



HONORING THE  
**SUGAR LAND 95**  
FORT BEND ISD

1843

Early sugar mill  
built at the site  
of what would  
become the  
Imperial Sugar Mill

**On February 19, 2018, a contractor working at the construction site of the FBISD James C. Reese Career and Technical Center uncovered the first human remains. What set out to be a routine period of construction turned into international news when a forgotten and unmarked cemetery was unearthed on land purchased by Fort Bend ISD to build the school.**

What was unearthed at the site was shocking. Under the guidance of the Texas Historical Commission, an archaeological firm led the exhumation. After months of excavating, archaeologists discovered the remains of 95 people, presumably 94 men and one woman. It was concluded that these people were part of a state-sanctioned convict leasing system, which operated in Texas after the abolition of slavery until the turn of the 20th century. Through archival research and intensive laboratory studies, the cemetery was found to be associated with the 19th century Bullhead Convict Labor Camp.

The discovery of the Sugar Land 95 has taken Fort Bend ISD on an unprecedented journey of twists and turns, all in the name of honoring those found and shedding light on the hidden history of the place we call home.

## CONVICT LEASING: A NEW FORM OF SLAVERY

Prior to the American Civil War, the main economic driver in the former Confederate

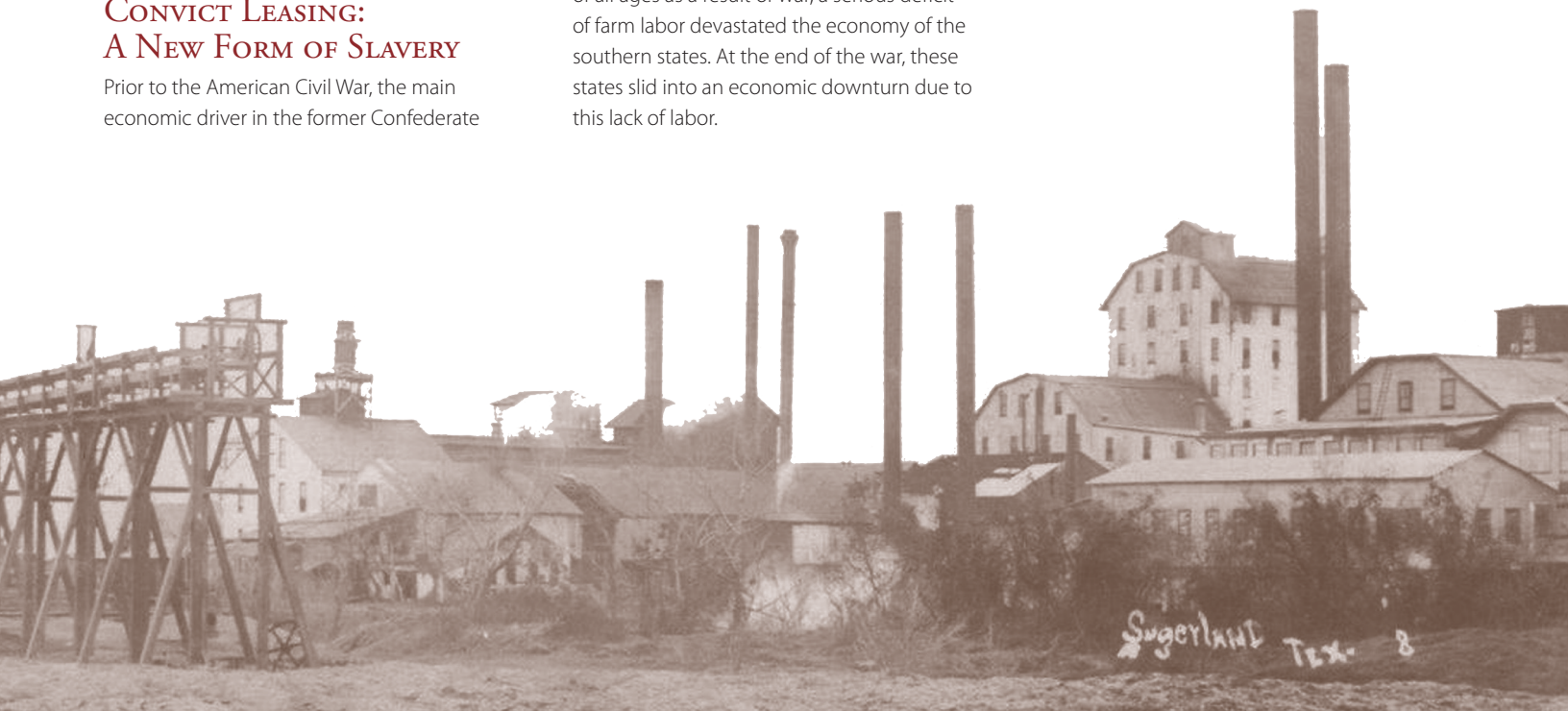


*Burial number 1 after the completion of hand-dug units. Protected against rainstorms with a cover of plastic sheeting and sandbags.*

States was large-scale agriculture, which was heavily dependent on forced labor in the form of chattel slavery. With the emancipation of slaves and the death of more than 250,000 men of all ages as a result of war, a serious deficit of farm labor devastated the economy of the southern states. At the end of the war, these states slid into an economic downturn due to this lack of labor.

Ratified in 1865, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery in the United States. However, upon reading the text of the amendment, it states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, nor any place subject to their jurisdiction."

In no time, lawmakers across the Old South began passing laws to continue their pre-war practice of using convict labor — a new form of slavery. Convict labor was used to rebuild the southern economy. Their free labor was instrumental to the success of many industries, as they were used to mine coal, build railroads, mill lumber, as well as farm on cotton and sugar plantations. Convict labor was even used to quarry the granite used to build the Texas State Capitol. The demand for convict labor grew as profits increased, thereby leading to



SUGARLAND TEX. 8



the increased arrest of Black people. It was not uncommon for Black men to be arrested for minor crimes, given over-inflated sentences, or even convicted based on false charges.

Vagrancy statutes — laws that penalized individuals who were unemployed or homeless — brought about the increased incarceration of newly freed Black people. These laws perpetuated the convict leasing system and set the stage for the discriminatory Jim Crow laws that governed America throughout the mid-20th century.

## CONVICT LEASING IN TEXAS

The convict leasing system in Texas got its earliest start in 1867 but officially began with the issuing of private leasing in 1871. This system would last until 1912.

During the period of convict leasing, typically, Anglo convicts were sent to the wood-cutting camps of East Texas and Hispanic convicts were sent to work on the railroad. Black convicts were sent to cultivate crops, primarily cotton and sugarcane. The picture to the bottom left is one of the few images depicting the work of convict laborers in Fort Bend County during this period.

## LABOR CAMPS IN SUGAR LAND

The peak of the convict leasing system occurred under the operation of two partners, Edward H. Cunningham and Littleberry A. Ellis. From 1878 to 1883 these men made a fortune in lease payments, much of which they put into the acquisition of more land, including much of Fort Bend County.

Cunningham, a resident of Bexar County, began acquiring land in Fort Bend County, that would

eventually total 12,500 acres. Ellis, previously owning land in Brazoria County, purchased active labor camps and agricultural fields in Fort Bend County. Eventually, Ellis owned 5,300 acres, which he named Sartartia Plantation after his daughter. Using the labor of convicts, Cunningham and Ellis were able to create one of the largest sugar plantations in the country following the Civil War.

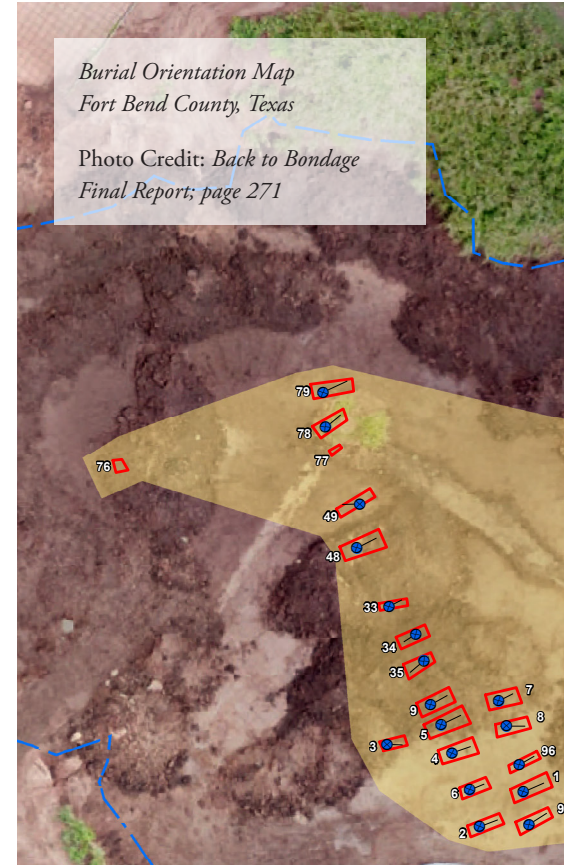
Together, by 1880, Ellis' Plantation and Cunningham's Plantation utilized 365 convicts, while leasing out hundreds more to local plantations in need of low-cost labor. Although they were only about 30 percent of the Texas population, Black people made up 50 to 60 percent of the prison population during the convict leasing period, from 1871 to 1911.

The prison camps established by these men did not cease operation when their lease of Huntsville Penitentiary ended in 1883. Prison labor continued on newly minted state prison farms including the Harlem State Farm, the Central State Farm, and the Imperial State Farm, to name a few. Today, relics of this horrific system still can be seen today throughout Fort Bend County, including that of the newly discovered Bullhead Camp Labor Force Cemetery.

## DATA SUMMARY

Based on extensive research and analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- The median age of death among the identified convicts was 24. The youngest fatality was William Nash at 16, serving four years for theft. He died of "brain congestion," possibly from a traumatic brain injury.



- The most common causes of death were: congestion of the brain/ bowels/organs; gunshot following attempted escape; pneumonia; and sun stroke. This likely indicated very poor living and working conditions.
- The median sentence length was five years. Yet, more than half of these Bullhead convicts died within a year of their arrival at the camp; 78 percent died within two years.

## FINAL REPORT OF FINDINGS

After two and a half long years of excavation, analysis, and in-depth research, the official report of findings was finalized and published in August 2020. The full report, *Back to Bondage* provides a comprehensive account of the history of convict leasing, the operation of the Bullhead Camp labor force under the ownership of Cunningham and Ellis, as well as a complete roster of individuals determined to have labored and died while serving in the

1906

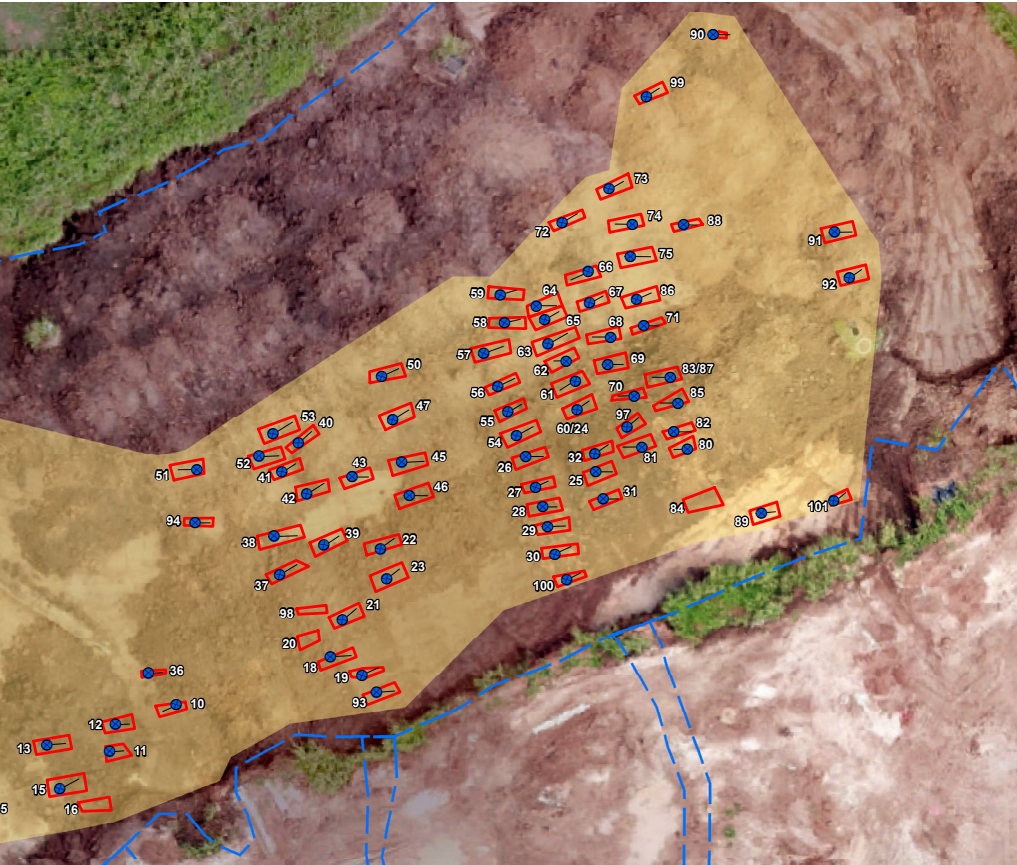
I.H. Kempner and W.T. Eldridge acquire land and start the company town for the Imperial Sugar Company

1909

Imperial State Prison Farm opened

1912

Official end of convict leasing in Texas



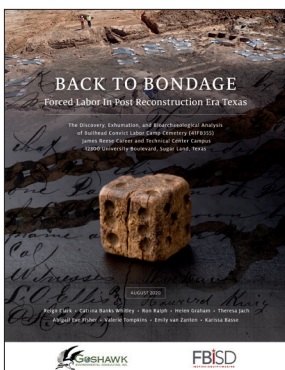
## BULLHEAD CAMP LABOR FORCE CEMETERY

- The Bullhead Camp Labor Force Cemetery was situated on the land once known as Sartartia Plantation, which was owned and operated by L.A. Ellis and his family.
- Named after its position along the Bullhead Bayou Creek, the labor force that lived and worked at this site operated under six different names.
- Between 1880 and 1910, the inmate population at the Bullhead Camp ranged between 57 and 387.
- Results of analysis has determined the 95 individuals found at the Bullhead Camp Cemetery were of African descent.



collaborating with the District in submitting the application for a Historic Texas Cemetery Designation. By gaining this designation, we will be able to apply for an Official Texas Historical Marker for the cemetery.

FBISD remains committed to educating our students and community about this remarkable discovery and the history of convict leasing. In 2019, our Board of Trustees approved the adoption of a local standard that allows for local history, including the Sugar Land 95 discovery, to be incorporated into the District's curriculum. With the assistance of FBISD, the newly-adopted African American studies course will include a standard which will allow students from across the state to learn about the Sugar Land 95 and the impact of convict leasing. In addition to our curriculum initiatives, we also take pride in our efforts to educate the community through a variety of education events, presentations, and resources.



labor force. In addition to the historical context, the report also provides extensive research and findings related to the

conditions of the remains, providing insight into the lives of these men, what they endured as convict laborers, and how they ultimately perished in the hands of the convict leasing system.

To access the full report and an executive summary to the report, please visit [www.fortbendisd.com/sugarland95](http://www.fortbendisd.com/sugarland95).

## EDUCATION AND MEMORIALIZATION OF THE SUGAR LAND 95

At this time, the work to properly memorialize the Sugar Land 95 is incomplete. There is still much to be done in order to honor their lives and legacies, and to educate our community about their contributions to the history of our county, state, and nation.

In the near future, the FBISD Board of Trustees will discuss the design of an educational exhibit, to be housed in the James C. Reese Career and Technical Center. The permanent grave stones were recently installed to officially mark the exact location of each grave found during the exhumation, and we encourage public visitation to the site.

We give special recognition to the Fort Bend Historical Commission Cemetery Committee and the Fort Bend Black Heritage Society for

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

### Mr. Reginald Moore

#### *An Example of Compassionate Citizenship*

This publication would not be complete without the acknowledgment of the late Mr. Reginald Moore for his faithful commitment and persistence in raising awareness of the state-sanctioned racial injustices in the convict leasing system.

After many years of research and advocacy, Mr. Moore's legacy of being a compassionate citizen within our community is one that should be highlighted. He dedicated his life to bringing awareness to the convict leasing system and emphasizing the cultural significance of the Sugar Land 95. Guided by his faith, he used his voice to speak for the voiceless.

He was never afraid to engage in tough conversations aimed at bringing awareness to the injustices of the past and improving our diverse community in the future. Mr. Moore is the reason why hundreds of thousands of people now know about the Sugar Land 95, and why future students in Fort Bend ISD will learn about this important part of our local history.

**Front cover:** *Postcard, potato crop Fort Bend Co.; may be prison farm laborers working in the field*

**Inside front cover:** *Sugar Land postcard, early sugar mill*

**Photo credit:** *Courtesy the Fort Bend History Association, Richmond, TX.*

## IN REMEMBRANCE OF...

Adams, Abe, 26	Davis, Phil, 26	Odam, Bill, 27
Adams, Loyd, <i>unknown</i>	Dixon, Ben, 23	Owens, Travis, 25
Allen, Sam, 20	Franklin, Ben, 39	Parker, Gus, <i>unknown</i>
Anderson, Tom, 23	Froch, Sebe, 60	Pope, Nathan, 18
Baker, George, 26	Fuller, Hardy, 28	Powell, Esau, 32
Baldwin, Mack, 24	Garcia, James, 19	Rhodes, Ike, <i>unknown</i>
Berman, Joe, 40	Glass, Jim, 22	Robinson, Arthur, 20
Blacksom, John, 25	Granville, Alex, 26	Rollins, Newton, 32
Bonner, William, 32	Gray, Morris, 40	Scott, West, 18
Boon, Auz., 27	Hagell, Will, 22	Shelton, Jim, <i>unknown</i>
Boone, Harry, 20	Jackson, Andy, 54	Simons, Hence, 27
Brewer, George, 40	Jackson, Ed, 20	Smith, Davy, 23
Brown, Peter, 23	Jessie, George, 25	Stephens, Wm., 23
Brown, Robert, 23	Lee, Sam, 22	Stroud, Garrison, 27
Cartinas, Manuel, 25	Miller, Dump, 20	Terry, Henry, 25
Chambers, John, 32	Miller, Joe, 22	Thomas, Jeff, 25
Cole, Coleman, 28	Mitchell, Jack, 33	Tollison, Allie, 26
Collins, Joseph, 24	Mitchell, Josh, 23	Varnes, John, 34
Corey, Henry, 29	Nash, William, 16	Walker, Henry, 25
Crawford, William, 21	Nevils, Jerry, 29	White, William, 26
Cruse, Michael, 18	Newman, Steve, <i>unknown</i>	Whitfield, Dempsey, 20
Darby, Aaron, 18	Newsom, Isreal, 38	Williams, John, 25
Davis, Alfred, 37	Nichols, Wm., 25	Williams, Riley, 25
Davis, John, 26	Norton, Jonathan, 27	Williams, Will, 22
Davis, Lewis, 24	O'Dair, Wafer, 23	

*This list of names is of men who are thought to be buried in some of the 95 unmarked graves found at the cemetery. The records used to create this list indicated that these men were located at the Bullhead Camp at their times of death, but did not indicate where they were buried. The roster of the deceased can be located in the full report.*



*Recent Installation of Granite Grave Markers at the Bullhead Camp Cemetery.*



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Sugar Land, TX 77479

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## HONORING THE SUGAR LAND 95

### To our FBISD Community –

As you receive this publication, our nation is in the middle of a period that will surely be marked in history. At the same time, Fort Bend ISD continues our efforts to bring awareness to a largely forgotten part of our nation's history – the convict leasing era. The discovery of the Sugar Land 95 has provided us with the opportunity to educate our students and community about the state-sanctioned convict leasing system, and bring to light the atrocities faced by those who were subjected to that system.

It has been nearly three years since crews discovered the first human remains at the site of the James Reese Career and Technical Center, and one year since these individuals were returned to their rest. It is heart breaking that the Sugar Land 95 were previously forgotten and left in an abandoned cemetery that was hidden for decades. Our District – and our Board of Trustees – is committed to honoring this monumental discovery, which is why we are taking steps to ensure they are not forgotten again.

Our hope is that you will take a few minutes to learn more about the countless hours of

research that has been performed to illustrate the important story of the Sugar Land 95, what happened at the site, and FBISD's ongoing efforts to develop educational opportunities about the exploitation and injustices these individuals suffered. In addition to this mailer, the final report and executive summary associated with the historic discovery can be found at [www.fortbendisid.com/sugarland95](http://www.fortbendisid.com/sugarland95).

There is still more work to be done as we work to educate our community and honor the Sugar Land 95. In future communications, we plan to provide more details about plans to create a place of remembrance and reflection for our students and community to learn about the discovery. The District is committed to engaging with community partners to achieve our long-term goal of memorializing the lives lost during the convict leasing era.

We appreciate your continued partnership and support.

Sincerely,  
Charles E. Dupre, Ed.D.  
*Superintendent of Schools*

### STAY UP TO DATE

FBISD regularly makes announcements and provides updates related to the Sugar Land 95 on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. To follow developments and community engagement events, please follow and visit:

[www.fortbendisid.com/Sugarland95](http://www.fortbendisid.com/Sugarland95)  
[www.fortbendisid.com/SL95report](http://www.fortbendisid.com/SL95report)  
@FortBendISD  
@FBISDEngages  
#WhoaretheSugarLand95

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

A permanent fund has been established by the University of Connecticut to support DNA extraction and analysis. To donate, please visit [www.fortbendisid.com/sugarland95](http://www.fortbendisid.com/sugarland95).