Unearthing Truth:
The Future of Sugar Land, Texas Depends on Its Bitter Past

(Top) A black & white version of early Imperial Sugar Company advertising artwork.
(Bottom) Orphaned and “Criminal” Children, convict leasing, 1903
Abstract

In April, remains from 95 bodies were unearthed from the old Imperial Sugar Company grounds in Sugar Land, Texas. Archaeologists announced that they belong to African American convict leasing prisoners from the Jim Crow era. Not only does this haunting excavation dismantle the dynamism of modernity, it also serves as a window into the identity of the city and its history. The striking disparity between the past and present identity of Sugar Land reveals the underlying networks of power, which has abused historic preservation to sanitize and glorify its tormented history. As such, history becomes distorted and “hidden in plain sight.” Despite such pervasive whitewashing of Sugar Land’s history, there is hope; this rare exposé can help welcome a new chapter of justice and healing by reinforcing Sugar Land with a more complete picture of its identity and history.
Since last year, Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD) had been planning to build a state-of-the-art technology center between Chatham avenue and University boulevard: a prime real-estate surrounded by affluent suburbia and just three miles west from the Sugar Land town square. The new center would allow students to explore diverse career options from information technology to cosmetology; this is exactly what the “dynamic district” of FBISD needed. But underneath the fallow field in Sugar Land, Texas, the ghosts of the past lurked, waiting to wreak a nationwide havoc and bring the construction to a screeching halt.

In April, while preparing the land for construction, the consulting firm found human bones in the soil. By June, Dr. Charles Dupre, the first African American FBISD superintendent, received a court’s permission to exhume the remains. Under the supervision of Texas Historical Commission, forensic anthropologists and archaeologists explored the ground and gathered data from the bones. After a month of digging, they found 95 bodies: of African American descent, dating from 1878 to 1910, all male except one, from 14 to 70 in age. Chains and bricks were also found alongside the bones. National and local media flocked to this chilling story and followed closely in the months to come.

(Left) Civil War-era graves excavated at a building site in Sugar Land, Texas. (Courtesy: KHOU)
(Right) Reign Clark Cultural Resources Director at Goshawk Environmental Consulting, Inc. points out at chains discovered at a historic burial site at the James Reese Career and Technical Center construction site in Sugar Land.
Why does an event like this disrupt a sense of peace and garner national attention? How could the 100-years-old bones shut down a 60-million dollar construction? What is really happening when human bones are found in the soil?

Anthony Giddens’ definitions of modernity suggest a clue to these questions. According to Giddens, separation of time and place creates a “peculiarly dynamic character of modern social life.”

In pre-modern settings, time and space were naturally inseparable, as one could only move throughout the space in a given time, and time constituted the boundaries of one’s movement. But following the series of inventions that disembedded time from space—such as a mechanical clock—people could move through space “without necessary reference to the particularities of place.” Globalization, Google Maps, and virtual reality exemplify the tenet of modernity’s separation of time and space.

Bones unearthed from the ground symbolize the opposite: the merging of time and space, a remnant from the pre-modern, static life. They signal that people actually lived and died on the very place, during a definite, traceable period of time; they render history as viscerally tangible. Consequently, modernity becomes an illusion. The past—marked by death—encroaches upon the living like an unwelcome guest to a party; no one wants to be reminded that death is near.

Giddens further identifies modernity with reflexivity. With reflexivity, actions and thoughts are “constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information… constitutively altering their character.” In other words, a new information—“95 bodies unearthed from Sugar Land”—compels a new system of thinking that can somehow explain the present in light of what we know now of what happened. Such haunting discoveries can leave people deeply disturbed and confused: how did we get
here, who are we, and where do we go from here? The history of Sugar Land offers a critical perspective and a possible remedy for this collective existential crisis.

Despite its sweet name, Sugar Land is built on a series of tormented pasts. In 1823, a southern pioneer and empresario—a Spanish word for entrepreneur—Stephen F. Austin acquired modern-day Fort Bend county through a Mexican land grant. Austin and other Texan colonists drove out the native Karankawa people by force and settled 300 southern families there. Fort Bend, to which Sugar Land belongs, is located by the lower valley of the Brazos river: a fertile floodplain and the center of transportation and commerce. The Karankawa tribe was believed to be extinct by 1891.

Not only did Austin secure this land through massacre, he and the southern settlers brought with them the practice of slavery to Sugar Land. In fact, he distributed land proportionate to the number of slaves the families owned; more slaves meant more wealth. Between 1820s and 1850s, the enslaved African Americans across the nation made numerous attempts of rebellion and escape from the brutal and inhuman life conditions of slavery. By 1857, however, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that African Americans, free or enslaved, cannot be citizens of the country in the landmark Dred Scott v. Sandford decision. Amidst all the tension and frenzy, Sugar Land reaped great wealth on its massive sugar plantations. Following the Civil War, emancipation, and depression, however, the “Sugar Bowl of Texas” quickly went bankrupt.

But Sugar Land persisted. In 1878, Edward H. Cunningham and Littleberry A. Ellis, confederate veterans and business partners, purchased one of the last remaining sugar plantations. Taking advantage of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery except as a punishment for crime, they struck a deal with the state to lease the entire prison population for their business. An egregious
practice now known as “convict leasing,” it manipulated the law to continue exploiting the African American people (private businesses and the justice system created “Black Codes” to incriminate African Americans for minor “offenses” and force them back into chains). Under “one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history,” more than 3,500 convict leasing prisoners died in Texas between 1865 and 1912 during the Jim Crow era. Shortly after the incorporation of the plantations into Imperial Sugar Company in 1908, legislation formally ended convict leasing. But African Americans’ brutal life conditions prolonged in the “Hellhole on the Brazos” and their history was quickly swept under the rug.

History reveals an anguished reality of the 95 bodies buried in the site. A 1915 map of Sugar Land confirms that the FBISD construction site aligns with a “Convict Camp.” How then, has the history of massacre, enslavement, and convict leasing shaped the identity of Sugar Land?
“Identity of places cannot and should not separate space from time or geography from history,” warns Doreen Massey. Boundaries result from millions of social interactions, power networks, both legal and physical force, as places depicted on maps show “places caught in a moment… slices through time.” Identity of a place depends upon a set of dominant narratives that demarcate, stabilize, and construct the history; as Ida B. Wells said, “those who commit the murders write the reports.”

Sugar Land was incorporated as a city in 1959. Statistics and recent news describe Sugar Land as a rapidly-growing suburb, 19 miles southwest of downtown Houston. By the 1980s, it became a home to the most master-planned communities in the nation, attracting white-collar and college educated commuters from Houston’s energy industry; it boasts steep increase in population, jobs, and housing. Overlooking Massey’s concern, the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation museum introduces Sugar Land as a company town, highlights its economic growth, and largely skips the history of enslavement and convict leasing. Reiterating the mysticism that possesses Sugar Land, Allen Bogard, the city manager of 17 years, remarked that “there’s not a single facility, road, nor improvement that exists today in the city of Sugar Land that can be traced back to either the convict-lease program or slavery.” He presents his city as “one of the best and safest places to live in the country.”

By 2013, Fort Bend became the most ethnically diverse county in the nation. After the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, which loosened immigration laws by abolishing the quota system based on national origins and preferring skilled immigrants from India and China, waves of highly skilled workers flooded into Fort Bend area, especially Sugar Land—into its job market and education systems like FBISD. Today, 21 percent of the population in Fort Bend county is African American, whereas only 7 percent is in Sugar Land. The stark demographic disparity indicates the displacement
of African Americans out of the city, as Sugar Land accommodates a newly sanitized identity of place. Strategic demarcation has once again told a contradicting and incomplete story.

What caused such duality between the history and present identity of Sugar Land? What other methodologies distorts and reconstructs the perception of the present?

“Eschewing modern historical modes of explanation, professionals, policy experts, and public figures iterate ahistorical and unhistorical views,” says David Lowenthal. They “remake the past in the mold they favor for the present.” Fulfilling this mission, historic preservation agencies such as Texas Historical Commission, Fort Bend Historical Commission, and Sugar Land Heritage Foundation designate historic values, build museums, and inspire community pride, rendering the past as “not only familiar and comprehensible but also accountable and controllable.” Mostly constituted of white “older patrician elite,” the organizations risk excluding African American history and narratives. Many of them are also actively involved in business and politics, such as John L. Nau III, the chairman of Texas Historical Commission who serves as a CEO of Silver Eagle Distributors, the nation’s largest distributor of Anheuser-Busch products, and as a major contributor to the Texas republican party.

Historic preservation has subjugated African Americans in both powerful and subtle ways, especially as a dog whistle for racially discriminatory policies; it has “devastating effects on blacks.”

Who is in charge of making history today? Who did the city of Sugar Land asked to be the task force for the exhumation of 95 bodies? Reluctant to sit on this table is Mr. Reginald Moore, a community activist who has spent decades advocating for the real history of Sugar Land. As the founder of the Texas Slave Descendants Society, he was the one who actually warned FBISD about the possible unearthing of a convict leasing site. Rice University now owns his extensive research on
convict leasing as its archival collection. His relentless advocacy helped preserve the Old Imperial Farm Cemetery in 2006, located just west to the FBISD construction site. Texas Historical Commission designated it and appointed Moore to be the guardian.

The reason why Moore is hesitant—despite some gains—is because he knows too well what's happening. When the city summoned the task force without his input, Moore couldn’t hide his disappointment:

“All the work I’ve done is going to be insignificant… They’re going to dilute everything I’ve done. They aren’t ever going to recognize the past. I won’t have anything to do with the museum. I won’t have anything to do with the memorial. Now they are bringing this group here, that doesn’t have any understanding of the history that we’ve been doing.”
According to Stephanie Yuhl, this is how certain histories remain “largely hidden in plain sight on the American commemorative landscape.” And unfortunately, the veiling of African American history is a nationwide pattern. Charleston’s Old Slave Mart Museum also suffered the persistent denial of city officials to acknowledge its tortured past. The historians and authorities agreed in 1952 that Charleston never had a slave market and that “the Southerner has never let the Negro suffer,” which sounds eerily similar to the claim made by Allen Bogard, the Sugar Land city manager. To recall Massey’s vital point, “history depends upon presenting a particular reading of that history.”

How might we confront a painful past in such a way that creates more justice and equity for the present and future? Is there hope for Sugar Land and Moore to see a new identity of the city propelled by the complete acknowledgement of its bitter history?

Around the same time the remains were being discovered, a new kind of history was in the making in Montgomery, Alabama. National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened its doors to the public: America’s first memorial “dedicated to the legacy of enslaved people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.” Located by the Alabama river, the memorial’s six-acre site served as the heart of domestic slave trade during the era of racial terrorism. Equal Justice Initiative, a public interest law firm that designed and established the memorial also sits nearby—inside a building that used to warehouse the enslaved. The front half of the building became the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, a museum unlike any other historic museums in America; it serves as “an engine for education about the legacy of racial inequality and for the truth and reconciliation.” The work of EJI can inspire and guide future decisions made regarding the convict leasing site in Sugar Land.
It is not clear whether similar events to what happened in Sugar Land will cause greater alarm or numbness over the tortured past of this nation. In 2015, University of Georgia unearthed over 100 bodies from an old slave burial site.\textsuperscript{43} Last year, one of the earliest slave remains were found in a 17th century plantation in Delaware.\textsuperscript{44} Enslavement, domestic slave trade, lynching, and convict leasing tell the unimaginable yet undisputable history—from the past not too far away. However, such cruel exploitation of labor and humanity generated incredible wealth and power, bolstering America as the most formidable nation in the history of mankind. And yet, it repeatedly glorifies its violent past; the monument of Stephen F. Austin as the “Father of Texas” placed at the Sugar Land town square in 2001 demonstrates just that.\textsuperscript{45} As such, the excavations in Sugar Land fits too perfectly to the pattern of distorting, sanitizing, and selective preserving of history, through which the white patrician hegemonic power networks persist. The task force’s collective decision over how to confront the past and memorialize its full history will determine the present and future identity of Sugar Land. The anxious hope for Sugar Land and America echos in the profound words of Maya Angelou:

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.”\textsuperscript{46}
Notes


11. Ibid, 17.


16. Ibid.


22. Ibid, 188.


30. Ibid, 1268.

31. Ibid.


39. Ibid, 608.


