

# Houston History Archives: Saving Stories of Region, Place, and People

By Teresa Tomkins-Walsh

Houston History Archives emerged as a relatively new enterprise in the realms of archiving when Joe Pratt relocated *The Houston Review: History and Culture of the Gulf Coast* journal to the University of Houston (UH) from the Houston Public Library. Pratt recognized the aptness of a publication (now the *Houston History* magazine), supported by a research component (UH Oral History Project) and a repository for oral histories and archival collections (Houston History Archives). So Pratt created the interlocking components of the Houston History Project in the Center for Public History.

In fall 2005, Houston History Archives at the University of Houston (UH-HHA) began acquisitions with the mission of building collections covering the growth and development of the Gulf Coast region. Energy, environmental, and ethnic history constitute specific areas of the collection policy. Beyond acquisitions, UH-HHA processes and preserves collections to foster research and disseminate the history of Houston and the Gulf Coast.

Despite its brief existence, UH-HHA continues the traditions of archiving begun in the ancient world, transported to Europe with the Dark Ages, and exported to North America in the nineteenth century. Archives (the term used to designate both the physical site and the matter preserved), represent the interplay of different communities: creators, custodians, and users, each with distinct intentions and skills. UH-HHA operates within the university community as it serves and reflects the interests of Houston's interwoven communities.

Archives also reflect the interplay between private and public. Preserving records began nearly as soon as humans developed writing systems with inherent potential for sharing beyond the creator to other individuals, prescribed groups, or multiple publics. In the ancient world, collections of writing reflected the activities of businesses, legislators, or scholars. Entrepreneurs or family estates created and protected records for private use. Archives often hold collections created for private use, then preserved for the public examination because of the creator's community standing, the scholarly value of the collection, or to provide public information.

Selectivity is another attribute of archives. Archives might be a source of public information but are not comprehensive sources. Creators may sanitize collections before offering them to the archives, and only selected collections

*The Citizens' Environmental Coalition Records housed in the Houston History Archives.*

Photo courtesy of Special Collections,  
M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.



reach archives. Policy, mission, and social forces determine selections, as well as space and funding. Archives of the past selected written record over oral tradition, elites over commoners, and records that mirrored a community's grand narrative.

Houston's grand narrative is the story of the city's growth from a plot of land on Buffalo Bayou into an international business center, managed by the hard work of leaders who valued independence and individualism, a narrative reflected in the papers of John Henry Kirby (1860-1940), also known as the "Father of Industrial Texas." Kirby's collection of letters and photographs was created in the course of business, most likely without the intention, at least initially, that they would reach public view. What was private became public because of Kirby's community stature and because his story reflects Houston's grand narrative. Historians, students, and citizens seek access to such records. Using Kirby's personal papers and other resources, Mary Lasswell wrote *John Henry Kirby: Prince of the Pines* (1967).

Kirby grew up in East Texas and made his fortune in timber. John Henry Kirby's collection includes over two hundred boxes of documents and photographs as well as a number of bound ledgers. Papers include business, political, and family correspondence, and letters that reveal details of his life. Kirby actively engaged in politics; he served two

terms in the Texas legislature in 1913 and in 1927, and served as delegate to the 1916 Democratic National Convention. Letters reveal that Kirby resisted defensive build up for the First World War as late as 1916, and exchanged letters with multiple correspondents to that effect (Box 191, Folder 150).

UH-HHA houses another collection of papers created by a giant of Texas business, Joseph S. Cullinan (1860-1937). As the founder of the Texas Oil Company, Cullinan created and preserved a collection of business and personal papers with tremendous scholarly and public value. Beyond the obvious business ventures covered by John O. King in his 1970 book, *Joseph S. Cullinan: A Study of Leadership in the Texas Petroleum Industry*, Cullinan's collection provides a broader view of Cullinan as a community leader. For instance, Cullinan spearheaded the construction of Houston's Negro Hospital, as a memorial to his son who died in the First World War and as a self-help initiative aimed at improving health care for the city's African Americans. Correspondence reveals the interactions between Cullinan's representatives and black leaders in the South. Letters also cover every detail of the hospital's construction, from costs to the selection of light fixtures, to program and music for the opening ceremony on Juneteenth 1926 (Boxes 18 and 19).

Challenges to Houston's prevailing narrative became visible in the late 1950s and early 1960s. African Americans

*Opening Ceremony for Houston Negro Hospital, Juneteenth 1926.*

Photo from the Joseph S. Cullinan Papers, courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.



resided in Houston from the city's founding, but as Robert Bullard noted in *Invisible Houston: Black Experience in Boom and Bust* (2000), the African American community lived below the dominant community's line of vision. UH-HHA acquired Thomas R. Cole Desegregation Papers as part of its mission to collect and tell the story of Houston's ethnic communities.

Cole developed three projects designed to illuminate desegregation of Houston. A video entitled, *The Strange Demise of Jim Crow* (1997) was Cole's first project. Following the lead of other southern cities, college students from Texas Southern University began to agitate for equal access to local stores and eateries between 1959 and 1963. Cole's research involved multiple interviews with student activists and African American community leaders as well as contributions from Houston's business and political elite. Records include script revisions, fundraising letters, and video clips, as well as interviews with notables such as Lt. Governor Bill Hobby, Curtis Graves, Eldrewey Stearns, and others. Topical segments cover "Houston's image," "Houston in the '50s and '60s," "Union Station," "theaters," and "violence."

Other collection materials include manuscript drafts and publicity materials for Cole's second project, the book, *No Color is My Kind: The Life of Eldrewey Stearns and the Integration of Houston* (1997). Cole interviewed Stearns, one of the key student leaders of civil rights protests in Houston, for the video project and his biography.

Finally, Cole collaborated to compile *On Equal Footing: A Memoir* (2001) by Quentin Mease who died in 2009 at the age of one hundred. A mentor to local leaders, including Stearns, Mease played an integral role in brokering a peaceful transition to desegregation in Houston. He fought for construction of and then ran the first black YMCA in the city and served as the first black member of the Harris County Hospital District, which he later chaired. Archival materials include the transcripts and audiotapes of extended interviews with Mease, press materials, budgets, and fundraising materials.

Rich in primary sources that make it valuable to UH-HHA patrons, Thomas R. Cole's collection reveals the historic contours of civil rights protests that renegotiated Houston's dominant narrative. It also demonstrates the careful steps required in a research project, from funding, to permissions, to transcripts and manuscripts, and finally to public relations.

Ninfa Laurenzo's small collection of memorabilia invites UH-HHA patrons to understand a different kind of struggle in another Houston community. Ninfa's story is legend in Houston. In 1969, Ninfa's husband died suddenly, leaving her five children to rear. Ninfa mortgaged her house and opened a little taqueria on the site of the family's tortilla factory. In 1973, she opened a ten-table restaurant, serving her mother's recipes plus her own. Using money from a friend in Mexico, Ninfa soon opened a second dining room and later pushed out a wall to expand further. Within ten years, the single restaurant grew into a multi-million dollar business with nine restaurants in Houston and one in Dallas. In 1985, Ninfa employed 800-1000 people and served about two million people per year. Some believe that Ninfa



Thomas R. Cole speaking at a pre-publication dinner honoring Quentin Mease, February 27, 2001.

Photo from Thomas Cole Papers, courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

Laurenzo laid the foundation for the Mexican restaurant industry in Houston.

With her success, Ninfa became visible beyond her restaurants. She served on numerous non-profit boards. In 1984, Vice-president George H. W. Bush appointed Ninfa to be one of five goodwill ambassadors to welcome Pope John Paul II to Puerto Rico, and in 1988 she seconded Bush's presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention. In 1996, Ninfa Laurenzo was named one of eight Legends of Texas along with Walter Cronkite and Barbara Jordan, recognition for their impact on Texas and its local communities. Ninfa was inducted into the Texas Women's Hall of Fame in 1998, and Theatre Under The Stars made her life into a musical (script included in the collection).

Ninfa Laurenzo died in 2001 from breast cancer. Her collection features menus, business plans, awards, and photographs, as well as a typescript of a brief autobiography. A survey of the collection reveals that Ninfa was all about family and community; her restaurants brought her family together, and she invited all of Houston to join her.

By the mid-1960s, Houston's big city affluence had created a city of remarkable growth and employment opportunities but degraded by poor air and water quality, troubled by recurrent flooding, and deficient in park and recreation space. UH-HHA's environmental collections include the records of groups that emerged to improve Houston's quality of life, although concern for Houston's natural amenities began long before the crisis of the 1960s. In Houston, enthusiasm for city beautification blended with the wilderness recreation movement that burgeoned just after the First World War. Rather than constitute a distinct community,



*Women of the Outdoor Nature Club, circa 1920s. Grace Keegan and Ruth Beasley building a fire on an outing.*

Photo from the Outdoor Nature Club Records, courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

the conservation/environmental community endorsed the philosophy of Houston's business elites, with the caveat that growth should be planned and include green space, parks, and preserved urban wilderness.

Environmental collections in UH-HHA chronicle the development of an environmental community in Houston, starting with mid-twentieth century volunteer conservation. Joseph Heiser founded the Outdoor Nature Club in 1923. Heiser worked as an accountant for Cullinan's Texas Oil Company, pursuing wilderness recreation and volunteer conservation in his free time. UH-HHA houses a small collection of Heiser's papers and the complete records of the Outdoor Nature Club. In the 1920s, Heiser directed national attention to his campaign to save holly trees along Buffalo Bayou from Christmas harvesting. Both the Outdoor Nature Club and Heiser campaigned with the National Audubon Society to create a sanctuary for the roseate spoonbill on the Vingtune Islands in Trinity Bay in the 1930s. In the 1950s, Heiser and others established the Little Thicket Nature Sanctuary in East Texas. Outdoor Nature Club records include a full set of *Spoonbill*, the ornithology group's newsletter, small monographs on selected plant and animal species, and a lovely set of botanical sketches of flowers, grasses, ferns, and lichens, plus all the standard organizational records.

A few members of the Outdoor Nature Club formed Texas Beaches Unlimited in 1958 to protect public access to Texas beaches, endangered by an oil company's successful ploy to secure oil drilling rights along the treasured Gulf Coast shoreline. Sarah and Army Emmott organized to challenge a Texas Supreme Court ruling on the matter. Facing tremendous opposition and supported by some legislative technicalities, Bob Eckhardt's Texas Open Beaches Law passed on July 16, 1959, the first such law passed in the United States. The law's constitutionality was tested, and Sarah Emmott's and Anella Dexter's research won the case, after which Sarah Emmott was named an honorary assistant attorney general.

Founders of Texas Beaches Unlimited, including the Emmotts, built a bridge between mid-twentieth century volunteer conservation and what became the post-World War II environmental movement. In spring 2011, UH-HHA will open the Sarah and Army Emmott Papers to the public, with records of numbers of environmental groups, conservation issues, and scientific projects.

Records of the Bayou Preservation Association (open now) and a partial accession Terry Tarlton Hershey Papers (scheduled to open by end of summer 2011) recount the rise of urban environmental action in Houston. During the mid-1960s, a group of homeowners in Houston's Memorial Park area formed the Buffalo Bayou Preservation Association (BBPA) to protect the natural beauty of their neighborhood bayou. Although BBPA began as a NIMBY (not in my back yard) organization, members realized by 1969 that their concerns for Buffalo Bayou applied to all Harris County watersheds, so the organization expanded its scope and re-tooled its name. Records in the Bayou Preservation Association collection follow the formation of the organization, efforts to encourage congressional support for the cause, and interactions between the group and the Harris County Flood Control District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Aside from organization records, the collection contains books, engineering reports, monographs, and seminar materials.

The campaign to preserve Buffalo Bayou lasted for five years and ended successfully in 1971, after Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act. During the five years Terry Hershey worked with other concerned women to form Citizens Who Care, an organization that evolved into the Citizens' Environmental Coalition. Realizing that a number of small groups dedicated to improving Houston's quality of life struggled independently, the women of Citizens Who Care decided that Houston needed a coordinating organization to facilitate environmental efforts. Working informally, Citizens' Environmental Coalition sponsored a community education program on air quality, in preparation for June 1970 hearings by the Texas Air Control Board. Their effort persuaded 1,500 citizens to attend the air quality hearing and led to the formal establishment of the Coalition.

Citizens' Environmental Coalition continues as the communication nexus for Houston's environmental community. In the beginning, it offered telephone answering services, an information hotline, and recommendations for expert speakers among other services. During the late 1980s, CEC sponsored a program on KPFT, Radio Pacifica, entitled "Talk of the Earth." By the 1990s, CEC had established a website and sent a weekly email newsletter. Records housed in UH-HHA cover this activity and the annual Synergy awards. One of the major accomplishments of the Citizens' Environmental Coalition is the resource guide, still produced annually and posted on the Coalition website; UH-HHA holds all back issues.

Also during the mid-1960s, concerned Houstonians formed Billboards Limited to reduce billboard blight. Billboards Limited supported a City of Houston sign ordinance to create standards and regulations for billboards in the city, but the billboard industry fought regulation. By



*Foley's new building on Main at Dallas, opening the construction project to the community in 1947.*

Photo from the Foley's Department Store Records, courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

1980, more than 10,000 billboards degraded Houston roads, and the media called Houston the "Billboard Capitol of the World." During the 1980s, Billboards Limited reorganized into the Lone Star Roadside Council and in the 1990s established Scenic Texas, Inc., a statewide entity with Scenic Houston as its largest and most active local chapter. Records housed in UH-HHA follow permutations of Houston's billboard ordinances from the 1960s to 2007.

UH-HHA's newest environmental acquisition, the David Marrack Papers, reflects Marrack's participation in many of the organizations mentioned above, but Marrack's papers add a new dimension to UH-HHA's environmental records. As a physician, Marrack studied public health issues arising from environmental problems. His collection covers legal cases, public health data, and details for a number of campaigns including environmental challenges to projects such as the Wallisville Dam. It will be at least a year before Marrack's papers can be opened to public access. Other environmental collections scheduled for processing are the Hana Ginzburg Papers related to the preservation of Armand Bayou and Kay Crooker's Papers collected from her years of activism in city planning.

As described above, collections housed in UH-HHA reflect the concerns of disparate groups within the city. One collection, however, resonates as a symbol of community for anyone who lived in Houston during the twentieth century. Opening to the public in spring 2011, the Foley's Department Store Records hold memories, pleasant or disagreeable, for all Houston. Part of Houston's booming growth since 1900, Foley's Brothers Dry Goods Store expanded over the first half of the twentieth century. Everyone in Houston knew Foley's, even when African Americans

were denied equal access to restrooms and prohibited from trying on clothes.

Foley's represented more to Houston than a retail store. Located downtown, it was the city's biggest store by 1927 and included an auditorium used as a civic center and a rehearsal hall for the Houston Symphony. During the Bank Holiday of 1933, Foley's replaced patrons' personal checks with Foley's checks which were accepted at stores around town. When banks reopened and Foley's deposited the personal checks, every check cleared. Foley's sponsored Houston's Thanksgiving Parade from 1950 to 1993, served



*Foley's Thanksgiving parade was a highly anticipated annual event in Houston, n.d.*

Photo from the Foley's Department Store Records, courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

as one of Houston's major philanthropists, and promoted educational opportunity through retail scholarships and distributive education opportunities. Even now everyone recalls Foley's Christmas windows, including people denied full access to Foley's retail amenities in earlier times.

Foley's began a new chapter in retailing when the new store opened on Main at Dallas in 1947. Designed by Kenneth Franzheim, the store offered a full block and six floors of retail space. Photographs of the building site and the new building reveal the first escalators in the South, state-of-the-art kitchens, and ventilation ducts. On opening day, as at least 8,000 shoppers explored the new store, Foley's proffered an invitation to postwar consumerism with every imaginable product displayed in grand surroundings.

Because of its visibility, Foley's became a central site for the desegregation efforts described in the Thomas Cole projects. Students mounted protests outside the store and staged a sit-in at the Foley's Fountain, where food service to African Americans was prohibited. Although Foley's initially resisted the protests, store management responded to the persuasion of John T. Jones, Jr. and agreed to desegregate the store quietly before most of Houston residents realized what had happened. As a result, Foley's example spearheaded the desegregation of Houston as hotels, movie theaters, and other public facilities followed suit. Houston had begun to change. At the height of her success, Ninfa featured a line of Mexican-themed dinnerware at Foley's.

Architectural themes recur throughout the Foley's collection, with the drawings, plans, and photographs of the central downtown store and its predecessors. Records in the Foley's collection also document the process of suburbanization in Houston. By the 1960s, Foley's began building branches to meet the needs of suburban residents. Architectural renderings and photographs reveal the long, low store designs characteristic of sprawling, low density suburban development patterns in Houston.

Archives endure as repositories of knowledge and information in the form of books and manuscripts, maps, photographs, and, more recently, video images and online exhibits. Most historians will affirm that history follows the documents. Communities that collect and transmit knowledge through oral tradition are less likely to preserve documents, and documents created by those excluded from the mainstream are often missing from archives and histories.

Since the 1960s and the emergence of history from the "bottom up," oral history has entered the toolbox of methodologies available to historians. Although oral history collections include interviews with elites, collections also preserve the memories of ordinary people. Unlike traditional historical inquiry, which is often an isolated undertaking that privileges the memories of elites who author books and leave public legacies, oral history embodies diversity, with projects designed to collect and preserve the everyday experiences of numbers of people who shared a place or event. With the inclusion of oral history, historical research becomes possible for broader segments of communities, including young people and the elderly, who often work together to preserve stories of the past for the generations of the future.

UH-HHA is building a collection of those everyday stories—now reaching nearly 700 interviews—to offer patrons evidence of life events from living witnesses told in their own words, in transcripts, recorded voices, and, in many cases, photographs. The collection continues to grow with interviews from oil field workers, activists, ethnic communities, even Hurricane Katrina first-responders.

UH-HHA's mission is to collect records that reflect Houston communities, but UH-HHA is itself a community of curators, custodians, and researchers. UH students organize, label, folder, and inventory the collections to prepare them for public use. During the 2009-2010 academic year, freshman Brittainy Perry worked in UH-HHA as a Work-Study STAR in the Foley's collection, developing a research project and poster on Foley's role in the desegregation of downtown Houston. During summer 2010 and continuing into the academic year, a number of graduate students worked in UH-HHA to prepare collections for public access. Tanmay Wagh, an electrical engineering master's student, spent endless hours organizing audiotapes and migrating digital files for the oral histories. Fangyi Lu, working on her master's in architecture, immersed herself in the environmental collections, preparing records for the public but also identifying vital information for her research. UH-HHA is more than boxes and shelves and old papers. It is people who are an integral part of the university, reaching into Houston communities, teaching and learning to implement a mission that serves the present and informs the future.

UH-HHA is located in Special Collections in the M. D. Anderson Library at the University of Houston. For more information, direct inquiries to [tomkinswalsh@uh.edu](mailto:tomkinswalsh@uh.edu). 

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*Graduate students working in UH-HHA collections during summer 2010.*

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.