

Mass Grave Recalls the Ugly Past of a City Where ‘Life Is Sweeter’

The Houston suburb Sugar Land got its name from a business reliant on the forced labor of convicts. But efforts to memorialize those people have stalled.



By Priya Krishna

Reporting from Sugar Land, Texas

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In Sugar Land, Texas, there’s a refrain you may hear from residents — an unofficial city motto of sorts: Life is sweeter here.

By many measures, it is. This Houston suburb is affluent, with a median household income nearly 70 percent higher than the nation’s. One of the world’s largest oil companies, Schlumberger, has a sprawling campus here. The crown jewel of its current development boom is the Imperial Char House, the sugar refinery that gave the town its name and will soon become the centerpiece of a complex including luxury apartments, museums and a distillery.

The city’s lure is so strong that it was chosen to host the inaugural Honeyland festival, a two-day celebration of Black food and music to be held this weekend, with a long lineup of celebrities that includes Mary J. Blige, Miguel and the chef Marcus Samuelsson.

But beneath Sugar Land’s success lies a disturbing piece of Black history. For decades after slavery was abolished in the United States, a prison farm that grew sugar for the Imperial refinery relied on the forced labor of prison inmates, most of them Black men, including many who had been locked up for conduct as minor as loitering or not having a job. The practice, known as convict leasing and used throughout the South, created such brutal conditions that many Sugar Land inmates died within two years after being incarcerated.



Sugar Land’s City Hall. The city is booming with jobs, infrastructure and people. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times



The city is much like any other affluent suburb, with well-kept shopping areas and large houses. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

In 2018, the remains of 95 African Americans — 94 men and one believed to have been a woman — were found during the construction of a technical school in Sugar Land. The discovery drew national news coverage and calls for a proper memorial, research into the convicts’ lives and broader education about convict leasing.

Five years later, the remains still sit, unidentified, in a makeshift graveyard facing a school parking lot. The few public testaments to the lives of these people — known as the Sugar Land 95 — include some references on the city’s website and in local museums, and a small exhibit in a Sugar Land school hallway.

Several groups have sprung up to push for a more robust memorial, but their efforts have been stalled by bitter disagreements about how to mark this history, and who should pay for it.

Sugar Land officials initially offered to move the remains to a city-owned cemetery, but the proposal failed to win public support and they have since dropped out of discussions. Fort Bend County, which includes Sugar Land, set aside \$4 million in 2020 to build a park around the remains, but has since reduced that commitment to \$1.5 million.

Many of the people pushing for a memorial say they're not counting on government support, given the lack of progress so far and the grimness of the history they want to see acknowledged.

"It's ugly," said Marilyn Moore, who founded the nonprofit Friends of the Sugar Land 95 to help manage the memorialization efforts. "They don't want it. It wasn't in the history books. It has not been taught. And so now that they are becoming aware, they don't want to talk about it."



After they were discovered six years ago during construction of a school, the remains of the Sugar Land 95 were buried on the site.
Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

Back in the 1990s, her husband, Reginald Moore, a former prison guard, began telling anyone who would listen that leased prison laborers had been buried in unmarked graves throughout the area, and campaigning for help in finding and preserving those sites. He was still pushing for a memorial when he died in 2020 at age 60.

Sugar Land is only one of several communities across the country — including Tracy City, Tenn., and Clemson, S.C. — where mass, unmarked graves of African Americans have recently been found. People in a number of those places have been looking to Sugar Land for guidance on how to proceed.

In Sugar Land, the task of figuring all of this out has fallen to the Fort Bend Independent School District, which owns the land where the remains were found. The district succeeded in creating a curriculum on convict leasing and persuading the state to allow its teaching in Texas schools — no small feat in a state that sets strict limits on how students can be taught about slavery. And school officials have completed a plan to build an outdoor exhibit and plaza around the cemetery, using the money promised by the county.



Marilyn Moore has continued the work of her husband, Reginald Moore, who alerted the community that there were unmarked Black cemeteries in the city before his death in 2020. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

Allen Bogard, who as city manager from 2001 to 2020 created a task force to decide how to bury and memorialize the Sugar Land 95, believes the state, which leased out the convicts and profited mightily from the deal, should be leading the charge. But he said state officials prefer to leave the work to the district, which lacks the money and experience to manage a cemetery, much less identify the remains and spread their story. (The office of Gov. Greg Abbott did not respond to requests for comment.)

“I believe everybody just wants to bury it,” Mr. Bogard said. “It’s an embarrassment. It runs completely counter to who Sugar Land is today.”

‘Hellhole on the Brazos’

The Sugar Land of today has one of the fastest-growing populations in the country. In 2021, U.S. News ranked Fort Bend as the nation's fifth most ethnically diverse county. But of the city's nearly 110,000 residents, just 7.2 percent are Black, about half the national figure.

In a city of lavish homes and freshly paved roads, the Sugar Land 95 cemetery is notably spare, set off by a thin chain-rope fence and two plaques that explain how the remains were discovered. The gray gravestones are all numbered and inscribed with the same word: “Unknown.” A state historical marker will be installed next year.

That history began in the 1820s, when settlers established sugar plantations, bringing with them enslaved people. The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery in 1865, but a loophole allowed the state to lease out its prisoners to plantation owners to fill the labor gap.



None of the Sugar Land 95 have been identified, but DNA testing has begun. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

The area that is now Sugar Land was so swampy and mosquito-infested, and the work of cultivating sugar cane so backbreaking, that it became known as the “hellhole on the Brazos.” Convict leasing was phased out in Sugar Land in the early 20th century, but even after Texas abolished the practice in 1910, the state bought farms and forced prisoners to work them until the 1980s.

The discovery of the Sugar Land 95 has national significance, said Robert Perkinson, the author of “Texas Tough: The Rise of a Prison Empire.” The area’s use of convict leasing, he said, was so expansive and lucrative that it created the template for a modern prison system that prioritizes punishment over rehabilitation, and for the continued use of prison labor by businesses.

Today, Texas is torn by political divisions that hinder the examination of that history, said Dexter McCoy, a Fort Bend County commissioner who represents a precinct near the Sugar Land 95 site. “Where we are now, we cannot agree on what facts are facts,” he said, “and so that complicates the situation that much more.”

Mr. McCoy, who worked for the school district during the discovery, grew so frustrated by the inaction over the Sugar Land 95 that he struck out on his own. He is using \$4 million in county money to build an African American memorial, scheduled to open in 2025, on the grounds of a Black cemetery in his precinct that will include 95 trees in honor of the workers.



Dexter McCoy, a Fort Bend County commissioner, felt frustrated with the lack of progress on the Sugar Land 95 and plans to memorialize the individuals in a park in his precinct. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

The school district, meanwhile, is raising money to build its outdoor memorial. But the district hasn't asked the city for funding, said Chassidy Olainu-Alade, a curriculum coordinator who is overseeing the project.

"We haven't been able to even establish a working relationship on the matter," she said, since the district rejected the city's offer to reinter the remains, which many activists both in and outside Sugar Land wanted to keep in their original resting place.

The school district, she said, is "trying to strike that balance between doing the right thing and having very little resources dedicated to doing it because it's not in the hands of a municipality." (Doug Adolph, a spokesman for the city, confirmed that Sugar Land has not allocated funding for the memorial because it is a school district project.)

In 2022, Ms. Olainu-Alade helped the district set up the small exhibit inside a school, with the aid of Ms. Moore and community members. Ms. Olainu-Alade and her team created the new curriculum about convict leasing, which local classrooms have incorporated in creative ways: Forensics students, for instance, learn to analyze skeletal remains using photos and other data on the Sugar Land 95.

But other groups championing the Sugar Land 95 have found the district's efforts lacking.

The Society of Justice and Equality for the People of Sugar Land is pushing for a museum showing the national scope of convict leasing. Robin Cole, who runs the group, said her organization had applied for grants that would also fund a traveling exhibit and virtual museum.



Members of the Society of Justice and Equality for the People of Sugar Land say the school district isn't doing enough to memorialize the Sugar Land 95. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

The Convict Leasing and Labor Project, founded by Mr. Moore and Jay Jenkins, says the school district is failing to honor the 95 people by not completing DNA testing to identify the remains before building a memorial. (The group did not respond to requests for an interview.)

A self-funded research group has begun DNA testing, which could take many years to complete, said Abigail Fisher, one of the researchers. Two others, Helen Graham and Sandra Rodgers, have combed state records and uncovered information about 75 people who died at the prison farm. The group also knows, from its analysis of the remains, that they endured great suffering — from gunshot wounds, sun stroke, traumatic brain injuries and pneumonia.

The researchers have interviewed a few descendants, including a Houston-area teacher who asked to be identified simply as Carolyn because she hadn't told some relatives about the family's connection to convict leasing. When she found out, she said, "it devastated me, thinking about my ancestors."

'There's No Blueprint'

For all the efforts to bring attention to the Sugar Land 95, the significance of their story doesn't seem widely understood in the city. Several residents interviewed either didn't know or didn't care about the history.

Na Guo, 35, a real estate developer who has lived in Sugar Land for more than a decade, said she knew about the Imperial Sugar company, but not the Sugar Land 95. "People don't talk about those things here, the dark side of history," Ms. Guo said, sipping a drink at an Italian cafe.

At the Sugar Land Heritage Foundation and Museum, which includes a brief history of convict leasing, Vincent Morales, 69, a retired funeral-home owner, wistfully gazed at photos of his father, a former Imperial Sugar employee. Mr. Morales said he knew about convict leasing, but “I would rather just hear about Sugar Land and Imperial Sugar.”

He was excited to discuss the renovation of the Imperial Char House next door. With its towering ceilings and sweeping views of the city, the former refinery building will become an office, dining and events complex by 2025. The city has agreed to reimburse developers up to \$5 million for the \$59 million project.

Mr. Adolph, the city spokesman, said that some tribute to the Sugar Land 95 would be incorporated into the complex, but that it was too early to say how.



One of the city's main priorities is redeveloping the former Imperial Sugar refinery into a complex of restaurants, offices and luxury housing. Michael Starghill Jr. for The New York Times

As plans for the Honeyland festival were announced this summer, its organizers made no public mention of the Sugar Land 95. But recently, the festival said it would honor them with a ceremony at the start of this weekend's event.

Ms. Cole emailed the organizers in recent months asking if at the event they'd discuss or encourage donations to help memorialize the Sugar Land 95. No one responded, she said. But she applied for a grant from the festival, which has pledged to award up to \$1 million to Black creators around the country.

Ms. Olainu-Alade said she only recently heard about the festival and didn't feel the need to reach out. She is busy answering phone calls from people asking what to do about the unmarked Black cemeteries they've discovered in their communities.

She is perplexed that her team's work might serve as a model for other cities. “I am like, how?” she said. “There's no blueprint. There's no guidebook.”

Sitting in her office, she read an email about plans to build an elementary school nearby, on the site of another prison farm. “This isn’t a Sugar Land issue, this isn’t a Texas issue,” she said. “This is a United States post-emancipation issue.”

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A correction was made on Nov. 8, 2023: An earlier version of this article misstated the surname of the school district curriculum coordinator who is overseeing the Sugar Land 95 project. She is Chassidy Olainu-Alade, not Alainu Olade.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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