

Historical Perspective on the Dunbar and East Guadalupe Neighborhoods

Research on these two neighborhoods was hampered by a lack of documentary evidence, thus resulting in a reliance on interviews with local historians and oral history. No pre-1950 city directories were found in any of the libraries or archives of San Marcos or Austin. The major publishers of city directories were contacted by phone, but none had records of a city directory of San Marcos from the early years. In addition, Sanborn maps were examined for 1885, 1891, 1902, 1906, 1912, 1922, and 1930. There were portions of the survey area that were not included on any of these Sanborn maps. The Dunbar neighborhood was not indicated on the Sanborn maps until 1922, at which time Martin Luther King and Centre streets were included. Many of the houses on these streets, however, pre-date 1922.

The U.S. Census data only contains names and occupations, but no addresses, until 1920. Unfortunately, the 1920 Census for San Marcos identifies only the street, but not street numbers so it was impossible to correlate an individual with a particular address. Since many of the streets in the survey are major thoroughfares extending beyond the survey areas, it was not possible to ascertain specific information for the purposes of this survey.

Historical Overview of the Dunbar Neighborhood

Located to the east of Guadalupe Street, the Dunbar neighborhood lies just to the southeast of the courthouse square and is bounded on the south by the floodplain of Purgatory Creek. The neighborhood encompasses a largely residential area of domestic buildings constructed in the early 20th century. Most of these structures are vernacular buildings that lack any stylistic ornamentation. The typical dwelling is characterized by a frame or board and batten construction. Shed-roof porches, supported by simple wood posts on the front elevation, are the only ornamentation. With a lack of written documentary records for ethnic groups, resources such as buildings, become even more important as research sources.

The area around Dunbar was first settled by Anglo farmers and it is likely that after the Civil War, African-Americans were employed as hired hands or tenant farmers, living in small enclaves of frame dwellings. None of these survive today. But the neighborhood undoubtedly grew in response to its proximity to the more affluent neighborhoods which began to develop in the 1880s along San Antonio, Hopkins, and Belvin Streets where many of the early residents of Dunbar worked as domestic servants, cooks, and groundskeepers. Others found employment at nearby gins, lumber

companies and warehouses located along the railroad tracks just to the west of the neighborhood, as well as in downtown businesses. According to historical sources, it was not until 1893 that five men became the first African-Americans to own property in the county (Wyatt Newman, James Landon, Henry Richardson, Luckey McQueen, and Miles Bowes) when they purchased land for the San Marcos Community Cemetery on Post Road.

After the close of the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau established schools throughout Texas. The earliest known African-American school in San Marcos was the Freedmen's School established as early as 1868 on land bought from Major Edward Burleson Jr. The trustees for the Freedmen's School sold the property to the Methodist African Church in late 1875, perhaps anticipating the passage of the Public Free School Law in 1876, which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Negro School District in January of 1877. An African-American minister served as instructor to 50 pupils. The location of the first school is not known, but it was typical to hold classes in churches. A school building was obtained in 1890 only when the Anglo school was moved to Woods Street for use by the African-American students.

In addition to schools, churches played a critical role for the neighborhood both as a religious and social center. The Wesley Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1875 and a church was constructed in 1879 on its current site on South Fredericksburg Street. The early date of this church (since replaced by several structures), offers evidence that this neighborhood was well established as a segregated, African-American community within a decade following Emancipation. Once known simply as "Colored Town," the neighborhood eventually took the name of the Dunbar school, named in honor of noted novelist and poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

The schools, churches and fraternal lodges provided a focal point for the social history of the neighborhood. The Old First Baptist Church and the "Calaboose" on Martin Luther King Street are the only surviving structures representing these building types as the Dunbar School was destroyed by fire. This school, initially constructed in the 1880s for Anglo children, was moved to the Dunbar neighborhood in 1918 and was added on to over the years. Named in 1961 for Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906), an African-American novelist and poet, the school also served as a social center for the community. It closed in the 1960s as the San Marcos schools were integrated. The separate Home Economics Building survived the fire and is an important landmark for the community. A portion of the old school, the infamous "barracks" wing, survives in a radically rehabilitated form on its new location on Valley Street. While this building represents an important aspect of the neighborhood's history, its alteration and relocation from its original context diminish its ability to accurately reflect that history.

Although the "Calaboose" once served as the segregated jail, its later uses as the Black USO and a fraternal lodge are significant to the history of the area. An Odd Fellows Hall, located at the corner of Centre Street and Shady Lane, was demolished years ago. The Old First Baptist Church (1908), the only surviving historic church building, served as both a religious and social center for African-Americans. Typical of African-American churches, it is characterized by a cruciform plan raised upon a tall basement with a steeply pitched roof. The gabled porch, flanked by two bell towers, announces its importance to the street. The interior features a mural behind the baptistry executed by Mrs. Henry Kyle. As a social center, commencement exercises were held in this church until the integration of the San Marcos schools

Dunbar became a thriving community of its own with its own restaurants, barber shops, beauty shops, grocery stores, and skating rink. A vital commercial strip developed along Martin Luther King Street two to three blocks to the east of Guadalupe Street. It is now occupied by the Century Phone Company which moved into the area in the mid-1950s. Known as "The Beat," these commercial establishments served the needs of the African-American residents who were often denied services in Anglo businesses during the period of segregation. A few surviving structures, however, represent this once vital commercial history of the neighborhood.

Many African-American neighborhoods such as Dunbar experienced a decline after World War II as the GI Bill and VA loans offered African-Americans opportunities to leave traditional neighborhoods for the suburbs. This trend accelerated after court-ordered desegregation of schools and civil rights victories of the late 1950s and early 1960s which made the transition to integrated suburbia easier for people of color. The Purgatory Creek watershed continually threatened the neighborhood with flooding. Some of the worst recorded floods occurred in the early 1970s. Many homes were destroyed and there is an indication that existing houses were simply moved into the area rather than new construction replacing homes washed away by the waters.

Historical Overview of the East Guadalupe Neighborhood

Hispanics were the earliest settlers in the area with the establishment of the 18th century Missions Nuestra Senora de la Candelaria and San Ildefonso and the 19th century settlement of San Marcos de Neve. Indeed, the very name of the City of San Marcos is owed to a pervasive Hispanic influence on the area. But with the Anglo settlement in the 1850s following the Texas Revolution and Statehood, Mexican-Americans became a minority who were often discriminated against.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed numerous waves of immigration of Mexican-Americans who found work on the farms