
The Humphreville-Beasley Collection: Photographs of Daily Life at Houston and Morgan's Point, ca. 1897-1912

Sam Akkerman

The turn of the nineteenth century was well documented by photographers. Images of people, events, landscapes, interiors, buildings, and modes of transportation were all captured for posterity by the camera's lens. Alongside the photographic works produced by prominent professionals and studios, exist countless images captured by amateur photographers, men, women, and children. The Humphreville-Beasley Collection is an example of a set of amateur works that illustrate this important period in Houston's growth from a more personal, honest perspective than that often presented by commercial photographers. The 240 prints in the collection, 212 made from dry-plate glass negatives, depict the life of the family of W. E. Humphreville, Sr. in Houston and at their summer home near Morgan's Point, circa 1897 to 1912. The prints are dated by documents contained with the plates, by extensive interviews with descendants of W. E. Humphreville, Sr., and by the approximate ages of the young Humphreville children, subjects in many of the photographs. Will was born in 1890, Blake in 1892, Susie in 1894, and George in 1897. According to curator Jim Glass, the collection provides "a remarkable and intimate glimpse into the social life of an affluent Gulf Coast family." Equally important are the revealing, candid images of turn-of-the-century Houston, a very small town on a swampy bayou, poised on the brink of the future.

The plates have been lost and found more than once during the last 100 years. In 1975, they were discovered in the attic of a vacant house

Sam Akkerman is the author of the forthcoming history of the Houston Yacht Club, *From Buffalo Bayou to Galveston Bay: The Centennial History of the Houston Yacht Club, 1897-1997*. Her book will be published in late 1997.

in Hyde Park and given to Raoul Beasley, owner of Beasley Printing. In 1995, they were entrusted by Beasley to historian Jim Glass for printing and preserving. "The late Mr. Beasley was...a noted connoisseur and collector of historical machinery, imprints, and artifacts. He was a founding force in Houston's Museum of Printing History. He made the first proofs of the Humphreville plates..." writes Glass in background material for the collection. Beasley's family is in the process of donating the indexed collection to the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.¹

While it is believed that W. E. Humphreville, Sr. was the primary photographer, it is apparent that more than one person produced the photos in the collection. His children and wife, who are subjects in many of the prints, may have all taken their turns with the camera. It is remarkable that the camera used glass plates. Such cameras were bulky and the plates themselves were cumbersome and expensive. Slow exposure times too often required the use of a tripod. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, amateurs more often took their casual, candid shots with a small hand-held box camera using flexible film, George Eastman's popular Kodak.²

Humphreville, a successful masonry contractor and an avid yachtsman, was an active participant in history in the making. (Purportedly, his name can still be found imprinted in downtown Houston sidewalks.) He was a founding member of the Houston Yacht Club in 1897 and later served two terms as commodore when the organization was known as the Houston Launch Club. Many of the images feature scenes of the earliest power yachts on Buffalo Bayou and Galveston Bay, boats under construction, launchings, and regattas. As a resort area where Houston's affluent families attempted to escape the discomforts of summer, Morgan's Point had an added attraction: it was situated on the growing ship channel. Like many prominent businessmen of the day, and all of the members of the Launch Club, Humphreville was actively involved in bringing deep water to Houston and was one of the first men to be commissioned as a pilot on the channel in 1915. He owned two large motor yachts, both named *Hudie* after his only daughter Susie, who as a young child mispronounced her own name as "Hudie." Both yachts were constructed in Houston between 1906 and 1910 and ranged in length from 40 to 52 feet.

As the family went about their daily lives, at work, home, and play, the camera recorded their activities, both the exceptional and mundane, resulting in a broad range of subjects in the collection. In addition to the 37 photographs of boats, there are steam oil derricks, still

lifes, flora, landscapes, structures, animals, individuals, and hunting and camping scenes. Numerous prints of buildings in various phases of construction (some of which are now designated historic), residential fireplaces, large residences, architectural details, and other structures attest to Humphreville's career as a masonry contractor. Along with typical family scenes such as picnics on the bayou, father and son hunting trips, children's pets, toys and games, and children at play are rare shots of private family moments, some of which would have been deemed scandalous according to the social standards of the period. Some of the photos, showing muddy unpaved streets, downtown flooding, hurricane damage, and the narrow, muddy bayou at Allen's Landing, contrast starkly with photographs published in the numerous booster publications so prevalent at the time. Humphreville shared his photographs with his friends: several prints have been located in other family collections and one, of bearded neighbor and banker Alexander P. Root, was published in 1975 in William Kirkland's *Old Bank New Bank*.³

Photographs of family gatherings, fishing, boating, swimming, and barefoot children at the Bay reflect the summer activities of Houstonians who moved their families each summer to the small communities along the shores of Galveston Bay, where the constant breeze alleviated Houston's heat, humidity, and mosquitos. Entire households, including servants and livestock, relocated for the summer months. For fathers who traveled daily to and from work in the city by train, commuter motor cars supplemented the regularly scheduled trains. Humphreville built his bay home in 1906 on Bay Ridge Road, adjacent to the small compound of summer homes known as Bay Ridge situated on the bluff between Morgan's Point and the nearby town of LaPorte.⁴ (Depicted in many of the photographs, this home, albeit modified several times, still overlooks the Bay from its original site, 603 Bayridge Road.)

The theme of extended family runs throughout the collection. Humphreville, his children Will, Blake, Susie, and George, his second wife Henrietta, and members of her family are in many of the photos. Humphreville's first wife Susie Freeman Humphreville died soon after the birth of their first child. He then married Henrietta Freeman, one of his first wife's four sisters. Together they had five children, but tragedy struck the family repeatedly. Humphreville's son by his first wife died at the age of four and his second son did not survive infancy. When the four surviving children were five, eight, 10, and 12 years old, their mother Henrietta died. Widowed twice, Humphreville never re-

married. He raised the four children with the help of a third Freeman sister, widow Mattie Freeman Shoemaker, who came to live with the family and appears in many of the photos.

While professional photographers of the era often attempted to project progress and wealth for Houston, glossing over unflattering aspects, the photos of the Humphreville-Beasley Collection are sometimes painfully honest. Buffalo Bayou was indeed only a narrow muddy stream, prone to uncontrolled flooding. Houston's stultifying heat and humidity flatten Victorian ruffles and collars and cause the curls to stick to Baby George's forehead and beads of perspiration to stand out on Papa Humphreville's brow. Sailing attire, if it could be called such, was more rustic than nautical and would have never passed muster with the venerable New York Yacht Club, already 60 years old at the time these photos were made. Nevertheless, as the prints attest, yachts, homes, summer houses, and commercial buildings were being built. Steam and gasoline vessels plied the bayou and pleasure craft dotted Galveston Bay. The City of Houston was paving the streets and the Army Corps of Engineers was steadfastly dredging the Channel. Oil derricks sprouted on the coastal plains east of town. The reality of Houston's future prosperity is apparent with startling clarity in the almost 100-year-old glass plate negatives.

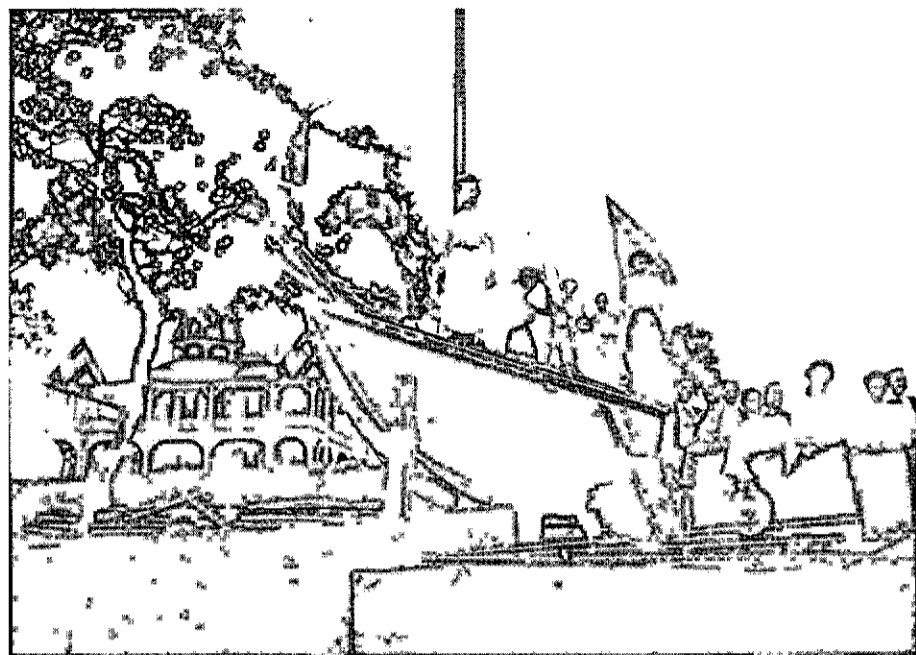
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¹The house in Hyde Park where the plates were found belonged at one time to Blake Humphreville, W. E. Humphreville's second oldest son. The plates were given to Raoul Beasley by his stepdaughter, Brownie Price Newton, who had just purchased the home. The author, researching the history of the Houston Yacht Club (HYC) for that organization's 100-year anniversary, contacted Jim Glass in 1996 seeking information regarding his late father's numerous yachts and 60-year association with HYC. Glass, who has painstakingly preserved, printed, and indexed the plates, recognized the potential significance to the author's project of the turn-of-the-century photographs of boating on Galveston Bay and made the prints available. At that time, the identities of the individuals, sites, and events in the collection came to light. The collection contains actual photographs of events the author had encountered during research.

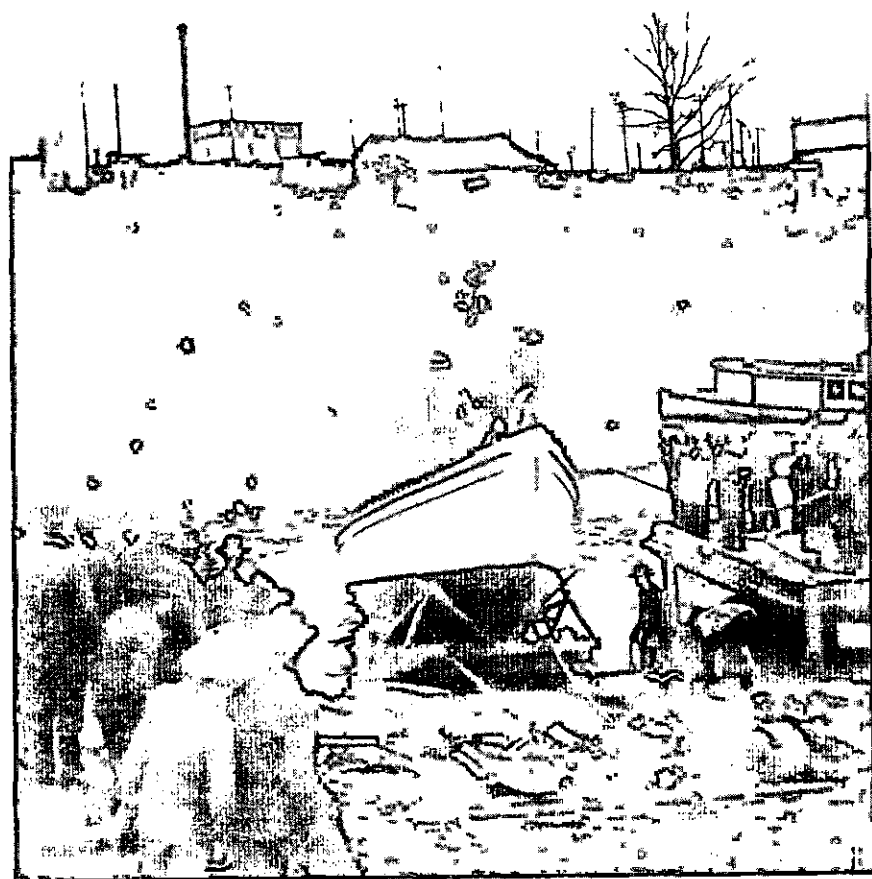
²Ford, Colin, ed., *The Story of Popular Photography* (North Pomfret, Vermont: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 1989), 60-68.

³William Kirkland, *Old Bank New Bank* (Houston: Pacesetter Press, 1975), 50.

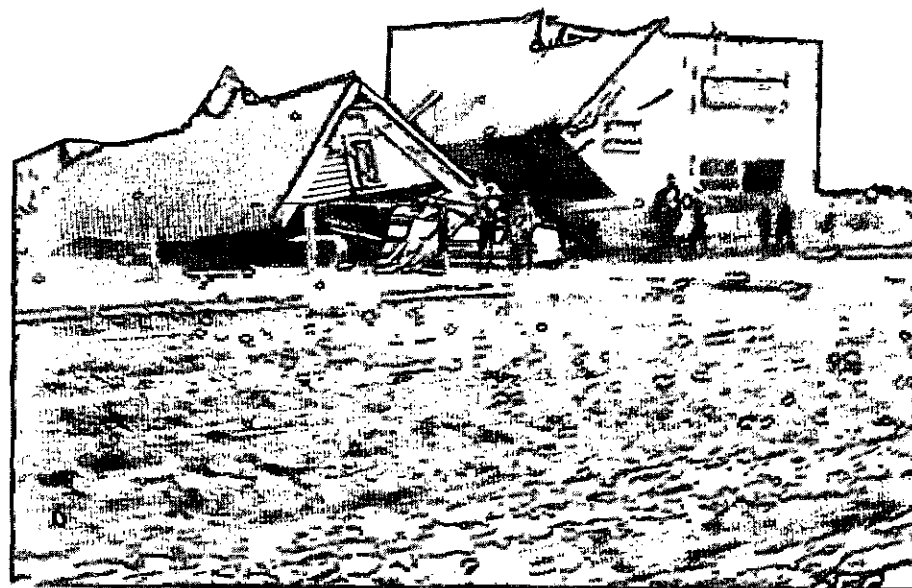
⁴Dorothy Knox Howe Houghton, et al., *Houston's Forgotten Heritage: Landscapes, Houses, Interiors, 1824-1914* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1991), 321-323; *Houston Post*, April 18, 1907.



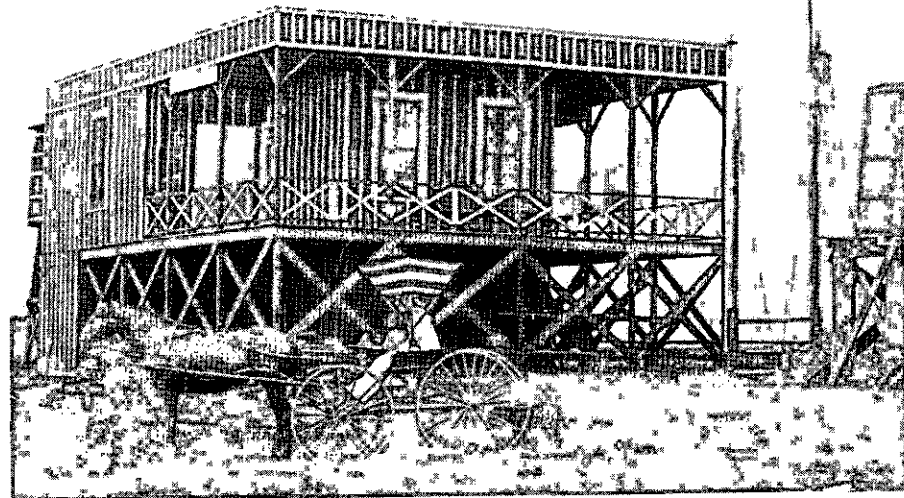
Family and friends gather for the launching of Dan E. Kennedy's *Ethlywayne* in front of Kennedy's Morgan's Point summer home. A Houston businessman and former Texas Ranger, Kennedy was elected the first commodore of the Houston Yacht Club, February 2, 1898. He was the son of Houston pioneer settler John Kennedy who built what is now the oldest structure in Houston, the Kennedy Bakery Building in Market Square. Dan Kennedy is shown here wearing the bowler hat. His wife Amelia is standing to his left. The house, minus the red and white shingled turrets, still exists on this site, 427 Bay Ridge. An original print from this negative is in possession of the Kennedy family.



Launching of *Hudie* into Buffalo Bayou at Allen's Landing, ca. 1906. This boat was constructed at the Humphreville home, 1803 Leeland, and hauled through town down Main Street for the launching, creating quite a media event. Humphreville's daughter Susie, after whom the boat was named, is on the bow. The boat on the opposite bank is the *Mildred*, owned by M. R. Waddell of Waddell's Furniture Co. Building on the left across Buffalo Bayou is the South Texas Grain Company.



Believed to be damage at Morgan's Point from the "Great Storm" of 1900. Humphreville owned property in the low lying Bayview section, now the area known as the "Flats." During the storm the family, along with many others, took refuge in the home of C. G. Pillot, which was on higher ground. Susie Humphreville, six years old, was placed in a washtub and floated to safety. Once a site for summer and year round homes, what is left of the area is now either marshland or almost completely occupied by the Barbours Cut Terminal of the Port of Houston.



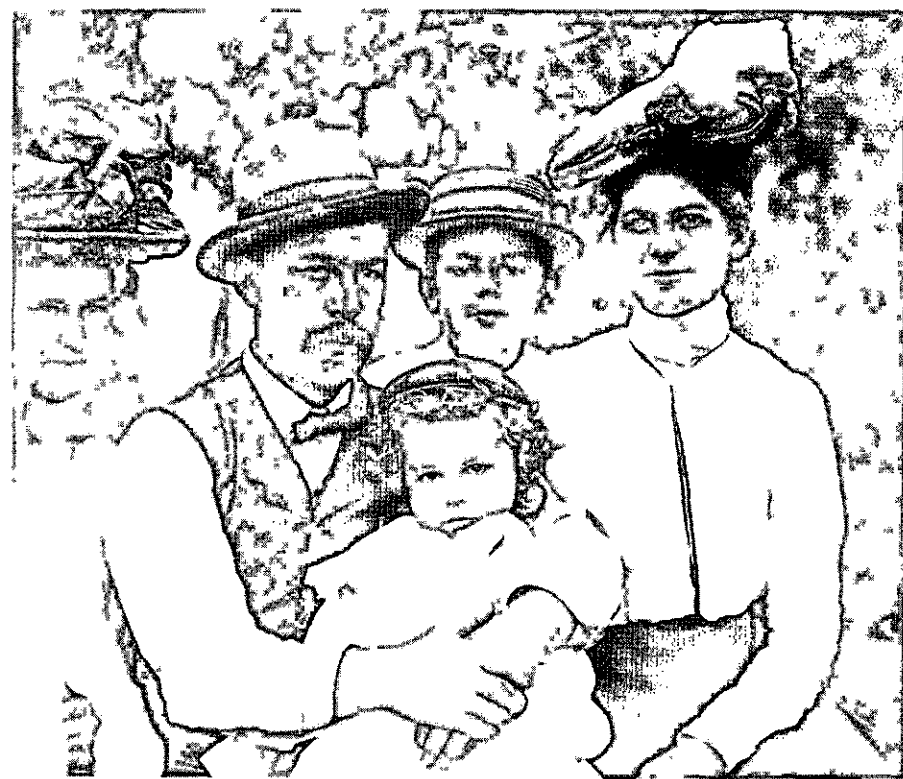
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers office at Morgan's Point, ca. 1899, during dredging of what was to become the Houston Ship Channel. Henrietta Freeman Humphreville, second wife of W. E. Humphreville, with daughter Susie and son George are in the buggy. The sign on the building reads "U.S. Engineers Office Galveston Ship Channel Buffalo Bayou Impt." Prior to 1899, federal funds for dredging a channel across Galveston Bay and up Buffalo Bayou were appropriated under the auspices of two separate projects: the Galveston Bay Ship Channel project and the Buffalo Bayou project. The Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 merged the two projects, which became known as "Galveston Ship Channel and Buffalo Bayou, Tex." It was not until the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1910 that the project became known as the Houston Ship Channel. See Lynn Alperin, *Custodians of the Coast* (Galveston, Tex.: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Galveston District), 99-101, 106.



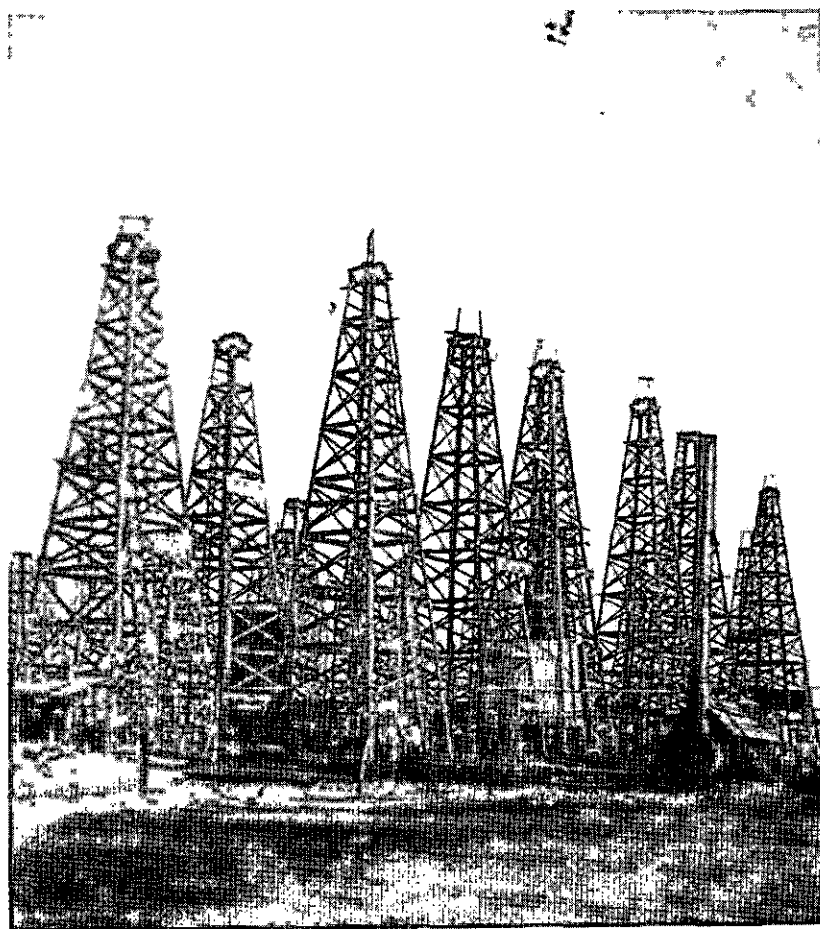
Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library Building under construction, incorporating the First Presbyterian Church building on right. Funds for this building came from Andrew Carnegie, who made the offer of \$50,000 at the urging of the Ladies Reading Club and the Women's Club in 1899. The stone Italian Renaissance building was dedicated in 1904. Houston outgrew this building within 15 short years. The site was sold back to the First Presbyterian Church, from whom they had bought it, and in 1926 the new building, later named after Houston's first professional librarian, Julia Ideson, opened. See Marguerite Johnston, *Houston, The Unknown City* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 106-107.



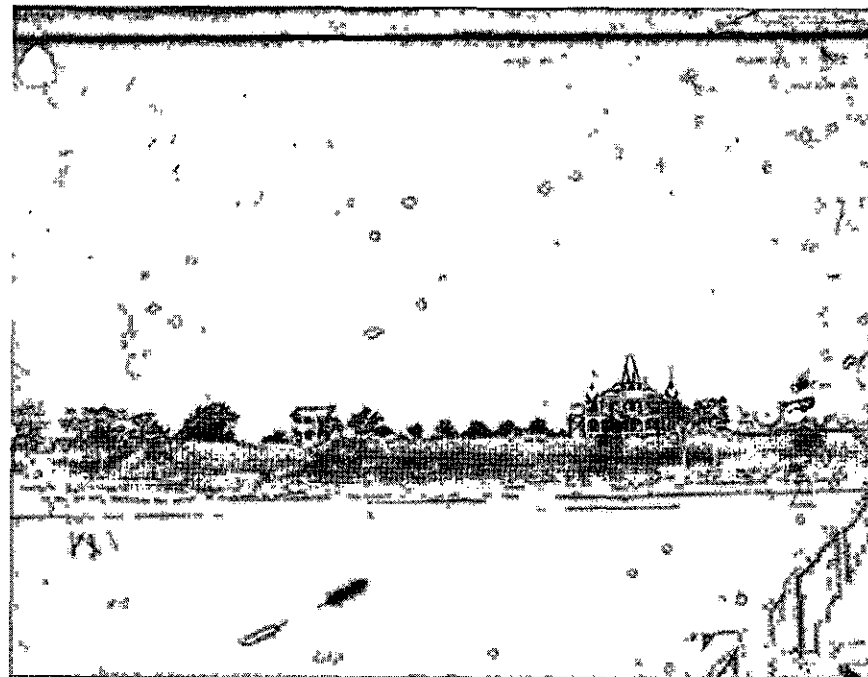
Still life of children's toys. The notion that photography could capture images in an artistic fashion—as opposed to the mere recording of studio-style portraits, tourist scenes, or family events—began to reach the United States, via Europe, by the end of the nineteenth century. The increasing number of photographs documenting toys, Christmas celebrations, and children during this period reflect the growing awareness during the Victorian era that childhood was a separate realm apart from the world of adults.



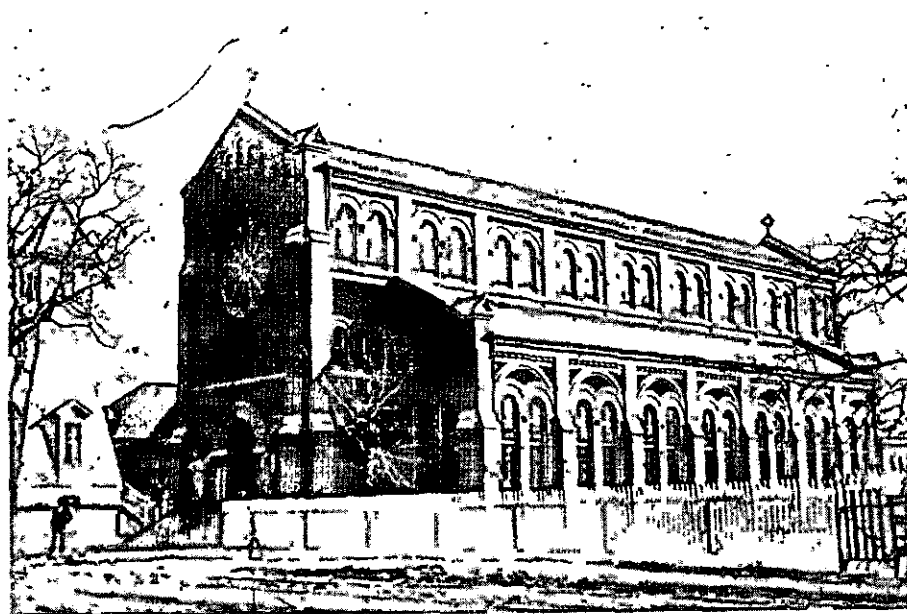
The photographer on a family picnic, ca. 1900. W. E. Humphreville was a self-educated, well-read, masonry contractor who learned his trade from the uncle who raised him after his parents died. He and his brothers were sent to live with different relatives and each learned the trade of their foster father. Left to right: Humphreville's second wife Henrietta Freeman Humphreville, who died in 1902; W. E. Humphreville holding his son George; his son Will; and Henrietta's sister, widow Mattie Freeman Shoemaker, who lived with the family after Henrietta's death. Humphreville took most of the photographs in the collection; however, his son Blake probably took this one.



Steam oil derricks, possibly the first in the Goose Creek field, near the current town of Baytown, where W. E. Humphreville owned interests in several wells. Wildcatting for oil began in Goose Creek in 1908. Thirty wells were brought in during 1909. Information from Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), Vol. 1, 710.



View looking north from pier in Galveston Bay toward homes on Bay Ridge Drive, Morgan's Point. On the right is the Daniel E. Kennedy home, believed to have been constructed in the "Flats" at Morgan's Point and moved to this site around 1896. The Kennedy home is still at this location, but the site where the smaller home sits is now occupied by the mansion often referred to as the "Texas White House," built in 1926 by Governor Ross Sterling. (Interview with Jeanne McIlvogue, current owner, 1995.)



St. Joseph's Church, 1505 Kane Street, showing the original bell tower on left. This brick building was dedicated February 23, 1902. The wooden belfry survived the storm of 1900. It was one of two belfries built along with the original wooden church in 1882. It was replaced with a brick bell tower in 1909. The 1909 tower, which had been leaking for many years, was declared unsafe after a fire on July 13, 1995, severely damaged the church. When the building was restored after the fire, this photograph was used by the church archivist to confirm that the 1909 tower was not part of the 1902 structure. The photograph was taken between 1902 and 1905. (Interview with Jimmy Wead, church archivist for St. Joseph's, July 15, 1997.)



The Thomas L. Hackney home was built in 1903 and located at 2210 Main at the intersection of Hadley Avenue. The house was designed by Swedish American architect Olle Lorehn, who came to Houston from St. Louis in the early 1890s to oversee construction of the American Brewing Company complex and subsequently worked on several important local projects, including the still-extant Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral and Houston Fire Station #7 (currently the Houston Fire Museum). Humphreville's recording of local landmarks like the Hackney home places him in the category of what author William Welling has termed "the purposeful amateur," his term for amateur photographers at the turn of the century who chronicled the scenes and events of the day. See William Welling, *Photography in America: The Formative Years, 1839-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978), 378-379.