Fondren Fellows Project Proposal Submission Form

Project Title – "Who Owned Freedmen's Town?: Tracking Deeds from 1867 to 1936"

Brief Summary:

This project documents land ownership in Houston's Freedmen's Town, where Black residents created a thriving neighborhood after Emancipation. Over time, the City of Houston came to own much of that land and used it to build an all-white public housing complex, the San Felipe Courts Apartments (now Historic Oaks at Allen Parkway). By expanding on an existing but partial database of real estate deeds in Freedmen's Town, this project helps to illustrate the forces driving that transition – including seemingly unrelated City policies like ordinances authorizing tax auctions and others establishing a red-light district in Freedmen's Town.

Project Description:

This project returns to a previous Fondren Fellows project to expand on an existing but partial research database of real estate records for the Hardcastle and Burton Home Additions in Houston's Fourth Ward. These two additions form the historic core of Freedmantown, where Black Houstonians created a thriving neighborhood after Emancipation, and where the City of Houston eventually came to own most of the land and used it to build an all-white public housing complex, the San Felipe Courts Apartments (now Historic Oaks at Allen Parkway). Published histories of this location usually neglect that the city placed a red-light district called "The Reservation" in the historically Black neighborhood. They also usually neglect that public auctions for failure to pay taxes were a significant route through which land would move from Black to white ownership. This real estate database is an essential first step in visualizing the impact both processes had on Freedmen's Town.

A proof of concept StoryMap is available.

Outline the key tasks that the Fondren Fellow(s) would work on.

The Harris County Archives has made available a beta version of an online portal for deeds created prior to 1960. Individual deeds are organized by index books. Fellows will use the portal to search those index books to identify deeds in the two targeted test case blocks. They will then use the same portal to search for the deeds themselves. They will capture the images for the deeds they find, name those captured images according to the naming conventions established by the project workflow, and record the deeds in the project research database. Fellows will then analyze the deeds already identified to determine the next deeds to search. This cyclical process will thus build coherent ownership chains for the two targeted test blocks

within the timeframe of the study – the earliest sale of property for Freedmen's Town in 1867 to the beginning of the San Felipe Courts Apartment development in 1936.

Whether the Fellows complete the ownership record in their test blocks or not, they will be in a position to analyze and create narratives of Freedmen's Town grounded in historical data. This may happen through ARCGIS and StoryMaps, drawing on digital humanities infrastructure already created through platforms like the Black Atlas of Houston and roadsTaken.

What qualifications would you expect from students working on this project?
Baseline skills include:
- Basic research skills – ability to search a Harris County Archive interface
- Basic visual and narrative analysis skills – reading real estate deeds
- Basic research tracking skills – familiarity with Microsoft Excel

Extra skills that would be appreciated:
- Any experience with ArcGIS / StoryMaps

What would students learn through their participation in this project?
This project exposes students to archival research methods and digital humanities communication tools. They will learn how to collate and track readily available real estate data from the now-digitized Harris County Archives. They will learn about digital humanities project management, and how early archival research activities and record keeping are directly shaped by future plans for visualization in platforms based on ARCGIS work.