

HOUSTON GIVES

Yates Museum and Unitarian Universalists are preserving Freedmen's Town, one house at a time



Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

In the heart of Houston's Fourth Ward is a story of preservation, culture and service. A story that involves two groups united by a common goal: to preserve the wellspring of Black history and culture known as Freedmen's Town.

The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum and First Unitarian Universalist Church have been working together for more than 26 years to restore historic homes in Freedmen's Town. The museum was formed in 1996 in response to a passionate plea from Olea Yates McCullough, the daughter of Rutherford B.H. Yates, a printer who was the son of the Rev. Jack Yates.

McCullough asked for the Yates house and other Freedmen homes to be saved from demolition and restored as museums for future generations to learn about the accomplishments of Houston's Freedmen. The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum acquired the Yates house and five other Freedmen homes and is looking to obtain two more.

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A photo at the Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum in Fourth Ward
Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Five Fourth Ward homes listed as historic structures will be restored as part of the Yates Museum, with buildings dedicated to printing, law and medicine, an archaeology field school lab, a barbershop and gift shop. Together, they will tell the story of Freedmen's Town, a Houston community built by former slaves and their descendents.

In 1996, the city of Houston designated the Yates house as a landmark and incorporated the home into the Freedmen's Town National Register Historic District. As the first restoration, it will become a Printing Museum.

Yates Museum co-founder Luther Brown Jr., a member of the choir at First Unitarian Universalist Church, told the congregation about the Yates Museum's project to save the historic homes; 34 people signed up to help. That was the beginning of a long partnership.

Lacking funds for full restoration of the houses, the church volunteers' work initially consisted of stabilizing the homes, said museum co-founder Catherine Roberts.

In memory of Brown, who died in 2011, the church's Social Justice Committee "adopted" the museum, making a commitment to see these homes restored.

"We moved from just keeping houses from getting worse to moving them ahead, basically rebuilding these houses and preserving them," said Phil Richardson, a church volunteer. "We went from working every four to six weeks to getting a group together every week, which is a huge volunteer commitment."



Volunteers from the First Unitarian Universalist Church are helping restore the Jay Vance Lewis house.
Yates Museum

Through the joint efforts of the museum and volunteer team, one house has been fully restored and two are in progress. Warren Snipes manages the scheduling, tasks and architectural drawing for the homes. Joel Harmon specializes in preservation architecture; and Richardson specializes in fundraising and recruitment.

Harmon trained the team in the process of restoring the homes in accordance with the National Park Service preservation standards. In order to adhere to the guidelines, 80% of the homes are built using historic materials.

“When they tear down old buildings, they keep the bricks, they keep the wood, windows, things of that nature,” Harmon said. “Warren and I would go on shopping trips and we would try to match the wood that we have in the houses from that period.”

The team keeps as many materials as possible. Wood boards originally used to build the homes are repaired by a glue mixture, and if the wood can't be saved, the team finds other historical wood to use. Sourcing is important in preservation. Only two window vendors in Texas follow the National Park Service guidelines.



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"This is not a typical volunteer team, any other group would come and rip it all out," Roberts said. "We'll rebuild it. The team has learned what needs to be done to make sure that we're honoring the memory of those freedmen that designed and built those homes in the late 1800s."

Roberts, who's also a member of the museum's board of directors, knows all about the history behind the six houses. Each home is being made into a museum that correlates to the owner's profession, and all the homes were built by one of three Freedmen architects in the town.

The Pullum house, owned by the Rev. Ned Pullum, will become the Museum of Health and Business. Pullum worked to establish one of the first Black hospitals in the Houston area.

Lawyer Jay Vance Lewis' house, 1218 Wilson, also served as his law office, which he referred to as "Van Court." Lewis had a successful career defending Black clients, and in 1910 he published his autobiography "Out of the Ditch: A True Story of An Ex-Slave." With its 14-foot ceilings, handpainted wallpaper and elegant design, the house will be known as the Museum of Legal Professions and Educators, Roberts said.



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“During COVID they had to elevate the house, crawl under it, and pull out historical materials. They carefully removed the brick piers, put them aside, and cleaned them,” Roberts said. “They’ve had to reassemble the porches, the floors, the ceilings. It’s been a real hands-on labor of love.”

Another home the team has been working on is the house of Isabela Sims; Sims and her sister purchased the land in 1874. The home will become a gift shop and tour office.

The Nixon House needed the most work; it will be an archaeological school and laboratory. New concrete piers and a stamped metal roof were installed, but the museum still needs more funding to restore the interior.

Next to the Nixon house is a cottage, set to become the Barbershop Museum. The cottage and the Pullum house were recognized as sites of memory under [UNESCO’s Slave Route project](#), which addresses the history of the slave trade and slavery through intercultural dialogue.

“Every board is like handling history; it’s touching with those first carpenters who crafted the house,” Roberts said. “They cut down the trees along Buffalo Bayou that were ancient stands of Cedar Cypress. They milled them themselves, they sanded them beautifully, and then they built their homes.”

To fund restoration efforts, the Yates Museum gets help from other organizations and corporate donors, including Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips and Union Pacific. Members of the congregation, too, have donated over the years. And volunteers from Shell, the Houston Texans, Texas Southern University have all worked with the team.

The Rutherford B.H. Yates Museum and First Unitarian Universalist Church are telling the history of freed slaves within the city of Houston.

“I don’t like to go paint a fence and have it come off. Instead, I like to have a lasting impact,” Richardson said. “Which is what our team is doing. That’s what drives our volunteers.”

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