



HOUSTON
FREEDMEN'S
TOWN
CONSERVANCY



A FOUNDATION FOR FREEDOM

Strategic Plan 2022-2024

A RARE JEWEL TELLING THE STORY OF FREEDOM

Founded in 1865 by formerly enslaved people post-Juneteenth, Freedmen's Town is a living testament to the struggles and perseverance of Black Americans and their yearning to be full participants in the American story. But Freedmen's Town represents more than participation in an American story—it represents a rebirth of Black ingenuity through the lives of those who made the town as historic as it is today. In this light, Freedmen's Town serves as a beacon to the world: an opportunity to celebrate the bounty reaped by freedom in all its forms.

Situated along Buffalo Bayou in Houston's Fourth Ward, Freedmen's Town was settled shortly after June 19, 1865—Juneteenth—when enslaved African Americans were finally granted the freedom that had been legally theirs since the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation 2 ½ years earlier. Eager to begin new lives in a new place as freed people, these men, women, and children from the surrounding rural areas journeyed to Houston, and began creating a community. In what became known as Freedmen's Town, they built homes, schools, businesses, churches, and lives. They built a world in which African Americans could prosper and thrive.

Freedmen's Town is where Black Houston took shape. It's the source of the city's early Black leadership. It's where the Story of Freedom began.



LAY THE GROUNDWORK

The Conservancy In Action

Created in 2018, Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy's role is to "Tell the Story of Freedom" by protecting and preserving Freedmen's Town, and by educating and engaging visitors from around the world about the unique and revelatory history of this largely untold chapter of Houston's and America's past.

The Conservancy has undertaken a variety of initiatives: the creation of historic and heritage districts; an augmented reality app that reveals Freedmen's Town's many layers; and a Visitors Center to harness the burgeoning interest in African American history. In physical and virtual form, Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy is making Freedmen's Town accessible to the world.



Through its partnerships and stewardship, Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy serves as a leading advocate for the Freedmen's Town community. These partners run the gamut from small, grassroots organizations and local governmental entities all the way to international institutions. Its efforts have already borne fruit: the designation of Freedmen's Town as Houston's first Heritage District; the feasibility insights gained by the commencement of the Emancipation National Historic Trail Study; and the reconciliation of historical research that accompanied the addition of 5 sites in Freedmen's Town to the UNESCO Slave Route Project. The vision of the Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy is to have global recognition of historic Freedmen's Town as the heritage district that transforms our understanding of emancipation to be the story of freedom. This once-overlooked place embodies human triumph over brutality, adversity, and oppression.

SHARE THE STORY OF FREEDOM

Just south of Buffalo Bayou, the narrow streets of Houston's Fourth Ward tell a remarkable story. They harken back to a time when legal enslavement had ended, and Black Americans were finally free from human bondage. Here, nearly 1,000 formerly enslaved people created an entire community, complete with houses, schools, churches, businesses, and yes, brick streets, to form Freedmen's Town. Here, they could live in relative freedom, with the opportunity to prosper and build a secure future for their descendants.

And prosper they did. By the early 1900s, residents owned 94% of the properties in Freedmen's Town, marking a substantial Black middle class. In 1870, the first two-story home in Black Houston was built in Freedmen's Town by the Reverend Jack Yates, who served as the first pastor for the Antioch Missionary Baptist Church. He also established the Houston Academy, the city's first school for African American children.

Aside from Rev. Yates, Freedmen's Town produced many notable Houstonians, including Black physicians, ministers, jazz musicians, businessmen and women, and attorneys. Emmet J. Scott, author and personal secretary to Booker T. Washington, and elected secretary of the National Negro Business League in 1901, was born in Freedmen's Town.

By 1880, Freedmen's Town was home to 95% of Black Houstonians. By the 1930s, it had produced over 400 Black-owned businesses. It was the "mother ward," the Harlem of the South.

Freedmen's Town is the oldest Black settlement in Houston. Its people, its land, its streets, its buildings—all have lessons to teach about a community borne of struggle that became a living testament to the shared human yearning for freedom.



THE URGENCY OF SUPPORT

A Pivotal Moment For Freedmen's Town

Currently, Freedmen's Town in Houston, Texas lacks the funding and legal protection for proper historically sensitive redevelopment, and there is no organization within the community that has the ability to arrange such necessities. Enter The Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy. Our mission is to use our skills and resources to become a voice for the community and establish relationships with local, federal, and national governments and various funders so that this historic neighborhood can be properly protected, preserved, and recognized for the treasure that it is.

Historic spaces representing the history of the newly freed people are considerably underrepresented when compared to other ethnic groups in the United States. Freedmen's Town settlements in large urban areas are very rare and with sufficient capital, the Freedmen's Town Conservancy has the opportunity to help create new revenue streams for the city. Without a working partnership or unified voice, Freedmen's Town risks losing out on potential funding for capital improvements, legal protections for its irreplaceable historic resources, and all vacant lots remain at risk for insensitive development. The community has paid a steep price—increased housing costs, crumbling infrastructure, demolition and displacement, with no means of arresting the decline. Accordingly, there's an urgent need to acquire property to buy back opportunities for Black-owned businesses and lower/middle income residential property owners to repatriate Freedmen's Town.



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FREEDMEN'S TOWN HERITAGE DISTRICT

Partnership That Empowers Houstonians

On June 16, 2021, Freedmen's Town took a giant step toward economic development, heritage tourism, and protection of the neighborhood's historic fabric when it was named as Houston's first Heritage District. Heritage districts are intended to foster civic and cultural pride by protecting character-defining elements within neighborhoods, highlighting the significant achievements and contributions of the community and promoting neighborhood stability.

This designation, crafted in partnership with the City of Houston, allows for enhanced stewardship of public property and rights-of-way in the district by a designated partner. Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy serves as that partner for the Heritage District, meaning it will work with city departments to manage projects such as signage and markers, utility work, public art, landscaping, the programming and activation of public spaces and parks, restoration and maintenance of the neighborhood's iconic brick streets.

With the Heritage District in place and Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy as the official steward, future public projects will be carried out with the neighborhood's legacy and irreplaceable history as top priorities.



HOUSTON FREEDMEN'S TOWN CONSERVANCY



I can think of no better community to designate as Houston's first heritage district than Freedmen's Town, and no better day than Juneteenth to share the good news," said Mayor Turner. "We thank the Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy for spearheading the efforts that have led to the development of heritage districts, which will benefit communities across the city.

— HOUSTON MAYOR SYLVESTER TURNER

A PLACE TO CELEBRATE HUMAN STORIES OF FREEDOM








THE VISITOR'S CENTER

Located in the heart of the Freedmen's Town's Heritage District, the Visitors Center will serve not just as a point of access and orientation, but a place to gather and celebrate stories of human freedom. Here, locals and visitors alike will experience the living history of Freedmen's Town through sight, sound, and touch. They'll engage in authentic cultural experiences in heritage, ethnicity, cuisine, crafts, art, and music. Home to Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy's operations, the Visitor's Center will be a demonstration of sensitive, appropriate reuse of historic resources. The Visitor's Center will serve as a new model for development, partnerships, community engagement, and heritage tourism in Freedmen's Town.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Freedmen's Town Heritage District Map

Legend

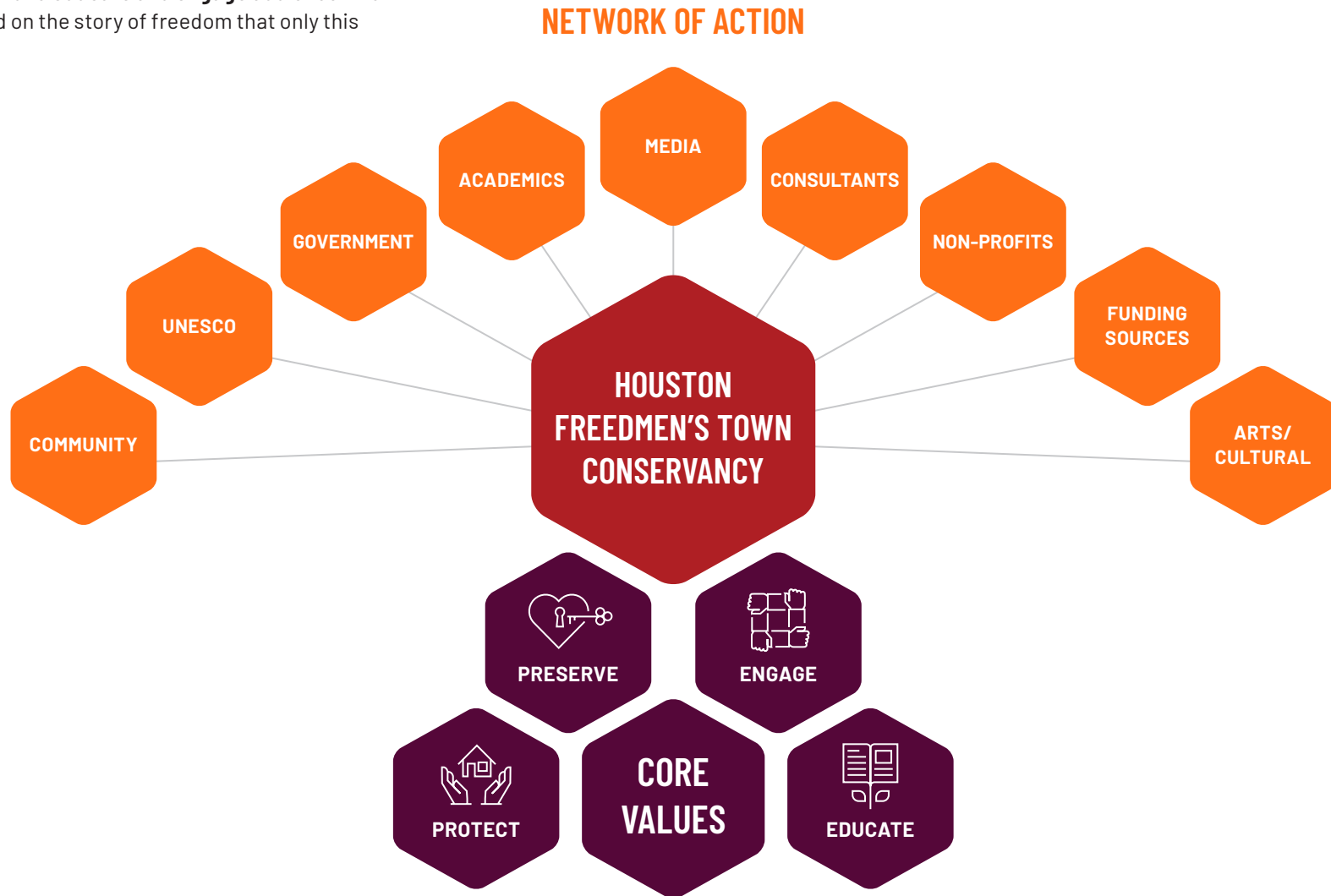
-  Freedmen's Town Heritage District
-  National Register of Historic Places (District)
-  City Designated Landmarks
-  Undesignated Historic Structures
-  Brick Streets



THE IMPACT OF OUR ACTIONS

Core Values

The Conservancy is uniquely positioned to **protect** and **preserve** Freedmen's Town, and to **educate** and **engage** audiences from Houston and beyond on the story of freedom that only this community can tell.



THE IMPACT OF OUR ACTIONS

A Plan With Purpose

The Strategic Plan serves to inform Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy's effective stewardship of Freedmen's Town in its evolution to a fully recognized and revitalized community. This document, which is the result of a series of meetings with community stakeholders, public officials and members of our boards and committees, will guide the Conservancy in putting our core values into action, ensuring both community and organizational sustainability.

Our Priorities

The Conservancy will implement its strategic plan via five goals, which address organizational growth, preservation, heritage tourism, citizen empowerment via education, and collaboration/partnerships. The specific objectives of these goals detail the ways in which the Conservancy will carry out its mission and operationalize its core values to protect, preserve, educate, and engage.



When UNESCO came and was so impressed with how much known history was still intact, it totally shifted my thinking from loss and scarcity to abundance and a rich existence of so much to talk about.

— DEBBIE MCNULTY,
AS MAYOR'S OFFICE OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS



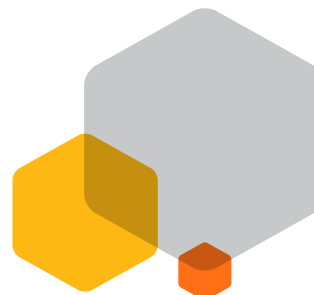


Historic Preservation & Building a Resilient Community

Public apathy and disengagement constitute the greatest threats, near and long-term, to Freedmen’s Town’s built environment. It is essential that The Conservancy make its cause more visible, more urgent, and more relevant to a larger audience. When Freedmen’s Town was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, it comprised over 568 historic structures. Since then, unfortunately, Freedmen’s Town has lost more than 450 of those buildings, including six churches. However, with resilient support from the community over 50 original structures and two miles of its original brick streets remain in place although damaged and can be repaired.

To avoid future losses and protect what remains, The Conservancy is championing historic preservation efforts. Past designations have lacked the necessary teeth to prevent demolition, so The Conservancy is working with the City of Houston on creative approaches that will guard against additional degradation of the district. Through adaptive reuse of three historic shotgun buildings for the Visitors Center, The Conservancy will demonstrate the economic and cultural value of sensitive renovation.

This goal is about much more than saving old buildings. It’s about the revenue power of historic preservation, and the tremendous economic impact of drawing heritage tourists to Freedmen’s Town.



PRIORITY
2

Heritage Tourism & Engaging Experiences

Through the Freedmen’s Town Visitor’s Center, The Conservancy is harnessing the burgeoning interest in sites of African American history via a heritage tourism plan that will support existing businesses and stakeholders—and directly benefits those in the community. The first step in this plan is already in place: the Heritage District, which will enable the creation of tourism infrastructure, including historic markers, wayfinding, signage, and other means of encouraging visitor engagement. The centerpiece of the heritage tourism effort will be the Visitor’s Center, which will serve as a point of orientation for those wishing to explore Freedmen’s Town and more fully understand its rich history and legacy.

The Visitor’s Center won’t just be for tourists, though. It’ll be a vibrant community hub that tells the stories and living history of Freedmen’s Town through sight, sound, and touch. It will act as a community resource and central location to develop events, activities, and programming that celebrate the intangible cultural heritage of the district.

Envisioned as a locus for information, engagement, and activities in the neighborhood, the Visitor’s Center will attract travelers seeking authentic cultural experiences in heritage, ethnicity, cuisine, crafts, arts, and music, and will significantly raise Houston’s profile as a destination for travel and tourism. Heritage tourism will bring not just visitors and their economic impact, but respect and reverence for this irreplaceable community.



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PRIORITY
3

Education & Citizen Empowerment

Despite the recent surge in the desire to learn about Black history and culture, the majority of the nation remains appreciative, yet miseducated. The Houston Freedmen’s Town Conservancy strives to remedy that by telling the story of freedom and providing a tangible history starting with the true origin story of Juneteenth and spreading the word about how emancipated slaves grew to prosper and thrive in this Houston, Texas community.

The generational amnesia about the history and legacy of Freedmen’s Town in Houston and American history has resulted in apathy toward its protection, and the loss of irreplaceable Black-built heritage.

The absence of empowered guardians of the district has left a gaping void in representation at all tables of power and influence. The Houston Freedmen’s Town Conservancy commits to being the voice of the district that consolidates community communication. We empower the community so that they can effectively participate in the political/decision-making processes. Equally, we educate all external stakeholders on how to partner with the community for equitable outcomes.



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PRIORITY
4

Collaborative Leadership & Networking

As the unifying force in Freedmen’s Town, the Conservancy will continue working with representatives of other organizations in the District, as well as groups from elsewhere in Houston and beyond who are engaged in the telling of African American history.

Informed by these partnerships and alliances, the Conservancy will design programming that invites practitioners and audiences to take part in relevant, impactful experiences that deepen understanding and appreciation of Freedmen’s Town’s rich legacy.

Through collaboration and networking, the Conservancy will engage and support Heritage District residents, stakeholders, partners, and allies in such a way as to provide new expertise, build relationships, and foster long-term stewardship and sustainability.



Informed by these partnerships and alliances, the Conservancy will design programming that invites practitioners and audiences to take part in relevant, impactful experiences that deepen understanding and appreciation of Freedmen’s Town’s rich legacy.



Organizational Growth & Effectiveness

Over the next three years, The Conservancy will add internal capacity, achieve operational sustainability, and become financially sound. Increased organizational capacity will enable The Conservancy to engage in educational and cultural programming and expand public outreach, and to economically empower residents of Freedmen's Town.

Already, The Conservancy is meeting this goal. We received a \$140,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund that will allow the hiring of a Manager of Learning and Engagement. A \$200,000 grant from the Houston Endowment funded organizational capacity building and community impact projects. One such project was the Juneteenth Worship Experience, which brought together visual artists, dancers, poets, and choirs to mark emancipation of the enslaved men and women in Texas.

The growth of Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy means more resources to build a solid foundation for the advancement of Freedmen's Town.



The time is now to accelerate change. As part of our commitment to eradicating anti-Black racism, Houston Endowment is honored to invest in and amplify the work of the Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy.

— STATEMENT FROM THE HOUSTON ENDOWMENT

JOIN US

As a nation we've **collectively** tapped into the importance of history, truth, and justice over these past few years. One thing's become abundantly clear to us:

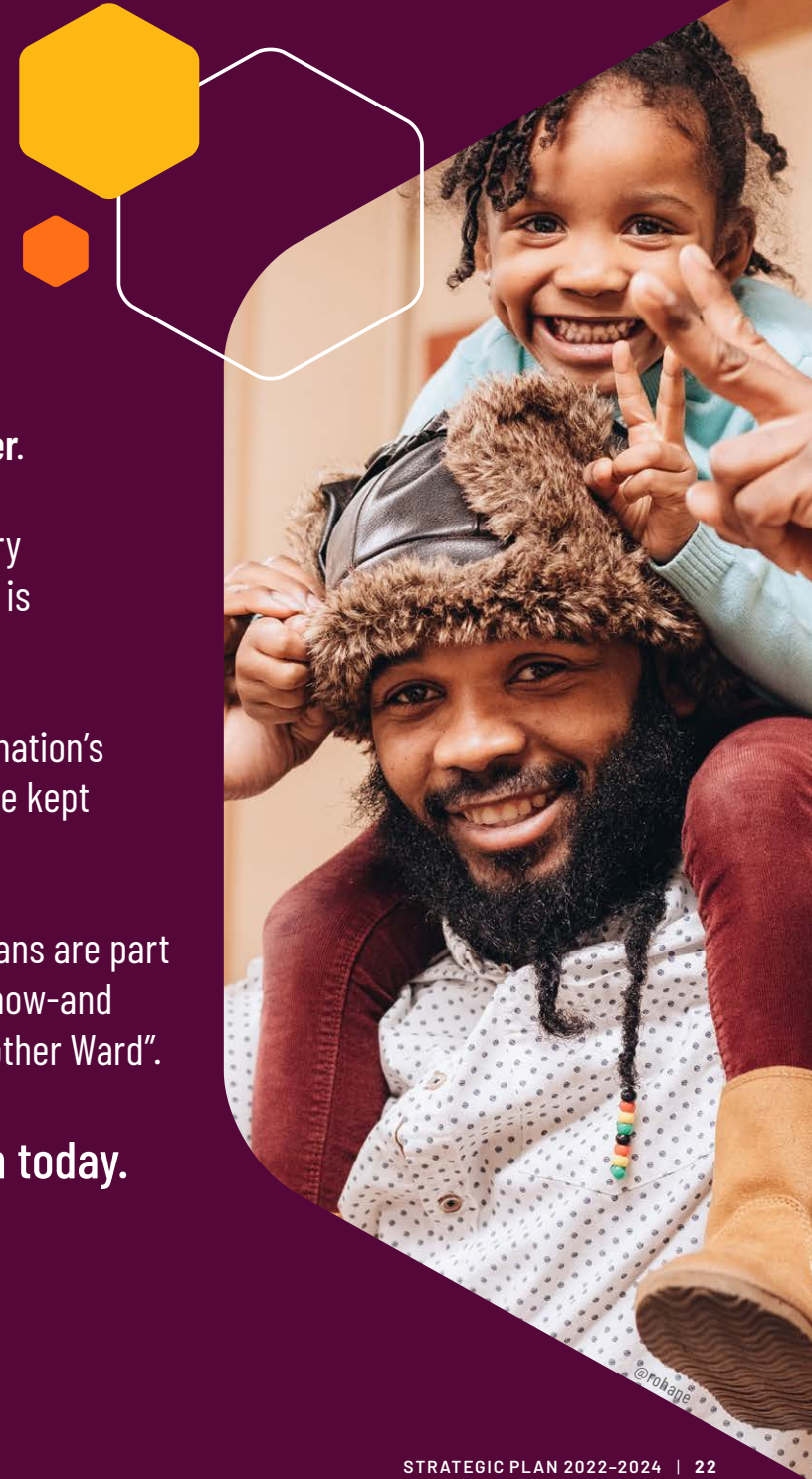
We need **connection**. We are **interdependent**. We **collaborate** and work together even while we stand apart. We **need** one another because we are **stronger together**.

The Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy is working with the guardian's of history in Freedmen's Town because the **ONLY** way we can protect this historic community is through collective action.

Freedmen's Town is a critical part of not only Texas' and Houston's history, but our nation's history. It is crucial that "stories of freedom that transpired" in this historic place be kept alive and told to generations to come.

Just as the homes, churches, and parks built over 150 years ago by African Americans are part of this unique cultural attraction, gifts made today will be working 150 years from now-and beyond to support the rebirth and sustainability of Freedmen's Town, Houston's "Mother Ward".

Take part in this historic moment by supporting Freedmen's Town today.





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About the images you see: These images are a representation of the past, present, and future of Houston and the communities we plan to welcome into the Story of Freedom. The portraits and vignettes show the expansive impact of Freedmen's Town on many generations and walks of life. Expressions of enlightenment as a result of the Conservancy's education about Emancipation breathe life into each of the photographs. These images come from a number of unique stock image sources that seek to bring more diversity to stock imagery. As we grow our support, we will one day replace these images with portraits of Houstonians and visitors from around the world. The portraits are combined with images of the neighborhood, buildings, and visionary architectural renderings to ground everything in the very specific place that is Freedmen's Town. We want to represent the unique history of Black Americans and show how it lives within the larger community, region, and world.

