



Destruction of Black Communities in the Name of Progress The Case of Austin, 1865-1928

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Introduction

In order to make policy decisions that promote the highest quality of life and opportunity for all Austinites, it is critical that we understand our past, especially as it relates to how and why we have crafted policy. This paper, part of a larger project to consider Austin's policy history as it relates to African American Austinites, covers the period from 1865 to 1928. 1865 marked the end of the Civil War, and is also the year of the Juneteenth decree that officially freed all people enslaved in Texas. African Americans already in Austin were freed, and additional freed African Americans from surrounding areas and beyond moved in. 1928 is critical not only to Austin's African American history, but Austin's policy history as well. This was the year of the release of a document, *A City Plan for Austin, Texas*, that had been commissioned by the City Planning Commission (Koch and Fowler, 1928). This document called for the segregation of Austin and the relegation of Blacks to a designated "Negro District." This segregation provided the framework for Austin's systematic discrimination against the Black population and for development of the city along racial lines up to the current era of gentrification.

Of equal importance during this era, though not the subject of this brief, is the city policy history dealing with Mexican Americans as the

city shifted from a bi-ethnic (White, Black) to a tri-ethnic (Black, White, Mexican American) town (McDonald, 2012). The most recent reality is Austin as a diverse, multi-ethnic municipality with a White population just below fifty percent of the total population, a large Mexican American population, a large number of new residents from throughout central America, a growing pan-Asian population, and a dramatically reduced African American population. Austin is a town with a complex, yet discernible, ethnic history worthy of deep consideration as we work to create an Austin that serves all Austinites well.

What we see in the period from 1865 to 1928 (and then in years after), is that Austin policy makers repeatedly harmed Black interests as they promoted opportunity and protected privilege for Whites. Today, as Austin's City Council, Boards and Commissions face difficult choices around housing, affordability, social services, homelessness, policing, transportation, and land use, we can look at our history and then allow that history to inform our decisions moving forward. We can continue the pattern of decision-making that promotes the interests of the privileged at the expense of others, or we can break from the past in ways that embrace, serve, and promote the strengths that can come with diversity. Accepting

the reality of our past, and then acting tangibly to counter the worst of it, are critical steps in formulating policy that serve all well. Hopefully, this brief contributes to that process.

The facts surrounding Austin's historic treatment of African Americans are known by some on a cursory level. If you mention the 1928 City Plan, those who follow local affairs are likely to at least understand the reference. Occasional articles in the *Austin American-Statesman* newspaper have discussed how the plan ensured social, educational, and economic inequality along racial lines (Zehr 2015, Greenberger 1997). A few are aware, as well, of the Black community of Clarksville that existed for just over 100 years, from 1871 until the 1970s. Still fewer know that that Clarksville was one of over a dozen black communities (Freedman Towns) in and around Austin, and that the city worked for decades to eradicate them. Understanding these and related policy-making aspects of our past can help us address the seldom-considered, but critically important, issue of the extent to which decision-making has improved since 1928, and how we can avoid replicating inequitable policy decisions that we made in the past.

Interest Convergence Theory

Austin's policy history as it relates to African Americans can be understood through the lens of Interest Convergence Theory, which was developed by the late legal scholar Derrick Bell (2004). Bell argued that when a power structure dominated by one group grants resources to a separate, marginalized group, they typically do so as part of a strategy to protect their own interests. Further, when it comes to an empowered group harming marginalized groups through its decisions, designs, and practices, the intent to harm need not be present for the harm to occur.

In the history of Austin, Interest Convergence Theory has been explanatory time and again. As

Austin decision makers have repeatedly harmed Black people and communities, they did not formally speak of doing ill to the Black community. Rather, they spoke of efficiency, practicality, and community benefit. As they advanced their (White) interests and violated African American rights and interests, they often provided compensatory resources to account – albeit inadequately – for the damage they did.

These points fit into a four-point argument about Austin policy making outlined below and to be developed over this series of writings. The remainder of this brief will focus on points one and two. Points three and four will be developed in subsequent briefs.

- 1. Over the course of our city's history, Austin decision-making bodies have repeatedly and predictably harmed African Americans to ensure the best possible circumstances for Whites.**
- 2. The predictable, systematic, and recurrent harm inflicted upon African Americans has not been a prime policy goal, rather the consistent byproduct of efforts to ensure quality of life and access to resources for Whites.**
3. In order to mask or make up for the harm resulting from their decisions, policy bodies have often provided compensatory resources. These resources have never fully accounted for damage done, nor have they matched the benefits the majority community gained through the harmful actions.
4. The systematic harm done to Austin's Black community by local policy making bodies offers the most plausible explanation for why we have a miniscule black population today.

Austin Policing and Policy-Making Following Juneteenth

Black emancipation officially came to Texas on June 19, 1865. On this day, a Union military Major General stationed in Galveston, Texas read General Order No. 3, which declared that “all slaves are free.” The occasion of this order has come to be known and celebrated by African Americans and others across the nation as Juneteenth. What is seldom appreciated is that along with declaring all 250,000 slaves in Texas free, this order also limited their movement and freedom of assembly, and created a template for how to control the Black population post-emancipation. General Order No. 3 decreed that Black people should typically be either at work or at home and that they should always be employed. It decried and outlawed idleness, as “idleness is sure to be productive of vice.” Further, the order charged “provost marshalls and their assistants” to use “every means in their power” to enforce the “instructions” of the order, which contained more language detailing what Blacks were not allowed to do than it guaranteed freedoms for what they *were* allowed to do. Within weeks, the language restricting Black liberty would be echoed in ordinances passed by Austin’s City Council.

According to the July 7, 1865 edition of Austin’s *Southern Intelligencer* newspaper, on June 27, the mayor and city council met to discuss “the fact that a large number of Negroes turned loose by their owners are congregating in and about Austin, as also perhaps desperate White men, making it necessary to organize a police force to deal with them” (Mears 2009, 25-26, 193). This meeting should not be misunderstood as the origination of policing in Austin. Elected or appointed Town Marshalls, U.S. Marshalls, or others serving as police had been present since the city’s founding, and the independent Austin Police Department would not be formed until 1924 (Rescola, Heckaman and Cirella 2018). Nonetheless, the June 1865 Council meeting was a call to respond to the Black presence in Austin with more police and with expanded police power.

Following the call for more police in order to deal with the presence of Black people, a vagrancy law was put into place to single out Blacks. It called for the arrest and punishment of “all able-bodied Negroes who have abandoned the service of their employers, for the purpose of idleness, or who are found loitering or rambling about, or idly wandering about the streets or other public thoroughfares.” Punishment could include arrest, whippings, and a fine between \$3 and \$100. If a person could not pay their appointed fine, an offender could be hired out to the lowest bidder (Mears 2009:26). Exorbitant fines provided a basis for retaking Black’s freedom and putting them to work building up the state’s resources, including providing forced labor to help with the construction of the Texas State Capitol (Blue 2000).

Few think of police as forces organized to control marginalized populations, and few associate the history of policing with the explicit desire to suppress Blacks. However, police forces across the South have their roots in the deputization of White citizens to track down runaway slaves, enforce oppressive Black codes, and in other ways control and terrorize Blacks (Robinson 2017). In other parts of the country, police forces were created to control ethnic populations and to control the working class and poor as they organized against oppressive work and life conditions (Robinson 2017, Obert 2018). Given the origins of local policing in municipalities across the nation, it should not be surprising that policing in Austin from 1865-1928 directly reflected the desire to control the feared, marginalized, and largely unwanted Black population.

Growth of Austin’s Black Communities

Following the Civil War, Texas was a violent state, but Travis County was less violent than much of the rest (Mears 2009). Austin, a population center in the heart of Travis County and the seat of the Texas capital, held the promise of jobs, relative opportunity, and relative safety. Even with the

early attempts to control the Black population, Austin was safer for Blacks than many other places. Blacks migrated to Austin from other places in central Texas, from other parts of Texas, and even from out of state. Before the Civil War, Austin was already around 30% Black, owing to the enslaved population. Immediately following the Civil War, the Black population grew to at least 36%.

From 1865-1868, White on Black violence in Texas resulted in the murder of at least 373 Blacks (Crouch 1984). Racial terrorism was rampant. Along with beatings, lynchings, and burnings, castration and forms of sex organ mutilation were a frequent aspect of White on Black incidents of torture and murder. Some acts were group attacks, but most were cases of individual White men killing individual Black men. In this era, “whites used violence in different guises to control blacks politically, economically, and socially” (1984:221). Some other Whites were appalled by the racial terrorism, and several who stood for Black people or their rights fell victim to the racial terrorism as well (Lavergne 2010).

Most of what we know of the White on Black violence in Texas comes from state and federal records compiled immediately after the Civil War. One set of records was collected by a special committee on lawlessness and violence established by the 1868 Texas Constitutional Convention. The second set of records was collected by the Texas Freedmen’s Bureau. In addition, Black

newspapers across the state reported incidents of racial violence. As many Whites reveled in their violence, lynching photography postcards provide additional graphic information about racial terrorism that occurred in Texas and across the South for decades. Members of White mobs would take pictures at lynchings and send them as postcards to friends and family (Allen 2000). The postcards document the festive atmosphere that often accompanied White on Black violence, and the reality that racial terrorism was celebrated and engaged by thousands of exuberant participants during the Reconstruction Era (Wood 2006; Lartey and Morris 2018).

It is amidst this backdrop of anti-Black violence that the Black population of Austin grew. The Blacks who came to Austin from points in Texas and beyond sought safety, autonomy, and opportunity. In the process, they founded well over a dozen freedman communities, most including a church and an autonomous, community-run school. Along with the work of survival in a hostile state and nation, the Black population was engaged in self-help and uplift through a range of work activities, worship, and schooling. There were small Black communities in all areas in the city and several around the city as well. The chart on the following page is from the work of historian Michelle Mears and includes the communities about which the most information is available. There were at least seven other Black freedman communities in addition to those listed here.



Students at Wheatville School, 1912 or 1913. Image courtesy of Austin History Center.

Select Freedman Communities in Austin			
Community	Date community established	Approximate population	Community-run school
Pleasant Hill	1865	180	
Kincheonville	1865	80	Kincheonville School
Barton Springs (Goodrich Plantation)	1865		School held in Barton Springs Baptist Church
Reyna Branch	1866	140	Reyna Branch School (1870)
Mason Town	1867	200	Mason Town School (1897)
Wheatville	1869	250	Wheatville (1881)
Robertson Hill	1869	400	Robertson Hill School (1897)
Clarksville	1871	360	Clarksville
Red River Street		400	Evan's community school (1881), later Central Grammar School (1885), later Trinity School (1896)
Burditt's Prairie (Burditt Plantation)	1875	148	Burditt's Prairie School (1897)
West Austin	1876	576	West Austin School (1897)
Gregorytown	1894	1206	Gregorytown School (1894)
South Side (Bouldin Plantation)	1895	100	South Side School (1895)

Displacement of Freedmen Communities

Rise and Fall of Clarksville

The freedman community of Clarksville was founded in 1871 by Charles Clark on land bought from former Governor Pease. The land in this neighborhood became increasingly sought after by Whites as the Missouri-Pacific Railroad came through and Austin expanded (Mears 2009). As White interests encroached upon the land, Austin's first gentrification effort began. For the next 100 years, Clarksville residents resisted White encroachment, held fast, and refused to be moved. As a result, they were effectively punished. The area went relatively unimproved for decades,

without paved roads and with limited municipal services. This state of affairs went on into the 1970s (Busch 2013). With the building of Mopac Expressway in 1967 and other incursions, the community would be carved into and undermined repeatedly until, eventually, White Austin won and the area ceased to exist as a majority Black area. Today, little is left of Black Clarksville beyond the Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church, which was founded in 1882. Now that the area is no longer majority Black, the infrastructure has been greatly improved.

Rise and Fall of Wheatville

The Black community of Wheatville was destroyed by egregious city negligence, targeted city ordinances, and the encroachment of The University of Texas. Wheatville existed primarily between what is now 24th and 26th Streets and between Rio Grande Street and Shoal Creek (near present day North Lamar Boulevard). It was founded in 1869 by freedman James Wheat and was the sight of a Black grocery store, the first Black newspaper in town, a church, and a school (Grose, 1972, Mears 2009). City practices made the community eventually uninhabitable. One means of taking control of the area was to create land and building codes that dictated types of structures allowed and how livestock should be maintained. These disrupted established and viable ways of life for Black people who lived there. In addition, the city regularly dumped garbage throughout the neighborhood and made sanitary conditions impossible (Hamilton 1913). In a 1913 report published by The University of Texas, with the cooperation and support of the City of Austin, a University of Texas research fellow provided a candid survey of Wheatville's sanitary conditions and the city's role in the state of affairs:

The garbage and waste are scattered about the lots and alleys. Why should they collect it, since the city wagons rarely, if ever, cover this section? Certainly the wagons go out there twice or thrice week. But for what purpose? To collect garbage and waste? No, to dump the garbage and waste they have collected from other sections. The city wagons have almost turned the streets and alleys of these people into dumping grounds. There is a city dumping ground where all kinds of trash and rubbish are thrown, a large part of which should be cremated, almost in the center of Wheatville. Frequently the wagons are emptied into a street or alley before the dump is reached (1913:53).

Eventually, as they would do 100 years later with the Blackland neighborhood of east Austin (McCarver 1995), The University of Texas and its interests would encroach upon Wheatville in order to support its growth (Myers et al, 2000). Clarksville and Wheatville were the strongest and largest Black communities outside of the eastside.

As their elimination was inevitable, so was the elimination of all other freedman communities outside of what would eventually become the city-designated place for Blacks to live.

The 1928 City Plan

The crystallizing moment of the freedman communities' decimation was the implementation of the now-infamous *1928 City Plan for Austin, Texas*. The plan formally segregated the city by creating a Negro district where all Black people were expected to live. Two aspects of the plan as it relates to Blacks are of specific note. First, the plan strategically sought to increase value to White interests by taking from Black people and Black communities. Second, the language never included harm to Blacks as an outcome, much more as an intended one. The plan instead spoke in disingenuous language of the resources to be provided to Blacks.

There are four references to negroes in the plan. The first two describe the strategy of cheaply acquiring lands held by Blacks in order to create something more desirable and of higher economic and social value to Whites. The second two discuss the provision of amenities for Blacks in a new "negro district," and recommend that these amenities be attractive to Blacks and that they be similar to the amenities provided to Whites in the city. In short, the plan provides an example of: (1) serving empowered interests to the detriment of the already disempowered; and (2) the lies (whether a matter of self-deception, or of being intentionally disingenuous) that governing bodies tell themselves and others when they serve the empowered and further harm the already disempowered.

Below are passages from the plan that describe taking Black-owned properties to make way for land improvements intended to benefit Whites (bold italics added):

We have already mentioned the Waller Creek Driveway, which will provide a convenient avenue for traffic from the northeast portion of Austin to the business district, and on south to the Colorado River Drive. The completion of this drive will entail

the acquisition of certain cheap property along the banks of Waller Creek from Eighth Street to Nineteenth Street. **Most of the property which will be needed is at present occupied by very unsightly and unsanitary shacks inhabited by negroes. With these buildings removed to provide for the traffic way, most of the remaining property will be of a substantial and more desirable type. The construction of this driveway, and reclamation of the banks of this creek, will make the remaining property very desirable and will increase its value many times the cost of the acquisition of the necessary property to complete the project.** (27-28)

Similarly, we are recommending the ultimate establishment of a neighborhood park in the vicinity of Eleventh and Twelfth Streets just east of the I & G N Railroad. This property, while it adjoins the City Limits, is well located to serve as a neighborhood park for this area in the future. **The topography is very rough and is at present occupied by the cheapest type of negro shacks, whereas the property immediately adjoining is more valuable and can eventually be residential property of the highest order. The acquisition of this property for park purposes, and the removal of the present type of development, will increase the value of the surrounding property many times the cost of the acquisition thereof.** (31-32)

Along with the plans to take Black people's lands and eradicate their communities, the plan also included the provision of compensatory amenities for Blacks once their lands had been taken:

Another neighborhood park which we consider very essential is in an area which there are now no facilities for a neighborhood park, and which is not accessible to any of the proposed neighborhood parks in the neighborhood of Eleventh and Chicon Streets. This park is recommended to be developed as a negro "neighborhood" park. **The location is very favorable for the proposed negro district and the value of the land at the present time is very low.** (32)

There has been considerable talk in Austin, as well as other cities, in regard to the race segregation problem. This problem cannot be solved legally

under any zoning law known to us at present. Practically all attempts of such have been proven unconstitutional.

In our studies in Austin we have found that the negroes are present in small numbers, in practically all sections of the city, excepting the area just east of East Avenue and south of the City Cemetery. This area seems to be all negro population. It is our recommendation that the nearest approach to the solution of the race segregation problem will be the recommendation of this district as a negro district; and that **all the facilities and conveniences be provided the negroes in this district, as an incentive to draw the negro population to this area.** This will eliminate the necessity of duplication of white and black schools, white and black parks, and other duplicate facilities for this area. We are recommending that sufficient area be acquired adjoining the negro high school to provide adequate space for a complete negro play-field in connection with the negro high school. **We further recommend that the negro schools in this area be provided with ample and adequate play ground space and facilities similar to the white schools of the city.** (57)

The 1928 City Plan for Austin, Texas hastened the displacement of Blacks from all parts of Austin outside of the eastside. But even the promise of resources "similar to" those provided Whites was never realized. Investment in the eastside never approached the levels of investment in the west side of the city until Whites began to move there in large numbers.

What Comes Next?

The 1928 City Plan, though seldom read in its entirety, is understood as a turning point in Austin's development and racial history. But rather than a moment where the city made a singular fateful decision to embrace Jim Crow, the plan is better understood as a crystallization of practices, policies, and development that had been coming together since 1865 and would continue for decades more. Future chapters in this series will discuss the policy decisions that lead to the ongoing hobbling and mistreatment of Austin's

Black communities beyond 1928. These included smaller, less consistently maintained parks; smaller, more poorly maintained swimming pools with fewer hours open; more unpaved roads; fewer street lights; fewer sidewalks; depressed property values; and less city investment in infrastructure overall. Eastside/westside decision-making with predictable systematic harm of Black and Brown people, coupled with the advancement of privilege and empowerment of Whites, characterized city leader actions until the current gentrification era. Today, with a wealthier, Whiter population, the eastside has more and better sidewalks, better pools, better parks, and better infrastructure than ever before. Such is the history of Austin policy-making.

For contemporary leaders who are concerned for the well-being and quality of life of all residents, it will be important to infuse our policy discussions with an awareness that our modus operandi since the Civil War has been to serve the most empowered first and then to serve the remaining population to the extent possible. With or without the intent to harm, our consistent focus on serving the interests of some has built in and escalated harm, and in several instances, abject misery, faced by others. Producing a better, more equitable, more livable city for all will require a paradigm shift. We should serve the least-empowered among us first, and then serve the already-privileged to the remaining extent possible. Are our Boards, Commissions and Councils up to the task?



A City Plan for Austin, Texas. Image courtesy of City of Austin.

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