

TWO WORLDS A MILE APART

A Brief History of the Fourth Ward

By Patricia Pando



Charlotte Baldwin Allen, the wife of Houston founder Augustus Allen and a powerful landowner in her own right, lived in Houston from its earliest days. Some stories credit her with naming the city. From the 1850s when the house was built until her death in 1895, she kept watch on her city from her home at Rusk and Main Streets. In 1929, the Gulf Building (now the J. P. Morgan Chase Building) rose on the site.

Clatter of light rail running down Main Street, cars roaring by, crowds gathering at the crosswalk champing to get on with the day—hectic life fills twenty-first century downtown Houston. But when a Houstonian takes a short stroll from the busy intersection of Congress and Main to nearby Sesquicentennial Park and wanders down the walk to Buffalo Bayou and its spanning bridge, the world changes. On this amazing walk of only a few blocks, 173 years fade away. As the visitor approaches the bridge, she'll hear an 1837-era steamboat whistle (courtesy of the City of Houston) taking her back in time to when the Torrey brothers moved along the bayou looking for a band of Alabama-Coushattas, preparing to set up camp and do some trading.¹

Trading was so good for the Torrey brothers along that stretch of bayou, they decided to stay. In a grove of magnolia trees, they built the first frame house in Houston; at first a trading post but soon purchased by R. D. Taylor. It remained home for Taylor and his family for many years.

Other industrious folks headed for the nascent city founded by brothers John Kirby Allen and Augustus Allen only the year before. The city incorporated in 1837 and welcomed new citizens like Andrew Briscoe, a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence and first judge of Harrisburg County (as Harris County was then known) who erected an impressive two-story home at Main and Prairie.²

The Republic of Texas president, Sam Houston, in a letter to Senator Robert Irion (later the republic's secretary of state) reported that in April, Houston had more than 100 houses and a population of 1,500. The city had new citizens—and more. It was now the capital of the new republic. Construction of the capitol building, appropriately located on Texas Avenue, began in April 1837.³

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On May 4, the Senate and the House convened and elected officers in the still unfinished building. The next day, President Houston received an enthusiastic welcome and addressed the audience of legislators and citizens from a flag-draped podium. Thus began Houston's two glory years as the republic's capital. All too soon, on October 12, 1839, a crowd watched as workers loaded the republic's furniture and records into waiting wagons. The next morning, President Mirabeau Lamar and an entourage of officials rode by the Capitol and saluted as they headed to the new capital of Texas, Austin. Later that afternoon, a sign appeared in a window of the now empty building, "For lease to responsible parties."

A few weeks later the Allen brothers advertised in the *Texas Morning Star*: "The Capitol for Rent—This large and commodious building can now be rented. There is no building in Texas so well or better arranged for public house. It can be had on reasonable terms." Within a month, the capitol building became the Capitol Hotel commencing a rich and continuing chapter in Houston history. This location, first as the Capitol Hotel, and later as the better-known Rice Hotel, welcomed many distinguished guests. Sam Houston was not the only national president to visit. Benjamin Henry Harrison, William Howard Taft, and Franklin D. Roosevelt came calling, as did, of course, Texan Lyndon Johnson. John F. Kennedy enjoyed his last dinner on the evening of November 21, 1963, in the International Suite of the Rice Hotel.⁴

When Houston relinquished the capital of Texas to Austin, the capitol building became the popular Capitol Hotel. In the mid-1850s, many guests arrived by stagecoach. In 1882, a larger, more ornate building replaced it. Today the Rice Lofts, once Jesse Jones' Rice Hotel, is on the site.



In 1839, the same year Houston lost its role as capital, the city adopted the ward system to define its political units—a system that continued until 1905. Congress Street and Main Street arbitrarily divided the four wards; South of Congress and west of Main lay the Fourth Ward, encompassing Market Square and the old capitol.⁵

Recent studies of the Fourth Ward focus on post-Civil War growth along West Dallas (called San Felipe Road at the time) toward Taft. In these studies, the eastern boundary is I-45, the Gulf Freeway. But the Gulf Freeway, the first freeway in Texas, did not appear until the mid-twentieth century. For more than a hundred years, the Fourth Ward was one unbroken stretch from the center of town into its southern and western fringes.⁶

In the early days, most action took place in the thriving center of town; however, early on, one thing was missing. A cemetery. The need for a cemetery became more crucial as the population grew and as yellow fever epidemics swept the young city. Responding to the suddenly critical need, the Allen brothers went to what was then the edge of town on San Felipe Road, now the heart of Fourth Ward, to establish Houston's first cemetery, today known as Founders Cemetery. Quickly it filled. Many early leaders are buried here, including John Kirby Allen. Several markers tell a sad story. Heroes of the Battle of San Jacinto, able to withstand Santa Anna's onslaught, became helpless in the face of yellow fever. They were not alone. Between July and December in 1839, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* reported that 229

people, about sixteen percent of the city's population, succumbed to the plague.⁷

Crowds gathered at the cemetery for more than funerals. S. O. Young, a founder of the *Houston Post*, recalled in his 1913 reminisces of early Houston that on at least three occasions hangings were held in the southeast corner of the property where a grove of trees was known as "Hangman Grove." The first legal hanging in Houston took place here in 1853 when a man named Hyde was executed for killing a traveler whom he robbed. Two other executions, one in 1868 and another about two years later, took place here. Young declared that he was a witness to both. After this, hanging did take place in Houston, but at the jail.⁸

The growth of churches came slowly and less dramatically. From the beginning, citizens participated in a variety of religious activities, frequently meeting in the capitol building. Both the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches organized in the Senate chamber. Church buildings did not appear so swiftly. The Allens donated a half block on Texas between Travis and Milam to the fledgling Methodists for their building. It took six years for the group to organize and build. In 1843, they announced plans for a brick church building on the site. It was the first brick building in the city, and possibly the first in Texas.⁹

At the time the congregation had sixty-eight members; thirty-two of them were African American, slaves of their fellow members. Later these African American members were given a separate building facing Milam, which they

subsequently moved to the corner of Travis and Bell, where it became Trinity Methodist Church. Today the church stands at the corner of Holman and Live Oak in the Third Ward.¹⁰

The brick building served the white congregation until 1883 when the Charles Shearn Memorial Church, as it was then named, erected a building of some elegance topped by a 130 foot tower. Finally, in 1907 members sold the property for \$115,000. They renamed themselves First Methodist Church and moved to the present location at Main and Clay.¹¹

New church neighbors soon joined the Methodists. The Baptists organized their church under the leadership of two women, Mrs. C. M. Fuller and, the appropriately named, Mrs. Piety L. Hadley. Poor in both finances and support, they set off to raise money for a building. In the universal spirit of church women, they organized craft fairs. They once received a mule as a donation for their project. They promptly fattened it up and sold it at a good price at the next fair. They made enough money to purchase lots on the corner of Texas and Travis. The first Baptist church built in Houston rose there and served its congregation until 1883.¹²

Prosperous shops in the Market Square area attracted more entrepreneurs. A preponderance of traffic for the market came in down San Felipe Road bringing merchandise and agricultural products from the fertile land west of the city. Most travelers lived south of Buffalo Bayou. The few coming in from the north used a ferry at the foot of Texas Avenue or the footbridges scattered along the bayou. The Harrisburg ferry provided access to the east. Wagon trains were beginning to arrive from Hempstead, northwest of the city, and the growing number of plantations along the upper Brazos and Colorado Rivers sent their products to the market. And, of course, the travelers and traders returned home along the same routes carrying their purchases and supplies. In 1848, the city responded to this traffic problem with the first bridge to span Buffalo Bayou—the Preston Street Bridge opened the doors of the Fourth Ward and downtown Houston.¹³

"In those years, Market Square was like a perennial county fair. Traders and vendors hawked their goods; women in sunbonnets and homespuns, men wearing steerhide jeans, bargained for choice venison, roasts or wild turkeys. This noisy teeming place was so much the center of Houston that businessmen sought sites for their stores," Francis R. Lubbock, Houston storeowner and rancher, later governor of Texas, recounted in his book, *Six Decades in Texas*.¹⁴

After the close of the Civil War, again, newcomers flooded into the city. Many were newly emancipated African Americans coming in from the outlying plantations to the west of town. Traveling along San Felipe Road, they settled in the city outskirts near Founders Cemetery. Some were able to buy their own homes. Others rented from white landlords. One popularly told story is how a Second Ward resident and former slaveholder offered free lots in the Fourth Ward to his former possessions. The area quickly became predominately, although never entirely, Black. Known as Freedmen's Town, it remains the heart of today's Fourth Ward.¹⁵



Sung and unsung Texas heroes, including John Kirby Allen, lie buried beneath the sheltering oaks of Founders Cemetery on West Dallas in the Fourth Ward. Neighboring historic Beth Israel Cemetery is the oldest Jewish cemetery in the city. The mausoleum, visible on the left, was designed by synagogue member and noted architect Joseph Finger.

Photo by Patricia Pando.



Looking north on Main Street from Lamar, the tower of the First Presbyterian Church is on the left in the Fourth Ward. Across the arbitrary boundary defined by Main Street is the Third Ward. This painting is based on a photograph taken in 1919.

Even before this influx of emigrants, former slave residents of Houston established what would become an important institution not only to Fourth Ward residents but to the city-wide African American community. Early in 1866, months after Texas emancipation, several African Americans met to establish their own Baptist church. The First Baptist Church invited the as-yet homeless congregation for their first service. The twelve members who attended welcomed seven new members who joined by baptism. The new Antioch Missionary Baptist Church later met in a brush arbor on the banks of Buffalo Bayou, and then in a frame structure at Rusk and Bagby. Antioch joined Trinity Methodist in Black church leadership.

The church did more than hold services. Its official history states, “Antioch provided the former slaves with opportunities to learn not only about God, but ministries were provided to help develop educationally, economically and socially.”

The impressive Jack Yates, himself a former slave, who became pastor late in 1868, led most of these endeavors. The church’s Baptist Academy brought basic education opportunities, offering classes in reading, writing, and arithmetic

and also training in trades so that individuals might find jobs or set up businesses for themselves.¹⁶

Yates became a critical leader in the Fourth Ward. He built his own home on Andrews Street in 1870. The building is now in Sam Houston Park. By 1875, the church was looking for a new home. Richard Allen, an active businessman and the first black legislator to represent Harris County, designed a red-brick structure at what is now 500 Clay, the first African American-owned brick structure in the city. The congregation thrived, and in 1890, added a second story giving the church much the appearance it has today as it sits in the shelter of near-by towering skyscrapers and continues to serve its congregation and community.¹⁷

Through the rest of the nineteenth century, Fourth Ward grew even as segregation became more entrenched. In 1870, the first black public school, Gregory Institute, opened on Victor Street, to be followed by others, all with Black teachers instructing the Black students. Houston public schools for white students opened about the same time.¹⁸

Private libraries (for whites) existed from the beginning of the city. Now, time had come for a public library.

The Houston Lyceum, itself closed to women until 1887, working with the Ladies Reading Club and the Women's Club, and with financial support from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, negotiated the construction of an Italian Renaissance structure on the east corner of Travis and McKinney. On March 3, 1904, the Carnegie Library opened its doors to the public—to the white public.



On March 3, 1904, the Carnegie Library, Houston's first public library, opened its doors on the corner of Travis and McKinney. In 1926, the Library moved into the larger Julia Ideson Building at 500 McKinney. The First Presbyterian Church, the site's original owner, repurchased the land.

Andrew Carnegie similarly extended his generosity to Houston's African American community, but later. The Houston Public Library had provided a small but inadequate branch. Community leaders wanted, and got, more. In 1913, the Colored Carnegie Branch of the Houston Public Library on Frederick Street opened its doors.¹⁹

While the Third and Fifth Wards were attracting most new African American residents, the Fourth Ward continued dominant as the center of African American business and professional activity. *The Red Book of Houston*, a survey of "Houston's colored population" published in 1915, gives an extensive listing, covering activities from attorneys to undertakers and wood dealers. The frequent occurrence of San Felipe Road addresses indicates that it continued as the retail and service artery, home to barbershops, furniture and dry goods stores, and two of the three undertakers. Not surprisingly, grocers were more dispersed.

One enterprise was not present on San Felipe Road or in any of the wards other than the Fourth. Professionals. Black professionals gathered to do business in sight of Market Square, primarily in the 400 blocks of Milam and Travis, with some on connecting Prairie. Of the seven physicians including the well-known B. J. Covington, all but one practiced there. C. A. George had his dental office on Milam, while J. L. Cockrell did his drilling on Travis. Lawyers and notaries joined in, as did insurance companies, a contractor and builder, a job-printer/publisher, and several realtors.

A thriving support community prospered as well. Not surprisingly, two druggists did business in the neighborhood. Bayou City Drugstore sat between Dr. Covington and the Bayou City Café. A couple of tailors and several barbers kept the men in trim. Today, these blocks on Milam and Travis lie vacant, shorn even of their buildings, offer-

ing parking for theater patrons as they wait for their next Houston incarnation.²⁰

Market Square is still a gathering place, but as a park, not a teeming market. This original focal point of the Fourth Ward seems a world away from today's Fourth Ward of Freedmen's Town and Gregory School west of I-45 and south of Buffalo Bayou. The distance is only about a mile.

This "old" Fourth Ward, now a part of greater "downtown," continues to bustle and change. Buildings go down. Buildings go up. Buildings change. The Rice Hotel, home to much of Texas history, is now residential—the Rice Lofts. Heritage Plaza, one of the tallest, and certainly, most dramatic skyscrapers in Houston, recently sold for a reported \$325 million, one of the largest sales in downtown real estate history. Another world away indeed.²¹

Only a block or so away from Heritage Plaza, however, these worlds come together under the very shadow of I-45 in Sam Houston Historic Park. There, one of Houston's oldest homes welcomes her transplanted Fourth Ward neighbors. Nathaniel K. Kellum built the house in 1847 for his fifteen-year-old bride, Elmira Cotton, using bricks made on the site. Later, when owned by the Noble family, it housed a school. Today, the historic home, the oldest in Houston occupying its original site, anchors the park. Nearby sits the home of the legendary Jack Yates, moved to the site from its original location on Andrews Street in 1994. In 2002, a Fourth Ward cottage joined the two. It is typical of the more modest homes in the area, an example of a "working man house," perhaps the home of a man who learned his skills under Yates and his school's tutelage.²²

Now, in the twenty-first century this is an ideal place to listen to the traffic on I-45, admire a stunning view of the Houston skyline, and contemplate the two worlds of the Fourth Ward. [QR](#)



Cars hurry south on I-45, the Gulf Freeway, as downtown skyscrapers led by temple-topped Heritage Plaza stand sentry over the other world of Fourth Ward's Freedmen's Town.

Photo by Robert Pando.

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