Urban Archaeology and the Pressures of Gentrification: Claiming, Naming, and Negotiating “Freedom” in Freedmen’s Town, Houston

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ABSTRACT

Freedmen’s Town, Houston, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an historically significant historic district in 1984. As the directors and staff of the Yates Community Archaeology Project (YCAP), we have been conducting archeological and public archeological research in Freedmen’s Town for several years. Our research is situated within competing definitions of what constitutes “community development” in Houston, as used by preservationists, descendants, developers, new residents, the larger community, politicians, and archeologists. In this urban context, property rights compete with the rights of indigenous grassroots residents to determine what certain neighborhoods are and will become, and archeology is deployed by various stakeholders in different ways. We discuss our early findings from both above-ground archeology and public archeology research, as they have emerged within the context of this constantly shifting political, social, and physical scene.

INTRODUCTION

Freedmen’s Town, Houston, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an historically significant historic district in 1984. As the directors and staff of the Yates Community Archaeology Project (YCAP), we have been conducting archeological and public archeological research in Freedmen’s Town for several years. Our research is situated within the competing definitions of what constitutes “community development” in Houston, as used by preservationists, descendants, developers, new residents, the larger community, politicians, and archeologists. In this urban context, property rights compete with the rights of indigenous residents to determine what certain neighborhoods are and will become, and archeology is deployed by various stakeholders in different ways. Our primary sponsor is the Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum (RBHY), a 501(c)3 preservation group working to preserve the few remaining historic properties in the rapidly gentrifying historic landscape of Freedmen’s Town. We conduct field schools for several local universities and colleges, do mitigation and research archeology on various Freedmen’s Town sites, and implement a variety of public archeology activities. Over time, we hope to create a collaborative, contextual, reciprocal, and mutually empowered project that is community based, not just community placed (Ervin 2000). At this point the jury is still out as to whether that will be possible.

In this article, we will examine how the name “Freedmen’s Town” has been embraced for past and present political and social purposes, and recognize how the act of naming is in itself a politically meaningful act by the community’s residents (McDavid 2006b; vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006). This recognition, and the re-claiming of the community’s historic name, was brought about by local descendants, politicians, and historical professionals, who not only wanted to honor the recently emancipated people who built the community (soon after the Civil War), but also hoped that the designation would provide one means for preserving (and restoring) the historic character of the neighborhood. This analysis is based on contemporary ethnographic research in the community, and is an example of public archeology as well as ethnographic archeology (Castaneda and Matthews 2008; Little and Shackel 2007; Shackel and Chambers 2004). After this, we will examine one aspect of the archeology of Freedman’s Town, the historic brick streets (Bruner et al. 2007).
THE POWER OF A NAME: RECLAIMING HERITAGE IN FREEDMEN’S TOWN, HOUSTON, TEXAS

This discussion (written primarily by the senior author) examines how a particular “freedom narrative” was enacted when previously enslaved people created Freedmantown, in Houston, Texas, and how this narrative continued as the founders’ descendants (lineal and cultural) occupied, renamed, and reclaimed the physical space in which the contemporary Freedmen’s Town still exists. Furthermore, this section examines how these processes occurred despite and because of racist public policies and gentrification pressures that have, over the past 67 years, systematically attempted to erase Freedmen’s Town from the map of Houston. Finally, the hope is to begin to account for the contested, overlapping, and multivalent ways that multiple stakeholders, including our archeology project and its sponsors, have participated in and intersected with this “freedom narrative.”

Historical Overview

After the Civil War, and in some cases before the war ended, Freedmen’s Towns—known by different variants, including Freedmantown, Freedman’s Town, and Free Man’s Town—began to appear across the South. Some of these were built as havens for escaped enslaved people, such as the one in Mitchelville, South Carolina. More often they were founded by people immigrating from rural to urban areas after the Civil War. Although I have found examples of several, from Texas to Mississippi to Kansas to South Carolina (perhaps most notably the one in Dallas; see Davidson [2004]), to my knowledge Houston’s Freedman’s Town is the only remaining freedman’s community in the United States that is still occupied by descendants of the original founders (House 2005). Although endangered, in every sense of the word, what local residents define as Freedman’s Town is still an extant community with a strong sense of its own history. It was founded by previously enslaved people immediately after the Civil War (House 2005; Maxwell 1997; Wintz 1990, 2002). Some of these founders already lived in Houston, but most flowed in from surrounding plantations, entering the city by way of the old San Felipe Road, and settling in the swampy Buffalo Bayou bottom land just west of central Houston. One historian, Louise Passey Maxwell, has made the case that one of the main reasons they chose this particular area to settle was because they were able, for a variety of reasons, to buy property there, and thus to create a black community, free from white surveillance. In any case, by the 1870s, black property owners comprised the majority of residents of Freedmantown (Maxwell 1997:149).

Freedmantown was located within a larger political and geographical unit called Fourth Ward, which had been established in 1839 and included other black and mixed neighborhoods to the south and east of San Felipe Road, the road which abutted Freedmantown. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries Fourth Ward, including Freedmantown, was the center of black cultural, educational, and professional life in Houston, notable for the number of important black institutions it housed (Wintz 1990). It is where Houston’s first black lawyers, printers, judges, doctors, ministers, and teachers owned homes, lived, and worked, and it became known as the “mother ward” of black Houston (Wintz 2002). The desire for self-determination that drove the creation of the original community—the freedom to live where one likes, and with whom one wants to live—still exists today.

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

According to oral history, what was originally mapped as “Freedmantown” (we have found one historic map with that name) had, by the time of the eminent domain action, expanded to include the area just south and east of the original settlement (House 2005); that is, part of the larger political unit known as Fourth Ward. Although we have not yet been able to track individual people through census and land records (an effort to do this is underway by local residents; personal communication, G. House, 2008), it does seem likely that many of those who were displaced from their original homes in 1938 simply moved to the other side of San Felipe, because this area was where many important churches, schools, and businesses had already been built. In
any case, over time the original name fell into disuse (Maxwell 1997), and people began referring to the neighborhood simply as “Fourth Ward.”

Over the middle part of the 20th century, Fourth Ward became vulnerable to expansion pressures from the central business district (Beeth and Wintz 1992); large parts of it are now under downtown skyscrapers. The part of the Ward that comprises the National Historic District of Freedmen’s Town is the area just south of the original settlement. This transition can best be told by jumping forward a few years, to examine contemporary hopes for the area, and to consider how our archeology project might intersect with those hopes.

FROM FREEDMANTOWN TO THE FREEDMEN’S TOWN HISTORIC DISTRICT

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

I would attend the community meetings [and hear] the bad attitude of the elected officials [about my neighborhood]…so I began to talk to some of the elders…and…to do…oral interviews…There was nothing in the library, the whole library, on Freedmen’s Town, so I began to do more research…[to] try and start putting something on paper about the history of Freedmen’s Town (House 2005).

These meetings changed her life, and House began to unearth the history of her neighborhood. She learned about what had happened at San Felipe Courts with the eminent domain action. She learned about the many early black leaders who had built the community. As she was learning, she was watching her historic community slowly being erased. So, she decided to apply for a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) designation for what she then referred to as “Freedmen’s Town” (it is uncertain exactly why the name was changed, because these applicants did have access to the original map. However, I have been told by another community activist that it was because a more “grammatical” name was wanted [Johnson 2005], and House has said that she and others wanted to distinguish it from the original settlement). Despite continued pressure from the city and from developers to prevent the application from being successful (including sending people around to threaten elderly residents that the designation would prevent them from ever selling their property), in January 1984 the Texas Historical Commission unanimously approved it. At the same time, House established the Freedman’s Town Association (note the different spelling; House has also said that this was intentional, and meant to distinguish the Association from the neighborhood). After the designation was approved, one of her earliest and most difficult fights was to get the local press, and others, to refer to the name of the area as “Freedmen’s Town,” instead of “Fourth Ward.” She had to force the city to post any signage at all, even after the designation was made, and was only able to get two official state markers installed about two years ago, having had to raise the money for those herself. House knew that claiming the name was a vital part of reclaiming the neighborhood, just as “the act of de-naming is a form of political annihilation” (vom Bruck and Bodenhorn 2006:1).

At about the same time that House was starting to work on the NRHP designation, in 1980 a man named Lenwood Johnson moved to the public housing project at San Felipe Courts—by then they were allowing African Americans to live there. He, too, became interested in the history of the land upon which his home sat. He decided to organize his community to obtain a NRHP listing, this time for San Felipe Courts, which was known by then as Allen Parkway Village. He enlisted the aid of several community professionals, and, despite the resistance of the Housing Authority that owned the project, that designation too was awarded, in 1987. Johnson formed a group called “The Unity,” which is now known as the “Free Man’s Neighborhood Association.” He told me that rather than working under the auspices of the Freedman’s Town Association, his group wanted to unite the people who lived in what was now “Freedmen’s Town” and the citizens of Allen Parkway Village, which was located over the original settlement. Johnson and his group wanted not only to preserve the physical structures in the project—which were in themselves an important example of early modernist architecture—but also to implement an ambitious, resident-led management plan. They received a great deal of support for this idea (even for a time from the Director of
HUD) but over time—this is a very long story, and I cannot do it justice here—the City and Housing Authority prevailed. In the mid-1990s, most of the project was bulldozed and a new mix of low income and affordable housing was built. The important point for my purpose here is that acquiring the NRHP designation for San Felipe Courts was seen by Johnson and others as a way to, in effect, reclaim the original Freedmantown and to reconnect it to the adjacent area that Gladys House had designated as “Freedmen’s Town.” In any event, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, hopes were high within the community that these designations would generate funds to drive a full scale preservation effort. However, the City refused to work with either Johnson or House (in fact exploiting their many differences whenever possible) and refused to lend any support to the grant applications that the designations would have enhanced (House 2005).

During the same period, pastors of the local churches were claiming their own stakes in the future of Freedmen’s Town. Some wanted to preserve the historical character of the community, and allied themselves with House or Johnson. Some wanted to promote their own property development schemes, and destroyed many historic houses in the process. Recently some of the more historically minded have formed the “Coalition of Pastoral Leaders,” in an effort to preserve several historic churches, and this organization actively collaborates with our museum sponsor on a number of community projects. Other stakeholders have also emerged, including the (mostly white) residents of the new housing in the community. I recently learned that some of these newcomers were told, by the outsider groups selling them their homes, that they should avoid associating with the existing (black) community groups, and instead should form their own neighborhood associations. Another stakeholder is the Yates Museum, our sponsor, which is buying property in order to preserve it. Developers and city planners who want to “redevelop” Freedmen’s Town into a yuppie village are stakeholders too, and most deny the racism and classism which underpins their efforts to “gentrify” the neighborhood. And we, the archeologists, are stakeholders too. We are building our careers on the backs of the community, and this article is one example of that.

In short, it is within this unstable, contested, strife-filled, and sometimes downright nasty political and social terrain that we are trying to do “community archeology.” Over the past year or so, we are a little closer to the goals I stated earlier, and I think that this is for two reasons. First, we now have a better understanding of the community, or as Leone et al. (1987) put it years ago, its “interests and conflicts,” and the historical and contemporary dynamics I have just described. The second reason is going to seem almost heretical, I suspect. We have started to understand that our work having meaning to the community has little to do with how we include them in the work itself; that is, how we formulate research questions, analyze results, and so on. It is wonderful when that happens, but the reality is that people have their own lives to lead. Mutually empowered collaborative research takes a huge amount of time—for everyone. While we—the archeologists—may be willing to devote these chunks of time, this is because we see this as our “job” (Stoecker 1997). The stakeholders we work with may not have that luxury, or, even, desire.

So, how does this relate back to the topic of “freedom”? How can the idea of freedom, as expressed in terms of self-reliance, self-determination, and independence, intersect with how we do archeology in Freedmen’s town? We can turn to the community’s own words for some clues. Here are merged excerpts from several interviews with House, Johnson, and other community members (House 2005; Johnson 2005; McGhee 2004):

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

When people speak of what they want for their community in the future, the same ideas emerge in a different form. As House put it:
I [want to] bring back all of the former grassroots residents of Freedmen’s Town…and all of them would be welcomed back in the community…We would open our businesses up out here again, so that we could be an independent community…and our people would be in power…this would be a community of being in charge of itself… (House 2005).

These expressions of freedom and independence in Freedmen’s Town are the cultural and spiritual descendants of the original spirit that created the original community of Freedmantown. Not long ago I asked both House and Johnson how they saw our work—what they saw it doing for them—in order to better understand how their freedom narrative could intersect with our archeology project. It surprised me to learn that they did not expect our work to aid directly in achieving the goals that they expressed above. Nor did they want to participate in our research. Both expressed enthusiastic support for archeology, but their enthusiasm was for three things. First, they want the new information that archeology can offer about the past, especially when this information can counter negative ethnic and class stereotypes in the larger Houston community. Second and equally important, they appreciate the legitimization that our work, done by people with Ph.D’s and so on, confers on their own efforts to convince others that their community is worth saving. That is, they use our work strategically, when they see the need. For example, House told me how she had put a report we had given her (about one of her properties we had investigated on a pro-bono basis, as part of the museum sponsorship) on the desk of a city planner, to show that a professional archeologist thought that her neighborhood was important enough to study, and to save. I know that she appreciated the specific content of our report, but I suspect that this personal interest was less important than the simple fact that we had done the work and written up the report. That is, that we had treated her neighborhood and its history with the professional respect it deserves. Third, they are enthusiastic (if a bit surprised, at times) about our ongoing efforts to talk to white people about African American archeology, as well as my own recent activism when speaking to white audiences about white privilege (McDavid 2007). While they are happy that we want to involve community people, especially kids, in our project, they are just as happy for us to bring students and volunteers in from the outside, most of whom are white. They know that this will create support for their own agendas, as well as more respect for their neighborhood. It does, too: I recently encountered a web blog where one of our previous students said his experience doing archeology in Freedmen’s Town had been “life changing.” House, Johnson, and others see clearly that our work can be used for their purposes, both directly and indirectly.

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

This discussion has dealt mostly with local contexts, but larger ones are important to mention, even if briefly. Gentrification and historic preservation efforts in Freedmen’s Town are part of the larger political economy of 21st century Texas. They are connected to national, even global, issues surrounding urban policy, historic consciousness, racism, classism, systemic erasure, and displacement. In Houston, as is true elsewhere, the proximity of the neighborhood to the downtown area lends urgency to the problem. I am not at all sure that one small archeology project can have a substantive role to play in resisting these larger forces.

However, we can take the time and energy to truly understand how the communities we work
with construct their own narratives, and how they find meaning in their own histories. That is, we can be what most archeologists in this country were trained to be in the first place: anthropologists. How many times do post-graduate archeologists conduct intensive, systematic, ethnographic research? We can use our archeological work to enhance community agendas (in the case described here, to support self-determination and independence), but only if we know what those agendas are, what they sprang from, and what they hope to accomplish. This type of contemporary context research, which is sometimes characterized as public archeology or, more recently, as ethnographic archeology, should not be something nice that we only do if we happen to have the time and budget for it. It should be mainstreamed into archeological projects and seen as a normative and necessary part of archeological research.

**ABOVE-GROUND ARCHEOLOGY: THE HISTORIC BRICK STREETS OF FREEDMEN’S TOWN**

Now we will move to a discussion of one particular component of our archeological project: the hypotheses, early findings, and preliminary analysis of the historic brick streets of Freedmen’s Town. This narrative was written jointly by all three authors of this article.

A few years ago the museum asked us to perform an assessment of the two remaining historic brick streets in Freedmen’s Town, in order to determine their potential cultural, archeological, and historical significance. We did our initial assessment in late 2002 and have done updates intermittently over the past six years, all on a pro-bono basis. Our work has included documentary research, oral histories, and interviews as well as pedestrian survey (a substantial portion of the documentary research cited below has also been done by our collaborator Debra Sloan, RBHY’s historical researcher). To date no excavation has taken place.

Part of the larger story about these streets—far too complex to recount in detail here—is that it is likely that very soon the remaining historic bricks will be removed and the street will be “renovated” by the City of Houston. Plans for that work are underway, and, not surprisingly, different stakeholders in both the local and larger communities have taken different positions on the relative merit of various plans that have been proposed for this work. Some call for no removal of any historic bricks; some require reinstallation of the same historic bricks (some in the same locations, some not); some would bring in antique bricks from other areas; and some would use new bricks. Even though YCAP has managed to avoid participating in the rather vicious political rhetoric that has raged around this issue, the hypotheses and data described here have been used by our client (RBHY), and by their community collaborators, to argue for a different sort of restoration plan than that which the city is currently attempting to execute. In short, they prefer a preservation-sensitive restoration of the streetscape rather than the “renovation” proposed by the City (although everyone is in agreement that the currently poor condition of the streets needs to be redressed).

At this writing, we have no idea what will happen, although we hope that streetscape (re)construction will include at least some archeological oversight. We should note that even though the streets are subject to Section 106 review under the National Historic Preservation Act, the review process for the city’s plan is under the purview of the Texas Historical Commission’s (THC’s) architecture, not archeology, division. That is, whether the streets are seen as archeological at all is not agreed upon by all players. We have argued that they should be, in several local public forums and in writing, via other versions of this article distributed to the City, local organizations, the THC, local press, etc. So have a number of key community groups. Unfortunately, none of these community groups are currently recognized by the THC as official consulting parties for this particular Section 106 undertaking. Some were consulting parties for other projects in the past, and the reasons they are not recognized as consulting parties for this project are, at best, confused. Nonetheless, several stakeholders have read this article and are in agreement that this paragraph accurately (although perhaps too briefly) describes the current situation. A fully contextualized account of “the brick street situation,” with all perspectives, rationales, and defenses included, will have to wait for another forum.

At this point we will move to the data itself and our analysis of it. This data will weave back and forth from oral, documentary, and material culture evidence, which we will then summarize and make several recommendations for future research. Figure 1 is a map showing the extent of the two remaining historic brick streets, which run almost a mile in length.
An important part of the research has been aimed at learning exactly when the streets were built, and by whom. According to oral accounts (House 2005), a “Reverend Jeremiah” led a community-wide effort to lay brick streets in the neighborhood because the city government of the time refused to do it. These narratives describe the reason for this initiative (that malaria was endemic due to the muddy streets) and information about how the streets were funded (with contributions of $1.00 per brick from individual residents). However, these accounts did not mention when this grassroots effort took place, or any other details.

The 1907 Sanborn Map for the City of Houston shows Andrews and Wilson streets as “unpaved,” whereas on the 1924 map (the next available map), no notation is made with regard to paving. Therefore our first assumption was that the current brick streets were likely laid between 1907 and 1924.

Subsequent documentary research by Debra Sloan (2008) then revealed a number of documents that indicate the first episode of paving was in 1914, when the city awarded bids to Eureka Paving Company to pave the portion of Andrews Street east of Wilson. In addition, in 1921, the city also paved Andrews west of Wilson, to Mason Street; additional paving contracts were found for that paving. However, Sloan found another document that is even more interesting, when considered alongside the community’s oral narrative. In a file in the office of the City Secretary of Houston, Sloan found a copy of a petition circulated by the residents of Andrews, west of Wilson, that had been submitted to the City in late 1921. The first two signatures on the petition were both “Elder E. L. Jeremiah”—he apparently owned two properties, and signed one line for each. The petition indicates that the signatories were in support of a city assessment of up to $1.25 per linear foot of property frontage for brick street paving, curbs, and gutters. At the bottom of this petition, the following handwritten addendum appears:

We did not get to see all on this street.
That is, we did not get the petition to all,
but there is nor but one man on the street who was not in favor of paving. He owns fifty feet. But we feel that we can get him. [signed] The committee

This document, in our opinion, provides significant support for the essence of the oral history story. “Elder” is an honorific frequently used for spiritual leaders in African American churches, and Elder E. L. Jeremiah was the first signature on a petition which the community itself circulated and signed. This petition indicated that these property owners made a financial commitment of $1.25 per foot to pay for paving their street. This amount corresponds with the “$1.00 per brick” mentioned in the oral narratives: the bricks used were 8-9 inches long. The handwritten comment at the bottom makes it clear that a community “committee” was an active agent in convincing property owners to support the assessment for street paving. At this point Sloan is still looking for a similar petition for the 1914 paving episode.

The Archeology

First we will describe the physical material culture evidence. We will then begin to interpret that evidence in light of ethnographic, oral historical, photographic, and archival data, and will then close with recommendations for further research.

During our first pedestrian survey in 2002 we searched for maker’s marks and any unusual features of the bricks themselves, as well as evidence of buried trolley rails (oral history data had suggested that at least some of the rails were still there, under the asphalt that was placed over the old trolley lines; Figure 2 illustrates this). We surveyed 100 percent of the project area with a metal detector and found no evidence of rails in this survey; further tests would be necessary to determine whether any of them are still there. Our most significant finding had to do with the patterning of the bricks as they were laid in the streets.

First, the pattern of the brick is different between the intersections and the streets themselves. We found three intersections where this variance

Figure 2. Andrews Street at Arthur Street, looking east (one of three intersections with similar patterns).
occurs (the other intersections in the survey area are now covered with asphalt so it is impossible to determine whether they were laid in the same way). As noted above, asphalt has been laid over the old rails, but one can still see the brick patterns in the rest of each intersection, and between the spaces where the rails were. The space between the two rails that does not lie within an intersection is laid in a straight running-bond pattern. The herringbone patterns are located only in the part of the street that lies both between the old trolley tracks and in the intersection. Perhaps more important, the rest of each intersection (that is, the portion outside the trolley line) is laid in a four-directional diagonal running-bond pattern. In this pattern, the four quadrants of a larger pattern come together in the approximate center of each intersection. This is most notable at the intersection of Wilson and Andrews, where the brick in the center is still present (Figure 3).

At the other intersections the same pattern variance was noted between the rail lines and the rest of the intersection. At the center point of these streets, manhole covers are located over the center spot. In all cases it appears that a four-directional brick pattern would converge in a point near the middle of the street if the center bricks on the street were still present. The manhole covers are over present-day storm sewer lines (see Figure 2). The abutting streets appear to have been laid in a straight running bond pattern, although with the overlaying asphalt this is difficult to tell.

Another physical finding has to do with the street marker on one particular intersection. The blue and white mosaic tile street name at the intersection of Andrews and Crosby was installed upside down (Figure 4). This “reverse” installation is on the southwest corner, next to Bethel Baptist Church, one of the earliest and most important historic African American churches in the area, and the reason for this will be addressed below.
Another feature of the brick streets was also noted during our original surveys. The herringbone pattern between the rail lines (see Figure 2) is very similar to the stonework patterning at Bethel Baptist Church on Andrews (Figure 5). This church was formed in 1891 at this site, though this particular building was built in 1950, on the footprint of the original. According to the cornerstone, the stonework was done by Magnolia Lodge #3, an African American Freemason Lodge.

Since the original walking survey, additional measurements and photographs have been taken. In Fall 2004 a small object was located very near the geographic (by measurement) center of Andrews and Wilson. This object was a small ceramic “die,” and was embedded in the cracks between two of the bricks. The “three” side of the die was aligned in a north/south direction, and the die is about 3/8-inch square (Figures 6a and 6b). This object was not noticed until we looked at the bricks very closely, from a distance of about 10 inches. Because of the threatened brick street removal, the object was removed and replaced with a marking object, after photographs and more measurements were taken. We have no idea when the die was originally deposited (it does seem unlikely that it was deposited when the streets were built) and we are still in the process of analyzing it. The surface of the die is pitted and cracked from natural exposure, and appears to be quite old.

We will now consider these physical observations in light of additional ethnographic, material culture, oral historical, photographic, and archival data.

1. There is considerable scholarly and popular culture documentation that speaks to the symbolic significance of “crossroads” in African and African American contexts.

The importance of this symbol, and this idea, is commonplace amongst students of African American culture and history. Discussions about “crossroads” have appeared in narratives discussing quilt patterns (Tobin and Dobard 1999), African and African American altars (Thompson 1983, 1990, 1993), histories of American blues (McInnis 2000), and descriptions of popular culture events such as dance performance (Janas 1999) and hip hop (Octopus 2002). Examples from both sides of the Black Atlantic appear in data gathered by scholars in folklore, art history, architecture, anthropology, and religion.

In addition, archeological research conducted in the Houston/Brazoria area, and elsewhere across the South, has revealed archeological evidence connecting non-Christian “cross” symbolism with a number of different African and African American religious practices (Brown 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2004; Brown and Cooper 1990; Bruner 1996; Fennell 2007; Ferguson 1992; Gundaker 1998a,
1. Artifacts and artifact contexts have been interpreted as adaptations of the “BaKongo Cosmogram.” This “cosmogram” represents a particular world view of the cycle of life, and has been of significant interest to historical archeologists in this country since the late 1980s. In some New World Diaspora contexts, the BaKongo tradition is creolized with certain Yoruba traditions, and the directionality of the four “quadrants” of the “cross” appears to take on meanings that vary with context, time, and association with other symbols. The most recent research suggests that the connection, symbolically, is not directly to the idea of a “cosmogram,” but instead a wider connection to the importance of cardinal direction crosses (Brown 2003e; Brown and Brown 1998; Gundaker 1998b).

2. Street intersections have been used as ceremonial places, in several African Diaspora and Black Atlantic contexts, including Freedmen’s Town.

   Robert Farris Thompson has specifically addressed the importance of intersections in his monumental book on African American altars and sacred places. In this work he recounts an example of how street intersections were used ceremonially in the Congo, and in Cuba’s African Diaspora community as well: “…the celebrants themselves used street intersections as a chain of found cosmograms…” (Thompson 1993:68).

   In addition, we have heard two ethnographic accounts that describe Yoruba ceremonies that have taken place in Houston intersections in order to protect or prepare for important events (M. Adamu, personal communication, 2003). More recently, some local churches have held gospel music and prayer services in the brick street intersections, and a local black activist group held a “crossroads ceremony” at the intersection of Andrews and Wilson on June-tenth of 2007 (Figure 7); note the chalk oval drawn in the center of the street. An oval is frequently used to depict the “cosmogram” or “cycle of life” idea in African Diaspora contexts (Brown and Cooper 1990; Bruner 1996).

3. As described above, oral history narratives and historical documentation from Freedmen’s Town residents suggest that the construction of the streets was, in part, an act of self-empowerment and community choice; a prominent African American citizen of Freedmen’s Town in the late 1800s was Reverend Ned Pullum, who owned a large brickyard (Sloan 2008).

   Pullum lived at the corner of Andrews and Wilson and would have been a contemporary of “Reverend Jeremiah,” as well as the other signatories on the 1921 petition described above (his portion of Andrews would have been paved in the earlier 1914 paving episode, for which no petition has yet been found). The obvious question (yet to be answered) is whether Pullum was part of a community-driven...
paving project for his own portion of the street, although it seems likely that he was, and he was undoubtedly in a financial and leadership position to participate if he chose. He was also, for a time, the pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church, the church where the brick patterns are the same as those on the streets. We should point out that we do not know what the original Bethel Church looked like, or whether there was continuity in design from the older one to the newer one. The current building replaced an earlier one but the stonework was, according to the cornerstone, laid by an African American Freemason chapter.

4. It is extremely likely, in terms of the manual labor force in post-emancipation Houston, that the people who laid the bricks were themselves African American.

It is not known whether the laborers themselves would have decided what patterns to use in the intersections: this is a matter for additional research. Historical construction methods also need to be examined. Research is also needed to establish connections between the African American residents of Freedmen’s Town and the laborers who built the streets. Although Sloan has found evidence of black brick masons living in Freedmen’s Town during the construction period (Sloan 2008), and we have seen photographs of African American laborers laying brick on other Houston streets in the “pre Great Depression” era (Powell 2003:76), direct connections between specific laborers and the street pavers of Freedmen’s Town streets have yet to be made.

5. At least one intersection (Crosby at Andrews) was marked with “reverse marking” (see Figure 4), and examples of similar “inversion” have been found in other symbolic African Diaspora contexts.

The street marker illustrated in Figure 4 was next to the Bethel Baptist church, on the south side of the street. In most “cosmogram” depictions, the southern portion represents the afterlife. Reversed letters and texts also exist on grave markers and features in three other African American cemeteries in the region: the Olivewood Cemetery (Houston’s oldest recorded African American cemetery), the College Park Cemetery in Houston, and the Juden Cemetery (the graveyard for individuals who worked on the Levi Jordan Plantation, in Brazoria, Texas).
(Bruner 1996, 2007). Recent research conducted by Bruner into the symbolism of inversion in the Kongo belief system indicates that reversed and upside down script may be intentional (see Bruner 1996; Thompson 1983:142). Figure 8 illustrates examples of inverted and reversed text from the Olivewood Cemetery. The text is composed of blue and white tiles: the same as that used for street markers in Freedmen’s Town.

6. The “die” described above was found in the center of Andrews and Wilson, which appears to have been the most important intersection in 19th century Freedmen’s Town.

According to the “Biography of Jack Yates,” written by his sons, Rutherford and Paul (Yates and Yates 1985:23), when one wanted to visit Freedmen’s Town, the directions commonly given were “Ride the San Felipe Car and ask the conductor to let you get off at Jack Yates.” The trolley on this brick street passed directly in front of the homes of Jack Yates and Ned Pullum, at this intersection. As mentioned above, members of both the local and larger African American communities in Houston still use this particular street intersection for ceremonial purposes.

CONCLUSIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In order to test connections between the above associations properly, it would be necessary to examine brick streets in other cities (and other parts of Houston, where they exist) to see if intersection patterning in Freedmen’s Town is repeated elsewhere. If it is, it would be necessary to examine exactly what sort of patterning variance exists between other streets and their intersections. That is, is it usually a matter of simply replacing one pattern with another (say, herringbone instead of the standard running-bond) or, as is the case here, is intersection patterning typically complex, with several patterns existing within the bounds of each intersection? We would also need to examine the context in which the patterning takes place. Is it, for example, more prevalent on streets that were built by African American labor, or in contexts in which African American people made design decisions?

If a variance between patterns on intersections and streets is customary—that is, “simply the way one builds brick streets”—then the streets in Freedmen’s Town would be fairly typical and one of our hypotheses (that the brick patterns themselves are important) would be unsupported. However, ethnographic and oral history evidence support a post-construction ceremonial use. This would be especially interesting in light of running water beneath the center of the streets, because the horizontal center line in most “cosmogram” depictions usually represents water. That is, it may not matter if the patterns and running water were on the minds of the street builders and street designers. Their cultural and archeological importance would not be diminished if they were used as “found cosmograms,” as Thompson’s work documents for other African Diaspora contexts. This research has yet to be undertaken.

Following are our recommendations for future research:

- Photo documentation, including detailed measurements and GIS mapping, of existing streets and patterns.
- Ethnographic, anthropological, and historical study of brick street patterning in other American communities, including photographic and historical documentation.

Figure 8. The tiled grave slab for W. A. Harris (left) and the entrance into a family plot with tiled letters (right).
- Study of the patterns themselves as they occur (or do not occur) in other African Diaspora contexts, such as art, architecture, textiles, religion, etc.

- Oral history about past and present use of the streetscape, sidewalks, etc., including but not limited to their connections to vernacular architecture, neighborhood landmarks, and structures.

- Study of street construction methods used in the Freedmen’s Town streets, and additional study of the labor force that designed and laid the streets.

- Archeological study of easement areas, when permitted by property owners, in order to search for physical evidence of the now-missing herringbone-pattern sidewalks that have been mentioned by several community members.

- Archeological study of the streets, including items potentially buried under them, if or when any construction or restoration work takes place.

- Most important, collaborative work with the existing indigenous community (including those who have been displaced and now live elsewhere, but are from the community), to both supplement and inform any research undertaken.

To conclude, in the first section of this article we discussed the social and political relevance behind the transformation of the names of the neighborhood now known as Freedmen’s Town. The act of naming the historic district itself was interpreted as a form of social and political self-empowerment. In the second section, names were also seen as an important aspect of the physical landscape. Place names and their transformations were identified through an array of historic records (maps, directories, oral narratives, etc). The meaning(s) of a place may be difficult to infer when faced with only a handful of written and oral accounts, but it is still possible to view these places as components of broader and ethnohistorically connected social landscapes.

Likewise, the brick streets of Freedmen’s Town now have a very active “name” in the political arena of preservation in Houston. There is clear evidence that the early 20th century residents of Freedmen’s Town took an active part in the construction of their streets: they caused them to be constructed and paid a significant percentage of the cost to do so. There is also a compelling web of associations to support the idea that the streets continue to serve as potent symbols of Freedmen’s Town heritage, to current residents and to other African Americans in Houston, whatever the intentions of the original builders may have been. It is only through a deeply contextualized, interdisciplinary, community-engaged approach to archeology that these meanings and associations have become visible.

Questions about continuities and differences between African, captive African, and African American life continue to be studied by scholars all over the world, but to our knowledge no one has studied streets and streetscapes with regard to the African Diaspora. We think they should be, and that the brick streets of Freedmen’s Town would be a good place to start.

ENDNOTES

1. An earlier version of this section was also published in McDavid (2006a).

2. Some examples include Oxford, Mississippi; Mitchelville and Lincolnville, South Carolina; Bryan, Denton, Austin, and San Antonio, Texas; and Nicodemus, Kansas.

3. Buffalo Bayou was also straightened during that period. While this caused many of the original house sites to disappear (Beeth and Wintz 1992), the San Felipe Courts housing project took by far the largest portion of land.

4. A map of central Houston, showing the location and name of the original settlement, is located in the Texas Room, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

5. This account is based on interviews conducted with Gladys House, Lenwood Johnson, Joan Denkler, Catherine Roberts, other people, and McDavid’s own recollections. Interview transcripts are in the possession of the senior author.

6. Recently, some stakeholders have formed the “Midtown West Civic Club,” and despite appeals, refuse to have any communication whatsoever with more historically minded stakeholders. They have also been successful in changing some of the signs designating the area to “Midtown,” not “Freedman’s Town”—the signs that House had fought so hard to install. Another new group is called “The New Fourth Ward Homeowners Association.”

7. Historic Sanborn maps are available on several online sources as well as the Houston Public Library’s Texas Room.
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