

# Houston Women in Texas and U.S. History:

## A Note from the Guest Editor of this Issue

by Audrey Crawford

It has been ten years since the 1990 "Women and Texas History: A Conference" published its book of selected papers and invited scholars of Texas women's history to broaden their scope and deepen their analyses. The selected papers from the Conference, published in 1993, feature thirteen Texas scholars and topics as diverse as women actresses, Mexican women workers, housewives in the oil patch, women politicians, and teachers.<sup>1</sup> The anthology continues to be noteworthy because it adds diversity to an area of scholarship still weighted toward studies of the experiences of white pioneer women.

During the subsequent decade, scholarship by and about Texas women has grown. Works by Elizabeth Turner, Judith McArthur, and Elizabeth Enstam explored significant contributions to the development of urban life in Texas by the women's organizations that made up the women's movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These works placed the agenda of Texas women in a national context by relating their activism to the national women's movement that culminated in the successful passage of the federal woman suffrage amendment in 1919.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars examined different aspects of Texas women's lives. Debbie Nathan's 1991 *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border* examined the life situations of Mexican American women in contemporary Texas. Rebecca Sharpless's study of twentieth century farmwomen in Texas and Paula Mitchell Marks' study of women's textile work in the early 19th century offered analyses of specific types of work.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1990s new studies about women in Houston appeared. Naomi W. Ledé's 1991 biography of Constance Houston Thompson described a family of elite African Americans who lived in Houston in the 1920s. Betty Chapman's article in a 1993 issue of *The Houston Review* tapped records from the Houston Metropolitan Research Center to examine the social service and literary clubs that white women founded in Houston. These clubs originated in the nineteenth century and ultimately took on public projects like founding the public library, enhancing programs in the public schools, and establishing public parks and a settlement house.

Two years later, Angela Boswell added dimension to Chapman's history by documenting the tradition of women's activism through church-related organizations in pre-Civil War Houston. Kate Kirkland's 1998 article about Ima Hogg suggests

how this tradition of women's activism continued far into the twentieth century. Merline Pitre's 1999 account of Lulu B. White's career as director of the Houston chapter of the NAACP introduced a gender focus into a study of the race conflicts that affected both black and white people in Texas in the 1940s and 1950s. In 2000, Chapman published *Houston Women: Invisible Threads in the Tapestry*, a broad survey in pictures, which impressively illustrates the extensive involvement by Houston women across all aspects of city life throughout the history of the city.<sup>4</sup>

Some recent unpublished theses continued to tap local sources. Beverly H. Tucker's study of the Houston Chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women collected fragmentary information about the activists in this group from papers in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Pamela Wille used YWCA papers to document the institution's history in Houston. The editor's thesis on the Texas Woman's Fair, a citywide event staged by Houston women in 1915, 1916, and 1917, gleaned a story from Houston newspapers that shows how the networks of Houston women's literary and political organizations supported the city's growth in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

This issue of *The Houston Review* is not the first attempt to inform a broader audience about the history of women in Houston. The Houston Women Project, formed as a non-profit organization in 1987, drew on the expertise and enthusiasm of a range of scholars and local historians to develop an exhibition including photographs, artifacts, and brief histories of women from the eight counties within a 100-mile radius of Houston. It produced a mobile exhibit of thirty-four panels featuring eighty women and numerous women's groups. The exhibit generated tremendous interest throughout the state and beyond. The Project organizers initially expected to circulate the exhibition for two years. However, before retiring, it ultimately exhibited in fifty library, business, school, and university venues over a period of six years. The much-celebrated panels still remain in storage.<sup>6</sup>

In preparing this anthology, we sought to involve local historians and writers, as well as academic scholars. The articles in this collection contribute to the ongoing recovery of the history of women in Houston and raise previously unexamined topics. Essays by Anne Sloan and by this issue's editor bring together fragmentary sources from an early period of Houston history about two very different groups. In highlighting the experience of

businesswomen in Houston prior to 1920, Sloan's essay not only inserts into the history of the city the experience of businesswomen, but also shows how much Houstonians struggled along with the rest of the nation to come to terms with the influx of women into the corporate workplace. The editor's article about African American clubwomen at the turn of the twentieth century constructs a context for this important group, which ties it with national movements and sets the tone for subsequent generations. Teresa Tomkins-Walsh's oral history of Third Ward resident Thelma Scott Bryant and the personal sketch by Patricia Smith Prather of her activism in recovering local African American history reinforce the significance of the history of African American clubwomen earlier in the century.

The articles by Ellen Fout and MaryRoss Taylor emphasize the national scope of Houston women's activism. Ellen Fout's article about the International Women's Year 1977 Conference is one of the first studies of this singular event in the history of twentieth century U.S. Fout's study describing the Houston Committee of the Conference highlights the organizational networks, commitment, and political savvy that characterize the activism of twentieth century Houston women. MaryRoss Taylor's examination of the first ten years of the Houston Women's Caucus for Art reveals the feminist activism that impacted the national art community in a period when the Houston art scene became a focus of national interest.

A pervasive theme throughout the essays in this volume is the tie Houston women have to national movements, people, and concerns that have reinforced Houston's visibility and influence in business, politics, and culture. These studies renew the challenge of the 1990 Women and Texas History Conference to "begin to piece together a theory adequate to understanding the history of women in the United States and the world."<sup>7</sup> This anthology demonstrates that the experience of Houston women is essential to this broader history.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Fane Downs and Nancy Baker Jones, eds., *Women and Texas History: Selected Essays* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1993).
2. Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston, 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Judith N. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women's Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Elizabeth York Enstam, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998).
3. Rebecca Sharpless, *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices: Women on Texas Cotton Farms, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Paula Mitchell Marks, *Hands To the Spindle: Texas Women and Home Textile Production, 1822-1880* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).
4. Naomi W. Ledé, *Precious Memories of a Black Socialite: A Narrative of the Life and Times of Constance Houston Thompson* (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., 1991); Betty Trapp Chapman, "From the Parlor to the Public: New Roles for Women in Houston, 1885-1918," *The Houston Review* 15, no. 1 (1993): 31-44; Angela Boswell, "The Meaning of Participation: White Protestant Women in Antebellum Houston Churches," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (July 1995): 26-47; Kate S. Kirkland, "For All Houston's Children: Ima Hogg and the Board of Education, 1943-1949," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (1998): 460-95; Merline Pitre, *In Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999); Betty Trapp Chapman, *Houston Women: Invisible Threads in the Tapestry* (Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 2000).
5. Beverly H. Tucker, "Southern Jewish Women As Volunteers, 1913-1940: The Untold Story of Progressivism in Houston, Texas" (master's thesis, Sam Houston State University, 1997); Pamela Faith Wille, "The First in the Southwest: The Houston Young Women's Christian Association, 1907-1939" (master's thesis, University of Houston-Clear Lake, 1995); Audrey Y. Crawford, "The Texas Woman's Fair: Women, Fairs, and the Growth of Houston in the Progressive Era" (master's thesis, University of Houston, 2002).
6. Judith Richards, "Houston Women Project Draws Strong Support," *Women's History Network News*, September 1993, 2; letter from Project Director Judith Richards to Friends of the Houston Women Project, June 4, 1994, copy in author's possession. Thanks to Betty Chapman for calling my attention to this Project history and for providing copies of these materials.
7. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Texas Women and the Writing of Women's History," in *Women and Texas History*, eds. Fane Downs and Nancy Baker Jones, 14.