

CITY OF HOUSTON

Archaeological & Historical Commission

Planning and Development Department

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE DESIGNATION REPORT

SITE NAME: Frost Town Archaeological Site - 80 Spruce Street

OWNER: Art and Environmental Architecture, Inc.

APPLICANT: Kirk Farris

LOCATION: 80 Spruce Street – Frost Town

30-DAY HEARING NOTICE: N/A

AGENDA ITEM: III

HPO FILE NO: 09AS1

DATE ACCEPTED: Sept-09-09

HAHC HEARING: Sept-24-09

PC HEARING: Oct-1-09

SITE INFORMATION

Lot 5 (being .1284 acres situated at the northwest corner of), Block F, Frost Town Subdivision, SSBB, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site is a vacant tract of land located within the former Frost Town site and has been designated as a State of Texas Archaeological Site.

TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED: Archaeological Site Designation

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

Frost Town was first settled in 1836 and would become the first residential suburb of the City of Houston, then-Capitol of the new Republic of Texas. Frost Town was located in a bend on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou approximately ½ mile downriver from the present site of downtown Houston. The 15-acre site was purchased from Augustus and John Allen by Jonathan Benson Frost, a Tennessee native and a recent veteran of the Texas Revolution, who paid \$1,500 (\$100 per acre) for the land in April 1837. Frost built a house and blacksmith shop on the property, but died shortly after of cholera. His brother, Samuel M. Frost subdivided the 15 acres into eight blocks of 12 lots each, and began to sell lots on July 4, 1838. By 1839, nearly 70% of the lots were sold. Two lots were set aside for a cemetery, where Jonathan Frost himself was buried.

Frost Town's early development mimics that of nearby Houston's with one notable exception. Whereas downtown Houston first developed as a mix of residences and businesses, Frost Town was primarily residential in character. Early property owners in Frost Town provide an important glimpse into the social and business life of early Houston, and included Michael DeChaumes, a French-born architect who was responsible for some of the earliest architect-designed buildings in Houston; Peter Gabel, a prominent local German-American brewer; and William Settegast, another German-American Houstonian who was a real estate partner of George Hermann.

By late 1840s, there were approx 75 families living in Frost Town. Many of the early families were German immigrants, although the makeup of the neighborhood was not exclusively German. By the late 1800s, railroad lines criss-crossed the area, and the land surrounding Frost Town was used increasingly for industrial purposes. By the 1930s, the ethnic makeup of the neighborhood had shifted to Mexican-American, and the neighborhood came to be known as Barrio Del Alacran. In the 1950s, Schrimp's Field on the east edge of Frost Town was redeveloped as the Clayton Homes public housing project, and the Elysian Street Viaduct and Highway 59 were constructed through the area. In the 1990s, the last

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remaining house in Frost Town was demolished and the former Frost Town streets were removed. Today, James Bute Park marks the former community.

Several archaeological studies of Frost Town have been performed at different locations over the past 18 years. Archaeological testing in 2004 uncovered archaeological remains at 80 Spruce Street dating to Frost Town's 19th century occupation. The site's location is also favorable for Pre-historic occupation due to its relatively high elevation, good drainage and close proximity to flowing water, although no archaeological testing has confirmed artifacts from the Pre-historic period. A Texas State Archaeological Landmark designation is currently pending for Frost Town, including the 80 Spruce Street location.

The Frost Town Archaeological Site at 80 Spruce Street represents a tangible link to the earliest phase of Houston's development and meets Criteria 1, 3, 7, and 8 for City of Houston Archaeological Site Designation.

HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE

The first known Anglo settlers to southeast Texas were members of Austin's Old 300 who first settled in Brazoria County in the 1820's. This group of settlers, which actually numbered 297, was encouraged to come to Texas at the urging of entrepreneur Stephen F. Austin, who was working with the then government of Mexico. The Mexican government encouraged Austin to promote Texas by recruiting potential new residents to colonize Texas contingent on meeting certain requirements as set forth by the Mexican government. Austin was expected to recruit the settlers and oversee all administrative duties associated with their arrival in the Mexican territory of Texas as prescribed under Spanish law. One of the earliest accounts of Anglo settlement in the Houston vicinity includes Jane Wilkins and family, and James Phelps, who arrived in 1822. The brothers John and Augustus Allen acknowledged the fact that there were already settlers in the general vicinity at the time of their arrival in 1836 although they do not offer specifics as to exact locations. Prior to and to some extent concurrent with the Anglo settlement, the area was inhabited by Native American groups which were comprised of members of the Atakapa, Akokisa, and Karankawa groups with the Alabama and Coushatta tribes located to the northeast, which used the bayous adjacent to Frost Town.

In August 1836 the brothers Augustus and John Allen, who had first arrived in Texas five years earlier, arranged to purchase 6,000 acres of land abutting Buffalo Bayou which had been a part of the original John Austin survey. In November of 1836, the land was surveyed and the original town plat for Houston was created with its peculiar grid pattern oriented approximately 33 degrees off of true North with Main Street forming the spine for the new town site. The earliest accounts of Houston tell of newly cleared streets and blocks, which after rains, were muddy and further impeded by the presence of tree stumps in the right of way.

Houston, in its ambitious first years, was not well prepared for the influx of new residents. The Allens had promoted the new town site, cleared and surveyed the land, and sold parcels with little attention paid to how the city would develop beyond that point. With little development regulation established or adopted, aside from the reserves set aside for a courthouse and market house, Houston developed early on with a mix of land uses. It was not uncommon in the first decade (1836-1846) to see both residences and businesses located beside one another. However, as Houston matured and the value of downtown

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real estate increased, the land became too valuable for residential use and was increasingly used for commercial purposes.

The first generation buildings erected by newcomers to the vicinity were emergency accommodations. Merchants and residents alike were forced to live and conduct business in whatever structure would provide shelter from the elements. First generation structures were usually the result of readily available materials or that which had been transported with the settlers. Vast timberlands were located nearby, but there were few if any sawmills to process the lumber. Pit sawing, a method of dressing lumber involving two men and the use of a two man saw, was available, but was slow and laborious and overall output was minimal. As a result of the deficiency of readily available building materials, accommodations were often tents and simple log dwellings. Tents could be erected until more substantial log dwellings could be built. Eventually these log buildings gave way to wood frame buildings constructed of dressed lumber. These were eventually replaced with masonry structures due to the frequency of fires which decimated Houston's first generation wood frame buildings.

Frost Town is generally acknowledged as the first residential addition to the newly created City of Houston, but was located approximately one half of a mile down river. As the fledgling township of Houston struggled with drainage, sanitation, and other infrastructure problems, Frost Town existed more like a small town near Houston or as an early suburb despite its very close proximity to downtown Houston. Although initially located downstream from Houston, Frost Town remained relatively isolated due to its location on a high peninsula which was surrounded by Buffalo Bayou on three sides. The community was laid out as a rectangular grid with its narrow end parallel to Buffalo Bayou on the north and with its long sides parallel with the sides of the peninsula on which it was located. The major thoroughfare through the Frost Town community was Spruce Street which was the main North-South axis. Other streets in the neighborhood included Pine, Arch, Race, and Vine. The main road connecting Frost Town to Houston was Commerce Street located to the south of the neighborhood.

Jonathan Benson Frost settled the 15 acres, which would come to be known as Frost Town in 1836 while fresh from service in the Texan army during the Texas Revolution. His closest neighbor, and abutting property owner, William Hodge, was also a veteran of the Texas Revolution. Frost was a Tennessee native born circa 1802. His father, John M. Frost, was a veteran of the war of 1812 under the command of General Andrew Jackson, and Jonathan Frost's grandfather had seen military service during the Revolutionary War on the loyalist side. Like many Tennesseans, Frost had come to Texas because of the lure of adventure offered through participation in the Texas Revolution as well as for the healthy reward of land promised to any volunteers who would enlist in the Texas Army for a period of one year or more. Frost enlisted with the Nacogdoches Mounted Volunteers on April 11, 1836 and was honorably discharged on July 12, 1836. Frost returned briefly to Tennessee, but was back in Texas by late 1836 or early 1837. Frost constructed a new house for himself on the eventual Frost Town Site which he had purchased, but without any formal contract or exchange of money. The sale of the land to Frost from the Allen Brothers did not occur until April of 1837, at which time the Allen brothers had begun to finalize sales which had taken place during the first year of Houston's existence. Frost purchased fifteen acres in total at the rate of \$100 per acre.

Frost died from cholera on September 16, 1837, only five months after purchasing his land and establishing both a home for himself and a blacksmith shop. The Frost Estate was referred to Probate

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Court that same year. Frost's surviving brother Samuel M. Frost was appointed as administrator of the estate of his deceased brother and was charged with the task of paying off the debts incurred by the deceased, which included the recent purchase of the land. The brother had the fifteen acre tract surveyed and then sold it to his other surviving brother James Frost, who sold the land back to Samuel Frost on the same day.

In June 1838 Samuel Frost platted the fifteen acres into residential lots. The Frost Town site was subdivided into 8 blocks. Each block was lettered A-H and contained 12 lots. Each block featured 10 lots measuring 50'x100' and two lots which measured 50'x125'. The northeast block "H", located closest to Buffalo Bayou, contained two lots set aside for cemetery purposes, which was the final resting place of Jonathan Benson Frost, the community's founder. The lots were priced accordingly at either \$25 or \$35 depending on size. The first sale was made to Henry Trott who purchased three lots. Land sales were apparently brisk with nearly two thirds of the lots being sold within the first year.

Although the majority of lots in Frost Town had been sold early on, the total number of families residing in Frost Town and their respective dwellings was comparatively low. This could have been the result of land speculation or simply the result of purchasers waiting to construct dwellings as funds permitted. A decade later, during the late 1840's there were approximately 75 families who resided in Frost Town. By this time, the make up of the neighborhood had begun to change and reflected a majority of residents claiming German ancestry which likely gave rise to the nickname "Germantown". The name Germantown has persisted and has caused much confusion over the following 150 years. A "Germantown" subdivision was eventually platted on the north side of Buffalo Bayou near White Oak Bayou in the late 19th century, although much of it was lost to expansion of Interstate 45.

The influx of Germans to Frost Town in the late 1840s mirrored similar settlement patterns elsewhere in Houston and in Texas. According to the 1860 Harris County census, the Second Ward, in which Frost Town was located, had a total population of 906 inhabitants. Of those inhabitants, 270 were born in one of the pre-unification German kingdoms. Several German families resided in Frost Town, but the overall make up of the neighborhood was not exclusively German.

The Joseph Settegast Home, formerly located at Maple and Gable Streets on the edge of Frost Town, was a notable Frost Town area landmark. Its two stories and double galleried porches reflected the popular style of architecture for those who could afford such luxuries in the third quarter of the 19th century. The home survived well into the 20th century and was eventually chosen as the site for the Rusk Settlement School circa 1909. The Rusk Settlement was operated by the Houston Settlement Association, which was comprised of women banded together for the common goal of providing "educational, industrial, social, and friendly aid to all those within our reach". At this site the group operated a kindergarten and small branch library, trained women in home making skills, and sponsored Houston's first Girl Scout troop.

The Frost Town community began to change rapidly during the first two decades of the 20th century. At this point in Frost Town history, many of the original families had moved to more prestigious parts of Houston as their fortunes improved. The housing stock in Frost Town was older and the community in general had been passed over by progress. Furthermore, the land surrounding Frost Town was used more increasingly for industrial purposes. In 1910 and 1911, construction commenced on the new Union

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Station train terminal (now the location of Minute Maid Field). Consequentially, the residential neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity, including a portion of Houston's upscale Quality Hill neighborhood, were demolished to make way for the massive new rail yard and terminal building. Other industries that moved into the immediate vicinity included Hartwell's Iron works and the Gable Street electric generating plant. The aforementioned industrial development served to once again isolate Frost Town.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 also played a deciding role in the future of Frost Town. The revolution had spurred large numbers of Mexican immigrants to move from their home country to Texas and eventually to Houston. Because of the rise of industrialization in Houston and specifically in the East End near Frost Town, many new immigrants settled in this area. The population shift was so pronounced that the Roman Catholic Diocese established Our Lady of Guadalupe Church within a short distance from Frost Town, in 2nd Ward, in 1912 to serve the spiritual needs of the new inhabitants. This was the first Catholic Church in the Houston area which held mass in Spanish. By the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s Frost Town was predominantly Hispanic in its cultural make up. Frost Town eventually shed its early moniker as the original families had since died or moved away. The area came to be known by its most recent residents as "El Alacran" or the Scorpion. Schrimpf's Alley, (aka "Shrimp's Alley") located on the eastern edge of the Frost Town site, became the new focal point of the community and by the 1950's the area was considered to be one of Houston's most underserved neighborhoods. Frost Town is no longer a neighborhood as the last house was demolished in the early 1990's and the former Frost Town streets were removed. Schrimpf's Field, located to the eastern boundary of the neighborhood, was redeveloped in the early 1950s as Clayton Homes, a Public Housing project of 296 residential units.

SITE DESCRIPTION AND DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

The Frost Town community site is now vacant land. The last of the Frost Town houses was demolished by the Texas Department of Transportation during a freeway widening project on US Highway 59 in the 1990s. The Frost Town site has been impacted by two modern elevated thoroughfares. The community was first impacted by the construction of the Galveston Houston and Henderson Railway which bisected the community's southwest corner in 1861 as the South was desperate to transport goods from inland to the seaports to help finance the war effort. The Frost Town community was further divided in 1955 and 1956 as the Crawford-Elysian overpass was constructed to provide a link from downtown to the North side of Buffalo Bayou in the 5th Ward. An elevated overpass of US Highway 59 was constructed on the East side of the Frost Town site in 1953. Furthermore, erosion to the north end of the Frost Town site has occurred due to Buffalo Bayou. This has resulted in the loss of Lots 7 and 8 of the Frost Town cemetery in Block H, which has completely eroded into Buffalo Bayou. The remainder of the Frost Town site remains relatively intact, including the subject site, which represents one of the last minimally impacted sites of archaeological deposits. As such, potential areas of archaeological deposits in the Frost Town site, which have been minimally impacted by major construction projects, remains small. According to a synopsis of archaeological field studies performed at the Frost Town site, written by J.K. Wagner and Co.,

"The current site of the Frost Town Subdivision has been capped with fill since 1984 with minimal intrusions into the site aside from the construction of the Viaduct. Limited archeological testing by JKW&CO and more substantial testing by Prewitt and Associates, Inc. indicates that the potential

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- (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;
- (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;
- (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;
- (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;
- (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;
- (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.

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 Archaeological Site Designation of the Frost Town Archaeological Site at 80 Spruce Street.

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SITE LOCATION MAP 80 SPRUCE STREET NOT TO SCALE

