TRANSLATING COMMUNITY HISTORY

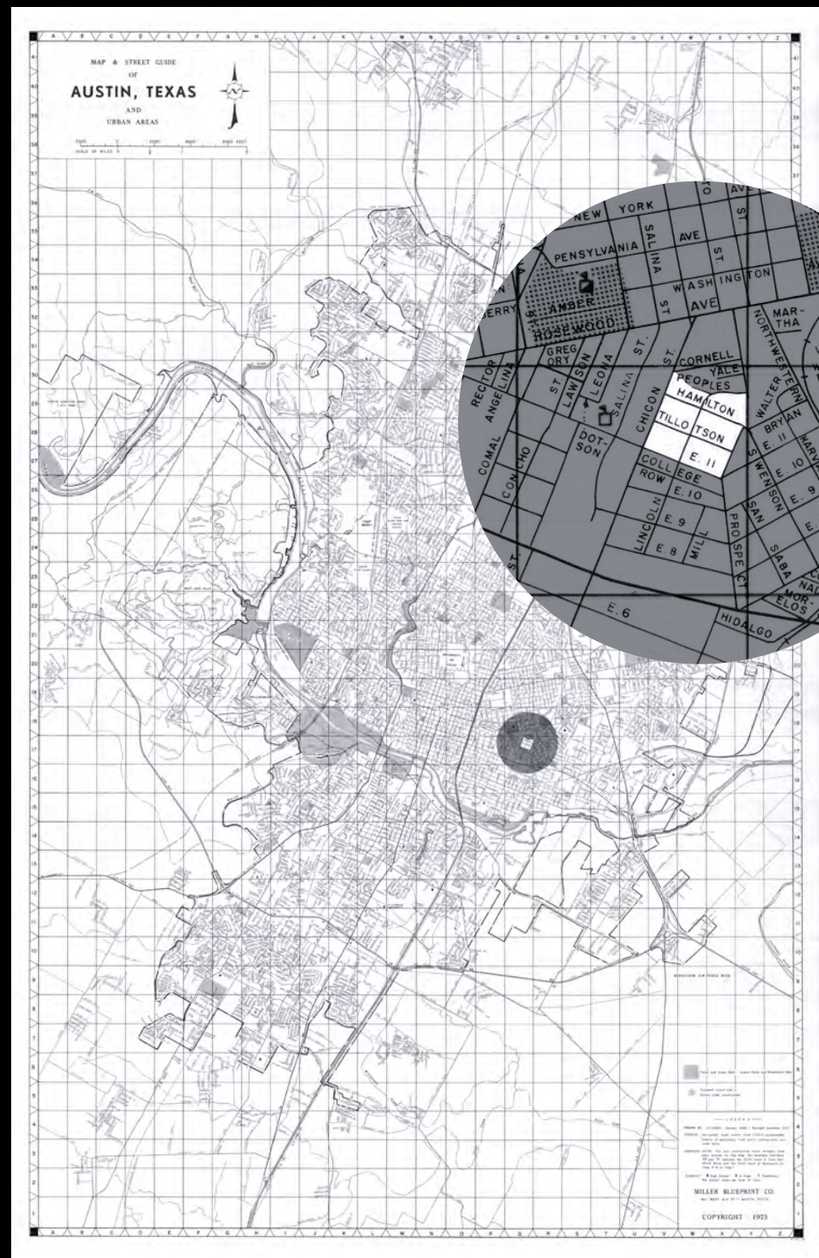
COLLEGE HEIGHTS &
AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

Black Lives Matter Rally
at Huston-Tillotson
University, 2020.

THE PROJECT

Chicon Street looking north, with Huston-Tillotson University to the left, 1968. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

The Translating Community History project uses creative archival practices to highlight the significance of East Austin neighborhoods. Open Chair and The Projecto, with support from the City of Austin Historic Preservation Office and the National Park Service, collaborated to create portraits and collect stories that celebrate the cultural and built heritage of these storied Black and Brown communities. Find more information at austintexas.gov/department/historic-preservation and submit your story at theopenchair.co.



Map of Austin. Map_N-11-1973b, 1973. Courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Map © Miller Imaging & Digital Solutions.

COLLEGE HEIGHTS

The College Heights subdivision, now part of the Blackshear Prospect Hill neighborhood, represents significant trends in local African American history. College Heights was established in 1913 near Gregorytown, a former African American freedmen's community. Gregorytown stretched from the Texas State Cemetery to Tillotson Institute—now Huston-Tillotson University—and was served by what is now Blackshear Elementary. College Heights' developers were white men, which was typical for the time. Few Black households had the resources to purchase land outright and racist lenders refused financing, so whites often bought and subdivided a tract for sale to African Americans. In College Heights, families purchased lots and built houses.

Chicon & East 11th streets looking north, 1968. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

By the mid-1920s, College Heights was almost completely built out with bungalow homes and small businesses along Chicon Street. College Heights was an African American neighborhood from the beginning, like nearby areas. More unusually, most families owned their homes. While the earliest residents worked as railroad laborers, laundresses, and in other blue-collar jobs, some business owners began to move to the area as segregation intensified throughout Austin in the 1920s.

In 1928, City Council adopted Austin's first master plan, which restricted where municipal services were offered. Unless Black families lived in East Austin, they could not receive City water, electricity, or sewer services; use libraries or pools; or send their children to public school. Even then, City services and infrastructure were subpar or nonexistent: streets in College Heights were not paved until 1960. Discriminatory lending practices, racial restrictive covenants, deed restrictions, and widespread prejudice added substantial hardships to the geographic segregation.

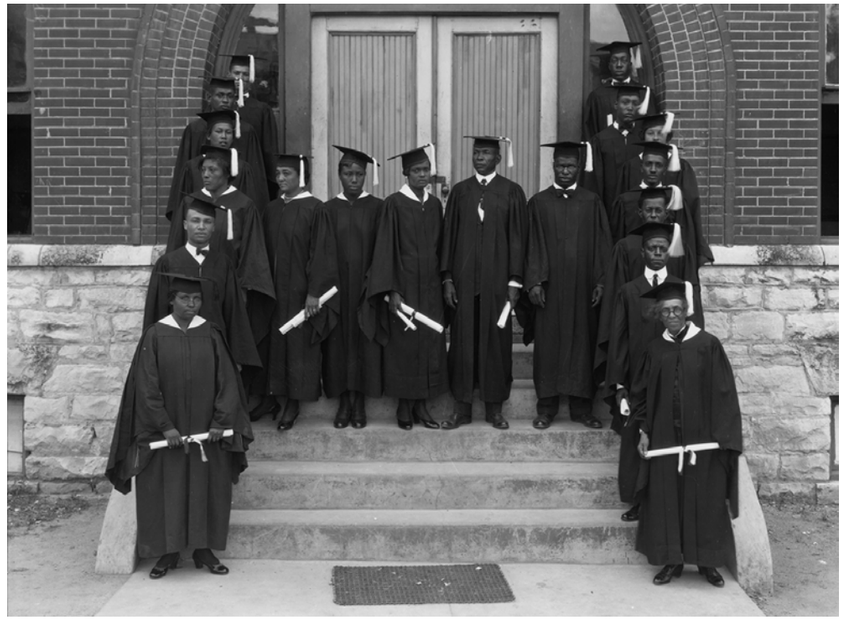
College Heights remained a Black neighborhood after the master plan, but it shifted from mostly homeowners to nearly half renters and more of a blue-collar identity. Small businesses also cropped up in the interior, including a grocery store and a meat market

run by Jerome Hill. Through this shift, many families lived in College Heights from the 1920s through the 1950s.

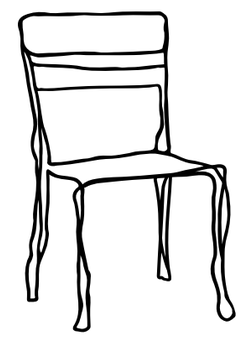
As Austin's economy boomed after World War II, College Heights saw a resurgence of residents who owned businesses. Many more members of the African American middle and upper classes moved into the neighborhood, building a socioeconomically diverse community. Luther C. and Ada Simond, prominent educators and historians, were among the new residents. Ms. Simond led the College Heights Improvement Council in the mid-1950s to encourage residents to maintain their property and to foster civic pride. *The Austin Statesman* called the Improvement Council the "largest and possibly the only self-sustaining community improvement project in the nation."

Huston-Tillotson University grew alongside College Heights as a nexus of African American education and culture and Austin's oldest institution of higher learning. The campus was historically home to Tillotson Institute, a Black teachers' college established in 1877 that merged with Samuel Huston College, another Black college established in 1875. Both schools initially offered elementary and high school education alongside college courses, responding to the need for education at all levels for formerly enslaved people. Like many historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), both institutions were established by religious groups.

Huston-Tillotson undertook a major building program after its merger in 1952. At the same time, external shifts challenged its historical mission. Educational segregation was declared unconstitutional in 1954-55, destabilizing enrollment and finances for HBCUs across the country even as the total number of Black college students increased dramatically over the following decades. Meanwhile, a shift in state and federal funding strategies provided tuition grants directly to students rather than institutions and left budget shortfalls. Scholars and activists assert that discrimination continues today by state governments and others in allocating resources—even as HBCUs maintain Black historical and cultural traditions, provide key leadership in the Black community, and produce students who are more likely both to finish college and go on to graduate school.



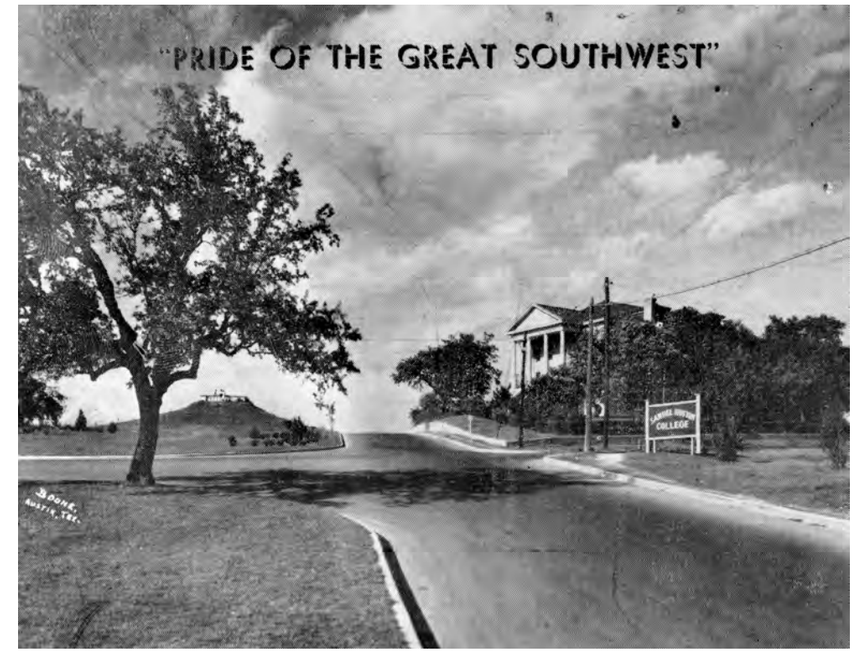
Huston-Tillotson graduation ceremony, undated. AR-2001-002-H132, The Villager Newspaper Photograph Collection, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.



Huston-Tillotson graduation ceremony, undated. AR-2001-002-H132, The Villager Newspaper Photograph.

“There was a sense of familiarity, a sense of belonging. Those spaces in time where you don’t feel otherness—where you feel like these are your people and this is your place.”

Natasha Harper-Madison



Eliza Dee Hall, the women’s dormitory at Samuel Huston College, in an undated photo. The building faced East Avenue and was demolished for the construction of I-35. PICA-27600b, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Left, Rider and child during Black Lives Matter Rally at Huston-Tillotson University, 2020.

Above, (from left to right) Silas Hershman, Siyon Harvey, Siyonna Mims, Anaiiya Garcia, 2020.

DANIELLE McGHEE

Danielle McGhee and her family are longtime Austin and Round Rock residents. She is currently the Director of Library and Media Services & University Archivist at Huston-Tillotson University.

Lawn view of Huston-Tillotson University, undated. PICA-27560b, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

"When I think about my childhood, I really think about my Big Mama's house. Being dropped off in the morning when my parents would go to work, and being there with my cousins. She had this big lot next to her house, so that was just like our playground. A lot of good memories. Behind her house she had a pecan tree. So we would pick pecans and she would make pecan pies. We used to get these small Styrofoam cups and go around the neighborhood and we would sell a cup of pecans for 25 cents a cup. The neighbors were all different. You have the dope boys on the corner, you have the people walking up and down the street, you know?

You wake up to the sound of *The Price Is Right*, the smell of oatmeal, or sometimes she would just make rice and she would add sugar. Jump On It Wednesdays. Where my Big Mama lived you would always hear the [Jump On It] music from Rosewood to her house, so we would sit on her porch and wait for my mama to pick us up to go to Bible class and then afterwards we found a way to go to Jump On It. Juneteenth parades, all the cookouts, linking up with friends that my mom grew up with around the area. You know, good times.

HT [Huston-Tillotson University] kinda came into the picture when I was in high school and I used to like to come to the homecoming basketball games. Or if we did the MLK marches we would end up here. Those are kind of the only stories I would hear about HT.

My siblings and I are the first generation [of] college students. My uncle mentioned that he attended school here. Those are things I never knew. And finding him in the yearbooks and I'm like, "Oh, he actually did!" Also, within my church community... some of the older people also attended HT and so I've seen a few of their pictures in the yearbooks. So in a way Huston-Tillotson has always been in my life, but in a distant way.

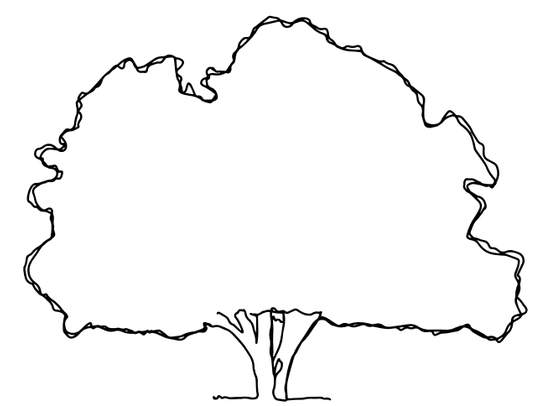
I know from learning about the history here, it's definitely deepened my understanding of how the city of Austin has grown, how it has been cultivated. My mom was [in] the last graduating class of the old L.C. Anderson High School, so there's just a lot of history in this specific area that definitely led me to apply for this position and to want to preserve the work here.

It's kind of sad when I look around and see how things are changing around here, but you preserve. And think that's another reason why I'm passionate about the work that I do because I get to preserve the memories and the history and people's experiences. And although it's a lot of work, it's one of those things that keeps me kind of focused on the work that I'm doing."

Jump On It Summer concert series founded by Nook Turner, and held at Rosewood Park from 1997 - 2003, photo undated. AR-2001-002-J089b, The Villager Newspaper Photograph Collection, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Juneteenth Parade, undated. AR-2001-002-J093b, The Villager Newspaper Photograph Collection, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Danielle McGhee in the
Huston-Tillotson University
archives, 2020.



KATRINA SIMPSON

Katrina Simpson is an Austin resident of more than 20 years. She is pictured here at her East Austin home with her neighbor Teo Hernandez.

“I moved to Austin in 1997. I originally had a house out in the suburbs but I just didn’t feel comfortable out there. I moved over here because I wanted to be in a neighborhood that was historically Black. I’m from Harlem, so I’m used to growing up around people that look like me and think like me and act like me. So I wanted to be more in that culture.

There was a lot of elderly people over here who’d been here for like 50 years. Either they rented or they owned their homes. Folks would walk the neighborhood a lot. There was a church on the corner where that giant mansion is now.

I liked it ’cause I could hear the church. I could hear people singing on Sunday morning. I could see all the old ladies going down to church with their hats on, all dressed up, and I could hear gospel singing coming out of the church.

Eventually the elderly people started dying off a little bit. It’s been weird to watch every house turn over. It’s weird to see people that look like us, that are comfortable with us, go. Now the neighbors, they don’t know me. The most devastating thing was when I watched that church burn down. They did not go into the church to stop the fire. I’d never seen anything like [that] before. They already had an aging congregation. But that’s the end of that history of our community. It also had a certain history in the culture.

That was the separation of how the culture started to happen.

The culture’s changed so much. There used to be a Black barbecue where Franklin’s is now. They were good also, but nobody was patronizing them so much. Where Hillside Farmacy is, there was a Black restaurant there called Gene’s, there was Creole, and they had a pretty decent business. Across from there, there was a drive-through convenience thing where Quickie Pickie is.

Me working in technology has afforded me to stay here. Most of my friends can’t stay here. I have roommates a lot and I try to support my friends who are artists who need a place to stay.

Doro Hernandez [is] my neighbor across the street. He told me he’s a carpenter so I [said], ‘Well, anytime I have some extra money, we can do some stuff together ’cause that way we keep it in the family.’ That’s how we started our relationship. We’ve pretty much been like family. I spend Thanksgiving with them; I spend Christmas with them. So for me it’s like a community. I just try to patronize the folks that are around me, that way we keep the money in the family.”

Katrina Simpson with her neighbor Doro Hernandez and his children, 2020.

Juneteenth Parade, 1995.
AR-2001-002-J095b,
The Villager Newspaper
Photograph Collection,
courtesy of Austin History
Center, Austin Public Library.

Ben's Long Branch Bar-B-Q,
located at the current site of
Franklin Barbecue, undated. The
Villager Newspaper Photograph
Collection, courtesy of George
Washington Carver Museum.

Katrina Simpson, Doro Hernandez and his children complete work in her backyard, 2020.

VOLMA OVERTON, JR.

“Gentrification has changed a lot and a lot of people have moved on up and out of this community.”

Volma Overton, Jr.

Volma Overton Jr. continues the civil rights work of his father, historic activist and former Austin NAACP President Volma Overton.

Volma Overton Jr., outside of the home of Richard Overton, 2020.

"This is Richard Overton's home. Richard was the grandson of an ex-enslaved person. Richard's grandfather and my great-grandfather were brothers. They were ex-slaves from Nashville, Tennessee. After the war, Richard's great-grandma came here with eight kids, and Richard's grandpa was one of those kids and [another] was my great-grandpa.

Richard bought this house after he came out of the military—around 1945. My family and other families loved to come here and sit, just sit around, and he would go on and on and on. He loved talking. The community came here and made him feel very loved. He was used to somebody coming by every day to see him that hadn't seen him before. That kept him going.

[The City of Austin] held out on giving [African American residents] electricity, running water, and gas right here in this neighborhood. This was just another reflection of how Negroes were treated here in Austin back in the day. It was basically citywide. The City Council had zoned certain areas for Blacks only, and back in the day they zoned parts of the East Side. They used deed restrictions to restrict Negroes to certain parts of town. The people got together and fought City Hall.

Back in the early '50s a Negro almost won a position in City Council because the district was strong and Black people were actively involved in trying to change things. As we are now, the Council people are voted on by districts. Originally it was by districts until this Black person almost won, then they changed it from districts to at-large. The City Council election was done by the at-large process till about 10 years ago, and that position of changing it from at-large back to district was fought in courts over years and years and years to try to get it back to district representation. When it's at-large the minorities don't have a great opportunity to get elected in the at-large position. But when it's a district, somebody from that district [will] get it regardless. So that's why they changed it, because there would have been representation from the Negro section in town.

Our status in town as far as a solid community of Black folks is no longer there. Gentrification has changed a lot, and a lot of people have moved on up and out of this community. There are four Black families on the street we're on right now. That's amazing: Hamilton Avenue, four Black families.

Volma Overton filed a historic federal lawsuit that led to the desegregation of Austin schools.

Sam Biscoe came to Austin as a young attorney. And he fought that case that took 11 years and went before the Supreme Court. DeDra Overton, my baby sister, was the plaintiff in the case. She was in elementary school when they filed the case and she was out of high school when it was settled. I cried many a tear myself as a kid cause we didn't understand it. We didn't understand why people hated us that much. My family has been involved in civil rights issues here in town for many many years. My father was president of the local NAACP for 20-plus years."

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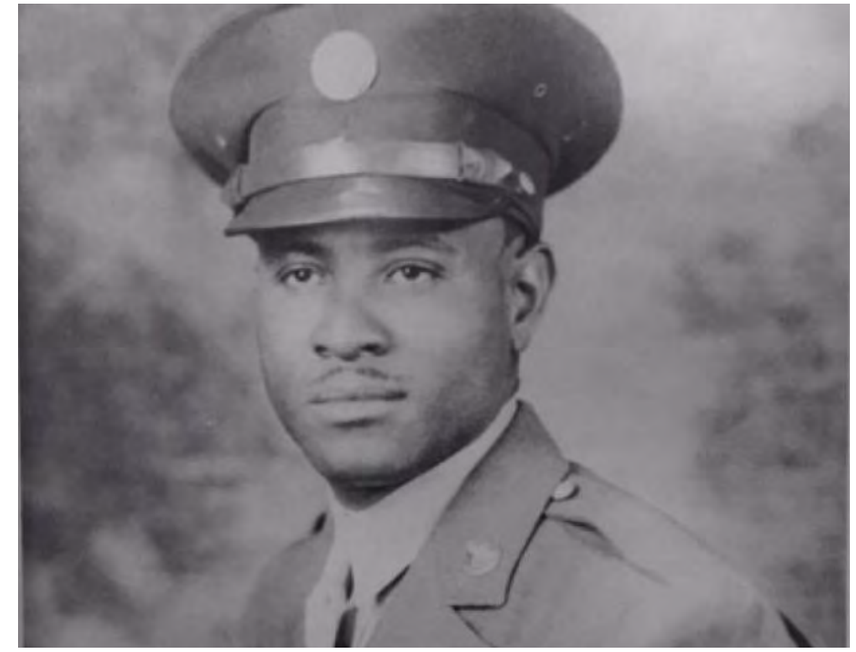
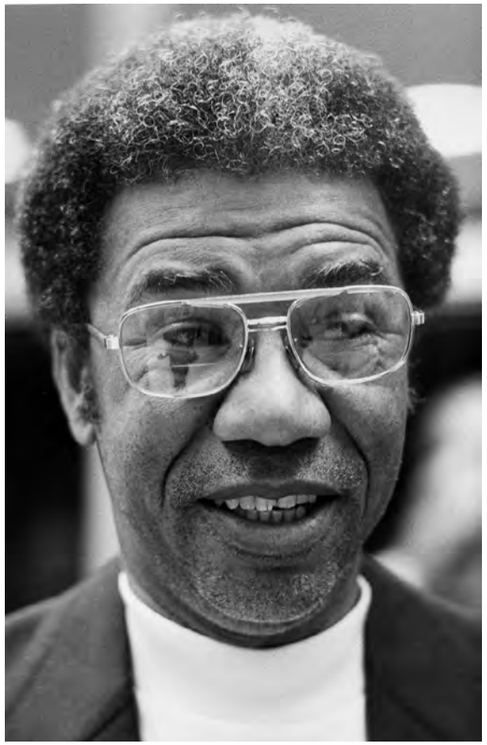
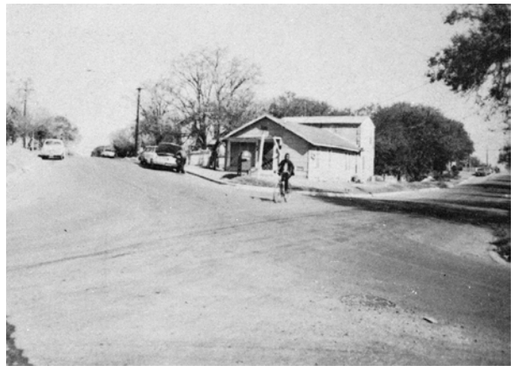


Beloved East Austinite Richard Overton (May 11, 1906 – December 27, 2018) was the United States's oldest U.S. World War II veteran until his death at age 112. His status as the United States oldest veteran brought him national recognition and in 2013, he was honored by President Barack Obama. His home still stands in East Austin as a historic landmark.



Left, Volma Overton Sr. is pictured standing in the midst of a "speak-in" or filibuster of Austin City Council on April 2, 1964. A release by the NAACP described the demonstration with the following words: "It is indeed our purpose by this speak-in to place emphasis on our grievances and thereby be afforded true democracy and first-class citizenship." PICA-28542, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Photo © Austin American Statesman.

Above, Volma Overton Sr., undated. Courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.



Top left, Prospect Avenue and East 11th Street, looking north, 1968. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

Top right, Poquito Street and Yale Street, with Rosewood Courts on the left, 1968. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

In 2017, the City of Austin gave Hamilton Avenue the honorary name of Richard Overton Avenue. Photo 2020.

NATASHA HARPER-MADISON

Council Member Natasha Harper-Madison represents Austin's District 1, the area where she was born and raised. She is the chair of the Health and Human Services Committee and sits on the Housing and Planning Committee, Judicial Committee, and Regional Affordability Committee.

Harper-Madison pictured
with her daughters, 2020.

“Watching the community come together every Sunday at Givens Park, I wasn’t the only kid with a shiny forehead ‘cause my mom took the leftover grease after she finished my hair and wiped me down.

There was a sense of familiarity, a sense of belonging. Those spaces in time where you don’t feel otherness—where you feel like these are your people and this is your place. And that’s always been my connection to East Austin.

It’s so bizarre to say we had to save for years to live in a neighborhood I grew up in. But that’s the truth. I knew that that was our mission. Yeah, we could live in the suburbs for a quarter of the cost, but no: I’m raising my kids in East Austin. So here we are. What I want to see stay is that togetherness, what I want to see change is that togetherness with us moving toward inspiration and optimism. I don’t want us to hang our hat on where we came from. I want us to continually recognize where we came from but actively evolve.”

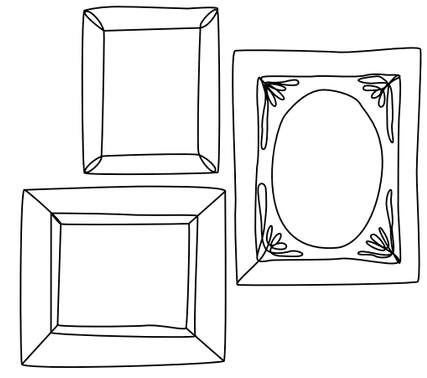
Harper-Madison pictured
with her daughters, 2020.

PATRICIA CALHOUN

Patricia Calhoun was born and raised in East Austin on Cotton and Comal streets. She attended Blackshear Elementary under Principal Friendly R. Rice, a close friend of Ms. Calhoun's father T.C. Calhoun. T.C. Calhoun was Principal of Kealing Jr High for nearly 40 years, retiring when the school closed in 1971. Ms. Calhoun graduated from the original L.C. Anderson High School. Calhoun is pictured seated outside of her home.

Patricia Calhoun pictured with family photos and documents, 2020.

“Living in a segregated world (which of course was all I knew at that time) had its merits. We had a thriving, close-knit community that was interested in the well-being of all. As a child, if I misbehaved or excelled, everyone knew! At the same time, it meant there was support from all parts of the community. Because of segregation, our teachers were among the best, as they all had advanced degrees from the best universities in the country; they also had a vested interest in their students’ success, as they were a part of the community. I’m sure if researched, findings would be that L.C. Anderson graduates were largely successful after graduation. Perhaps desegregation could have been more successful if white teachers and students had integrated black schools instead of the other way around. Because of our intense sense of community and the faithful, resilient people we are, I believe Blacks would have been more accepting of Whites in our environment than they were/have been of us in theirs.



Our social activities tended to revolve around the home with periodic large events of Greek or civic organizations. Churches were vibrant and totally involved with communities, creating strong individual faith and confidence. These are attributes that I think we lost with the way desegregation was handled.

While it sounds like I preferred segregation, I did not; I was always reminded when I stepped outside of my community that I was viewed as ‘less than.’ Before desegregation, a trip downtown to shop could be stressful… one could not try on clothes, could not stop to eat, and had to plan for restroom visits. (As I recall, there was a restroom in one of the bank buildings.) It didn’t make sense to me that you could buy the clothes but had to try them on in a closet or back room with the housekeeper assisting you instead of a salesperson. (Of course, in the end you got some great buys because those ladies would watch the stock and hide items for you.)

I recall (as a very young child), asking my mother constantly why we couldn’t go to the Piccadilly Cafeteria to eat… there was just something about the Piccadilly! There weren’t mainstream restaurants on the Eastside- couldn’t get food delivered, not even a pizza. Unfortunately, the effects of segregation—the struggle to achieve and just live, continue to be with us even though things are physically different.”

THE MIMS FAMILY

Mims family pictured at their grandmother's East Austin home. The Mims family has been residing in East Austin for generations.

From left to right, Sharonna Mims, Anayiia Garcia, Siyon Harvey, Siyonna Mims, and Silas Hershman, 2020.

The Mims children at the street intersection of their grandmother's family home. Front row: Siyonna Mims, Siyon Harvey. Back row: Anayiia Garcia, Silas Hershman, 2020.

"My family is a fourth-generation East Austin family. My mom's been living in East Austin her whole life. She used to tell us stories about how everything was Black-owned. The teachers, the mailman, the grocery stores, everything was Black."

Antoinette Mims

Antoinette Mims not pictured.

Above, Anayiia Garcia and Siyonna Mims, 2020.

Left, Siyon Harvey standing on his street, 2020.

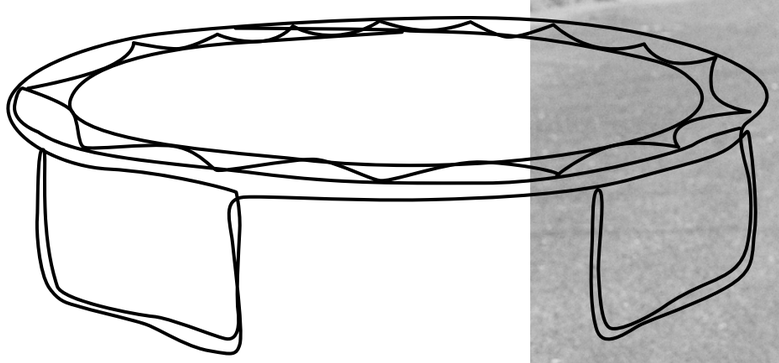
Siblings Siyon Harvey
and Siyonna Mims, 2020.

Siyon Harvey and
Siyonna Mims pictured
on the trampoline in
their backyard, 2020.

“It’s okay to love self. When we grew up it was gangsta, it was hood. 12th Street was the hot spot. It was kinda scary. I went to Blackshear and it was way different. It was immediately post-[crack epidemic]. It was kinda like broken homes, but it was still Black. There were a lot of Black people who owned houses out here. Not too many good memories for me. My mom and my father, they were both on crack cocaine. My mom smoked dope my whole life. Years ago she just stopped.

Now she’s buying this house, she got two jobs, it’s like she aged backwards. She’s so beautiful and so strong. That’s what I feed off of. I’m so glad my kids get to be around her and feed off of that. It’s awesome.

There’s a lot of people my mom’s age, whose parents have worked hard for these houses and they’re just selling out. I refuse, no way. Not me. To me it’s so much deeper than that. It’s deeper than the one lump sum. When people haven’t had money, that means everything to them. The history to me and [what’s] behind it—it’s not worth it.”



Siyon Harvey stands on
his street, 2020.

MARILYN POOLE

Marilyn Poole is a multigenerational Austin resident and lawyer who graduated from Reagan High School and earned her law degree University of Texas Law School. She is pictured in front of her grandparents home holding a copy of a newspaper article highlighting her grandfather Jerome Hill.

Marilyn Poole's late grandfather Jerome Hill worked for Southern Pacific Railroad and the City of Austin. He also ran a meat market in his home at 1909 Tillotson Avenue. Mr. Hill was most renowned as a master gardener who grew "one of the finest hibiscus gardens" in Austin, according to *The Austin American-Statesman*. His yard featured 14 varieties of hibiscus, as well as abundant other plants, fruits, and vegetables. Local garden clubs praised his work—unusual recognition at a time when Austin was highly segregated—and Lady Bird Johnson visited the property. After his retirement, Mr. Hill designed the Huston-Tillotson campus grounds. The Martinez family (pictured at right) currently resides in her late grandfather's home.

Left, Jerome Hill and Walter Long, undated. Courtesy of George Washington Carver Museum.

Right, (from left to right) Nabor Martinez, Susana Martinez, Marilyn Poole, 2020.

Top left, Blackshear Elementary, undated. PICA 36350, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Top right, Holy Cross Church, circa 1936-1940. PICA-24454b, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Bottom right, Locs Studio on Chicon Street, 2020.

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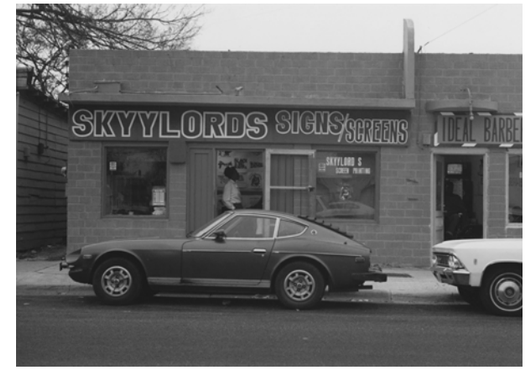


Top, Skylord's on East 12th, 1988. AR-1992-009-011, photo by Robert Barnstone, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Bottom, Buffalo Soldiers ride through a Juneteenth parade, undated. AR-2001-002-J101b, The Villager Newspaper Photograph Collection, courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

DORIS WILLIAMS

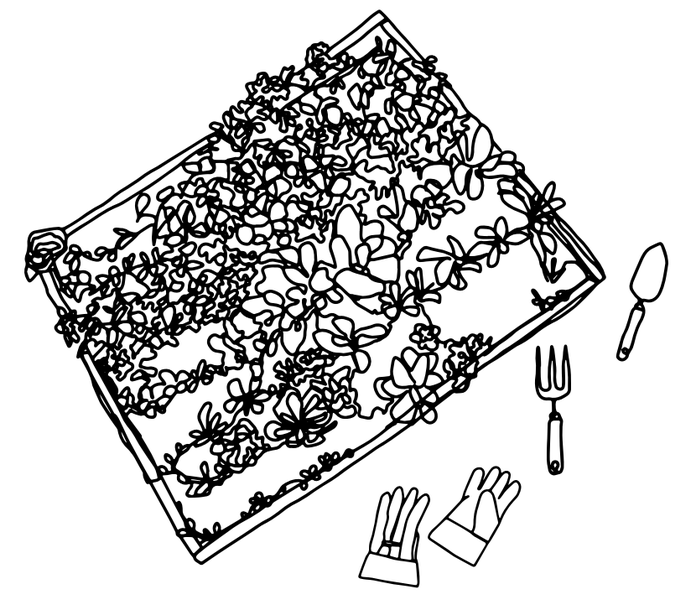
Doris Williams was an active community member and former resident of the Blackshear Prospect Hill Neighborhood. She now lives with her son in Missouri, Texas. Williams is pictured in front of her home.

Above, Flower from Ms. Williams garden, 2020.

Doris Williams seated
outside of her home, 2020.

“I hope that we will start taking part and take control. You have to go to the meetings, you have to know what’s going on, and you have to vote. I have a grandson who’s 19, and I told him to register to vote. I usually study the leagues of people [running for office] and make my decision according to that. I try to learn as much about them and what they’ve done and not just come to our church when it’s time for election. But I’ve been in meetings so long and schedules so long that I don’t like to participate in anything that’s scheduled. I want my freedom.

But I do work and try to get young people involved. And I influence the people in the neighborhood, ’cause when I tell them something it’s gonna be right, [it’s] not for selfish reasons. I don’t have anything to be selfish for, because if God gave me 90 years, and fun years, why should I not be free with people?”



BRIGIDA HOLMES

Brigida Holmes is an East Austin resident. She is pictured here at her East Austin home. The photo she is holding shows her grandmother in the house where she currently resides.

“I told my sons when I’m gone, y’all make sure y’all keep it going. Either one of them stay here or fix it up and rent it out. I’ve been living here 40 years, so I’ve been here. I went to Blackshear Elementary. I’ve seen it all. I raised kids in this house, grandkids and everything.”

Brigida Holmes son
Raymond Selby and
family friend Dee Halnot,
on Holmes' porch, 2020.

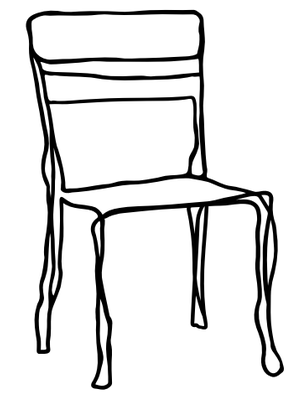
CHRISTIANNA MAXFIELD

Christianna Maxfield is an East Austin resident standing outside of her home, 2020.

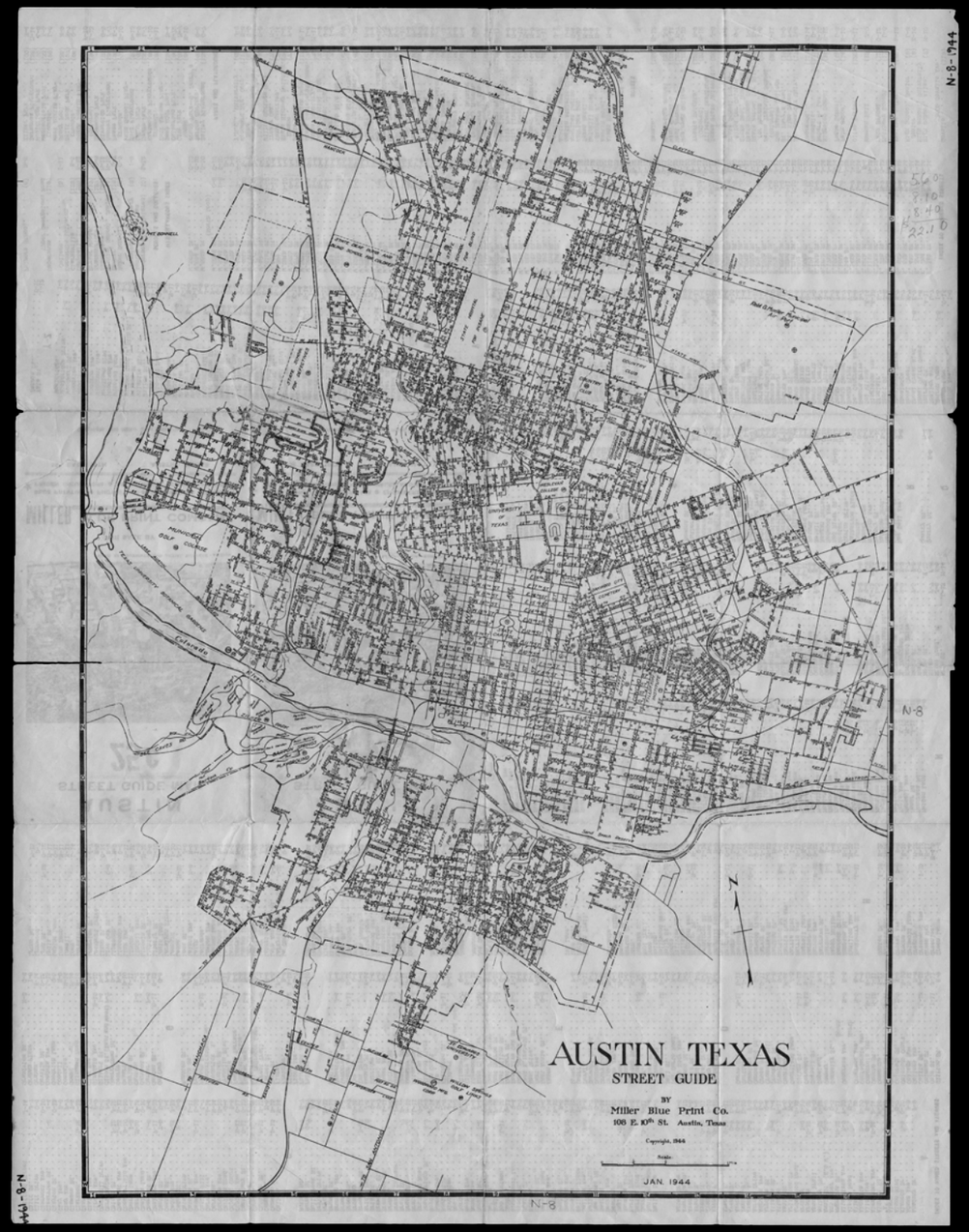
“Unfortunately, the effects of segregation—the struggle to achieve and just live—continue to be with us even though things are physically different.”

Patricia Calhoun

OPEN CHAIR: THE MISSION



Through community-centered open portrait studios and visual exhibitions, the Open Chair team uses various creative practices to intervene on narratives of (in)visibility that shape perceptions of Black and Brown communities in the American city. The resulting works illustrate the resoluteness of these communities and their impact in shaping the American city.



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Austin street guide. Map N-8-1944, 1944. Courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Miller Imaging & Digital Solutions.

This book captures only a fraction of the vibrant people who have inhabited and nurtured East Austin. Contact us to contribute your story to Open Chair.

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The Open Chair team, (from left to right), Tamar Price, Brittney Williams, Moyo Oyelola, and Chuka Agbaraji.

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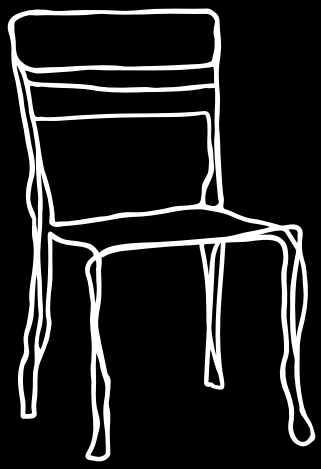
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