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Austin Midnight Assassin

Four years before Jack the Ripper, Austin experienced a series of horrific axe murders (Corcoran, 2000; Hollandsworth, 2000; Humphrey, 1982-1983; Plohetski, 2004; Saylor, 2000). From New Year's Eve 1884 to Christmas Eve 1885, eight people were killed in the Texas capital city of 23,000. The victims were predominantly black females, cooks and maids taken from their homes at night and "outraged" (to use the newspaper vernacular of the time). The serial killer operated with impunity, not so surprising considering that at any one time there were only four police officers on duty in the city. The media used monikers such as the Austin Ripper, the Austin Axe Murderer, and the Austin Servant Girl Annihilator.¹ Like his later and more famous Whitechapel cousin, the Austin murderer was never caught and the case remains unsolved.

Figure 15.18 shows an 1885 map of Austin. The city was confined to the north bank of the undammed Colorado River, its built landscape limited to present-day downtown. The Texas Capitol and the University of Texas at Austin are respectively marked as State House and College Hill.

¹ This name was given to the killer by the writer O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), a resident of Austin at the time of the murders.



Figure 15.18. Austin, Texas, 1885 (courtesy Texas State Library and Archives Commission).

*Bloody Work. A Fearful Midnight Murder on West Pecan – Mystery and Crime.*²

The first attack occurred on Wednesday morning, early New Year's Eve, December 31, 1884, at 901 West Pecan (now Sixth) Street. Mollie Smith, a mulatto female, worked for W. K. Hall, and lived in a small apartment at the rear of his house just back of the kitchen. Sometime between 3 am and 4 am she was dragged outside, assaulted, and murdered with an axe. She was found behind a small outhouse, 50 steps from the room where she slept. Her boyfriend, Walter Spencer, was also attacked and injured. There was a trail of bare footprints in the fresh snow that led east from the murder scene to Shoal Creek, a block away.

The Foul Fiends.... Another Deed of Deviltry in the Crimson Catalogue of Crime.

The next victim was Eliza Shelly, a black female, who lived in a small one-room cabin on the property of Dr. L. B. Johnson, 302 East Cypress (now Third) Street, at San Jacinto Boulevard. The Central Railway line ran in front of the house. Shelly's cabin was some 40 or 50 steps to the rear of Dr. Johnson's neat cottage, separated by a high fence with a connecting gate. An alley ran behind the cabin. Around 6 am, Thursday, May 7, 1885, Shelly was found murdered in her home, her head nearly cleaved in two. The weapon used was possibly a hatchet. Bare footprints were found at the crime scene.

More Butchery. Another Colored Woman Terribly Stabbed by an Unknown Fiend.... When Will It End?

Irene Cross, another black female, was attacked on Saturday, May 23, 1885, shortly after midnight. She lived in Whittman's yard, 1737 San Jacinto Boulevard, at Linden (now Seventeenth) Street, across from Scholz's Beer Garden. The murder weapon was apparently a knife. The victim's arm was nearly chopped in two, and her head was cut as if she had been scalped. Her nephew claimed to have seen the assailant. "He said that the intruder was a 'big, chunky negro man, barefooted and with his pants rolled up.' He had on a brown hat and a ragged coat."

An Atrocious Crime.... One of the Most Horrible Occurrences on Record.

The fourth victim was Mary Ramey, an 11-year-old black girl who lived with her mother, Rebecca Ramey, in the kitchen of the premises of V. O. Weed, 300 East Cedar (now Fourth) Street, at San Jacinto Boulevard. Sometime between 4 am and 5 am on Sunday, August 30, 1885, the killer dragged Mary from the kitchen where she was sleeping with her mother to a washhouse outside. Rebecca had been "sandbagged" (knocked unconscious). Mary was "ravished," and an iron pin driven through her ear into her brain. The ground was damp, and the killer's bare footprints could easily be seen. They went in and out of the backyard, through the alley gate, and into the alley. Bloodhounds followed the trail, which ended at some nearby stables.

² The subheadings and quotations in this section are from the *Austin Statesman* and the *Austin Daily Statesman*.

Slain Servants. Monday Morning's Horrible Butchery.

On Monday morning, September 28, 1885, a double murder occurred. Gracie Vance and Orange Washington lived common law in a small wooden shanty at 2408 West San Marcos (now Guadalupe) Street, catty-corner from the new University of Texas campus. Between 1 am and 2 am, the killer entered the shanty and hit Washington on the skull with an axe, killing him; he was the only male victim in the series. Vance was dragged 75 yards from her room to just back of some stables where she was raped and murdered, "her head almost beaten into a jelly." Two other women, Lucinda Boddy and Patsie Gibson, asleep in the shanty at the time, were also attacked and injured. Vance, Washington, Boddy, and Gibson were all black. A man was seen running toward the black part of town. Tracks from the crime scene disappeared in a creek.

The Demons Have Transferred Their Thirst for Blood to White People!

Austin's citizens were shocked by the events of Christmas Eve 1885. The killer struck twice in one night, and for the first time his victims were white. Sometime before 11:30 pm on Thursday, December 24, 1885, Susan Hancock, "one of the most refined ladies in Austin," was dragged out of her house at 203 East Water (now First) Street, in the neighborhood of Germantown. She was found dead in the backyard by her husband, William H. Hancock, her head split open by an axe.

The Monsters in Human Shape Who Have Been Doing the Devil's Bidding.

An hour later, 12:30 am Friday morning, December 25, 1885, Eula Phillips became the second victim of the night. Her nude body was found outside her home, a "dozen squares away" (0.7 miles, a 15-minute walk). Phillips lived at 302 West Hickory (now Eighth) Street, at Lavaca Street, on the same property as the parents of her husband, James Phillips, Jr. Her forehead had been bashed in with the butt end of an axe. James was also attacked and injured, though the couple's baby boy was not harmed. A bloody trail showed Eula was dragged from her house onto the gallery, through the backyard, across another gallery, which connected her house with her husband's parents' house, then into a second backyard to some outbuildings. She "had been outraged and most brutally maltreated." Tracks led from the crime scene to Shoal Creek.

Figure 15.19 shows the locations of the Midnight Assassin's eight attacks marked with red circles. Shoal Creek is the wavy gray line on the lower left.

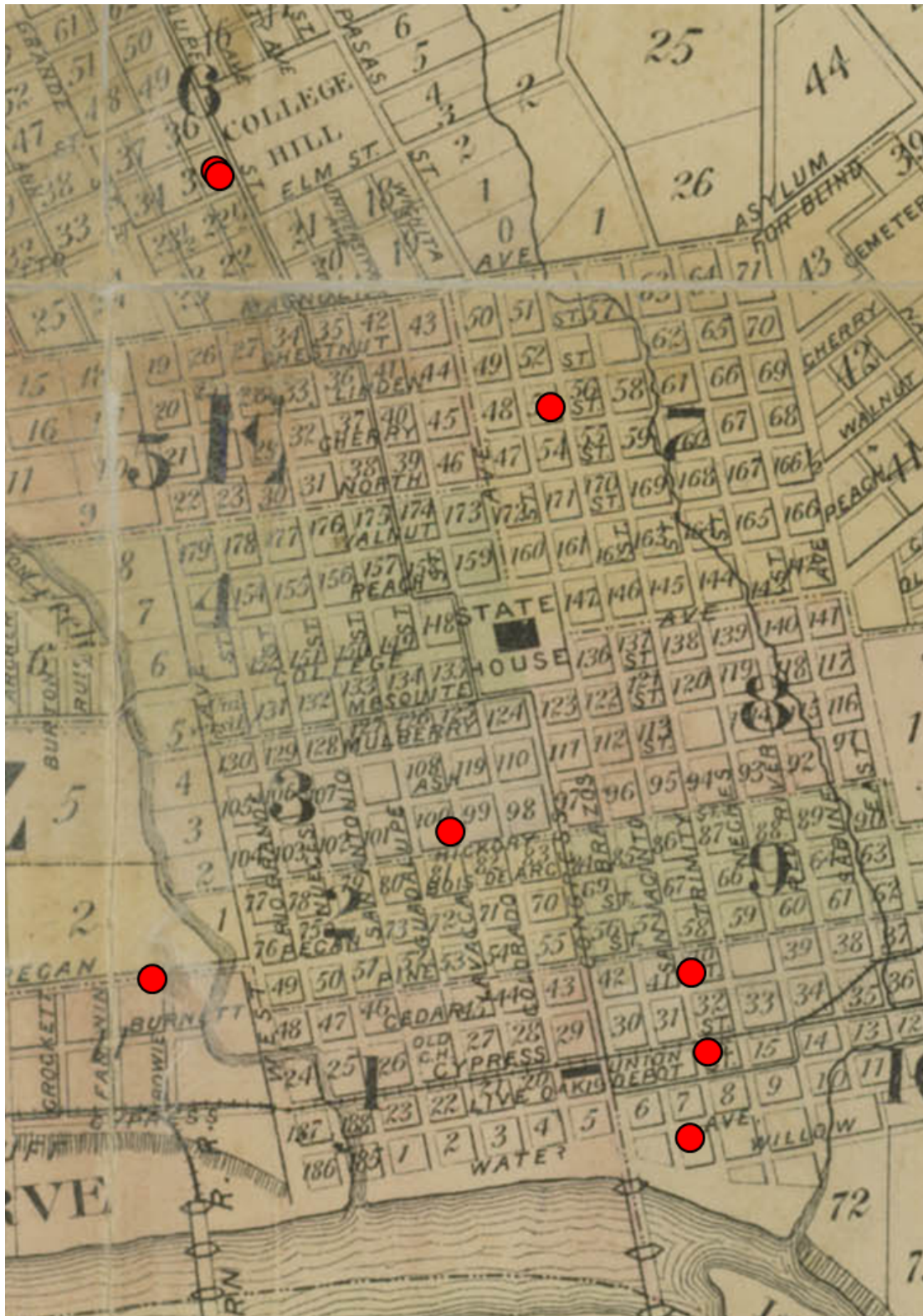


Figure 15.19. Austin Midnight Assassin Murder Sites (base map courtesy Texas State Library and Archives Commission).

The killer crossed racial lines in a former Confederate state just 20 years after the Civil War. Two attacks in the same night and both against white women – predictably, the community reacted with fear and outrage. A half-dozen black men were arrested on mere suspicion immediately following these murders. During 1885, a total of 400 people, mainly black men, were arrested and “severely examined” by police. One man was tried but ultimately acquitted.

However, the investigation took an unexpected turn when detectives discovered Eula Phillips had been a “nymph du pave” and one of her customers the favored candidate for governor (Hollandsworth, 2000). She worked at May Tobin’s house of assignation, 103 Congress Avenue. Was the killer a customer? Nearby was Guy Town, a racially mixed district of prostitution, gambling, and saloons. The legal age of consent in Texas at the time was 10 years. Despite an ordinance banning “fandangoes,” the First Ward (as the notorious neighborhood was officially known) hosted city council members, legislators, businessmen, and university students. Figure 15.20 shows the residential patterns of Guy Town sex trade workers at the end of the 19th century.

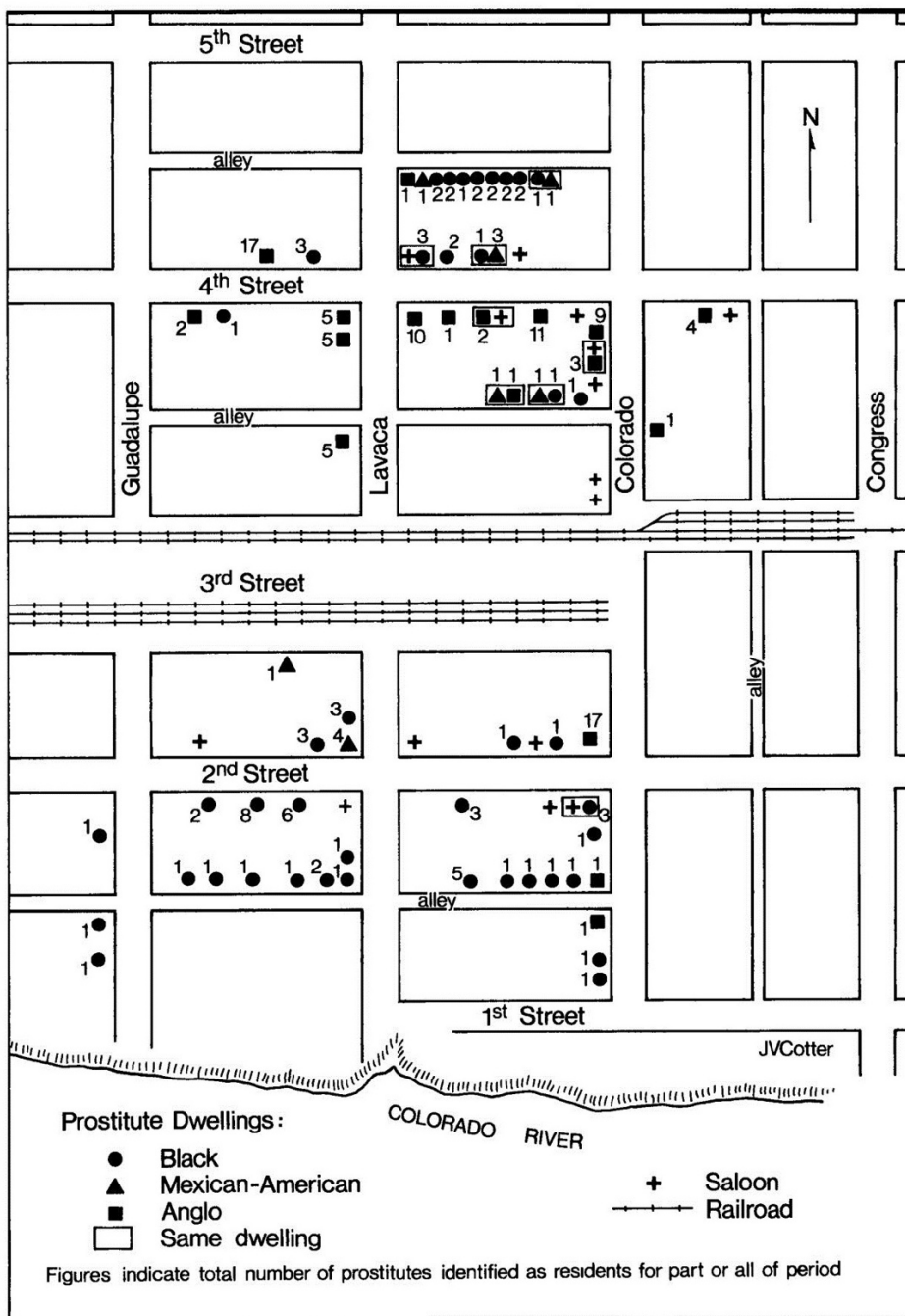


Figure 15.20. Residential Patterns of Prostitutes in Guy Town, July 1897 – June 1900 (courtesy *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*).

The theories of the murders were as varied as they were speculative. Then, just as mysteriously as they began, the attacks stopped. The crimes were never solved and the killer disappeared into history, taking the secret of his identity to the grave.

The Midnight Assassin attacks are now over 130 years old, and the offender is long dead. It is

more a historical than a cold case. While much here will forever remain a mystery, it is interesting to imagine what could have been accomplished given modern forensic and behavioral analysis techniques. One such approach is geographic profiling. What can a geoprofile tell us after so much time? Well, at the least it allows us to reassess what is already known and perhaps may provide a geographic perspective on the cast of characters and places (Estaville, Egan, & Rossmo, 2013; Rossmo, 2017).

While a list of all the suspects investigated by police does not exist, J. R. Galloway, from the University of Texas Libraries, uncovered an intriguing possibility. Nathan Elgin was a 19-year-old African American cook who worked at the Simon and Billeisen restaurant in the Simon Hotel, 609 Congress Avenue, where he also lived (Galloway, 2010). Elgin had grown up in Austin and was known as “a kind of bad citizen” (Hollandsworth, 2016). Shortly after midnight on February 9, 1886, he caused a “tumult” in a Masontown saloon in East Austin when he attacked a girl in a drunken rage. He furiously kicked and beat the young woman, before carrying her outside. In contemporary vernacular, Elgin’s purpose “in dragging her off from the crowd, to a house, several blocks away, is believed to have been for the purpose of outrage, and perhaps murder” (*Austin Daily Statesman*, February 10, 1886; Galloway, 2010).

When police tried to intervene, he cut at them with a knife and struck a violent blow to the head of an officer. Elgin was shot and died two days later (Galloway, 2010). The autopsy report noted his right foot was missing a toe. This apparently matched a bloody footprint found at the murder site of Mary Ramey. Sheriff Hornsby would later testify that “he took a plaster cast of Elgin’s foot after his death, and one toe was missing; his foot corresponded with a bloody track he examined on the Phillips’ porch the morning after her murder” (*Austin Daily Statesman*, June 3, 1887). The sheriff further stated there had been no more mysterious murders following Elgin’s death.

Elgin is arguably the best of the known Midnight Assassin suspects. It should be remembered, however, that he is only one possibility of many; while some facts point toward him, definitive evidence is lacking. There is usually no shortage of strong suspects in serial murder cases – a dangerous and demented individual, “clearly the killer” – that ended up being innocent (at least of those crimes).

Suspect sites in this case include (Galloway, 2010; Hollandsworth, 2016; Saylor, 2000):

1. The Black Elephant Saloon, East Pecan (now Sixth) Street, the most popular black bar in Austin, and a sometimes-focal point for police searches.
2. May Tobin’s brothel, 103 Congress Avenue, where Eula Phillips worked.
3. Guy Town, located roughly between Colorado Avenue on the east and Guadalupe Street on the west, and Live Oak (now Second) Street on the south and Cedar (now Fourth) Street on the north.
4. Pearl House, 221 Congress Avenue. Maurice, a Malay cook employed in 1885 at the Pearl House, disappeared in January 1886, shortly after the last murder. He was thought by some to be the Austin Ripper.
5. Union Depot, 100 block West Cypress (now Third) Street. It is possible the killer worked at the train station or lived outside Austin and traveled into the city by train.
6. Simon Hotel, 609 Congress Avenue, home and work for Nathan Elgin.

Figure 15.21 shows the top 5% of the geopofile, with the six suspect sites marked by blue squares (numbered as above). Interestingly, all these places rank high on the geopofile (with the Union Depot and the Simon Hotel being the highest), with one exception – the Black Elephant Saloon. If geographic profiling was available in 1885, police detectives hunting the Austin Midnight Assassin might have had a different focus (Rossmo, 2017).

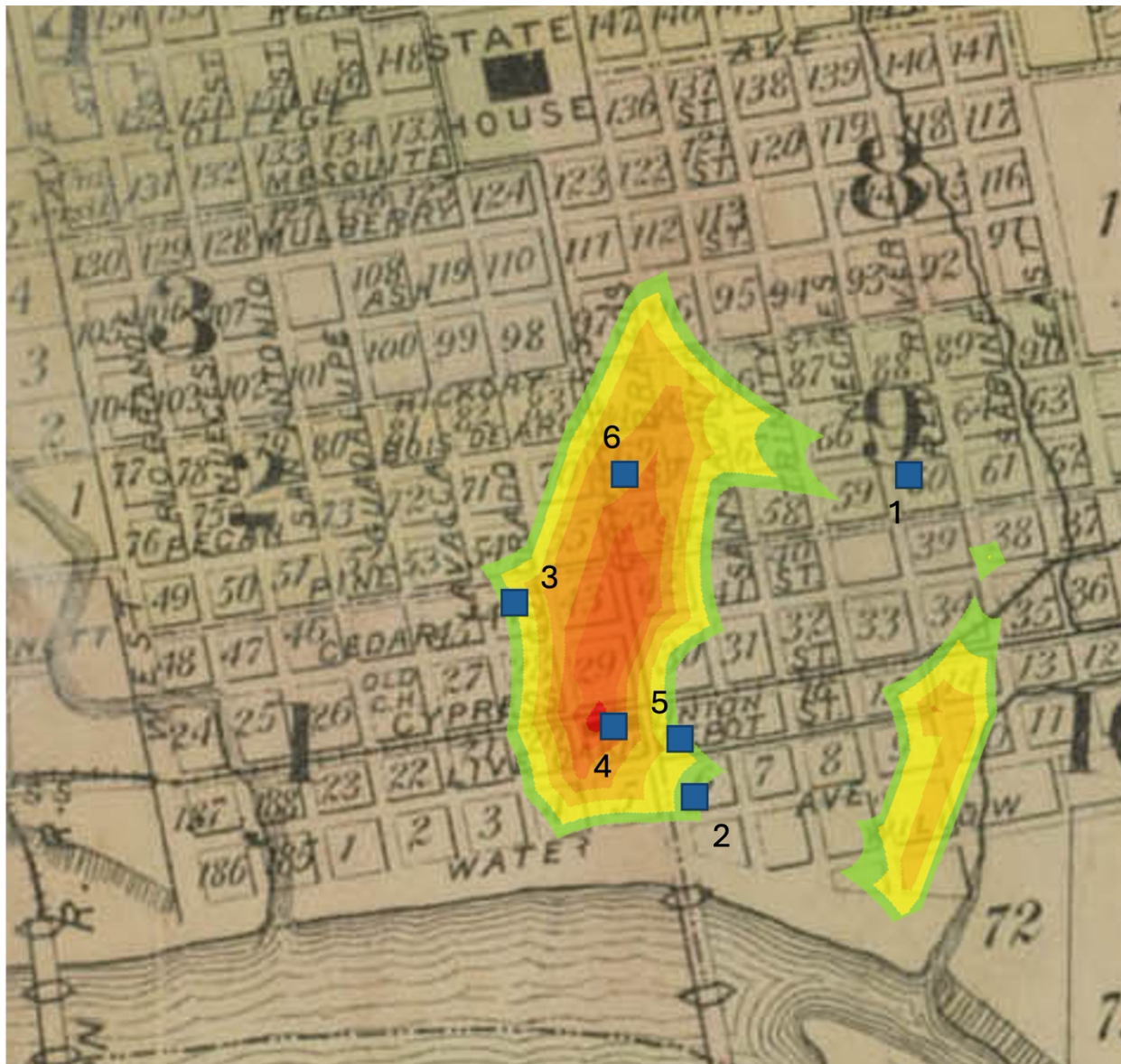


Figure 15.21. Austin Midnight Assassin GeoProfile (top 5%) with Suspect Locations (base map courtesy Texas State Library and Archives Commission).