



The Ghost of Frost Town

It comes as a surprise to many that the settlement of Houston did not start in the summer of 1836, but rather 14 years earlier in 1822, one half-mile downstream from the bayou landing at the foot of Main Street. The original Houstonians were about 20 people, in four or five families, who settled under the supervision of Stephen F. Austin; little is known about them but their names, and we only have a few of those.

By the mid-1830s, this eight-block, 96-lot plat was called Frost Town, after the Frost family, who were among the original settlers. By the 1840s, Frost Town was a largely German town within a town; it boasted three churches and one synagogue, a school, a volunteer fire department, an armory, a brewery, an iceworks, a slaughterhouse/meat market, a blacksmith, mercantile establishments, and a cemetery.

Some say Frost Town's decline began in 1853, when the Galveston, Houston, and Henderson Railroad sliced through the neighborhood, connecting the Texas & Pacific and International Great Northern lines. By the early 20th century, Frost Town was just a huddle of shabby houses known, in reflection of its changed ethnic makeup, as Barrio de la Cran. A second mortal cut was made in the early 1950s for an industrial road connecting downtown with the Ship Channel. Then construction started on the elevated Elysian Viaduct, which linked the central business district with US 59 North.

By the early 1990s only two or three shotgun houses remained in Frost Town. Then in 1992 the state paid \$800 to the owner of the last remaining house, which was located at 1820 Bramble Street, and

promptly tore it down. It vanished like the last passenger pigeon.

Today, Frost Town lives vividly in the mind of environmental artist and activist Kirk Farris. Pursuing a fascination with Buffalo Bayou bridges, in 1985 Farris persuaded the city to let his non-profit organization, Art and Environmental Architecture, paint the remarkable reinforced concrete girder that is the McKee Street Bridge. Once this was completed, his next step was to assemble land on the south end of the bridge for what became known as James Bute Park—and was, coincidentally, the heart of old Frost Town. Since that time, Farris has been pushing research, encouraging urban archeology, and writing and speaking wherever possible to promote his vision of a large Frost Town park.

A master plan, completed in 1999 with the help of Keiji Asakura of SLA Studio Land, Inc., envisions a public open space, partly shaded by the aging viaduct above, with paved pedestrian ways laid out in the old street pattern, and different ground cover vegetation indicating different historic land uses. With the anticipated acquisition of two or three remaining parcels the historic town site will be complete. And then, perhaps in the near future, visitors will be able to get an abstract sense of what kind of place Frost Town was 170 years ago.

There are some people in Houston who can drive by a modern building and clearly visualize what stood on the same site in their youth. But very few can do what Kirk Farris can—recycle throwaway land, dig into its human past, create a vision of the oldest part of Houston, and make you believe he really used to live there. — Barry Moore

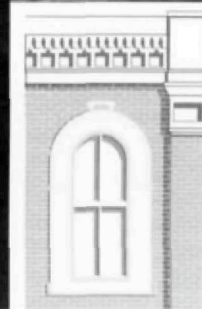
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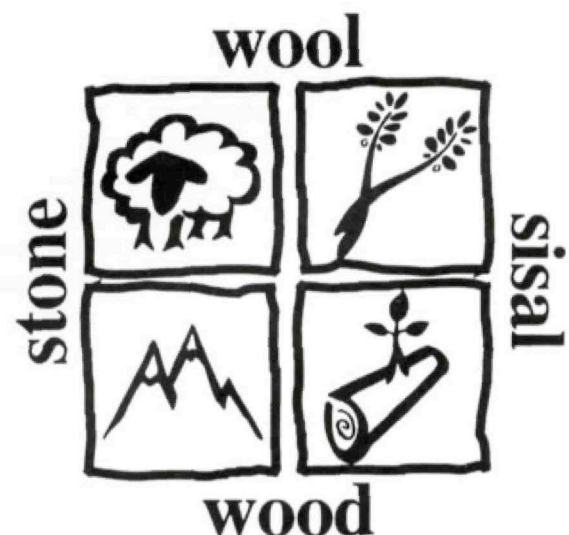
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