



The 1847 Kellum-Noble House served as Houston Parks Department headquarters for many years.
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SAM HOUSTON PARK: Houston History through the Ages *By Wallace W. Saage*

The history of Texas and the history of the city of Houston are inextricably linked to one factor – land. Both Texas and Houston used the legacy of the land to encourage settlement, bringing in a great multicultural mélange of settlers that left a lasting impression on the state. An early Mexican land grant to John Austin in 1824 led to a far-reaching development plan and the founding of a new city on the banks of Buffalo Bayou. In 1836, after the Republic of Texas won its independence, brothers John Kirby Allen and Augustus C. Allen purchased several acres of this

grant from Austin’s widow, Mrs. J. F. L. Parrot, and laid out a new city.¹ They named it Houston.

The growth of Sam Houston Park, originally called City Park, has always been closely related to the transfer of land, particularly the physical and cultural evolution of Houston’s downtown region that the park borders. Contained within the present park boundaries are sites acquired by the city from separate entities, which had erected private homes, businesses, and two cemeteries there.

Over the years, the city has refurbished the park, made changes in the physical plant, and accommodated the increased use of automobiles to access a growing downtown. The greatest transformation of the park, however, grew out of the proposed demolition of the original Kellum House built on the site in 1847. In 1954, a group of concerned citizens banded together to save the house and, under an agreement with the city, turn it into a museum. This original group, Harris County Heritage and Conservation Society (now known as The Heritage Society), restored the home and opened it in 1958, establishing a place where structures representing a window into Houston’s past could be preserved for future generations.

GATHERING THE LAND

With the Allens’ purchase of the tract to found the city of Houston, land began to change hands throughout the city for residential and commercial ventures. An eight-acre tract of land, made up of subdivided city lots, which became the future nucleus of Old City Park, was no exception.



Children flocked to the cool waters in Sam Houston Park’s wading pool.
 Postcard, c. 1908. All images courtesy of The Heritage Society Permanent Collection unless otherwise noted.

The various deeds trace this transformation:

- July 20, 1824 John Austin—Granted two leagues by the government of Texas
- 1836 A. C. & John Allen—Tracts bought from Austin's widow, Mrs. Parrot
- May 3, 1837 Wm. N. Mock—Allens deeded Mock eight acres
- Jan. 22, 1838 Robert P. Stewart—Deed from Mock for eight acres
- June 26, 1839 M. Dyer/Peter Elgart—Bought two town lots from the eight acres
- June 26, 1839 Thomas C. Dobbs—Bought the two lots and improvements
- July 14, 1839 H. Baldwin—Three acres out of the eight acres survey for \$2,500
- Aug. 4, 1839 W. Colton—One acre of Baldwin's three acres for \$400²

Despite the many changes in ownership associated with the property, all claims were nullified except the original transfer from Allen to Mock. The Allens had a lien against the property and on May 2, 1839, the Harris County sheriff seized the property, which T. M. Bagby bought at public auction in 1843.

The history of Sam Houston Park begins here, when Nathaniel Kelly Kellum purchased the tract of land from Bagby to use for business purposes and to construct his residence on the south bank of Buffalo Bayou.³ A native of Virginia, Kellum had immigrated to Houston in 1839 and became involved in construction. Credited with constructing several commercial buildings in Houston, he operated a brick factory, lime vats for making mortar and plaster, and a tannery for hides, which were made into boots and sold by businessman B. A. Shepherd.

After buying the eight acre tract, Kellum began buying other property in the general area. Paying \$200 to James S. Holman, he purchased "2 1/10 acres of land on the south side of Buffalo Bayou south of and adjoining a tract of land now occupied by the said Kellum as a brick yard and west of a tract known as the City Hospital." On November 22, 1845, Kellum purchased "8 town lots known as the hospital lots" from Francis R. Lubbock.⁴ These two land acquisitions along with the original eight-acre purchase were then combined into one tract of land containing approximately thirteen acres known as the Kellum property.

Nathaniel Kellum built a two story brick home for his family on the southern portion of the tract in 1847. The bricks undoubtedly came from the brickyard on the property. The family had not lived there long when Kellum decided to liquidate his Houston holdings and move to Grimes County. He gave power of attorney to sell the property to B. A. Shepherd who purchased the house, thirteen acres, business properties, and a

Kellum-Noble House's second parlor includes a mahogany square grand piano and a pine and ash Texas six-leg daybed, both c. 1850.

Photo by Annette Boatwright.

store with frontage on Main Street for \$8,000.⁵

Within a few months, Shepherd put the original thirteen acres and house on the market again; and A. W. Noble and his wife Zerviah purchased the property, agreeing to pay the note by a certain time. The family lived there for several years, but the marriage proved to be unstable and was dissolved. By court decree, Zerviah Noble got the Kellum House and property in the divorce settlement. To retire the debt owed to Shepherd, Mrs. Noble and her daughter Catherine A. Kelly paid \$2,045.35 for the property.⁶ The property, obtained in 1856, stayed in possession of Mrs. Noble and her heirs until 1899 when the City of Houston, led by Mayor Samuel Brashear, acquired it.⁷ The area was called City Park until 1903 when the city renamed it Sam Houston Park, and the brick house built by Kellum became the headquarters for Houston's Parks Department.

The owners of other city lots bordering the original Mock survey developed them in various ways, constructing residences and businesses closely linked to Bagby Street. At various times, the City of Houston acquired these properties to expand the park, including the purchases of the Episcopal and Masonic cemeteries. Christ Episcopal Church established the Episcopal Cemetery in 1848; however, when Glenwood Cemetery opened in 1871, many graves from the Episcopal Cemetery were re-interred there. The Episcopal Cemetery's designation was removed June 22, 1938, and the remaining graves moved to Brookside Memorial Park in 1948. Christ Church sold the property to the city for \$52,500 and the city added the acreage to Sam Houston Park.⁸ Also bordering the original Mock survey, the Masonic Cemetery was established in 1856 by Holland Lodge No.1, which purchased the property from Peter Gray. It became a burial place for many prominent Houstonians, but several of its graves were also moved to Glenwood. The Masons had the cemetery dedication removed in 1959 and sold the property to the city in 1960 for \$289,964. Although initially used for a parking lot, the land was eventually incorporated into Sam Houston Park.⁹



The city acquired additional tracts of land in 1913 and 1914 at a cost of \$45,675. It purchased a parking lot on the corner of McKinney and Bagby from the De George estate in 1959 and the street-front lots on Bagby and Lamar in 1961. This enlarged the park space to nearly twenty-one acres.¹⁰

Just as the land purchases added to Sam Houston Park's size, municipal development dramatically changed its character. Access to Houston's business district apparently acted as the driving force to change access patterns through the park, replacing the old graceful drives with simplified urban roadbeds. In 1938, the City of Houston constructed the Fire Alarm Building on the northwest corner of Bagby and Lamar adjacent to the park entrance, further changing its atmosphere. Although the Kellum-Noble House still made its presence known and the city had moved several civic memorials to the area, the park no longer served as an active leisure site for Houstonians.

Perhaps the greatest damage to the character of the original park occurred as a result of the Interstate Highway System's decision to construct an elevated freeway loop along the park's western edge. The Highway Department removed an almost 1.8-acre tract of land from the park to provide support piers for the Interstate 45 elevated roadway, exit, and access ramps.¹¹

PRESERVING THE PAST

Ironically, the Kellum-Noble House became the catalyst that returned Sam Houston Park to its original mission as a gathering place for Houstonians. In a city often criticized for placing little value on its historic buildings, it was inevitable that a structure as old as the Kellum-Noble House became a target for destruction. Vacant for several years, it had deteriorated to the point that in 1954 the City of Houston announced plans to raze the building. A vanguard of prominent preservation-minded citizens banded together to save this important part of Houston history. As a result, the city agreed to allow the Harris County Heritage and Conservation Society to stabilize the building and convert it into a museum. The Kellum-Noble House opened for public tours in 1958.



The Nichols-Rice-Cherry House, built in 1850, was originally located on Courthouse Square before Emma Cherry moved it to the Montrose area. In 1959, it became the first historic structure moved to the park.

Very soon thereafter, another opportunity arose to save an important historic building, the Nichols-Rice-Cherry House. Originally built downtown in 1850 by Ebenezer B. Nichols, the Greek Revival-style house was also home to Houston businessman William Marsh Rice for a time. In 1899, Emma Richardson Cherry moved it to the Montrose area where it stayed until 1959 when it became the first historic building moved into Sam Houston Park by the Harris County Heritage and Conservation Society.

Over the past six decades, The Heritage Society has moved eight more historic structures to the park. Additionally, the organization constructed replicas of one of Houston's first office blocks and of City Park's original bandstand, as well as the Museum Gallery for permanent and temporary exhibitions. Sculptures and monuments have also been added to the original park acreage.

The Heritage Society has helped Sam Houston Park re-emerge as a popular gathering place for Houstonians and tourists. An estimated 250,000 people visit the park each year for guided tours of the historic buildings, festivals, sporting events, and everyday recreation. Because demands on the park have increased dramatically, the City of Houston is implementing a new master plan during 2013. Among other improvements, the plans include reconfiguring sidewalks, adding lighting, relocating and restoring the 1866 4th Ward Cottage and park bandstand, repaving parking lots, and installing markers to identify the park's entrances. These changes will enable Sam Houston Park to continue educating visitors about Houston's fascinating history for years to come.

Wallace W. Saage has served as collections curator for The Heritage Society (THS) since 1996. He previously served as curator of the Alamo. During his tenure with THS, several important items, including numerous Texas Decorative Arts, have been added to THS's Permanent Collection.



Postcard, c. 1907, showing the bandstand in Sam Houston Park as a popular gathering place for visitors.

SAM HOUSTON PARK is open daily dawn to dusk. The Heritage Society, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Guided historic structures tours are available at 10:00 a.m., 11:30 a.m., 1:00 p.m., and 2:30 p.m. For more information about The Heritage Society or to make a donation, visit www.heritatesociety.org.



Old Place was moved from the west bank of Clear Creek to Sam Houston Park in 1973. Its roughly hewn cedar logs and mortise and tenon jointure represent defining elements of Texas frontier architecture. The cabin's interpretive features illustrate the hardships faced by early settlers.



Moved to Sam Houston Park in 2002 from 809 Robin Street in Freedman's Town, 4th Ward Cottage dates back as far as 1866, when Houston's first City Directory indicates that Charles Englehard and his family lived there. The house will be moved next to the Yates House, where it will be rehabilitated and interpreted as an architectural archaeology exhibit using the building's materials to tell its history.



Built by Eugene Pillot at 1803 McKinney Street in 1868, this Eastlake Victorian Style house was continuously occupied by the Pillot family until 1965 when they donated it to The Heritage Society to move to the park. Pillot had an intricate copper gutter system installed to provide fresh water to the house.



Originally built in 1870 at 1319 Andrews Street in Freedman's Town by Reverend Jack Yates, the Greek Revival structure serves as a repository of Yates family belongings. The home was moved to the park in 1994.



Relocated to the park in 1963, San Felipe Cottage serves as an example of the vernacular architecture and the culture of Houston's German working-class population of the late nineteenth century. Originally located at 313 San Felipe Road and built in 1868, the structure holds The Heritage Society's collection of Texas Decorative Arts.