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Count the Outside Children! Kinkeeping as Preservation Practice Among Descendants of Texas' Freedom Colonies

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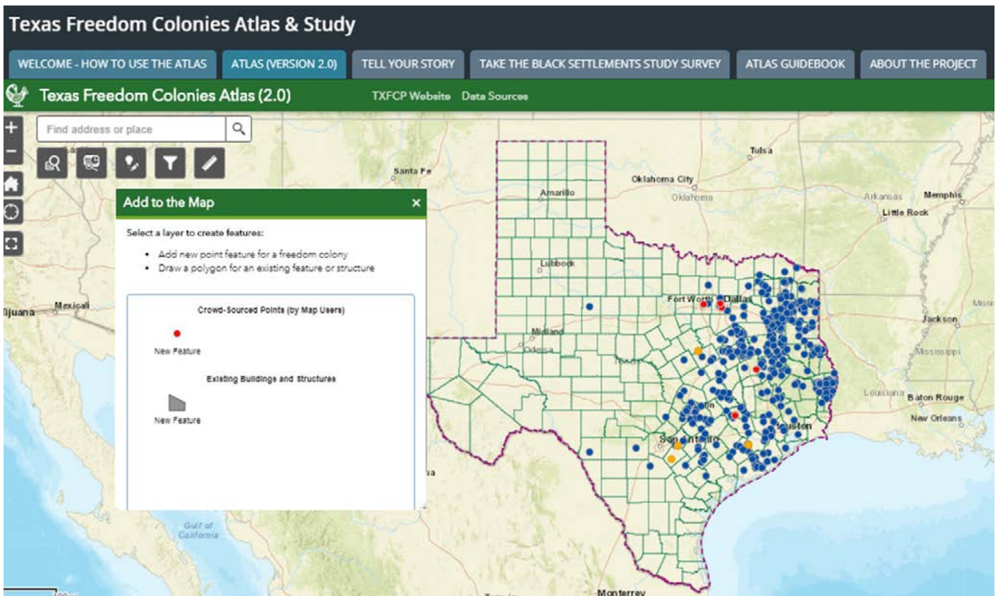
Gwen Bluiett, a former Houston resident, retired mail carrier, and self-taught genealogist, could recite, in some instances, the date and time someone was born without referring to any written list or computer database. I watched her do this several times as she and her cousin Herman Wright led me on tours down the back roads of Deep East Texas and through cemeteries, including the graveyard adjacent to where hate-crime victim James Byrd's body was found in 1998.[1] Though the death is associated with the city of Jasper (where the murderers were sentenced), the site of this hate crime was actually Huff Creek settlement, a historic black community where Bluiett's ancestors settled shortly after

The Texas Freedom Colony Atlas and Study is a map of freedom colonies on a StoryMap platform. The Atlas maps known settlements and allows for storage of kinkeepers' stories, archival materials, and tours which are often the only way to spatialize previously unmapped freedom colonies.



emancipation. During my visit to Huff Creek, I learned about the remaining structures, landmarks, and buildings associated with other settlements in the area. As we walked down the dirt road between a former school and a graveyard, I asked her why gathering genealogical data from cemeteries was so important. She explained that she wanted to ensure that descendants of community founders "know who their people are." Bluiett describes these revelatory moments as feeling "just like you coming back home, even though I was not reared here, this is a part of my heritage... I think there is a connection that takes you waaaaay back."

While interviewing nearly 50 descendants (during 2014–16) in several black settlements in Deep East Texas, I encountered women like Gwen Bluiett, who each took me waaaaay back. They shared family histories that were actually community histories, which enabled me to map nearly imperceptible cultural landscapes and settlement patterns. Their collection and organization of different forms of ephemeral knowledge associated with kinship and place is called "kinkeeping." Kinkeepers remember, define, and enumerate people and places that for years have ceased to count among preservationists and planners.

Huff Creek settlement is one of those places, and it is challenging to find without the aid of a kinkeeper. The settlement, whose heritage is overshadowed by the gruesome 1998 dragging death of James Byrd, is one of 557 Texas freedom colonies,[2] once independent, self-sustaining historic black communities unrecognizable as official places to most Americans. Founded by formerly enslaved Texans between 1865 and 1920,[3] many of these freedom colonies are missing from official maps and have lost population since the Great Migration. Because most never had legally recognized boundaries, freedom colonies are best understood through the features that remain—churches, schools, clusters of buildings belonging to long-time landowners, and cemeteries. Sprawl, gentrification, natural disasters, heir property (communally owned land by heirs of someone who didn't leave a will), outmigration of residents to higher opportunity areas, and urban renewal have destroyed many freedom colonies. However, some descendants of community founders remain committed to making sure these places are not forgotten.

Gwen Bluiett is a Jasper County resident who lives in a freedom colony called Magnolia Springs. Here, she leads a tour of a freedom colony known as Clear Creek Community. She is pointing to and recalling her time attending the church when it was active and the settlement was populated.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA R. ROBERTS

During an ethnographic study of Newton and Jasper County freedom colonies, I identified kinkeeping as a local preservation practice. I followed kinkeepers on walking tours, and recorded their memories and oral histories at the kitchen table, during overnight stays, at reunions, and at homecomings. Interviewing kinkeepers reveals the specific meanings and attachments that matter in a particular context, belying the appearances of places hidden behind the Pine Curtain[4] in the Deep East Texas woods. Kinkeepers enable planners and preservationists to avoid treating African Americans and their communities like abstractions[5] or conversely emphasizing specific elements of buildings to the exclusion of local conceptualizations of historical significance rooted in a whole community.[6] Instead, kinkeepers like Bluiett, through their knowledge and understanding of belonging[7] rooted in complex social networks, add both emotional and historical visibility and dimensions of significance[8] to what remains of freedom colonies assumed historically insignificant and placeless by the untrained observer.[9]

THE ROLE OF THE KINKEEPERS

To validate that a place exists or is worthy of listing as a significant cultural resource, it is the fundamental practice of planning and preservation professionals to establish measureable, documented facts: determining population levels, boundaries, building types, and recorded historic activities and events.

White accounts of African American history are steeped in such enumerations. Whether it is the counting of African Americans by age, cotton production, spatial concentration, or slave auction block value, black use value has been incorporated into land-use practice and the country's political economy.[10] Before and after emancipation, racialization of landscapes[11] has overshadowed culturally relevant kinship types and forms of land ownership.[12] Hortense Spillers describes the ambiguity in the accounting of Africans as cargo on the way to the new world disconnected from their groups of origin, gender roles, naming conventions, or the manner in which they constructed kinship ties. Captive, enumerated black people would be bundled and stacked in ship hulls, bred in plantation cabins, then cordoned off and penned into redlined zoning districts with racial covenants.[13] Enumeration, accounting and categorization of people and places, are agents of abstraction.[14] Because these forms of data and associated analysis are thought to be objective, questioning their underlying assumptions is discouraged.

Kinkeepers disrupt this accounting approach by articulating connections between people and place as they maintain family relationships via various activities, such as planning family rituals or reunions,[15] coordinating family caregiving,[16] or serving as a repository of family kinship and medical information.[17] Characterized as a female hobby, kinkeeping is a practice of collecting and managing information about belonging—who belongs to whom and who belongs where. Kinkeepers' womanist[18] knowledge and understanding of belonging, emerges from the everyday lives of black women. I characterize the kinkeeping I witnessed—recollecting, reviewing archival materials, and reciting family tree information—among freedom colony descendants as alternating processes of "conjuring and quilting."[19] They conjure the names and offspring through careful prodding at community events and then quilt together their relationships with each other and the land (as they did for me in follow-up interviews and cognitive mapping).

Like other practices associated with black women, quilting and conjuring place and familial relations have been considered a resource for researchers but not as evidence of legitimate preservation

expertise. However, preservation is not the only sphere in which the legitimacy of black women's voices, family structures, and leadership capabilities have been perpetually questioned and dismissed. During the 1960s, a federal report claimed that matriarchal family structures hinder the progress of African Americans "as a whole."[20] Black family formations were deemed "destructive."[21] The report and the census also sliced and diced relationships into categories such as "household, single-mother"; associated births were called "illegitimate." Women I interacted with while conducting research often spoke of those who fell outside the scope of the Western construction of family and respectability as "outside children," or the "outside child." However, kinkeepers allocated space in their place and family narratives for unkempt notions of family and land ownership that include multiple marriages, prodigal children, and lapsed church membership.

The kinkeepers embrace and integrate seemingly errant people or places back into the stories of communities, church foundings, and land acquisition—thereby reconstituting disassembled remnants into place. Men's "second" families, single-mother households, or otherwise non-nuclear households are integrated into the family and place narrative with ease. Through an inclusive definition of family, the kinkeeper is concurrently exposing and legitimizing family structures and relationships dismissed and shamed elsewhere.

Kinkeepers seize the opportunity to unpack kinship at events such as homecomings and within spaces like cemeteries, where they can operate outside authorized relationships or familial structures. Homecomings are annual community celebrations held at churches within freedom colonies. During these two-day events, kinship and church networks meld. Those who grew up in the settlement attend, as well as many of their progeny no matter where they may live now. Nearby settlements also attend, and the offering collected pays for cemetery maintenance for the community as well as next year's celebration. In cemeteries they may simultaneously tell the history of a place and their kinship to grand-aunts and -uncles visiting from California during reunions and homecoming celebrations.

Left: Huff Creek Chapel, located in a freedom colony of the same name. Huff Creek was one of several freedom colonies through which Gwen Bluiett led informal tours in Jasper County. The Chapel faces Huff Creek Road where hate crime victim James Byrd's body was found after his dragging death in 1998. Right: Herman Wright and Gwen Bluiett, area freedom colony descendants, at Huff Creek Chapel.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA R. ROBERTS

During our visit to cemeteries, Wright and Bluiett walked the grounds and pieced together kinship and place while talking with the grave-keepers and homecoming presidents who plan annual events commemorating community founders for Huff Creek. Wright and Bluiett walked through the minefield of explaining kinship disrupted or complicated by enslavement. While recounting this genealogy and list of area freedom colonies, I heard Bluiett bear witness to the black female body as the site of involuntary community creation. She recalled the lack of control her enslaved female ancestors had over their own bodies but chose to emphasize their humanity as the matriarchs of area families—honoring their labor, sacrifice, and role in founding the freedom colonies.

Other kinkeepers maintain timelines and calendars. Gwen Bryant Carter, who has roots in Magnolia Springs and Rock Hill settlements, maintains, in her head, the locations of freedom colony cemeteries, the Newton and Jasper freedom colony homecoming network calendar, and the list of names of settlements in the region. During our conversations, Carter connected family names with anchor sites like schools and the churches where homecomings are held. I was also able to attend some of the homecomings, having learned from Carter the weekends and months in which they had been held since the Great Migration.

AN EXPANSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF "BELONGING"

In their recollections and stories, kinkeepers use expansive, inclusive definitions of belonging and place. This inclusiveness is exemplified through their ease and nonjudgmental approach to explaining the relationship between women crossing amorphous settlement, familial, and social boundaries. These relationships subvert current maps.

For example, women who grew up in the Shankleville settlement of Newton County remember keeping kin (biologically related or not) by assisting neighbors living in secluded, wooded areas. Lillie White of Shankleville recalls,

> "We'd walk, the women, if somebody gets sick they take the old lamps, oh I mean the lights, like a splinter, pine splinters. And they go to people's house and put on those high-top shoes and walk the people out, and sit up all night with them. That's the way we had to travel. And all of those were old ladies, but they went to see about them."

There's no physical evidence of these long-lost circulation patterns and corridors between freedom colonies, of course, but the memories of the late-night walks tell us much about sense of place and expansive belonging among freedom colony women.

Jasper and Newton County's official and unofficial boundaries challenge formal planning constructions of communities and places. Interestingly, the border issue was a real one, as census takers mistook the Huff Creek settlement as being located in Newton County in two decennial censuses. Gwen Bluiett clarified that Huff Creek was a porous border town, serving as a social way station for Newton and Jasper County freedom colonies. Huff Creek settlement was central to regional freedom colony life. Within this in-between place, marriage, school and church attendance, cemetery burial, and homecomings celebrations connected residents. Youth from both counties attended the settlement's Rosenwald School or nearby Jamestown School in Newton County or walked through Huff Creek on the way to their own schools or activities. Here place and kinship came together, she explained, as the families in Jamestown in Newton County married or attended church with the families of Magnolia Springs in Jasper County.

Marian Shankle (left) and Gwen Bluiett at the Shankleville Community Homecoming in Newton County, Texas.

PHOTO BY ANDREA R. ROBERTS

CO-CREATING NEW MAPS

After my field research was completed, my next task was to translate these graveyard recollections, quiltings, conjurings, and calendars into a map. Freedom colony place names, often associated with remaining cemeteries, churches, or natural features, were affixed to audio file names and geotagged photos from the field research. Kinkeepers were also invited to verify or dispute names and boundaries from historical county and Texas Department of Transportation maps. Those points were combined with overlays of information gathered from state historical marker files and historical census data. I demarcated places into two black geographic identities: Black Pockets (a term that emerged from discussions with Carter) and freedom colonies (from the 2005 book of the same name).[22]

The resulting map shows a tremendous gap between professionally trained archivists and kinkeepers' embodied knowledge of place. Cumulatively, there are at least 38 freedom colonies and Black Pockets in Newton and Jasper Counties. The Texas Freedom Colonies Project has continued this database and mapping process, relying primarily on publicly available information as well as crowdsourced and archival data. Using an ArcGIS and StoryMap platform, 357 of the 557 known place names have been mapped with another 16 locations and origin stories crowdsourced. To map the 200+ known and unknown settlements, more co-research with descendants is needed.

HOW BELONGING DEFINES PLACE

Drawing cognitive maps, divining social networks from event programs, and reviewing old historical marker applications revealed the way even objective measures (such as the National Historic Preservation Act and National Register of Historic Places criteria)[23] obscure traces of African American landscapes. Criteria for listing places on historic registers, for example, emphasize the physicality and integrity of buildings, structures, and tangible features, rather than considering the meanings and group attachments embodied in places, which leave out many African American landscapes. These criteria are often the reason we see, map, and plan for some communities and not others.

Kinkeepers' womanist[24] knowledge and understanding of belonging, emerging from the everyday lives of black women, is essential to making freedom colonies visible to preservationists and planners. Preservationists might characterize the kinkeepers' remembering and telling of place and kinship histories as "family" but not community history. Yet the very survival of freedom colonies requires that planners, researchers, and cultural resource managers tap into the kinkeepers' distinctive store of information.[25]

Kinkeepers allow for unkempt notions of family and land ownership that include broken marriages, prodigal children, and lapsed church membership. Women I interacted with while conducting research often spoke of those who fell outside the scope of the Western construction of family and respectability[26] as "outside children," or the "outside child." Being able to identify many of Texas' historic black communities and settlements often require a willingness to recognize and record the "outside children," a name I ascribe to legally undefined places and spaces. Mapping and conserving these communities will require bringing the outside children into planning and preservation through collaboration with kinkeepers.

Kinkeepers' collecting, recollecting, reconstituting, and quilting together place meaning, locations, and significance help overcome the perceived placelessness of freedom colonies.[27] Like the kinkeepers, the architects, planners, and cultural resource managers committed

to social inclusion in preservation must join in counting the outside children—places established under circumstances for which we were meant to feel shame, places we ignore because they require that we acknowledge the disquieting conditions under which these freedom colonies were founded and why they were necessary. **FJ**

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