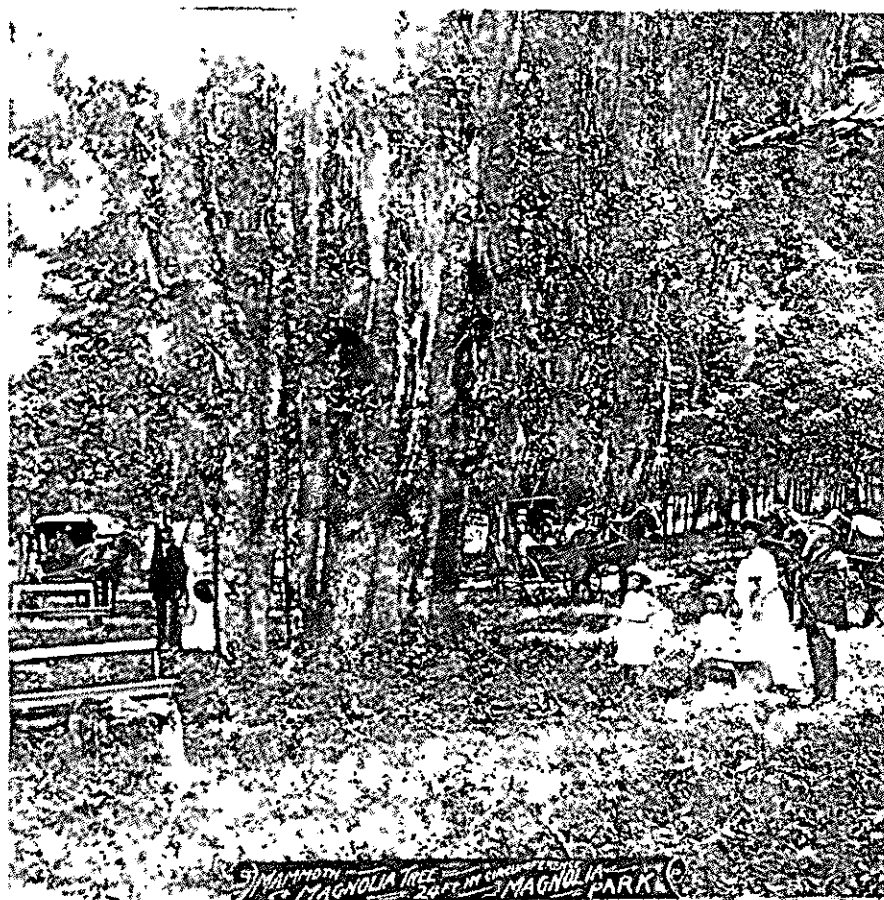


Harbor, Industry, and Homes

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the city of Houston expanded at an explosive rate. The city's slogan during these years was, "Where 17 railroads meet the sea," and it was indeed the connection between inland rail and ocean shipping in the Gulf of Mexico that assured Houston's place as the major commercial hub of the Gulf Coast region. In 1896, the U.S. Congress passed a bill to deepen Buffalo Bayou to 25 feet, so that ocean-going vessels could navigate past Harrisburg, but the project met opposition and delays. A \$1 million congressional allocation in 1902 allowed some work on a navigational channel and also on a turning basin, which was completed in 1904 just above Harrisburg. Workmen finished dredging the bayou to an 18½-foot depth in 1908. In 1914, it was dredged again, reaching the 25-foot depth which allowed full usage by larger ocean-going vessels. Houston thus became an official deep-water port. The Houston Ship Channel carried traffic from the increasingly important petroleum industry as well as from the traditional agribusiness commodities such as cotton and lumber which had long formed the basis of Houston's economy. Oil refineries, cotton compresses, railroad yards, wharves, and warehouses sprouted up along the Channel. These new industries required a large labor force, accessibly housed—and Houston entrepreneurs rushed to the Channel with land development schemes to fill the need.

The situation was exactly right to build industrial "new towns." Town planning was a popular concept at the turn of the century: some models stressed the integration of the work place with residential life, while others offset the disadvantages of traditional city living with the concept of the garden suburb. One of the offshoots of the Progressive urban reform movement, which flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was the drive to establish planned communities for poor and working-class families. Reformers hoped that these new towns would develop around the industrial areas that were locating outside the city limits of most large American metropolises. Streetcars to the central city allowed massive suburban residential development for the growing managerial and professional class, but less affluent families still needed to be physically close to their place of employment. Relocating industrial and residential complexes on the urban fringe, on more inexpensive land, allowed workers to



In the 1890s, Magnolia Park was a sylvan retreat for picnickers.

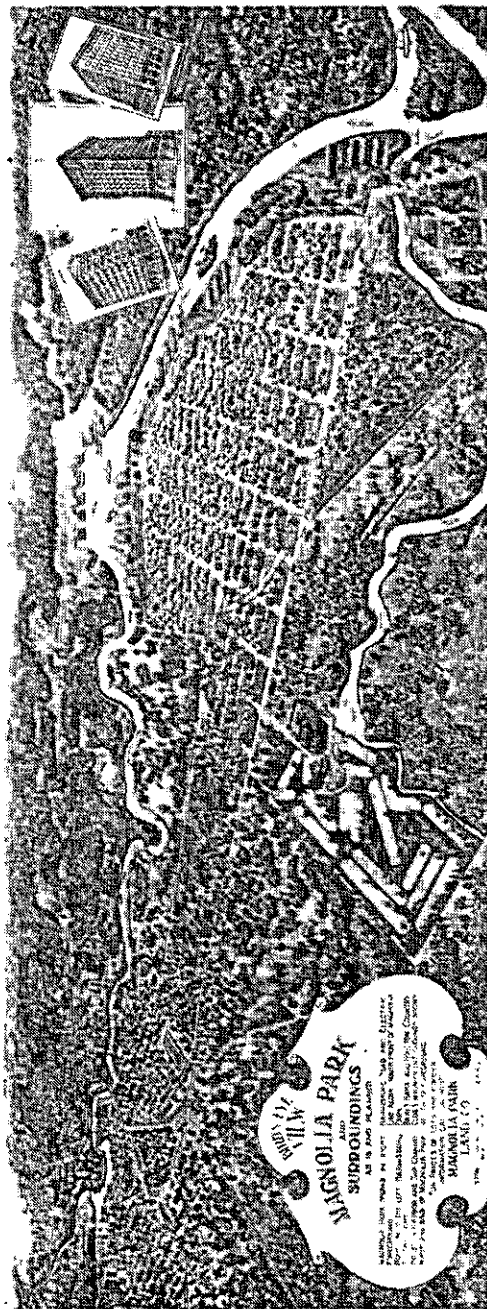
have their own small single-family homes. Initially, many of these projects were begun by large corporations, but the failure of George Pullman's model town outside Chicago in the 1890s left the development of future projects in the hands of private real estate developers.

The first such planned development in the Houston area was the Houston Heights, laid out in 1891 as an attractive working-class area along the railroad lines north of the city. But the industrial planned town found its widest local application along the new Houston Ship Channel. The first area to be developed was immediately adjacent to the Turning Basin, ultimately resulting in the creation of the communities of Magnolia Park, Central Park, Houston Harbor, and Port Houston.

The history of Magnolia Park, on the south side of Buffalo Bayou, had begun with a business speculation in the nineteenth century. The area's owner, John Thomas Brady, was a participant in early efforts to provide a deep-water channel to Houston and wanted his land to become the railroad connection to the hoped-for channel. With this in mind, he constructed the Houston Belt and Magnolia Park Railway. However, the Southern Pacific Railroad and its associated Morgan shipping interests chose to locate on the north side of the bayou. Since Brady's land featured magnolia trees which had long been admired by Texas travelers, he decided to turn his land into a park. With its dance and concert pavilion, pleasure boats, and winding paths through beautiful sylvan groves, Magnolia Park proved extremely popular with Houstonians. Publisher Charles Morse described the park in an 1893 souvenir album of Houston: "there is but one Magnolia Park in all the world. . . which is destined to make the city famous throughout America, as was Central Park, New York, Woodard's Gardens, San Francisco, and Shaw's Garden, St. Louis."

As work progressed on the Turning Basin and Ship Channel, there was renewed interest in developing the area. Several corporations formed and dissolved, and finally in 1909 the Magnolia Park Land Company acquired 431 acres on the south side of the bayou and began to plat and market it as the Magnolia Park subdivision. President of the Magnolia Park Land Company was entrepreneur J. R. Cheek. As the new company almost regretfully pointed out in a booklet published in June 1909, "the time has now fully come when commercialism must, in part, transform this scene of woodland beauty into one of humming wheels and busy factories and mercantile houses; and, in part, into a charming neighborhood of homes, tree-studded lawns and shaded streets; where the music of children's voices may always be heard mingled with the sighing of the pines. The tide of progress and development must at last sweep over it."

Aggressively marketed both locally and out of state, Magnolia Park lots were offered for as little as \$200 or less, and could be purchased on terms of



Magnolia Park Lots

at present prices are as sure to grow in value as
Houston is sure to grow

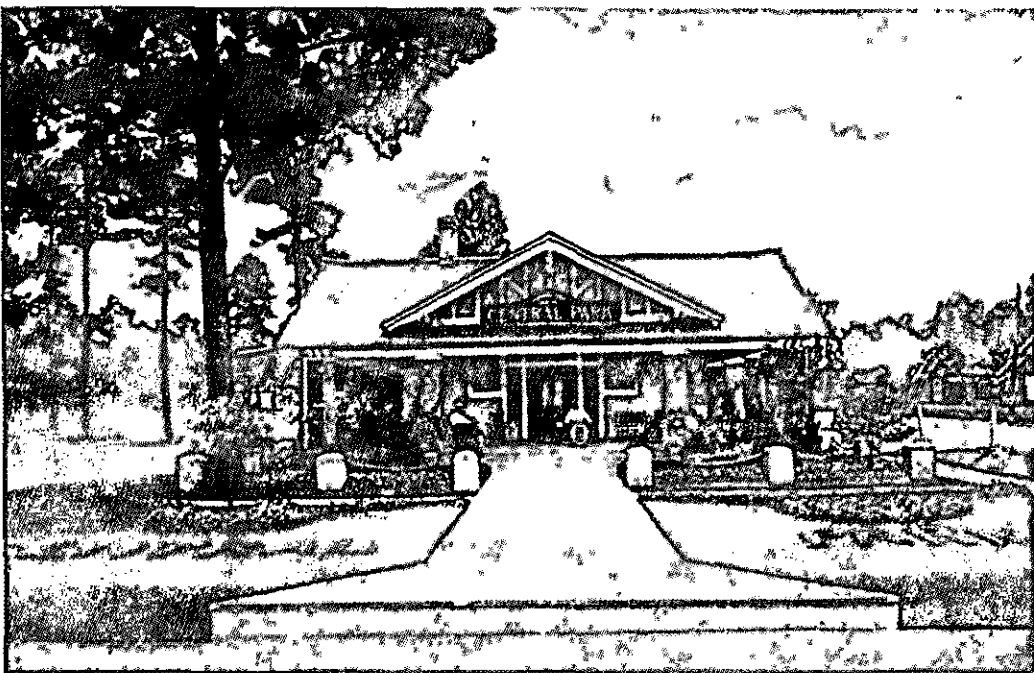
This bird's-eye view advertising lots in Magnolia Park shows a neat separation of industrial facilities along the Turning Basin and wooded residential lots within the subdivision proper.

\$5.00 down and \$5.00 per month. Lots priced from \$200 to \$400 could be purchased for \$10.00 down and \$10.00 per month, while those priced over \$400 cost \$15.00 down and \$15.00 per month. By May 1910, the company claimed to have sold two thousand lots. Telephone service was soon in operation with electric service following close behind. Access to downtown Houston was relatively easy via the paved Harrisburg Road. An electric street car line ran along the road, allowing Magnolia Park residents to reach Houston in only 20 minutes for a cost of five cents.

The market which the Magnolia Park Land Company aimed at in their advertising brochures was a mix of investors and prospective residents. For the homeowner, the brochures stressed the beauty of the area. "To have a picturesque home and grounds in Magnolia Park, one need not undergo the expense and tedious years of waiting for the growing of trees and shrubbery: they are there now, evergreen and deciduous, set by Nature's skillful hand." The combination of natural beauty and ease of access to Houston proper made the area suitable as "high class residence property." The easy purchase terms for the lots, along with special inducements such as "life insurance"—in case of the purchaser's death, title to the land passed to the heirs without further payment—made it attractive to would-be home builders. The company was direct in its appeals to investors, as well. "No man can get rich from *saving alone!*" one brochure remarked. "*He must invest his money where it will grow.*" Glowing reports of the future growth of Houston down the Channel and assurances that the area would increase in value many times over in the following years were interspersed with the prospect of immediate profits since "houses erected there find ready tenants at a rental which gives handsome returns on your investment."

The Magnolia Park development was apparently a success for its backers, since the company went on to develop adjacent Central Park in 1912. By that time, Magnolia Park's population was given as 1,600 and a second street car line was under construction in the area. Lots in Central Park started at \$7.00 cash and \$7.00 monthly. "The city's greatest growth is in this district [around the Ship Channel] and houses are going up on all sides," announced the Magnolia Park Land Company. The market was much the same as that for Magnolia Park, primarily small investors. The Magnolia Park Land Company went on to develop more subdivisions in the Channel area during the 1920s, such as Manchester (east of Harrisburg) in 1921 and Pecan Park (a more traditional residential development southwest of Harrisburg) in 1927.

Meanwhile, development was also taking place on the north side of Buffalo Bayou. The Port Houston subdivision had easy access to the sheds and industries lining the northeast side of the Turning Basin, along the Texas and New Orleans Railroad line. Port Houston was developed about

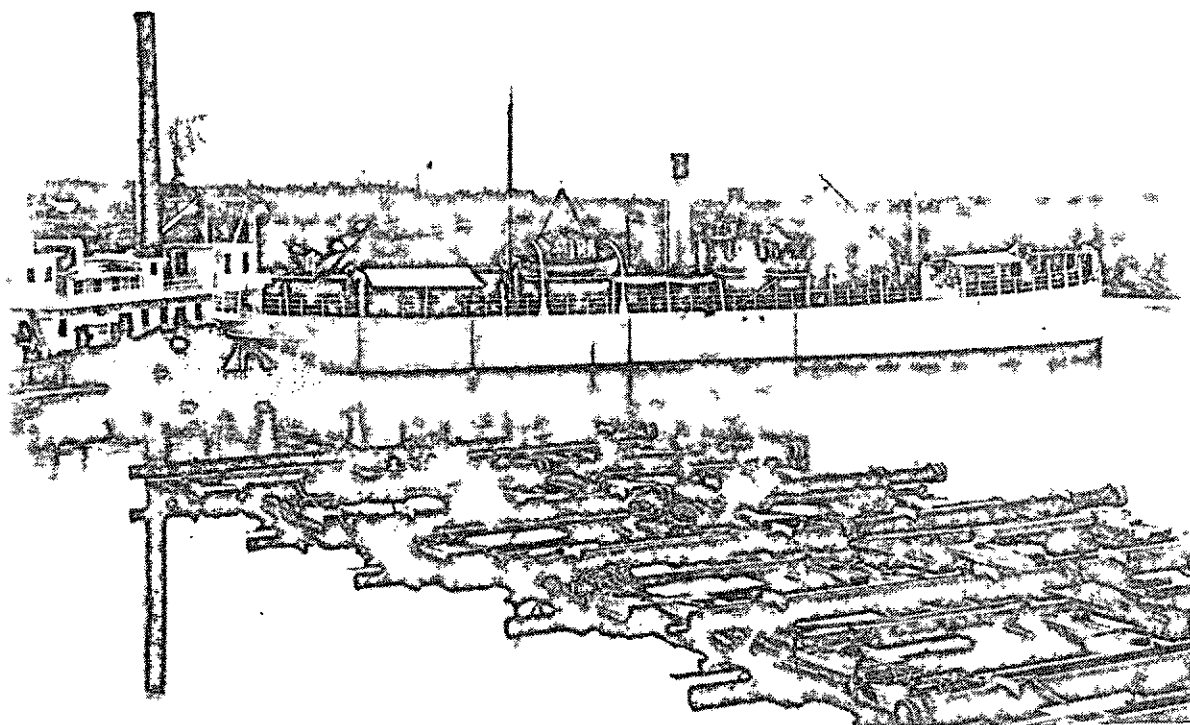


The Central Park sales office of the Magnolia Park Land Company carried out the "desirable residential property" theme with its domestic exterior and extensive flower beds.

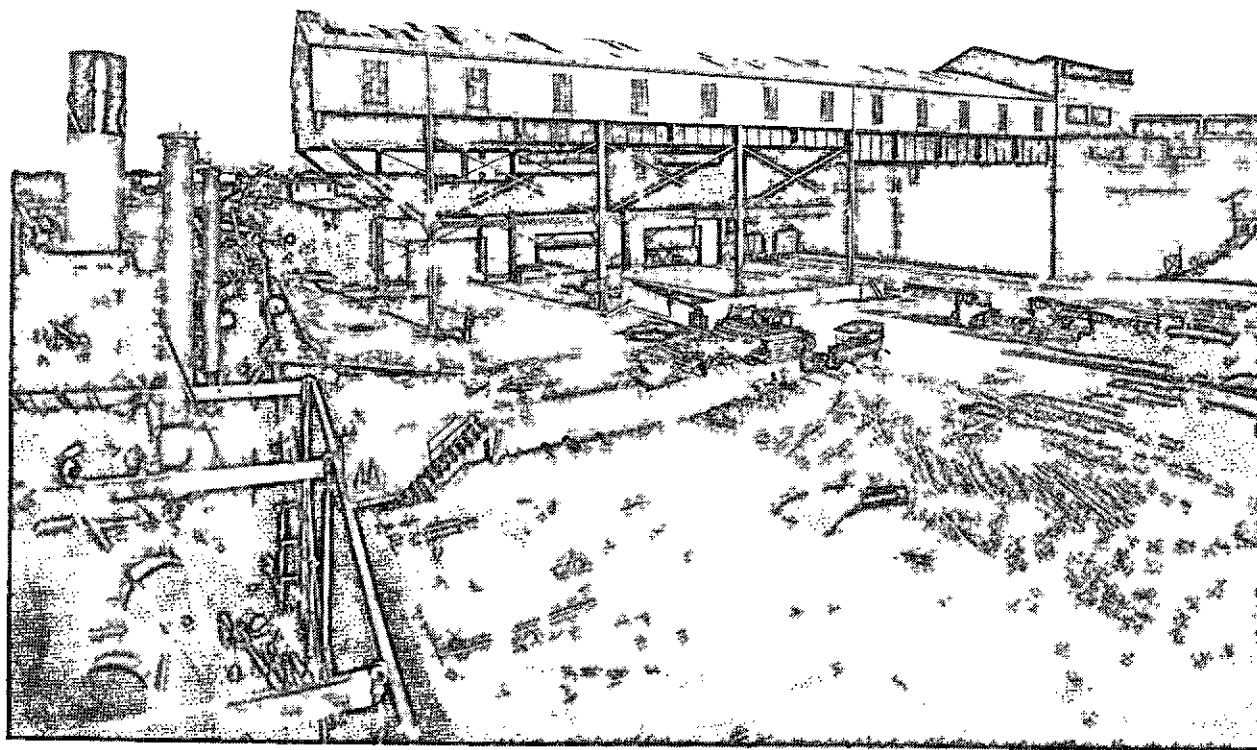
home to the largest Houston barrio by 1929. Many of the newcomers built their own single-family frame homes. Mexican Americans in Magnolia Park established a wide range of community institutions, including mutual aid societies, religious organizations, and theatrical groups.

Over the years, residential as well as industrial development continued to fill in along the Ship Channel. Much of the Houston Harbor and Port Houston subdivisions were added to the City of Houston in its 1913 expansion of boundaries, while Central Park and Magnolia Park were annexed in 1926. The area around the Turning Basin more than fulfilled its promise of growth: from undeveloped land at the turn of the century to a series of industrial complexes and working-class neighborhoods by World War I. The Magnolia Park Land Company and other developers did, indeed, accurately predict the future value of the land, in the best of Houston's booster tradition.

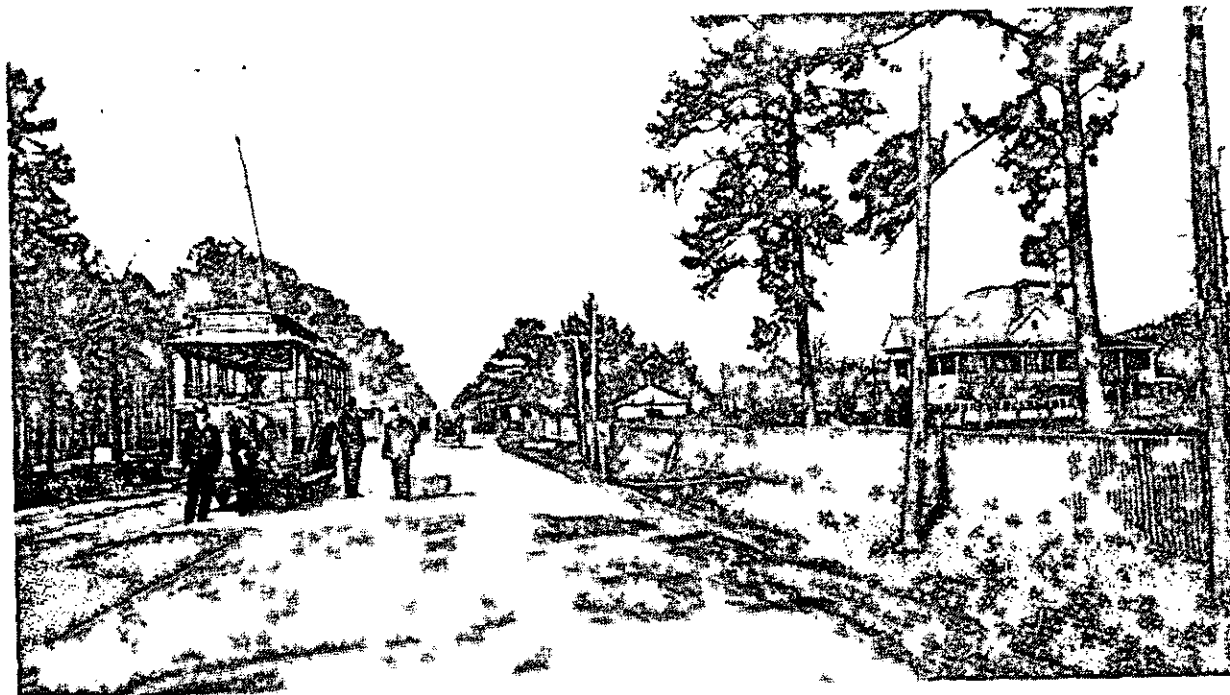
Nancy Hadley
Associate Editor



This large dredge and pontoon pipes were being used to form slips at the edge of the Turning Basin.



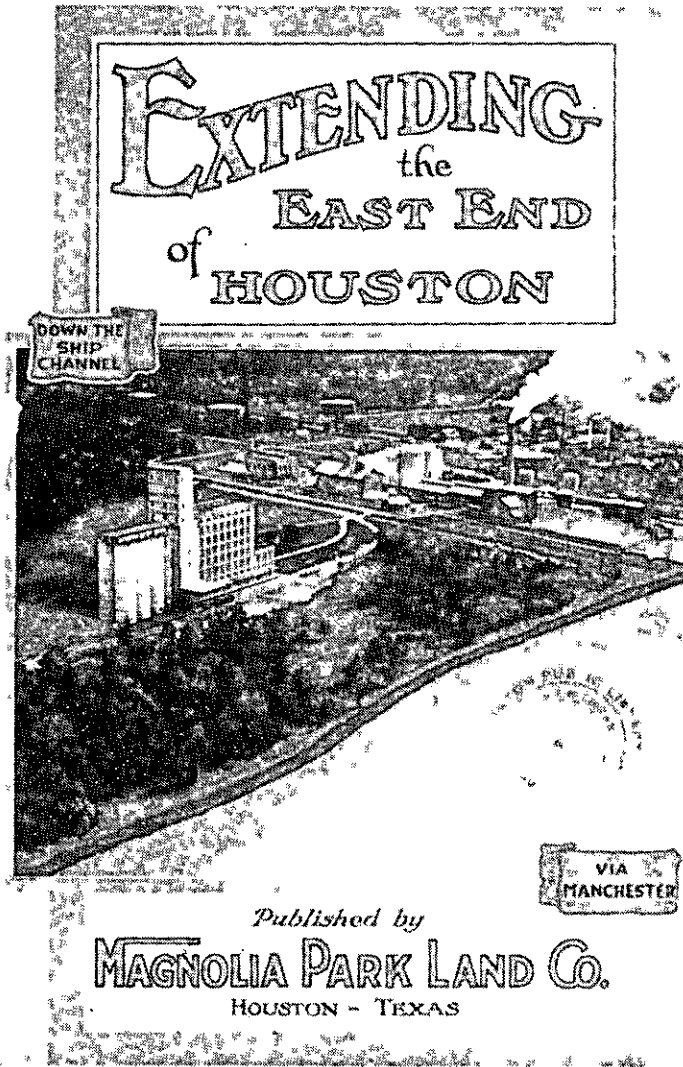
Municipal Wharf No. 4 in 1922, complete with storage facilities and an electric crane.



The electric streetcar connected Magnolia Park with Houston along the shell-surfaced Harrishburg Road.



The company's advertising brochure used this photograph, apparently of a proud homeowner, to illustrate "Samples of Homes Being Erected in Magnolia Park."



Published by
MAGNOLIA PARK LAND CO.
 HOUSTON - TEXAS

This 1920s brochure for the Manchester subdivision focused almost entirely on industrial development, although it was used to sell residential lots.

Houston Architecture
 Gerald M. ...
 (Houston: ...
 1990.) Pp.

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