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REBIRTH OF AN ICON

Black history library will honor 4th Ward

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Nick de la Torre Chronicle

Hellena Stokes, manager of the Houston Public
Library's African American Library at the Gregory
School, said it will "pay homage to the people who
were living here, the people who created the
community."

Vacant for almost 30 years, Fourth Ward's Edgar
Gregory School — once a bastion of education in
the heart of Houston's oldest black neighborhood —
had fallen on hard times. Wind whistled
through broken windows; rain cascaded through
the roof; pigeons frolicked where once earnest
young scholars pursued their vision of a broader,
better life.

All around the Victor Street elementary, a direct
descendant of Houston's first African-American
school, market forces whittled away at
Freedmen's Town, a once-vibrant center of black

life. What was left was, as with the school, little
more than a reminder of what had been.

But don't sell the Gregory short. Next month, the
school will bound back to the center of
community life as the African American Library
at Gregory School, the first Houston Public
Library branch exclusively devoted to black
history and culture. The makeover cost $11
million from federal community development
block grants, and library and city of Houston
construction funds, said library spokeswoman
Sandra Fernandez.

It will feature reading rooms, galleries, an oral
history recording studio and office space for
visiting scholars. At its core will be an archive of
photos, recordings and documents focusing on
the lives of blacks in Houston.

To administrative manager Hellena Stokes, the
new library will "pay homage to the people who
were living here, the people who created the
community," and preserve their legacy for
current and future generations.

"It will help us realize that we have a great
history," she said, "and that history is Houston's
history."

The African American Library, set to open Nov.
14, will join the public library's other special
collections, which include the Houston
Metropolitan Research Center specializing in
local and state history and the Clayton Library

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for Genealogical Research.

As a research library, Stokes said, the center will differ from neighborhood libraries in that it will not lend books or other materials.

Glass-fronted lobby

Renovation of the Gregory School, which opened in 1926, began last year, said Wendy Heger, the library's assistant director for planning and facilities.

"The interior was a wreck," Heger said. "The floors were rotten and had holes. The roof had holes. But the brick and concrete superstructure was good. We did a little reinforcing of the structure, but it was solid."

The school's exterior had been coated with white cement plaster, which was removed to reveal the handsome underlying red bricks. The biggest change to the building — a Texas Historical Commission archeological landmark — is a glass-fronted lobby on the building's north end.

"When we open our doors, people are going to be totally amazed," Stokes said. "The transformation is wonderful, but there still is a sense of the old school. The hallways still are like the elementary schools of those times."

The building's first floor will be devoted to exhibits documenting black history. The upper floor will contain the library's collections, and provide reading rooms and office space for staff and visiting scholars.

A long lineage

Gregory School is a direct descendant of the

Gregory Institute, the city's first black school, which opened in 1870 on Jefferson Street. The school was named for the Freedmen's Bureau official who donated land for the institute. For decades, the Victor Street school was a center of community life for Freedmen's Town, a black neighborhood abutting downtown that was settled by freed slaves after the Civil War.

The library's collections will include a broad range of materials documenting the black American experience, Stokes said. The local collections, which will include letters, newspaper clippings, business documents, photographs and recorded oral accounts, are being assembled from the ground up.

"A lot of people think we will just be getting materials from the Houston Metropolitan R esearch Center, but that's not the case at all," she said. An effort to solicit items for the library began earlier this year with the opening of collection centers at neighborhood libraries and an outreach program to local churches.

A special emphasis is being given to the library's Fourth Ward neighborhood. "We were a real community," Stokes said. "We had churches, homes and businesses. A lot of that is gone without a trace. Gentrification has happened just as it happens in most major cities."

Thus far, about 200 items — photos of and ads for historic businesses, letters, news accounts of school sports triumphs — have been collected.

"This library has been a long time coming," Stokes said. "But it's here. It's a reality."

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