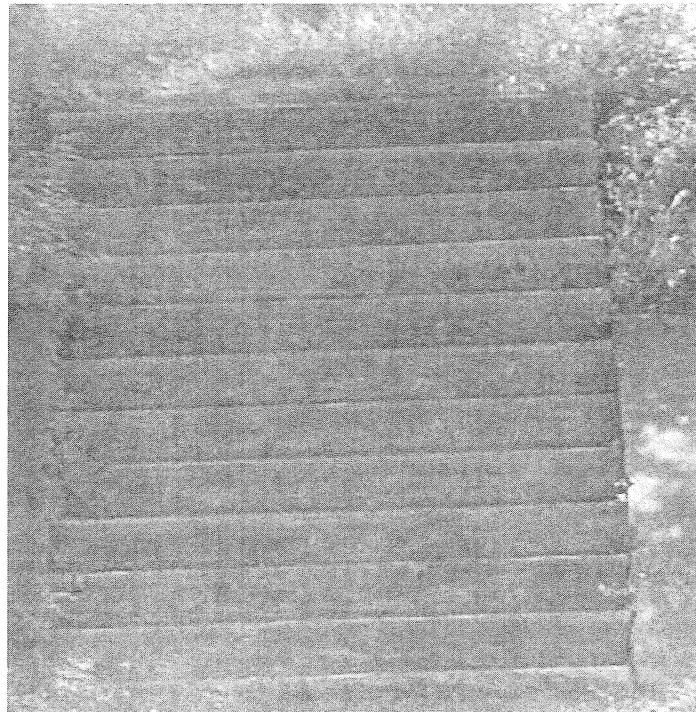


## THE EMPTY STAIRS: THE LOST HISTORY OF EAST AUSTIN

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Steps to an abandoned home site, East Eleventh Street, Austin.

*Photo by Sharon Hill.*

When any longtime resident of Austin travels through the neighborhood of East Eleventh Street, change is easy to notice, since the area is not the same as years ago. Just one of the original homes of the residential neighborhood remains. It represents what has been lost and forgotten in this community. Turning onto Eleventh from Interstate 35, a large, metal arch decorates the entrance. To the right, a multi-storied condominium stands, and further down the street is another new high-rise with exclusive shops and restaurants on street level. Homes in the surrounding neighborhood are now shiny and new. One begins to wonder if previous residents would recognize the neighborhood where they raised children, worked, played, went to school, and attended church.

Where did the neighborhood residents go? How was the history of the area and its people swept up and cleared away without consideration? There are two words for what has happened here—urban renewal—and it often means the rehabilitation of an area by removing structures or adding new ones. Urban renewal changes the historic and social fabric of the neighborhood. Along with such changes, gentrification often occurs. This is

when the increasing value of property exceeds the capacity of local residents to pay the higher taxes, resulting in changes of ownership. As longtime residents leave, individuals of different socio-economic levels replace older residents.<sup>1</sup> This is exactly what has happened on East Eleventh Street and the surrounding area of Juniper and Olive Streets. Many longtime residents, including second-, third-, and even fourth-generation Austinites, inherited homes from their parents. According to fourth-generation Austinite Eva Lindsey, the residents of this area suffered what social scientist Mindy Fulliove refers to as “root shock.”<sup>2</sup> This is when people move out of their close-knit neighborhoods to other communities, resulting in a loss of identity and sense of place.<sup>3</sup> The residents living in the neighborhood today are probably unaware of the rich history connected with their part of Austin.

During the Republic of Texas era in the mid-nineteenth century, the French Legation owned land around Eleventh and Twelfth Streets, with part of the property owned by the Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, the French *charge d'affaires*. Saligny later sold the property to Joseph W. Robertson. After the Civil War, Robertson became gravely ill, and his son George began selling the land around the plantation to freed slaves. George sold one of the first lots in 1869 to a freedman named Malick Wilson, who built a house on what is now Eleventh Street, formerly called Mesquite.<sup>4</sup> On the 1873 bird’s eye view map created by cartographer Augustus Koch, only Eleventh and Twelfth Streets appear in the neighborhood, but the area began to develop soon after. As it did, new schools opened to serve the increased population. Residents built the Robinson School in 1884 on San Marcos and East Eleventh Street under the direction of Supt. A.P. Wooldridge. In 1894, residents built the Gregory School to serve the African American children in the neighborhood. Olive Street School came later on the site of present-day Lott Pocket Park. Parents of school children worked, women held jobs like seamstresses and laundresses, and the men worked primarily in the trade and service industries at such jobs as porters, masons, and barbers.<sup>5</sup>

Two colleges developed for the African American community and provided higher education for area youth. Samuel Huston College opened in 1877 between Eleventh and Twelfth Streets, and Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute opened farther down Eleventh Street. Huston College provided an education in such work as blacksmithing, preaching, bookkeeping, and teaching. In 1910, Huston College developed as a college preparatory school, and in 1927 it became a senior college.<sup>6</sup>

African Americans built their homes along streets east of East Avenue, where the interstate is now located. At the same time, other freedman communities began developing in West Austin. Both Clarksville and Wheatville were freedman communities established after the Civil War. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the 1928 master plan called for all African Americans to move out of West Austin and into East Austin.<sup>7</sup>

The city developed a master plan and suggested moving all blacks to East Austin. The 1928 master plan legally segregated African American citizens into their own community east of East Avenue. The City of Austin decided not to provide Clarksville and Wheatville with sewer lines or paved roads, further forcing African Americans to move to East Austin. The 1928 plan reported the greatest concentrations of blacks living in East Austin, and officials created a “negro district” with all city services provided.<sup>8</sup> Residents in East Austin had amenities like schools, parks, swimming pools, and sewer systems. In addition to the master plan, the city practiced redlining, a means by which some Southern cities segregated African Americans into particular neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> In Austin, this resulted in white residents moving out of these areas, resulting in further alienation. By the early

twentieth century, African Americans lived in a segregated East Austin, and as Eva Lindsey recently said, “It’s like they dropped us off here and forgot about us.”<sup>10</sup> With the master plan in place, East Austin soon developed in its own unique way.

The area of Eleventh Street contained some of the oldest African American-owned businesses in the city and during the 1940s developed into a major thoroughfare with many businesses to support the community. African American businesses located in East Austin, like Hillside Drugs at 607 San Jacinto, served the community. The owner was Dr. Ulysses Young, who graduated from Paul Quinn College in Waco. Young then entered Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. After receiving his degree in pharmacy, he worked for one year at South Side Pharmacy in Nashville and later in Dallas. Dr. Young and his father eventually purchased their Austin pharmacy from Dr. T. L. Delashwah and moved it to a different location to serve the community better.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Young usually prepared prescriptions and medicines specifically for the needs of the African American community. Eva Lindsey said, “My mother would send me up there, and I would go get hair oil, hair grease as they called it. He had a pestle and a mortar and would make things, all kind of things. Things for aching and pain.”<sup>12</sup>

Rhambo’s developed as the only African American barbershop in the community. Perry C. Rhambo, born in 1875, began working at the age of seven. He worked for six dollars per month plus room and board, and eventually acquired enough money to purchase property on East Eleventh Street where his mother and father lived. He worked in an oil mill until 1900, when he got a position as a porter at the Sutor Hotel on Congress. In addition to his regular job, he also raised hogs, which he took care of and sold in his off hours. He eventually saved enough money to purchase a building for his barbershop. Rhambo attended Tillotson College, and his philosophy of life was, “Make every day count; make every day make you more than it takes to live.” The barbershop employed many African American men in the area.<sup>13</sup>

The Victory Grill opened on Victory Over Japan (VJ) Day in 1945 at 1104 East Eleventh Street and provided a place where African American soldiers from nearby bases could go for entertainment. Because of city ordinances at the time, segregation of nightclubs and restaurants became the norm, and in Austin this meant east of East Avenue. Johnny Holmes, known for his music promotion, provided a place the black community could dance to live music and have a good meal. Through the late 1960s, many great blues artists appeared at the Victory Grill, including B.B. King, the Grey Ghost (Roosevelt Williams), Bobby “Blues” Bland, Erbie Bowser, and Tina Turner. The grill became part of the “Chitlin Circuit” and provided African American artists a venue to play their music. In the late 1980s, the grill burned, but the building is now restored. Although it is no longer the Victory Grill, it still stands as a representation of a time when communities socialized together.<sup>14</sup>

The city did not enforce zoning ordinances in East Austin, so many business owners created their own opportunities. Beauty salons were often in private homes with a separate entrance in the back. Some beauty shops operated independently of their residence, like the Parisienne Beauty Shop. The full service salon, operated by Jewel Warren at 1014 East Eleventh Street, catered to the African American community. Warren graduated from Tillotson College and Crescent Beauty College.<sup>15</sup> Another unique business, the Harlem Service Station and Shadow Bar and Grill catered to the community in an interesting way. Customers could get an oil change or car repairs and have a beer while they waited.<sup>16</sup>

Arnold’s Bakery served the neighborhood and later became Rueter’s Bakery. It was located in what is now the historically designated Haehnel building at 1101 East Eleventh,

restored by the Austin Revitalization Authority. In the 1940 city directory, two generations of Rueters worked and lived behind the bakery. When Rueters Bakery left, the Southern Dinette Café opened along with the Jolly Hour Recreational Club located in the back.<sup>17</sup>

The Deluxe Hotel located at 1101 Navasota served the African American community, and James Reed and his wife Gladys operated the business. Reed also served as chairman of the Negro section of the local Community Chest Drive, which helped people in need of food, clothing, and money. He also worked as trustee for Huston College and other agencies to better the community.<sup>18</sup>

The Crescent Institute located at 1205 East Eleventh Street and founded in 1931 by businessperson Urissa Christian, helped better train young people with technology available in the workforce. The school had a beauty department and trained women for employment in salons. The curriculum also included business administration and a mechanical department. The school offered evening classes and job placement services.

Many people and businesses contributed to the culture of the African American community in East Austin, and residents of the area created a sense of unity and self-reliance. Chase Deslandes lived with his wife Flourine at 804 East Eleventh Street. He attended Huston College and graduated from the Academic Department. He then attended Kansas University and received his Bachelor of Arts degree. He began working as a teacher at Huston College in 1929 and obtained a promotion to professor. In 1938, he became acting dean of Huston College, and one year later received an appointment as dean.<sup>19</sup>

An African American folklorist, J. Mason Brewer, and his wife Mae, lived at 817 East Eleventh Street. He received his Ph.D. in Literature from Paul Quinn College in Waco. Upon returning to Austin, Brewer taught and headed the department of Language and Literature at Huston College in 1944. His work focused on the cultural history of Southern African Americans, and he presented programs on black folklore at the University of Texas at Austin. Brewer often wrote for African American historical journals and anthologies, and in 1970 he published the book, *Negro Legislators of Texas*.<sup>20</sup>

Nearby, Dr. Everett Givens lived at 803 Eleventh Street. His father, Morris Givens, worked as the only black chef at the Driskill Hotel, and his mother was active in the community. She was one of the original founders of the King's Daughters, an African American women's organization. Givens attended Huston College, and after graduation, he attended High Park School in Chicago to meet entrance requirements for dental school. He later attended Howard University, where he received his dental degree and returned to Austin, opening a practice on East Sixth Street. Givens' interest in the African American community grew, and he identified some much-needed improvements. Through his participation in local organizations, such as the Negro Citizens' Council (NCC), he was able to make contributions improving the quality of life for the residents in East Austin. NCC, founded in 1934, had already accomplished much for the community: they improved sanitary conditions, added African Americans to the police force, put in a city library for blacks, and improved parks in the neighborhood. Through Givens' efforts as vice president of the NCC, the school district erected new school buildings and built a recreational center for local black youth, and the city provided equal pay for equal work for African American city workers.<sup>21</sup>

Reverend William Holland of Sweet Home Baptist Church lived at 1727 East Eleventh Street. He participated in welfare programs in Austin and gained national fame. He founded the West Side Community House, where African Americans trained for

domestic positions and found assistance in job placement. Mrs. Holland, a graduate of Prairie View College, directed the Community House and taught homemaking. Both Mr. and Mrs. Holland dedicated much of their lives to assisting the African American community in East Austin.<sup>22</sup>

In March 1966, an investigation by the Department of Planning for the City of Austin, called "The Climate for Renewal," evaluated the sociological status and the impact of planned urban renewal on families in East Austin and the neighborhood in general. The conclusion of the study confirmed a committee should not decide on urban renewal, but that the City of Austin should vote on it as a city referendum. However, several years later, the city ignored this study they went forward with a committee on urban renewal.<sup>23</sup>

The Blackshear Urban Renewal program, proposed in 1969, encompassed much of the area; the approved plan moved forward in 1972 after the City Council approved it. The city viewed overcrowded, substandard land divisions, and an inadequate street layout as contributing to the decay of the neighborhood, so they worked to refine these areas. The city supplied the renewed neighborhood with new streets, landscaped public areas, water and sewer lines, and new streetlights and traffic lights. Homeowners forced to bring their property up to standards were often not financially able to make the necessary improvements, and often eminent domain enforced the acquisition of designated properties.<sup>24</sup>

A renewal project in the area of East Eleventh and Twelfth Streets began in earnest in 1996 with the Central East Austin Neighborhood Plan. It focused on land use and zoning, but the first goal of this plan was to preserve and restore recognized historical resources. One of the homes listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the Barnes Home at 1105 East Twelfth, is no longer standing on its original site.<sup>25</sup> Even though a home is in the National Register, this does not ensure its preservation, and owner neglect can often lead to enforced demolition.

The revised Central East Austin Neighborhood Plan in December 2001 called for low-cost housing accessible to anyone, and it sought to create safe, attractive neighborhoods.<sup>26</sup> This plan respectfully stated the importance of the historically ethnic character of the neighborhood. However, concerns arose within the community regarding how residents would be able to keep their historic and cultural resources when neighborhood pricing and property taxes caused them to relocate.

As part of the plan's identification process of historic areas in need of preservation, the area of Eleventh Street became a focus. Austin revised the Historic District Ordinance, creating a local historic district instead of qualifying individual homes for historical significance. The areas near Juniper Street and San Bernard Street both qualified as historical districts. The renewal program for East Eleventh and Twelfth Streets involved local organizations in the East Austin Community, and a design company, Crane Urban Design Team, assisted in the strategy. Development along East Eleventh and Twelfth Streets was primarily commercial and mixed use.<sup>27</sup>

The urban renewal plan for East Eleventh and Twelfth Streets contained clarifications for actions, including the acknowledgement of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) dated April 18, 1997 and signed by the Texas Historical Commission, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the City of Austin. Did the MOA become ineffective and thus unable to save historic properties of the area? Through such agreements, Austin

was able to relinquish some of its responsibility for historic preservation in the neighborhood.<sup>28</sup>

When driving down Eleventh Street and the surrounding neighborhood in 2012, it becomes apparent it is not the same neighborhood as years past. Residents of previous generations would not recognize it. This story of gentrification is a poignant one that resonates with public historians eager to preserve communities. When viewing the neighborhood, with its vacant lots where vibrant families once lived, one must consider the stories of the former residents, such as Huston College Dean Chase Deslandes, African American folklorist J. Mason Brewer, and Dr. Everett Givens. These residents and their businesses connected and developed a community in East Austin, but the physical relics of their achievements no longer stand.

A lone home stands on Lydia Street, silently awaiting its fate. When asked about this specific house, Mrs. Lindsey paused and stated, “There are a lot of feelings in that house. When my parents had to move out of that house, I moved into that house.”<sup>29</sup> In this East Austin neighborhood, there are many silent lots, driveways, and steps, and they are a remembrance of a rich community history.

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<sup>1</sup> “gentrification.” Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/gentrification> (accessed: May 02, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Eva Lindsey, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX, April 3, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle M. Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: African American Freedman Communities of Austin, Texas 1865-1928* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2009), 40.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “SAMUEL HUSTON COLLEGE,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/kbs06>, (accessed May 02, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Nolan Thompson, “WHEATVILLE, TX (TRAVIS COUNTY),” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hpw01>, (accessed May 02, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Nolan Thompson, “CLARKSVILLE, TX (TRAVIS COUNTY),” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hpc01>, (accessed May 02, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Michelle M. Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: African American Freedmen Communities of Austin, Texas*.

<sup>10</sup> Eva Lindsey, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX, April 3, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> J. Mason Brewer, “An Historical Outline of the Negro in Travis County,” *The Class of Negro History of Samuel Huston College* (Austin: Summer 1940), 70.

<sup>12</sup> Eva Lindsey, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX, April 3, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Brewer, “An Historical Outline of the Negro in Travis County,” 76.

<sup>14</sup> Karen D. Riles, “Victory Grill,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, United States Department of Interior, National Park Service (September 4, 1997), 5 and 9.

<sup>15</sup> J. Mason Brewer, “A Pictorial and Historical Souvenir of Negro Life in Austin, Texas 1950-1951: Who’s Who and What’s What” (1951), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Eva Lindsey, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX, April 3, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> *Austin Revitalization Authority*, <http://www.austinrev.org/historic.htm> (accessed May 2, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> J. Mason Brewer, “A Pictorial and Historical Souvenir,” 6.

<sup>19</sup> J. Mason Brewer, “An Historical Outline of the Negro in Travis County,” 49.

<sup>20</sup> J. Mason Brewer, “A Pictorial and Historical Souvenir of Negro Life in Austin, Texas,” 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> William R. Hazard, *The climate for renewal in Austin, Texas: a sociological investigation of attitudes toward urban renewal and community development*, 1966 (Austin: Community Development Program).

<sup>24</sup> City of Austin, “Urban Renewal Plan: Blackshear Area,” December 9, 1969.

<sup>25</sup> Terri Meyers, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX March 29, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> City of Austin, Central East Austin Neighborhood Plan, *An Amendment to the City of Austin's Comprehensive Plan: The Austin Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan*, Chap. 5, Sec. 5-9, Exh. A, December 13, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Eva Lindsey, interviewed by Sharon Hill, Austin, TX, April 3, 2011.