



HART Program
Houston Action Research Team
Engaged Research Opportunity
Fall 2021

Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site, Main House Redesign

This project will support the Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site (VHP) by crafting interpretive exhibit plans that contribute to the on-going redesign of the plantation's Main House. This project follows a spring 2021 HART project that conducted research and crafted written recommendations for this redesign. Public history has an important and vital role in communicating stories about the past to people in the present and this project strives to continue to assist heritage professionals in their responsibility to constantly (re)evaluate how historical knowledge is disseminated in public spaces.

Varner Hogg was a 19th-century sugarcane plantation in Brazoria County. Throughout the 19th century, dozens of enslaved Africans lived on the plantation and worked the land and sugar mill; after emancipation, convict laborers were used at the plantation. The story of the plantation is often told through its owners--from its original land grant recipient-owner Martin Varner, to Columbus Patton and his family who built a significant sugarcane enterprise, to its transfer of ownership to former Texas Governor James Stephen Hogg's family in the 20th century.

The staff at VHP seek to re-interpret the Main House to upend past, 'traditional' conceptualizations of how and what plantation-era houses typically convey to the public. Specifically, they seek to better situate and interpret the history of enslaved people and convict laborers at the site, and to provide a way to approach the difficult and challenging narratives of captive labor at the site. While other exhibit spaces have undergone periodic updates, interpretation at the Main House, which currently serves as a house museum displaying antiques and furniture, has largely stayed the same since the 1960s. Recommendations are open to innovative and creative ideas but the redesign plan should focus on helping VHP in its ongoing efforts to decenter historical narratives that focus primarily on the white, owner experience and move toward a more inclusive and accessible approach to public history interpretation that acknowledges other periods, voices, and experiences.

During the Fall semester of 2021, this Houston Action Research Team will:

- Consider recommendations made in the written plan by a previous HART team.
- Represent interpretative themes that contribute to and support a more regional understanding of historical development in Brazoria County.
- Demonstrate how redesign can effectively target audiences of all ages.
- Analyze and incorporate any new data collected by VHP site staff regarding the visitor experience to inform recommendations. Examples of such data include visitor comment

cards/surveys, public forums, and listening sessions/roundtables with descendant groups and community members.

- Visit VHP a number of times throughout the semester.
- Recommend examples of objects, documents, or other materials that may be used for display in exhibits.
- Write sample text for exhibits.
- Create mock-ups of potential exhibits using computer drawing software for specific spaces in the Main House.
- Identify how technology might be integrated into the Main House both for interpretation and accessibility.
- Complete a written report and oral presentation of recommended plans to VHP.

This engaged research opportunity is available to Rice undergraduate students for Fall of 2021. An interdisciplinary team of four students, each of whom will bring different, but equally important, skills, knowledge, and experiences, will undertake this project. Team members will each work approximately 10 hours per week on this project between August 23rd and December 3rd under the guidance of Dr. Molly Morgan (Anthropology) and CCL staff and will receive \$10/hour for their project work. Work time will be flexible, although team members must attend weekly meetings and must coordinate time to work with other team members on the project as needed. Undergraduate students from **all fields of study** with interests and/or skills in at least some of the following areas are encouraged to apply:

Anthropology, history, anti-racism, museum study, art history, professional writing, public presentations, teamwork, community engagement

APPLICATIONS ARE DUE: Sunday June 6, 2021 at 11:59pm cst
To inquire or apply contact Dr. Jessica Khalaf, jkhalaf@rice.edu
For more about Rice's HART Program, visit: <http://ccl.rice.edu/hart>