

Central Wharf, Galveston, circa 1861. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

## Sandbar to Seaport: Galveston's Waterfront in the Nineteenth Century

Galveston in 1839, the year of its founding, was a sparsely settled community on the eastern end of a sandbar with an excellent natural harbor. Vessels calling there had to remain anchored offshore while lighters carried in their cargoes. But by the close of the nineteenth century, Galveston had been transformed into a bustling seaport, with oceangoing freighters tied up along its piers.

Ephraim McLean began a wharf, the island's first, in 1838 at the foot of Eighteenth Street. Eventually falling into disrepair, it was replaced by Kuhn's Wharf, built by merchants William and Joseph J. Hendley in 1855. With the city's founding, other entrepreneurs took advantage of the wharf privileges donated by Michel B. Menard, president of the Galveston City Company. Central Wharf was built in 1840 at the base of Twenty-First Street. Eleven years later, B. S. Parsons erected a small wharf at the same location for handling lumber. Further west, the firm of McKinney & Williams built Palmetto Wharf in 1840 at the foot of Twenty-Fourth Street. It was named for the palmetto piling on which it stood.

The Brick Wharf, built in 1845-46 by John S. Sydnor, stood between Nineteenth and Twentieth Streets. It took its name from the two brick walls which enclosed a small part of the street approach. The Commercial Wharf, which Abraham P. Lufkin erected in 1847, was at the foot of Twenty-Fifth Street. Dr. Nicholas Labadie built a wharf between Twenty-Sixth and Twenty-Seventh Streets in 1851, and Henri de St. Cyr and Robert Mills erected their Western Wharf two years later between Twenty-Seventh and Twenty-Eighth Streets. Merchant's Wharf appeared in 1855 at the foot of Sixteenth Street. Bean's Wharf, built about 1860, stood between Twenty-Ninth and Thirtieth Streets.

The Galveston Wharf and Cotton Press Company grew out of a meeting of the various owners which Menard organized to unify the administration and policies of the wharves. The company was chartered on February 4, 1854, with Menard, Samuel May Williams, Ebenezer B. Nichols, Stacey B. Lewis, and Isidore Le Clere as directors. Menard also served as president. The company's capital stock was estimated at one million dollars, divided into shares of \$100 each.

The first stockholders' meeting took place on June 26, 1854. The Wharf Company initially assumed control of Central Wharf, the Brick Wharf,

Lufkin's Wharf, and the Western Wharf. Its acquisitions were completed with Bean's Wharf in 1872.

During the Civil War, the Battle of Galveston centered on the waterfront. Three companies of the Forty-Second Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment under Colonel I. S. Burrell landed at Kuhn's Wharf on Christmas Day, 1862, and fortified themselves behind barricades. Union gunboats were moored nearby. On New Year's Day, Confederate forces under Major General John Bankhead Magruder slipped into Galveston and took the Union troops under artillery fire. Three hundred Confederates tried an assault on Kuhn's Wharf but found their scaling ladders were too short. A Confederate packet, the *Neptune*, rammed the Union vessel *Harriet Lane* and sank. Another packet, the *Bayou City*, also rammed and then captured the *Harriet Lane*. The surviving Union warships retired, leaving the troops under Colonel Burrell no hope of support or withdrawal. He surrendered, and Galveston remained in Confederate hands for the remainder of the war.

During 1863 and 1864, the Wharf Company's stockholders held their meetings in Houston. None of the wharves survived the war in good condition, so the company used its earnings to pay for repairs. In 1866, the New Wharf arose at the foot of Thirty-Third Street.

A decree of April 1, 1869, resolved a longstanding dispute between the city of Galveston and the Wharf Company over the ownership of the sand flats that bordered the waterfront. Confirmed by the state legislature in 1870, it gave the city an undivided one-third interest in the Wharf Company. The company's capital stock of 12,444 shares was increased by one-half, or 6,222 shares, which were issued to the city for the flats. The total stock thus equaled 18,666 shares, of which the city owned one third.

The decree also gave the city partial representation on the Wharf Company's board. Of a total of nine directors, three would be from the city: the mayor, an alderman, and an alderman or citizen. The latter two were to be elected by the city council. The company's property included all of the land north of Avenue A between Ninth and Thirty-First Streets.

The next two decades saw further improvements along the waterfront. Beginning about 1870, the flats were filled in, at first with dump cars and later by hydraulic pumps. A wharf railway, built in 1874, cost one hundred thousand dollars. A grain elevator was erected on the levee between Twenty-Second and Twenty-Third Streets in 1873. Capable of holding 30,000 bushels, it burned and was not rebuilt. In 1887 the Texas Star Flour Mills opened at the foot of Twenty-First Street.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Galveston had emerged as a deep water port. In December 1889, a board of engineers selected by Congress chose Galveston as the most suitable location for a deep water port on the northwestern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. It recommended \$6.2 million in appropriations for dredging the harbor to a depth of thirty feet.

John E. Bailey, secretary of the Galveston Wharf Company, announced in May 1890 plans to rebuild the old wooden wharves, which could no longer keep pace with the commercial activity. The plans called for stone bulkheads to be built around the wharves, and then to be filled in with rocks and sand. These new piers would be able to handle heavier cargoes and railroad traffic.

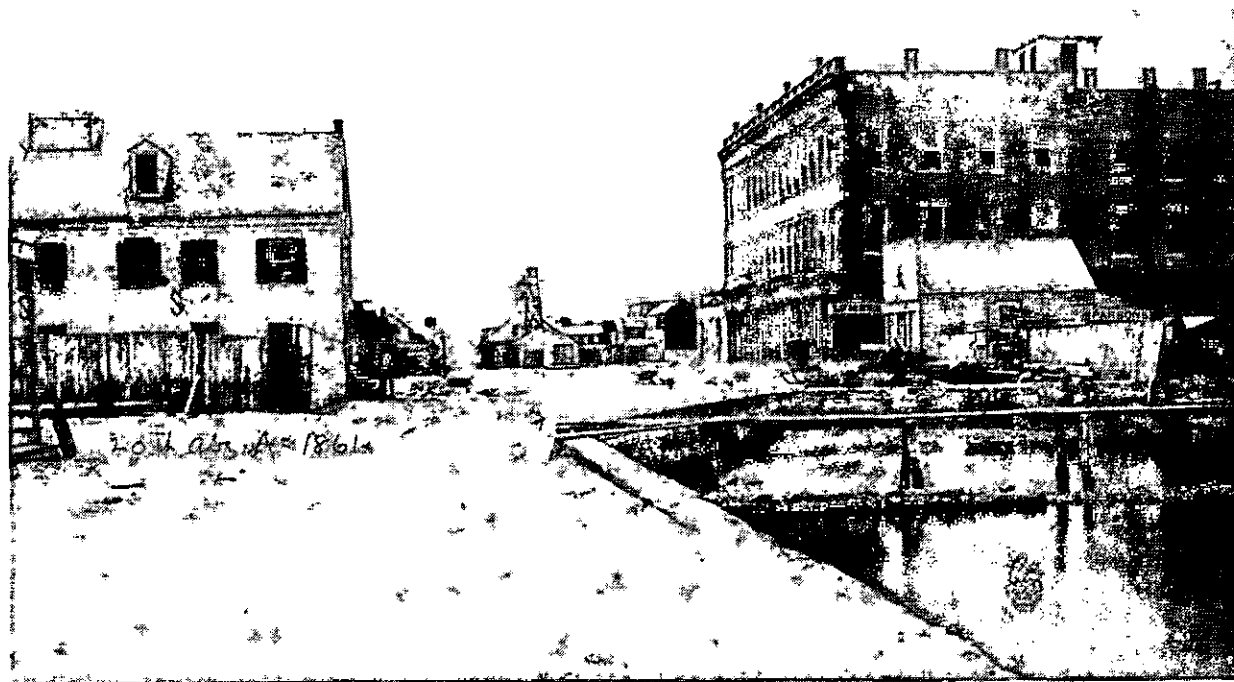
To complement the deep water port, the Wharf Company also planned the rebuilding of Pier 33 (previously the Western Wharf) and its extension from Twenty-Ninth to Thirty-Fifth Streets. The pier system was projected to be extended to Forty-First Street, the western boundary of the Wharf Company's property.

The final major improvement came with the Wharf Company's decision on September 1, 1891, to build a grain elevator of one million bushel capacity. Elevator A was designed to be capable of unloading grain from two hundred railroad cars and loading it on vessels every ten hours. The construction contract was awarded to Stewart & Co. of St. Louis. Upon its completion in June 1892, Elevator A stood 180 feet high and was constructed of 4.5 million feet of lumber, nearly all Texas pine.

As the century drew to a close, Colis P. Huntington, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, obtained a water privilege extending from Fortieth to Fiftieth Streets. This area was immediately west of the Wharf Company's property. The flats were filled in and slips excavated. Although Huntington died in August 1900, work was completed two years later.

The storm of September 8, 1900, wrecked the waterfront, leaving great piles of debris and sailing boats piled up along the wharves. Grain elevators and sheds lost their walls and roofs. Although the port recovered, the storm and other factors, including dropping cotton prices and the rise of other deep water ports, such as Houston in 1914, provided the seeds of Galveston's eventual decline as a seaport.

Casey Greene  
Rosenberg Library



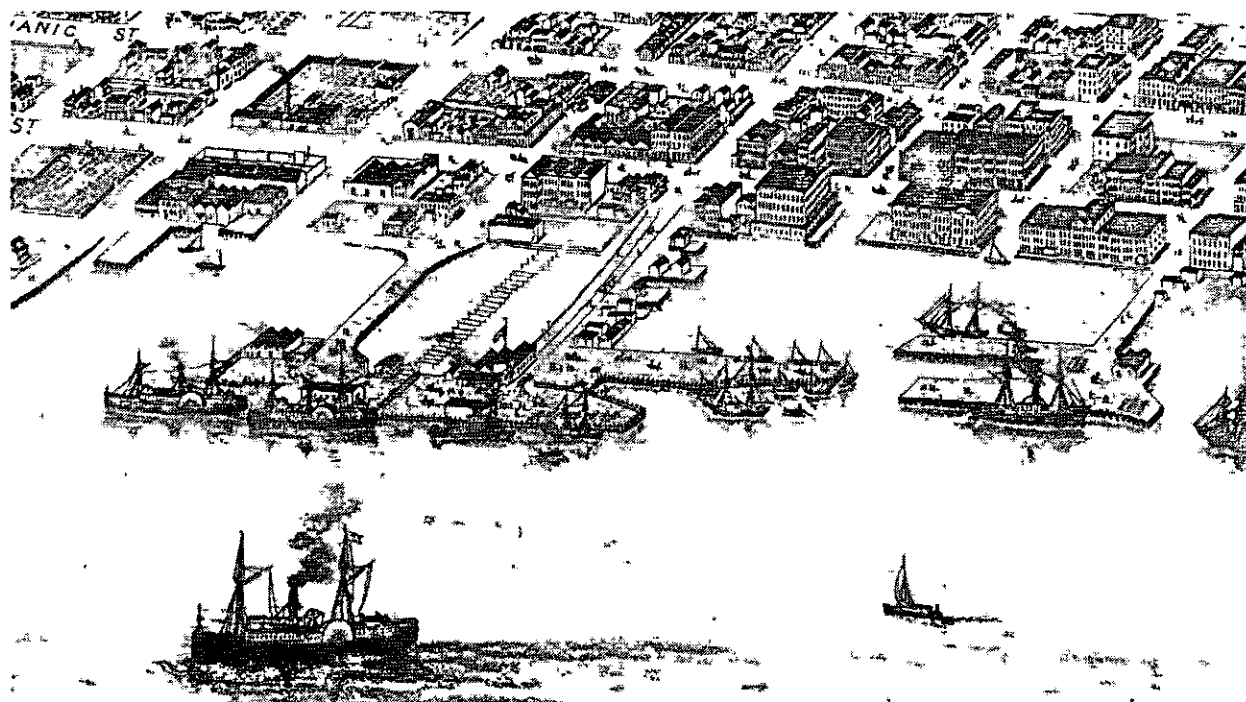
Parson's Wharf, circa 1861, showing Hendley's Building in the background to the right. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.



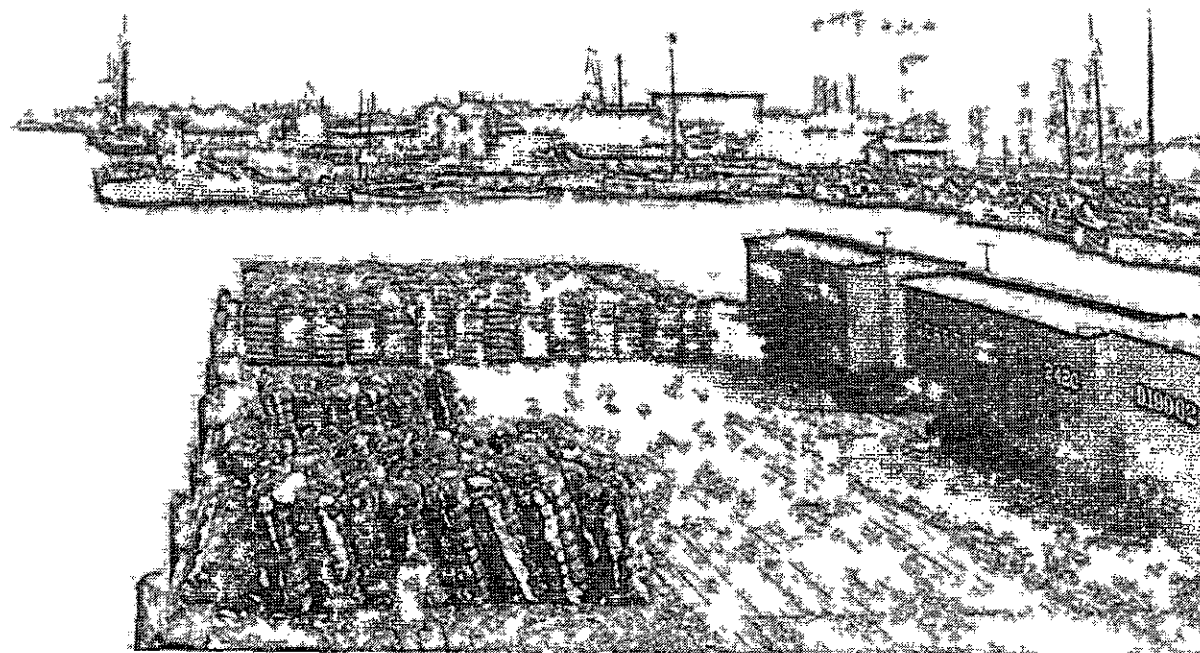
The Battle of Galveston, January 1, 1863, drawn by James E. Rourke. Note the Confederate troops attacking Kuhn's Wharf. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.



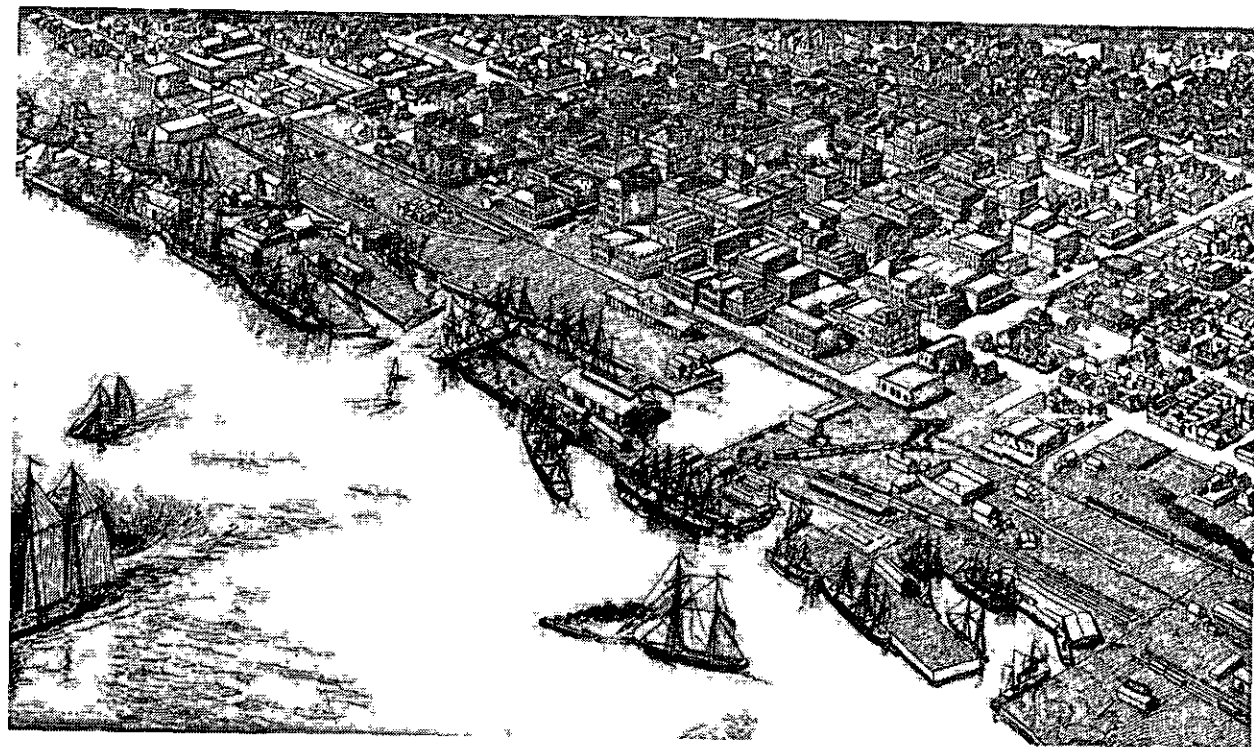
Galveston's waterfront took the full brunt of the hurricane of October 2-3, 1867, which littered it with wrecked sailing vessels. This view was taken from the vicinity of Twenty-Fourth Street, looking west. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.



A detail of the waterfront as depicted in a bird's-eye view of Galveston drawn by C. M. Drie in 1871. Shown, from left to right, are Brick Wharf, Central Wharf, and Palmetto Wharf. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

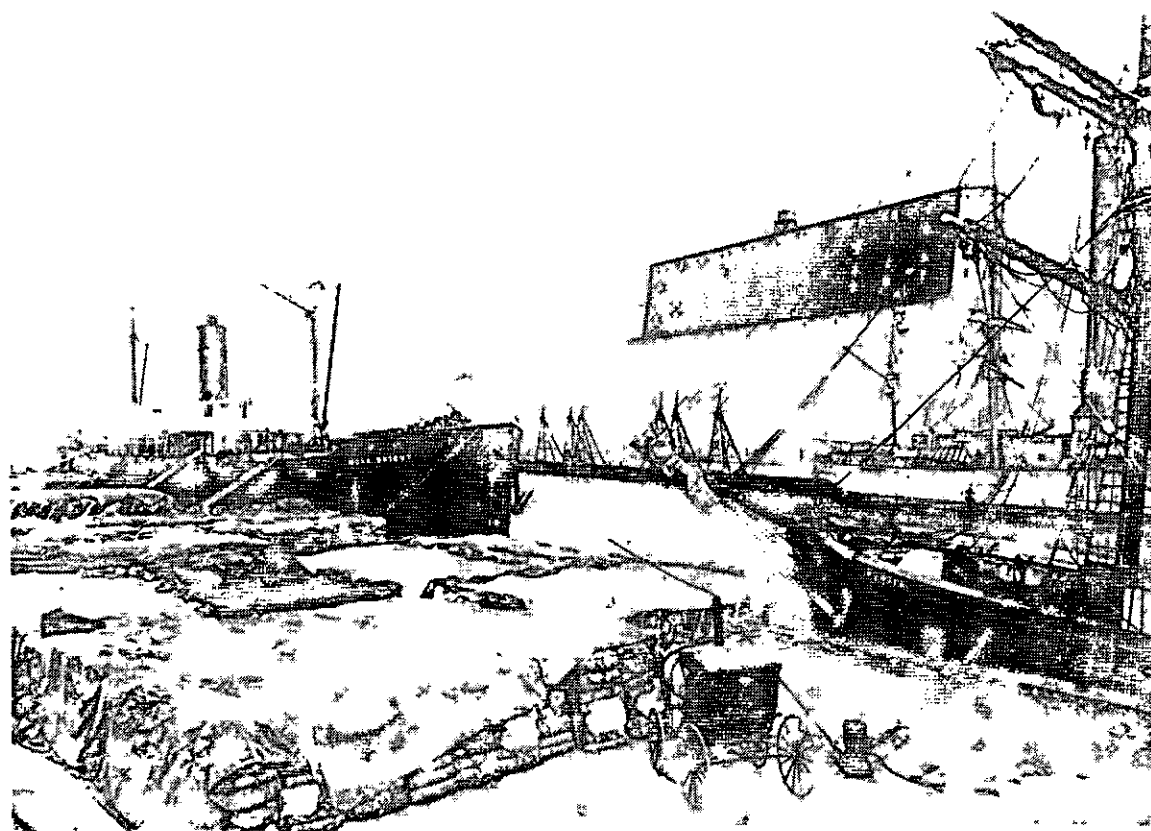


Looking toward Central Wharf, circa 1887, with the Texas Star Flour Mill in the background to the right. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

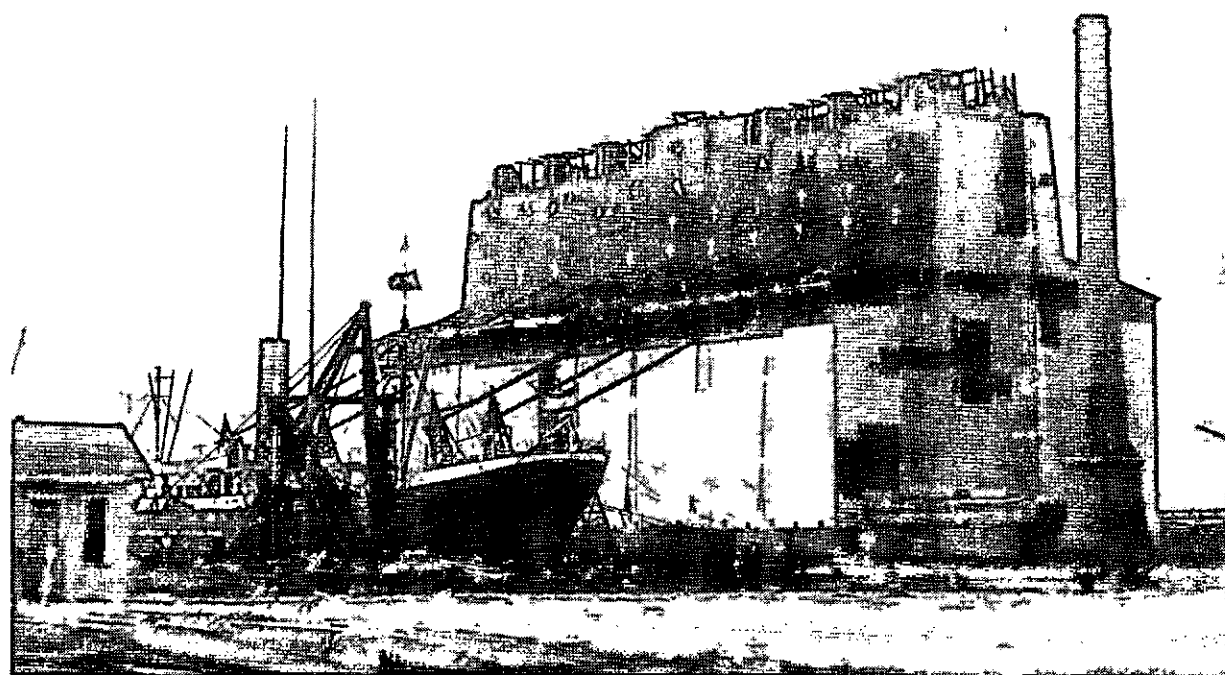


Portion of the waterfront from a bird's-eye view of Galveston published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 31, 1890. The area shown is the same location as in the post-hurricane view on page 92. Note the progress made in filling in the flats. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

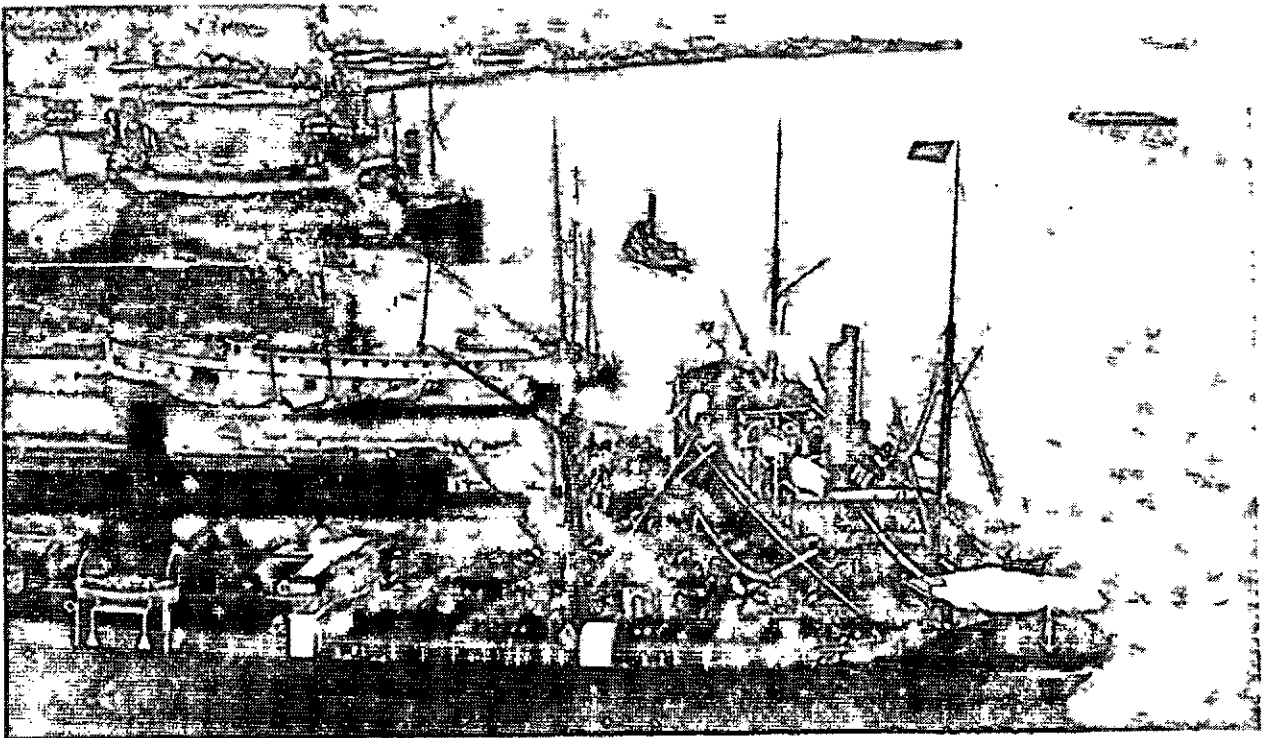




Looking from Pier 15 to Pier 14, with Elevator A in the background, circa 1894. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.



Elevator A was seriously damaged in the hurricane of September 8, 1900. Note its missing roof. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas



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*Harbor & Bay. Galveston, Tex. 1896*

THE METZ-FEIN CO. PUBLISHERS

Postcard view of the Galveston waterfront, 1896, indicative of the city's pride in its port facilities. Courtesy Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

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