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Plant explosions rock Port Neches

Just days after EPA safety rollback, SE Texas town awakens to inferno

By Kaitlin Bain and Jacob Dick
STAFF WRITERS

Two explosions over a span of 13 hours rocked a Port Neches chemical plant on Wednesday, injuring workers and a few residents, damaging homes and businesses, and prompting a series of mandatory evacuations and a 10 p.m. curfew enforced by state law enforcement officers dispatched by the governor.

The first blast shook Mid-County residents from their beds around 1 a.m. when a processing unit at the Houston-based Texas Petrochemicals Group facility exploded. Three workers were treated at hospitals, along with at least five others sprayed by shattered glass or debris. None of the injuries appear to have been serious, plant and local emergency officials said.

As far away as Port Arthur, people spent hours

Blasts continues on A14

Kim Brent / Staff photographer

Three workers were injured early Wednesday in a massive explosion at the TPC plant in Port Neches.

Houston-based TPC Group has spotty environmental record.
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Time again plays in fortune's favor as an even worse disaster is averted

By Jacob Dick, Perla Trevizo and Matt Dempsey
STAFF WRITERS

Wilma Shahan was asleep when the window above her bed blew in, showering her with glass.

"I thought a car ran into the house," she said on Wednesday, a few hours after the dead-of-night fireball in Port Neches. "It was a loud explosion, so loud it busted my hearing aids."

Still, it was just a close call for the Shahans and an estimated 38,000 others who live within a 3-mile radius of the plant. Three schools, two churches and a library are within a mile. Thirty percent of residents are 17 or younger. Had the first blast occurred at, say, 1 p.m. instead of 1 a.m., many more folks would have been in harm's way.

Roger Wallace's granddaughter might have been playing with her toys, which he kept in the utility

Close call continues on A15

"Y'all safe 'til next year."

Renee Hooper, reluctant executor — but not executioner — of which turkey will make for the family dinner

Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

Renee Hooper's bourbon red turkeys, Big Daddy and Little Man, await their fate in Hempstead.

For Thanksgiving, it's a fowl choice for Mrs. Hooper

Which turkey will be the feast centerpiece? Will it be Kevin? Little Man?

By Emily Foxhall
STAFF WRITER

WALLER COUNTY – Renee Hooper sat on her porch the morning before Thanksgiving, trying to ignore what was happening in her yard.

She normally would have sipped her coffee there, chatting with her four favorite turkeys as they serenaded her with gobbles.

But she didn't want to say goodbye. It had been up to her to choose which one they'd take to her brother's house in Wallis for their Thanksgiving meal.

They had eight turkeys total. Her favorite four were the right age, the right size, to feed the family.

Renee, 52, had been losing sleep, knowing one was going to be killed.

She was captivated by their first turkey, Bronzeson, with his shiny black back feathers, his patterned brown tail. He was beautiful, she said.

"Dad says he's going to be beautiful in the oven," her 12-year-old son Danny quipped.

They got more turkeys not long after buying him: Big Daddy, Little Man and Mama, who kept to herself. And Kevin.

She'd known one of them would probably have to go.

But still.

Her husband, Johnnie, 60, thought she might not be able

Turkey continues on A12

Voting centers are a hit in Harris Co.

Half of voters utilized new option to cast outside precincts

By Mike Morris
STAFF WRITER

Half of Harris County voters who turned out Nov. 5 cast ballots outside of their home polling places, taking advantage of a new program that lets citizens vote at any Election Day polling place rather than only their assigned precincts.

The move to "voting centers" was a key plank in Harris County Clerk Diane Trautman's campaign for the office last year, and this month's election was the first time it was used on a wide scale.

Nearly 17 percent of the county's 2.3 million registered voters cast ballots earlier this month, far more than the 4 percent turnout last May in a trial run of the voting-center approach, which Trautman's office calls "Vote Your Way."

Prior to last May, Harris County residents could cast ballots at any one of dozens of locations during early voting but were required to visit polls in their home precincts on Election Day.

Trautman said the benefits of the change are clear. In November 2018, she said, 2,500 voters showed up at polling places other than their assigned precincts on Election Day and had to cast provisional ballots that likely were not counted.

"This year there was no wrong location," said Trautman, a Dem-

Voting continues on A10

A new framework for talking history

Reopening of historic Kellum-Noble House includes slavery topic

By Diane Cowen
STAFF WRITER

When the Heritage Society reopens the historic Kellum-Noble House this week, it will not only give visitors access to the city's oldest surviving structure again, but also will address a topic that many Southern house museums have been uncomfortable with: slavery.

The Kellum-Noble House – the city's oldest structure still on its original foundation – closed in 2014 for extensive repairs that will total $2.3 million when the porches are completed.

When touring the centerpiece of Sam Houston Park's collection of historic homes, guests will hear about more than the home's owners, the Kellums and the Nobles. Docents will discuss the slaves who lived and worked there.

"The Heritage Society has skirted around a few of the more uncomfortable facts about the house," Heritage Society curator Ginger Berni said. "As a historian, I believe it's important to speak to those facts, and they are that the Kellums had slaves. This was well before the Civil War. (Nathaniel Kellum) had industries that he operated, and he had white immigrant workers as well as slaves in his brickyard."

The slaves were sometimes contracted out to others who needed their labor.

House continues on A12

Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

The Kellum-Noble House at Sam Houston Park in downtown Houston, built in 1847, was closed in 2014 for extensive repairs.

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TURKEY

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to do it. He'd eyed the frozen turkeys at the grocery store just in case.

But she'd given him a name and, the night before, a nod.

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It is a ritual all over the Houston area ahead of the holiday, among farmers and hobbyists alike. Turkey "processing," some call it. Others are more sentimental.

The Hoopers had eaten rabbits they raised, and chickens.

But the turkeys liked her. They puffed up their feathers around her, showing off. They defended against strangers such as the electrician.

They followed her together like little clouds around the 20-acre Waller County property where they live with a whole array of animals – dogs, chickens, pigs, ducks, horses, cows, a tortoise.

The birds pecked at the window if she was in the dining room. When she talked to them, they gobbled back. Sometimes one jumped in the side-by-side utility vehicle with her to ride around.

How could she pick one to kill?

Bronzeson had been the start of it all. She found him on Craigslist, maybe a year and a half ago and they drove to get him near Conroe. It was clear by the time they got home that he would be a pet, not dinner.

"Do Little Man," her 13-year-old daughter, Haley, suggested in the yard Tuesday evening, where, presumably, the birds couldn't understand what she said. "Or Kevin."

"No, not Kevin," Renee said.

"He doesn't show anything," Haley argued, pointing out how he rarely puffed up his feathers.

"He does for me," she said.

Photos by Elizabeth Conley / Staff photographer

Alas, Little Man, a bourbon red turkey with a sweet disposition, is carried to his fate by Johnnie Hooper after being chosen to be on the family's Thanksgiving table.

Renee Hooper and her daughter, Haley, watch the remaining three turkeys strut and gobble around the yard.

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Here was the breakdown: Big Daddy was dominant. He circled and rubbed against Renee.

Little Man was sweet. She gave him medicine by mouth and cuddled him when he was sick.

Bronzeson was quiet and liked to show off his feathers.

Kevin, not yet fully accepted by the others, went about life largely unpuffed.

In the choice of who to eat, working against Big Daddy and Little Man was the fact both were bourbon red turkeys, their feathers matching the auburn color of Renee's hair.

Bronzeson was a Narragansett, and Kevin a blue slate.

"Y'all coming?" Renee called to the birds Tuesday night as she went to feed the animals.

The poultry made their little puffing noises and plodded behind.

Johnnie, her husband, drank a beer. He didn't see a chance of getting Big Daddy or Bronzeson on the Thanksgiving table.

He pointed at Little Man.

"That one," he said. "I've got a chance."

"We're getting one of those right?" he asked about the ever-present turkey clan of four.

Renee gave a nod.

"That's the best you're going to get," she said. "Just a little bob of the head."

□ □ □

Haley crouched and caught Little Man.

Johnnie, who works in oil field sales, picked him up by the feet. He was heavier than expected.

"You going inside?" Haley asked her mom, who hurried in the front door.

Johnnie slipped the bird's head into the hole in the bucket attached to the tree. Little Man's feet stuck out of the top.

Minutes passed. From inside the house, Renee heard nothing.

Haley came inside to keep her mom company and then hollered to her dad: "Are you done?"

"Well, yeah," her dad replied.

Renee came out and flipped her husband, well, the bird.

She squatted next to Bronzeson, Kevin and Big Daddy and smiled.

Then she walked over to where her husband plucked Little Man's feathers, loosened by the hot water.

Her remaining birds, as usual, shadowed her.

"Y'all safe 'til next year," she told them.

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HOUSE

From page A1

House museums have traditionally celebrated an individual or historic location, Berni said, citing Mount Vernon, the Virginia home of our first president, George Washington.

"They saved his home because of him and preserved it and celebrated him," she said, "but over the years they started to talk about all of the other people who lived there, including slaves, which gives you a more accurate picture of what that house and location represents. It is happening all over the country that historians are taking a second look at properties and trying to be more complete about the picture and the history they present."

Kellum moved to a fledgling Houston in 1839 just a couple of years after the city itself was founded. He opened a lumber and brickyard, and in 1847 built what was likely the grandest home in the city, an L-shaped masonry structure whose bricks were made of mud from the banks of Buffalo Bayou.

After a couple of years, Kellum shut down his businesses and moved to Grimes County and took his family and slaves with him. Eventually, Abram and Zerviah Noble, a widow and widower who married and blended their families, bought the home and its 13 acres.

The Nobles came with their own group of slaves, using them as collateral when they bought the home, so their names were listed in the deed and property transactions: Frank, 36; Willis, 26; "Doc" or Ambrose, 28; Mary, 22, and her children, Sam, 3, and Jake, 2. Harriet, 14, was listed as "also a child of Mary." The slaves' names will appear on a large plaque in the house, a permanent reminder that their own story is intertwined with the story of the home and its owners.

Zerviah was from a wealthy Connecticut family, so when the Nobles' marriage dissolved more than a decade later, she and her daughter from her first marriage kept the home and land and some of their slaves. The divorce documents show that the couple fought over one slave, a boy named George.

Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

When touring the Kellum-Noble home, guests will not only hear about the home's owners but also will learn about the slaves who lived and worked there.

Broadening history

Daina Ramey Berry is the associate dean of Graduate Education Transformation and the Oliver H. Radkey Regents professor of History at the University of Texas. Part of her work – with UT colleagues Anthony L. Brown and Keffrelyn D. Brown – is the Teaching Texas Slavery Project, launched in late 2018 to work with schools and others to broaden the scope of the history we learn about where we live.

She noted that many Southern museums and house museums are just starting to address slavery. In mid-2018, Monticello, the home of founding father Thomas Jefferson opened a room devoted to Sally Hemings after years of grappling with how to talk about Jefferson's relationship with the enslaved woman who was 30 years his junior and the mother of several of his children.

At Montpelier, the home of founding father James Madison and his wife, Dolley, the lives of slaves who served three generations have been talked about for a while, but a new permanent exhibition, "The Mere Distinction of Color," opened in June 2017 and elevated the conversation, said Elizabeth Chew, Montpelier's executive vice president and chief curator. The Montpelier exhibit has earned six significant national history awards and numerous calls from other museum curators with questions about how they, too, can tell a more thorough story.

It's important to include the topic of slavery and the stories of enslaved people, Berry said, if we want an accurate story of how our society and culture has evolved.

"A number of people will be extremely uncomfortable and say this is in the past and we shouldn't have these conversations, but they inform where we are and where we have been," she said.

"If you exclude the story of people who were instrumental in the lives of the people at the house, then you won't understand their life. We know the Kellums owned slaves, and the way the house functioned revolved around the enslaved people serving them."

Houston Chronicle file photo

In 1954, the city slated the Kellum-Noble House for demolition, but it was spared and underwent restoration work in 1956.

Renovation setbacks

Work on the Kellum-Noble House took much longer than expected, in part due to complications of Hurricane Harvey. The house itself didn't flood, but flooding elsewhere caused a shortage of labor and materials, which drove up the cost of both, said David Bucek of Stern and Bucek Architects, who worked on the restoration work.

An additional wrinkle came earlier this year when financial struggles forced the Heritage Society to cut its full-time staff to part time, relying on volunteers to keep the park open.

The group's staff and board started raising money in 2013, and in the summer of 2014, the furnishings in the house were removed so that work could begin.

Bucek, who worked on the restoration of NASA's original Mission Control and shared in the National Trust for Historic Preservation President's Award that it earned, said the current work at the Kellum-Noble House was based in part on Historic American Buildings Survey drawings created during the Great Depression. The government created jobs for architects and draftsmen who were tasked with creating simple but thorough drawings of historic buildings that would then be stored in the Library of Congress. As a pre-Civil War building, the Kellum-Noble House was included and the resulting structural drawings were the earliest official documents the Heritage Society could find as they launched their most recent work.

One example is the exterior color of the home, painted white with black shutters, as shown in the HABS drawings.

Steel rods were inserted into the structure to keep it from bowing out, and the foundation repair – filling in a crawl space – virtually turned into an archaeological dig that uncovered thousands of artifacts, from old German marbles to chalk and slate used by students.

When they started finding items underneath the house, Bucek said, they called in the Houston Archaeological Society to help.

"As we were removing the dirt we just started finding things, little pieces that looked important," Berni said. "I'm not a trained archaeologist, but I can recognize a piece of pottery that looks fancy and say, 'Wait a minute.'"

"One of the neatest things we found was a piece of transferware that was popular in the mid-1800s. One pattern, Texian Campaign, was produced in England to honor the Texas Republic," Berni said.

A city park

When the Nobles first moved in, Zerviah Noble taught classes in English, music and painting and by 1871 she operated the city's first public school with a few dozen students.

She died in 1894, the City of Houston bought the property in 1899 and created the city's first public park. For a short time the site even had a zoo, with a variety of small animals like opossums, geese, ducks and even a pair of wolves named King and Queen, Berni said. Originally it was called City Park, but the downtown site has been called Sam Houston Park since the start of the 20th century. For a time, it housed the city's park department offices.

Over time, nine other buildings were moved to Sam Houston, including the 1868 Pillot House, the 1870 Yates House, the 1891 St. John Church, a Fourth Ward Cottage and a structure they call the Old Place, a rough-hewn cedar home built in 1823 on the banks of Clear Creek and moved to the park in 1973 to be restored.

By the 1950s, though, the Kellum-Noble was crumbling under its own weight, a victim of the climate and shifting soil, Bucek said.

Historic preservationists Faith Bybee and Marie Phelps, as well as architect Harvin C. Moore founded The Heritage Society in 1954 to preserve the Kellum-Noble House. Charter members included other notable names: Ima Hogg, Birdsall P. Briscoe and Kenneth Franzheim.

Their aim grew over time, and a subcommittee left to create a new entity, what is today Preservation Houston, to work on behalf of preservation issues throughout the city.

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