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Book & Geospatial Resources Review of The Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas & Study

By Amanda Tickner

Roberts, Andrea, Mohammad Javad Biazar. *The Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas & Study*. July 2018.

<https://www.thetexasfreedomcoloniesproject.com/atlas>. March 22, 2023



Logo: The Texas Freedom Colonies Project

The Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas is an interactive map sourced from ground truthed crowd-sourced data as well as historical sources. It presents the location of the Freedom Colonies in Texas. There is an informational page on the website that describes Freedom Colonies: “Freedom Colonies are places that were settled by formerly enslaved people during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras in Texas following Emancipation. From 1865-1930, African Americans accumulated land and founded 557 historic black settlements or Freedom Colonies. Freedom Colonies were intentional communities created largely in response to political and economic repression by mainstream white society.” The term Freedom Colonies is distinct to Texas, but similar settlements existed across the South during this period.



As described on the site, compared to similar settlements of freed slaves outside of Texas, the Freedom Colonies were often unmapped and undocumented, in part because they usually did not become incorporated parts of towns. The settlements were often found in the Eastern part of Texas. The locations were often in proximity to areas where there were farms and plantations where people were enslaved. Also, the land claimed was often nearer to the coast and prone to flooding, which made it more available for former slaves to take up residence without anyone contesting their presence.

The overall site is comprised of nine pages, which include a home page, an About Us page, a page describing the history of the Freedom Settlements, the Atlas, a section for getting involved in history preservation projects, a page of community resources which provides references related to methods, a page on research publications from the project, a digital projects page which presents class projects, a contact us page, and a news page which presents the project newsletter and other news stories. It is a comprehensive collection of information about the project.

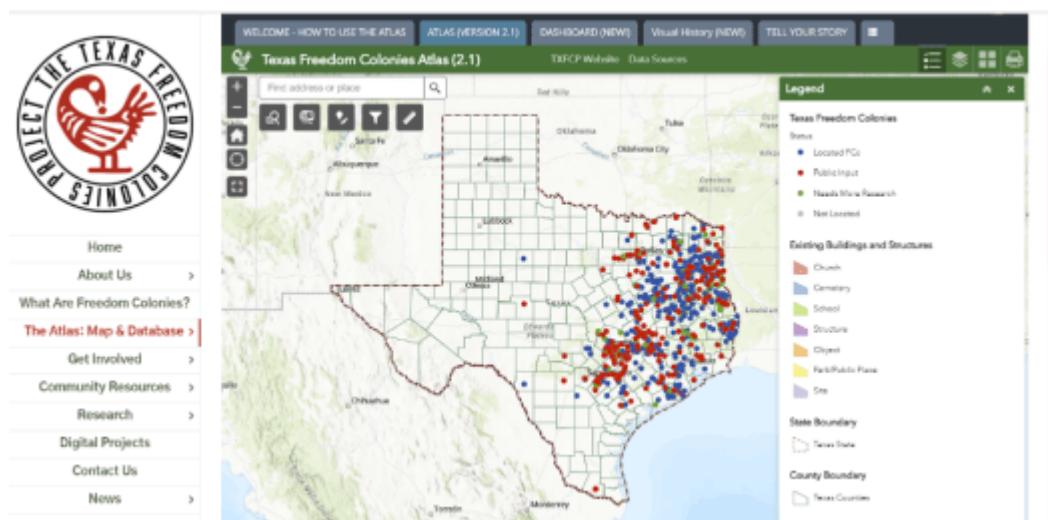


Figure 1: Screenshot of the Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas (2.1) March 29, 2023

From a usability perspective, there were a few problematic elements and some positive elements in the Atlas map design. There is a tab devoted to explaining how to use the map, with a captioned screenshot of the map, which is helpful for people that are unfamiliar with web maps.

The features and functions on the maps generally follow the typical constraints of ArcGIS Online maps. Basemaps can be customized with the typical ESRI basemap options. The customizing basemap option is nice as some basemap selections



increase contrast between the points and the basemap which improves readability. There were two map tabs, one that showed structures (according to the legend) and point locations, as well as a dashboard with point locations of the Freedom Colonies with some summary statistics.

The main map on the site included structures in the Freedom Colonies as a layer, however, I could not locate anything from the structure layer on the map (there may have been an issue with scale, to see the structure layer you would need to be zoomed in, and it was hard to know where to zoom to).

The points on the dashboard map showing the locations of Freedom Colonies fall into three categories: located Freedom Colonies, new input Under Review, and needs more research. The representing these categories are red, green, and blue. For low vision accessibility and for people who are color blind this may be problematic, it would be better to use a different color scheme with higher contrast differences between the points. Making each category a unique symbol, so color isn't the only way of differentiating the information contained by the points would also improve readability.

There were also some layers related to demography. While looking at the map layer that showed the location of Freedom Colonies by point, I did have a question about the underlying demography of the state, based on the clustering of points, and it was excellent to find a layer option showing the population of the state by county which could underlie the location points. Even though it isn't historical population data, this was a good piece of information to contextualize the distribution of the Freedom Colonies' locations.

Additional options for contextualizing information would be a positive inclusion. The background page of the website stated that the colonies distribution on the landscape was attributed in part to physical geographic characteristics that related to land value. Having some of that information regarding flooding and historic land values included as underlying layers would also be helpful for contextualization, especially given that information was mentioned in their background section.

A significant component of this project is the crowd sourcing capabilities for expanding the dataset, and this sets it apart from other projects. This crowd sourcing is likely made easier by the project being a digital project. A Survey123 form is included in the Atlas for those who want to report information relating to the Freedom colonies for potential inclusion in the Atlas. The Atlas data can easily be



expanded as more information is discovered and more sites are confirmed on the ground, which is a useful affordance of a digital map versus a paper publication.

Google searching reveals there are roughly comparable projects to this one, including the African American Trail Project from Tufts University which also relies on crowd source public data gathering as an element of their data collection. The African American Trail Project does not have a web map associated with it, it provides information via a static map, which cannot be zoomed in or out of, and is unfortunately difficult to read on a screen. The National Park Service has an interactive map of “verified sites connected to the underground railroad” as part of its Network to Freedom program which has some similarities and is admirable for allowing a spreadsheet download of the data, which is useful for research. That project does say that they are adding sites, but it is not actively soliciting locations from the public in the same way the Texas Freedom Project is. So, while these projects are generally comparable, they are not utilizing the affordances of being on the web the way the Texas Freedom project does.

Because the Freedom Colonies are endangered or now not as visible in the landscape this project is an important record of their presence. The project and atlas serve as a record of these endangered sites, create awareness of the Freedom Colonies, and also help expand the historical record by soliciting community input and information. Being a digital project, it has the potential for expansion over time and affordances for the inclusion of data gathered from the community.

One of the agreements that you are requested to acknowledge when entering the site is: “I affirm that documenting the existence of freedom colonies and participating in descendants’ collective preservation practice is an act of resistance to white supremacy.” The atlas is a valuable contribution to resisting white supremacy by preserving black history in Texas and the United States.

Other projects referenced:

Tufts University and the African American Trail Project. *The African American Trail Project* 2021. <https://africanamericantrailproject.tufts.edu/map-tuftsuniversity>. March 22, 2023

National Park Service. Underground Railroad: Explore the Network to Freedom. January 10, 2023.



<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/ntf-listings.htm>. March 22, 2023

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