

The African American Library at the Gregory School in Houston, Texas



The African American Library at the Gregory School (photo at left by Pin Lim/Freelance) officially opened its doors on Saturday, November 14, 2009. Located in the historic Freeman's Town at 1300 Victor St., Houston, Texas, the library is housed in the Edgar M. Gregory School, which served as the first public school for African Americans in Houston. The first library of its kind in Houston and one of the few African American libraries in

the country, the Gregory School serves as a resource to preserve, promote, and celebrate the rich history and culture of African Americans in Houston, the surrounding region, and the African Diaspora.

This historic building was reconditioned to serve as a repository for use by historians, researchers, and general public. The African American Library at the Gregory School is the newest of three special collections operated by the Houston Public library. The library provides incomparable collections of multi-type resources including reference books, rare books, archival materials, exhibits, artifacts, oral histories, and innovative programs. With community participation, this facility is expected to become one-of-a-kind research and cultural center, providing valuable information to the Houston community and the entire world. All programming at The African American Library at the Gregory School is free and open to the public. For more information, visit: www.houstonlibrary.org/events; call 832-393-1440, or email: vog.xtnotsuoh@loohcsyrogerg.lph.

Oral Histories

The African American Library at the Gregory School's oral history project is a campaign to record the personal experiences of men and women who helped shape the African American history of Houston, Texas and the surrounding areas.

The oral histories capture rich, first-hand experiences from individuals who contribute to African American culture and offer a firsthand view that is Houston's African American experience. Scheduled recording sessions are offered, the oral history programs are open to researchers and the public, and an experienced staff can guide individuals through the oral history process.

1926 Restored Classroom

A classroom has been restored to its original 1926 appearance so that visitors can see what the Gregory School looked like at its inception. The classroom is also equipped with modern technology to help bring the history of African Americans to life.

Permanent Exhibits: Freedmen's Town, Fourth Ward

This exhibit chronicles a crucial period in Houston African American history when a community was established following emancipation. This later became known as Freedmen's Town, Fourth Ward. The exhibit incorporates a wide variety of stories proving the power of a people's commitment to one another by building and sustaining family, communities of worship, and social organizations which built this thriving, self-contained neighborhood.

African Americans in Houston

To honor generations of people whose cultural heritage played a significant role in what the city of Houston is today and what it will be tomorrow, we celebrate African American Houstonians. Integral to the exhibit are photographs and artifacts representing the seven principles (the Nguzo Saba via the African American holiday Kwanzaa created by Dr. Maulana Karenga) that are universal to the development of communities: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, purpose, cooperative economics, creativity and faith.

Special Exhibits

Every few months the gallery will present a new and exciting exhibition featuring themes in African American history, culture or the arts. Diverse educational programs are developed to augment and complement these special exhibits, including lectures, films and workshops. Objects for the special exhibits will also rotate to utilize the Gregory Schools own archival materials, and involve community scholars and leaders to insure we convey the vast history of African Americans in Houston is being told.



A History: The Gregory School and Freedman's Town

Built in 1926, The Gregory School today stands as a monument honoring the memories and sacrifices of a past generation of African-Americans that lived and thrived during a period in history where segregation, civil rights oppression and educational disadvantages were the norm.

The two-story, 20,000-square-foot former elementary school named after Edgar M. Gregory, a Union officer and Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau for the Texas area, has been vacant since 1980 and is located in Freedman's Town Historical District, in Houston's Fourth Ward. This area is considered to be the city's oldest established African-American community.

The first 1,000 freed formerly enslaved settled and developed this small community after the Civil War to exist independent of the Anglo community that did not accept them. They selected the area because land was cheap, and because Anglos did not want to live along the swampy southern edge of Buffalo Bayou which was susceptible to flooding.

Freedman's Town grew rapidly, many African-Americans of the time became self-sustaining businessmen, their establishments flourished, and they provided whatever the community needed to thrive. These Houstonians created their own utilities and services and even paved the streets with bricks they hand-made.

The heart of the town was the community's church where the Freedmen's Bureau and the American Mission Association opened schools within the church to provide adults with literacy and basic math skills. In 1870 the Texas Legislature created public schools for African-Americans and the Gregory Institute was opened; by 1872 most students and teachers left the closed Freedmen's Bureau Image of the engraving of the Gregory School name on the build in schools to attend the Gregory Institute, and by 1876 The Gregory Institute became a part of the Houston Independent School District and the Gregory School became the first public education institution for African-American children. Subsequently, the State Historical Commission designated the Gregory School building as a State Archaeological Landmark. This designation is the highest historical landmark classification that can be placed on any building.