

My Neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s

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The Objectives of the Curriculum:

- ◆ To understand the concept of community.
- ◆ An awareness of the role of a community historian.
- ◆ The importance of ones' own history as it relates to a particular community.
- ◆ The importance of taking pictures and keeping written records of people, places and events that have occurred in a particular community.
- ◆ To learn place geography through mapping activities.

This curriculum is designed to be used in an English or Social Studies class, grades 6-12. The time span of this unit is planned for students who attend a school without walls with a limited enrollment period of two - four weeks. However, it can be tailored to fit any time frame desired.

NARRATIVE OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
 - A. Geographical location of Houston
 - B. Physical features
 - C. General facts about Houston
- II. Third Ward
 - A. Geographical location
 - B. Physical features
 - C. General facts
- III. My Neighborhood
 - A. Geographical location
 - B. Physical features
 - C. People who made up the neighborhood
 - 1. Interesting persons
 - 2. Outstanding persons
 - 3. Economic life
 - 4. Social life

IV. Changes

- A. How did the neighborhood change.
- B. What caused the changes in the neighbor?
- C. What happened to the people in the neighborhood?
- D. Was the changes in the neighborhood productive or destructive?

Introduction:

Houston is the fourth most populous city in the nation and the largest in Texas. Despite its vast population, which seems to be increasing day-by-day, Houston is the youngest of the nation's four largest cities. Houston was founded in 1836 and grew rapidly, in part from the city's emergence as the center of Texas's petroleum and petrochemical industries. Houston is the home of the world's largest man-made ship channel and the nation's third busiest seaport. Sprawling over than 1800 square miles on the coastal plain, 50 miles from the Gulf of Mexico, Houston is the primary industrial and commercial core of Texas and the Southwest. Not only limited to petroleum chemical industries and man-made seaports, Houston is also home to the technological Johnson Space Center. For the most part, this is the Houston described in textbooks and encyclopedias. The Houston I know, the one in which I was born, the one that was the heart of my environment and influenced my life was much, much more.

Houston was filled with segregation, police brutality, white supremacy, and inferior schools. Despite the negative, I was consumed by laughter, innocence, friends, caring neighbors, determination and self-pride. Looking back, this world seemed like a fantasy, a fairy tale. My remote fantasy world was Third Ward, but in reality my community was developed out of a political need.

Third Ward:

Third Ward has a rich history as a black community. Third Ward is one of the city's original four wards. Its general boundaries are south of Congress, east of Main and north of Brays Bayou. It was developed in 1839 when Houston consisted of only nine square miles. The wards were created as political subdivisions. Forerunners of voting precincts, each was represented by two elected aldermen. Although Third Ward was technically dissolved as a political boundary in 1906, it continues to represent a distinct community to many Houstonians today. In 1950 approximately two-thirds of the city's black population was concentrated in three major neighborhoods: The Fifth Ward, in northeast Houston, was the largest black area, with more than 40,000 inhabitants, Third ward, located in south-central Houston was second, with more than 29,000 persons and the Fourth Ward was home to more than 9,000 blacks. These neighborhoods emerged as predominantly black areas amidst the demands and pressures for more black housing, that existed after World War II and whites began to move out of the Fourth and Fifth Ward areas.

In the early fifties there was only one high school in Third Ward. Students in grades seventh through twelfth grade attended Jack Yates. The population in Third Ward was skyrocketing. In the late fifties a new Jack Yates was built and the name of the old

school was changed to Ryan Middle school-- the first black middle school in Third Ward, but not for long. Ryan was too crowded, and since whites were moving out as fast as blacks were moving in, the original Johnson Middle School was now changed to William E. Miller. There were two elementary schools in Third Ward: J. W. Jones Colored and Blackshear Colored Elementary school.

The decline of the Fourth and Fifth Wards allowed the Third Ward to become the hub of black social, cultural, and economic life in Houston, and it now serves as the financial center of black Houston. Old Dowling Street looked like a downtown area, with all types of stores. The black businesses were the pride of the entire Third Ward area. In addition to being the financial and business center of black Houston, Third Ward serves as a center of black higher education, with the nation's third largest historically black university, Texas Southern University. Residing in its boundaries are three black newspapers, and the only black owned radio station in Houston. Furthermore, the black cultural, civil rights, and political awareness organizations' main offices, such as the Urban League, NAACP, United Negro College Fund, and SHAPE Community Center, are located in Third Ward.

Note: The following essay is an example for students that may have lost interest in school. Quantity should be secondary when assessing the students' essays. Effort should always be primary when addressing this population.

Narrative: My Neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s

My world in Houston, Texas was the section of Third Ward east of Almeda, west of Scott, south of Elgin and north of Wheeler. It is very difficult for me to return to my old neighborhood without getting very emotional. For sixteen years of my life, 3707 Tierwester was where I called home.

Tierwester consisted of eight country blocks (two blocks in one). My home was approximately one block from Texas Southern University and parallel to the Cuney homes, a federal housing community (contrary to today's popular belief, the Cuney homes of the fifties and sixties were well kept and well managed). Every house on the street was complemented with trees --- either oak, tallow or mulberry. The lawns were manicured and homes painted on a regular basis. The soil was rich and fertile. My mother could attest to this because she always had a "victory garden". All the homes were owned by the residents who lived in them except one; it was rented. To this day, I still wonder who owned the rented house.

With violence ever so present today, it is almost impossible to believe that people in my Third Ward neighborhood left their windows and doors unlocked. The people were honest, and stealing from neighbors was outlawed. No one ever thought of harming or stealing from their neighbors unless they were psychologically crazy. If someone even thought of committing a violent act, the community would treat them as an outcast.

The occupation of my neighbors varied. Among its residents were doctors, pharmacists, mail carriers, small business owners, maids, carpenters, teachers and general laborers. My father, although educated, worked as a carpenter, general laborer and Christmas helper at the Post office until he was hired by Baylor College of Medicine in the early sixties. My mother was a housewife until I was in kindergarten, when she became a substitute teacher. Four years later she attained a permanent teaching position at Blackshear Colored Elementary.

I attended Blackshear Colored Elementary located parallel to the Negro Hospital on Holman and Ennis. I attended Blackshear only until the fourth grade because the Houston Independent School District drew new boundaries to compensate for the “white flight” out of the neighborhood. Therefore, I was forced to finish out my elementary education at Turner Elementary school located on Rosedale. (Blacks had now moved as far south as Brays Bayou.)

Although we had hand-me-down books from the white schools, we learned. I never met a child who could not read until the seventies. Teachers had integrity. Even though there were students who were not accustomed to strict discipline, they had respect for teachers and other authoritative figures. Not once in my schooling career did I ever hear a student curse or hit a teacher. Teachers were not only concerned with students learning, but also with developing good character and manners. It was in these ‘inferior’ schools that I learned information that has helped me to survive and become a productive citizen.

In spite of what many would wish to believe, black teachers taught about Bach, Beethoven, Mendelson and other great composers. They gave their students the opportunity to attend operas and concerts every year. Basketball, baseball and football were not the only sports they exposed their student to; tennis, archery, and swimming were incorporated as well. I think that the most important concept my teachers, blacks teachers, taught was the spirit of “I can” despite the realities of race and discrimination. They also promoted the concept of community involvement and community camaraderie.

I knew the names of all of my neighbors, not just on Tierwester, but also those who lived four streets behind me. There were many interesting individuals and families in my neighborhood. There were two families in particular whom I shall never forget, Mrs. Minvera and the Johnsons.

Mrs. Minvera was a plump, fair complexion black woman originally from Louisiana. She believed in voodoo and practiced it on a regular basis. On several occasions I had the opportunity to go with her to a voodoo supply store located downtown near the Greyhound Bus Station. I remember the time she tried to voodoo my mother, but luckily she was unsuccessful.

Then there was Mr. Johnson and his wife Mama Moot who had lots of children, who in returned had lots of children. I use to wonder how in the world could they keep such a clean yard and home with so many people in and out. Mama Moot cooked red beans

and rice everyday, and she used newspapers as plates for her grandchildren. Ironing was Mama Moot's occupation. During those times many black women who could not find work outside the home, except for domestic work such as ironing for whites. Monday through Saturday white people would come early in the morning to late in the evening to pick up their laundry. The laundry pickups and deliveries from the mailman were the only visits from whites that I would encounter in my neighborhood.

My family, like most families, rarely left the neighborhood to shop because there were businesses that catered to their needs. The vegetables my mom did not grow in her "victory garden," she bought from the vegetable man that made his daily rounds. There were three variety stores in the neighborhood for quick purchases such as clothing, toys, or kitchenware. Mr. Edward and Mr. West each owned a small grocery store, but there were also three larger grocery stores. One was owned by an Italian family and the other two by Asians. When my mother did large volume shopping, she would always go to Hoppe Lee (one of the Asian grocery stores) because he would let her have credit until my father got paid. In addition to these businesses there were the Do Stop In, The Driftin Inn, and Tucker's Beer Parlor. Anyone from ages birth to infinity could enter. It was understood that if you were a child, you stayed in a child's place and only bought things that were non-alcoholic. Kids would go to the Do Stop In to buy pickles and pickled pig feet, the Driftin Inn to buy sea food dinners, and Tucker's to buy ice cream. Also located in the neighborhood was Jack's Taxi Service, Burk's Shoe Hospital and the famous Groovy Grill.

Since its humble snack bar beginnings in 1942, the Third Ward's Groovey Grill has been more than just a comfortable spot to eat home cooking. The grill was the only nice eatery where Houston's blacks could dine and mingle. A few of its visitors have been former President Lyndon B. Johnson, boxing champion Muhammad Ali and baseball greats Willie Mays and Roy Campanella. In the fifties and early sixties it was located on the corner of Tierwester at Wheeler Avenue.

One of the things my friends and I enjoyed doing was going to town on Saturdays. The bus stop was about a quarter of a mile from my house on Holman Street. As long as we were in the black neighborhood, we could sit wherever we pleased, but once we transferred from the Holman bus to the Downtown bus it was another world. Although the fare was the same, a black person would have to sit or stand behind the "colored line". The line was drawn on the bus floor, separating approximately one-fourth of the bus seating space -- it was always in the rear. The buses were not air-conditioned and the fumes from the diesel engine, located in the back of the bus, would almost choke you to death.

My friends and I loved to look at all the pretty things they had in Sakowitz, Neiman Marcus and Battlestein, but we hated how they treated us. From the moment we entered, either store a security person would obviously follow us around as if we had no rights to look nor purchase the merchandise. I still wonder why some blacks pretended to be buying for their bosses just to purchase from these stores. I was really glad when

Sakowitz and Battlestein went out of business and hope I will live to see Neiman Marcus do the same. In fact the only major store at this time that treated blacks with any respect was Foley's. It was the first department store in Houston to hire a black sales clerk. Another one of our favorite thing to do was eat at Woolworth. Even though we had to eat in the basement and use those nasty, filthy "colored only" restrooms, the food was good and it did give a few blacks jobs.

All of my life my father celebrated June Nineteenth (the day that blacks in Texas got the word that they were no longer slaves) until his death. He and many other families in the neighborhood would begin preparing for the celebration at the break of dawn. Our feast consisted of barbecue, chilled watermelons, and red sodas. My mom would purchase from the Cuney Home's Variety Store a new short set for all of her children to wear later that evening. The highlight of the day was our visit to Playland Amusement Park located on Main near Kirby. On Juneteenth the owners of the park would close it to whites and let the blacks have one day of fun. The majority of Third Ward was there, albeit it wasn't fair who cared-- it was a time of celebration.

It's funny, when life changes one doesn't really want it to change, but to go on with life, change must be accepted. I remember like it was yesterday. I was watching the five o'clock news with my sisters and the news commentators started talking about a lady named Rosa Parks. The story was that she refused to give up her seat to a white woman on the bus. My oldest sister ran into the kitchen to get my mom; my mom just stood in front of the television just shaking her head, repeating over-and-over, "They are going to kill her." When my father got home later on that evening, I could hear them discussing it with fear in their voices. The next morning when I awakened, my father was still reading the paper; (my father read the paper from cover to cover each morning but was finished by the time I got up) he said he had read the story several times not wanting to believe it, fearing the worse for Mrs. Parks. Shortly after, we began to hear and read about a man named Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who lead the black boycott of the busline. We were all so a afraid, not just my family, but the community.

The nation was changing and so was Third Ward. It happened so quickly; it seemed as if it was a ball of confusion-- boycotts, sit-ins, marches, race riots, segregation, and integration. Life began to look a little greener for some blacks in Third Ward. In 1965, we like so many other families moved from the old neighborhood to the other side of Brays Bayou. The people I knew, the streets where I played, my original home, and the family ran businesses that I remember are no more----they have been replaced by a parking lot for Texas Southern University.

Instructional Objectives:

1. Given a map of Houston and its surrounding areas the student will: locate their street of residence and the main streets surrounding it. The students will develop a geographical description of their place of residence.

2. Students will give the names of their subdivision and local precinct number.
3. Students will show pictures of people, industries, events, homes and interesting sites in their neighborhood.
4. Students will be able to list five physical or environmental features in their neighborhood.
5. Students will write a three page-plus paper about their neighborhood.

Suggested Activities:

This curriculum is designed for two week.

Day 1:

Explain the objectives of the project.

Begin explaining the following words as they relate to the topic:

neighborhood	urban	high crime area
city counselor	renewal	low density
geographical area	major	high density
flood zone	primary source	voting precinct
soil	secondary source	
map scale	underdeveloped	
landmark	undeveloped	

Days 2-4:

Give student a map of Houston and surrounding area. Explain how to read the map and pin point a street. Working in teams let each member find his street and write a geographical description of its location (do not use longitude or latitude). Pass out *Fact Seeking Sheet*, three days of class will be taken to complete assignment, otherwise assignment must be finished at home.

Day 6:

In class, discuss *Fact Seeking Sheet* findings. Let students work individually and develop and outline using their *Fact Seeking Sheet*.

Day 7-14:

Independent study. Students will develop individual narratives about their neighborhood.

Fact Seeking Sheet

The following questions are pertaining to your particular neighborhood.

What are the names of the major streets in your geographical area?

Name three persons who lived in your community with

- a. the prettiest homes.
- b. impressed you positively
- c. impressed you negatively

Explain your answers.

Are there many trees in your neighborhood? If so what kind?

Are there any other physical features that may define your neighborhood such as, a bayou or lake? If so, what is its name?

What kind of businesses exist in your neighborhood?

Have you always stayed in this area? If yes, for how long? And if not, how often have you moved?

How would you describe the crime level in your neighborhood? Very low, Low, Moderate, High, Very High. Why do you think this?

What is the social class of most of the people in your neighborhood? (i.e., poor, rich, middle class) Explain your answer.

Are there any parks in your neighborhood? Name them. Are there any recreational facilities in your neighborhood? Name them.

How many of your neighbors do you know by name and why?

What congressional district do you live in? Who represents your neighborhood in Congress? Have you seen them in the neighborhood? What is your voting precinct?

Do your parents vote? Why or Why not?

Annotated Bibliography

Note: A general bibliography is provided without division because student readings are limited.

Beeth, Howard and Wintz Cary, D., editors. *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992. The first anthology to track the black experience in a single southern city across the entire slavery/post-slavery continuum. It combines the best previously published scholarship about black Houston and little-known contemporary eyewitness accounts of the city with fresh, unpublished essays by historians and social scientists.

Bullard, Robert. *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1987. Bullard's primary thesis is that the blacks of Houston live in an invisible city because of institutionalized racism. Adopting a sociological perspective, Bullard covers the history of black Houstonians during the city's boom of the 1970s, as well as during its bust of the 1980s.

Houston, Sam (Madge Thornall Roberts, editor). *The Personal Correspondence of Sam Houston: 1846-1848 (Volume 2)*. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 1998. The second volume of Houston's correspondence covers the Mexican War While Houston was serving as a senator from Texas. He wrote Margaret daily, often from the senate floor while speeches were being made or from his room filled with company attempting to talk to him. While Houston rarely took part in the social life of Washington D. C. he gives many; interesting descriptions of life during this time.

Johnston, Marguerite. *Houston: The Unknown City, 1836-1946*. College Station: Texas A.& M Press, 1991. In their willingness to leave home and country to create a new city and a new nation, the first Houstonians were a special breed. They were adventurers and builders; they were citizens of the world. This is the story of these people, their descendants and their city, up to the end of the Second World War.

McEchin, James. *Farewell To The Mockingbirds*. Rharl Publishing, 1997. MacEachin takes the reader back to the time of World War I, beginning in 1917. It takes the reader into the midst of the 24th US Infantry Regiment and in particular King Company. Farewell to The Mockingbirds presents the story of those called "colored" at the time. It presents their reaction, their fears, and their anger at the treatment by those in authority.

Miller's Ray. *Ray Miller's Houston*. Active Record Cordovan Trade Paper, 1991. He gives a detail description of interesting places he has visited in Houston, Texas.

Murray, Richard, Stein, Robert and Weiher, Gregory. *The Houston Metropolitan Study/An Entrepreneurial Community Looks Ahead*. Identifies issues that will define success for the City of Houston and the surrounding region in the 21st century.

Smith, Patricia Prather. *From Slave to Statesman: The Legacy of Joshua Houston, Servant to Sam Houston*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1993. Imaginative biography of a man born without a last name and then willed to a woman only a few years his senior, Margaret Lea. Lea married Sam Houston and Joshua became the general's servant and property. Joshua's story was created largely from Margaret and Sam Houston's correspondence and from the family stories of Joshua's descendants.

Red Book of Houston. Houston: Sotex Publisher, 1915. A compendium of social, professional, religious, educational and industrial interest of Houston's black population.

Turrentine, Jan. *The Story of Mildred McWhorter*. New Hope Publisher, 1988. Presents a biography of Mildred McWhorter, a missionary serving in the inner city of Houston, Texas.

von der Mehden, Fred, editor. *The Ethnic Groups of Houston*. Houston: Rice University, 1984. After an opening chapter by Fred von der Mehden that gives an overview of the waves of immigration in to the city, other Houstonians take a close look at their particular group's history, struggles, and contributions to the cultural mosaic of the city.

Williams, David A. *Bricks without Straw*. Eakins Press: Austin, Texas. 1997. This comprehensive study of African Americans in Texas sheds light on a hidden, oppressed, and ignored subculture in the Lone Star State. From the earliest days of Texas history to the present, African Americans have had a heretofore; unrecognized influence that is addressed in this book.

Winningham, Geoff (photographs) and Reinert, Al (text). *A Place of Dreams...Houston, An American City*. This book is an appreciation of what makes Houston special and singular, important and personal. It celebrates the city just as the city celebrates its people. Geoff Winningham has turned his camera on the city he loves best and lives in, on his own home. He has captured images that reveal its richness and subtlety without intruding on the life of the place, without disturbing the reality of what is Houston.