

second-hand, weak, and flat. In the choice of such models is to be found the meaning of provincialism." Using the example of a Houston group almost successfully imitating the Modern Jazz Quartet, he notes "how much I have missed hearing the Modern Jazz Quartet" and that "we know what we know of the principal sources of our culture in pretty much this pale, unsatisfactory way. This too is part of the definition of provincialism"—a piety embraced by the media, "a lovely myth that enables us to avoid the arduous business of seeking out and experiencing the New."

Barthelme, of course, was going through just this process: as editor of *Forum* publishing Walker Percy, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and W.H. Gass; next as director of the Contemporary Arts Museum sponsoring exhibits or appearances or performances of work by avant-garde artists in all media; and finally, as a logical step, physically moving out of the provinces to New York and the physical and literary company of many of the writers and painters whose work he had sponsored.

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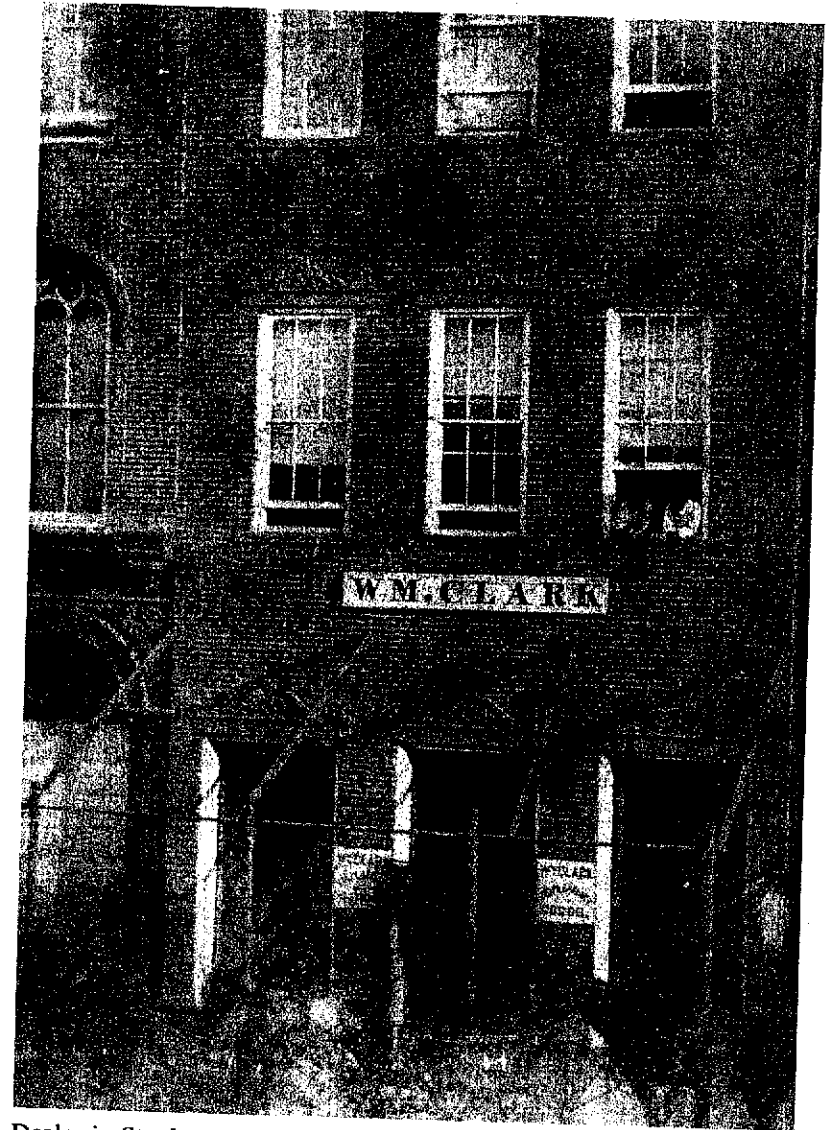
THE HOUSTON OF THE "DARING PLUNGERS"

As the photographs which follow attest, early Houston was not an imposing place physically. The city's unpretentious appearance was achieved as much by design as by accident. As the editor of Galveston's newspaper complained in 1858, "in Houston everything is business Our merchants are spending their thousands in building handsome stores with iron fronts, while the merchants of Houston are doing a much larger business in the same buildings they have been occupying for years." Houston clearly lacked the culture and elegance—an urbane attitude almost European in nature—that characterized Galveston, but it had enterprise. The monuments left by the "daring plungers of Houston"—as E.H. Cushing described the city's merchant class in 1859—were not to be found in mansions or impressive storefronts, but in the thriving commerce that made Houston "the great interior commercial emporium" of Texas.

As Houston entered into the second half of the nineteenth century, the town still possessed many frontier characteristics: the population was highly transient, the sexes were unbalanced, there were a relatively small number of children, but a large number of men older than 20 years and younger than 50. The most easily identifiable individuals in the population were the city's successful merchants: men like William R. Baker, William Marsh Rice, William J. Hutchins, Cornelius Ennis, Paul Bremond or Benjamin Shepherd. Despite its raw appearance, the town was becoming more sedate. The forces of order and decency had diminished its unenviable reputation for brawling; no longer could patrolman Edward Stiff describe Houston as "a grand rendezvous for abandoned characters from the four quarters of the globe." By mid-century there were eight churches in the town and numerous fraternal, debating and singing societies. Since 1858 the town had boasted of the existence of the Houston Academy with Dr. Ashbel Smith as its first superintendent. Cultural activities were still limited: Jenny Lind visited town in 1859, and the same year Professor Wilbur drew a considerable crowd to observe him ascend in a balloon from Market Square. A curious sight that same winter was the occasional appearance of a camel on the town's streets. A large herd of the desert beasts had been employed as camouflage on a slave smuggling ship and they were pastured for a time on Francis Lubbock's farm just outside of town.

Most visitors noted the fragility of those elements in Houston that enhance the quality of daily life, but they were more impressed with the energy and optimism that characterized its entrepreneurs. The city had prospered in

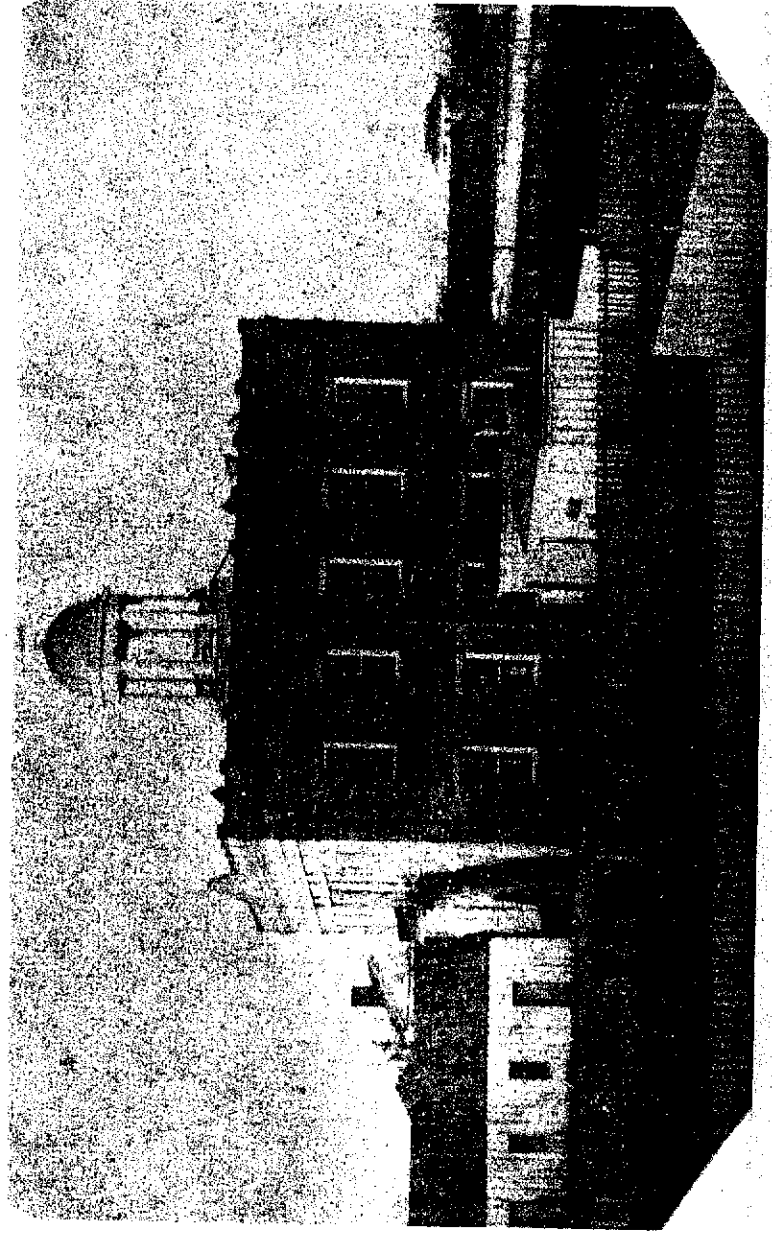
previous decades by virtue of its location as a natural break in transportation between the rich interior agricultural lands and the market lanes of the sea. Despite its narrow, twisting nature, Houston's merchants utilized Buffalo Bayou to dominate commerce between the interior and Galveston's port. For a time ox carts and teamsters were the "peculiar institution" of the city as they struggled across the muddy prairies to bring cotton, sugar and a host of other commodities to the city and hauled away groceries and manufactured goods. In the 1850s oxen became obsolete as the aggressive businessmen of Houston assured the city's future by promoting and constructing railroads. By the eve of the Civil War, five railroads radiated from the town; of the 450 miles of rail track in Texas, more than 350 led to Houston and made it the hub of railroad activity in the state. One old timer marvelled at the growth and energy he found in Houston and concluded that it had outstripped its competitors not because of its location, but because its rivals "lacked enterprise." In the second half of the century, Houstonians would make another important decision and abandon their cooperative relationship with Galveston to challenge the island city by seeking deep water to make Houston an ocean port. The accompanying photographs—some of the earliest photographs of the city that exist—convey visual hints of the nature of the city on the bayou as it was in the 1860s.



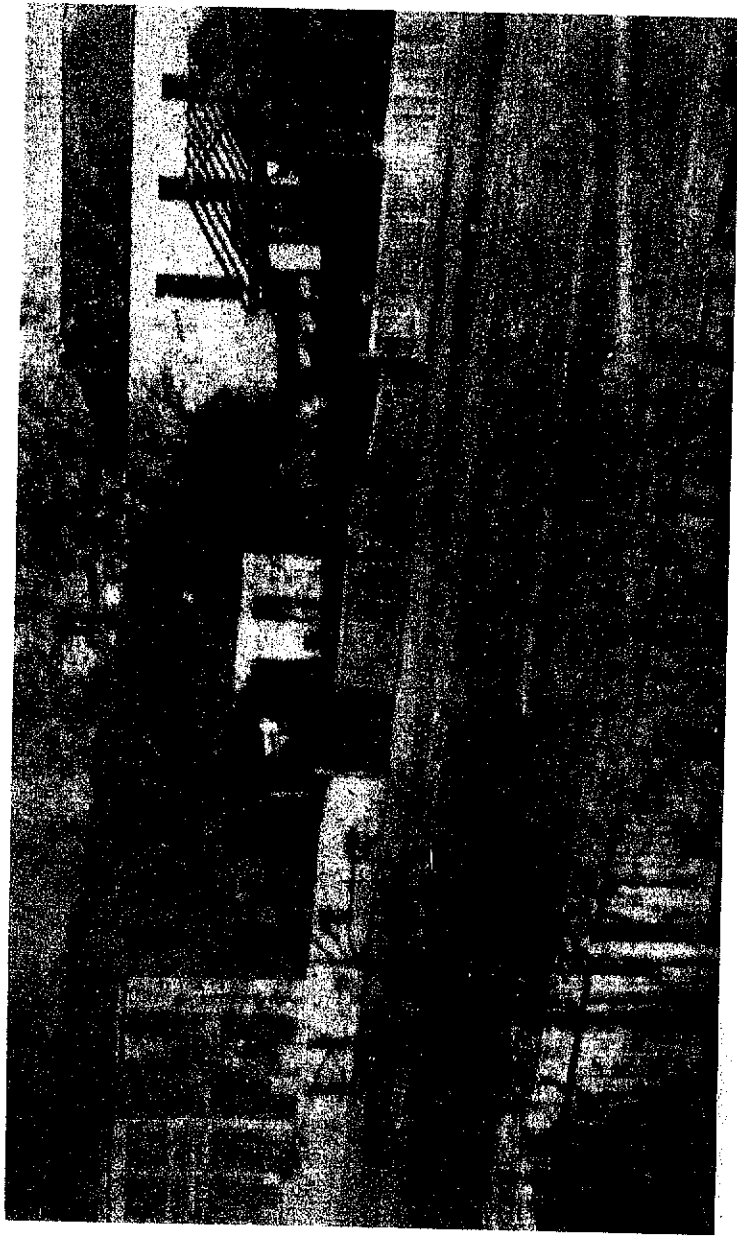
A Dealer in Staple and Fancy Dry Goods, William Clark's store was located on Main Street between Congress and Preston Streets, in the 1860s.



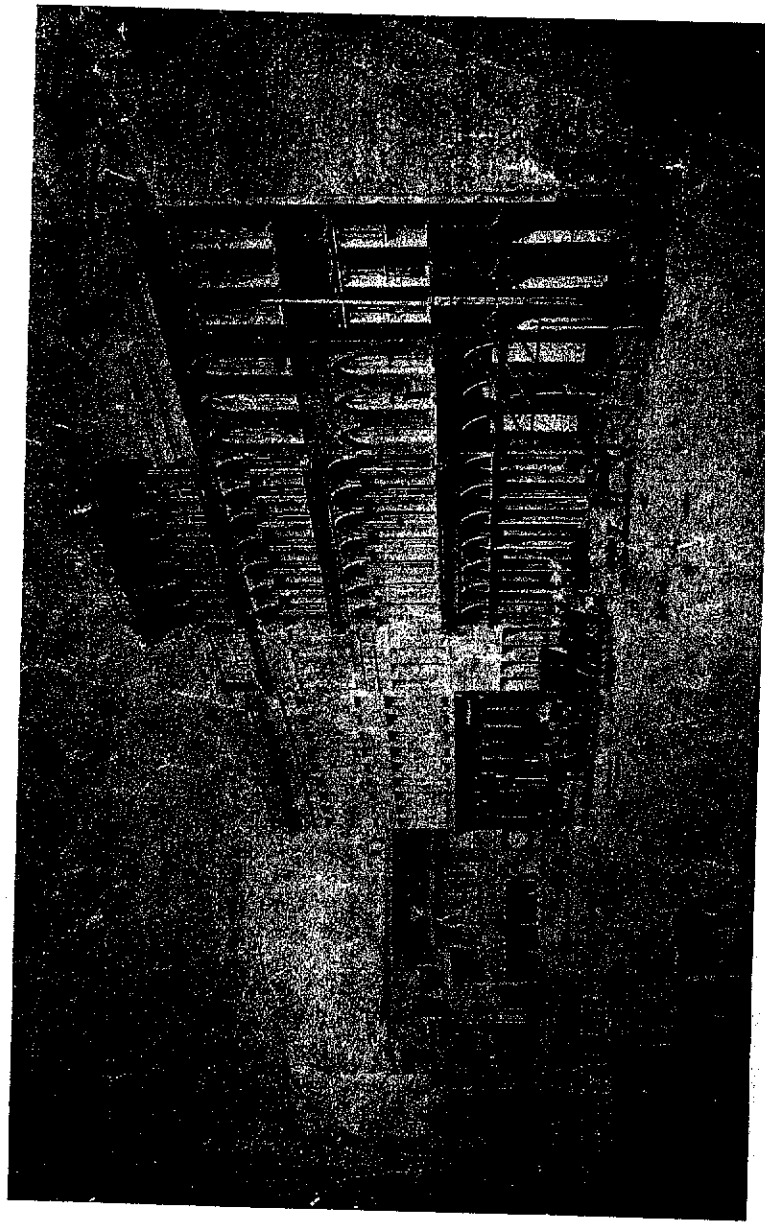
Dr. L. Quinby, dentist, is identified in the 1866 city directory; his office was located at 1864 Main Street, between Preston and Prairie Streets.



The Houston Academy was chartered in 1856; in 1859 it occupied this two story brick building. Its first superintendent was Dr. Ashbel Smith.



Texas Avenue at Austin Street in the 1860s.



The Van Alstyne Building was located at the corner of Main and Congress Streets. This photograph dates from the 1860s.



The small building at the right hand top of the street is the business location of W. H. Elliot, druggist. In 1866, it was located on Preston Street between San Jacinto and Caroline Streets.

NEWS AND NOTES OF THE HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER

BY DEBORAH A. BAUER

On May 17, 1980 the Houston Metropolitan Research Center hosted the first citywide competition of the Houston Area History Fair. The finalists for the fair were selected from eight regional competitions representing eleven school districts and some 700 students throughout the Houston area. Trophies, ribbons, and books were awarded to the winners in grades seven through twelve as well as special prizes for the best projects on Texas, family, and community history. Prizes were made possible through generous contributions from Northwest Bank and Trust; the Harris County Historical Society; Jefferson Davis Chapter No. 1637, United Daughters of the Confederacy; Ann Poage Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution; and the San Jacinto Chapter, Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

An exhibition entitled "Early Houston Theatres" is currently on display in the Julia Ideson Building. The exhibition traces the evolution of theatre architecture in Houston from the early 1890s Sweeney-Coombs Opera House, through the vaudeville houses of the early twentieth century, to the moving picture palaces of the late 1920s. Items in the exhibition are from the Alfred C. Finn Collection, HMRC; the HMRC photographic collection; and the George Fuermann City of Houston Collection, University of Houston Libraries. None of the theatres featured in this display exist today. The drawings, photographs, and memorabilia remaining offer a rare opportunity to glimpse the grandeur and elegance which once awaited Houston audiences. "Early Houston Theatres" will be open to the public through the month of August.

One of the facets of HMRC is its function as a Regional Historical Resource Depository. RHRD is a statewide program coordinating the efforts of libraries, historical organizations, local governments, and the State to preserve and make available to the public local government records. These include documents generated by cities, counties, schools, regional units and special districts. Encompassing the six counties of Harris, Fort Bend, Galveston, Matagorda, Brazoria and Wharton, the HMRC regional historical depository now contains 800 feet of public records and is continually being expanded. These public documents can be a significant source of information for the genealogist and local historian as well as a means of legal verification