

Detail showing City Hall and Market House, from Augustus Koch, "Bird's Eye View of the City of Houston" (1873). The entire map is pictured on page 52.

Watching Houston Grow: Maps in the Houston Public Library's Collection

Carol Johnson

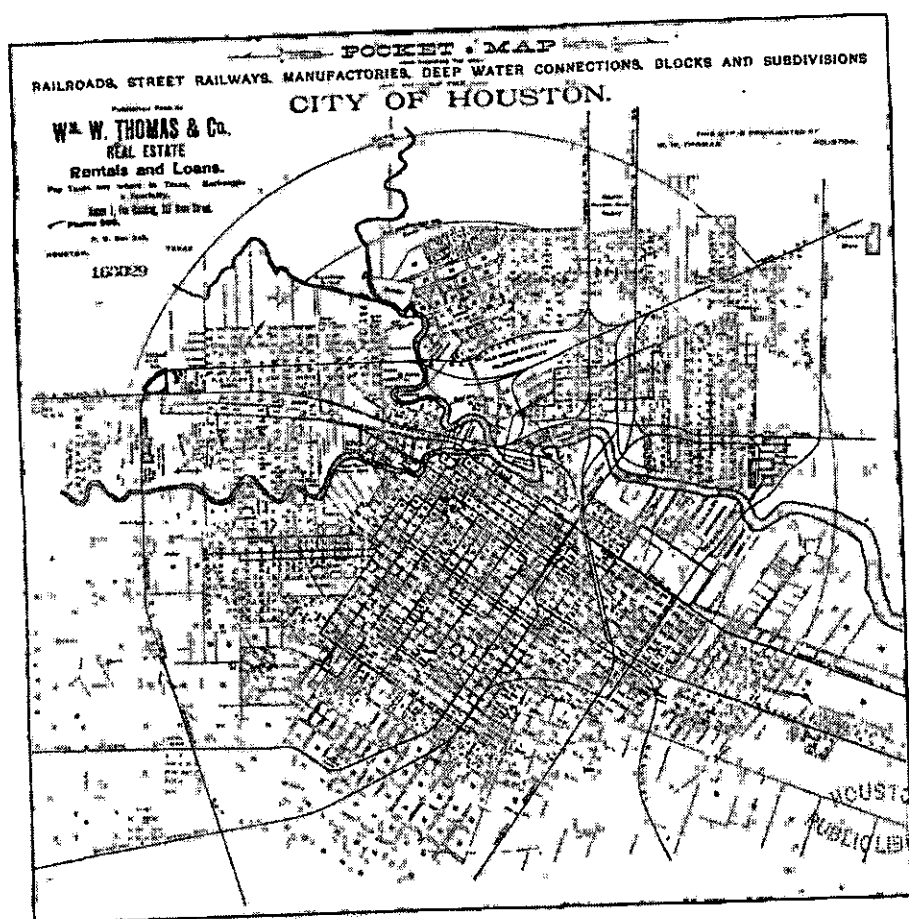
This essay is the second of a series intended to highlight Houston Public Library's historic Texas map collection. The previous article, "Texas and Houston, 1836-1846: Maps in the Houston Public Library's Collection," in Vol. XIV, No. 3, featured the earliest Houston maps, dating from the period of the Texas Republic.

A city grows in various aspects that can be either seen or inferred from maps. The Texas and Local History collection of Houston Public Library features a variety of maps showing Houston from its inception to the present. Depending on their purpose, these maps vary in style, scale, and theme. Taken as a whole, the collection offers a visual summary of the city's physical, architectural, and economic development.

By the time Texas achieved statehood in 1846, the city of Houston had expanded well beyond the 147 acres initially platted for the Allen brothers by Gail and Thomas Borden. Although the seat of government had been removed from Houston to Austin in 1839, the "commercial emporium" envisioned by John and Augustus Allen had become a reality, and Houston's standing as a center for trade and transportation was firmly established as the basis of its growth into today's metropolis.

The aspect of growth that is easiest to represent by maps is, of course, physical expansion. The city incorporated in 1837 with the original 147 acres. Eighteen months later, a reincorporation expanded the area tenfold to encompass a wedge of land on either side of Buffalo Bayou. A second reincorporation in 1840 tripled that area to 6.57 square miles. These 1840 limits held until the turn of the century with one short interruption. An 1870 expansion to 25 square miles proved unmanageable and was rescinded in 1874.

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Wm. W. Thomas & Co., "Pocket Map Showing the Railroads, Street Railways, Manufactories, Deep Water Connections, Blocks and Subdivisions of the City of Houston" (ca. 1895).

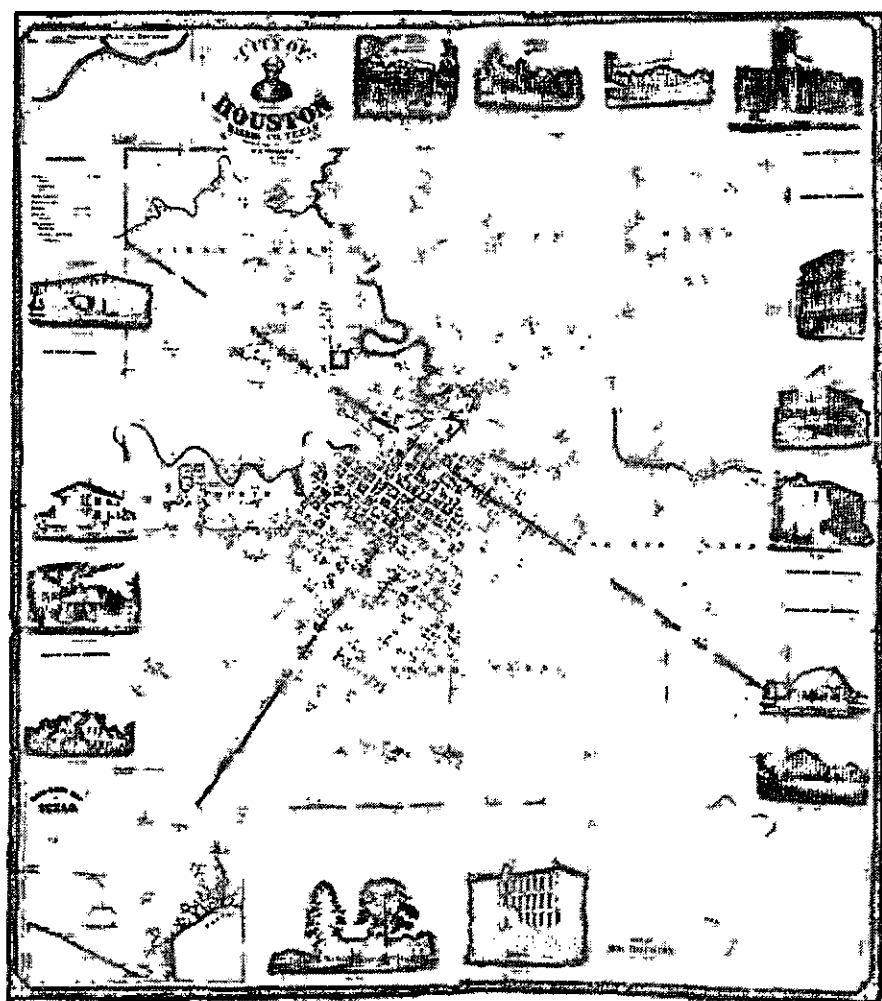
The pattern of development within the 1840-1903 city limits can be seen in an advertising circular, "Pocket Map Showing the Railroads, Street Railways, Manufactories, Deep Water Connections, Blocks, and Subdivisions," distributed by the real estate firm Wm. W. Thomas & Co. in the 1890s. The commercial emphasis of this map is reflected in the dominance of rail and industry among the labeled features, though parks, cemeteries, and residential blocks are readily identifiable. Only one subdivision, Riverside Park, is labeled by name. Larger land holdings, presumably still in agricultural use, can be seen south of the developed areas.

A dominant feature of most Houston maps throughout the nineteenth century is the outline of ward boundaries. From the early 1840s until the city government was reorganized in 1915, these were primarily political units, with aldermen representing each ward and a mayor elected by all. The wards were defined by Main and Congress streets, Buffalo and White Oak bayous, and the city limits. The Sixth Ward was split from the Fourth around 1897 using the natural boundary, Buffalo Bayou. During the 75 or so years under the ward system, it became commonplace to refer to the wards as a means of pinpointing locations. Although the wards lost their original political significance after the mayor-alderman form of government was abandoned, the designations continued to appear as labels on some city maps. Even today the terms retain some of their geographic meaning.

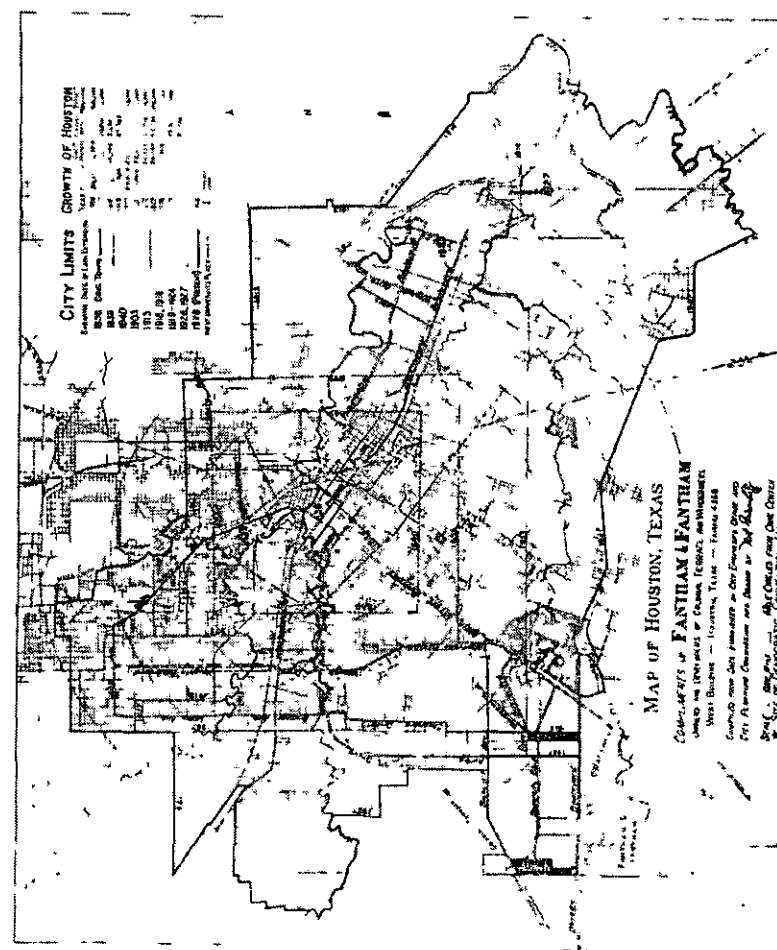
Beginning in 1903, the city established a pattern of frequently annexing small tracts of land. More than 50 such annexations, most of them less than one square mile, brought the city's total to nearly 76 square miles by the end of 1949, when a single dramatic annexation more than doubled its reach in an attempt to prevent encirclement by independently incorporated suburban towns. Bad feelings resulting from that preemptive action simmered until after Houston redoubled itself in 1956 and then settled once again to absorbing smaller tracts, with occasional deannexations reflecting the difficulty of providing municipal services to newly added areas.¹

Researchers using the map collection often want to display the expansion of the city's boundaries over a period of time. This information is represented very clearly on a number of maps that superimpose dated city limit lines over the streets or other geography. One of the clearest of these was issued in 1928 by developers Fantham & Fantham. Notes on the map point to the locations under development by the company, Colonial Terrace and Windermere, as well as a tract "to be developed." Historically valuable statistics on telephone and utility connections are compiled in a table. The site of the Democratic

¹David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 139.



W. E. Wood, "City of Houston, Harris Co., Texas" (1869). The Wood map, measuring 66 x 58 inches, shows the footprint of every building in the city. The boundaries of the five existing wards are highlighted, and engravings of some of the city's principal buildings surround the map. The City Council officially approved the map as accurate.



Neil Geisenhoff, "Map of Houston, Texas, Compliments of Fantham & Fantham, Owners and Developers of Colonial Terrace and Windermere. . . ." (1928). The city limits and Fantham & Fantham's developments are shown in red.

National Convention Hall—a matter of current general interest in Houston in 1928—is marked with a star.

For the most part, tracts of land annexed to the city in this century have been substantially developed before the city moved to encompass them. In some instances the city has absorbed areas already chartered as independent, incorporated towns. One such town was Harrisburg, which was settled earlier than Houston but was burned during the Texas Revolution. Although the rebuilt town rivaled Houston as a transportation hub for some years, Houston's industrial growth along the ship channel predominated. Harrisburg was officially absorbed in 1926. Maps in the collection reflect the independent Harrisburg from 1840 to 1924, but by the late 1920s it appears on Houston maps labeled as a subdivision.

Another town that maintained an independent status for a period of time was Houston Heights. Conceived by developers from the Omaha and South Texas Land Company in 1891 as a fully planned, largely self-contained community, this early Houston suburb quickly established a commercial and industrial base including a streetcar company, an electric utility, and smaller businesses to support the residents' needs; other industries soon followed. The town voted to incorporate in 1896; 22 years later, in February 1918, its citizens voted to accept annexation to Houston.²

Perhaps the need to attract residents to the Heights from the larger city increased the utility of the promotional flyer featuring a map as a sales tool. Two of these promotional maps for Houston Heights in the collection embody both the artistic and the historical value of the type. Drawings of important homes, industrial plants, and public buildings, marvelously detailed and highlighted with color, accompany the usual outlines of streets and facilities. Featured text offers descriptive and statistical details. The 1890 Heights map calls attention to the same amenities that sell residential property even today: "Excellent Schools," "Nominal Taxes," "Pure Artesian Water," and "Miles of Sidewalks," among others.

Although Houston sometimes grew by absorbing independent municipalities like Harrisburg and Houston Heights, more often the city expanded by redrawing its limits outward to encompass newly built residential developments. One by one throughout the first half of the twentieth century, substantial landholdings were platted for residential use, built and sold to accommodate the growing population, and then annexed. Many of these subdivisions retain their identity as neighborhoods to the present day.

²Dorothy Knox Howe Houghton et al., *Houston's Forgotten Heritage: Landscape, Houses, Interiors, 1824-1914* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1991), 41-42.



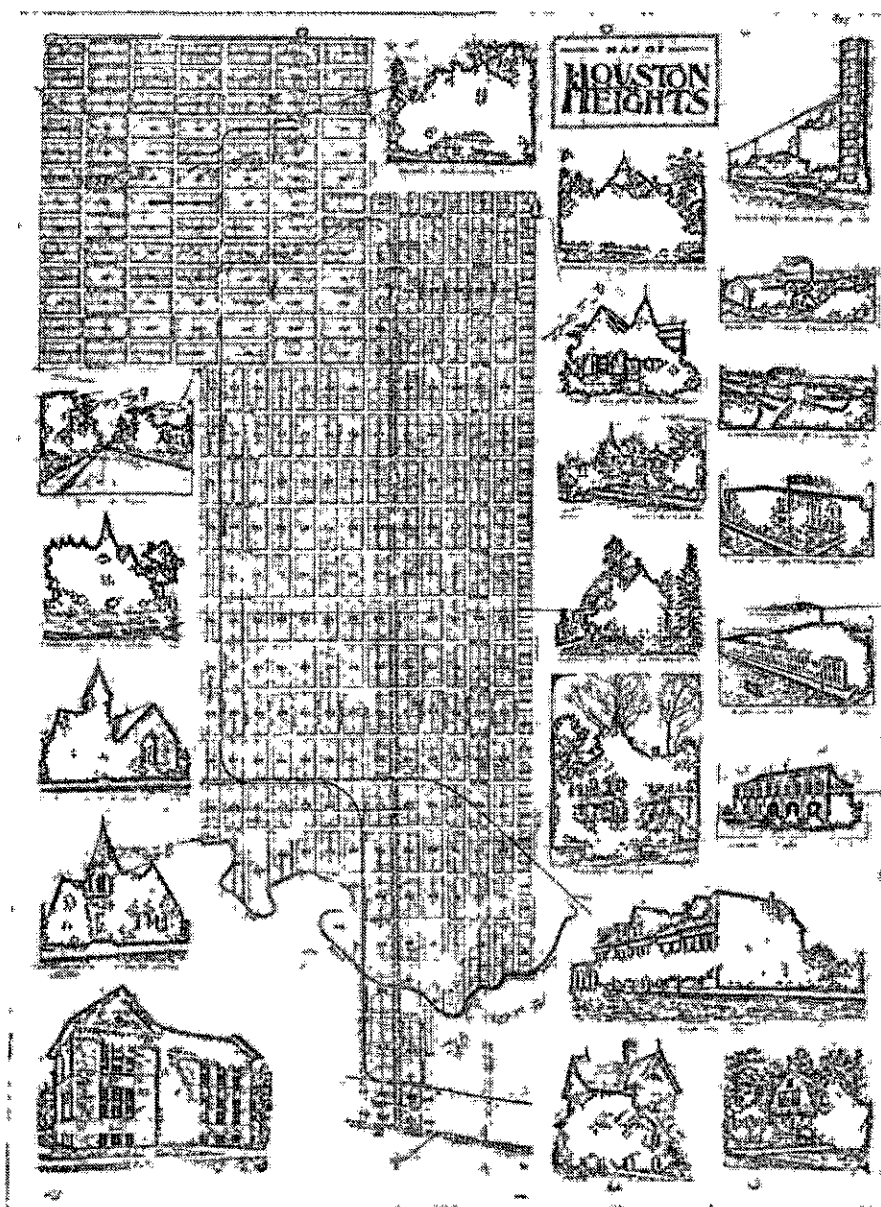
Detail from "Map of Houston Heights" (1890), shown on page 48.

HMRC's subdivision collection includes assorted documentation, including plats and promotional maps, for many of these neighborhoods.

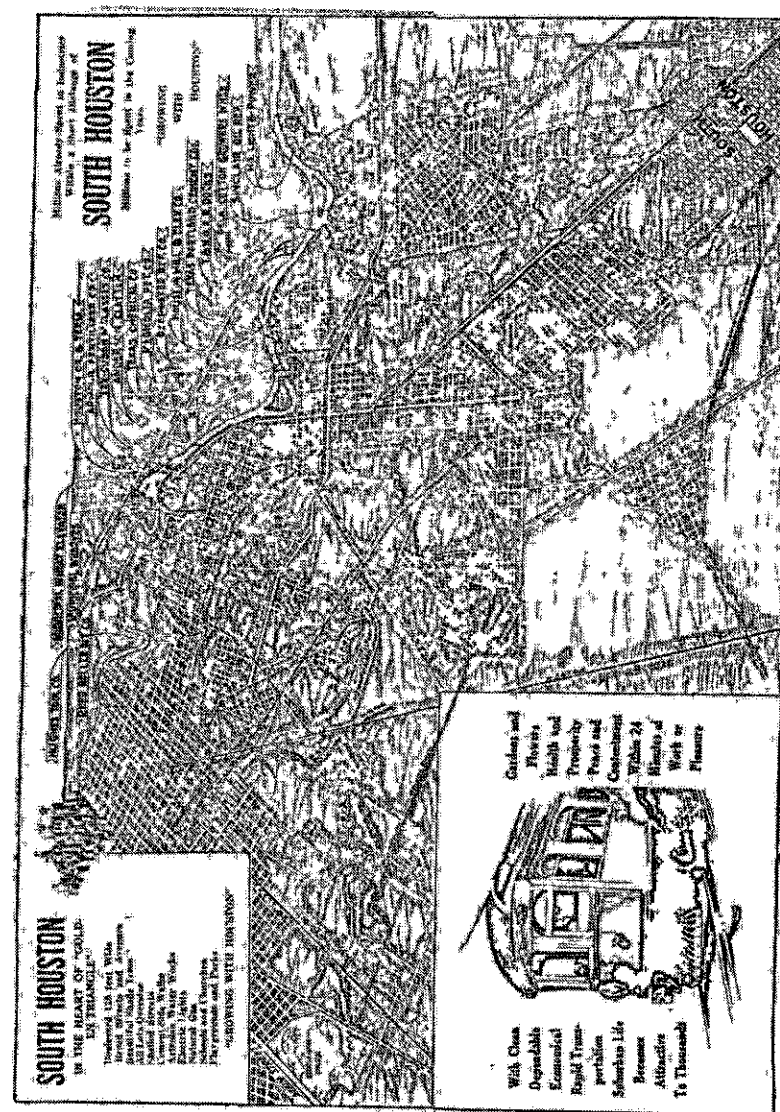
One of the most prestigious of the developments was and is River Oaks, which was planned and built under the leadership of Will and Mike Hogg with their partner, Hugh Potter, beginning in 1923. The carefully planned community was situated adjoining the newly established River Oaks Country Club to attract potential residents who would enjoy the club's busy calendar of athletic and social events. The plan for the area incorporated the best features of similar developments nationwide, with the physical amenities of streets and utilities, the recreational facilities centering on the country club and a five-acre playground for the children, and the aesthetic benefits of architectural guidelines and acreage set aside for gardens and parks. Easy access to downtown Houston was provided for and quickly achieved with the extension of Buffalo Drive (now Allen Parkway), West Gray, and Westheimer Road to the entrance of the development.³

The growth and vitality of this community is unusually well documented in the library's collection with a succession of promotional maps and other publications. One example, a 1928 map of Houston published by Country Club Estates, precursor of the River Oaks Corporation, represents the entire city with a residential buyer's eye, prominently labeling and color-coding the parks and subdivisions. River Oaks is highlighted in commanding red and detailed with a separate, enlarged map on the reverse side.

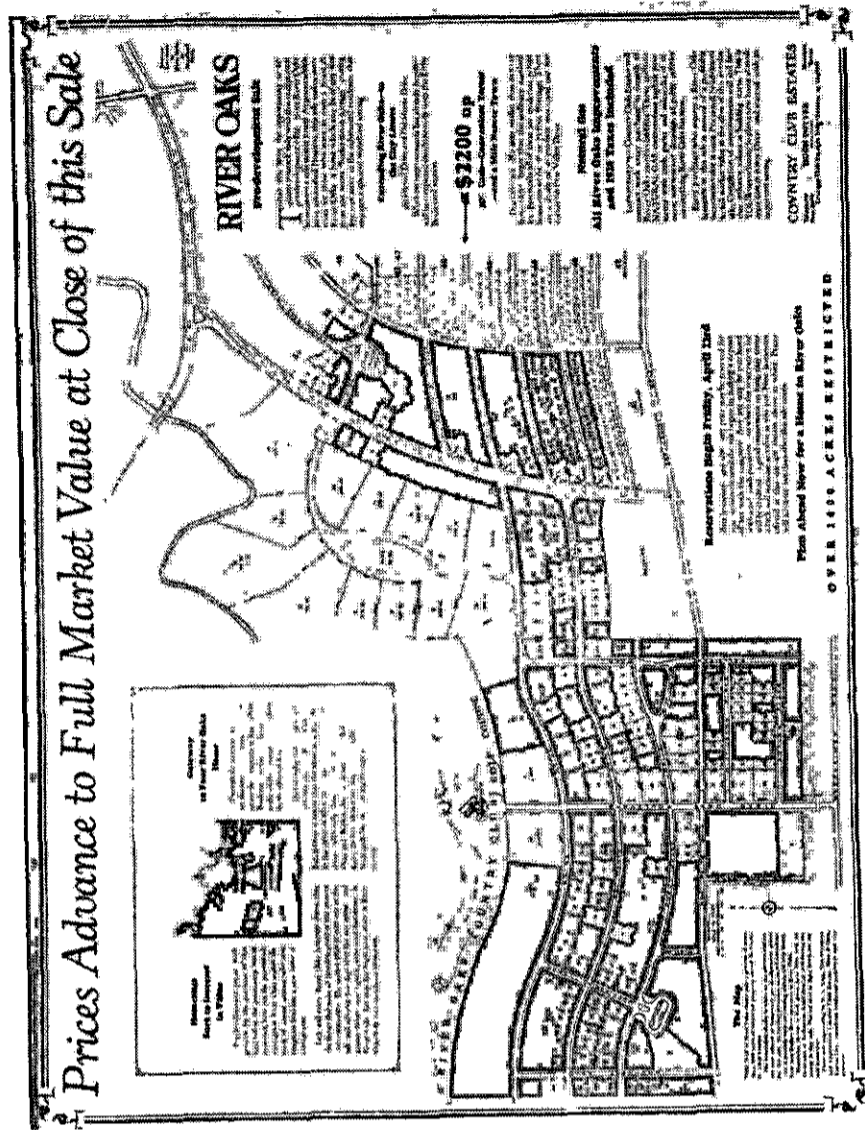
³*Living in River Oaks* (published as Anniversary Edition, *River Oaks Magazine* 5, no. 4, May 1941).



"Map of Houston Heights" (1890). Distributed by the developers, the map shows the layout of the new town and also features engravings of industrial and residential buildings (see page 47).



"South Houston" (1911), issued by Suburban Homes Co., Inc. The new industrial residential suburb of South Houston is shown in the lower right, with downtown Houston in the upper left. Industries along the ship channel are named, and nearby suburbs along the interurban line or major streets are carefully drawn. On the reverse is a detailed map of the lots in South Houston.



"River Oaks" (ca. 1926) issued by Country Club Estates, developers of the new subdivision.

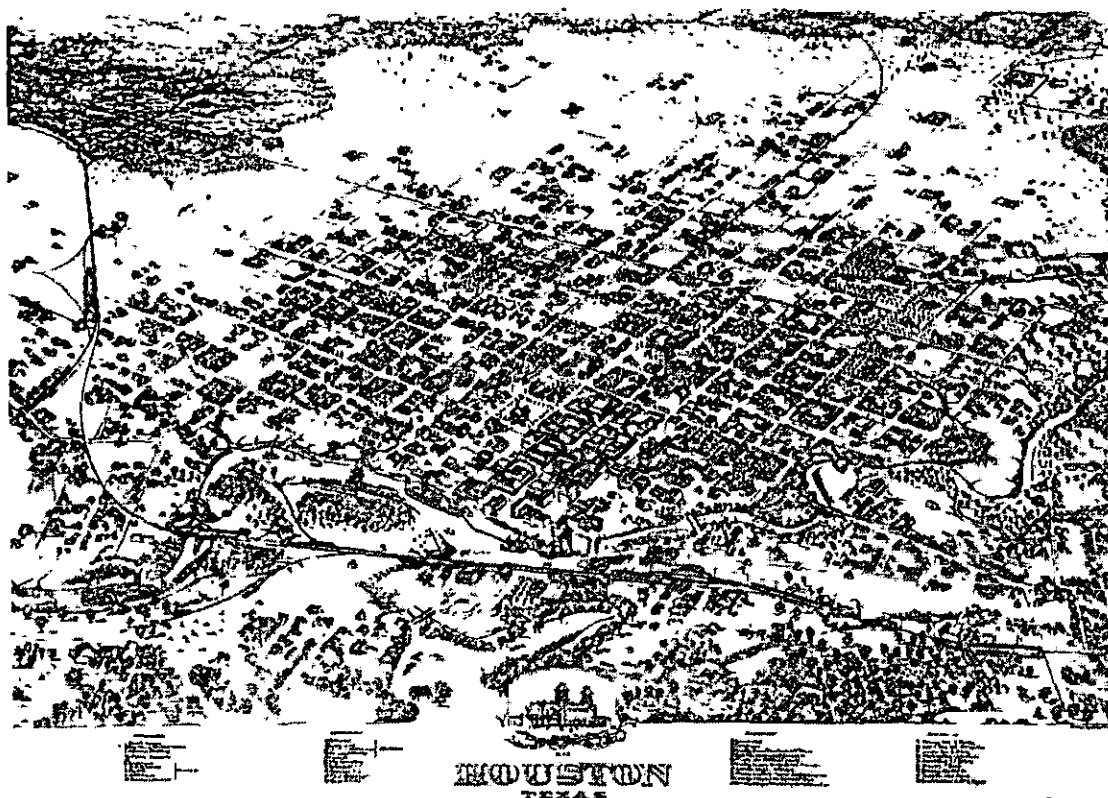
While maps promoting real estate development were very attractive and often contained historically significant details about the industrial and residential organization of the city, another, more artistic form of map was the bird's-eye view. This format originated in Europe and enjoyed a heyday in the developing nineteenth-century American West, including Texas. These detailed representations of cities and towns as seen from an advantageous, but imaginary, position in the air were produced by commercial publishers and sold by subscription at retail. In some cases they were distributed as advertising literature by railroads, real estate firms, banks, and other enterprises desiring to foster interest in a given location. The views became a popular art form commonly used to decorate the walls of offices and homes.

Augustus Koch was a traveling artist who focused his efforts on Texas cities for a time in the early 1870s, producing views of Austin, San Antonio, and Houston in quick succession.⁴ An original of Koch's 1873 Houston view represents the urban scene with an accuracy born of careful, personal observation. Extraordinary architectural detail can be seen in homes, churches, public buildings such as City Hall, commercial and office buildings, and some 16 factories and mills enumerated in the key. Transportation and communication are vividly depicted. Traffic on Buffalo Bayou includes passenger sidewheelers *T. M. Bagby* and *Diana*, cargo vessels up to three masts, and smaller boats. Both passenger and freight trains are on the move. Pedestrians and wagons are shown on the streets. A telegraph line runs 14 blocks from the rail depot into the center of town. Several bridges span the bayous. Trees, gardens, and uncleared land are easily identifiable.

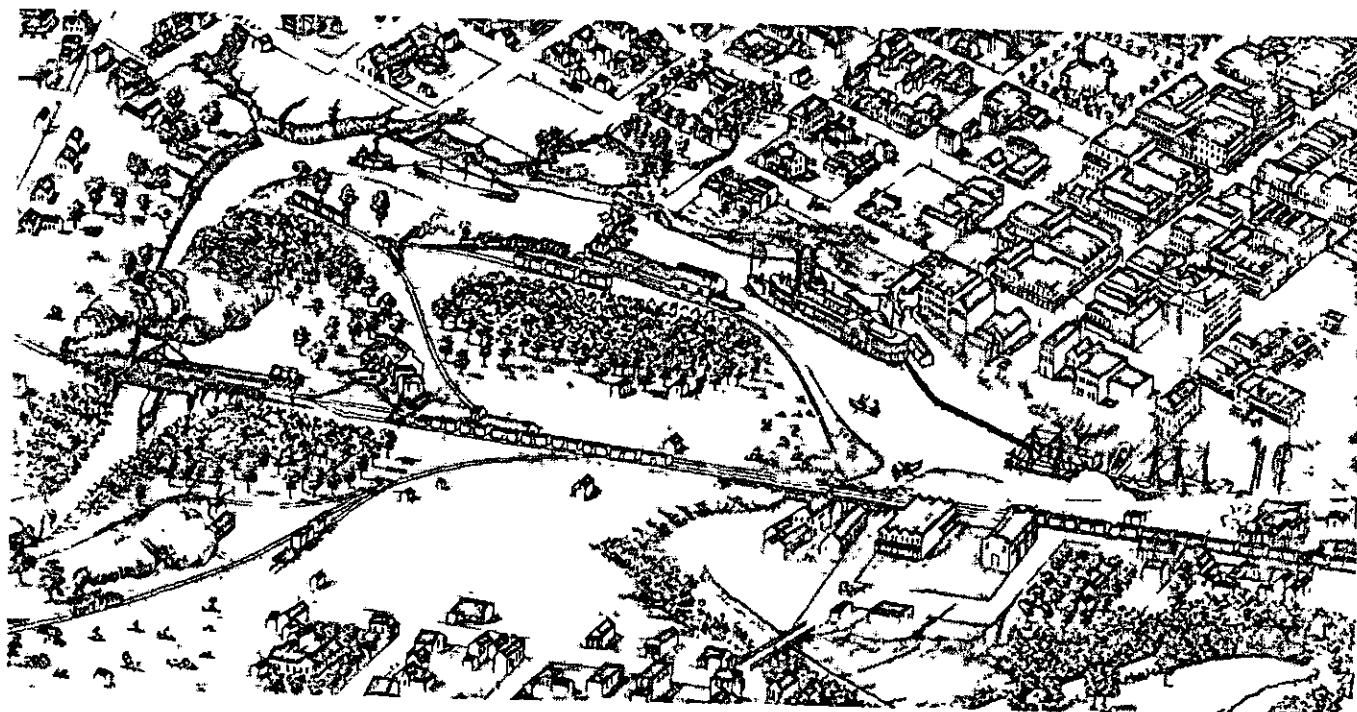
Similar levels of detail can be seen in a reproduction of a better-known 1891 view from the Library of Congress collection. Much of the fascination in these views lies in noting the changes in the city in a short 18 years. The scale of this view is necessarily smaller in order to represent the full urban panorama, which is much expanded since 1873. The surrounding forest has retreated. Industry now dominates the north side of Buffalo Bayou, evidenced by smokestacks at regular intervals along its banks. Both rail lines and churches have multiplied—there are now five rail depots instead of two—and residential areas have expanded. Cotton dominates the index of major industrial establishments. The Cotton Exchange, one gin, and three compress companies are itemized.

The bird's-eye technique captures so much information in so attractive a package that it has retained its popularity with later artists. The map collection features several additional examples showing primarily downtown

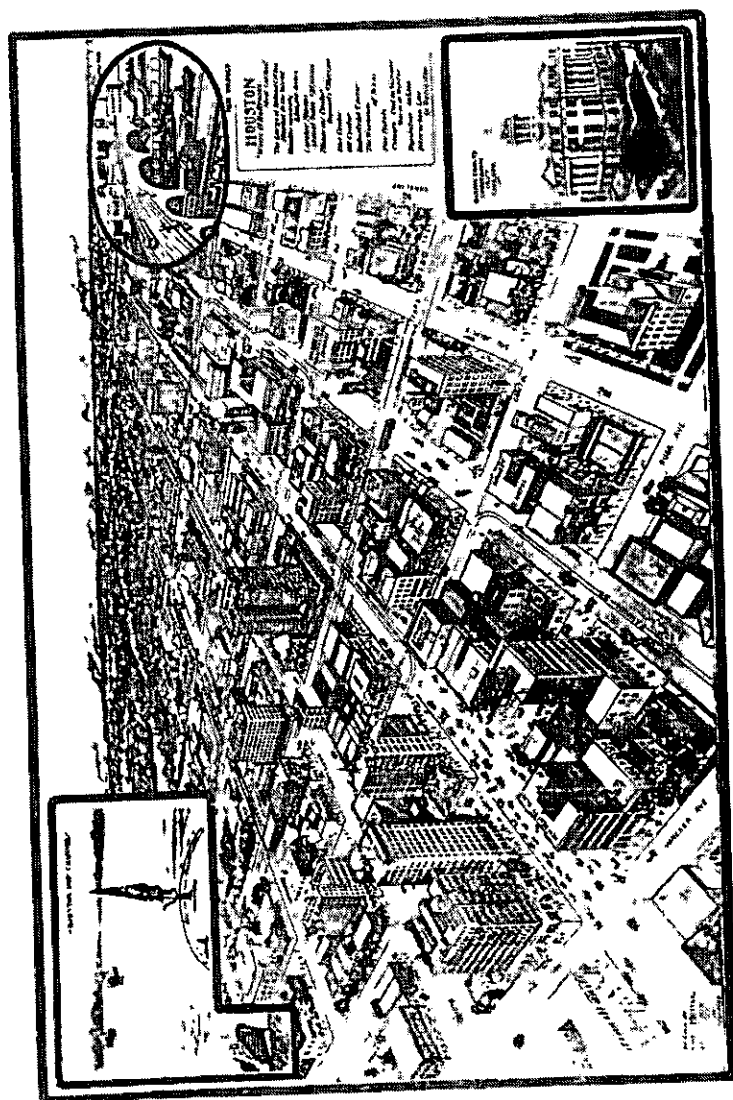
⁴John W. Reys, *Cities on Stone: Nineteenth Century Lithograph Images of the Urban West* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1976), 2, 19, 24, 29-31.



Augustus Koch, "Bird's Eye View of the City of Houston" (1873). This beautiful, full-color map is rare and seldom reproduced. Details from the map are shown on pages 40 and 53.



Detail showing the convergence of land and water transportation in Houston, Augustus Koch, "Bird's Eye View of the City of Houston" (1873).



Houston—a Modern City

In Workshop of Texas. More Factories, more Warehouses and Longer Payroll in the Suburbs. The greatest Railroad Center in the South. Oil and Rice Fields. Largest Lumber Yard. Home of Ship Channel leading to the Gulf. Home of the Texas-Mississippi country 500 miles nearer to the sea and 950 miles nearer to the Panama Canal than any Atlantic and Pacific port.

Hopkins & Motter, "Houston—a Modern City" (1912). This bird's-eye view focuses on downtown. The names of many of the buildings are indicated on their roofs. The captions boast of Houston's industrial and economic advantages.

Houston at various intervals through the twentieth century. Some of these were drawn based on contemporary observation; others are retrospectively based on historic photographs, city directories, and other architectural research sources. Horse-drawn wagons, automobiles, and electric trolleys mingle in the streets of 1912. A 1927 drawing takes a distant enough perspective to present the appearance of a relief map featuring major subdivisions, but architectural detail is shown for selected areas. A number of early "skyscrapers" dominate downtown. Rice Institute, Hermann Hospital, and the Warwick Hotel are recognizable in the newly developed South End. Parks and country clubs feature golf courses. The industrial complex now lines both banks of the ship channel.

Among the most recent examples of the bird's-eye view is a downtown map dated 1982, displaying most of the distinctive modern skyscrapers that have come to dominate Houston's present skyline, mingled with the remaining structures from earlier times. A visitor's pocket map of metropolitan Houston published in 1989 uses bird's-eye detail to show landmarks on the grid of major streets and freeways, with enlarged inset bird's-eye views of downtown, the Texas Medical Center, Greenway Plaza, and the Galleria area.

While commercially produced street maps, updated from year to year, are an important part of the collection, they are complemented by maps from other sources, which may focus on a single theme such as land use, tourism, or economic development. Maps created for city planning purposes are especially useful in studying Houston's growth. Planning maps in the collection span a range of topics. Some record the official decisions that shaped future development, such as major street plans establishing the location and relative importance of planned traffic arteries. Commercial street maps from later years show when these major streets were actually built and when development took place along them. Other planning maps recorded then-current information used for decision making, such as a series of maps recording a 1989 Real Property Survey by the Houston Housing Authority, showing such information as the condition of dwellings and the length of owner or tenant occupancy. Still others record actions already taken, such as a 1945 map that proudly shows the achievements of the city government under the city manager system of the previous four years in terms of new street paving, storm sewers, sanitary sewers, and water mains.

Today, such special-purpose maps can gain added visual impact and informational content with the advanced technologies of aerial and satellite photography, computer graphics, and digitally enhanced images. An example is a 1987 map from the West Houston Association emphasizing the economic advantages of the growth area from Gessner to the Harris County



Housing Authority of the City of Houston, "Real Property Survey, Map XIII, Average Rental" (1939). The shading shows average monthly rental values ranging from less than \$9.99 (lightest) to \$50.00 or more (darkest).

line. With an aerial photograph of the area as a base, the lines of the streets and highways are enhanced and labeled, and colors are added to indicate land use.

These representations of Houston as it developed over a century and a half are used to research and illustrate the city's history by scholars in varying disciplines at all age levels. The maps are open to view by the public, although handling of the more fragile items may be restricted in order to preserve them. In most of these cases a reproduction is available for use. Additional maps, both old and new, are continually added to the collection to fulfill the Texas and Local History Department's commitment to documenting Houston's growth.