CEPA would have paid the attorneys one half of the amount of taxes due for each year for ten years, a total of \$2500, divided equally between Masterson and the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ 1915 Houston City Directory.

⁴⁶ Harris Masterson III papers.

⁴⁷ Wray, Beth. Excerpt from “The Masterson Family Papers,” *The Flyleaf*, Vol. 24, No. 3, October 1974. Friends of Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Texas. Accessed online through Texas Archival Resources Online, “Guide to the Harris Masterson I papers, 1860-1942, bulk 1880-1920”, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/ricewrc/00134/rice-00134p1.html> on July 19, 2007.

⁴⁸ Legal documents furnished by the Friends of Emancipation Park.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Harris Masterson III papers.

other law firm.⁵¹ Because the existing copy of this agreement was not signed, it is not clear whether the claim was ever filed. If it was filed, it was not successful.

On May 18, 1914, the day before payment was due on the first \$1000 promissory note, Harris Masterson transferred the note to J. B. Bell for the sum of \$1050.⁵² As a result, the CEPA was now in debt to Bell. This was not the first instance of Bell's acting as a benefactor. J. B. Bell was a realtor, a deacon and the treasurer of Antioch Baptist Church. He had been instrumental in securing funding for the construction of Houston's Colored Carnegie Library in 1911, and personally loaned the library association \$1000 to purchase the land for the library, on Robin Street in Fourth Ward, across from Antioch Baptist Church. He was also the treasurer of the first library board. Bell was well-connected, locally and nationally; he was a personal acquaintance of Houston Mayor H. Baldwin Rice, and he had accompanied Booker T. Washington to a meeting at Andrew Carnegie's home in 1910, as a member of a delegation from the National Negro Business League.⁵³ In 1912, when Washington came to Houston to address the National Black Convention, he lodged in Bell's home.⁵⁴

The CEPA was also unable to pay the second promissory note to Masterson. On May 18, 1915, the day before that note was due, the directors of the Association signed a promissory note borrowing \$1000 from Mollie A. (Mary) Baker, an African-American widow. The promissory note states that the loan was requested from Mrs. Baker in order to pay a note due to Harris Masterson on May 19, 1915.⁵⁵

The directors of the CEPA signing the Baker note were, like their predecessors, prominent figures in business, politics, and the church. Charles N. Love (CEPA president) was the editor of *The Houston Independent*, the first black newspaper in the city, and later became the publisher of the *Texas Freeman* newspaper when it merged with the *Independent* in 1931.⁵⁶ William E. Miller (CEPA secretary) served as the principal of Gregory Elementary School (a City of Houston Protected Landmark) and Booker T. Washington High School and was a deacon of Antioch Baptist Church. John (or Jerome) W. Hubert, a blacksmith,⁵⁷ was an officer in the U. S. Armed Forces during World War I.⁵⁸ James L. Sweatt, a clerk, is probably best remembered as the father of Heman M. Sweatt, who between 1946 and 1950 successfully sued the University of Texas to gain admission for African-Americans to the university's law school.⁵⁹ Frank A. Martinier (or Martiniere) was a cook and Harris Burton was a grocer. Alexander Johnson was a laborer,⁶⁰ as well as a politician and community leader. Duke Crawford, Jr. was a charter member of the Texas chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1912 and its president in 1933; he was also the president of the Houston Colored Chamber of Commerce in 1937-38.⁶¹ Several of these men went on to figure prominently in the history of the Houston Negro Hospital (later called Riverside General Hospital; City of Houston Landmark); in 1926, when the all-white board of directors resigned and became an Advisory Committee, the first African-American board of directors included Hubert (president), Johnson (financial secretary), and Miller (treasurer).⁶²

⁵¹ Harris Masterson III papers.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cheryl Knott Malone, "Autonomy and Accommodation: Houston's Colored Carnegie Library, 1907-1922," *Libraries & Culture*, Vol. 34, No. 2, Spring 1999.

⁵⁴ Brooks, *Historical Highlights of Antioch Baptist Church*, 5.

⁵⁵ Legal documents provided by Friends of Emancipation Park.

⁵⁶ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 54, 90, 101

⁵⁷ 1915 Houston City Directory.

⁵⁸ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 72.

⁵⁹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "SWEATT, HEMAN MARION" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/fsw23.html> (accessed August 9, 2007)

⁶⁰ 1915 Houston City Directory.

⁶¹ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 67, 77, 106, 132.

⁶² Jones, *The Red Diary*, 89.

Finally, on November 30, 1915, a loan in the amount of \$500, payable in six months with 8% interest, was made from the J. B. Farthing Lumber Co. to the Colored Emancipation Park Association. The lumber company was owned by John B. Farthing, who also was the president of Farwood Realty.⁶³ The note was secured by the Association's 10 acre lot of land; it includes the legal description and further describes the property as being "known as the 'Emancipation Park'."

With the exception of the note transferred to Bell, records show that all of these loans were repaid within a two-week period in Spring 1916. A quit-claim deed executed by Lane, Wolters & Storey, Attorneys at Law, was issued on March 29, 1916, indicating that the loan from the lumber company had been paid in full. One day later, on March 30, a quit-claim deed was signed, indicating full payment of the loan from Mollie Baker. Finally, on April 10, 1916, Masterson filed a quit-claim deed with the Harris County clerk of courts in indicating that the remaining note from 1913 had been paid in full.⁶⁴

The Red Diary, a history of black Americans in Houston, notes that the Emancipation Park was donated to the City of Houston in 1916.⁶⁵ According to a 1936 essay by Houston College for Negroes student, Willie Parker Chestnutt,⁶⁶ the Park Board and an Advisory Committee appealed to city officials to take possession of the park, "at which time the mortgage was lifted." It is unclear whether the City paid these debts as part of its acquisition of the park. An editorial in the *Houston Post* on April 13, 1916, noted that the city had taken possession of the park and that it was in need of (and deserving of) the city's attention and beautification. Chestnutt's report indicated that the park was to be managed by a board of African-American citizens: J. B. Grigsby (chairman); Q. B. Watson, Ed Jones, and Sidney L. Hoggatt.

James B. Grigsby was a founder (in 1908), and later the president, of the American Mutual Benefit Association of Houston, one of several organizations that provided insurance and other assistance to African-Americans in the early 1900s. In 1929, he co-founded the Gibraltar Life Insurance Company of Houston. Grigsby was also active politically; he ran for public office, after black Republicans withdrew from the Harris County Republican Party's convention in 1920, as a member of the "Black and Tan" Republicans. In 1928, he filed suit in U. S. District Court against the local Democratic party, which only permitted white citizens to vote in its primary elections; the claim — and a subsequent motion to appeal — were denied. When Grigsby filed to run for the Houston School Board, in 1939, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on his front lawn.⁶⁷ Q. B. Watson was a barber, and Ed Jones may have been a porter.⁶⁸ Sidney L. Hoggatt would go on to be named "Man of the Year" by the Houston Colored Chamber of Commerce in 1947. In 1952, he was elected as its president, an office he held for three years.⁶⁹

The City of Houston had first formed a Board of Park Commissioners in 1910, under the administration of Mayor H. Baldwin Rice, "to advise the mayor and city commissioners on the acquisition, maintenance, and development of park property." In 1912, the Board commissioned landscape architect and city planner Arthur Coleman Comey to evaluate Houston's existing greenspace and "make recommendations for the sort of park and parkways system which ought to be developed." Comey, who had studied landscape architecture at Harvard under Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and was one of the first formally trained landscape architects in the United States, produced a report titled "Houston, Tentative Plans for its Development." This was Houston's first city plan and included recommendations for developing parks and boulevards along the bayous, as well as a major

⁶³ 1915 Houston City Directory.

⁶⁴ Legal documents provided by Friends of Emancipation Park.

⁶⁵ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 72.

⁶⁶ Chestnutt.

⁶⁷ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 64, 81, 82, 94-95, 99, 135.

⁶⁸ 1915 Houston City Directory.

⁶⁹ Jones, *The Red Diary*, 156, 174, 176.

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

park, which came to fruition as Hermann Park in 1914. The Board of Park Commissioners then hired George E. Kessler to plan the development of Hermann Park and other city projects.⁷⁰ Kessler had lived in Dallas as a child and had offices there and in St. Louis, Missouri.⁷¹ He was a prolific landscape architect and planner whose career included 230 known projects in 23 states and 46 communities; he was an advisor to numerous park boards and city planning commissions prior to his death in 1923.⁷²

The first department of Public Parks was created in 1916. In 1919, this was supplemented by a community Recreation Bureau, headed by Miss Corrinne Fonde. The Recreation Bureau was merged with the Houston Service Bureau, another community organization, in 1921, becoming the Houston Recreation and Community Service Association, with Fonde remaining on as executive secretary.⁷³

The City of Houston officially segregated parks in 1922, and for several decades following its donation to the city, Emancipation Park was the only public park in Houston open to African-Americans. The second such space, John T. Finnigan Park, was donated to the city of Houston by suffragist and art patron Annette Finnigan in honor of her father. Annette Finnigan organized the first women's suffrage movement in Texas between 1904 and 1916. She later traveled extensively abroad, bringing home donations of art objects for the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and illuminated manuscripts for the Houston Public Library. Shortly before her death in 1940, she gave the city 18 acres of land with the intention that it would be provided for the use of African-Americans.⁷⁴

As the only "colored park" in Houston before 1940, Emancipation Park quickly became a well-used public space; it was the site for band concerts, movies, and parades. The first De-Ro-Loc Carnival (originally called the De-Ro-Loc No-Tsu-Oh Carnival — "Colored Houston" spelled backward) was held there in December 1909. The De-Ro-Loc Carnival was started by an association between John A. Matthews, William Jones, Van H. McKinney, and M. H. Broyles after the Houston Fruit, Flower, and Vegetable Festival stopped admitting African-Americans.⁷⁵ That festival, also known as the "No-Tsu-Oh" Carnival, was an annual week-long Mardi Gras-style event designed to stimulate commerce and tourism; it was celebrated for about 15 years, beginning in 1899.⁷⁶ Activities at the De-Ro-Loc Carnival included a Children's Day, Galveston Day, and College Day, as well as a Wild West show, a Plantation show, something called "Dreamland," and a football game between Prairie View and Bishop Colleges. The highlight of the festivities was the unmasking of the carnival's King La-Yol E-Civ-Res (Loyal Service).⁷⁷

In the early 1920s, the park was open daily from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. and offered playground equipment and games, a Sunday story hour, as well as classes for girls in handcrafts, such as rag rug making and pine-needle basket weaving.⁷⁸ Daily activities included croquet, volleyball, indoor baseball, and tennis. The children were

⁷⁰ Stephen Fox, "Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park," published online at <http://www.hermannpark.org>.

⁷¹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "KESSLER, GEORGE" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/KK/fke44.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁷² George Kessler Society website, <http://www.georgekessler.org/> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁷³ "History of the Parks Department," City of Houston website, <http://www.houstontx.gov/parks/HistoryDept2.html> (accessed August 10, 2007).

⁷⁴ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "FINNIGAN, ANNETTE," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/FF/ffi35.html> (accessed August 9, 2007).

⁷⁵ "Negro Carnival Opens Monday," *Houston Chronicle*, November 16, 1913; "Fun Town," November 18, 1913.

⁷⁶ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v., "NO-TSU-OH," <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/NN/lnl.html> (accessed July 25, 2007).

⁷⁷ "Negro Carnival Opens Monday," *Houston Chronicle*, November 16, 1913; "Fun Town," November 18, 1913.

⁷⁸ "Emancipation Park Playground Mecca for City Children," *Houston Informer*, date unknown, 1922.

supervised by volunteers from the neighborhood churches, a school teacher, and teenaged members of the neighborhood Camp Fire Girls.⁷⁹

Juneteenth continued to be celebrated, with the event organized by a committee of citizens. Honorary officers for the event were elected and included a grand president, grand secretary, grand chaplain, grand marshal, orator of the day, and grand vice presidents from each of the wards, as well as Independence Heights, Harrisburg, and the city at large. Committees were formed and committee chairs elected in the areas of Arrangement, Parade, Decoration, Program, Amusements, and Publicity. The 1921 parade included entries solicited from “all business houses in the city employing any number of colored people;” in addition, “every colored automobile owner (was) asked to enter his car in the parade.”⁸⁰

That spring, the newspaper lamented that “only a few more weeks and the Juneteenth celebration will be upon us ... thus far no plans have been announced ... are we to have no fitting celebration at Emancipation Park on the nineteenth of June?” By May 21, however, a community meeting had been scheduled by the park’s board of trustees, including J. W. Hubert (president), J. B. Grigsby (vice president), W. E. Jones (park manager), J. D. Ryan (treasurer), and W. E. Miller (secretary).⁸¹ The June 4 and 11 editions of the newspaper noted that the Juneteenth event that year would be “a mammoth celebration” and free to the public, unlike “other occasions (when) there has been a fee charged for admission.” A “grand street pageant” was to be held in the morning. In addition, the newspaper reported that “free dinner and plenty of drinks will be provided for all ex-slaves ... Free band concerts throughout the day (will be performed) by the famous Masonic Band. There will be no money solicited for this grand affair. All expenses will be paid by the park board.”⁸²

The use of the park seems to have become a controversial issue a few years later. On June 30, 1923, *Houston Informer* publisher C. F. Richardson wrote in a front-page editorial, “Since the board of directors of Emancipation Park was so bitterly opposed to the late Juneteenth celebration, and since all the park trustees were absent on Emancipation Day, excepting Dave Burney [secretary of the park board of directors] who had to be there or get a can tied to him, why did not this great, grand and glorious board take charge of the park and conduct the Independence Day celebration on July 4th?” Apparently, the park board had rented the park on July Fourth for a private event (for a fee of \$62.50) “on a day that the entire citizenry should use and enjoy the park like they did on the Juneteenth.” The five-member park board now included two previous members and three “recent city hall appointees,” and while Richardson admits that the new board members were “trying to inaugurate so many new and novel ideas regarding celebrations at our park,” he indicates that the City Park Department was also attempting to exercise greater control of the park than it previously had.

A second article from the same edition of the paper, “Where Is That \$500, Henk?,” recounts the events of the May 14 planning meeting attended by the new park manager, Henderson “Henk” Lethbridge. During the meeting, Lethbridge had made motions to celebrate the holiday at Emancipation Park, to eliminate the parade from that year’s events (due to lack of funds and time to organize it), and to nominate himself as the “grand president” for the day, stating that “while such procedure is unusual, I want some honors!” Lethbridge is described as being “the chief stumbling block in the way of the appropriation from the city council for music for the celebration,” having promised to obtain \$500 to cover both the music and the barbecue. Minutes from the meeting indicate that the new board chair was James Matthews and another member was James B. Anderson, who had purchased “the dance hall privilege” (the right to run that operation at the park). Concession privileges

⁷⁹ “Young Negroes Enjoy Their Playgrounds,” undated newspaper article, “An Historical Scrap-Book, Vol. 1, 1919-1923,” Houston Recreation and Community Services Association, Department of Recreation and Community Service, City of Houston.

⁸⁰ “Colored Citizens Hold Big 19th Mass Meeting; On Time and Harmonious,” *Houston Informer*, June 17, 1919.

⁸¹ “19th Mass Meeting For Monday Night,” *Houston Informer*, May 28, 1921.

⁸² “Colored Citizens Lay Plans for Juneteenth Celebration; Big Street Pageant Planned,” *Houston Informer*, June 4, 1921; and “Emancipation Day Will Be Celebrated In Grand Style By Houston and Its Environs June 20,” *Houston Informer*, June 11, 1921.

were sold first through competitive bidding, with any left-over stands and privileges sold on a first-come, first-served basis.

No matter what had happened during the planning phase, the Juneteenth event that year was widely promoted and included a program of music by the Masonic Band, games, speeches, and afternoon and evening dances with music by the South Texas Jazzing Devils, as evidenced in a full-page newspaper ad placed in the *Informer* on June 9, 1923.

Matthews continued as the park board president in 1924, but in 1925 he was replaced by the previous vice-president of the board, James B. Grigsby, the insurance agent. A public notice in the *Informer* on June 6 of that year lists the concession privileges to be sold to the highest bidder: three restaurants, three ice cream stands, two soda water stands, two root beer stands, two hamburger stands, three peanut and popcorn stands, two candy and chewing gum stands, one “smoke” stand, one novelty stand, and two watermelon stands. Bids for the operation of the dance pavilion were handled separately.

In 1925, a *Houston Chronicle* article listed Ellie Walls Mims as the playground director for Emancipation Park, having completed the playground director’s school conducted by the Houston Recreation and Community Service Association. That year, 48 white students and 35 African-Americans had enrolled in the school, where they received lectures and hands-on training in “playground technique” including drama, music, and athletics. “All of the students ... (were) of the best type of leaders and have had previous training ... the greater part of them are teachers or college students.” Sidney Millard was the “boy’s worker” at the park.⁸³

A women’s Park Improvement Club was active in the 1930s; the club assisted with park beautification and installed equipment, including drinking fountains, park benches, basketball hoops and backboards, and a refreshment stand (which was later converted into storage for playground equipment). The club volunteered at carnivals and events, organized a community Christmas Tree for less fortunate children, and planted flowers along sidewalks and driveways.⁸⁴

A recreation center, swimming pool, and bathhouse (changing rooms and showers) at Emancipation Park were constructed in 1938-39 as part of the Public Works Administration (PWA). The PWA was established during the Great Depression as a means to increase employment and revive American industry. Bridges, dams, airports, schools, and hospitals were among the more than 34,000 construction projects completed between 1933 and 1939, at a cost of over \$6 billion.⁸⁵ In Texas, a large proportion of the PWA’s funds were spent to construct dams on the Colorado River in and around Austin, the state’s capitol.⁸⁶ Houston’s the best-known PWA building is City Hall (a Protected City Landmark), constructed in 1934; other significant projects included the Houston Municipal Airport terminal (also a Protected City Landmark, and now the Air Terminal Museum at William H. Hobby Airport).

Located inside the Emancipation Park recreation building, in the center of what probably was the original exterior wall of the gymnasium, is a plaque which reads:

⁸³ “Eleven New Playgrounds to Be Opened,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 14, 1925.

⁸⁴ Festival programs located in “An Historical Scrap-Book, Vol. 1, 1919-1923”, Houston Recreation and Community Services Association, Department of Recreation and Community Service, City of Houston.

⁸⁵ The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers. “Public Works Administration.” *Teaching Eleanor Roosevelt*, ed. by Allida Black, June Hopkins, et. al. (Hyde Park, New York: Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site, 2003), <http://www.nps.gov/archive/elro/glossary/pwa.htm> (accessed August 14, 2007).

⁸⁶ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “AUSTIN, TEXAS,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/hda3.html> (accessed July 23, 2007).

Federal Works Agency
 Public Works Administration
 John M. Carmody
 Public Works Administrator
 Franklin D. Roosevelt
 President of the United States
 Emancipation Park
 Club House

1939

The 1940 Juneteenth celebration was a two-day event planned by the Houston Colored Recreation Council and the Emancipation Park Improvement Club. The first evening included a “musical and patriotic program” with performances by the Coleridge Taylor Choir, the Emancipation Park Band, and “a massed municipal negro choir.” Speakers included Robert T. Holland, the “supervisor of negro playgrounds,” as well as men and women from the community. The next day began with “a series of Boy Scout activities” followed by a dedication of the first completed units at Cuney Homes, “the USHA low-cost housing project for negroes.” During the afternoon, Emancipation Park was the setting for contests, games, and sporting events, followed by speeches at the park auditorium and emancipation programs honoring and veterans of the Spanish-American and World Wars. The day ended with a barbecue, dancing, and swimming.⁸⁷

In 1942, the WPA publication “Houston: A History and Guide” noted that many black Houstonians were — despite the obstacles presented by segregation — doing well for themselves. “More businesses are owned and operated by Negroes here than in any other Southern city. Local Negroes have more than 100 churches, 28 public schools and a college, three newspapers, a Young Men’s Christian Association and a Young Women’s Christian Association, three branch libraries, a hospital, and an active chamber of commerce. Emancipation Park, 2900-3200 Dowling Street, and John T. Finnigan Park, on Lockwood Drive, are for their use. In 1941 it was estimated that a larger number of Negroes owned houses in Houston than in any other city in the South, and that they had \$7,000,000 on deposit in local banks.”⁸⁸

The Juneteenth holiday declined in popularity during World War II. Interest briefly revived in 1950 but fell off again as the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum. For the past several decades, since the early 1970s, resurgence in interest has led to annual Juneteenth celebrations at Emancipation Park. The Juneteenth Blues Festival, founded in 1974, was originally staged at the park and has frequently opened there. In the early days of the festival, featured musicians included Third Ward natives and nationally known bandleaders, Milt Larkin and Arnett Cobb, both of whom rose to prominence at the Eldorado Ballroom, across Elgin Street from the park. The majority of festival events are now held at the Miller Outdoor Theater in Herrmann Park.⁸⁹

In 1976, the Association for Study of Afro-American Life and History donated and placed a plaque, dedicated to Reverend Jack Yates, inside the entrance to the community center. It reads, “In memory of Reverend Jack Yates – Leader, Clergyman, First Pastor Antioch Baptist Church – October 1976 – Erected by the Association for Study of Afro-American Life and History In Cooperation with The Amoco Foundation, Inc.”

⁸⁷ “Big Juneteenth Celebration is Scheduled Here,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 9, 1940; and “Plans are Made for Juneteenth Programs Here,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1940.

⁸⁸ *Houston: A History and Guide*, compiled by workers of the Writers Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas (Houston: The Anson Jones Press), 1942, 172-173.

⁸⁹ Various Juneteenth Blues Festival programs.

Today, classes for youth and adults, community meetings, and summer and after-school programs for children are held at the community center. The park remains a gathering place for local residents and a popular spot for picnics and family reunions. It is being supported by the newly-established Friends of Emancipation Park organization, which has been created to improve the park's facilities, establish a public art program, and secure local, state, and national recognition for the site.

The park is also an integral part of a proposed redevelopment plan in the Third Ward. Located nearby on Holman Street, the non-profit organization Project Row Houses, Inc. has spearheaded redevelopment efforts in the neighborhood. Founded in 1993 by artist Rick Lowe, Project Row Houses promotes arts and cultural education, historic preservation, and community development. It has since established the Row House Community Development Corporation. In 2002, Project Row Houses worked with the City of Houston Planning and Development Department to create the Row House District redevelopment plan for Third Ward. Building upon the 1995 Greater Third Ward Community Plan, the proposed Row House District would address development opportunities, infrastructure, parking issues, and environmental concerns while ensuring that the historic architectural and cultural qualities of the area are retained. Emancipation Park is located squarely at the center of the proposed district.

For the past 141 years, Emancipation Park has been the site of community and family celebrations for African-Americans in Houston. The Juneteenth holiday has spread beyond Texas and is now celebrated throughout the United States and around the world. Following Texas' example, more than 25 U. S. states have now declared Juneteenth to be an official state holiday. As the site for the original Juneteenth celebration and one of the first parks in America purchased by African-Americans specifically for this event, Emancipation Park remains an important symbol of a turning point in state and national history.

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY:

The first description of the park grounds comes from elderly former residents, who describe the park at the turn of the century as being enclosed by a six-foot-high privacy fence and encircled by a race track, with the remainder of the property containing two dance floors, a stable, and a beer tavern.⁹⁰

In 1917, plans were drawn up by the office of the Houston City Architect for a shelter house to be placed in the park. A drawing dated January 16, 1917, shows an open-sided structure with an asphalt-shingled hipped roof supported by 26 brick piers around its perimeter; a wooden railing of 2" x 4" lumber bounded each long side. It is unclear when this was constructed; on June 11, 1921, a "new pavilion" with a "swell dancing floor" at the park was mentioned in a Boston Shoe Store advertisement in the *Houston Informer*.

A 1927 site plan produced by the Park Department shows presumably the same building, located in the center of the park and described as a "Shelter House/Dance Hall". This plan also indicates a baseball backstop, swings, bandstand, "Giant Stride" and "Gymn" playground equipment, a seesaw, a flagpole, a lighted dirt tennis court, and men's and women's toilets. A park keeper's house was located in the corner of the park at Tuam Avenue and Hutchins Street, both of which are described as "unimproved." Lights were located throughout the park, as well as nearly 100 post oak trees, the diameters of which are indicated as measuring between 10 and 40 inches. A paved sidewalk ran the length of the park parallel to Dowling Street, which was paved; the park was bisected by Shell Drive, which led to and around the shelter house, parallel to Elgin Street, which at that time was a gravel thoroughfare.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Reed.

⁹¹ Hare & Hare collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

In 1938-39, the shelter house was replaced by a recreation center, swimming pool, and bathhouse, designed by the prolific Houston architect William Ward Watkin, which were built on the site by the Work Projects Administration.

According to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, Watkin studied architecture with Paul Philippe Cret at the University of Pennsylvania, graduating in 1908. He was sent to Houston in August 1910 by the Boston architectural firm of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson to oversee the construction of the first buildings at the Rice Institute (now Rice University). The president of the Rice Institute, Edgar Lovett, offered Watkin a position in the architecture department at Rice as an instructor, initially of architectural engineering; he was promoted to assistant professor in 1915 and full professor in 1922 and was head of the department of architecture until his death in 1952. While at Rice, Watkin oversaw the construction of many campus buildings, and he personally designed the Faculty Club, Rice Stadium, and the Navy ROTC building. In addition, Watkin maintained his own architectural practice; among his most notable commissions in Houston were Trinity Church (1919, in association with Cram & Ferguson), the Houston Public Library (1926; City of Houston Protected Landmark), and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts (1924 and 1926). His practice varied widely; Watkin specialized in church architecture and built a number of chapels and churches between 1926 and 1947. He also designed houses for private clients, including Howard Hughes. Watkin received a number of commissions for structures in Houston parks: in addition to the buildings at Emancipation Park, he designed the Miller Memorial Outdoor Theater (1921; demolished) on the site in Hermann Park that had been designated by George Kessler for a concert pavilion.⁹² Watkin also designed park activities centers for Root Square (1937), Hennessey Park (1938), and Proctor Plaza (1938; now within the City's Norhill Historic District); and the Garden Center in Hermann Park (1938-1940).

The recreation center is located on the centerline of the park, facing Dowling Street. It is described by the Parks Department in a 1947 facilities inventory as having a gymnasium, a stage for dramatic and musical events, game rooms, a pre-school room, and a snack bar. The gymnasium is noted as being used for dances and social gatherings. In a 1956 park facilities inventory, the building is described as a “gymnasium type clubhouse building” with an auditorium, club room, stage, game room, pre-school room, library room, and kitchen. The building was used at that time for “dramatics, dances, music, arts & crafts, social and community gatherings.”

The Parks and Recreation Department differentiated between a “Club House Type Center” and the “older Gymnasium Type Center”; the recreation center at Emancipation Park falls into the latter category. According to an undated brochure, “(t)he Club House Type Center has a large room with a seating capacity of from 100 to 150. This is used for meetings, dances, classes, and in conjunction with the immediate park area. Many of these Centers have stages – although in some cases this is merely a permanent platform provided. All Centers have a kitchen and storage room.” In contrast, “the older Gymnasium Type Centers [such as Emancipation Park’s recreation center] (have) a basketball size gymnasium. In addition, a majority of these contain a kitchen, a stage, storage room, coat room, office, and a small room that will hold two table tennis tables. The newer Gymnasium Type Center has an open air gym (roof only) with the remainder of the building enclosed and air conditioned. The enclosed portion contains Arts and Crafts, Social, Kitchen, Office and rest room sections.” The brochure further states that “(a)ll Recreation Center Buildings include rest rooms and several contain separate dressing rooms. Rest Rooms in the newer buildings also have outside entrances, so that they may be used when the main building is closed.” (This is not the case at Emancipation Park, where the restrooms can be accessed only from the interior.)

The Emancipation Park recreation center is a T-shaped, solid brick masonry building laid predominantly in common bond. Black sans-serif lettering attached to the front of the building reads “Emancipation Park

⁹² Fox, “Big Park, Little Plans: A History of Hermann Park.”

Community Center” with the street number “3018.” It currently contains meeting/classroom spaces, a kitchen, and restrooms (which collectively make up the horizontal bar of the T) and a gymnasium and stage (the vertical stroke of the T). The exterior is currently painted in two colors: cream on the upper structure and tan below. The main entrance appears originally to have had five openings (approximately five feet wide and 12-13 feet tall) separated by slightly inset brick piers (approximately two feet wide). The location of these openings and piers is evident at the foundation, and one can see where brick masonry was added to create a continuous wall surface in front of the piers. A concrete lintel, apparently supported by the brick piers, is visible and extends across the entire width of the five openings. Where the two outermost openings were once located, the current entrances are inset approximately 12 inches from the exterior wall surface. Each entrance consists of a single steel entry door, with no window or peephole, and with plywood on either side covering what may be sidelights. The door and plywood are painted dark green. Above and on the same vertical plane as the doorway, brick masonry fills the remainder of the original opening. A contemporary electric light fixture, centered horizontally near the upper edge of the brick infill, illuminates each doorway and the ground in front of it. One contemporary window, consisting of a single light in a one-piece metal frame set into the brick wall, is located in what would have been the original center opening, approximately four feet above the ground. All walls are topped with a metal cap, painted cream to match the exterior paint.

Inside the building, the brick piers are visible. Plywood covers the sidelight areas on the interior as well, and is painted tan to match the interior walls.

Steel doors, leading into the gymnasium, are located on the original exterior wall of the gymnasium in approximately the same position as the current exterior doors. The area between the original exterior wall and the current one is now comprised of a lobby area and an office for the park facility manager. The office space is enclosed on one side by the original exterior wall and on the other three sides by an approximately four foot high brick wall with approximately 2' x 3' glass panes set in steel frames atop the brick. A sheetrocked soffit above the glass completes the wall. It is unclear when this enclosure was constructed; the masonry work seems to be of the same general quality as both the original exterior and the infill. With the exception of the brick piers, the interior walls of the lobby area are covered with sheetrock and painted; a drop ceiling of acoustical tile, suspended by a metal grid, contains contemporary fluorescent light fixtures.

On the southeast side of the lobby, a large room contains weight-lifting equipment. A door on the northwest side of this room opens to the exterior. On the other side of the lobby, a smaller classroom (with a chair rail approximately two feet above the finished floor) opens to the lobby as well as to a short hallway that leads from the lobby to the kitchen and restrooms. A fifth room off this hallway contains mechanical systems and appears to be the only space in the building (with the exception of the gymnasium) without drop ceilings. The ceiling in this small room appears to be about 12 feet high. This wing of the building has no exterior door.

The gymnasium contains a basketball court with approximately three to four feet of space surrounding the court on all four sides. This space has no windows. The wooden gym floor, constructed with approximately two-inch maple strip flooring, appears to be original. A stage originally occupied the northwest end of the building; at some point in the past, the opening facing the gymnasium was filled in with brick masonry; the concrete deck (stage floor) and the outline of the original opening are visible. The deck is approximately two to three feet above the finished gym floor. Behind that wall, the room that would have been the backstage area is slightly more narrow than the gym; the concrete deck appears to continue through to the exterior wall, approximately 15-20 feet behind the original interior opening. This enclosed space is accessed through two steel single-entry doors on either side of the original stage opening; it is now used for storage and houses the heating and air conditioning systems. A second set of steel single-entry doors open from the gymnasium to the outside. These doors are also located on the stage wall, one on either side between the backstage doors and the corners of the room. From the backstage area, an exterior door opens to the northeast side of the building at the level of the concrete deck; a set of four concrete stairs with a metal pipe railing lead to the ground.

The northwest end of the building appears to have been an exterior stage; it faces what was originally an outdoor amphitheater. The center section of this portion of the building, which contains the backstage area described above, is as high as the flat roof of the gymnasium. It is flanked by two smaller, shorter sections which — along with the concrete stage deck and the wall below it — protrude about two feet forward of the upper façade of the tall section. The northwest wall of each short section is decorated with a vertical panel of brickwork featuring a lattice pattern in relief. These short sections are as tall as the original exterior stage opening; the horizontal line created by the cap topping the wall of each short section is continued across the façade of the taller section by what appears to be a lintel. Above the lintel, the brick façade is dominated by three decorative elements. First, a slightly protruding brick border encloses six square blocks, approximately 18" x 18", laid in alternating horizontal and vertical common bond and flush with the rest of the wall. Immediately adjacent to either side of the panel, and equal in height to it, are two cement blocks featuring the Comedy and Tragedy theater masks in a stylized Native American design that appears to have been pressed or carved into the cement. Between the lintel above and the stage deck below, and flush with the upper façade, common bond brick fills what seems to have been the exterior stage opening. Approximately two feet of the stage deck is currently exposed. The possibility that this was somehow open to the exterior is reinforced by a 1938 landscape plan for the park, which shows the building footprint and indicates that this part of the exterior wall was open.

Metal downspouts with rectangular heads are attached to the exterior of the building at various locations. There are no exterior gutters. The sky is visible through rough rectangular holes cut through the downspout heads, enabling the observer to discern that the flat gymnasium roof is about four feet below the top of the parapet. This unusually high parapet features a large frieze in which the brick is laid in a large basket-weave pattern. The remainder of the exterior is fairly unadorned, with the exception of a large mural, painted on wood and attached to the southwest side of the building (outside the smaller classroom). The mural depicts artist/educator John Biggers and Reverend Jack Yates, as well as symbols of sports and emancipation. A small plaque reads, "Children at Emancipation Park and artist Rickey Donato created this mural in the summer of 2001 through a collaboration between the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. This project received generous funding from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, the Junior League of Houston, Inc., and Citicorp Private Bank."

The swimming pool and bathhouse are located to the northeast of the recreation center. The pool is long and narrow and today features a water slide. The bathhouse is a one-story solid brick masonry building with a flat roof, painted a tan color. The walls are topped with a metal cap painted red. It is divided into three sections. The main entrance is in the center of the southwest side of the building; shower rooms for men and women flank this on either side. The center section features a parapet that extends approximately 18" above the flat roof of the shower rooms. The entrance and the parapet above it protrude slightly, compared to the approximately four horizontal feet of wall space to the left and right of the entrance. The entrance is comprised of four slender brick columns that support what appears to be a shallow concrete slab overhang, creating a somewhat covered entrance. The three sections of wall between these columns contain two large screened window openings, covered with permanently fixed louvers, on either side of a steel single-entry door. The window openings and door are set into brick masonry walls that appear to be original. A contemporary electric light is located high above the door; red sans-serif letters spell the words "Swimming Pool" and the street number "3018" on the wall between the light and the door. Similar, but larger, letters are attached to the parapet above the concrete overhang and spell "Emancipation Park."

The shower rooms have ribbon-type window openings; panels of fixed metal louvers, covered with metal security screens, alternate with plywood panels reinforced with wooden frames and vertical ribs. The right side of the building forms an L around the pool deck. A single-entry doorway and large window-type opening (now covered with plywood), as well as a bracket of the size and type used to support an air-conditioning unit,

indicate the possibility that a concession stand may have been located on the northwest end of the building at one time.

The aforementioned landscape plan, by Hare & Hare of Kansas City, Missouri, was rendered in pencil on tissue paper. It was originally drawn on May 31, 1938, and revised on October 17 of the same year. This “General Plan for the Development of Emancipation Park” shows many of the same mature trees that appear on the 1927 site plan. More than 100 additional trees were to be planted around the entire perimeter of the park, around the main park entrance near the recreation center and bathhouse, and around the recreation center and the outdoor theater. Sidewalks or pathways would border all four sides of the park and bisect the greenspace in each direction to provide access to the center of the park from all four streets. On this plan, tennis courts are shown in approximately their current location, near the corner of Tuam and Hutchins, with space for “possible future expansion” indicated. A combination volleyball/basketball court and softball field are shown on the Tuam Avenue side of the park. The other half of the park was to be divided into a children’s playground and picnic grounds.

The nationally renowned firm of Hare & Hare designed landscapes for many parks and city properties in their role as consultants to Houston’s City Planning Commission and Board of Park Commissioners, following George Kessler’s death in 1923 and continuing to 1960. The firm also served as park planning consultants to Dallas, Fort Worth, and Oklahoma City and received commissions for projects across the country. In Texas, some of their most notable work included landscape planning for college campuses, including the University of Houston and the University of Texas at Austin. The firm was founded by Sidney J. Hare and his son, S. Herbert Hare. Like Comey, Herbert Hare had studied with Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., at Harvard; he led the firm’s work in Houston.⁹³ Hare & Hare’s project coordinator for Hermann Park, landscape architect Ralph Ellifrit, became the Houston Planning Department’s first director in 1940 and served the city in that capacity until 1962.

The 1947 park facilities inventory describes the outdoor facilities at the park as including a swimming pool and bath house, two lighted softball diamonds, tennis courts, and play apparatus; in 1956, the list included the swimming pool and bathhouse, two lighted ball fields with backstop and bleachers, “tennis courts (lighting under construction)”, playground equipment, picnic area with tables and benches, and volleyball and basketball courts.

The Parks Department continued to make improvements to Emancipation Park following World War II. A *Houston Chronicle* article in September 1948 titled, “\$850,000 Being Spent on Parks, Playgrounds Here” notes that new lighted softball diamonds and bleachers had been installed at Emancipation Park and five other parks, at a total cost of \$100,000. (Emancipation Park was the only site to receive two diamonds.) The same article notes that “because they needed it worst, the first building improvements went to Finnigan Park for negroes ... (including a) \$90,000 clubhouse building and a \$130,000 swimming pool and bath house.”

Improvements to the park seem to have been undertaken about every twelve years since the mid-1970s. The park was re-dedicated in July 1975, following the completion of \$300,000 in improvements that included additions to the recreation center. A plaque in the lobby of the Emancipation Park Community Center building commemorates “Improvements to Emancipation Park, City of Houston, 1975” — a Model Cities project during the administration of Mayor Fred Hofheinz. At the time, George Lanier was the Director of Parks and E. B. Cape was the Director of Public Works. The renovations were carried out by Marmon & Mok Associates, Architect; Marmon Mok & Green, Inc., Landscape Architect; and Larvin Enterprises, Inc., Contractor.

⁹³ Cydney Millstein, “History of the Landscape Architecture Firm of Hare and Hare,” WHMC-KC, University of Missouri. Accessed online at <http://www.umkc.edu/whmckc/Hare/Hare%20history.htm> on August 10, 2007.

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A general improvement project for Emancipation Park was announced in 1987, as part of a larger renovation plan for eight parks.⁹⁴ In 1998, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department's "Parks to Standards Program" resulted in extensive renovations at the park. The program was an outgrowth of a comprehensive master plan designed to improve facilities at existing city parks and to substantially increase the amount of parkland to meet national standards. Emancipation Park currently includes lighted tennis courts, a lighted basketball court, a large combined softball/football field, a picnic area, exercise equipment, and a playground, in addition to the community center and swimming pool.

The information and sources provided for this application have been researched and compiled by Randy Pace and Steph McDougal, Summer Intern, Planning and Development Department, City of Houston, under the supervision of Randy Pace, Historic Preservation Officer, 713/837-7796 or Randy.Pace@cityofhouston.net.

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⁹⁴ "City Council OKs Renovation of Eight Parks," *Houston Chronicle*, May 6, 1987.

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APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR PROTECTED LANDMARK DESIGNATION:

Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation of a Protected Landmark.

(a) The HAHC and the commission, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider three or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the Protected Landmark designation. If the HAHC reviews an application for designation of a Protected Landmark initiated after the designation of the Landmark, the HAHC shall review the basis for its initial recommendation for designation and may recommend designation of the landmark as a protected landmark unless the property owner elects to designate and if the landmark has met at least (3) three of the criteria of Section 33-224 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance (HPO) at the time of its designation or, based upon additional information considered by the HAHC, the landmark then meets at least (3) three of criteria of Section 33-224 of the HPO, as follows:

S	NA	S - satisfies	D - does not satisfy	NA - not applicable
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	(6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation;		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	(7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;		

- (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.

OR

- The property was constructed before 1905;

OR

- The property was listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or designated as a “contributing structure” in an historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places;

OR

- The property was designated as a State of Texas Recorded Texas Historical Landmark.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Houston Planning Commission accept the recommendation of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission and recommend to City Council the Landmark and Protected Landmark Designation of Emancipation Park at 3018 Dowling Street.

SITE LOCATION MAP
EMANCIPATION PARK
3018 DOWLING STREET
NOT TO SCALE

