

EMANCIPATION PARK  
3018 Dowling Street  
Houston  
Harris County  
Texas

HALS TX-7  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### EMANCIPATION PARK

HALS NO. TX-7

**Location:** Emancipation Park, 3018 Dowling Street, Houston, Texas 77004, is located entirely on 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. The park is located in Houston's Third Ward, an historically African-American neighborhood that was the center of black commercial and cultural activity in the city during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

29.737251, -95.365268 (North corner of park/Tuam at Hutchins)  
29.736264, -95.363654 (East corner of park/Tuam at Dowling)  
29.73455, -95.365011 (South corner of park/Dowling at Elgin)  
29.735514, -95.366642 (West corner of park/Elgin at Hutchins)  
All coordinates from itouchmap.com.

**Significance:** Since 1872, Emancipation Park has been the site of community and family celebrations for African-Americans in Houston. Although President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, slavery in Texas did not end until June 19, 1865, when the Union Army landed at Galveston to enforce it. The anniversary of emancipation in Texas, known as "Juneteenth," is now an official state holiday in more than 25 states in America and is celebrated around the world. As the site for the original Juneteenth celebration in 1866 and one of the first parks in America purchased by African-Americans specifically for this event, in 1872, Emancipation Park remains an important symbol of a turning point in Texas and United States history.

**Description:** Emancipation Park occupies one full 10-acre city block and today retains many of its mid-century structures and natural features.

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 racetrack, with the remainder of the property containing two dance floors, a stable, and a beer tavern.

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* newspaper.

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.

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.

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 and built by the Public Works Administration (PWA). 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 personally designed the Faculty Club, Rice Stadium, and 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, including 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.” A swimming pool and bathhouse are located to the northeast of the recreation center.

A landscape plan by the nationally renowned firm of Hare & Hare of Kansas City, Missouri, was drawn on May 31, 1938, and revised on October 17 of the same year. 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 from 1923 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. This “General Plan for the Development of Emancipation Park” shows many of the same mature trees that appear on the 1927 site plan and are extant today. In the Hare & Hare 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 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 park was re-dedicated in July 1975, following the completion of \$300,000 in Model Cities Program improvements that included additions to the recreation center. The renovations were carried out by Marmon & Mok Associates, Architect; Marmon Mok & Green, Inc., Landscape Architect; and Larvin Enterprises, Inc., Contractor.

A general improvement project for Emancipation Park was announced in 1987, as part of a larger renovation plan for eight parks. 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.

Between 2008–2009, the City of Houston and the Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority worked with Partners for Public Spaces to facilitate a community-based effort to create a long-term vision to guide the park's development, interpret its history, and ensure that the park becomes a neighborhood attraction and a monument of national significance.

In 2011, nationally renowned African-American architect Phillip Freelon was contracted to design improvements to the park that would turn it into "a catalyst for local development" and "a national and international destination". Components of the project are expected to include public art, interpretative displays, an outdoor amphitheater (in a nod to the original Hare & Hare landscape design), the restoration of the original race track loop around the park as a jogging trail, and an expansion of the community center's gymnasium to accommodate a regulation-size basketball court.

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.

**History:**

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.

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.

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 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. 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.”

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.

African-Americans rushed into nearby cities in search of better work. In Houston, the black population more than tripled as hundreds of freed slaves poured into the city from the plantations in neighboring counties — and soon

African-Americans 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 Third Ward, in Freedman's Town and similar neighborhoods in Fourth Ward, and in the Frost Town area of Second Ward.

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.

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

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. The deed recording the sale 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."

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.

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.”

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 and circus operators.

Emancipation Park was donated to the City of Houston in 1916. The City of Houston officially segregated parks in 1922, and until 1940, Emancipation Park was the only public park in Houston open to African-Americans.

The Juneteenth holiday declined in popularity during World War II. 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, although the majority of festival events are now held at the Miller Outdoor Theater in Herrmann Park.

In 2007, a group of civic and business leaders established The Friends of Emancipation Park as a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization to advocate for the park as a natural, cultural, and heritage landmark and to promote responsible park usage and resource management. The park was designated as a City of Houston Protected Local Landmark in 2007 and recognized by the State of Texas with an historical marker in 2009.

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.

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