



Looking for Justice at Turkey Creek

Out of the classroom and into the past

As a freshwater paddler who had recently moved from Memphis to the Mississippi coast, I first encountered Turkey Creek and Mr. Flowers White from my canoe. White was clearly having more luck with his cane pole than my boys and I were with our spinning reels. He taught us some insider's tricks and then invited us back to his home for fried crappie. As he shared his fish and the recipe for a mean fry batter, he also shared stories about himself and his community. This was my introduction to the rich history that my students at Gulfport High School and I would later explore.

White can trace his family history back to the founding of Turkey Creek in 1866. A group of freed slaves bought 320 acres of "swampland" north of what would later become Gulfport. They created a self-sufficient and socially isolated community of farms, residences, businesses, a church, and a school that flourished for more than a century. Then, beginning in the 1980s, Gulfport's growth nearly led to Turkey Creek's demise.

Gambling was legalized in our area in 1992. With the inrush of casino money, Gulfport became Mississippi's fastest growing city. City planners sought to annex only the affluent areas north of town, which would have created a dumbbell-shaped city. When a judge ruled against this plan, Turkey Creek was included in the annexation. Gulfport's planners then proceeded to make decisions with weighty implications for the fate of this low-income black community without including its members at the table. Acres of wetlands in the Turkey Creek watershed were filled in and new zoning laws passed to allow Walmart, Family Dollar, and other commercial buildings to go up along the section of Highway 49 (Gulfport's north-south corridor) that intersects Turkey Creek. As a result, the Turkey Creek community has shrunk precipitously and is now surrounded by an airport, concrete and electrical companies, and a strip mall business district.

According to Ella Holmes-Hines, Turkey Creek resident and longtime city

councilwoman, the community has been "under attack" ever since its incorporation at the expense of Gulfport's growth. The environmental and political repercussions for Turkey Creek have been profound.

Hidden in Plain Sight

My students pass over Turkey Creek every time they go north of I-10 to get to the movie theater, the soccer fields, or any of the big-box stores and fast-food restaurants they frequent. In fact, the shortcut to Walmart takes them right through the heart of the Turkey Creek community. But I suspected that the community, creek, and watershed—their history and the controversy surrounding them—were as invisible to my students as they had been to me. I decided that Turkey Creek would be the next "text" for my elective contemporary issues course. In this history class, I attempt to empower students and foster empathy through case studies. The 21 students enrolled in the course were representative of our large public high school's demographics: 57 percent black and 40 percent white, with only a few Latina/o and Asian American students.

I introduced the unit to my students by reading an excerpt of the history compiled by Derrick Evans, founder of the Turkey Creek Community Initiative, in response to the threat posed by the development of wetlands:

The pioneers who settled the

BY HARDY THAMES

Hardy Thames (hardy.thames@gulfportschools.org) is a native Mississippian and teaches at Gulfport High School in Gulfport, Mississippi. Student names have been changed.

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poorly drained “eight forties” [the eight original 40-acre parcels] were visionary, industrious, and innovative. With far less financial, political, or social capital than the celebrated founders of Gulfport, Turkey Creek’s early settlers created arable land to practice sustainable agriculture, and developed a viable, self-sufficient American community bound together by local customs and institutions.

My students were surprised to learn that such a community existed within our city. I challenged them to identify it: “Where is the African American community that was founded in 1866 by people who had been enslaved?” No response. “Where is the community, just a few miles from here, which predated the city of Gulfport by 30 years?” No response. “Which community’s homes and businesses used to be where the airport now stands? Most of you cross the bridge running through it every day.” Finally one student offered, “Oh, that bridge past the golf course on the way to Sonic?” I promised that, after our study,

“How can you ignore that we have a white-dominated past that is still visible here?”

they would know the place’s history and importance, and they would get to see the bridge from a canoe. With that, my students were on board.

Before we began our study of Turkey Creek, I searched the archives of the local *Sun Herald* newspaper, as well as the internet and academic journals, for relevant and accessible articles. Then I provided the published literature on Turkey Creek among small groups of students. I explained the overall driving question for the unit: “Is what has happened to Turkey Creek a question of social and economic growth, or is it a social justice issue?”

The students read the articles in

their groups and presented the information to the class, which then generated lists of topics that interested them and questions they wished to pursue further. Their task was to formulate a driving question from an area of interest. For example, one group’s question was “Is the water dirty?” When a student encountered the name of someone who might help them answer their questions, they added the name to the list of “follow-ups” on the back wall of our classroom. The students then called these community members, litigators, activists, and city officials—including the mayor—and invited them to come speak to the class. At times the students’ attempts were more successful than mine. I had attempted without success to contact Turkey Creek activist Rose Johnson and Reilly Morse, president of the Mississippi Center for Justice. Then one day Armin announced that they had accepted his invitation to come speak to us.

When my students read that councilman Kim Savant had referred to Turkey Creek as a “drainage ditch” that would service a growing Gulfport, my students took offense. This “drainage

ditch” flowed through the community that was home to Warren White (Flow-er’s brother), with whom Antonio would soon spend a day learning to make Warren’s signature aluminum can airplane weather vanes. Antonio later reflected:

It was like visiting my grandfather in the summer. Turkey Creek is a special place that should be appreciated by more people, not bulldozed or flooded. To say that it is a drainage ditch is just ignorant.

As their knowledge grew, so did their appreciation for Turkey Creek and their affinity with its residents; and with

that, their ability to empathize with them.

A *Bill Moyers' Journal* segment on Leah Mahan's documentary *Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek* (see sidebar, p. 36) proved a rich source of material. We were moved by the accounts of residents whose relatives' graves had been "developed" into a parking lot for an apartment complex. We watched Eva Skinner clutching the 10-foot chain-link fence that prevents entry to the few marked graves left in the historic Turkey Creek cemetery and lamenting, "What's all that back there, they used to be graves. My son was buried on the corner. Oh, my God, it's sad, honey. Ain't no telling how many hundreds of people were buried here."

An article from our local newspaper archives stoked my students' outrage. When a reporter asked Savant about the legality of bulldozing and paving a graveyard, he replied, "We were going to rezone the property and I was told that there was a minority cemetery in that area." But when he looked at the written record, Savant told the reporter, he "couldn't find a cemetery . . . we couldn't find it." My students could not believe it. "It's down the street from here! Just take a walk and talk to people. Open your eyes." Later, in her culminating project on the Turkey Creek grave site, Raina would conclude: "This would not have happened to a 'white' graveyard."

Other students were moved by another moment in the video clip in which Derrick Evans floats along a bank that the city inexplicably clear-cut, saying, "It's like somebody died." These moments, juxtaposed against the disdain and dismissal expressed by Gulfport politicians, created a moral dissonance in my students, who were shocked that such things happened in their city, in their lifetime.

During Gulfport's frenzy of rezoning, clear-cutting, and indiscriminate building, Turkey Creek residents began to organize. When they successfully stopped a development that would fill



LOLITA PARKER JR.

in hundreds of acres of wetland, then-mayor Ken Combs called them "dumb bastards" in a meeting with the local newspaper's editorial board, noting that "those people" had not voted for him in the last election, in which his opponent was African American.

But no reading or video clip could compare to our field trips to Turkey Creek's homes and church, or to class visitors whose passion and investment in the issue were infectious.

Final Projects: Research and Action

I asked students to choose a final project within the themes of the land, the culture, or the politics of Turkey Creek. My only requirement was that their project should have both research and action components. I needed a two- to three-page written research paper and a physical product or activity. So, for example, if students created photo essays, they would need to find a place to show them. When some students chose to focus on Turkey Creek's edible plants—the wild blueberries we picked from a bush inspired them—they documented their

research as well as harvesting and preparing the plants. Some chose papers, others presentations, still others, like Antonio, pursued the arts and crafts of Turkey Creek.

After students chose a particular topic or question, we made a chart that helped keep their projects on track. Each group's project was different. I devoted one wall of my classroom to the groups' research, interviews, contacts, and daily activity.

Several groups invited guests into the school and recorded their meetings, which now form an audio/video library other students can use. Julianne's group decided to study alternate routes for the city's proposed connector road—planned to link the port to the interstate at great cost to the low-income communities between the port and I-10. An environmental planner presented the city's plans. The proposed four-lane limited access highway (think 18-wheelers) would wind around low-income neighborhoods and an elementary school, and required the filling of scarce wetlands, which would increase flooding downstream at Turkey Creek. After tal-



Come Hell or High Water

Come Hell or High Water: The Battle for Turkey Creek is an intimate portrait of a community's struggle for survival. We follow Boston teacher Derrick Evans, who moves back to his Mississippi home after his community's ancestral graves are bulldozed to make way for Gulfport's "development." For years, Evans and longtime residents of this historic African American community resist powerful corporate interests and the politicians who do their bidding. And

they survive the ravages of Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil catastrophe. This is the perfect classroom resource to introduce concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice. It's one of those small films that tells a gigantic story—about community, resilience, resistance, and hope.

Directed by Leah Mahan / 56 min. / www.turkeycreekproject.org

— Bill Bigelow

lying the costs of such a plan—blight, noise and air pollution, and downstream flooding—and comparing that to cheaper plans with far less environmental cost, Julianne was beside herself, demanding, "Where do these people live? It's just stupid. I bet they don't send their kids to the school that's going to be right next to an interstate. It's obviously a bad plan. I'm serious, I'm going to their houses."

Although the city council members and mayor were spared harassment, my students were beginning to take the perspectives of the Turkey Creek community as their own.

I asked my students to identify common themes in our research. One theme emerged clearly: To my students, Turkey Creek was a case of environmental injustice in which both environmental concerns and the residents of an historic African American community were being sacrificed in the name of development. Steven could not believe that "Beauvoir [Jefferson Davis' home overlooking the sound] has been rebuilt with a new library while this place is being wiped out."

We traced the logic of economic development: poor people buy low-lying land because, being prone to flooding, it is cheapest. Gulfport, with the Gulf of Mexico to its south, could only grow northward. The Turkey Creek watershed encompasses north Gulfport. For "development," the wetlands had to be filled in.

"Beauvoir [Jefferson Davis' home overlooking the sound] has been rebuilt with a new library while this place is being wiped out."

This would degrade Turkey Creek and lead to flooding in communities downstream but would create taxable real estate for city coffers and—supposedly—jobs for all.

Just prior to our study of Turkey Creek, my students had spent two weeks making audio documentaries about how status and power operate in our high school by observing, interviewing, and surveying their peers in the cafeteria. Reading excerpts from Murray Milner

Jr.'s *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids* helped some of them see that power and status are still blue-chip commodities in high school. But most were uncritical, arguing that they cohabitated peacefully in a post-*Breakfast Club*, status-blind world. After seeing the unequal distribution of power in our city, my students became more keen to see it in their school. Kendal's observations in particular factored into our discussions regarding power and status in Gulfport:

People keep saying, "That's just how things are." I don't accept that. When you see the cafeteria you see mostly well-to-do white kids in the middle with the black kids kind of milling about on the walls. How can you ignore that we have a white-dominated past that is still visible here? Yeah, it's "how things are" but that doesn't make it right.

I played this section of her audio documentary back to my students and asked, "Does this apply to Gulfport?" The consensus was a resounding "yes." Beverly added, "Turkey Creek is definitely against the wall."

Such conclusions seemed warranted when my students asked incoming

mayor Billy Hewes whether rich people deserve to be rich or whether the poor deserve their lot. He did "not like the tone of the question," and went on to admonish the offending student, saying that true wealth lies in having health and a family. Kendal later confirmed through her research that "many healthy families in Turkey Creek and the North Gulfport watershed area nevertheless

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know that they are not rich and suffer from poverty.”

For students like Kendal, a young African American woman, this project was an opportunity to put research, observations, and feelings into one package. She would later say that these projects in combination helped her understand that inequalities exist, how they have come to be, and that a more equitable society is possible. She concluded:

I saw that who had power and who doesn't depends on the history of the place. That doesn't mean blaming stuff on slavery or “The Man.” It just shows our actions matter and make up what history is.

Connecting to the Community

To conclude our study, I asked my students to present their projects to the class. Although many projects focused on history, power, and status, others celebrated the Turkey Creek community, its unique culture and natural beauty. Their final products were varied and rich.

For their comparison of two plans for the connector road, Julianne, Samantha, and Shelby researched eminent domain cases and spent hours with stakeholders, poring over maps and documents. They then made their own proposal. For future reference, they also created an issue profile guide that summarized the statements and viewpoints of everyone they researched or interviewed.

Steven and Beverly designed a community garden, wrote two grants for seeds and materials, and created an annual to-do calendar that covers gardening from planting to composting. They connected the school with the community by writing a proposal that was approved by the Mt. Pleasant Methodist Church, which owns the garden property.

Cecilia and Rileigh created photo essays. Some of the photos will hang in

Mt. Pleasant Methodist Church's fellowship hall.

Philip and Avery created an historical map, using GPS as residents walked them through the area, pointing out where businesses used to flourish. This required them to spend much time with

The asphalt, concrete, and strip malls that rise above what were Turkey Creek's wetlands represent historical moments in which leaders made decisions that had great social and environmental impact.

residents during and after school. Pierce concluded: “These people are all pretty much a family, and it's pretty amazing that they are still having to fight to keep that place the way it is now. I truly feel that if we keep this project up we can help them out even more.”

Emily made a meal using native plants, berries, and fish culled from the creek and its banks (baked mullet, dandelion salad, and blackberries) with an accompanying video documentary. I sat amazed as most of my students sampled it: “Not bad. Could use more salt.”

“The Past Is Never Dead.”

After jumping through many procedural hoops, we took our last field trip to Turkey Creek, canoes in tow (trailer and canoes kindly donated for this project by a former outfitter). As my students floated from the cleared banks along the airport into the green canopy of what remains of the historic community, I reassured myself that at the least they had gained an appreciation of the creek's beauty. My hope is that they will be able to better perceive power relationships, see inequitable distributions of power and status, and find ways to counter racist historical legacies. From their projects and comments in class, I know that they saw that history has great explanatory value.

The world they inhabit is the result of human decisions—the landscape and

people are the historical record. As my students peered 6 feet down into what is left of wetland in the Walmart parking lot, they got a 50-square-yard glimpse of what the land was 20 years ago, and a huge look at what it has become. The asphalt, concrete, and strip malls that rise

above what were Turkey Creek's wetlands represent historical moments in which leaders made decisions that had great social and environmental impacts.

We often talk of “bringing history to life,” as though it ever died. My students realized, as William Faulkner famously put it, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” I am reassured that my students stand a better chance than previous leaders in countering a history that makes economic “progress” at the expense of the least powerful and most vulnerable. ■

RESOURCES

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