

Trailblazers in Houston's East End: The Impact of Ripley House and the Settlement Association on Houston's Hispanic Population

By Thomas McWhorter



At an annual rate of \$600, the Houston Settlement Association secured the Settegast Home in 1909, serving as a landmark of the community, and offering recreation and entertainment.

All photos courtesy of Ripley House, Neighborhood Centers, Inc., unless otherwise noted.

The turn of the twentieth century marked a period of accelerated population growth for Houston, and Houston's Second Ward followed suit. The people who moved to Houston came from a wide array of countries and from other states. Many of these people settled into the aging housing stock located in the Second Ward. The more well-to-do and better established families began to migrate away from the city center and toward the newly developed street car suburbs south and west of town like Montrose, the South End, and the Heights, named for their locations on early street car routes.¹

The influx of new Houstonians came during the city's infancy, and few, if any, social welfare programs existed. In February 1907, a group of twelve influential and civic-minded Houston women met at the home of James A. Baker under the leadership of his wife, Alice Graham Baker (grandmother to future Secretary of State James A. Baker III).² They wanted to form a "Settlement Association" based on the national settlement house movement. The U.S. movement was modeled after London's Toynbee Hall, es-

tablished in East London in 1884 by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett. Located in one of the poorest, most crime ridden, and underserved areas in London, Toynbee Hall sought to "bring the most privileged—the future elite—to live in the poorest area of London, a privilege for which they had to pay." The experience gained would, in turn, help to educate the country's future leaders about the need for social change.³ This same notion of public service inspired those twelve Houston women more than one hundred years ago.

During the late 1880s and 1890s, other major American cities witnessed the successful implementation of settlement houses, including Hull House in Chicago, South End House in Boston, and the Neighborhood Guild in New York's Lower East Side. Using these models, and to a certain extent following the model of Toynbee Hall, the Houston Settlement Association engaged and involved Houston's social elite in one of the city's most underserved neighborhoods. The Settlement Association aimed to extend "educational, industrial, social, and friendly aid to all those within our reach."⁴

The organizers believed that the citizens they served should also take an active role in working towards their own betterment. This resulted in the formation of the Second Ward Citizen's Club and the Second Ward Women's Club. These clubs sought to uplift the neighborhood both morally and physically, and to raise money to help support the work of the Settlement Association.⁵

In 1908, the Settlement Association began operating the Rusk Settlement in a small cottage formerly used as a kindergarten by the Women's Club. By 1909, the programs as well as the number of people served by the Settlement Association had outgrown the small building. To expand its operations, it rented the former Settegast Home, located at Gable and Maple Streets in the old Frost Town area. The rambling, old two-story structure would house the workers on the second floor and provide rooms for club meetings, pool tables, and a dispensary with a full-time nurse on the first floor. The original Rusk Settlement building was moved onto the same property as the former Settegast Home and both facilities came to share the grounds with the new Rusk public school, operated by the school board.⁶ During the early years of the Rusk Settlement, a large number of the area residents came from Russia, Ireland, Germany, and twelve other countries in addition to the native-born African American and Anglo population. In the 1910 census, only fifty people from the Second Ward listed Mexico as their birthplace, but this soon changed.⁷

The year 1910 marked the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, a decade-long power struggle that engulfed much of Mexico. The revolutionaries sought to overthrow long-time Mexican leader Porfirio Díaz, who had supported the wealthy ruling elite and put in place onerous land ownership policies. This caused already poor conditions to worsen for Mexico's vast lower class. The political, economic, and social situation deteriorated as different factions struggled for control and used private armies to wage war. Eventually, the situation led to general civil war and the exodus of many Mexican people.⁸

With this extreme strife in their homeland, many Mexicans looked to the United States for escape. Houston presented an attractive alternative, having recently become the region's premier center for commerce following the 1900 hurricane in Galveston. The combination of a new deep-water port, expanding railroads, and discovery of oil in southeast Texas provided new job opportunities unrivaled in other American cities. As a result, Houston attracted large numbers of Mexican immigrants who settled in Houston's East End, especially in the Second Ward, in the area surrounding the Rusk Settlement and in the Frost Town area.

By the early 1920s, the area surrounding the Rusk Settlement had a significant Hispanic presence. The old Frost Town neighborhood nearby became known as, "*El Barrio El Alacrán*," or "the Scorpion Neighborhood."⁹



In the early twentieth century, Houston's Second Ward was a melting pot of immigrants. Here, Hispanic and Anglo American children pose with their Easter baskets on the steps of Rusk Settlement House in the 1920s.



Participants in a U.S. Citizenship class conducted in Spanish meet at Rusk Settlement. Neighborhood Centers, Inc.'s Felix Fraga is proud his parents were in attendance. His mother is seated second from the left and his father is standing fourth on the right.

One of the most underserved neighborhoods in the city, El Barrio El Alacrán's housing stock was so deteriorated and its infrastructure so poor, that many considered it one of the most blighted areas of Houston.¹⁰

A 1919 report of the Settlement Association noted the rise in the Hispanic population of the area. The board of the Rusk Settlement determined that classes in English literacy for both adults and children represented one of the most crucial services it needed to offer. The Settlement Association also set about the creation of a job placement program and expanded its daycare services. The most intriguing facet of the Settlement's work at this time was the many hundreds of "Consultations" logged in the official Rusk Settlement records, which appear to be early examples of casework in Houston.¹¹

Rusk Settlement served the newly arrived Mexican community in other capacities as well. The Settlement organized groups of "Attendance Officers" to visit the homes of pupils who had ceased attending school. Rusk Settlement formed multiple all-Mexican Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops. It also offered free shower facilities to those pupils and residents who did not have running water or sanitary service in their homes.¹² The lack of such fundamental services demonstrated a common problem in the area at the time. Felix Fraga, a Mexican American area resident and driving force behind Rusk Settlement and Ripley House, remembered, "One time we lived in a tenement house. It was jokingly called Rice Hotel because Rice Hotel was THE prime hotel back then in those days. And that [tenement] didn't have indoor plumbing. We had water for the sink, but no indoor restrooms."¹³

In 1940, a different kind of social welfare center opened up in the East End that served as an early model for com-

munity centers to follow—The Ripley House, built approximately one half mile east of the Rusk Settlement. Houston philanthropists Daniel and Edith Ripley left an endowment to construct a building that would benefit the women and children of Houston. The Ripley Foundation had searched for just the right partnership, which they found in the Settlement Association. As part of the agreement, the Ripley Foundation constructed the new facility, which then became the new headquarters for the Settlement Association. The Rusk Settlement continued to operate, however.¹⁴

In 1940, older and more established Anglo families inhabited the section of the Second Ward where the new Ripley House would be built, and some did not appreciate the news of the center coming to their neighborhood. Fraga explained, "When they announced in the paper that it [Ripley House] was going to get built, a facility for the underprivileged people of Houston, the people that lived in that neighborhood that were all Anglo protested to say that they were not poor or underprivileged. They came and picketed when the building was being built, but they went ahead and built it."¹⁵

The Ripley Foundation hired notable Houston Architect Maurice Sullivan to design the new building. In preparation for the commission, he toured existing settlement houses on the East Coast. The programming for the new Ripley House included a diagnostic clinic complete with exam rooms and x-ray machines, game and club rooms, a kindergarten and a nursery school, space dedicated to the arts, an auditorium, and a gymnasium. Ripley House became a state-of-the-art facility with a low-cost membership fee of \$2 per year for the entire family. The building was dedicated in March 1940 to great fanfare and a crowd of 2,500 people.¹⁶

Despite the facility's state-of-the-art design and generous

endowment, the early years of Ripley House were not easy ones. The first director was replaced after a couple of years by Franklin Harbach who ran Ripley House for approximately forty years. He started out with unexpected challenges—like making the center appear viable to outsiders. Felix Fraga recalled, “One of the things that he had to do in the beginning was to get all the staff to park in front of the building so it would look like it was being used.”¹⁷

The Ripley Foundation brought Harbach to Houston from New York in 1943. He had served as director of the Henry Street Settlement House in the Lower East Side.¹⁸ According to Fraga, “This Director, Mr. Harbach, he was a guy that could see way ahead and he already noted that the segregation here was real strict. There wasn’t a Hispanic family that could come to Ripley House or that would feel welcome. I guess they figured they would keep Rusk Settlement for Mexican families and Ripley House would be for the Anglos.”¹⁹ Physically, Ripley House was located a short distance from the Rusk Settlement and the surrounding Mexican American community, but symbolically, it was located far away in an all-white part of the neighborhood where Mexican Americans were discouraged from going for any reason.

Harbach knew that integrating Ripley House into the neighborhood would be a difficult task. In 1954, Felix Fraga, having already worked at Rusk Settlement since 1946, was invited to do his social work fieldwork at Ripley House. At that time, Fraga recalled, no other Hispanics attended or worked at Ripley House.

My having to do fieldwork there, I think, was part of the plan. I remember that I had Anglo kids that I was supposed to supervise on the playground. . . . One kid said, “You know I like this man. He can speak Spanish.” I used to just give them a few words in Spanish. Buenos días and gracias and how to count just to make conversation with them. For this kid it was something admirable in a person. . . . In the early ‘50s, Mr. Harbach started this program of bringing workers from South America, social workers. It was good to train the social workers from South America, but also he wanted to show the Anglo people in the Ripley area that Hispanics were also educated people and professional people.²⁰

By the late 1950s and 1960s, the patrons of Ripley House became increasingly Hispanic as the neighborhood around it became predominantly Mexican American. The Rusk Settlement eventually moved to a new building alongside the settlement’s daycare facilities located at St. Charles Street and Canal in 1951; but the impact of the Rusk Settlement on the immediate neighborhood and the city had begun to diminish. Many of the families that had attended Rusk Settlement moved farther east to the Houston Ship Channel area and to Magnolia Park. New settlement houses were established such as Hester House in Fifth Ward, Clayton Homes in the old Alacrán neighborhood, and the South Houston, Pasadena, and La Porte Settlement Houses.²¹ The eventual demise of the Rusk Settlement was a testament to the success of the Houston Settlement Association’s mission as it had spread the word and the services to many areas of Houston.



The gift from Daniel and Edith Ripley establishing Ripley House continues to serve the Second Ward community. Likewise, Felix Fraga’s legacy continues at Neighborhood Centers through his son Bolivar “Bo” Fraga, who is the Ripley House Community Developer.
Photo courtesy of Bolivar Fraga.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Ripley House became the hub for many important social issues. Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, passed by Congress as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, was a social welfare program intended to improve the lives of the impoverished through healthcare and education. In Houston, Ripley House became one of its primary organizational centers. The War on Poverty included the Head Start program to address the problems associated with early childhood development among economically disadvantaged children. Ripley House accommodated a Head Start program for the East End community.

In the early 1970s, Ripley House found itself again at the center of another important social issue. The mandatory



Today, hundreds of residents from Houston’s East End walk through the doors of Ripley House Neighborhood Center where they can access education, financial, wellness, and community-engagement opportunities.



More than 1,000 Neighborhood Centers' staff members connect with 250,000 men, women, and children in the Texas Gulf Coast through events and services provided to neighbors in their communities. The annual holiday celebration is one of the most cherished and long-held traditions.



Ripley House Neighborhood Center keeps Houston's East End a place rich with cultural connections and often presents art exhibits and visual-arts performances like this Folklorico dance performed by some of the children at Ripley House Neighborhood Center.

integration of public schools in Houston caused tensions between the Mexican American community and the Houston School District. HISD had made little progress over the preceding years to integrate by its mandatory deadline in 1970. As a last minute effort, school officials counted Hispanics as Anglo to meet the federal requirements for integration. This resulted in the busing of Hispanic school children to predominantly African American schools. Many angry Hispanics boycotted Houston public schools and used

Ripley House as a staging ground for their protests. Ripley was again used for public meetings during the infamous Joe Campos Torres murder case in 1977.

Today, Ripley House carries on the tradition and intent of the original Houston Settlement Association from a new state-of-the-art facility constructed on the Ripley House grounds in 2001. Neighborhood Centers, Inc., the successor to the Houston Settlement Association, operates a wide array of programs at its various locations throughout Houston. These include a credit union for the segment of society that does not or cannot form a traditional relationship with a bank, and the fostering of entrepreneurship through small business development. The organization continues to offer immigration and citizenship assistance, family health and education services, as well as youth and seniors programs. The center collaborates with other organizations like Houston Volunteer Lawyers, Mental Health Mental Retardation Authority, the City of Houston Anti-Gang Office, and Texas Children's Pediatrics Associates to name a few.²² Above all, Ripley House remains a steadfast neighborhood partner in the heart of Houston's East End, fulfilling its vision to help individuals and communities live up to their full potential. [↪](#)

Thomas McWhorter is a native Houstonian and fifth-generation Harris County resident. He has had a lifelong passion for history, which began at age nine with his membership in the Houston Archaeological Society. His professional background is in archaeology and historic preservation where he has worked in both the public and private sectors. He is currently a senior historic planner in the City of Houston's Office of Historic Preservation.