

Houston's First Ward—Producing Food from Farm to Counter

By Betty Trapp Chapman

In 1839 Houston was divided into four wards, each a geographic area which provided representation for the municipal government. The crossing at Congress Avenue and Main Street became the intersecting point for dividing the wards. The First Ward, located in the northwest quadrant of that intersection, bordered the strategic location where Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou converged. By design, Main Street ended here, providing a logical docking place for boats for the next six decades. Naturally, the area around the docks fostered a warehouse district where goods were distributed for sale in mercantile establishments in town or for shipment down the bayou. As a result, Commerce Street, the artery closest to the docks, became known as “Produce Row” and a strong factor in the business development of the First Ward.¹



Commerce Street, 1890, the “heart of produce row.”

The First Ward area was also known for its natural resource of free-flowing springs. A number of artesian wells existed near the juncture of White Oak and Little White Oak bayous. In 1832 Thomas D. Beauchamp immigrated to Texas from Kentucky and settled in the bayou area. He reportedly traded with the Bidai Indians and camped with them at the local springs. In 1838 Beauchamp purchased from the Allen brothers a fifty-four-acre tract of land on the south bank of White Oak Bayou that included free flowing springs. There he established a community that he named Beauchampville. Since Buffalo Bayou was the main water supply for Houstonians and its water was frequently contaminated, Beauchamp began selling his pure spring water to Houstonians for seventy-five cents for each thirty-gallon barrel. Not only was it a cleaner water supply for the city, but it enabled Beauchamp to recover some of his investment. Although Beauchampville eventually faded, this area of his property became known as Beauchamp Springs, a location often noted on maps today.²

As Houston began to develop, most of the First Ward land outside the town's business district was laid out in farms. Some of the earliest farmers were German immigrants. Heinrich Guese, a typical German immigrant, bought two acres for fifty dollars in 1857. Guese and his wife, Hannah, built their house, a Gulf Coast cottage, on their property. (The Guese house, constructed on what later became Spring Street, is extant although it was moved to the Sixth Ward a few years ago to escape demolition at its original location.) By 1869 there were fewer than

twenty-five houses in the immediate twenty-block area containing the Guese home. Their neighbors were families by the name of Puls, Wichman, Kaertjie, Tiekoeetter, and Barteles, many of whom had come from the same town in Germany as the Gueses. These farmers grew produce and sold it at the city's market, or at independently-run curbside markets along Commerce Street. Heinrich Guese reportedly operated two stalls at the Market House and also worked as a gardener.³

Because of its proximity to Buffalo Bayou and the Market House, residents in First Ward became heavily involved in the community's commodity and produce business. Commerce Street was lined with storehouses for goods awaiting transport, first down the bayou and later on the railroads. A portion, however, found its way daily to the First Ward, where European immigrants established grocery stores. By the early twentieth century many of these immigrants were Italian. Names like Valenti, Mandola, Bonno, Costa, Montalbano, and Ciulla appeared on these stores, which were frequently attached to the family's house. The Bonno family had a wholesale grocery business on Commerce Street where they sold to larger grocery firms in the city. The Bonnos are credited with introducing the sale of coffee in one-pound bags, a practice still in place today.⁴

First Ward represented a typical working-man's community. Businesses other than grocery stores were boarding houses, saloons, barber shops, bakeries, meat and fish markets, and laundries. The 1866 Houston City Directory listed these occupations



Postcard: Lake, Highland Park, 1906.

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for residents: bridge builder, tailor, grocer, blacksmith, gardener, painter, carpenter, machinist, cotton broker, barber, drayman, and railroad engineer. In time, the neighborhood attracted the owners of a brick yard, ice-making plant, iron foundry, and carriage-making firm.⁵ In view of the limited means of transportation, people preferred living near their place of business



Postcard: Boathouse, Highland Park, 1908.

or employment. This made the close-in First Ward residences a popular choice for those engaged in commerce or employed in service-oriented jobs.

By 1890 the railroads, quickly becoming a major industry in Houston, emerged as one of the largest employers. Rail lines crossed the First Ward, giving rise to railroad shops, especially those of the Houston and Texas Central line and later the Southern Pacific. In 1887 a grand railroad depot was built on Washington Avenue (originally referred to as the road to Washington, Texas), which was near the southern-most boundary of the ward. Constructed at a cost of \$80,000, it was considered “the finest in the south.” The land near the site of the depot has a colorful history associated with it. Merchant Henry Henke’s store was located on Congress Avenue across from the Market House. When farmers arrived in Houston with wagons filled with their goods, they camped out on Henke’s property on “the road to Washington” taking them to the market square. Within a few years this area, known as Vinegar Hill, contained brickyards, iron works, slaughter houses, the city waterworks, and multiple boarding houses for the laborers employed in these industries. One block of Vinegar Hill, called Tin Can Alley, seldom appeared on maps, but nevertheless was frequently the scene of notorious activity.⁶ Tin Can Alley disappeared with the widening of Washington Avenue and the construction of I-45. Its former location now lies between the United States Post Office and the Aquarium entertainment complex.

Since Texas did not mandate public education until 1876, schooling was usually left to individuals prior to that time. When the City of Houston opened schools, the earliest one in First Ward was First Ward Colored School, a one-room frame building at Bingham and Colorado. The City Directory in 1880 did not list a school for the ward’s white children, but the directory indicated there was a Grammar School in Shepherd’s Building on Main Street. It is possible that white children may have attended this school. In 1890 Dow School on Washington served the First and Fourth North wards. Finally in 1893, Hawthorne school opened on Houston Avenue with seven teach-

ers and a principal. According to school census records, First Ward had the smallest number of white school-age children among the wards. In fact, First Ward was always the smallest ward in land area and population until the Sixth Ward was officially formed in 1896.⁷

Although First Ward had the least black residents of any ward, they established numerous churches in their community. The first was likely St. Paul’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, founded by former slaves in 1873, making it one of Houston’s oldest black congregations. Other African American congregations were Brown’s Chapel AME and Burton Grove Baptist. First Ward Methodist Episcopal Church was established in 1885 and renamed five years later for the denomination’s bishop in New Orleans: Willard Francis Mallalieu. The 1900 hurricane that unfurled some of its fury on Houston after devastating the island city of Galveston destroyed the church’s first building. Members of the congregation built a third structure in 1926, using materials from the dismantling of Camp Logan, a military camp in Houston during World War I. Mallalieu United Methodist Church’s building has since become a City of Houston Landmark. Other churches in First Ward at the turn of the twentieth century were German Baptist Church, Washington St. Methodist Episcopal Church South, and Houston Avenue Mission Christian Church.⁸

As in other city neighborhoods, the streetcar system was important in transporting people around town. In 1874 the original public transit system, incorporating cars pulled by mules, included a five-mile route on Washington that turned around at Glenwood Cemetery, which had been incorporated just a few years earlier. With the introduction of electric streetcars in 1892, a Houston Avenue line operated and ran as far as Crockett Street. By 1900 track had been laid on Dart, Hickory, and Shearn streets, and the tracks on Houston Avenue were discontinued until 1906 when the route returned to its original alignment and was renamed Woodland Heights after a new neighborhood just north of the original First Ward.⁹



Postcard: Sunday afternoon promenade, Highland Park, 1907.

Parks were a rarity in Houston at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet the First Ward received a grand one in 1903 when the streetcar company opened Highland Park, located on thirty acres of the Beauchamp Springs tract between Houston Avenue and the banks of Little White Oak Bayou. In addition to a restaurant and a dance pavilion, facilities included a dam built across Little White Oak Bayou to create an artificial lake large

enough to accommodate small boats. It was described as “the prettiest site for a park in the South.” To ensure that it was suitable for family outings, park officials posted this sign: “A strict watch will be kept to see that no dissolute characters get in.” Soon Highland Park attracted as many as five thousand visitors each weekend. It remained a popular destination for several years. By 1914, however, newer amusements in Houston began attracting families and the park, by then named San Jacinto Park, declined in population.¹⁰ Today a small portion of the old Highland Park remains as green space on the edge of Woodland Heights and bears the name Woodland Park.

The First Ward, like each of the other wards, elected two aldermen to represent them on City Council and served terms were for one year until 1880 when they became two-year terms. Thus, there was a rapid turnover of aldermen, especially in the First Ward. Records reveal that sixty-one men served as First Ward aldermen from 1839 to 1905, when the commission form of government replaced the ward-based system. A majority of these aldermen served only a single term. The longest-serving ones were W. J. Kohlhaup and Hugh Hamilton—each elected to four terms. Two First Ward aldermen advanced to the office

of mayor: Alexander McGowan in 1858 and I. C. Lord in 1875. During the Reconstruction period, two black aldermen represented First Ward: Jason Rice and Taylor Burke—among the first blacks to hold office in Houston.¹¹ The representatives from First Ward likely had less influence in making city-wide decisions since the commercial-civic elites held the reins of government for most of these years, and First Ward aldermen usually came from the working class.

Today First Ward is an eclectic blend of industrial factories, storage facilities, historic houses, new condominiums, artist studios, vacant lots, and small businesses in rehabbed buildings. It is truly a neighborhood in transition. Its inner-city location has driven older residents out and brought in commercial interests. That reality has dismayed longtime residents. They remember when the area was a community where neighbors knew one another and shared in both good and not-so-good times. Residents fear the loss of the neighborhood’s history as older buildings are demolished.

There are, nevertheless, bright spots in this time of dramatic change. Some older homes underwent renovations to maintain their charm and to reflect the area’s history. Avenue Community



1924 Jefferson Davis Hospital, now Elder Street Artists Lofts.

Photo courtesy of Betty T. Chapman.



First Ward house.


Photo courtesy of Betty T. Chapman.

Development Corporation, a non-profit organization committed to providing affordable housing, has redeveloped homes in the First Ward through its Move Home program in which donated houses are moved to vacant lots, rehabilitated, and sold to low-income families. The organization's first major project in First Ward was the revitalization of the old Jefferson Davis Hospital, which had been vacant for many years. The hospital opened in 1924 at the corner of Elder and Girard as a joint city-county project. Praised as one of the most modern hospitals in the nation when it was built, it was considered inadequate in just five years and was replaced in 1937 by a new Jeff Davis on Allen Parkway. The older building fell into disrepair and sat neglected for decades. Avenue CDC purchased the building and through a partnership with Artspace Projects Inc. turned it into affordable housing for artists named Elder Street Artists Lofts. The project houses thirty-four live/work units, many of them offering spectacular views of the downtown skyline.¹²

First Ward is becoming well known for its art spaces. Winter Street Studios, the largest group of artists in the Houston area, is part of the area's thriving arts community. Housed in a renovated furniture factory, Winter Street provides seventy-five studios for both established and emerging artists. Open houses and gallery shows are held frequently in order for the public to experience the art offerings.¹³

First Ward contains a one-mile railroad corridor with daily freight traffic moving through the neighborhood at all hours. The First Ward Civic Club worked with the City of Houston in addressing safety issues related to the rail traffic, as well as those of noise. As a result, the city closed several streets with rail crossings and established a "quiet zone" to improve the quality of life for First Ward residents.¹⁴

The downtown section of First Ward has remained relatively unchanged since the early twentieth century. Even some of the Produce Row warehouses that lined Commerce Street are still there, although they have different uses with different tenants. A popular restaurant, Spaghetti Warehouse, has been housed in one for many years. Other important historic buildings in the city's commercial development—Cotton Exchange, W. L. Foley Dry Goods, Magnolia Brewery Taproom, Kennedy Steam Bakery—are being adaptively reused. The Southern Pacific Building, headquarters for the rail line that employed many First Ward residents, is now Bayou Lofts, a residential high-rise, while the Hermann Estate Building has become Hermann Lofts. Two former banks on Main Street have also been converted to a new use: Union National Bank is now Hotel Icon and Houston National Bank is used as an Islamic Education Center.¹⁵

First Ward, once filled with small farms, is now an inner city neighborhood reflecting all aspects of life in a major city. Although the original ward has been divided by freeway construction and diminished by the loss of many historic buildings and institutions, it still holds the rich history of those pioneers who put down roots in the nineteenth century intent on doing their share in the development of Houston, the place they called home. In doing so, they bequeathed a significant legacy to those of us who are Houstonians in the twenty-first century. 

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