

## **STAFF REPORT**

### **C14H-1977-0015 – 2402 San Gabriel Street**

Staff and the Historic Landmark Commission propose renaming the building at 2402 San Gabriel Street, currently known as the Franzetti Store – Wheatville Building to the Reverend Jacob Fontaine Gold Dollar Building to recognize the existence of the African-American community at Wheatville, and the contributions of Rev. Jacob Fontaine to the city of Austin and the African-American citizens of the city.

The rock rubble building at 2402 San Gabriel Street was constructed around 1870 in what was then the African-American settlement of Wheatville, one of a number of communities of emancipated slaves around Austin. Wheatville extended from what corresponds now to West 24<sup>th</sup> Street north to West 26<sup>th</sup> Street and from Rio Grande Street down to Shoal Creek. This building is the only structure remaining from the Wheatville settlement.

Rev. Jacob Fontaine was born into slavery in 1808 in Arkansas and moved with his employer, Edward Fontaine, to Austin in 1839 at the very beginning of the city's existence; Edward Fontaine was the secretary to Mirabeau Lamar, the first president of the Republic of Texas, and the founder of the City of Austin.

After emancipation in 1865, Fontaine became very active in Austin. His goals were to lift up the newly-freed slaves through education, the ministry, and entrepreneurship. He established the First Baptist Church (Colored) on the current site of the Austin History Center at 9<sup>th</sup> and Guadalupe Streets in 1867. Fontaine went on to establish several other Baptist churches in central Texas, including the Sweet Home Missionary Baptist Church in the Clarksville neighborhood of Austin. He was a teacher, knowing that illiteracy was one of the primary banes of the freedmen, and hindering their ability to move forward. African-American churches also served this function of elevating the newly-freed slaves through religious fellowship that many had been denied during slavery, and through education.

Fontaine moved into this building around 1875, and established a grocery store here for the Wheatville community. The most important aspect of his association with this building, however, was his establishment of the first African-American newspaper in Austin, the Gold Dollar, which he published until his death in the 1890s. The Gold Dollar was one of the first African-American newspapers in Texas and the South. Its significance in promoting literacy and providing a means for news reporting and advertisements for African-American-owned businesses in Austin is indisputable.

Fontaine also established a Baptist church here in Wheatville in the late 1880s, although it is not clear whether the congregation met in this building or another no-longer-extant building on the site. Fontaine never owned this building, but his associations with it lasted from 1875 until his death in 1898. After Jacob Fontaine's death, the Fontaine family moved out of this building, and Italian immigrant families, the Perrones and later the Franzettis, moved in and operated a neighborhood grocery store here. At the time this building was designated a historic landmark in 1977, it was still owned by descendants of the Franzetti family. The designation form prepared by Betty Baker in 1977 references the history of the building as the Wheatville store building.

The building retains most of its appearance from when Jacob Fontaine and his family lived here and operated their various businesses. The second-story porch was added in 1923 and the

north addition was constructed in 1924, but otherwise the building remains intact with its 19<sup>th</sup> century appearance.

While the association with the Franzetti family is more long-standing than that of Jacob Fontaine, his association was earlier and had a profound impact on Austin's African-American citizens for many years. Staff believes that the building should reflect the contributions of Reverend Fontaine in its name and designation.

The Historic Landmark Commission voted unanimously on September 24, 2018 to endorse the name change for this building.

## FONTAINE, JACOB

*Gene A. Burd*

**FONTAINE, JACOB** (1808–1898). Jacob (Jake) Fontaine, Baptist preacher, political and civic leader, and newspaper publisher in Austin, was born into [slavery](#) in Arkansas in 1808. His several owners included the Tuttle and Isaacs families, but his best known and most influential master was Rev. [Edward Fontaine](#), a great-grandson of Patrick Henry, who moved to Austin, Texas, in 1839 as the personal secretary of Texas president [Mirabeau B. Lamar](#).

Jacob was Edward Fontaine's sexton at St. David's Episcopal Church in Austin in 1855, but in 1860 he was attending the First Baptist Church, which [Sam Houston](#) attended. While serving as Edward Fontaine's sexton, he would preach in the afternoons to blacks in the basement of the old Methodist church at Brazos and Tenth streets. Jacob Fontaine and other members of the black congregation began to meet secretly in 1864 to organize a break from the white church. In 1867, after emancipation, Jacob founded the First (Colored) Baptist Church in Austin. He was a janitor in the old Land Office Building, became active in Republican and [Greenback party](#) politics during [Reconstruction](#) in Travis County, operated a grocery, laundry, book, and medicine store, and in 1876 established the [Austin Gold Dollar](#), one of the first black weekly newspapers in the South and the first newspaper under black ownership in Austin.

In 1867 Fontaine helped to found the St. John Regular Missionary Baptist Association, originally known as the Travis County Association, and was elected its first moderator. He also founded five churches in addition to the First (Colored) Baptist Church: Mount Zion (Williamson Creek), 1873; Good Hope (Round Rock), 1874; Sweet Home (Clarksville), 1877; New Hope (Wheatsville), 1887; and St. Stephen's (Waters Park), 1887. He and his minister son Israel Jacob Fontaine II later founded a local chapter of the Colored Brothers of the Eastern Star.

The Fontaine family lived on the Woodlawn plantation near the Austin home of ex-governor [Elisha M. Pease](#). Jacob's wife Melvina (Viney) was a housekeeper there and had cooked at the [Governor's Mansion](#), where their daughter Melissa married a custodian, Joe Gordon, on March 18, 1870. They had two other daughters. From 1875 to 1898 the Fontaines lived in a two-story structure at twenty-fourth and Orange (San Gabriel), now an Austin landmark. Fontaine started his newspaper there, with sixty dollars he earned from the investment of a gold dollar given to him in 1872 by his sister, Nelly Miller, when they were reunited in Mississippi after a separation caused twenty years before by slavery. In 1881–82 Fontaine emerged as Austin's leading black advocate for the establishment of the University of Texas in Austin. He traveled to San Antonio, Seguin, and Marlin to secure the black vote for his cause. Fontaine's work in the church and in newspaper publishing was continued by his son George, a depot porter in Austin, who published the *Silver Messenger* in 1897–98. George's son, Rev. Israel Jacob Fontaine III, founded the Fontaine Memorial Baptist Church in 1962 and published the *Austin Express* and the *Fort Worth Community News* before taking up advertising and insurance work in Austin.

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