

The Long Journey of the Merchants

by Garna L. Christian



In a city in which a twenty-year-old building is often considered obsolete and a forty-year-old structure routinely ends as a parking lot, the Merchants and Manufacturers Building continues its seventy-eight year watch over Buffalo Bayou, a few hundred feet from the birthplace of Houston. Indeed, the varied aspirations of builders and owners have matched in their ambition those of city founders John, Augustus, and Charlotte Allen for their crude settlement in 1836. Yet, the recipient of historical designations from the National Register of Historic Places and the Texas Historical Commission hovered on the brink of extinction for half its existence due to an uncanny combination of hard luck and miscalculations.¹

The location at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak bayous, occupied by the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) since 1974, held a conspicuous position on the outskirts of the city for almost a century before the construction of the building. The streams that fed into the San Jacinto River, through the present day ship channel, provided the basis for the Allens' dream of a navigable waterway connecting the potential port of Houston to Galveston Bay and beyond. Indian tribes camped in its forests en route to visiting their friend President Sam Houston on the site of the present day Scanlan Building, in the new Republic of Texas. A Texas Historical Commission marker, recently removed

from the path of the light train that traverses the Main Street Viaduct to the grounds of the UHD campus, notes the use on this site of an earlier structure housing 350 Union prisoners during the Civil War. At the nearby intersection of Commerce and Travis streets, a Confederate supply ship sank into Buffalo Bayou after escaping a Yankee blockade at Galveston before falling victim to navigational obstacles. After the restoration of peace, Louis Pless and Samuel L. Allen operated a warehouse on the later site of the M&M Building, with Allen extending commercial operations as far as Oklahoma and New Mexico. Despite the success of the enterprise, the once vibrant area had deteriorated into an "unsightly jumble of ramshackle warehouses and shacks" by 1927, according to a local business magazine.²

Houston stood near the forefront of American cities expanding their business districts in the prosperous 1920s. In the decade in which the United States officially became an urban nation and the gross national product exceeded one hundred billion dollars for the first time in history, municipalities enthusiastically augmented their skylines. Within the decade William Hogg and associates planned and opened the exclusive community of River Oaks on the city's west side; Jesse Jones promised and delivered Sam Houston Hall, on the site of the later Coliseum, for the 1928 Democratic National Convention; and Houston businessmen applied for \$36 million of building permits, seventh highest nationally.

and Manufacturers Building



Amid this building boom, two Houstonians, Rex Dunbar Frazier and James R. Cheek, in 1924, conceived the idea of a novel commercial center that would access street, water, and rail routes.³ Akin in its novelty to contemporary developments such as the Chicago Mart and Santa Fe Terminal Building at Dallas, the building would integrate wholesale and retail merchandising with the transportation of goods within a single location.

Both men had contributed signally to their city's economic development. A Chicago native, Frazier was vice president and general manager of the proposed structure. He directed the Manchester Terminal Corporation on the Houston Ship Channel to the position of the world's largest cotton compress and warehouse. Once described as a "combination of scientist, writer, businessman, dreamer, and philosopher," he had written numerous articles on meteorology and biology and worked for several newspapers, including the *Houston Daily Post*. Frazier was president of the South American Hardwood Importers, the Buffalo Warehouse Company, and Texas Rope Company. The former mining, oil, and railroad operator stocked his Webb County ranch, Rancho Balcones, with extensive quantities of cattle, sheep, and goats. Cheek, who died in 1928 before seeing his project completed, headed the Magnolia Park Land Company and Citizens Loan and Land Company and served as vice president of Fidelity Realty Corporation.⁴

The ambitious project attracted prestigious names in

construction. Bertram E. Giesecke and Augustus H. Harris, who headed a prominent architectural firm in Austin, Texas, conducted an eighteen-month study to determine the design best suited to the location and its particular requirements. Hendrick and Gottlieb, of Houston, and Wyatt C. Hedrick, of Fort Worth, collaborated on the engineering features. Don Hall, the contractor, had contributed to the erection of one hundred and thirty three buildings within the decade, including the New Cotton Exchange, Warwick Hotel, Medical Arts, Houston National Bank, wharf facilities, and headquarters for the *Houston Post-Dispatch* and *Houston Press*. Georgia born Edward Andrew Peden, president of the building, had directed a leading iron and steel business in his adopted city since 1890 and had served on the Houston Port Commission, Chamber of Commerce, First National Bank, Houston Lighting and Power Company, and the Texas Hardware Jobbers Association. He administered a European relief program for Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover during the First World War and became a trustee for Rice Institute, now Rice University.⁵ Donald Marion (Curly) Harwood, general superintendent, had accumulated both engineering experience and tributes to his successes while working as an associate of Stone and Webster Engineering Corporation. Examples of his art were presented in textbooks as models. He established a speed record for ship construction during the late war. Harwood added to his laurels by completing the Merchants and Manufactur-

ers Building in less than a year without the loss of a single worker's life.⁶

Other participants in the project included John K. Stirton, secretary-treasurer and officer in the Magnolia Park Land Company and East End Home Builders, and a distinguished board of directors. Prominent among the latter were Don Hall; J.W. Neal of the Second National Bank; Walter H. Walne of the law firm of Baker, Botts, Parker, and Garwood; W.L. Pearson, chief officer of W.L. Pearson and Company; Clyde L. Paul of Paul and Company; and A.J. Hennings, Fred Thulin, and T.C. Ernest, representing the banking house of Peabody, Houghteling, and Company of Chicago. The latter financial institution, in existence since 1865, long had financed industries in the coastal region. Walne had attained particular distinction. He joined the Baker Botts law firm in 1912 and became managing partner, known for his recruiting of talented lawyers from various parts of the state. In 1946 the firm bore his name as Baker, Botts, Andrews, and Walne.⁷

The Merchants and Manufacturers Building opened to accolades from the press on April 17, 1930. An enthusiastic reporter pronounced it a "modern combination office and warehouse...unique in the Southwest." Another praised the edifice as "a modern miracle of architectural genius," which "no single term can fully describe." The architects confirmed that "no similar type of structure" existed in the nation. The city assuredly welcomed an opportunity to wake Houston from the financial doldrums. The object of attention stood eleven stories tall, alone against the skyline, where no competing structure could "obstruct its view or light." The bifurcated, twin-surfaced building came in at around six million "prosperity decade" dollars, the equivalent to more than seventy-three million in today's currency.

The art nouveau and art deco style reflected the transitional period in architecture of the late 1920s that emulated the New York and Chicago schools. The most pronounced ornamentation graced the terminus of each bay at the ninth floor and on the parapet wall, assuring the building recognition as a landmark of Houston. Its six hundred thousand feet capacity made the Merchants and Manufacturers Building the largest in Houston at the time and the third in height. Indeed, it boasted the largest floor area of any building south of St. Louis. An admirer calculated that the edifice could accommodate ninety thousand people, a third of the city's population, or the floor space of any other local building within its interior with additional room for another structure. One observer, with perhaps an overactive imagination, estimated that a person requiring fifteen seconds to open a window would need six hours to perform the task on the forty thousand window panes.⁸

The M&M Building, as Houstonians soon dubbed it, offered various innovative features. The single structure housed convenience stores, private and general offices, wholesale and retail displays, distribution and warehouse

areas, and garage space for four hundred autos under one roof. Tenants and clients could relax at clubs, lounges, and restaurants without leaving the premises. Parcel post chutes to provide a billing system and the city's first automatic telephone recording device functioned in advance of general use. Brass mail boxes at the northern and southern sides of the building remained nearly eight decades later as silent testimony to the grandiose aspirations of the designers. Six rapid passenger elevators and eight freight elevators moved people and cargo efficiently. Each floor provided a special purpose in the overall design. The first floor served warehousing and distribution functions; the second floor, also below street level, housed a spacious parking garage; the third floor, opening on Main Street, encompassed more than forty arcade stores; the fourth through ninth floors featured single offices and suites, each enjoying an outside exposure; the tenth floor consisted of local and foreign

industrial displays; the eleventh floor contained administrative offices. An advertisement extolling "Finely Finished Offices" listed "General Offices, Accounting rooms, Display and Sample rooms, large or small areas for laboratories, assembling and light manufacturing. Stores and arcade display rooms. Steam heated, circulating ice water, running hot and cold water..."⁹

The physical surroundings complemented the nature of the enterprise. Its location, which guaranteed an unobstructed view, assured truck, rail, and water

transportation access to the three and one half acre site. Maximum advantage of the options, however, required some modification. The city widened the Main Street viaduct, fronting the building, to facilitate entry. The Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, whose tracks paralleled the building, dropped plans to construct a similar building on adjacent property and undertook a new bridge across White Oak Bayou and additional trackage. The M&M Building designers added a barge dock to accommodate increased water travel and excavated a tunnel to connect the dock to the warehouse facilities.¹⁰

Amid slumping building permits, restricted municipal funds, falling tax collections, and threats of borrowing freezes at the outset of the Great Depression, the Bayou City needed a financial boost. The ensuing economic malaise, however, mocked the vitality of the effort and the applause of the civic leaders. Although Houston, now the largest city in the state, with the nation's sixth ranking port, maintained an image of job opportunities superior to many other municipalities, it was caught in the universal tide. Cotton, oil, and hamburgers fell to a nickel and Texans on relief reached thirteen percent of the population. In 1932, the year that brought Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal to the national stage, building permits in the Bayou City fell to below three million dollars. Shanty towns sprang up along the train yards and waterways within view of the Merchants

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and Manufacturers Building as Houstonians peacefully demonstrated for employment. Construction and operational costs of the structure demanded full occupancy, a goal that appeared easily attainable at the time of its planning. Now tenants, finding it difficult to meet their rent, began canceling their leases. Flood damage, sustained in 1929, permitted numerous lessees an opportunity to exit. The businesses that remained represented a range of economic activities, including oil well supplies, produce, printing, warehousing, rubber products, barbering, and publishing, but their numbers failed to cover the expenses and interest payments. Floor rentals slumped from a minimum of nine cents per square foot to five cents, and the building succumbed to debt. Like new constructions across the country, including the famous Empire State Building in Manhattan, the M&M building faced a stark future. The owners filed for bankruptcy in 1934.¹¹

After Houston and the nation sought to climb out of the Great Depression through the remainder of the 1930s, the onset of World War II boosted employment and demand for strategic goods. The chemical, steel, and shipbuilding industries, in particular, enjoyed new life. Still, prosperity frustratingly eluded the M&M Building. Merchandisers and printers, the staple of the tenancy, suffered shortages of vital materials. The advertising of the 1930s, which had hailed the structure as one of the leading merchandising marts in the nation, waned to one-line listings in the City Directory. Inflation, more than demand, elevated the rental of square footage to eight and eventually ten cents before the end of the war.

A postwar boom held out new hope for the M & M Building. Houston diversified its economic base. The port and medical center expanded, along with the city's boundaries and population, and the near-town airport, now Hobby, acquired east and west flights to complement the north-south air axis. Veterans flocked to the University of Houston in record numbers, filling trailers and temporary housing assigned to supplement dormitories. A second opportunity for the Merchants and Manufacturers Building to attain its optimistic promise presented itself in the person of businessman H.H. Coffield, who retrieved the building from bankruptcy in 1948 with a successful bid of two million dollars.¹²

A native of Rockdale, Texas, and a transplanted Dallas oilman, Coffield had earned a local reputation as a "hard,

shrewd businessman" with extensive warehouse holdings in Houston. He appeared to be the man for the difficult task of rejuvenating the eighteen year old building. A rags-to-riches success in his Central Texas hometown, Coffield had earned a fortune in the scrap iron business during World War I. Concurrent with acquiring the M&M Building, he purchased three buildings of the Hughes Tool Company and the wartime plant of Reed Roller Bit, commenting, "You can't miss a bet in Houston." Variousy described as "a perfectionist" and "impatient with details," the extremely private individual also possessed a strong commitment to civic improvement. He served as a national officer of the Boy Scouts of America and the Salvation Army, to which, along with the Episcopal Church, he subsequently bequeathed the bulk of his estate. He sat on the Good Neighbor Commission and the Texas Department of Corrections, where his credentials as a reformer induced the state to name a prison unit for him in Anderson County. The Texas Heritage Foundation named Coffield and celebrated philanthropist Ima Hogg as Texans of the Year.¹³

His son, C.H. (Pete) Coffield, shared many of the father's interests and joined in the rejuvenation project. The younger man managed the M&M Building while acting as secretary of the State Democratic Executive Committee and serving on the Battleship Texas Commission and Texas Conservation Foundation. For recreation he navigated a quarter-million dollar air conditioned paddle steamer, a replica of a Mississippi River craft. A Houston mayor appointed him to the Crime Commission.¹⁴

While promising "no radical changes" in the operation of the building, the elder Coffield designated three quarters of a million dollars for improvements, including a three-to-five-story garage and an air conditioning unit. The new owner immediately razed one and a half acres on the west side of the building for the proposed improvements. He placed advertisements in business journals under the title, "Growing Because We Serve the Houston Metropolitan Area." Accompanying photographs extolled the spacious office, storage, and parking facilities.¹⁵

Once again, however, the times proved unpropitious for the huge structure. The remarkable postwar expansion of Houston mitigated the attraction of the central location. Consistent with the new national trend, freeways, outlying shopping centers, and suburban housing developments sapped the commercial life and revenue from the downtown area, leaving a deteriorating core in their wake. Major department stores followed the lead or relocated farther from the old lower downtown business area. City officials cut the ribbon on the newly completed Gulf Freeway, helping create new neighborhoods and businesses between Houston and Galveston. Wildcatter Glenn McCarthy located the innovative Shamrock Hotel beyond Rice Institute, on the southern edge of the city. Humble Oil's industrial site at the West Ranch led to the NASA Manned Space Center in the following decade. Houston doubled its area in 1949 to prevent encirclement and ten years later embarked on a freeway expansion program.¹⁶

Downtown interests fought vainly to save the original heart of the city. As early as 1946 Houston businessmen met to formulate a plan. Out of this concern sprang the





Students relax in the lobby mall which once housed numerous downtown Houston businesses and government offices.



The campus cafe, a center of activity in the early years of UHD, has been replaced by a modern food court in the Academic Building.

Central Houston Improvement Association, which sought improved police protection, expanded transportation systems, and increased investment capital. In the mid-1950s a related group, the Rehabilitation Committee of Downtown Houston, led by John L. Andrew of the First National Bank, focused on the section between Buffalo Bayou and Texas Avenue. These efforts, in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce, resulted in the establishment of Allen's Landing Park, a monument to the city's founding.¹⁷

Nevertheless, restoration of Houston's core still lay decades in the future. From 1948 through 1958, the share of total retail sales for downtown outlets shrunk from 51 percent to 28 percent. The Merchants and Manufacturers Building stood guard over an abandoned area and its occupancy dwindled to 50 percent. With one bullet left in the chamber, the younger Coffield in 1966 made a final bold attempt to rescue the investment. Acting on a plan of businessman Nathan H. Goldberg to establish a home furnishings mart, Coffield devoted 12,000 square feet of the eighth floor to the venture. Thirty exhibitors of a proposed two hundred displayed merchandise to visiting merchants, departing from the custom of merely supplying pictures of the goods. Within four months the gamble showed cautious success, as the Home Furnishings Mart attracted ten more clients. Coffield released additional space for a gift mart, enticing an average of eight dealers daily to view the \$45,000 inventory. The modest gains, however, peaked at that point; a similar enterprise at Dallas further depressed the market. The flight to suburbia, like the depression and the war before it, dashed the dream of the M&M Building for commercial success. The Coffields placed the building on the block.¹⁸

Salvation, although not immediate, arrived in a quite different form. A mile to the south, South Texas Junior College

had outgrown its facilities at 1600 Louisiana. Founded in 1948 as an educational arm of the Young Men's Christian Association and companion to South Texas College of Law, the school grew into the largest private two-year college in the state. Sorely pressed for larger facilities, in 1963 the governing board empowered attorney Elliott Johnson to head a search committee for a new campus. The committee combed the greater Houston area, driven by criteria demanding choice location, accessibility to public and private transportation, and adequate space. When the Coffields presented the M&M Building for consideration, some members, recalling its hard luck history, paused. One later recalled, "Winos inhabited the area," and another described it as a "homely old building" that had been "a flop for everybody." An inspector observed that a single light bulb constituted the entire illumination of a lower floor.¹⁹

The building's attributes, however, won over the opposition. Houston Endowment, a financial supporter of the college, desired a central north side location, and the building fulfilled all the criteria of the search committee for the new campus. The structural strength, considered the soundest in the city, easily met all perceived challenges, and the voluminous yet compact design afforded ample vertical movement for a large student body. Noting that the receptive owners had cleaned the building, the committee recommended the move. Accordingly, in November 1966 the YMCA leased 30,000 feet of space from the Coffields and prepared to occupy the premises by the following February. The timetable placed stress on both the owners and the new occupants. Neither could find a contractor willing to guarantee completion of the necessary remodeling in time for the opening of the spring semester. Nevertheless, zealous efforts by the Coffields, the building manager, architect Carroll Broadnax, interior designer Newell Stickney, and

others, accomplished the ambitious task.²⁰

Attendance soared and South Texas Junior College, as previously agreed, attained independence from the parent organization in early 1968. The college purchased the building for a sum of four million dollars, for which the sellers promised a gift to the institution of \$325,000. In 1972 Houston Endowment transferred to the school controlling interest in Houston Terminal Warehouse and Cold Store Company, an adjacent six story structure of more than 134,000 square feet. The gift, valued at \$700,000, comprised more than seventy percent of the outstanding common stock in the warehouse firm, one of the oldest in the city. The college established One Main Plaza Corporation as a non-profit subsidiary to operate the building.²¹

External forces again conspired against the Merchants and Manufacturers Building. Student enrollment declined as the new Houston Community College system offered lower tuition, the selective service modified college deferments as the Vietnam War wound down, and the burden of debt pressed more heavily. Attendance decreased from 5,245 students in 1968 to 3,179 in 1972. In common with other private colleges across the nation, South Texas Junior College faced a bleak future. Attempts at merger with Houston Community College sputtered and stalled. Administrators and faculty braced themselves for likely closure and the M&M Building faced the possibility of demolition.²²



The U.S. Department of Interior awarded the M&M Building official recognition as a historic building in the minimum amount of time, fifty years.

Opportunely, fate finally moved in a different direction. The University of Houston, losing a longstanding downtown site, sought another central location. A series of conferences between UH president Philip G. Hoffman and president W.I. Dykes and the board of directors of South Texas Junior College produced an agreement by which the two-year school turned over its assets to the larger institution in 1974. With no interruption in the schedule, faculty, staff, and students returned to the familiar premises in the fall semester. Renovation outlays soon exceeded the original cost of the building, but the exterior, in accordance with the guidelines of the US Department of Interior and Texas Historical Commission, which awarded the building a historical marker in 1980, remains virtually the same as at the celebrated opening.



This view of the university from downtown shows the 1997 addition of the Academic Building (left).

Today, almost eighty years after its opening and after decades of uncertainty over its future, the Merchant and Manufacturers Building has taken an important place in the city of Houston. Originally envisioned as a commercial center with access to street, water, and rail routes, it has added access through a new mode of transportation, light rail, serving as one terminus for a line that connects downtown Houston, the museum district, Rice University, the Texas Medical Center, and Reliant Stadium. Now devoted to education, not commerce, it is the primary building for the campus of the University of Houston-Downtown. It is now a place where Houstonians from all walks of life come in search of educational opportunities to improve their choices in life. The M & M Building still stands in its singular location, where, consistent with the vision of its founders, no other edifice obstructs its view or light.²³

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