



Alfred Charles Finn, 1883-1964

Alfred C. Finn: Houston Architect

Michael E. Wilson

The life and career of architect Alfred Charles Finn coincided with one of the most explosive periods of growth in the history of Houston. He designed many of the most important business buildings, homes, apartments, hotels, theatres, and public buildings in the city and elsewhere in Texas during a long practice between 1913 and 1964. His preeminent place in the architectural development of Houston is assured through the design of such projects as the Gulf Building for the National Bank of Commerce, 1927-1929, the San Jacinto Monument, 1935-1938, the Sam Houston Music Hall and Coliseum, 1935-1937, and Sakowitz Brothers Store, 1949-1950. His many office buildings such as the Bankers Mortgage Building, 1923, the State National Bank Building, 1923, the Commerce Building Extension, 1938, and the City National Bank Building, 1945-1946, also contributed to his place of importance, as did buildings with which the public became familiar like the Ezekiel W. Cullen Administration Building, 1947-1950, at the University of Houston, the Lamar Hotel, the Loew's State Theatre and the Metropolitan Theatre, all 1926, and the Shriners Crippled Children's Hospital, 1950. These projects are some of the most important construction in Houston during the period.

Finn was born July 2, 1883 in Bellville, Texas.¹ His parents were Edwin E. and Bertha Rogge Finn. The family moved to Hempstead when Alfred was very young, perhaps about three years of age. The elder Finn was a German immigrant who was a blacksmith by trade, and reportedly worked on the repair of carriages in his shop. A newspaper reporter who interviewed Alfred Finn in later life credits the fact that he had experience in his father's blacksmith shop as the reason Finn left home at the age of twelve—about 1895—to get a job heating rivets for the Brazos River Bridge, then under construction near Hempstead.² There is evidence that necessity played a stronger role than adventure in the reason Finn left home. Finn was the second of eight brothers and sisters, and all indications are that the household was poor.

¹Alfred C. Finn, Jr., interview with author on March 9, 1983, in Houston, Texas.

²Houston *Chronicle*, October 10, 1950.

In 1900, at about the age of seventeen, Finn made his way to Houston and found a job building boxcars for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In an apparent effort to improve his long term earning power, gain a lasting profession, and achieve the stability his life did not yet afford, he took a correspondence course in architecture.³ He then moved to Dallas in 1904 as an apprentice draftsman with Sanguinet and Staats, the foremost architectural firm in Texas at the time. This firm was one of the most influential in the Southwest during the early twentieth century, and its work reached all parts of the state. Theirs was a general architectural practice, and they could and did execute residential, institutional, and religious structures of taste and refinement. The firm, however, is identified with the tall steel skeleton office building as a building type, and received design contracts for the largest and costliest buildings in Texas.

The work of young Finn obviously met the standards of the firm and he was transferred to Fort Worth to work in the main office in 1907. Another promotion in 1912 brought Finn back to Houston as assistant to Alfred E. Barnes, manager of the Houston office of the firm. Barnes was in Houston earlier, from 1903 until about 1905, and it is possible Finn met him during this time.

But Finn had a strong urge to be independent. Less than a year after his return to Houston, he severed his professional relationship of nine years with Sanguinet and Staats, and established his own office in May 1913. In fact, he apparently did little work for Sanguinet and Staats after returning to Houston, since he reportedly worked as a local architect on the Rice Hotel designed by the St. Louis firm of Mauran, Russell, and Crowell. This hotel was built for Jesse H. Jones (1874-1956), Houston lumberman, developer, publisher, financier, statesman and philanthropist, and was under construction from February 1912 until May 1913. Speaking about his father, Finn's son later recounted, "... he did everything on it, and it was through that job, that was the way he met Jesse Jones, through the building of the first two wings of the Rice Hotel."⁴

The period 1915 to 1925 was one of growth and maturation for the Finn office. With the opening of the deepened Houston Ship Channel in 1914, the generally favorable economic climate of the 1920s began. The petroleum industry created jobs and profits, and the city burgeoned. A dramatic population jump pushed residential development into suburban areas, and commercial development downtown accelerated to a level previously unknown in Houston. Finn prospered from both trends. Comfortable by this time with a steady clientele, the office designed residences in the upper middle-class

³Alfred C. Finn, Jr., interview with author on March 9, 1983, in Houston, Texas.

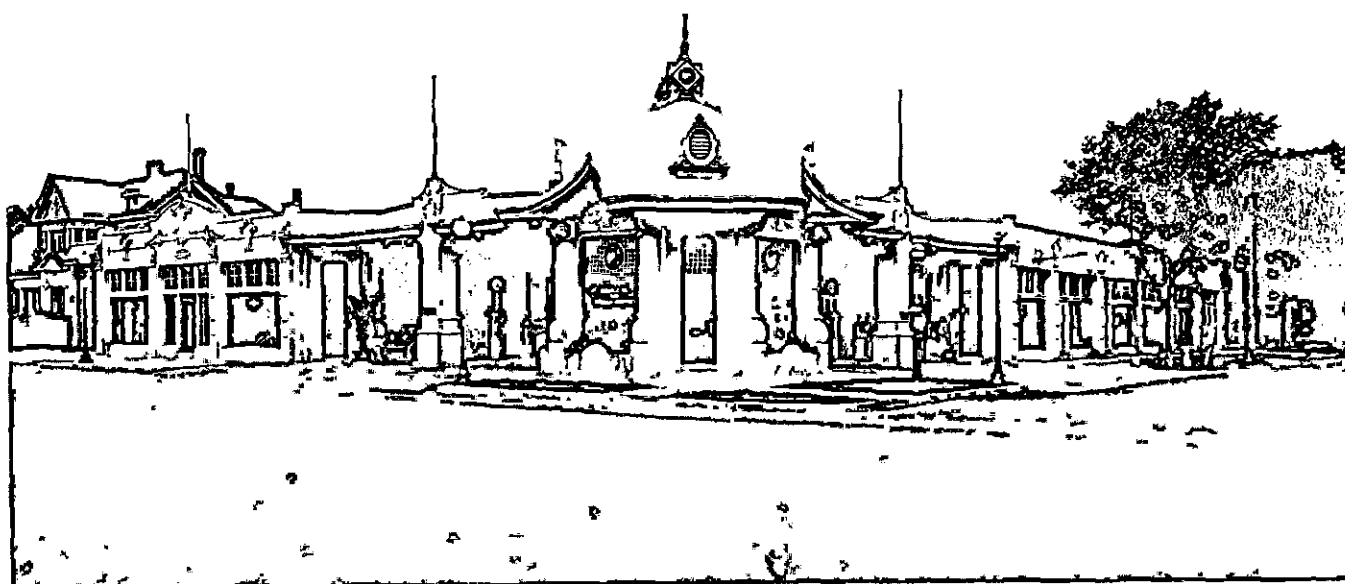
⁴Alfred C. Finn, Jr., interview with Louis J. Marchiafava on May 20, 1978, in Houston, Texas.

enclaves which rapidly developed in the South End, Montrose, Shadyside, and Courtlandt Place. In the period after the deepening of the ship channel, the Houston central business district advanced into the formerly elite residential area along Main Street in what is today the southern end of downtown. Residents of this neighborhood, as well as new citizens attracted to Houston by the growth of the petroleum industry, commissioned Finn and other architects to design their new homes in the suburbs. One such citizen was Henry H. Dickson, President of Dickson Car Wheel Company, whose Main Street home, designed by Nicholas J. Clayton in 1877, was a Victorian showplace of Houston. In 1917, Finn designed a new home for the Dicksons on Montrose Boulevard. The next year their former home on Main was replaced by the Humble Oil Company Building.

The demand for better office blocks, stores, hotels, service stations, theatres, warehouses, and structures for fraternal and charitable institutions was also satisfied by Finn. His Foster and Mason Buildings of 1913, Rusk Building of 1915, Bankers Mortgage Building of 1922, and Milam, Electric, and State National Bank buildings of 1923 provided for the groundswell of new offices locating in Houston. His Metropolitan Theatre of 1926 and Loew's State Theatre of 1927 were among the most important structures erected for entertainment purposes in the history of Houston. His Dixie Filling Station for the Humble Oil Company of 1918-1919 shows the coming importance of the automobile, especially in Houston, and the extensive ornamentation of the building shows the importance then attached to blending the automobile and structures designed for its service into the built environment. The Rice Hotel wing of 1925-1926, the Lamar Hotel of 1927, Jones Lumber Company of 1924, Houston Scottish Rite Cathedral of 1922, and Houston Light Guard Armory of 1924 were all structures made necessary by the rapid growth in population and prosperity.

Additionally, the office gained an enviable reputation in smaller towns and cities throughout central and east Texas, an asset which paid considerable dividends for the firm in the following decade. A few of the many projects in this category are the Wharton Bank and Trust Company Building of 1919; Longview Hospital of 1919; Hicks Motor Car Company Building, Shreveport, Louisiana of 1920; Woolridge Filling Station, Conroe, 1921; Citizens State Bank and Office Building, Goose Creek, Texas, 1921; International and Great Northern Railroad Hospital, Palestine, Texas, 1921; Sealy High School, Sealy, Texas, 1922; and First State Bank of Columbus, 1923.

The years from the mid-1920s until the beginning of the Great Depression were a golden period for Finn. Development reached an unprecedented level and the office was constantly busy with major projects. A force of as many as twenty architects was employed during this time, making it by far the largest architectural firm in Houston. Many of the grandest Finn achievements date from these years.



One of the most fancifully ornamented of Finn's commercial structures, the Dixie Filling Station for Humble Oil and Refining Company of 1918-1919 included decorative elements common in his work of this early period. Finn Collection, HMRC.

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House for Mr. & Mrs. Earl K. Wharton, Shadyside, 1919-20. During the first decade of his practice in Houston, Finn designed a number of upper-class residences in newer, high income suburbs in the South End. Photograph by Paul Hester, Houston Architectural Survey, 1980.

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From the beginning of his practice in Houston, Finn worked frequently for Jones, and a great percentage of the work of the office was done for Jones on a handshake basis, without contracts. Jones was responsible for much construction, Finn was his architect, and the working relationship was very close. There was great job security for Finn in this arrangement, since he had a steady client. One architect working for Finn during the period described the office as "owned" by Jones.⁵ Another, who joined the staff in 1927, recalled just how closely the office worked with Jones: "Finn's office did all Jesse Jones's work. I can recall very simply, because it was of so much importance to me later, working one Saturday morning, Mr. Jones showed up at the office, whatever I was doing, he had me step off the stool and he got on and he made suggestions and corrections on whatever I was working on. Mr. Jones paraded in and out of Mr. Finn's office, with Mr. Finn following in his footsteps."⁶

In Houston, as elsewhere, construction came to a near halt following the economic collapse of 1929. At that time, the business expertise of Finn and his association with Jones carried the office through the dark years of the 1930s, a time when architectural firms everywhere suffered greatly. Finn had the ability to define a project in terms business people understood, and won jobs in small towns away from more noted architects who concentrated their efforts on artistic presentations. During this era, in 1934, Alfred C. Finn, Jr. joined the firm of his father. Years later he recalled the dispatch with which his father worked with small town clientele during the depression.

He had an uncanny sense of estimating costs and values. He was uncanny. I don't know, I couldn't tell you how he did it. I don't know but he would come up so close to what a building was going to cost. In commercial building that's what they are interested in. They don't understand how pretty it is or that sort of thing. In commercial building they use it for the return value on the dollar. Just to give you an instance, back there in the depression along about in 1932—height of the depression—in Tyler, Texas, there was one Judge S.A. Lindsey up there, who owned the People's National Bank and was quite wealthy. In fact, he owned the whole telephone system and everything else. And he decided he wanted to build a big building, around twenty stories, and put a new bank in it. It so happened this was one of my summers for breaking-in training. Of course, at that time during the depression a twenty story building wasn't heard of. They just weren't being built anywhere, and there were architects from New York and San Francisco, and you could see them with all their pretty

⁵Earl R. Gilbert, letter to Robert Reid (photocopy), February 3, 1982, architectural archives, HMRC.

⁶Eugene Werlin, interview with Robert Rick on December 6, 1980, in Houston, Texas.

pictures, with all the work they had done, with all their ideas of what the design would be. And I went in there with my father and here sits the old judge with his hat on, an old black hat. And all Dad had was an old scratch pad and a pencil. I said, 'Dad you're crazy with all these guys with their stuff up here. They are going to show what they can do, their accomplishments and everything. And here all you have is a scratch pad and pencil.' I soon learned. I learned pretty quick. He sat down there with Judge Lindsey and in less than ten minutes the Judge stuck out his hand and said, 'Finn, you've got the job.' It all happened so fast I couldn't figure it out.⁷

What happened, of course, was that Finn quickly told the banker how much rentable floor space could be provided for a specified cash outlay. These were the figures the banker needed to project his investment.

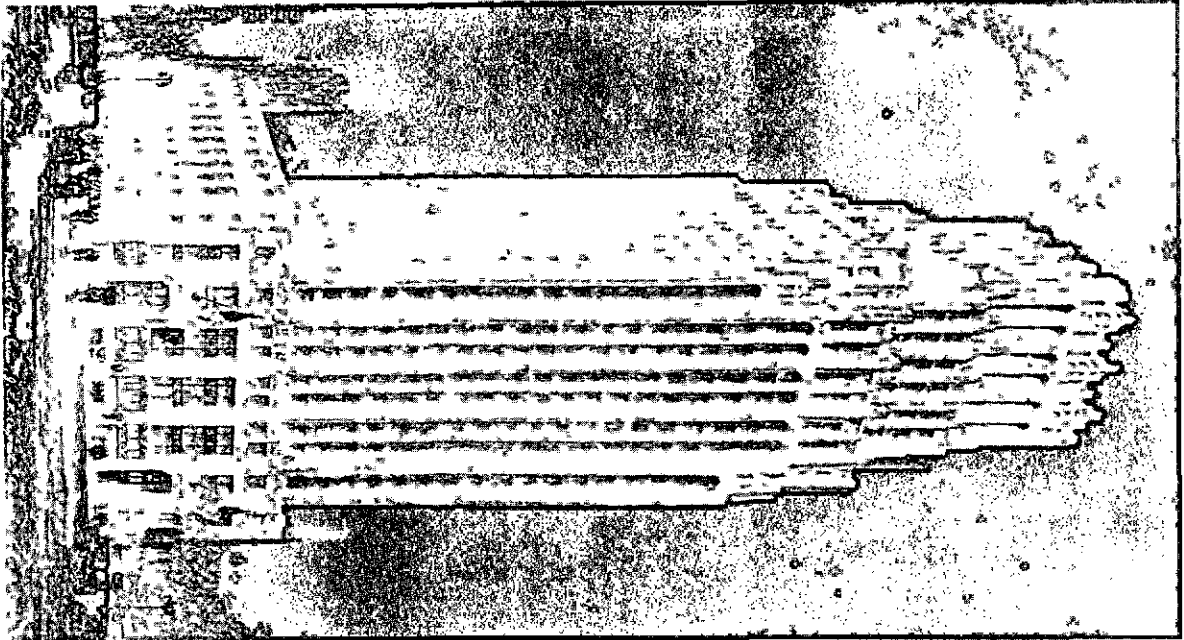
In 1932 Jones was appointed to the board of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation by President Hoover. He was Chairman of the Board during the leanest years of the depression, from 1933 until 1939, and supervised New Deal lending programs. He served as Secretary of Commerce in the Roosevelt cabinet from 1940 until 1945. In 1934 Finn became the first architectural supervisor for the Federal Housing Administration,⁸ and much Federal work came to the Finn office during the following decade. Public Works Administration designs of the Finn office include the Jefferson Davis Hospital, 1932; Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall, 1937; and the United States Courthouse and Post Office in Galveston, 1934. The major PWA work of the Finn office, one of the most important PWA works in Texas, is the San Jacinto Monument. In 1910 the State of Texas dedicated the area around the San Jacinto battleground as a state park. During the early 1930s, as the centennial of the battle for Texas independence from Mexico approached, plans were formulated for a museum and monument. In 1935, under the leadership of Jones, Finn was named architect for the design of the monument. Monies for the project were provided by the State of Texas, the Public Works Administration, and from a Federal appropriation for the Texas Centennial.⁹ The result of a long design process, this moderne obelisk, seventy feet taller than the Washington Monument, is significant in that it is one of the most striking public memorials erected anywhere during the period.

With United States entry into World War II, the Houston petrochemical industry led the city into an economic bonanza. The Defense Department ordered fuels from area producers to supply its forces. New investment in the

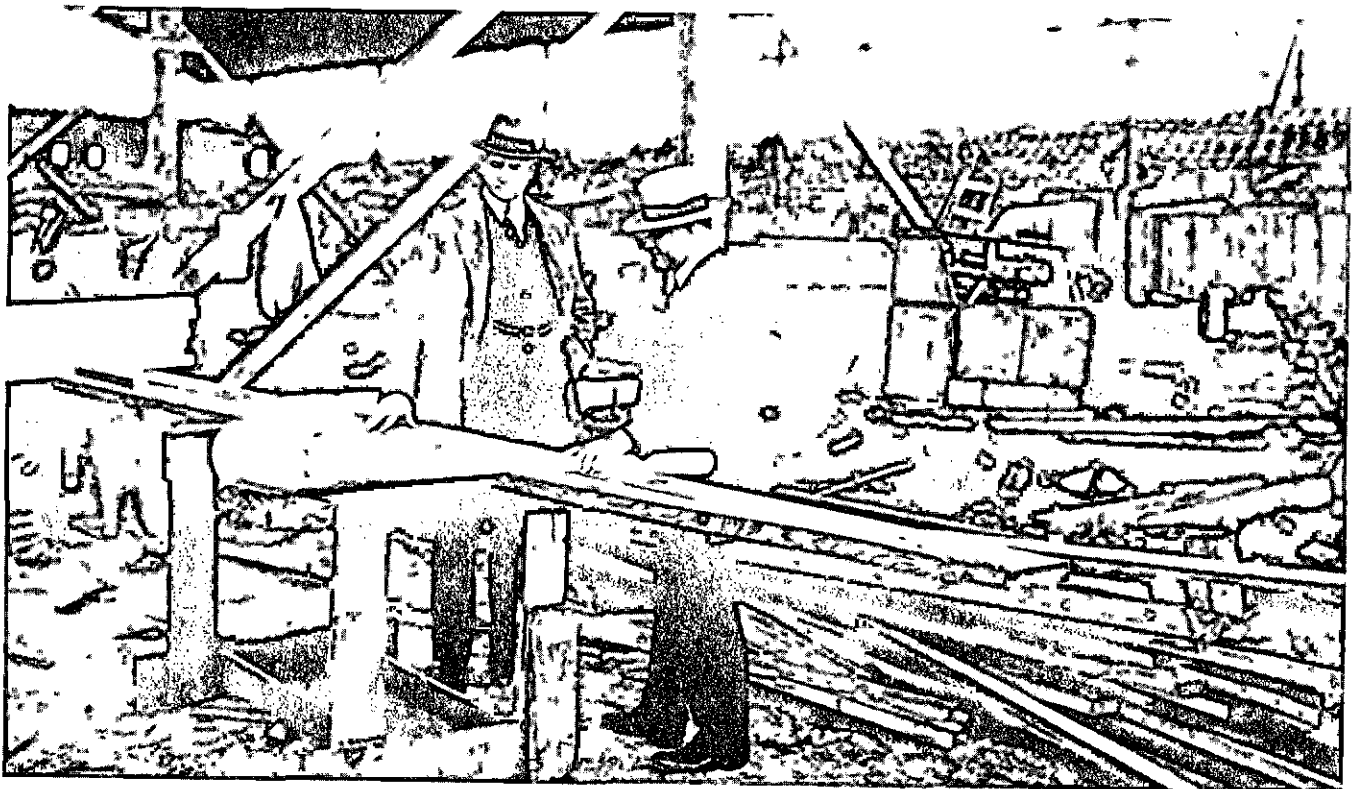
⁷Alfred C. Finn, Jr., interview with Louis J. Marchiafava on May 20, 1978, in Houston, Texas.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Drexel Turner, Stephen Fox, and Barrie Scardino, "Houston Architectural Survey," (unpublished, 1980), Vol. II, p. 433.



Designed and executed for the National Bank of Commerce during 1927-1929, the Gulf Building was designed by Finn in collaboration with Kenneth Franzheim. This structure introduced the "French Moderne" design, later called Art Deco, to Houston and is widely recognized as one of the finest designs of Finn. Final perspective, HMRC.



Largely through the efforts of Jesse Jones, the 1928 Democratic National Convention was held in Houston. A large new structure was erected for this meeting, and in this photograph by Cecil Thomson Studios, Jones, left, and Finn examine plans as the structure is rushed to completion. Finn Collection, HMRC.

region during and immediately following the war totaled \$900 million.¹⁰ During the war, the Finn office worked on defense projects, notably China Springs Air Force Base near Waco, built under direction of the War Department and the Galveston Division of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. The office also designed and supervised construction of houses in Freeport, Texas, and elsewhere for Defense Homes Corporation and several groups of temporary school buildings at the A&M College of Texas which were vital in providing for the added number of students taking military courses.

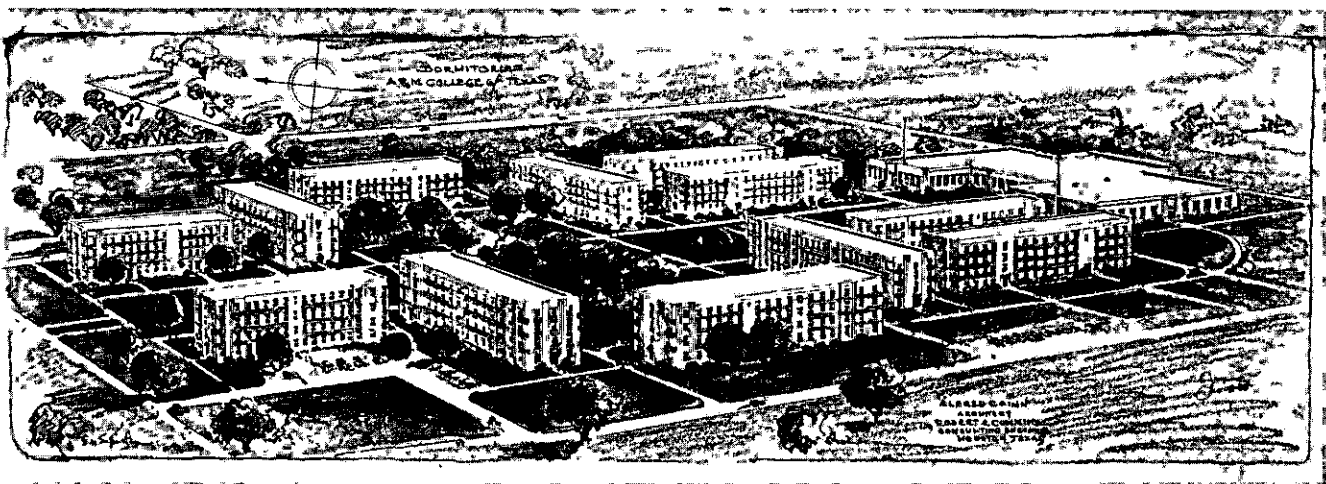
As the war ended, the Houston area, like much of the rest of the nation, was waiting to start another building boom. Much needed construction was held up by the depression and the war. Houston expanded in all directions, and Finn was right in the middle of it. Immediately after the war, the new City National Bank building was constructed. Finn worked with bank officials before the conflict ended in order to expedite planning the building. Following City National, Finn received commissions for several hospitals, the first of which, the United States Naval Hospital at Houston, was possibly a result of his defense work during the war. Other projects under construction and in design during this period include an addition to the Gulf Building, 1946, an annex and remodeling of the Houston Chronicle Building, 1946-1949, and an addition to the Commerce Building, 1947. By this time Finn was a senior figure in the world of architecture, called by the *Houston Press* "The gray-haired skyscraper genius." He was quoted in the same article as saying, "Houston...is growing faster than you know." Finn was very optimistic about the growth, economic development, and construction in the city. "It will grow much faster than anyone now thinks!" he told a *Press* reporter in August 1948. Prophetically, he commented, "We'll have skyscrapers outside of the downtown district, too...satellite business districts will grow."¹¹ He predicted that Houston would be a showplace for multistoried hospitals.

Finn was one of the first to oppose the imposition of limits on the height of Houston buildings, saying this would be detrimental to the progress and prestige of the city. He made these remarks in response to a proposed zoning ordinance developed by the City Planning Commission in 1942.¹² Mr. Finn had good reason to be optimistic. Houston was a rapidly growing city, spurred by the war years.

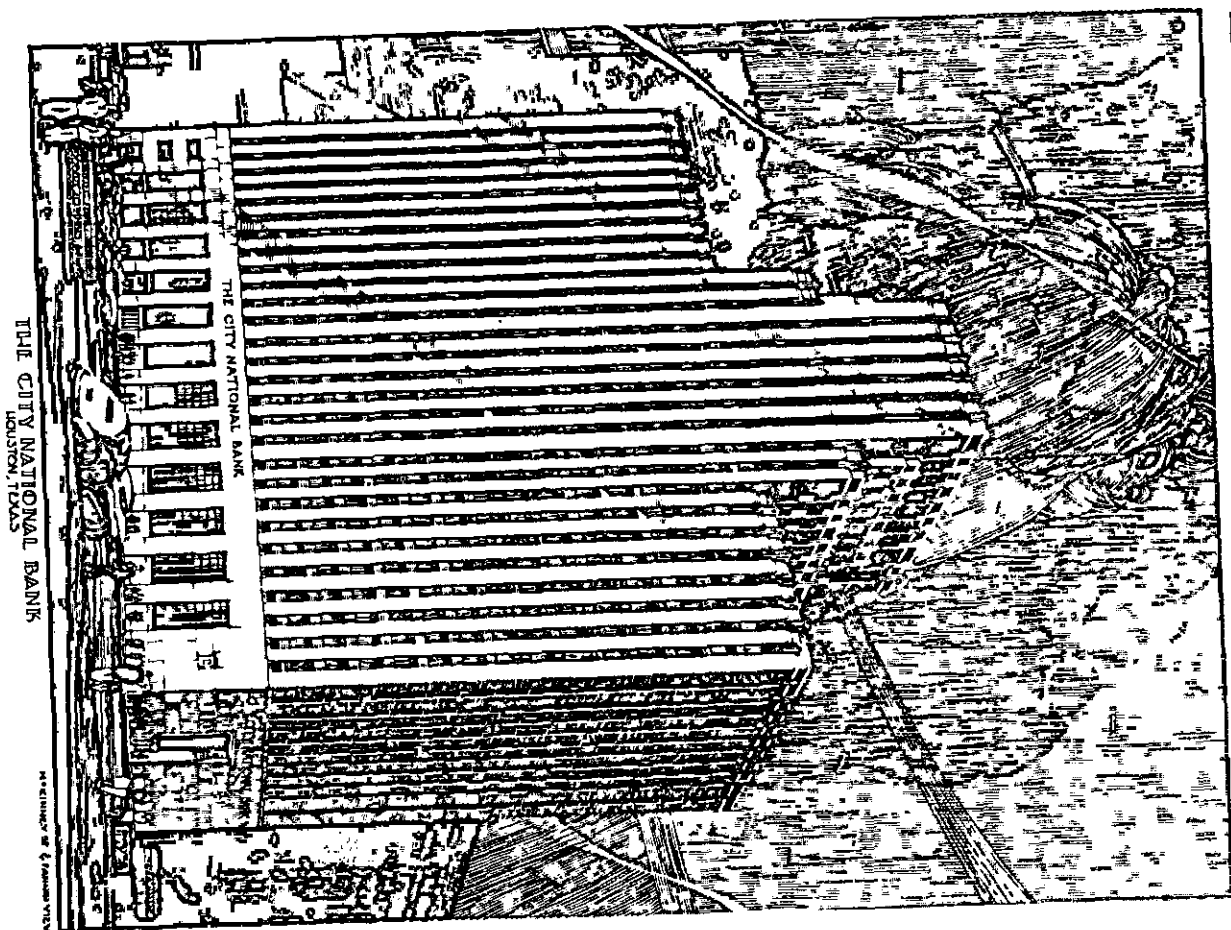
¹⁰David McComb, "The Houston-Galveston Rivalry," in Francisco A. Rosales and Barry J. Kaplan, eds., *Houston: A Twentieth Century Urban Frontier* (Port Washington, New York: National University Publications/Associated Faculty Press, Inc., 1983), pp. 7-21.

¹¹*Houston Press*, August 9, 1948.

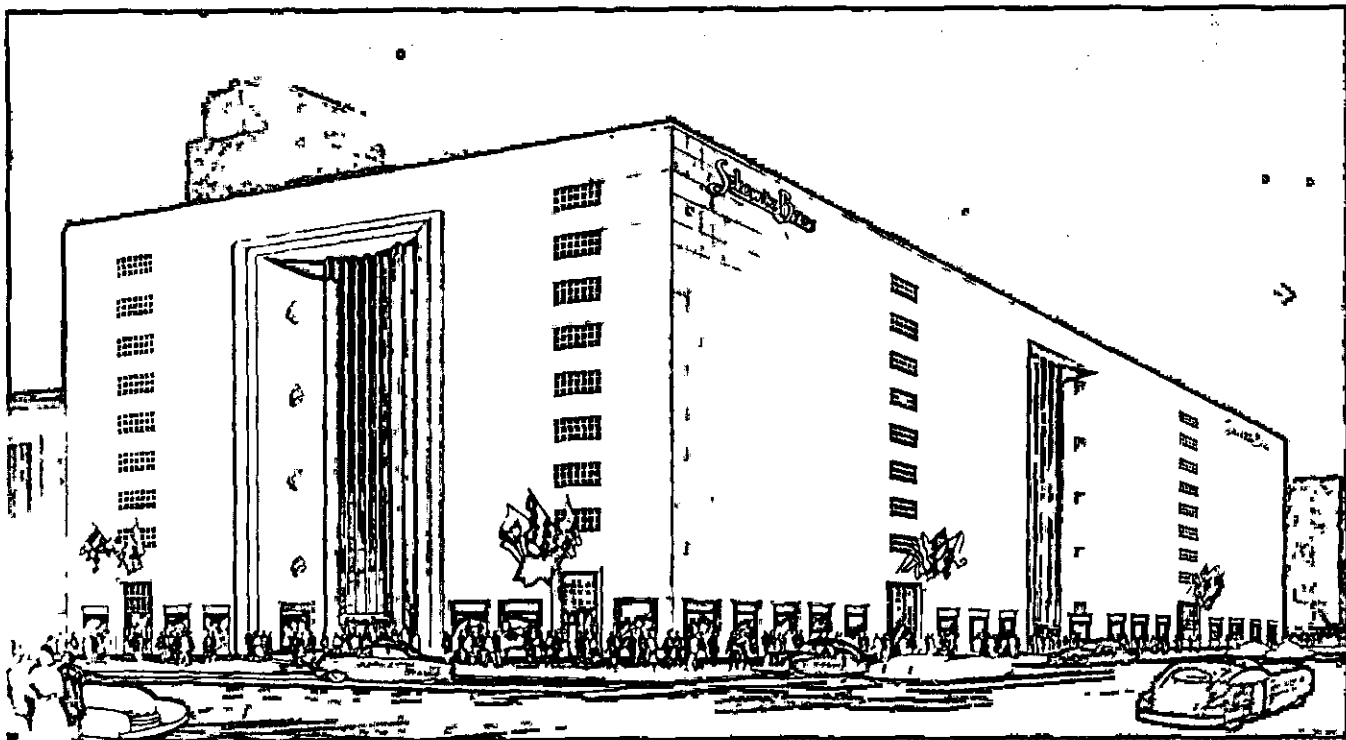
¹²*Houston Post*, August, 24, 1946.



Texas A&M University Dormitories, College Station. Finn designed university buildings several times during his career; this was his most massive academic project. Aerial perspective drawing, Finn Collection, HMRC.



The first large office block built in Houston after World War II, the late moderne City National Bank Building of 1945-1947 represents the mature period of Finn in corporate architecture. Final perspective drawing, Finn Collection, HMRC.



Finn was especially proud of his Sakowitz Brothers store of 1951. He submitted the project unsuccessfully for a National Honor Award of the American Institute of Architects in 1955. Finn Collection, HMRC.

For three and one-half decades, Mr. Finn was known as the principal architect of Houston. The zenith of his career came on February 9, 1949 when he was voted a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects "for his notable contributions to the advancement of the profession of architecture...."¹³ One of the largest educational buildings in the nation at the time, the Ezekiel W. Cullen Building at the University of Houston, was under construction, a product of the Finn office.

As the career of Alfred Finn was closely linked to the life and projects of Jesse Jones, the final years of the Finn office closely followed the demise of Jones. Jesse Jones passed away June 1, 1956. Thereafter, circumstances unfolded indicating that the career of Finn, and the life of Finn, were to draw rapidly to a close. Finn worked for Jones over the years without the benefit of formal contracts. It was a relationship of trust and mutual understanding. But the issue of contracts, and specifically, the clause in the contract detailing when and by whom he was to be paid, became a tragic concern of Finn. Outside the special relation with Jones, architectural contracts became, as Finn discovered unpleasantly, essential.

During the late 1940s a diagnostic clinic was planned, but not built, in the Houston Medical Center. Shortly thereafter, the City of Houston and Harris County planned a joint hospital venture, which eventually produced Ben Taub Hospital. The city and county discovered they could not afford to build the hospital, so the private funding agencies backing the diagnostic clinic agreed to join the project, and agreed to pay the architectural fees. The city pressed for early completion of the plans, which were delivered to City Hall at great expense to the Finn office, since many changes were ordered. In July 1953, a dispute arose between the governmental agencies and the private funding sources which resulted in the divorce of the clinic from the hospital project and the withdrawal of private funds from the project. At the urging of the city, Finn delivered the plans for which he had not been paid, and for which there then existed no provision for payment. The firm took out a number of loans to finance the project, and this ultimately ruined the Finn business and family.¹⁴

In December 1953, Finn suffered a stroke which left him partially paralyzed. Although he was able to go to the office in a wheelchair and make some public appearances, he was unable to work or to administer the business.¹⁵ Mr. Finn died at home June 26, 1964. The operations of the firm ceased with his death.

¹³Certificate of Fellowship, Finn Collection, HMRC.

¹⁴Information on the city-county hospital is from a 13 page report by A.C. Finn, Sr., n.d., circa 1961. Finn Collection, HMRC.

¹⁵Alfred C. Finn, Jr., interview with Louis J. Marchiafava on May 20, 1978, in Houston, Texas.

One conclusion of a study of the career of Finn must be that he was first and foremost a commercial architect. His business was to provide the client with usable, working structures in which spaces function the way the client needs and wants. In this regard he was more a businessman in temperament than many architects of his period. He became accustomed to talking with the business people of Houston, simply detailing rentable footage versus cost of construction. Thus, he could demonstrate return on the investment of the client. This ability was greatly appreciated by the business community, and business people responded by giving Finn their major commissions. He did not sell the art of decoration or architectural ornamentation; these were considerations to be addressed after the form and function of a structure was set.

The applied decoration on the architecture of Finn followed popular trends of the periods in which he worked. The work of Sanguinet and Staats followed the lines of classical revival skyscrapers of the early 1900s. Ornamentation on many structures designed by the firm was modeled on a combination of the classical revival and the art nouveau, especially the foliate forms common to both. There were swags, cartouches, and garlands, often near the top of a facade, typically of terra cotta. The early work of the Finn office continued and simplified this applied ornamentation, and especially evolved toward the softening, then elimination, of the cornice on office buildings. An elongated oval cartouche or "shield" as stated on one plan was a frequent signature on the early work of Finn. This was executed in terra cotta, cast stone, or stucco, and is akin to designs from the office of Sanguinet and Staats during the period Finn worked with them. Finn maintained his own plaster modeling studio during the construction of the richly ornamented theatres. In supply catalogues of decorative plaster ornaments in the Finn library, books from the 1920s illustrate "Art Nouveau" and "modernistic" ornamentation.

The ability of Finn to respond to commercial needs, to interpret his plans successfully to business clients, the fact that he came to Houston during a period of unprecedented growth, and his identification with Jones and other entrepreneurs, caused the Finn name to be foremost among designers of the built environment in Houston. Architects who apprenticed in the office over the years number in the dozens. Many of these progressed to active, successful careers in Houston and elsewhere. Finn paid special attention to hiring young architecture graduates in order to give them jobs, much as he was given the chance to learn the profession by Sanguinet and Staats in 1904. These architects who trained in the office bring the legacy of Finn to more recent generations. No other architectural firm enjoyed an impact so great, or so lasting, on the Houston scene.



Jesus Murillo as a young artist in San Antonio, 1919. Murillo Family Collection, HMRC.

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