Emancipation is a Park

By Carroll Parrott Blue

Jack Yates, far left, and other members of the African American community celebrate Juneteenth, circa 1880.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

During the summer between second and third grade, I fell hopelessly in love with cotton candy. That delicacy excelled as the most perfect experience in my then eight-year-old world. Watching it being made, then touching and finally tasting it was mesmerizing. The notion that a machine could spew out pink strands of sugar fascinated me. I recall the stickiness between my fingers as I snatched at bits of fluff from the huge ball of its sweetness. I remember these pink fluffs turning into red shards that I eagerly stuffed in my mouth.

I was at a carnival on a hot summer night in Houston's Emancipation Park when I met cotton candy. Because I loved everything about that first bite's memory, I also fell in love with hot summer nights, the carnival, and the park.

Cotton candy was a ruse that summoned me in search of its sweetness to also partake of the park's other delights. I learned how to swim in the giant pool, to eat hot spicy barbecue and ice-cold watermelon at church picnics, to bring pastel colored wrapped gifts to my friends' birthday parties, and to proudly pass the park on my way to St. John's Baptist Church on Dowling Street in Easter outfits that signaled my growth from flat-chested kiddy tops to bras underneath sleek junior miss dresses.

As life diverted my attention elsewhere, I forgot about the park. When I returned sixty years later in 2009 for the park's 135th birthday, I was open to learning what it had taken to allow a little eight-year-old Black girl to love her first bite of cotton candy. The answer, I discovered, was inside the far-sighted and determined intent of four former slaves. In the nineteenth century, the four exhorted a community to sacrifice a collectively hard-earned $1,000 to buy ten acres of land so that all of Black Houston could celebrate into perpetuity the Emancipation Proclamation on June 19, or Juneteenth, in honor of that fateful day in 1865 when Texas slaves finally learned that they were free.

Emancipation Park, as it has been named since 1872, is located in Houston's Third Ward and is bounded by Dowling, Elgin, Hutchins, and Tuam Streets. At first it was an empty lot that was closed, fenced off and used for one purpose: to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation on Juneteenth. The original founders did not have enough money to keep the park open the rest of the year after the

Emancipation Park mural of African American leaders, 1975. Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

annual celebration. Yet because of their initial effort, from 1872 on there were the festive Juneteenth celebrations with music, dancing, food, and inspirational speeches that over time have created a legacy for African Americans.

One document that the park leaders created with the City of Houston stated that for as long as Houston existed, the park was to be dedicated to its African American citizens. Past agreements written, signed, and archived do last. I discovered that in spite of how we were doing it, we, the living, were continuing to expand on the legacy of the former slaves' vision.

While the United States of America's Emancipation Proclamation dates slavery's end as starting on January 1, 1863, African Americans in Texas were not yet aware of the proclamation. On June 18, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger, the commander of U.S. troops in Texas, arrived in Galveston with 2,000 federal troops in tow to take possession of the state and enforce the emancipation of its slaves. On June 19, 1865, he read General Order 3, making freedom a reality for 250,000 Texas slaves.

To celebrate their freedom, newly-freed Texas slaves decided to memorialize this day, and the following year, Juneteenth celebrations began across the state. In many places, they pooled their funds specifically for their communities' increasingly large Juneteenth gatherings.

An African American tradition since that time, Juneteenth is now the oldest known celebration commemorating the end of slavery in the United States. While these festivities have followed an ebb and flow in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Houston's Emancipation Park remains the first public land purchased in Texas in 1872 by former slaves specifically for Juneteenth events.

Children play at Emancipation Park in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

A couple relaxing at the park. Photo by Ray Carrington.

Other documented land purchases include Mexia, Texas's Booker T. Washington Emancipation Proclamation Park being purchased in 1898, followed in 1909 by the purchase of Austin, Texas's Emancipation Park. There is one other Emancipation Park in the world, and it is in Kingston, Jamaica. That park's name is also centered on that country's history of slavery.

The state of Texas named Juneteenth an official state holiday in 1980, and as of March 2010, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have recognized Juneteenth as either a state holiday or state holiday observance.

On one bleak and bone-chilly winter day in 2006, Bill Milligan and I ambled through what seemed to be, to most people, an abandoned park. Bill is semiretired, like myself. In addition to writing poetry and taking photographs, he is a staunch community member who, as a child, was nurtured by the park's activities, namely swimming, baseball, square dancing, and outdoor movies.

We both are from this neighborhood and had visited this park many times as children. Although we did not know each other then, we held fond memories of this park as a vibrant, child-friendly, living place. But on this particular day, without a word between us, we both knew that the park that we had known in the past was dying.

That day the sky's gray blanket of clouds covered everything. Bill was looking straight away at this gleaming new downtown Houston. He heaved his shoulders and sighed. Heavy was so full of everywhere that I could not stand the hopelessness in our silence.

"Hey Bill," I blurted out in the heat of discovery, "No one wants this place. This is neutral territory. We can build here."

We were standing in this park over fifty years after the civil rights movement, and we were looking at the downside of this movement's triumph. According to Dr. Mindy Fullilove in *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It*, a groundbreaking book on the impact of urban displacement and gentrification on African American communities, since 1949 over 2,500 communities had experienced the U.S. government's urban renewal plans. Over 1,600 of these communities were African American. The ensuing gentrification and displacement done in the name of progress had left our community in shambles.

Photo by Ray Carrington.

Over the years, our Third Ward community had turned into a war zone for politicians, ministers, business people, and just plain old power-hungry folk who claim this and that location or organization as their very own private turf. Poverty showed up as decay, empty lots, and unemployed broken spirits that overtook everything. We were losing Third Ward to developers, transportation czars, city planners, and well-heeled middle-class young people who, even when Black, did not look or act like us. Our enemies were those who wanted to and could choose to live here in expensive new townhouses, close to downtown because they had either the money or the credit scores to buy the land. Most of us who had remained were renters, retired, on disability, or jobless and therefore ripe for displacement.

That very afternoon we dusted ourselves off by re-starting the Friends of Emancipation Park. We invited people who we knew cared to join us. Regular monthly meetings followed.

Bill's deep sense of giving back to our community motivated him. What propelled me was my childhood memories of what was now lost and what could be recovered, when people cared. These memories washed over me. Every year the carnival would come to town. One year, the merry-go-round that I insisted on riding made my father throw up. An empty lot right across Dowling had once been the home of Rettig's Ice Cream Parlor where I ate my first banana split. It was so nasty that from that day to this I have never had the stomach to try another. The Park Theatre was once cattycorner to the park. It was here that I watched Ava Gardner transform herself into *The Barefoot Contessa*. Her bad-girl-gone-wild role ignited a sense of the free spirit inside me, even though the film, in the end, punished her for her transgressions. And then there was that day in 1970 when I forced my father, as he drove us down Dowling Street, to turn his head to actually see the rifles sternly and proudly held by the Black Panthers in front of their office located on the corner across from the park. At home he had insisted that there were no guns. "Those boys bluffing," he told me.

I dared him to drive back by to see for himself. He did, taking me with him. As he drove nearer to the site, I regretted my dare when I saw his hands trembling on the steering wheel. My father was born in 1899. As I watched the fear grow in my father's old eyes, I saw him turn and look straight into the fearless eyes of those armed young men. Shortly after that day, on July 26, 1970, Houston police gunned them down.

Houston, Texas, cannot abide Negro men with guns.

The last time this city experienced this phenomena was on August 23, 1917. It was at the start of World War I, and Black soldiers were sent in to guard Camp Logan as it was being built to house a military training camp. On that summer night over 140 Black soldiers who were tired of whites harassing them, targeted and killed close to twenty white policemen and other white men who had been making their lives hell.

Almost one hundred years ago, city fathers decided that Houston would never again have a military base. This decision grew out of their fear of Negro men with guns. People say that integration and the building of two freeways crisscrossing Third Ward was the start of my community's demise. I, on the other hand, mark the fifty year space between the 1917 Camp Logan incident and the 1970 police murder of Black Panther Carl Hampton, the group's leader. Carl Hampton was not related to Chicago's Fred Hampton. The 1917 and 1970 events encase us in this winter in America that brought about Emancipation Park's hibernation — the long sleep that Bill and I witnessed during our afternoon journey in the park.

Houston is so flat that you can see for miles around. I remembered the park in the past as being surrounded by a great horizon of trees and sky in the distance. Today the city's skyscrapers have grown so tall that they loom over the park. Houston is no longer a backwater town. Houston is now the energy capital of the world. A strange quality of change does exist here, even as Dixie's overlay remains.

By 2010, Houston's Emancipation Park had been awarded a historic designation from the city and money for the park's revitalization followed. Emancipation Park is now slated to become an international destination. With $6 million seed funding, Philip Freelon, an internationally recognized architect with a solid design and engineering team behind him, is designing a plan that the City of Houston is using to raise the funds to renovate the park.

In the fall of 2010, the Freelon Group took a group of us – Emancipation Park friends and stakeholders – to visit New York City and Chicago to see other neighborhood parks to inspire us and our design team as we work together to create the park's new identity.

This African American community pocket park in Houston is the city's oldest park, the first park in the state of Texas celebrating Juneteenth. In the 1860s, most white Americans thought of slaves as nothing more than work horses, mules, and dogs. Blaming the victim, most whites thought of slaves as dirty, smelly, childlike, and ignorant chattel, as something less than human. Yet our country's economic greatness has been and continues to be gained on the backs of those whose free or cheap labor has fattened our wealth. For some reason we tend to distance ourselves from this fact. We turn the people who provide our country's almost free, and in some cases, slave labor into animals or criminals rather than acknowledge the enormous value that this cheap and mostly free labor brings us.

What an irony, then, that the ten acres of land purchased here in Houston by former slaves to celebrate their freedom would become the first park in Texas designated for Juneteenth celebrations. And that this park has now become known as the oldest park in our city. And that Juneteenth, the designation for June 19, 1865, celebrates the real end of slavery across the United States of America.

In the twentieth century I played in Emancipation Park unaware that it was created by former slaves for future generations of children like me or that in the twenty-first century Black children would continue to play there amongst their families, some of whom were now homeless, prostitutes, pimps, and drug dealers. Resolute in 1872 to make things better, those newly freed ancestors had willed their reach into an unknowable future to provide me with a safe place so liberated in spirit that I could invent – without any limitations – my eight-year-old sense of fun.

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In 2007, the late Thelma Scott Bryant, who was over 100 years old at the time, showed off her scrapbook. Her handwriting describes posing by a tree with her "Beau" in Emancipation Park when she was in the ninth grade.

Photos courtesy of Johnny Hanson.

The Next Phase for Emancipation Park

By Naveen Inampudi

Current proposals to renovate Emancipation Park will focus on both restoration and expansion, from refurbishing the existing community center and pool to creating new water features and trails to enhance the experience of park guests. Reflecting the desires expressed by the community, the overall development project, estimated at $33.6 million, has three central objectives: to create a beautiful and functional park space for the residents of Third Ward, to spark redevelopment of the neighborhood, and to make the park a destination point for national and international visitors.[1] Given Emancipation Park's historical significance, Michael Mauer of M2L Associates, the local landscape architect for the Emancipation Park upgrade, stressed that the Freelon Group, which is handling the improvements, recognizes that adding to the park while maintaining some of the park's original form and amenities are paramount to reviving the park and honoring its legacy.[2]

Over time, the park has evolved to meet many different needs, and the Freelon Group has proposed a number of additions to reestablish the park as a cornerstone of Third Ward. A redesigned recreation center with multipurpose functionality will be the focal point of the park to draw in the neighborhood children and create an atmosphere that engenders daily use of the facilities by young and old alike. The recreation center will boast a bevy of features including a high-school-size gym, fitness center, locker rooms, and classroom space. Mauer notes that the design of the recreation center encourages its use as a meeting point. Other additions to the park include a patio in the northwest corner with rocking chairs where adults can sit and watch their children on the playground and an expanded picnic area in the southwest corner to add to the neighborhood feel. Throughout the park, plaques will be added that commemorate Emancipation Park's history, telling the story of its founders and heritage.[3]

The Freelon Group and M2L Associates aim to create a sustainable park that keeps maintenance costs and energy usage to a minimum, including the addition of solar power components. The architects have designed the community center to maximize efficiency by taking advantage of natural lighting during the day and using the lights only when necessary at night. They hope to take advantage of nature by reusing rainwater collected in retention ponds and tanks to water the plants and grass, keeping water bills to a minimum.[4]

The design team, managed by ESPA Corp, plans to improve the park's functionality so that residents can use the open areas and new buildings for community events and future Juneteenth celebrations. The designers hope to continue the spirit of by-gone traditions like cotton candy and Johnny Nash concerts while appealing to a whole new generation of park patrons. They want Emancipation Park to remain a center for mobilization and activism, with rallies such as the one held there recently to demonstrate support for Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager who was walking home from a convenience store when a neighborhood watch captain in Sanford, Florida, confronted and killed him following a struggle.[5]

Reverend Jack Yates and his congregation started off with a ten-acre lot in 1872, and since then, Emancipation Park has remained important to area residents, even when it showed its years. After the renovation project is completed, historic Emancipation Park will once again be a jewel of Third Ward.

Emancipation Park bird's-eye-view artist rendering.

Image courtesy of OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority.