

# Fondren Fellows

## Project Title

Building a History of Industrial Accidents and Disasters in Houston



## Brief Summary:

In 2016, the Houston Chronicle has reported that Houston area experiences a chemical fire or explosion, on average, every six weeks. While the report is out of date, the statistic is the most recent figure regarding industrial accidents in Houston – and it does not take into account the long history of disasters throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This project will utilize archival data and publicly available government sources to build a history of industrial accidents in the Houston area – allowing us to determine the frequency, periods of change in safety, policies that proved effective in regulating serial polluters.

## Project Description:

Houston was built by industry: the plants and refineries along the Ship Channel serve as the largest reason for the region's remarkable growth in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While these facilities have brought new residents and jobs, they have also brought a legacy of industrial pollution, leaks, fires, and outright disasters. Some of these incidents have resulted in fatalities, many lead to permanent injuries, and the high number of repeat incidents creates ongoing quality of life issues such as public health risks, reduced property values, and mentally harmful shelter-in-place or evacuation orders. The sheer number of industrial accidents makes media interest in incidents limited, and often issues are only covered in comparison to major catastrophes – minimizing the ongoing risks and harms caused by repetitive events. What this frequency represents is a normalization, and tacit acceptance, of industry pollution amidst a sector that has failed to sufficiently build safety regulations and protocols into aging facilities.

In many ways, this culture of disaster is built into the region's identity. Texas City, home to many of the largest petrochemical facilities in the world, is the site of two of the most prominent industrial disasters in US history (in 1947 and 2005 respectively). While journalists and social scientists are aware of the frequent incidents throughout the region, little historical research has been done beyond the largest pollution and disaster events of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

To understand how this culture of risk-taking has become a central part of Houston's industrial culture, historical research is needed to understand the range of accidents (fires, leaks, explosions, and regulation violating pollution events). This project will create a centralized database that indexes such events in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries to both demonstrate their frequency and provide an accessible reference for scholars, journalists, and the public to understand the history and ongoing challenges of what is often culturally written off as "the costs of doing business."

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

- Archival research
- Gathering contemporary data from government sources
- Devising (with faculty) an approach to uncovering historic industrial accidents
- Developing a website or digital tool (with Fondren experts) to showcase the findings for the public

**What qualifications would you expect from students working on this project?**

Students would be expected to learn skills throughout the project. Some of the skills they would be able to develop or refine include:

- Archival research
- Digital design
- Public communications (through digital platform/tool)

**What would students learn through their participation in this project?**

- Students will leave with a practiced understanding of how to conduct archival research.
- Students will leave with a practiced understanding of how to find government sources, public data, and add this to a public data set.
- Students will learn how to build a data set for historical research, as well as how to make this information legible to diverse audiences.
- Students will gain skills in digital design and communication, working with faculty to make the findings publicly accessible.