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Forgetting Waller Creek: An Environmental History of Race, Parks, and Planning in Downtown Austin, Texas

By KATHERINE LEAH PACE

WALLER CREEK IS A FLOOD-PRONE STREAM THAT RUNS THROUGH the center of Austin, Texas. To quote Joseph Jones, an English professor who published a 1982 treatise on the waterway, Waller Creek flows “quite literally” through “the inner heart of Austin.” It originates in the city’s north-central suburbs and flows generally south through the University of Texas (UT) flagship campus, past the historic Brackenridge Hospital, around the east side of Capitol Square, which sits on a hill, and down the eastern edge of downtown, where it empties into Town Lake, an impounded stretch of the Colorado River. It is Austin’s most urbanized, polluted, and degraded creek; yet, as ecologists insist, it continues to provide habitat for a host of animal and plant species.¹

A “flash flood alley,” central Texas is a convergence zone for divergent weather systems, including massive, humid tropical fronts that roll off the Gulf of Mexico and cold dry fronts that move into Texas from the north and west. When these systems collide, they produce intense storms. Central Texas soils are relatively thin and rocky or heavy in clay, while the region’s terrain is hilly, limiting the soil’s capacity to absorb rainfall. As such, during intense storms, runoff flows rapidly into nearby streams, triggering sudden, high-velocity, and enormously destructive flash floods.²

¹Joseph Jones, *Life on Waller Creek: A Palaver about History as Pure and Applied Education* (Austin, 1982), 8–9 (quotation on 9). In 2007 Town Lake was renamed Lady Bird Lake. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided to me by archivists at the Austin History Center and to thank Dr. Sarah Dooling for her encouragement and edits.

²Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers’ Compensation, “Flash Flood Safety,” *Take 5 for Safety*, no. HS99-501E (05-21), <https://www.tdi.texas.gov/pubs/videoresource/t5flood.pdf> (quotation); William Keith Guthrie, “Flood Alley: An Environmental History of Flooding in Texas” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 2006), 1–9; Victor R. Baker, *Flood Hazards along the Balcones Escarpment in Central Texas: Alternative Approaches to Their Recognition, Mapping, and Management*, Geological Circular 75-5 (Austin, 1975); Gene Fowler, *Texas Storms: Stories of Raging Weather in the Lone Star State* (Mankato, Minn., 2011), 8–10.

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Austin's racial geographies evolved from the interplay between such floods and racial capitalism as it took shape in the American South and West.³ After the Civil War, formerly enslaved people migrated to southern towns and cities in search of work, education, and haven from anti-Black violence. They received a "chilly reception" from white innkeepers and landlords, and unable to find lodging, they squatted on the fringes of town "in tents, dugouts, and makeshift shelters." Recognizing that Black people were a captive mark, white owners of land on the city outskirts "were quick to seize the opportunity for profit." They subdivided their holdings and sold African Americans "the poorest land"—that is, steep land, land near industry, and, most often, lowlands susceptible to pestilence and flooding. Other African Americans settled nearby. They quickly established freedpeople's communities, or freedom colonies, each with its own businesses, churches, schools, and name. Consequently, as historian Craig E. Colten writes about the postbellum South, "The most common form of African American residential cluster was a bottomlands settlement near the city boundary."⁴

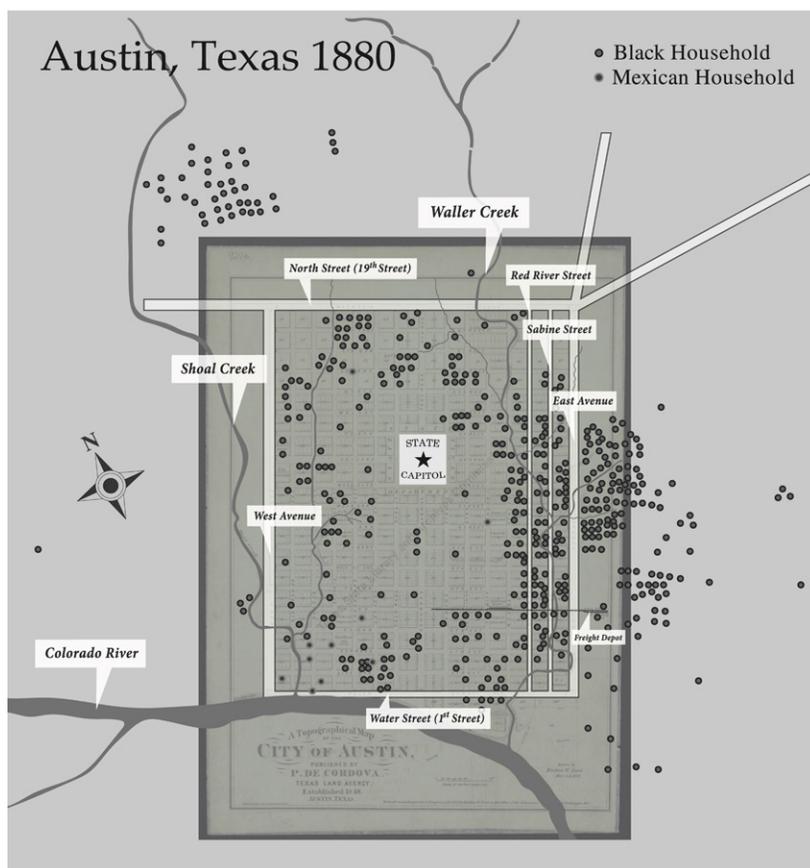
Black migrants likewise settled in Austin's bottomlands; however, the most common nineteenth-century Black residential cluster in the city was a riparian settlement located along the winding floodplains of Austin's streams. Because of Waller Creek's location, three of Austin's earliest, densest, and most enduring postbellum Black enclaves developed along the waterway's lower downtown stretch, between the Colorado River and 19th Street (the city's original northern boundary). These enclaves were the epicenter of Black settlement in nineteenth-century Austin (Map 1). Along with industry, they drew racially diverse settlement eastward, laying the foundations for Austin's Jim Crow geography.

In the 1910s, affordable automobiles hit the U.S. market. Confronted with pressure from a consolidating real estate industry that sought to

³First coined by Cedric J. Robinson, the term *racial capitalism* refers to the ways in which "[t]he development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions." Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983; 3rd ed., Chapel Hill, 2020), 2.

⁴Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle, 2012), 322 (first and second quotations); John Kellogg, "Negro Urban Clusters in the Postbellum South," *Geographical Review* 67 (July 1977): 310–21 (third and fourth quotations on 312); Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge, 2005), 80 (fifth quotation). See also Bartow Elmore, "Hydrology and Residential Segregation in the Postwar South: An Environmental History of Atlanta, 1865–1895," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 94 (Spring 2010): 30–61; and Lisa Goff, *Shantytown, USA: Forgotten Landscapes of the Working Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), chap. 7.

MAP 1
BLACK AND MEXICAN HOUSEHOLDS IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, 1880



NOTE: Some households have been moved minimally to make lower Waller Creek visible.

SOURCES: Data is from John J. Henneberger and Ernest C. Huff, *Housing Patterns Study: Segregation and Discrimination in Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1979); the base map is *Plan of the City of Austin, 1853*, Texas State Archives Map Collection (Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Tex.), https://www.tsl.texas.gov/apps/arc/maps/storage/texas_media/imgs/map00928.jpg. Map by Rachel Stewart, 2016.

build white-only automobile suburbs, Austin's white leaders opted to do away with the city's scattered freedom colonies and to segregate Black (and brown) people where they were already concentrated, namely, on the east side of town. In response, East Austin's white residents fled west, and the city divided into two racialized and inequitable spaces, East and West Austin.

Throughout Jim Crow, lower Waller Creek's floodplains were a defining part of East Austin's musical, commercial, educational, residential, and recreational landscapes. Waller Creek's larger riparian zones were simultaneously a winding color line. More precisely, lower Waller Creek was a mixed-race "edge" in the ecological sense, where East and West Austin met, overlapped, and transitioned.⁵ It remained a racial boundary until the mid-1970s, when urban renewal displaced Black people from the waterway's main branch, shifting the color line to Austin's nearby downtown stretch of Interstate 35 (I-35).

Despite this history, Waller Creek is largely absent from the historical memory of residential segregation in Austin. Historical memory is "that of which we are reminded, as distinct from that which we remember." Defined by recollection and forgetting, it is social, the product of community, of "external programming," and, thereby, of memory workers, such as activists, the media, and historians.⁶ Austin's historical memory of Jim Crow segregation crystallized in the early 2000s. A decade prior, a handful of Chicano/a East Austin residents founded an environmental justice group, People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources (PODER), to address the impacts of urban industries on communities of color. At the time, over 90 percent of the city's industry was located in East Austin and Austin's larger working-class Eastern Crescent. In order to reveal the patterned and intentional nature of environmental racism, activists drew attention to Austin's first comprehensive city plan. Approved in 1928, the plan institutionalized zoning and residential segregation, directing city leaders to segregate both industrial zoning and African Americans in East Austin. PODER's campaigns captured media and scholarly attention, and by the late 1990s the history of Austin's first master plan had spread into public awareness.⁷

⁵Ecological edges are "zones of transition from one ecosystem to another." They are not sharp boundaries but rather spaces in which divergent ecosystems overlap, giving rise to a notable diversity of plant and animal species. For an application of the term to cultural studies, see Nancy J. Turner, Iain J. Davidson-Hunt, and Michael O'Flaherty, "Living on the Edge: Ecological and Cultural Edges as Sources of Diversity for Social-Ecological Resilience," *Human Ecology* 31 (September 2003): 439–61 (quotation in note on 440).

⁶Tadhg O'Keefe, "Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology," in Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan, eds., *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape* (New York, 2007), 3–18 (first quotation on 5; second quotation on 6). See also John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992); Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York, 1989); and George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990).

⁷Koch & Fowler, *A City Plan for Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1928); Scott S. Greenberger, "City's First Zoning Map Plotted Neighborhood of Minorities, Hazards," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 20,

A young technopolis, Austin by this point was one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States, and the local real estate market was booming. In its continuous “seesaw from developed to underdeveloped space and back again,” capital returned to downtown Austin, reversing the effects of white flight to the suburbs.⁸ In the late 1990s, capital returned to East Austin. Alienated by new white neighbors and squeezed by rising rents and property taxes, the area’s Black and brown residents began moving out. Critics of gentrification decried the displacement of East Austin’s poor but nonetheless cohesive and culturally rich communities. In an effort to impress upon the public the injustice underway in East Austin, and in hopes of spurring the city to action, they reminded the public of Austin’s Jim Crow past and, in particular, of Austin’s first comprehensive city plan.⁹

Somewhere along the way, scholars, activists, and the media assumed that the city’s Jim Crow landscape developed precisely as planners had intended. Their thinking was logical. Austin’s 1928 plan envisioned the creation of a Black district “just east of East Avenue,” at the time downtown Austin’s eastern municipal boundary.¹⁰ In the late 1950s, East Avenue was converted into Austin’s downtown stretch of I-35. Nationwide, planners designed highways to function as what historian N. D. B. Connolly terms “race wall[s].”¹¹ Memory workers assumed Austin planners likewise designed I-35 to be a racial boundary. They also assumed I-35 neatly replaced Austin’s original color line, East Avenue.¹² The ensuing narrative has reconstructed a historic East Austin

1997, pp. A1, A8. On PODER’s history, see Sylvia Herrera, “From the Tank Farms in East Austin to Immigration Struggles in Arizona and Beyond,” March 2, 2013, audio at <https://renerenteria.wordpress.com/2013/03/19/dr-sylvia-herrera-chicana-leadership/>; and “Tackling Texas Toxics,” in Aubrey Wallace, *Green Means: Living Gently on the Planet* (San Francisco, 1994), 187–95.

⁸ Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (3rd ed.; Athens, Ga., 2008), 199.

⁹ Between 2000 and 2010, the number of Black and Latino/a residents in central East Austin neighborhoods decreased by 66 and 33 percent, respectively, while the area’s white population increased more than fourfold. See Eric Tang and Bisola Falola, “Those Who Stayed: The Impact of Gentrification on Longstanding Residents of East Austin” (Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis, University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 3, https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/iupra/_files/Those-Who-Stayed.pdf. On the gentrification of downtown Austin, see also Eliot Tretter, “Sustainability and Neoliberal Urban Development: The Environment, Crime and the Remaking of Austin’s Downtown,” *Urban Studies* 50 (August 2013): 2222–37.

¹⁰ Koch & Fowler, *City Plan for Austin, Texas*, 57.

¹¹ N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago, 2014), 264. See also Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 61–69; James Hanlon, “Unseen Urban Menaces and the Rescaling of Residential Segregation in the United States,” *Journal of Urban History* 37 (September 2011): 732–56; and Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940–1968* (Lexington, Ky., 1995), 140–41.

¹² Andrew M. Busch, *City in a Garden: Environmental Transformations and Racial Justice in Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 79; Marie Le Guen, “Urban Transformations,

of which Waller Creek was not part, and with few exceptions, it overlooks the impact of flash floods on the development of Austin's Jim Crow geography.¹³

The biography of an urban stream, this article writes lower Waller Creek into Austin's history of residential segregation. It begins in the summer of 1865, when Black migrants began arriving in Austin, and continues through the early 2000s, when the East Avenue legend took shape. It traces the creek's development into an urban boundary, a freedom colony, a racialized hazard, a Jim Crow color line, a redevelopment corridor, and, eventually, a forgotten part of the city's landscape. In the process, it makes three main contributions to studies of the urban South.

First, this article builds on scholarship that shows that in cities across the South (and the West) "the color line in any guise was inherently environmental." As Mark Fiege shows in his study of Topeka, Kansas, many nineteenth-century lowland communities survived Jim Crow. As such, in the 1950s as in the 1890s, Topeka's Black people "resided in enclaves . . . that tended to be in topographically low places."¹⁴ Elsewhere, Black people moved from one flood-prone space to another. Craig Colten, for example, has shown that while early-twentieth-century municipal drainage works remade New Orleans's hydrological and racial landscapes, racist real estate practices continued pushing Black

Ideologies of Planning and Actors' Interplay in a Booming City—Austin, Texas," *Urbanities* 7 (November 2017): 22–34, esp. 28; Jason McDonald, *Racial Dynamics in Early Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas* (Lanham, Md., 2012), 112; Alberta Phillips, "Proof of Austin's Past Is Right There—in Black and White," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 22, 2009, p. H2; Jennifer E. Ruch, "Far Out in Texas: Countercultural Sound and the Construction of Cultural Heritage in the Capital City" (M.A. thesis, Texas State University, 2016), 16; Dan Zehr, "History of Austin's Racial Divide in Maps," *Statesman In-Depth: Inheriting Inequality* (an *Austin American-Statesman* online project), <https://projects.statesman.com/news/economic-mobility/>; Red Salmon Arts, "City of Austin: Segregation and Civil Rights, 1865–1965," <https://salmonrojo.tumblr.com/post/75406738/city-of-austin-segregation-and-civil-rights/amp/>; Robin Peeples and Anna Radley, "35," <http://www.robinpeeples.com/archive/I-35/highway.html>; Bisola Falola, Eric Tang, and Chelsi West Ohueri, "About," *East Avenue: Research in the Past and Present of Racial Segregation in Austin, Texas*, <http://www.segregatedaustin.org/about>

¹³Geographers Eliot M. Tretter and Melissa Adams have written about the impact of flash floods on Austin's nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Hispanic enclave, Little Mexico. They note, "Flooding had a substantial role in shaping the changing historical geographies of race and class in the city during the era of Jim Crow"; however, while they offer a comprehensive analysis of the environmental forces that shaped Austin's Little Mexico, their narrative surrounding the impact of floods on the development of Jim Crow East Austin remains somewhat vague and is at times inaccurate. See Eliot M. Tretter and Melissa Adams, "The Privilege of Staying Dry: The Impact of Flooding and Racism on the Emergence of the 'Mexican' Ghetto in Austin's Low-Eastside, 1880–1935," in Sarah Dooling and Gregory Simon, eds., *Cities, Nature and Development: The Politics and Production of Urban Vulnerabilities* (Burlington, Vt., 2012), 187–205 (quotation on 187). Likewise, historian Andrew M. Busch writes about Austin's nineteenth-century lowland and riparian Black enclaves, but he incorrectly assumes that lower Waller Creek's freedom colonies did not survive Jim Crow. See Busch, *City in a Garden*, 77–78.

¹⁴Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, 318–57 (first quotation on 320; second quotation on 321).

people into flood-prone areas.¹⁵ Along with such scholarship, this article suggests that, while most histories and public memory tend to describe geographies of racial segregation in terms of blocks and roads, historians would do well to also think of Jim Crow landscapes in terms of topography, drainage works, streams, and flood control.

Second, this history illuminates an interplay between natural hazards, “racial” hazards, and park planning. As a multidisciplinary cohort of scholars have shown, natural hazards are socially conditioned. For example, floods are ecologically beneficial events that nourish dense riparian ecosystems. Permanent settlement of floodplains turns floods into hazards, and it turns floodplains into hazardous spaces. Poverty and discrimination have tended to drive poor, socially marginalized people—in Austin’s case, working poor Black and brown people—into such spaces. To quote geographer Neil Smith, in cities around the world “topographic gradients doubled as class and race gradients.”¹⁶ As N. D. B. Connolly explains in his history of race and real estate in south Florida, in the United States “real estate carried an inherent racial politics—a white supremacist politics—that made white Americans, immigrants, Native Americans, and even black Americans themselves understand black people—and, again, the black poor, especially—as potential threats to property values.”¹⁷ From the perspective of property developers as well as planners, who by and large embraced racial capitalist precepts, Black people were hazardous to land development.¹⁸ Lowlands occupied by Black people were therefore doubly hazardous.

¹⁵ Colten, *Unnatural Metropolis*, chaps. 3–5.

¹⁶ Neil Smith, “There’s No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster,” *Items* (a Social Science Research Council blog), June 11, 2006, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/>. On the social construction of natural disasters and the inequitable impact of such disasters on marginalized communities in the South and around the United States and the world, see also Greg Bankoff, Georg Frerks, and Dorothea Hilhorst, eds., *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People* (Sterling, Va., 2004); John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York, 1997); Piers Blaikie et al., eds., *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability, and Disasters* (New York, 1994); Dooling and Simon, eds., *Cities, Nature and Development*; Richard C. Keller, *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* (Chicago, 2015); Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago, 2002); Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (New York, 2000); Keith Wailoo et al., eds., *Katrina’s Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2010); and Andy Horowitz, “Hurricane Betsy and the Politics of Disaster in New Orleans’s Lower Ninth Ward, 1965–1967,” *Journal of Southern History* 80 (November 2014): 893–934.

¹⁷ Connolly, *World More Concrete*, 7. See also David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago, 2007); and Raymond A. Mohl, “The Second Ghetto and the ‘Infiltration Theory’ in Urban Real Estate, 1940–1960,” in June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, eds., *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997), 58–74.

¹⁸ On the relationship between city planning and capitalism, see Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (New York, 2019).

Austin planners attempted to mitigate this perceived double hazard by turning flood-prone land into public parks. Recognizing that poor people tended to settle in floodplains, planners repeatedly turned to parks to rupture relationships between topographic and social gradients. They used parks to “protect” undeveloped urban lowlands from settlement by poor people, and they used parks to whiten and gentrify lowlands and floodplains already occupied by people of color. To borrow the language of Robert B. Fairbanks, planners used green spaces to wage “war” on Austin’s low-lying Black and brown slums.¹⁹

Third, this article builds on geographies of historical memory. Memory scholars have shown that physical landscapes function as texts that transmit social memory. When these landscapes are lost due to displacement or other processes of alienation, social memory is disrupted, “creating a dislocation from the past.”²⁰ In a similar vein, environmental historians argue that humans forget nature when we cease to interact with it.²¹ Urban scholars tend to implicate technologies such as highways, and city planning projects such as urban renewal, in processes of alienation and loss of social memory. This article also implicates parks. In the process, it illuminates part of the nation’s “long, untold history of shantytowns,” and it contributes to a growing field on African American and Mexican American experiences of nature.²²

¹⁹Robert B. Fairbanks, *The War on Slums in the Southwest: Public Housing and Slum Clearance in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, 1935–1965* (Philadelphia, 2014). This argument makes explicit an argument implicit in a number of histories of parks in the United States. Such histories show that planners often chose to build parks on land that was hilly, swampy, or flood-prone and difficult to develop, and these same parks often displaced poor people, including African Americans. For example, see Robin F. Bachin, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890–1919* (Chicago, 2004), 132; Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 45; and Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, 66–68.

²⁰Jenéa Tallentire, “Strategies of Memory: History, Social Memory, and the Community,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 34 (May 2001): 197–212 (quotation on 205). See also Laura Cameron, *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method, and Sumas Lake* (Montreal, 1997); Heather M. Cox et al., “Drowning Voices and Drowning Shoreline: A Riverside View of the Social and Ecological Impacts of the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project,” *Rural History* 10 (October 1999): 235–57; and Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (New York, 1997).

²¹Christian Knoeller, *Reimagining Environmental History: Ecological Memory in the Wake of Landscape Change* (Reno, Nev., 2017); Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York, 1993), 18.

²²Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, xiii. On Black experiences of nature, see Camille T. Dungy, ed., *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (Athens, Ga., 2009); Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, eds., “To Love the Wind and the Rain”: *African Americans and Environmental History* (Pittsburgh, 2006); Dianne D. Glave, *Rooted in the Earth: Reclaiming the African American Environmental Heritage* (Chicago, 2010); Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012); and Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017). A significantly smaller body of scholarship on Mexican American

It also joins scholars of urban nature who argue that “[t]he process of improving on nature has engendered social inequities” that privilege white residents and developers at the expense of people of color.²³

On June 19, 1865, the day after arriving at Galveston Island in the company of two thousand Federal troops, Union general Gordon Granger stood on a villa balcony and informed Texans that chattel slavery had ended. As Federal troops fanned across the state, “‘colored folks started on the move.’” Migrants arrived in Austin largely from the east, from the corn and cotton plantations that dotted Texas’s fertile coastal plain, and so “black squatter settlements mushroomed” on the eastern outskirts of town.²⁴

More precisely, these migrant camps mushroomed just east of Waller Creek, for in 1865 lower Waller Creek was Austin’s eastern boundary. The Colorado River was unnavigable. Regional roads were rudimentary. The city was vulnerable to Comanche attacks, and Texas legislators remained undecided about the capitol’s permanent location. As such, Austin was a tiny, cash-poor town. It could ill afford to build sturdy bridges, so residents ferried across the river. They placed wooden plank bridges across Waller Creek and, most likely, across a neighboring stream, Shoal Creek, which flanked the city’s west side. Floods easily swept these bridges away and washed out roads, making it “well nigh impassable for carriages and light vehicles” to cross “without great danger of having them broken.” To avoid crossings, most people settled between the creeks, turning the waterways into boundaries. According to its first city plan of 1839, Austin extended from East Avenue to West Avenue. In real life, as a newspaperman wrote in 1852, “The city plot proper extends from the river north one mile, and from Waller creek to Shoal creek.”²⁵

experiences of nature includes Jason Byrne and Jennifer Wolch, “Nature, Race, and Parks: Past Research and Future Directions for Geographic Research,” *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (December 2009): 743–65; and Devon Gerardo Peña, *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida* (Tucson, 2005).

²³Busch, *City in a Garden*, 2. On environmental gentrification, see Melissa Checker, “Wiped Out by the ‘Greenwave’: Environmental Gentrification and the Paradoxical Politics of Urban Sustainability,” *City and Society* 23, no. 2 (2011): 210–29; and Sarah Dooling, “Ecological Gentrification: A Research Agenda Exploring Justice in the City,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 (September 2009): 621–39.

²⁴Alwyn Barr, *Black Texans: A History of African Americans in Texas, 1528–1995* (Norman, Okla., 1996), 39–40 (first quotation on 40); Jane Manaster, “The Ethnic Geography of Austin, Texas, 1875–1910” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1986), 90 (second quotation).

²⁵“To the Editor of the Gazette,” *Austin Texas State Gazette*, August 20, 1853, p. 3 (first and second quotations); “The City of Austin,” *Austin South-Western American*, June 16, 1852, p. 2 (third quotation). See also *Austin Texas State Gazette*, September 19, 1857, p. 2; and Carolyn H. Wright, “Becoming a Capital City: How Waller Creek Shaped Early Austin,” in Phillip Fry and Carolyn H. Wright, eds., *Austin’s Waller Creek: Promise for Tomorrow* (Austin, 2013), 3–23, esp. 6.

According to historian Michelle M. Mears, Austin's first freedom colony, Pleasant Hill, "appears to have been a squatter's camp, consisting of tents as well as shacks." It was located between 7th and 11th Streets, on a hillside overlooking the main branch of Waller Creek, which was the enclave's western border. A tributary of Waller Creek, the Pleasant Hill draw, ran down the hill along 9th Street. In the summer of 1865, the hillside was undeveloped and covered in brush. By 1871, it had developed into a veritable town. That summer, a newspaperman wrote about Pleasant Hill, "This euphonious name has been given, by the colored residents, to the settlement just outside of the city limits, east of Waller creek This town, for such it is in reality, has been built exclusively by our colored citizens. There are between forty and fifty houses on the hill and in the vicinity."²⁶

On a hillside just north of Pleasant Hill, another tributary of Waller Creek flowed between 11th and 12th Streets. It passed through what was at the time the northwest corner of the Robertson plantation and then cut down along East Avenue. After the Civil War, the Robertson patriarch fell gravely ill, and his eldest son began subdividing outlying parts of the estate to provide for the family. In December 1869, he sold the first subdivision, an 11th Street plot, to a Black man. Early the following year, he sold another 11th Street plot to an African American couple. By 1871, a second Black riparian enclave, the Robertson Hill community, had consolidated around the Robertson Hill tributary. By 1875, the enclave was home to a Baptist church and by the early 1880s to a Black elementary school.²⁷ Through the mid-1870s, newspapers referred to Pleasant Hill, but it appears that, by 1880, the enclave had effectively merged into its neighbor.

African Americans also settled along the main branch of lower Waller Creek, in an area that included Red River Street. Twice, between 2nd and 3rd Streets and between 11th and 12th Streets, Waller Creek cut through Red River Street; however, the road was the flattest north-south

²⁶Michelle M. Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: African American Freedmen Communities of Austin, Texas, 1865–1928* (Lubbock, Tex., 2009), 27–29 (first quotation on 27); Louis Klappenbach, *Map of the City of Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1876) (and see Figure 2 in Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 29); "Pleasant Hill," *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, September 7, 1871, p. 4 (second quotation). On Pleasant Hill's history, see also James M. Smallwood, *Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texans During Reconstruction* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1981), 118. For a map showing the location of Pleasant Hill and other freedom colonies in Austin, see Austin History Center, "Early Freedman Communities," <http://austinlibrary.com/ahc/downloads/FreedmanMapOptimized.pdf>.

²⁷Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 40–42, 114; Wilson E. Dolman, Barry W. Hutcheson, and Terri Meyers, *East Austin Historic Sites Inventory: Robertson Hill, Austin, Travis County, Texas* (2 vols.; Austin, 2006), 1:7–9.

thoroughfare in the city, and though flood-prone, it developed into a transit and commercial corridor. In the 1860s it was home to a scattering of dry goods stores, lumber and wagon yards, stables, homesteads, and a German school, all owned and operated by white people. Just west of Waller Creek's mouth, between 1st and 5th Streets, there was a well-to-do neighborhood of white professionals, entrepreneurs, and planters.²⁸

In 1869, these demographics began to change. In July of that year, after three days of almost continuous rain, a record flood swept down the Colorado. The floodwater's momentum "changed entirely" the "appearance of the river banks near our city" and washed away "two little islands" near Waller Creek's mouth.²⁹ The river's tributaries backed up, and they too flooded. That August, a Black man purchased an undeveloped lot on the corner of Red River and 11th Streets. Waller Creek "meandered" through the property. By year's end, another Black man had purchased a lot at Red River and 12th.³⁰ Concurrently, in what one historian describes as an "exodus," white residents began moving out of the well-to-do neighborhood near Waller Creek's mouth. By the decade's end, the neighborhood "showed early signs of ethnic and economic diversity as both white and black, middle and working class families moved into the area."³¹

In October 1870, after thirty-six hours of continuous rainfall, the Colorado flooded again. Along lower Waller Creek, houses were washed away. At least three children reportedly drowned, and residents were "compelled to take refuge in the trees." After the flood, economic and racial diversity near Waller Creek's mouth increased. In 1871, Jeremiah J. Hamilton, a Black carpenter and member of the twelfth Texas legislature, purchased the aforementioned plot at Red River and 11th Streets and built a two-story, triangular home. He and his family lived on the top floor and out of the bottom ran a grocery.³²

²⁸Wright, "Becoming a Capital City," 7–9; "Austin's Creeks: A Tribute to Tributaries" exhibition, September 7–November 22, 1999 (Austin History Center, Austin Public Library, Austin, Tex.; hereinafter cited as AHC).

²⁹"The Flood," *Austin Tri-Weekly Texas State Gazette*, July 7, 1869, p. 3; "The Change," *Austin Tri-Weekly Texas State Gazette*, July 12, 1869, p. 3 (quotations).

³⁰Angela Parmelee, "Docent Training: Brief History of the Site of Symphony Square," 1976, Folder 3, Box 2, Peggy Brown Papers, AR.2009.051 (AHC). See also "Historic Marker Application: The Jeremiah Hamilton House," 1978, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark Files (Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Tex.), online via *Portal to Texas History* (University of North Texas Libraries, Denton, Tex.), <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph491609/>.

³¹Wright, "Becoming a Capital City," 9.

³²"The Flood!," *Austin Tri-Weekly State Gazette*, October 17, 1870, p. 2 (quotation); Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 46–47; Wright, "Becoming a Capital City," 13–15. See also "Historic Marker Application: The Jeremiah Hamilton House."

Black settlement along Red River Street—or, more precisely, along lower Waller Creek’s main branch—quickly solidified into another riparian freedom colony, dubbed by Michelle Mears the Red River community.³³ A residential and commercial district, it included Red River and adjacent flood-prone Sabine Streets. Referring to census data, historian Jane Manaster writes that, by 1875, “a pronounced black cluster ran south to the river along the banks of Waller Creek, especially in the area bounded by Red River and Sabine, Eighth and Thirteenth Street.”³⁴ Businesses in the cluster included Hamilton’s grocery as well as a handful of blacksmiths, at least two other grocers, and at least one cobbler.³⁵

Because urban floodplains change as watersheds develop, floodplain maps are imperfect historical resources; however, when read in conjunction with city records of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century flood damage, such maps suggest that most of the Red River community’s businesses and residences were located in the floodplains of the main branch of lower Waller Creek.³⁶ Between 12th and 15th Streets, at the eastern foot of the hilltop Capitol Square, there was riparian bottomland. In the 1870s, this bottomland developed into a racially mixed, working-class neighborhood.³⁷ As in other cities, Black and brown communities in Austin were internally differentiated by class and geography, and the Red River community’s poorest residents crowded into shanties located along Waller’s steep and particularly flood-prone banks.³⁸ Meanwhile, despite flooding and anti-Black stigma, Red River Street continued to attract white businesses, and the

³³ Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 46.

³⁴ Manaster, “Ethnic Geography of Austin, Texas,” 90.

³⁵ Gray & Moore, *Mercantile and General City Directory of Austin, Texas, 1872–73* (Austin, 1872), 37, 56, 57, 60, 67, 87, 88, 92, 93; Dolman, Hutcheson, and Meyers, *East Austin Historic Sites Inventory*, 1:28–29.

³⁶ For example, Sanborn Company fire insurance maps from 1889 depict “Negro Tenements” located adjacent to the waterway. Sanborn Map Company, *Austin, Texas, Travis Co.*, July 1889, Sheet 8 (Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), accessed through Fire Insurance Maps (Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin), http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/sanborn/austin_1889_8.jpg. See also Hardy, Heck, Moore & Myers, Inc., *Historic Resources Survey of East Austin: Survey Report* (Austin, 2000), 72–73, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=242864>; and Dolman, Hutcheson, and Meyers, *East Austin Historic Sites Inventory*, 1:28–29. Records of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century flood damage include minutes of city council meetings, during which residents petitioned for financial aid to repair flood damage to their properties. For example, in 1914 the city resolved to pay twenty-six dollars to the owner of a property located on the corner of Neches and 4th Streets (one block west of Red River Street) due to damages incurred from a recent flood. Austin City Council Minutes, February 19, 1914, <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=118175>.

³⁷ Wright, “Becoming a Capital City,” 15.

³⁸ On the relationships between class and geography within Black communities, see Fiege, *Republic of Nature*, 333–36.

eastern edge of downtown developed into a working-class, mixed-race, residential and commercial district of which the Red River community was part.

The outlines of Austin's postbellum racial geography were firmly in place by 1872, when the city became home to its first industrial facility. After the Civil War, the federal government launched its military at the Plains Indians, opening the American West to railroads and white settlement. The first railroad to Austin was completed on Christmas Day 1871, connecting the Texas capital to the state's major port cities, Houston and Galveston. The spur was also central Texas's first rail line, and it turned Austin into a regional trading hub.³⁹ Between 1870 and 1880, the city's population more than doubled.⁴⁰ There was no bridge over the Colorado River, discouraging growth to the south. To the west were large private estates. In 1870, the U.S. Army built the first stone bridge over Waller Creek at 6th Street, and landowners just east of the city began subdividing their properties.⁴¹

In February 1872, the railroad's owners built a rail and freight yard along the tracks just east of the city. Austin resident Frank Brown later recalled, "A considerable village sprang up in the vicinity of the freight depot, east of Waller creek, between Fourth and Sixth streets."⁴² The depot attracted warehouses and manufacturing and industrial facilities, including a lumber yard and cotton gin. It industrialized lower East Austin, drawing Black, white, and immigrant laborers and families to the area. In the 1880s, Swedish and German immigrants established enclaves atop Robertson and Pleasant Hills, beyond Waller Creek's riparian zones.⁴³ While there were "nicer" white neighborhoods south

³⁹"The Railroad," *Austin Democratic Statesman*, December 28, 1871, p. 2; Busch, *City in a Garden*, 23.

⁴⁰Between 1870 and 1880, Austin's population grew from 4,428 to 11,013. *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1883), Table VI, p. 424.

⁴¹"Historic Resources of East Austin," National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, prepared by Martha Doty Freeman, Walker, Doty & Freeman, August 8, 1984, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/pdfhost/docs/NRHP/Text/64000840.pdf>.

⁴²Frank Brown, "Annals of Travis County and the City of Austin (From the Earliest Times to the Close of 1875)," n.d., Vol. 11 (Travis County Historical Commission, Austin, Tex.), online via *Portal to Texas History*, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph841234/>, image #100.

⁴³Because of the proximity of Robertson Hill's Black and immigrant communities, historians have described nineteenth-century Robertson Hill as a "racially integrated neighborhood." Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 42. In fact, the neighborhood's Black residents "almost exclusively occupied the region between East 11th and East 12th streets . . . , the 800–900 blocks of East 11th Street and the 900–1000 blocks of East 10th Street." Hardy, Heck, Moore & Myers, *Historic Resources Survey of East Austin*, 56. In other words, Black residents lived in an area that corresponded with the winding riparian zones of Waller Creek's Robertson Hill tributary. The hill's German and Swedish residents, in contrast, had "the privilege of staying dry." See Tretter and Adams, "Privilege of Staying Dry."

of the rail yard, beyond its noises and smells, industry pushed most well-to-do white settlement northward.⁴⁴

Previously Austin's eastern boundary, lower Waller Creek developed into the boundary between downtown and Austin's eastern suburbs. Local government used its new tax base to build stone and sturdier wooden bridges over the waterway; however, wide piers and abutments narrowed the creek bed, intensifying flood velocities. Additionally, settlers' agricultural, grazing, and building practices denuded the land, triggering soil erosion. Deprived of their reservoir, streams began to go dry between rain events, and runoff increased, intensifying flooding.⁴⁵ Indeed, late-nineteenth-century newspapers were rife with reports of bridges "in a bad way and dangerous to cross," and so Waller remained a boundary in the urban landscape. In 1883, a newspaperman wrote, "A trip to East Austin will convince the most skeptical that the capital city is building up with almost Aladdin-like rapidity. In every direction on the east side of Waller creek new houses are built, the streets are being cleared, leveled and graded, and trees are being trimmed or removed."⁴⁶

Black educational institutions quickly consolidated in and around Waller Creek's Black enclaves, reinforcing racial settlement patterns. In the mid-1870s, after deciding to open a Black teacher training college in Texas, white Congregationalist minister George J. Tillotson purchased land just east of Pleasant Hill and north of the rail yard. Austin's first institution of higher learning, the Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute opened in 1881. By the mid-1890s, the area just north and east of the institute's campus was home to a middle-class Black enclave, Gregorytown. In 1889, the city's first (and until desegregation only) Black high school opened on Robertson Hill.⁴⁷ The University of Texas, which opened in 1883, was located in North Austin.

In 1890, after residents approved a municipal bond measure, workers broke ground on the Austin Dam. New railroad lines had shifted trade away from Austin, and though the state legislature voted in 1873 to keep

⁴⁴In 1891, for example, a real estate developer established Austin's first streetcar suburb, Hyde Park, a white-only neighborhood located in North Austin and settled in the main by businessmen and clergymen. See Manaster, "Ethnic Geography of Austin, Texas," 47.

⁴⁵The loss of gallery forests also intensified floods. Dense forests that grew in the winding riparian zones of central Texas streams, gallery forests slowed the velocity of floodwaters, allowing rain to percolate into the soil. By the 1880s, these forests had largely disappeared, having been felled for fuel and timber. Guthrie, "Flood Alley," 66–73.

⁴⁶"In a Bad Way," *Austin Weekly Statesman*, May 20, 1897, p. 5 (first quotation); *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, September 7, 1871, p. 4; "A World of Water: Works Wreck and Ruin in and about the Capital City," *Austin Weekly Statesman*, April 30, 1885, p. 3; "Street Caved In," *Austin Weekly Statesman*, March 5, 1891, p. 8; "Rapid Building," *Austin Weekly Democratic Statesman*, March 1, 1883, p. 4 (second quotation).

⁴⁷Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 53, 114.

the capital in Austin, urban growth had slowed. In response, developers proposed the city build a hydroelectric dam on the Colorado River, providing Austin with an abundant energy supply that would attract manufacturing. The structure was completed in 1893. It immediately began showing signs of stress, including leaks and siltation. On April 7, 1900, after weeks of heavy rain followed by a torrential downpour, the Colorado flooded, and the dam burst, sending a wave of water forty feet high through downtown, washing away Austin's new powerhouse, killing five workers and three children inside, and leaving the city with millions of dollars of debt and no manufacturing base with which to pay off this debt.⁴⁸

That same year, a second Black college, Samuel Huston College, opened its doors. Founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the school was also located in Robertson Hill, on the corner of East Avenue and 12th Street. Along with Tillotson College and Austin's Black high school, Samuel Huston drew African Americans eastward. The descendants of the hill's Swedish and German enclaves sold their properties to Black buyers and moved west, and by 1920, the neighborhood was a predominantly Black space, home to riparian shanties and, above the shanties, a "fine middle class [African American] neighborhood."⁴⁹

By the early 1900s, Jim Crow was in full swing. In 1891 Texas segregated its railroads, and in March 1906 Austin issued an ordinance segregating streetcars. After "city officials ignored Black Austin's request to revoke the ordinance, a boycott was organized. . . . Black owners of horses and wagons met on Robertson Hill each day to offer rides to boycotters." The protest lasted into the summer, when it was defeated by heat, police aggression, and the city's unwillingness to budge.⁵⁰

At this point, Austin remained "a dyadic society, composed of [predominantly] whites and blacks"; however, Austin's Hispanic population was increasing and making its presence felt along lower Waller Creek. Permanent Hispanic settlement in Austin began in the early 1870s, when the railroad brought Mexican and Tejano workers to the city, where they, too, faced racial discrimination. Most Hispanic migrants

⁴⁸Edward A. Sevcik, "Selling the Austin Dam: A Disastrous Experiment in Encouraging Growth," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 96 (October 1992): 214–40; Busch, *City in a Garden*, 28.

⁴⁹Manaster, "Ethnic Geography of Austin, Texas," 116. See also Hardy, Heck, Moore & Myers, *Historic Resources Survey of East Austin*, 57–59; and Wilhelmina E. Perry and August N. Swain, *The Huston-Tillotson University Legacy* (Austin, 2007).

⁵⁰Mears, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home*, 138; Bruce Hunt, "Austin's First Electric Streetcar Era," *Not Even Past*, March 17, 2013, <https://notevenpast.org/austins-first-electric-streetcar-era/>; Austin History Center, "Black in the Past: 1906 Streetcar Boycott" (quotation), online at <https://youtu.be/aUNoe5mYeX0> (video) and <http://austinlibrary.com/ahc/downloads/transcripts/Transcript%20of%20Video%20of%201906%20Streetcar%20Boycott.pdf> (transcript).

settled in the southwest corner of downtown, at the confluence of Shoal Creek and the Colorado River, another of the most flood-prone parts of the city. The area developed into Austin's Little Mexico.⁵¹ After the turn of the twentieth century, Hispanic settlement also spread to the eastern edge of downtown. In 1908, Mexican American resident Ben Garza opened a meat market at 6th and Sabine Streets, in a building overlooking Waller Creek. According to a study produced by Austin's Human Relations Commission, in 1910 lower Waller Creek's main branch was home to seventeen of approximately eighty-five Mexican households located within Austin's city limits.⁵²

Owing in large part to debt from the Austin Dam, municipal water and sewage systems grew slowly, and into the 1920s residents relied on wells and cesspools. Intermittently, cesspools leaked into the groundwater, contaminating wells with typhoid. As the disease most often affected crowded Black neighborhoods, it went largely ignored by city officials until the summer of 1912, when an outbreak sickened white people. In response, the city closed dozens of wells and commissioned its special health inspector, William B. Hamilton, to conduct a study of sanitation hazards in the city. Like sanitation surveys commissioned by other U.S. cities, usually in the aftermath of epidemics, Hamilton's *Social Survey of Austin* generated an "invoice" of public health hazards, and it made "comprehensive, citywide" recommendations, including constructing new water and sewage systems, tearing down shanties, developing parks, and paving streets. Such surveys laid a foundation for future city planning.⁵³

Although Hamilton identified hazards around Austin, he homed in on the city's poorest neighborhoods, namely, the riparian shanty districts located along "Waller Creek and the two draws which run into it" and in the "three blocks near the mouth of Shoal Creek." Though Austin

⁵¹ McDonald, *Racial Dynamics in Early Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas*, 17 (quotation), 105, 113–20; Tretter and Adams, "Privilege of Staying Dry," 198–99; *Writing Austin's Lives: A Community Portrait* (Austin, 2004), 230–31.

⁵² Allen Childs, *Sixth Street* (Charleston, S.C., 2010), 62–63; John J. Henneberger and Ernest C. Huff, *Housing Patterns Study: Segregation and Discrimination in Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1979), 16. Mexican American residents also established a small but growing enclave in East Austin, just south of the rail yard, which, though semi-industrial, was not as polluted, crowded, or flood-prone as Little Mexico and Waller Creek.

⁵³ William B. Hamilton, *A Social Survey of Austin* (Austin, 1913), iii (first quotation), 2–7; Andy Karvonen, "Sanitary Sewer System Development and Municipal Governance in Austin, Texas, 1880 to 1913," in Peter Wilding, ed., *Urban Infrastructure in Transition: What Can We Learn from History?* (International Summer Academy on Technology Studies, Deutschlandsberg, Austria, 2004), 167–80; Steven Joseph Kraus, "Water, Sewers, and Streets: The Acquisition of Public Utilities in Austin, Texas, 1875–1930" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1973); Jason Corburn, *Toward the Healthy City: People, Places, and the Politics of Urban Planning* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 32–33 (second quotation on 32).

had “no tenement districts . . . as in the large cities of America,” Hamilton wrote, “people are crowded together in small huts, one and two families in a one-room shant[y], and little children are forced to play out in the dusty street on the filthy, dirty creek or river bank where their homes are located.” Embracing the moral environmentalism prominent at the time, according to which crowded, unsanitary living conditions produced diseased, antisocial people, Hamilton insisted, “There are many blocks of shanties in Austin which ought to be destroyed They are but breeding places for moral and physical degeneracy, contagious diseases, and crime. . . . I speak more particularly of what is known as the Mexican settlement between Colorado, Rio Grande, Fourth Streets, and the river front; and also of certain districts populated by the negroes and Mexicans along the banks of Waller Creek.”⁵⁴

Houses in both areas were overcrowded, unventilated, and poorly maintained, yet landlords charged exorbitant rents. Hamilton observed that “Waller Creek is an open sewer from Nineteenth Street to the river. . . . On both sides of this creek are jammed together small shacks.” Hamilton counted 106 residences located within twenty feet of the creek bed and 122 outhouses within six feet of the creek bed, many of which dropped “compost . . . directly into the creek.” He counted seven wells nearby. He lamented, “Fruit is offered for sale to the public at this place.”⁵⁵

The bottom eight blocks of Shoal Creek “in no way differ[ed] from Waller Creek,” except that the Mexican district was home to Austin’s main garbage dump, located on the Colorado River’s banks. Daily, “city dump carts overloaded with stable manure” spilled their contents into the streets. Poor whites, Blacks, and Mexicans “follow the city wagons to the dump to pick out the old rags, cans of spoiled food, [and] partly rotten apples and other fruit.” Nearby, in the river, fish fed on a federal-government-run sewage outlet. Hamilton observed, “Negroes and Mexicans can be seen fishing here any time of the day. This is put on the Austin market.” He also observed clothes hanging over Shoal Creek to dry. He wrote, “The shanties in which they are ironed are reeking in dirt and filth. I have seen these same clothes taken from such holes of filth and disease directly to homes to be worn by the white children of refined families.”⁵⁶

Though perhaps at times exaggerated, Hamilton’s study bears witness to the ways that race and environmental hazards, including floods and

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *Social Survey of Austin*, 55 (first and second quotations), 48 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6–7 (first quotation on 6; second and third quotations on 7).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6–8 (first quotation on 7; fourth quotation on 6), 11–12 (second quotation on 11), 57–58 (third quotation on 58; fifth quotation on 57).

waste, structured early-twentieth-century urban space. It also illuminates the racism that animated the sanitation reform movement: disease was a problem when it impacted white people. Hamilton observed poor, hard-working residents carving homes and livelihoods out of the urban landscape; however, like other well-to-do observers of shantytowns, Hamilton saw potential criminals and carriers of disease. He also saw a threat to property values. He wrote, "Austin is paying heavily because of her bad housing conditions. She has received much damaging advertising by permitting these conditions to exist. This city . . . should and will become the Mecca for cultured people, a place where men, having made a success in business in smaller towns, are wont to make their residence. The best advertising the Austin Chamber of Commerce can do is to see that the housing conditions are improved at once."⁵⁷

In order to improve the city's housing stock, Hamilton recommended that Austin tear its shacks down and institute new building codes. Little Mexico was "aptly suited" to become a manufacturing district, and Waller Creek's banks should become parks. He wrote about the waterway, "The bed of the creek divides the blocks into two parts, neither of which is deep enough for a residence lot. We may expect nothing but shacks to be erected here." He concluded, "The shacks along Waller Creek should be moved back or torn down for one block on each side, the creek cleaned out, . . . and parked from Twenty-seventh Street to the river. This is the only solution of the housing question along its banks."⁵⁸ Hamilton's logic was clear. Austin's shantytowns, which were Black and brown spaces, were hazardous to land development. Only shacks would ever be built along the banks of Waller Creek. The city should therefore turn the creek's banks into parkland.

Hamilton's vision took shape alongside the local park movement. In 1909, Alexander P. Wooldridge, a proponent of the Austin Dam and the City Beautiful movement, was elected mayor. As Samuel Stein writes, "City Beautiful was a real estate program that sought to attract investment by building massive, Beaux Arts-inspired municipal buildings, tree-lined boulevards and carefully manicured open spaces." Its ideas merged with the park movement, which embraced the concept of green chains, or interconnected citywide park systems.⁵⁹ In addition to instigating the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 84. On the gazes of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century shantytown observers, see Goff, *Shantytown, USA*.

⁵⁸ Hamilton, *Social Survey of Austin*, 85–86 (first quotation on 85; second and third quotations on 86).

⁵⁹ Stein, *Capital City*, 22 (quotation); Jon A. Peterson, *The Birth of City Planning in the United States, 1840–1917* (Baltimore, 2003), 98–122; Jon A. Peterson, "The Evolution of Public Open Space in American Cities," *Journal of Urban History* 12 (November 1985): 75–88.

rebuilding of the Austin Dam, Wooldridge began developing Austin's rudimentary park system. The city cleaned up a downtown park, curbed new parks along lower East Avenue, and began planning a park along the Colorado. Attuned to these developments, Hamilton imagined that the parks along Waller Creek "would connect with the river front park the city is planning and give a continuous chain of parks and drives."⁶⁰

Such plans did not come to fruition, for Austin once again flooded. In mid-April 1915, a river flood destroyed the incomplete Austin Dam. On April 22, a separate storm stalled over Waller Creek's watershed. As federal engineers later reported, "A cloudburst at its [Waller Creek's] head contributed so much water in such a short time that the stream flowing through a constricted channel tore out all bridges, retaining walls, and adjacent buildings." According to the *Austin Statesman*, "Nearly every house on the bank of Waller creek was either flooded or moved by the waters." Many people drowned. The *Statesman* continued, "Numerous reports of negroes being swept away were made. The Mexican and negro population on the east side suffered heavily from the loss of life and property."⁶¹

Faced with extensive damage to urban infrastructure, the city scrapped many of its improvement plans. It did not build parks along the river or Waller Creek. Poor people of color continued living in shacks along the creek's banks, and Black and brown people continued to do business in Waller's floodplains. Ben Garza, for example, opened a second meat market at Red River and 10th Streets, in another building overlooking Waller Creek. In 1918, African American horse trainer Simon Sidle opened an antiques store on the corner of Red River and 8th.⁶²

In 1925, University of Texas graduate student Earl Monroe Connell completed a study of Austin's Mexican population. Under pressure from southwestern agriculture, mining, and railroad interests, the federal government had waived immigration restrictions on contracted Mexican workers, and between 1920 and 1929, temporary labor programs brought nearly a half million Mexicans to the United States. Between 1910 and 1930, the proportion of Austin's population that was Mexican rose from 1.7 to 9.6 percent, and Austin became a "triadic" city "made up of whites,

⁶⁰Ruth Ann Overbeck, "Alexander Penn Wooldridge [Part 2]," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 67 (April 1964): 524–58; Hamilton, *Social Survey of Austin*, 86 (quotation).

⁶¹*House Documents*, 66 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 304: *Report on the Preliminary Examination of the Colorado River; Tex., . . . for Flood Protection* (Serial 7643; Washington, D.C., 1919), 32 (first quotation); "Flood Sweeps Down Waller and Shoal Creeks with Heavy Loss of Life and a Big Property Damage," *Austin Statesman*, April 23, 1915, pp. 1–2 (second quotation on 1; third quotation on 2).

⁶²Gretchen Neff, "Red River's Tannie and Theresa" (Austin High School, Austin, Tex., 1970), in Folder U5000 (5), Austin Files (AHC).

blacks, and Mexicans.”⁶³ According to Connell, in 1925 most Hispanic residents of Austin lived in Little Mexico. The “second largest” population of Mexican Americans lived “along Waller Creek between 14th and 6th streets.” Streets in the area were unpaved and “in many places are almost impassable because of the creeks and rocky hills. . . . There are a few native white people living within these bounds, but in the main, the section is occupied by Mexicans and negroes.”⁶⁴

In 1927, the Austin city council commissioned the Dallas-based planning firm Koch & Fowler to draft Austin’s first comprehensive city plan. Described as “one of the great achievements of Progressive Era reform,” comprehensive city planning sought to create long-term plans that integrated the interests of property developers and the City Beautiful, park, sanitation, housing reform, and road building movements. Geographer Samuel Stein writes, “Rational planners imagined themselves to be efficient, scientific, apolitical experts.”⁶⁵ In reality, planners were quick to embrace white supremacist capitalism, particularly in the South, where they collaborated with city officials to devise schemes to segregate the races. At first, southern planners attempted to use zoning to implement residential segregation. After the U.S. Supreme Court, in 1917, declared racial zoning a violation of private property rights, southern planners developed another strategy. Cities would set aside tracts of land for “negro village[s]” and would strategically locate nonwhite public facilities therein.⁶⁶

Approved in 1928, Austin’s first comprehensive city plan reflected these regional trends. The plan also reflected existing land-use and settlement patterns. North and West Austin were industry-free, largely white, and home to some of the city’s wealthiest suburbs. East Austin was economically and racially diverse and home to industry and to multiple Black

⁶³ Gilberto Cardenas, “United States Immigration Policy Toward Mexico: An Historical Perspective,” *Chicano Law Review* 2 (Summer 1975): 66–91, esp. 70; Clare Sheridan, “Contested Citizenship: National Identity and the Mexican Immigration Debates of the 1920s,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21 (Spring 2002): 3–35; McDonald, *Racial Dynamics in Early Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas*, 17–20 (quotations on 17).

⁶⁴ Earl Monroe Connell, “The Mexican Population of Austin, Texas” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1925), 1–2 (first and second quotations on 1; third quotation on 2).

⁶⁵ Peterson, *Birth of City Planning*, 246 (first quotation); Stein, *Capital City*, 25 (second quotation). See also John W. Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, 1965).

⁶⁶ Christopher Silver, “The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities,” in Thomas and Ritzdorf, eds., *Urban Planning and the African American Community*, 23–42 (quotation on 37); *Buchanan v. Warley*, 245 U.S. 60 (1917). On the alliance between segregationists and city planning in the American South, see also Charles E. Connerly, “*The Most Segregated City in America*”: *City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920–1980* (Charlottesville, 2005), chap. 3; Robert B. Fairbanks, *For the City as a Whole: Planning, Politics, and the Public Interest in Dallas, Texas, 1900–1965* (Columbus, Ohio, 1998), 29; and McDonald, *Racial Dynamics in Early Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas*, 108–11.

communities, including the Robertson Hill community, which by 1927 was an entirely Black space. Prioritizing the interests of Austin's well-to-do white suburbs, Koch & Fowler recommended that the city locate industrial and unrestricted zoning along the river and in East Austin. The consulting firm also recommended the city segregate Black people where Black people were already concentrated. The report's authors wrote, "In our studies in Austin we have found that the negroes are present in small numbers, in practically all sections of the city, excepting the area just east of East Avenue and south of the City Cemetery. This area [Robertson Hill] seems to be all negro population. . . . [T]he nearest approach to the solution of the race segregation problem will be the recommendation of this district as a negro district."⁶⁷

Historians correctly characterize the implementation of residential segregation in Austin as a "radical reorganization of urban space."⁶⁸ The city used "[s]trict enforcement of tax foreclosure laws along with rapid upward revaluation of property" to "attack" Black communities in West Austin.⁶⁹ It also denied permits to Black West Austin businesses, and it located its only "colored" library and parks in East Austin, near Austin's Black high school. These tactics worked. By 1940, a good 75 percent of Black residents lived on the east side of town, where they were joined by growing numbers of Mexican Americans. Meanwhile, East Austin's white residents fled west to white-only suburbs. Once a patchwork of diverse enclaves, Austin developed into a series of large expanses of racially homogeneous space. At the same time, the Red River community and other lowland freedom colonies located outside Austin's eastern "negro district" survived Jim Crow. Additionally, by overlaying Austin's Jim Crow district onto Robertson Hill, the 1928 plan reinforced a racial geography that took shape in the nineteenth century in concert with floods.⁷⁰

Koch & Fowler's segregationist vision—one in which Austin's Black district began and ended at East Avenue—developed alongside plans to turn the floodplains of the main branch of lower Waller Creek into parkland. In the 1920s, road planning and the park movement converged, birthing the modern parkway. Wider than nineteenth-century roads and paved, such parkways had limited points of access, improved lines of sight, and regulated traffic flows at intersections. They were planted

⁶⁷ Koch & Fowler, *City Plan for Austin, Texas*, 57.

⁶⁸ Busch, *City in a Garden*, 63.

⁶⁹ Henneberger and Huff, *Housing Patterns Study*, 13.

⁷⁰ Scott S. Greenberger, "City's First Zoning Map Plotted Neighborhood of Minorities, Hazards," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 20, 1997, pp. A1, A8; Anthony M. Orum, *Power, Money, and the People: The Making of Modern Austin* (Austin, 1987), 175–77; Koch & Fowler, *City Plan for Austin, Texas*, 57 (quotation).

with “naturalistic landscaping,” offering commuters “scenic pleasure drive[s],” and they were lined with public parks, increasing access to recreational environments. The first modern parkway in the United States, the Bronx River Parkway, opened in Westchester County, New York, in 1925 to much acclaim. It triggered a building frenzy along the route, attracting the attention of planners nationwide who attempted to imitate its success.⁷¹ Koch & Fowler proposed that Austin build two such parkways, one in the Shoal Creek valley and another along East Avenue and Waller Creek. The avenue, along with a new Shoal Creek Driveway, would serve “fast moving” traffic. Cutoffs from the roads would lead to parks along the streams.⁷²

Though planners praised East Avenue’s “landscape advantages,” they insisted that, when designing Austin’s parkway system, they “endeavored to make the aesthetic part of the program . . . a secondary condition.” They explained, “The boulevards and parkways which are recommended have for their primary purposes their utility as a traffic-way The fact that some of them border creeks and ravines, does not necessarily mean that they were located primarily on account of the natural scenery, but rather on account of the natural grades available and the fact that such ground is usually more unsuited for residential purposes.”⁷³ These parks were thus designed with two primary goals in mind: mitigating traffic and controlling the development of lowlands.

Echoing William Hamilton, Koch & Fowler insisted lowlands were “wholly unsuited for residential purposes” because they attracted poor people. They wrote about “low lying property” in North Austin: “It is in the midst of the high class resident area and if developed for residential purposes would naturally be used for a cheap inferior type of residences.” Planners concluded that “the entire area should be converted into a large neighborhood park.” They wrote that Shoal Creek “is flanked on either side by high bluffs, and very desirable residential property. Between the bluffs, however, . . . are considerable low lands which are not particularly desirable for residential use. We are recommending that the low lands of this valley be acquired for a large park. . . . to control the nature of developments of the bluff front properties.” In addition to preventing “inferior” development in lowlands, parks would

⁷¹ Timothy Davis, “The Rise and Decline of the American Parkway,” in Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds., *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe* (Athens, Ohio, 2008), 35–58 (quotations on 40). See also Anne Mitchell Whisnant, *Super-Scenic Motorway: A Blue Ridge Parkway History* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

⁷² Koch & Fowler, *City Plan for Austin, Texas*, 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14 (first quotation), 22 (second and third quotations).

replace existing lowland communities, thereby boosting nearby property values. Koch & Fowler wrote that Clarksville, a bottomland freedom colony located in West Austin, was “occupied by the cheapest type of negro shacks, whereas the property immediately adjoining is more valuable.” They recommended the “establishment of a neighborhood park” in the area, explaining, “The acquisition of this property for park purposes, and the removal of the present type of development, will increase the value of the surrounding property.”⁷⁴

The Waller Creek Driveway would displace Black shanty dwellers from the main branch of lower Waller Creek: “The completion of this drive will entail the acquisition of certain cheap property along the banks of Waller Creek from Eighth Street to Nineteenth Street. Most of the property which will be needed is at present occupied by very unsightly and unsanitary shacks inhabited by negroes. With these buildings removed . . . the remaining property will be of a substantial and more desirable type.” Of a bend in Waller Creek at 3rd Street, which was home to a white elementary school, planners wrote, “The block to the west of Palm School . . . is also very cheap property and will remain so as long as Waller Creek is permitted to continue in its present condition.” If the city purchased the land, “vacated” the area, and straightened the creek, the tract could become “a very desirable neighborhood play ground.”⁷⁵ Again, planners’ logic was clear. Lowlands “naturally” attracted poor residents, depressing surrounding property values. Planners would protect white communities by turning nearby lowlands into parks.

However, the Waller Creek Driveway never materialized. Voters approved bonds to implement the 1928 plan’s recommendations, and in the 1930s Austin received New Deal monies and labor to expand its municipal infrastructure. The city invested most of these resources in West Austin, where it built the Shoal Creek Driveway. It did straighten Waller Creek near Palm School, and adjacent to the school, it built Palm Park. Between 1930 and 1934, it paved East Avenue.⁷⁶ These were the only major “improvements” along East Avenue and lower Waller Creek. Though hazardous, and in fact because they were hazardous, Waller Creek’s floodplains protected the Red River community from planners’

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 22 (first quotation), 29–33 (second, third, fourth, and sixth quotations on 33; fifth quotation on 29; seventh quotation on 31–32; eighth quotation on 31; ninth quotation on 32).

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 27–28 (first quotation), 55–56 (second, third, and fourth quotations on 56).

⁷⁶“Grading and Graveling Contracts Awarded,” *Austin Statesman*, May 11, 1933, p. 12; Tom Gullette, “Sharp Contrast of Playground Described,” *Austin Statesman*, February 23, 1933, p. 3; “Street Paving Near Stadium to Be Ready for Thanksgiving,” *Austin Statesman*, October 10, 1930, p. 1; “Traffic Moves on East Avenue,” *Austin Statesman*, November 14, 1934, p. 3.

visions, and Waller Creek's main branch remained home to dense clusters of homes and businesses of Black and brown people.

Indeed, oral histories, business records, and census data suggest that during the Jim Crow era, the main branch of lower Waller Creek was an integral part of East Austin's social, commercial, and residential landscapes. These sources also suggest that as residential segregation solidified, Waller Creek developed into a color line. In 2012, for example, an Austin music historian interviewed W. C. Clark, a Black blues artist and prominent figure in East Austin's early blues scene. In the 1950s, East 11th Street was an entertainment strip and a stop on the so-called chitlin circuit, a corridor of Black performance venues that stretched from New York to Texas. The circuit nurtured a rich blues music scene in East Austin. Although this scene caught the attention of white University of Texas students in the 1960s, in the 1950s blues music was stigmatized. Clark recalled, "During the time, the blues scene extended down to 6th Street, but it was just so far up 6th Street you could go. When you passed Red River . . . then business[es] started getting real prejudiced." Clifford Antone, a white man who opened a downtown blues venue in 1975, "was . . . able to break that code. He went [past] Red River."⁷⁷

Another telling archive includes the African American Oral History Project's 2004 interview with Charles E. Urdy. A science professor and former city councilman, Urdy moved to East Austin in the 1950s to attend Huston-Tillotson College, the result of a merger between Austin's two Black institutions of higher education. When asked about Austin's Jim Crow geography, Urdy replied:

There was a line there somewhere . . . wherever Black folks lived white folks didn't . . . It was East Avenue at that time, and it was not a high rise or anything. You could walk across it . . . And there was a little creek that was out in the middle of it that ran through part of it I guess from about Eleventh Street on down someplace. So there was not a barrier, a physical barrier in that sense, but it, it pretty much—

In all I guess that really was not true, because on the other side of East Avenue there was Sabine Street and Red River . . . which was predominantly Black, that stretch of Sabine up around Twelfth, Eleventh Street, in there. . . . There had been like a large number of Black businesses along East Sixth Street, and then Blacks owned Red River and even whatever the next street over was. And then sort of, and Hispanics, too, as well.⁷⁸

⁷⁷Josep Pedro, "W. C. Clark: Soulin' the Blues," April 12, 2012, *Blues Vibe*, <https://bluesvibe.com/2012/04/12/w-c-clark-soulin-the-blues/>.

⁷⁸Interview with Charles E. Urdy by Heather Teague, February 23, 2004, Lift Every Voice (African American Oral History Project), clip 4, in possession of Martha Norkunas, Middle Tennessee State University. For information on the collection, see https://www.loc.gov/folklife/civilrights/survey/view_collection.php?coll_id=1165.

Though Austin's East Avenue legend was firmly in place by 2004, it "really was not true." The avenue was not a physical or racial barrier. "You could walk across it," and on the other side, along Red River and Sabine Streets, there were Black and Hispanic businesses. Nature is implicit in Urdy's memories of Jim Crow: Black businesses were clustered in that particularly flood-prone stretch of Red River and Sabine, around 11th and 12th Streets. Nature is also explicit: in the middle of East Avenue "there was a little creek." This was the Robertson Hill draw, making its way toward the main branch of Waller Creek.

Business records confirm Urdy's memories. In 1929, Simon Sidle relocated his antiques store to Red River and 13th Streets. There he remained until 1953, shortly before his death. He taught his daughter Theresa the tricks of his trade. In the mid-1940s, she and her husband, Tannie Mays, opened an antiques store across the street. After her father's passing, Theresa inherited his inventory, and she moved the store into a larger building at Red River and 11th.⁷⁹ The Magnolia Service Station, owned by African American J. J. Upshaw, was across the street, and at Red River and 7th, there was a Black-owned car garage and print shop.⁸⁰

Alongside Black businesses there were Mexican American restaurants, bars, and a body shop. On the corner of 6th and Sabine, in a building overlooking Waller Creek, there was a barbershop run by Ramón Donley, a Mexican immigrant and the father of Tejano music legend Manuel "Cowboy" Donley. East Austin Stories, a documentary project, filmed Manuel as he and a friend drove through East Austin. The men drove west across I-35, parked in front of the building that had housed Ramón's barbershop, and stood on the 6th Street bridge over Waller Creek. Manuel remembered, "I used to look down at that water and daydream like mad, you know, on those lazy afternoons."⁸¹

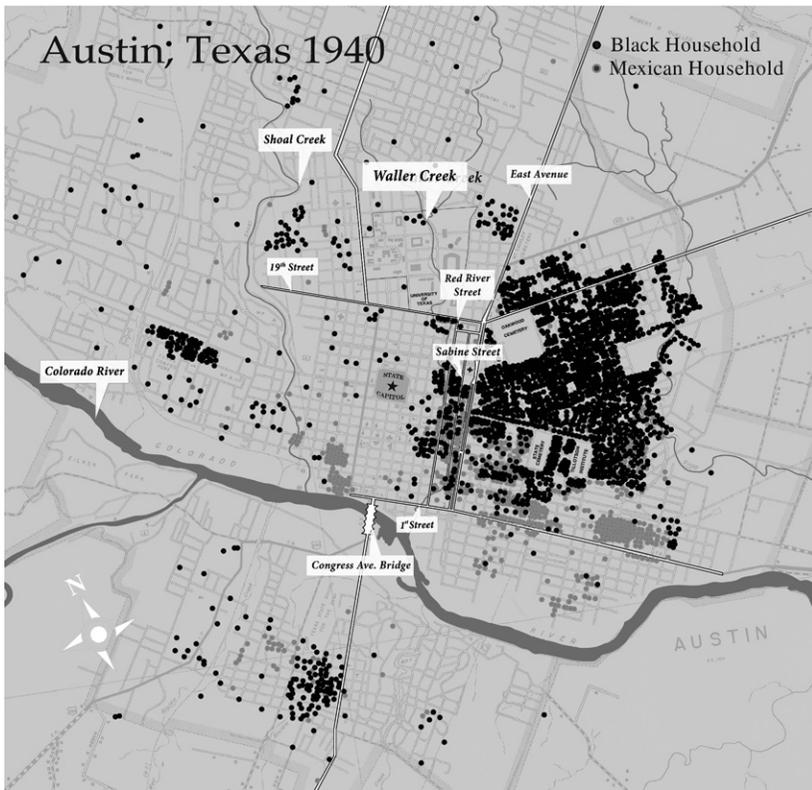
Map 2 shows that at the time of the 1940 census, the vast majority of Austin's African American and Mexican American residents lived in a

⁷⁹Neff, "Red River's Tannie and Theresa"; Kelly E. Lindner, "Family Tradition," *Austin Woman*, July 2015, p. 32, https://issuu.com/austinwoman/docs/aw_july_2015; Michael Corcoran, "Passing the Touch: The Antiques Business Is the Tie That Binds Generations of an Austin Family," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 25, 2001, pp. K1, K3.

⁸⁰J. Mason Brewer, *A Pictorial and Historical Souvenir of Negro Life in Austin, Texas, 1950-51* (Austin, 1951); *Writing Austin's Lives*, 8-9; Austin (Travis County, Tex.) City Directory (1955-1956), Yellow Pages, pp. 3, 6, 56.

⁸¹Austin (Travis County, Tex.) City Directory (1955-1956), Yellow Pages, p. 6; Belinda Acosta, "Beautiful Songs and Good, Heavy Sounds," *Austin Chronicle*, November 27, 1998, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/music/1998-11-27/520687/>; "Cowboy" Donley, directed by Collin Lessing and Chad Sandahl (East Austin Stories, 2006), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8ELcEh3xjk&t=339s> (quotation).

MAP 2
BLACK AND MEXICAN HOUSEHOLDS IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, 1940



NOTE: Some households have been moved minimally to make lower Waller Creek visible.

SOURCES: Data is from John J. Henneberger and Ernest C. Huff, *Housing Patterns Study: Segregation and Discrimination in Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1979); the base map is *General Highway Map, Supplementary Sheet, Showing Detail of Cities and Towns in Travis County Texas* (1936; revised 1940), Texas State Archives Map Collection (Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Tex.), https://www.tsl.texas.gov/apps/arc/maps/storage/texas_media/imgs/map05009.jpg. Map by Rachel Stewart, 2016.

contiguous space that included and was bordered by lower Waller Creek. The Red River district's poorest residents continued living in shacks located along the waterway's banks, drawing the ire of politicians. At Christmas 1937, Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson visited the Texas capital. He later said in a radio address, "I took a walk here in Austin—a short walk, just a few short blocks from Congress Avenue, and there I found people living in such squalor that Christmas Day was to them just one more day of filth and misery. Forty families on one lot, using one water faucet. Living in barren one-room huts." "The need for clearing up

our slum areas is apparent,” he concluded. Though Johnson did not mention Waller Creek, scholars assume he walked a few blocks east from the capitol, where he came upon the waterway.⁸²

In the late 1940s, Paul Sessums was a teenager who shined shoes downtown. He recalled in a 1996 interview, “Waller Creek was all Mexican laborers in little houses.” They “used to wash their clothes down in Waller Creek There wasn’t stabilized land like there is now. A lot of it sloped down, and you had floodings So, all the Mexicans lived down there where it flooded all the time.” In 1955, in another tirade against Austin’s slums, *Texas Observer* editor Ronnie Dugger described local living conditions: “Within a two-minute walk of the spreading lawns of the Capitol grounds, eight people live in three rooms with wood for heat and no glass in the windows. On up the same street a Mexican mother keeps her four children in two rooms with wide cracks between the floorboards.”⁸³

Mexicans also settled in Rainey Street, a historically white working-class community tucked between Waller Creek’s mouth and East Avenue. In the 1930s, Texas used federal funds to construct six hydroelectric dams along the Colorado River. When the first four of these dams were completed in 1942, major river floods in Austin ended. Little Mexico gentrified, and Hispanic residents moved eastward. Most settled in lower East Austin, in an area that included Rainey Street. By 1960, Mexican Americans occupied 60 percent of the neighborhood’s homes, while Anglos occupied the remainder.⁸⁴ Because Mexican Americans were officially classified as white, Hispanic children could attend Palm School. Years later, East Austin resident Lori Rentería recalled during a history walking tour of lower East Austin, “most of the kids in this neighborhood went to Palm Elementary, and many of them used Waller Creek to get to and from school.”⁸⁵

Barred from many swimming pools, youth of color also played in the creek. Richard Sanchez grew up on Rainey Street during Jim Crow. In

⁸²“Tarnish on the Violet Crown: Radio Address by Hon. Lyndon B. Johnson, of Texas, on January 23, 1938,” *Congressional Record*, 75 Cong., 3 Sess., February 3, 1938, Appendix, at 429–30 (quotations on 429); Jones, *Life on Waller Creek*, 189.

⁸³“Music Amidst Used Furniture: The History of the Red River Strip,” *Austin Chronicle*, October 11, 1996, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/music/1996-10-11/525396/> (first and second quotations); [Ronnie Dugger], “In the Shadow . . .,” *Texas Observer*, November 23, 1955, p. 1 (third quotation).

⁸⁴Amy E. Dase and Russell B. Ward, *The Peculiar Genius of Rainey Street: A Social and Architectural History* (Austin, 2000), 25–27.

⁸⁵*East Austin History: The Demolition of the Pan American University*, produced by Mopac Media (Austin, 2016), audio available at <https://soundcloud.com/solidarity-circuit/east-austin-history-the-demolition-of-pan-am-university>.

2011, he told a reporter, “Waller Creek and Town Lake, those were our playgrounds!” In a 2009 interview, East Austin resident Sabino Rentería recalled that he and his friends swam in the creek’s Robertson Hill draw or, in Rentería’s words, “at the corner of the 11th frontage road of 35 There was a creek that ran right through the middle of that.” Youths also swam where the Robertson and Pleasant Hill draws met Waller’s main branch. Rentería remembered, “There on 9th Street . . . that bridge wasn’t there, it was a dead end. There was a swimming hole there for all the kids that lived around there We just naturally hanged out there in Waller Creek. It was just a fun part of growing up there. You escaped everything.”⁸⁶ In sum, throughout Jim Crow, Austin’s Black and brown residents made music, worked, lived, commuted, daydreamed, and played along lower Waller Creek, which was both part of East Austin and East Austin’s western boundary.

In the late 1950s, East Avenue was converted into a stretch of I-35, disrupting residents’ relationship with the waterway. Initially, the Texas Highway Department and Austin officials decided to run the highway through West Austin, for an East Avenue route encountered “a high bluff” south of the river. Aware that white residents would object, the highway department promised to cover the cost of bridging the Colorado. As there was no bridge west of downtown, the city accepted the deal, but when officials made their plans public in 1940, West Austin residents protested. They took their complaints to highway department meetings, and planners returned to the drawing board. In 1947, when city officials hosted another round of public meetings, they informed residents that Austin’s new “super highway” would run along East Avenue.⁸⁷

Like other highways across the country, Austin’s stretch of I-35 displaced and dislocated working-class communities, particularly communities of color. As Sabino Rentería recalled, I-35 “tore everything up.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶Hannah Carney, “Priced Out in the Shadow of Downtown Austin,” *Texas Observer*, November 10, 2011, <http://www.texasobserver.org/priced-out-in-the-shadow-of-downtown-austin/> (first quotation); Bjørn Sletto, ed., *It Was a Crystal Clear Creek: The Multiple Pasts, Presents and Futures of Waller Creek* (Austin, 2009), 53 (second and third quotations).

⁸⁷Morris Midkiff, “Special Council Session Receiving Further Protests Against Shoal Creek Route,” *Austin Statesman*, January 5, 1940, pp. 1, 15 (first quotation); “City Starts Right-of-Way Negotiations,” *Austin Statesman*, July 21, 1947, p. 10; “Purchase of Route for New Super-Highway Draws Near,” *Austin American*, April 30, 1947, p. 2 (second quotation); “Interregional Routes Approved,” *Austin American*, August 8, 1947, p. 4.

⁸⁸Sletto, ed., *It Was a Crystal Clear Creek*, 54. On the impact of highways on poor and working-class communities, particularly communities of color, see Kyle Shelton, *Power Moves: Transportation, Politics, and Development in Houston* (Austin, 2017); Sam Bass Warner Jr., *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City* (New York, 1972), 46–48; Robert D. Bullard, “The Anatomy of Transportation Racism,” in Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres, eds.,

It also alienated Black and brown people from Waller Creek. Samuel Huston College, for example, sat just outside the highway's right-of-way. Its campus had grown and straddled the Robertson Hill tributary. In 1952, a college student wrote a poem about the draw, part of which went, "Very soon now, summer will come / And this little stream will dry / And I will graduate and leave it behind me / But never will my love for it die."⁸⁹ That year, the college merged with Tillotson College to form Huston-Tillotson. While buses initially transported students between the school's east and west campuses, I-35's immanent presence encouraged Huston-Tillotson to abandon its west campus, and the college left Waller Creek for quieter ground.⁹⁰

As highway construction advanced, the Robertson and Pleasant Hill draws were rerouted into drainage projects and cemented over, burying both the waterways and a central piece of Austin's Black history. Needless to say, children stopped swimming in the tributaries. To facilitate highway access, "Waller Creek soon became the most bridged-over waterway in Austin," and in this way, too, I-35 buried the creek, hiding its materiality from view.⁹¹ Sabino Rentería remembered, "Because I-35 was built it was too dangerous for our kids to go to school at Palm." Enrollment declined, and residents petitioned for a new school east of the highway. In 1976, the city finally met residents' demands, and Palm School was closed. Children no longer used Waller Creek to walk to and from school.⁹²

Despite such disruption, I-35 did not displace the Red River community. Simon Sidle had started a trend, and by the 1960s Red River Street was lined with a good dozen "we buy, sell, and trade anything" shops. Many were run by seasoned antiques dealers, including Theresa and Tannie Mays, who continued doing business at Red River and 12th. On the same corner, Theresa's sister Ilestia Sidle Alexander opened Johnnie's Swap Shop with her husband in 1964. According to Theresa's

Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 15–31; and Raymond A. Mohl, "Citizen Activism and Freeway Revolts in Memphis and Nashville: The Road to Litigation," *Journal of Urban History* 40 (September 2014): 870–93. On I-35's impact on Austin residents and communities, see Ben E. King, *Interregional Highway Appraisal, Austin, Texas* (Austin, 1953); "East Avenue Baptist Church Slates Move," *Austin Statesman*, January 17, 1958, p. 5; and Belinda Acosta, "Mapping Calle Ancha," *Austin Chronicle*, January 26, 2001, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/features/2001-01-26/80324/>.

⁸⁹ Aaron McBride, "The Stream of Water," *Samuel Huston Bulletin*, May 1952, in Folder H4800 (1), Austin Files.

⁹⁰ Perry and Swain, *Huston-Tillotson University Legacy*, 75; Jane H. Rivera and Gilberto C. Rivera, *Austin's Rosewood Neighborhood* (Charleston, S.C., 2012), 51.

⁹¹ Thomas W. Shefelman et al., *Waller Creek Master Plan: Phase B Program Development* (Austin, 1975), 4.

⁹² Sletto, ed., *It Was a Crystal Clear Creek*, 54.

niece Dorothy McPhaul (who took over Johnnie's in 1997), Red River's antiques dealers, Black and white, "got along well, often shopping in each other's stores."⁹³ Nearby were a Black-owned pharmacy, electrical appliance repair shop, and three service stations, and there were restaurants, bars, and at least one service station operated by Mexican Americans.⁹⁴ At Red River and 12th, there was the New Orleans Club, an interracial live music venue and student hot spot. The 13th Floor Elevators, a white psychedelic band, played upstairs, while Ernie Mae Miller, a Black jazz artist, performed on the first floor. Miller later remembered, "One night it rained, and the place got flooded. That night I'd bought a brand-new pair of red suede shoes. You had to walk down about six steps to get to the club, and that night I had to walk—slush, slush—across Coke cases through the water, while upstairs was the Elevators with people dancing. I sure did like those shoes."⁹⁵

There was also a scattering of low-cost apartments and rooming houses in the district, and to the east below the state capitol there were still shanties. In 1961, a reporter wrote, "This is the shame of a city—and so close under the proud Capitol dome you can almost hear the full-throated oratory in the halls of state. Here along the banks of Waller Creek most of the stoves burn wood, the plumbing is outside, the roofs are tin, . . . and the dirt streets hold water." A photograph accompanying the story depicted two neatly dressed Black girls walking side by side. Beyond them was a row of simple wooden houses, one with a collapsed porch, and beyond the houses the capitol dome (Figure 1).⁹⁶

In the early 1970s, Austin's urban renewal agency uprooted this community and built a park. Urban renewal was the U.S. response to slums and the "suburban revolution," which threatened the value of downtown and inner-city properties.⁹⁷ It developed in tandem with the public

⁹³Neff, "Red River's Tannie and Theresa," 1–2; Interview with Dorothy McPhaul by Amber Abbas, 2005, Lift Every Voice (African American Oral History Project), clip 3, in possession of Martha Norkunas, Middle Tennessee State University (quotation); Lindner, "Family Tradition"; Corcoran, "Passing the Touch."

⁹⁴*The Black Registry of Austin's Businesses* (Austin, 1971), 7; Acosta, "Beautiful Songs and Good, Heavy Sounds"; *Polk's Austin (Travis County, Texas) City Directory* (Dallas, 1970), 14–15.

⁹⁵Margaret Moser, "Bright Lights, Inner City: When Austin's Eastside Music Scene Was Lit Up Like Broadway," *Austin Chronicle*, July 4, 2003, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2003-07-04/166659/>.

⁹⁶Wray Weddell Jr., "Stigma of Slums: This Is in Austin," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 21, 1961, pp. 1 (quotation), 5. The published photograph was manipulated to include the capitol dome, which did not appear in the original version of the photo, as the dome was obscured by foliage. The original can be found as "East Austin," AS-61-33884, November 14, 1961, Austin *American-Statesman* Photographic Morgue, AR.2014.039 (AHC).

⁹⁷Freund, *Colored Property*, 4. A few of the many histories written about urban renewal include Ronald H. Bayor, "The Second Ghetto: Then and Now," *Journal of Urban History* 29 (March 2003): 238–42; Jeremy Bryson, "Greening Urban Renewal: Expo '74, Urban



Figure 1. This photograph of shanties along Waller Creek in the shadow of the Texas Capitol accompanied Wray Weddell Jr.'s front-page article, "Stigma of Slums: This Is in Austin," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 21, 1961. *Used with permission.*

housing movement and ideas about economic blight. In the 1920s sociologists appropriated the concept of blight, used by ecologists to describe

Environmentalism and Green Space on the Spokane Riverfront, 1965–1974," *Journal of Urban History* 39 (May 2013): 495–512; John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920–1974* (Philadelphia, 1987); Fairbanks, *War on Slums in the Southwest*, chap. 6; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983); E. Michael Jones, *The Slaughter of Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing* (South Bend, Ind., 2004); James Robert Saunders and Renae Nadine Shackelford, *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia: An Oral History of Vinegar Hill* (Jefferson, N.C., 1998); Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore, 1990); and Samuel Zipp, "The Roots and Routes of Urban Renewal," *Journal of Urban History* 39 (May 2013): 366–91.

plant contagion, and applied the concept to urban theory, arguing that slum conditions were contagious. “To secure political and judicial approval” for massive slum clearance projects, developers, planners, and city officials embraced the concept, “elevating blight into a disease that would destroy the city.” States passed legislation empowering cities to replace slums with public housing, while courts approved cities’ use of eminent domain to eliminate “the ‘public menace’ of blight,” paving the way for federal urban renewal legislation.⁹⁸

The Housing Act of 1949 authorized the federal government to provide cities with millions of dollars in loans and grants to offset the cost of purchasing and razing slums and blighted areas. It also authorized federal loans and grants to build 810,000 public housing units over six years. In the 1950s, however, public support for government housing plummeted thanks in significant part to the real estate industry’s anti-public housing campaigns, which capitalized on racial stereotypes and antisocialist Cold War hysteria. The government did not appropriate the funds needed to meet the act’s housing goals. Amendments to the legislation further minimized the government’s commitment to affordable housing, and urban renewal morphed into a “quest,” led by private developers, “to maintain the downtown area as the dynamic center of the city.”⁹⁹

A vague term, *blight* enabled urban renewal agencies to target stable neighborhoods that were “profitably attractive” to developers. It also enabled cities to target communities of color. After the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* against school segregation, urban renewal became a new tool with which to control urban racial geographies, “making the integration of schools far more difficult.”¹⁰⁰

Urban renewal in Austin developed alongside segregation and efforts to attract knowledge industries to the city. After World War II, experts concluded that science-based technologies, from radar to atomic weaponry, had been crucial to winning the war and would be instrumental in ensuring America’s success in future conflicts; and so, as the Cold War unfolded, the U.S. military expanded in size and scope. It built thousands of new installations, and it established new research partnerships with universities,

⁹⁸ Wendell E. Pritchett, “The ‘Public Menace’ of Blight: Urban Renewal and the Private Uses of Eminent Domain,” *Yale Law and Policy Review* 21 (Winter 2003): 1–52 (quotations on 3).

⁹⁹ Fairbanks, *War on Slums in the Southwest*, 2–5 (quotation on 2).

¹⁰⁰ Pritchett, “‘Public Menace’ of Blight,” 32 (first quotation), 44 (second quotation). Indeed, also in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Berman v. Parker* (348 U.S. 26 [1954]) that urban renewal’s use of eminent domain was constitutional. See also Ansley T. Erickson, “Building Inequality: The Spatial Organization of Schooling in Nashville, Tennessee, after *Brown*,” *Journal of Urban History* 38 (March 2012): 247–70.

which began to play “a new, elevated role” in the development of regional and municipal economies. Capitalists quickly recognized the potential impact of research on the development of products for the private market, leading to a proliferation of research-intensive knowledge industries.¹⁰¹

New Deal and World War II defense spending emboldened a new generation of developers in the South and the Southwest, and after the war, they aggressively sought military contracts. The University of Texas was “the centerpiece of Austin’s growth model.”¹⁰² For example, in the mid-1940s, Austin developers facilitated efforts to turn an abandoned federal magnesium plant into a UT-managed defense research facility. In the 1950s and 1960s, as the knowledge economy expanded, developers campaigned to sell Austin on private technology industries, and they launched a marketing campaign to draw such industries to the city. In the mid-1960s, IBM located an office in Austin, and the city’s pro-growth forces “gain[ed] a prominent hegemony over Austin politics.”¹⁰³

Austin’s urban renewal agency (URA) was a partner in this growth campaign. Established in 1959, the agency included professional planners and all city council members. From 1964 to 1976, it completed four projects, all of which targeted downtown and inner East Austin neighborhoods with Black and brown majorities. As Andrew Busch argues, the projects were designed to move people of color farther east, thereby helping “maintain a nonindustrial image that city leaders used to market Austin as a pleasant place to live and do business for knowledge workers.”¹⁰⁴

Approved in 1968, Austin’s Brackenridge Urban Renewal Project targeted the main branch of lower Waller Creek. The project’s target area stretched from 10th to 19th Streets and from the eastern foot of the

¹⁰¹ Eliot M. Tretter, *Shadows of a Sunbelt City: The Environment, Racism, and the Knowledge Economy in Austin* (Athens, Ga., 2016), 33–35 (quotation on 34); Michael Storper and Allen J. Scott, “Rethinking Human Capital, Creativity and Urban Growth,” *Journal of Economic Geography* 9 (March 2009): 147–67; Gavin Wright, “World War II, the Cold War, and the Knowledge Economies of the Pacific Coast,” in Mark Brilliant and David M. Kennedy, eds., *World War II and the West It Wrought* (Stanford, Calif., 2020), 74–99.

¹⁰² Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938–1980* (New York, 1991); Andrew Busch, “Building ‘a City of Upper-Middle-Class Citizens’: Labor Markets, Segregation, and Growth in Austin, Texas, 1950–1973,” *Journal of Urban History* 39 (September 2013): 975–96 (quotation on 978).

¹⁰³ Orum, *Power, Money, and the People*, 229–48, 253 (quotation). On Austin’s transition into a technology hub, see also Lisa Hartenberger, Zeynep Tufekci, and Stuart Davis, “A History of High Tech and the Technopolis in Austin,” in Joseph Straubhaar et al., eds., *Inequity in the Technopolis: Race, Class, Gender, and the Digital Divide in Austin* (Austin, 2012), 63–83.

¹⁰⁴ Busch, “Building ‘a City of Upper-Middle-Class Citizens,’” 977. The agency approved two other projects that also targeted communities of color, but these were abandoned due to community resistance and cuts to federal funding. See also Austin Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners Records finding aid, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/aushc/00462/auc-00462.html>.

capitol hill to I-35, encompassing Brackenridge Hospital and the geographic heart of the historic Red River community. The project's stated goals were twofold: to provide space for the University of Texas, the capitol complex, and Brackenridge to grow and to "enhance" the district's "environmental characteristics" so that "the area will become a definite asset from both an aesthetic as well as an economic consideration to the entire metropolitan area."¹⁰⁵

While URA documents cited numerous "deficiencies" in the project area, including "overcrowded" buildings and "mixed-uses," the agency did not conclude the area was declining.¹⁰⁶ To the contrary, a 1966 land utilization and marketability study determined that "the area itself has more or less 'turned the corner' from a totally declining neighborhood to one that is now in transience and appears to be improving in general character."¹⁰⁷ As Lisa Goff writes, however, "shanties are defined in terms of the people who build and inhabit them, not by any particular assemblage of materials in any particular form."¹⁰⁸ Lending weight to this argument, Austin's URA did not invest in lower Waller Creek's neighborhood. Instead, it razed the neighborhood to the ground.

Urban renewal agency officials decided to build a park along Waller Creek between 12th and 15th Streets, in the long-maligned bottomland located at the foot of the capitol. Project documents explained that a "public parkway along Waller Creek" would "enhance the economic value of those private redevelopment parcels adjacent thereto. This space will also serve as a drainage area since most of this proposed dedicated parking is subject to flooding by Waller Creek."¹⁰⁹ Planners do not appear to have gone on record about the problem of lowland slums. Nonetheless, the agency did exactly what previous planners proposed to do. It displaced Black communities from lower Waller Creek and, in the interest of nearby property values, replaced these communities with parkland.

Though Austin residents circulated a petition to "do away" with the Brackenridge project, in December 1972 Theresa Sidle Mays received a month's notice to vacate her rental property. In January, she auctioned the stock and for the last time shut the store's doors. Soon after, a

¹⁰⁵ Real Estate Research Corporation, *Land Utilization and Marketability Study: Brackenridge Urban Renewal Project (TEX. R-94)*, Austin, Texas (Dallas, 1966), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Austin Urban Renewal Agency, *Brackenridge Urban Renewal Project* (Austin, 1967).

¹⁰⁷ Real Estate Research Corporation, *Land Utilization and Marketability Study*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ Goff, *Shantytown, USA*, 38.

¹⁰⁹ Austin Urban Renewal Agency, *Brackenridge Urban Renewal Project*, 5.

reporter interviewed Mays. Mays lamented, “The great Red River’s falling It’s heart-breaking to give up a place that’s your old stomping grounds Red River’s my home.”¹¹⁰ Demolitions began soon after. In 1975, work began on the bottomland park. It was called Waterloo Park, and it was completed in 1976 and then deeded to the city.¹¹¹

Around the same time, the University East urban renewal project displaced an interracial neighborhood located just east of the UT campus. Along with the Brackenridge project, University East “removed the remaining Black families from along the west side of IH 35 and confined the East Austin community to the east side of this major traffic artery.”¹¹² In other words, urban renewal shifted Austin’s color line from lower Waller Creek to the interstate highway.

Archives suggest that the Brackenridge project also ruptured the social memory of Waller Creek. In 1960, the city of Austin completed the Longhorn Dam, turning the downtown stretch of the Colorado River into Town Lake. Around the country, urban environmentalists were working to convert degraded, neglected urban creeks into green recreational spaces. They often sold their ideas to planners by emphasizing the beneficial impact of green spaces on property values, and their projects often merged with urban renewal.¹¹³

Again, these national trends played out in Austin. In 1971, the Town Lake Beautification Committee resolved to line the lake with a chain of parks. Beginning in 1973, a coalition of UT architecture and community planning students presented the concept of a Waller Creek hike and bike trail to civic groups and public officials. The proposed trail would run from Waterloo Park to the river, creating picturesque recreational spaces that would draw people and capital to the eastern edge of downtown. In May 1974, the city council approved construction of an

¹¹⁰ Austin Urban Renewal Agency Regular Board Meeting Minutes, September 9, 1969, Box 2, Austin Urban Renewal Agency Board of Commissioners Records, AR.2002.037 (AHC) (first quotation); “Urban Renewal Takes Red River Institution,” *Austin Citizen*, January 18, 1973, p. 2 (second quotation).

¹¹¹ Austin Bicentennial Committee, *Austin Creeks* (Austin, 1976), 27, in Folder C9060 (1), Austin Files, and available online via *Texas ScholarWorks* (University of Texas Libraries), <http://hdl.handle.net/2152/64677>.

¹¹² Robena Estelle Jackson, “East Austin: A Socio-Historical View of a Segregated Community” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1979), 119–20.

¹¹³ Bryson, “Greening Urban Renewal”; Edward K. Muller, “Urban Blueways: John Ormsbee Simonds and Riverfront Planning,” *Journal of Planning History* 11 (November 2012): 308–29; Kara Murphy Schlichting, “Rethinking the Bronx’s ‘Soundview Slums’: The Intersecting Histories of Large-Scale Waterfront Redevelopment and Community-Scaled Planning in an Era of Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Planning History* 16 (May 2017): 112–38.

integrated hike and bike system along the Colorado River and four central creeks, including Waller Creek.¹¹⁴

In response, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department drafted a new Waller Creek master plan, which it released in 1975. The document began with a brief history of the relationship between topography, streams, and place in Austin. This history read, "A generally shared perception of Austin is that as it grew, its hills and waterways formed districts and neighborhoods, determined pathways and acted as drainage systems. Waller Creek, Shoal Creek and the Colorado River were the city edges until the booming years after the Reconstruction. They then became the edges of the major districts as we still know them, East Austin, West Austin, South Austin and what we now call the Core Area." The Austin *American-Statesman* reprinted this history verbatim in its coverage of the new plan, suggesting that the history was indeed a "generally shared perception of Austin" and that Waller Creek was in fact East Austin's edge.¹¹⁵ Over a decade after I-35's completion, Waller Creek remained a central part of historical memory of urban space, suggesting that I-35 alone did not shift Austin's color line. Rather, as Dorothy McPhaul said in a 2005 interview, "they killed a part of history when they did away with Red River."¹¹⁶

Indeed, a process of forgetting surrounded the Brackenridge project. This process took the form of "facadism," a term used to describe the historic preservation movement's "single-minded preoccupation with the aesthetics of building styles and surfaces at the expense of interpretation." A response to urban renewal's "wanton destruction of the physical environment," the preservation movement saved many historic buildings, but the structures were often "[d]raped in the thinnest veneer of history," discouraging people from engaging with problematic urban pasts.¹¹⁷

After the Austin Heritage Society began "raising a fuss" about the Brackenridge project, Austin's urban renewal agency and the Austin Symphony created Symphony Square, a preservation project located at Red River and 11th Streets, on the plot where Jeremiah Hamilton had built his family home in 1871. The symphony restored the building and used it to house its offices. With financial assistance from the URA, it

¹¹⁴ Sinclair Black, "Dream Scheme for Austin Creeks," *Texas Architect* 26 (September–October 1976): 15–18; Austin Bicentennial Committee, *Austin Creeks*, 2–3; "Creeks Key to City Greenbelt System," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 6, 1975, p. C1.

¹¹⁵ "Waller Creek Corridor Report Made," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 20, 1975, Downtown Christmas Special sec., pp. 2 (quotations), 6–7, 11. See also Shefelman et al., *Waller Creek Master Plan*, 1.

¹¹⁶ McPhaul interview.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia, 2010), 20 (first, second, and fourth quotations), 2 (third quotation).

relocated three additional buildings, including the New Orleans Club, to the plot. The buildings were “fixed up, spruced up, cleaned up and restored” to their original, nineteenth-century appearance, excising Jim Crow from their history.¹¹⁸

In anticipation of the square’s 1976 opening, a symphony employee wrote detailed histories of each building, and for a month after the ribbon cutting, docents gave guided history and architectural tours. Once the month was up, the study was tucked into the symphony’s files.¹¹⁹ There were no ongoing history tours and no historical pamphlets—only a small plaque on the Hamilton building telling visitors that Jeremiah Hamilton, “one of nine black representatives in the 12th Texas legislature, . . . bought this lot on Waller Creek in 1871 and began building this oddly shaped stone structure to house his grocery store.”¹²⁰ The University of Texas alumni magazine reported that since there were some thirty historic buildings around lower Waller Creek, a “Historic Buildings Trail with markers relating the history of each structure will probably be created in the future.” Such a trail was not forthcoming.¹²¹

A similar facadism played out in Waterloo Park. In 1975, the Austin *American-Statesman* published an article about the park’s design. Landscape architects, the reporter wrote, “realized that most of what was there was already beautiful. So they are saving as much as possible and changing as little as possible.” In other words, where “a house once stood on a hillside with garage underneath, the pillars and gates of the garage, and steps and platforms, have been left as the nucleus of an unstructured playground. . . . [T]he grape arbor built by a former creekside dweller has been preserved, and will be ‘refurnished’ with new posts and latticework to hold up the vines.” In other places, “an old cistern will become the center of a new jasmine-covered gazebo.” Absent from the article was any interest in the history or fate of the creekside dwellers who left behind such picturesque remains; neither did the author appear to have appreciated the irony of plans to “save as much as possible” the remnants of a community displaced for ostensibly aesthetic reasons. Once completed, Waterloo Park likewise offered the public no interpretation of the area’s history.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Jane Dunn Sibley and Jim Comer, *Jane’s Window: My Spirited Life in West Texas and Austin* (College Station, Tex., 2013), 186–200 (first quotation on 187); Jane Ulrich, “Symphony Tunes Up New Orleans Club,” *Austin American-Statesman*, April 16, 1976, p. C1 (second quotation).

¹¹⁹ Parmelee, “Docent Training.”

¹²⁰ “Historic Marker Application: The Jeremiah Hamilton House.”

¹²¹ “Waller Creek,” *Alcalde* 55 (November–December 1977): 6–10 (quotation on 10).

¹²² Gayle Reaves, “Downtown Park to Be ‘Hiding Place,’” *Austin American-Statesman*, August 14, 1975, Downtown Special sec., pp. 1–2 (quotations on 2).

After 1976, lower Waller Creek developed into a socially vacuous space. Though designed to be a “sheltered retreat” and a site for “art shows, street concerts,” and the like, Waterloo Park exemplified the naive *if you build it, they will come* attitude that Jane Jacobs criticized in her treatise on city planning. Waterloo was surrounded by office buildings whose workers did not use the park or entered the park “all . . . at once” and only briefly during lunch hours. As such, for most of the day, the park sat empty. It was, in McPhaul’s words, a place “where hardly no one goes.”¹²³

In addition, few of the new buildings envisioned by planners materialized, thanks in large part to ongoing floods. As Austin grew, new development covered more and more of the city’s watersheds with concrete and other impermeable surfaces. Runoff increased, and flash floods along urban creeks become more intense and frequent. In the mid-1970s, just as the Brackenridge project was wrapping up, Austin joined the National Flood Insurance Program.¹²⁴ Established by the 1968 National Floodplain Insurance Act, the program sought to reduce flood hazards by offering federally subsidized flood insurance to cities that limited floodplain development. To determine flood risk, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used historical data and topographical algorithms to produce floodplain maps. Areas deemed to have a 1 percent chance of flooding in any given year were labeled 100-year floodplains.¹²⁵

Austin’s 1974 floodplain ordinance prevented new development in 100-year floodplains if such development would raise flood levels by more than one foot. Another ordinance prohibited development in 25-year floodplains and required permits to alter “any site straddling or bordering a creek.” As the 1975 Waller Creek master plan explained, because of these ordinances, “creek development is more expensive than similar development elsewhere.”¹²⁶ Along with the flash flood risk

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 1 (first and second quotations); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961; New York, 1992), 97 (third quotation); McPhaul interview (fourth quotation).

¹²⁴ Watershed Protection Department, *Staff Report—Resolution No. 20140515-064—Flood Insurance Programs and Federal Buyout Assistance* (Austin, 2014). Far from minimizing flooding, Waterloo Park seems to have exacerbated it. As a 1980 Parks and Recreation Department report explained, “development must be sensitive to the hydrologic regimen of drainage areas. The urban renewal effort to beautify Waller Creek near Waterloo Park has created serious functional and aesthetic problems because of inappropriate development.” Austin Parks and Recreation Department, *Austin Parks and Recreation Master Plan* (Austin, 1980), 31–32.

¹²⁵ Erwann O. Michel-Kerjan, “Catastrophe Economics: The National Flood Insurance Program,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 24 (Fall 2010): 165–86; Scott Gabriel Knowles and Howard C. Kunreuther, “Troubled Waters: The National Flood Insurance Program in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Policy History* 26, no. 3 (2014): 327–53.

¹²⁶ Shefelman et al., *Waller Creek Master Plan*, 15, 27 (quotations).

and racial stigma associated with East Austin, such regulations deterred developers from the Brackenridge project area.

Enthusiasm for Waller Creek's hike and bike trail quickly faded, and just as quickly, funds ran short. In 1978, "two years after the ambitious Waller Creek improvement program began, a half-finished job await[ed] completion."¹²⁷ On Memorial Day 1981, major floods swept down Shoal and Waller Creeks. The following year, residents acquired an incomplete, flood-damaged, and in many areas inaccessible Waller Creek greenbelt.¹²⁸ By this point, large-scale impervious coverage of Waller's watershed had turned the creek into the most contaminated stream in the city. Leaking sewage pipes laid in the creek bed in the 1880s exacerbated water-quality problems, as did dozens of businesses that dumped effluents into the waterway. In 1975, an ecological assessment of Waller Creek described "heavy algal growths, and unpleasant odors," especially along the creek's "lower reaches."¹²⁹ Unsurprisingly, residents did not flock to Waller Creek's new trail.

In the early 1980s, in an effort to woo high-tech firms to the city with competitive incentive packages, Austin's pro-growth leaders developed a "careful collaboration" between the public and private sectors, including the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, the University of Texas, and local government. Their strategy proved effective, and in 1983 the Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation moved to Austin, followed in 1988 by Sematech, a consortium of semiconductor manufacturers. Hundreds of smaller technology firms also migrated to the city, and a pattern developed. Tech firms built their administrative and research facilities in West Austin, while they located their manufacturing facilities to the east. In 1991, Sematech announced plans to build a manufacturing facility in southeast Austin, motivating East Austin residents to found PODER.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Chris Grove, "Up a Creek Without Another \$600,000," *Austin Daily Texan*, February 2, 1978, p. 20, clipping in Folder C9060 (25), Austin Files.

¹²⁸ Bruce Hight, "13 Die as Floods Ravage City; Losses Estimated in Millions," *Austin American-Statesman*, May 26, 1981, pp. A1, A8; Max Woodfin, "Take a Run at City Jogging Trails," *Austin American-Statesman*, *Onward* sec., July 20, 1982, p. 6.

¹²⁹ Rowland Nethaway, "In Waller Creek: LaRue to Halt His Dumping," *Austin American-Statesman*, April 23, 1970, p. B33; "Search for Creek Toxin Yields No Quick Answer," *Austin Statesman*, December 2, 1976, p. B4; Becca Adams and John O'Connell, "Sewer Line Leaks Unrepaired," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 5, 1974, p. A13; URS/Forrest and Cotton, Inc., and Espey, Huston and Associates, Inc., *Preliminary Ecological Assessment of Waller Creek* (n.p., 1975), 18 (quotations).

¹³⁰ Pike Powers, "Building the Austin Technology Cluster: The Role of Government and Community Collaboration in *the Human Capital*," in Nancy Novack, Mark Drabenstott, and Stephan Weiler, eds., *New Governance for a New Rural Economy: Reinventing Public and Private*

Nationwide, rates of homelessness were rising, and by the mid-1980s, homeless people filled Waller Creek's empty, green riparian spaces. Drawn to shelters and other services located downtown, Austin's homeless population sought refuge nearby in secluded parkland. By 1985, "[a]t least 10 hobo camps" had sprung "up along Town Lake and Waller Creek," further alienating the general public from the waterway. As a newspaper reported, Waller Creek attracted "trash, algae growth and vagrants, but few visitors." In 1993, PODER collaborated with a coalition of African American East Austin neighborhood associations to film an East Austin Watershed Tour of dangerous, neglected, flood-prone streams. Unsurprisingly, the tour did not visit Waller Creek.¹³¹

As more and more tech firms located in the city, property values in North and West Austin soared. In turn, East Austin rent gaps increased, overpowering the racial stigma that had long kept public and private investment in East Austin at bay.¹³² In 1999, Austin completed the East 11th and 12th Street urban renewal plan, which targeted the historic Robertson Hill community. The plan marked the beginning of a wave of gentrification that fanned from Robertson Hill eastward. Waller Creek was by this point "a forgotten and neglected ditch."¹³³ In contrast, I-35 dominated the physical landscape, and as activists and scholars decried the displacement of East Austin's Black and brown communities, the highway also dominated historical memory of residential segregation.

In 2017, the city completed a flood diversion tunnel beneath lower Waller Creek. Designed to remove twenty-eight acres of downtown real estate from Waller's 100-year floodplains, the tunnel is part

Institutions (Kansas City, Mo., 2004), 53–71 (quotation on 56); Tretter, *Shadows of a Sunbelt City*, 106; Hartenberger, Tufekci, and Davis, "History of High Tech and the Technopolis in Austin," 77.

¹³¹ Leigh Hopper, "A Decade of Austin's Struggle to Solve the Homeless Problem," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 27, 1995, p. A9 (first and second quotations); Kim Tyson, "Tunnel Vision," *Austin American-Statesman*, February 18, 1996, p. A1 (third quotation); *Living Waters: The East Austin Watershed Tour*, produced by Rene Renteria and PODER (Austin, 1993), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkJHvuhRWH0>.

¹³² First defined by Neil Smith in 1979 to explain processes of gentrification, rent gap refers to the difference between the current rental income of a property and the potential rental income. See Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York, 1996), 65.

¹³³ Brant Bingamon, "The Long Story of East 11th and 12th Streets Takes a Turn," *Austin Chronicle*, October 18, 2019, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2019-10-18/the-long-story-of-east-11th-and-12th-streets-takes-a-turn/>; Kayte Vanscoy, "Waller, Waller Everywhere," *Austin Chronicle*, January 23, 1998, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/1998-01-23/519447/> (quotation).

of an ongoing larger creek revitalization project that involves the development of a chain of parks and trails along the waterway. There are numerous continuities between this tunnel and past planning efforts. The tunnel has been envisioned to realize “Waller Creek’s development potential.” In order to spur the gentrification of Waller Creek, it must be part of a larger project that displaces people—this time homeless people—from the waterway. It may also prove to be another failed project. In 2018, Atlas 14, a National Weather Service study of changing rainfall patterns in Texas, showed that central Texas will likely experience larger storms than previously thought, expanding the size of its 100-year floodplains and casting doubt on the tunnel’s efficacy.¹³⁴

Ever hopeful, tunnel advocates have argued that, nevertheless, the waterway “will be a place for people to experience and interact with nature in the middle of the city.”¹³⁵ Yet such statements echo predictions about Waterloo Park. In 1975, the University of Texas student newspaper quoted Eugene Wukasch, a member of the firm hired to design the park, who explained, “The intent is to try to get as close to nature with this thing as possible.”¹³⁶ A 1975 *Statesman* article explained that, throughout the park, “trails, benches and other facilities are planned . . . to help people enjoy the natural beauties by singling them out.” “A trail may point directly at a particularly beautiful tree,” for example, “then veer off to give an exceptional view of the creek.”¹³⁷

Human relationships with the environment, however, are not simply sensory. They are historical. Though touted as a tool with which to bring people closer to nature, Waterloo Park was a central part of a

¹³⁴ Elizabeth Findell and Bridget Grumet, “Tax Dollars (Slowly) at Work,” *Austin American-Statesman*, July 5, 2017, pp. B1, B5; Jack Murphy, “Artificially Natural: On the Transformation of Austin’s Waller Creek,” *Rice Design Alliance*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.ricedesignalliance.org/artificially-natural-on-the-transformation-of-austins-waller-creek>; Chuck Lindell, “A Vision for Waller Creek: Flood Control Viewed as the Key to Turning ‘a Nasty Hole’ into an Austin Riverwalk,” *Austin American-Statesman*, February 1, 1998, pp. H1 (quotation), H6; Dooling, “Ecological Gentrification”; Austin Watershed Protection Department, “Flood Risk and Atlas 14: Overview,” <http://www.austintexas.gov/atlas14>. There have also been reports that contractors built a “shoddy tunnel” with a limited ability to control flooding and a limited lifespan. Elizabeth Findell, “Waller Creek Tunnel Wasn’t Built Right, Won’t Function Fully, City Says,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.statesman.com/news/20180309/waller-creek-tunnel-wasnt-built-right-wont-function-fully-city-says>.

¹³⁵ Charles A. Betts, “New Economic Growth: Prosperity along the Waller Creek Corridor,” in Fry and Wright, eds., *Austin’s Waller Creek*, 147–49 (quotation on 147).

¹³⁶ “Waller Creek Park Plans Derailed,” *Austin Daily Texan*, October 9, 1975, clipping in Folder C9060 (25), Austin Files.

¹³⁷ Gayle Reaves, “Downtown Park to Be ‘Hiding Place,’” *Austin American-Statesman*, August 14, 1975, Downtown Special sec., pp. 1–2 (first quotation on 1; second and third quotations on 2).

planning project that displaced Black and brown people from Waller Creek's floodplains, "killing" a piece of history. In sum, and as this history suggests, while parks may indeed facilitate human interactions with the environment, when used as tools of displacement, they alienate people from the natural world.