



FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

In this issue we have a short report on the “Good Brick Awards,” which are given by the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance each year to celebrate notable achievements in historic preservation in our region. Also contained is an article about the futile efforts to save the Southwestern Savings Association Building in Bellaire. Good Bricks versus Bad

Wrecking Balls—a familiar story in our city’s history, with wrecking balls holding a big edge over good bricks in head-to-head competition.

As a magazine about our region’s past, *Houston History* comes naturally by its interest in historic structures that have been preserved, as well as those that have been destroyed. Past issues have celebrated the restoration in downtown Houston of the Gulf Building (a.k.a., the Chase Building) and the Magnolia Ballroom. We also have featured stories on the Eldorado Ballroom, Temple Beth Israel, the Houston Heights Public Library, and the West Mansion in Clear Lake. In the works are articles on Courtlande Place and the Galveston Opera House. The continued use of such buildings reminds us that achievements worthy of “Good Bricks” in the past have made our region a richer, more interesting, and better place to live.

Stories about the destruction of historic structures remind us of a harsh truth: those who favor preservation must save a historic structure again and again, while those wanting to destroy it need only prevail once to end the debate. In a previous issue of our magazine, we had a short article on the destruction of Freedman’s Town. To that we now add the story of the Southwestern Savings Association Building. In the future, we hope to reclaim at least the historical memories and images of other lost structures. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned in studying losing battles.

All of us who think that historic preservation is important to the future tone and quality of life in our city must at times be tempted to give up and look for a new cause. After all, a defining characteristic of our city’s history has been its dynamic, unrestrained growth. In Houston’s past, developers consistently have won. But there is now a sense that preservation is possible under Mayor White. The time for effective activism is now—or perhaps never—for many buildings in our region.

This issue as a whole argues that preservation includes more than saving buildings; Story Sloane’s historic photographs show us how our city appeared in the past. The extraordinary richness and clarity of his large restored photographs pull us back into the reality of historic Houston. These photographs force our mind’s eye to compare the present with the past, engaging us in the essential task of the historian, the appreciation of change over time.

Oral history adds human voices to such visual images. Our minds contain a personal historical record of people, places, and events. Unless “preserved” through interviews or memoirs, such memories pass from the historical record when we die. Rollin Baker’s “first views of Houston” in this issue gives us a pleasant stroll through Houston in the 1920s, taking us to a somewhat familiar place most of us have never been.

Archival records are also historic preservation. They save historical records of organizations and personal correspondence of individuals, along with visual evidence, oral histories, and material culture. Professional historians use them to help write history. All of us can use them to find pieces of the past of special interest to us, from our family trees to the history of our communities. When I

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NEH- Cullen Chair of History and Business - UH

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first began working in archives as a professional historian, I found that I “wasted” half my time reading the old baseball box scores in newspapers. Although my great book remains unwritten, at least I have a deeper love of baseball because of this early research.

When all of this preservation effort comes together in good historical research, it can broaden our understanding of the past. One article in this issue recalls a time when labor unions in oil refineries had real bargaining power; another tells us about the downtown trolleys and trains to Galveston we had before we had cars; still another allows us to watch the Gulf Freeway being designed and built.

History can give us a sense of change through time, a reminder that choices in the past shape our lives, a way to broaden our sense of ourselves and our surroundings. Historic preservation of all sorts protects and retains the building blocks of history. Those of us committed to retrieving the past must continue to work to keep the wrecking ball away from the “good bricks” of history, which include structures, photographs, interviews, and documents. To be effective in this effort, we must show those around us the value of history.