Fondren Fellows Project:

Any questions can be directed to fondrenfellows@rice.edu

Mentors:

Carrie Masiello and Lisa Spiro

Project Title:

Building the "Creosote Contamination in Houston's Fifth Ward" Collection

Description:

Working with partners at Rice and in Houston, two Fondren Fellows will assemble, describe, contextualize, and make available a collection of documents about the events surrounding the detection of creosote contamination in Houston's Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens.

Project Summary:

Since the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) designated Houston's Fifth Ward and Kashmere Gardens an official cancer cluster, an area with outsized rates of cancer, this environmental and public health crisis has become a major news and political issue in the city. The majority Black and Hispanic residents of the area experience a range of health implications due to the region's century-long history of using creosote, dioxin, and other harmful chemicals for the treatment of wood and production of railway ties for use across Houston and the Southwest. Despite this, insufficient work has been done to archive the history, changing news, and political activism around the issue. In the spring of 2024, students in an Environmental Science capstone course wrote a Wikipedia article to offer a research-based account of this case to the public. In the course of this process, it became clear that there are materials being generated that are substantive but ephemeral. For example: some EPA data links included in the Wikipedia article no longer exist, rendering preliminary EPA data inaccessible over the long term. Another example is the body of political literature generated as flyers that appear during events, as well as documents produced by the railway company legally liable for the contamination. There are also student projects collecting community stories that are not currently archived. These materials are important because they will allow future scholars to better

understand an event that is likely an inflection point in environmental justice in Houston, and potentially in the US. This points to the need for a stable, well-preserved, accessible collection of documents related to this case of environmental injustice.

Two Fondren Fellows will work together to compile this collection, collaborating with librarians and researchers at Rice and members of community groups. Fellows will collect, digitize (if necessary), describe, and contextualize documents and work with library staff to make them available in the Rice Research Repository (R2), a platform managed by Fondren Library. In addition, they will develop an in-depth understanding of the scientific and policy dimensions of creosote contamination and share this knowledge with the public via media such as videos, oral histories, explainers, and podcasts. If materials cannot be placed online because of copyright, privacy, or other restrictions, they will form part of an accompanying collection maintained by the Woodson Research Center.

Fellows will consult with the following people as they develop the project:

- Portia Hopkins (University Historian): community archiving
- Shannon Kipphut-Smith (scholarly communications liaison): developing digital collections
- Qilin Li (Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering): science of creosote contamination
- Weston Twardowski (Center for Environmental Studies): telling environmental stories

This project supports several library goals, including deepening collaborations with Rice research institutes, increasing engagement with the community, and contributing to Rice's environmental sustainability efforts. Providing access to these documents will enable (1) community members to better understand what happened and why, (2) researchers to study an important environmental justice case, and (3) decision-makers and advocates to have an authoritative and stable source of information. With the support of mentors and advisors, the Fellows should be able to collect, describe, and contextualize a core set of documents within the academic year.

Project Outline:

Major tasks include:

o Fall Semester

- Get trained in community engagement, data curation, and metadata creation

- Do background research to identify relevant documents
- Initiate contact with community groups
- Begin to collect, organize, and describe documents and data (these could be originals or digitized versions)
- Work with library staff to ingest resources into the repository

o Spring semester

- Work with community groups to collect relevant documents
- Continue to collect, organize, describe, and ingest documents and data
- Develop a collection ofdigital stories that contextualize the collection, in collaboration with Rice's Center for Environmental Studies.

Qualifications for applicants:

Students should have:

- Two semesters of general chemistry so that they can understand the science of creosote contamination
- Interest or coursework in public policy
- Availability in evenings and weekends to attend relevant community meetings
- Excellent listening skills
- Strong writing skills

What would students learn through their participation in this project?

Through their work on this project, students will:

- Understand how to engage with community organizations in an ethical way
- Gain skills in data collection and curation
- Learn how to create metadata records
- Gain experience crafting environmental stories
- Understand the science of creosote contamination