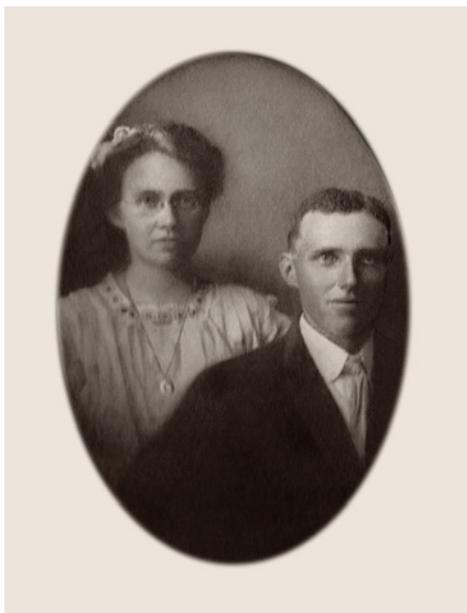


The Kuhlmann Family: Planting Roots for Future Generations

By Betty Trapp Chapman

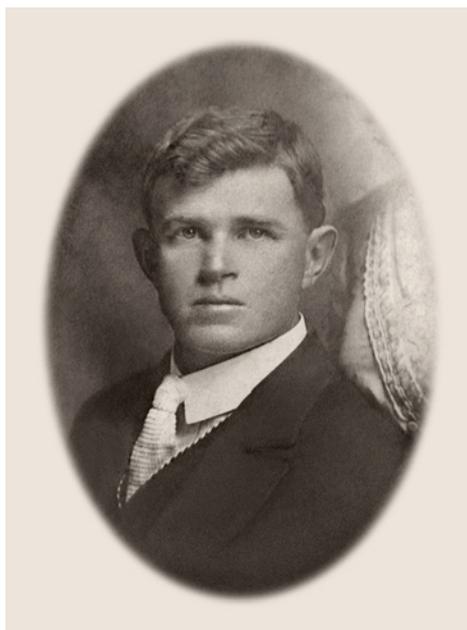
In 1836 young Johann Frederick Kuhlmann made his way from Germany to America, eventually landing at the port of New Orleans after one of his sea journeys. Remaining in New Orleans working in various jobs, he continuously heard stories about the newly established Republic of Texas and its capital, Houston. To satisfy his curiosity, he made a trip to Houston and liked what he saw: a bustling little town that might provide him a promising future. He returned to New Orleans and soon claimed Mary Ann Heitman as his wife. In 1839, looking ahead to the future, Johann (or John as he was called in America) brought his bride to Texas where the couple began life together on their recently purchased acreage for which John had paid \$1 an acre “with buildings and improvements.” The land, totaling 226 acres, lay three miles south of the fledgling town of Houston along Brays Bayou, one of the many streams in the area. The property that John claimed was originally part of the Luke Moore League, granted to Moore on August 3, 1824, by Stephen F. Austin.¹

Other members of John Kuhlmann’s family eventually joined him in Texas. Three of his brothers—Daniel Justus, John Heinrich, and George Deadrick—had also emigrated from their hometown of Buchen in the Hanover Province of Germany, settling in Loudon County, Virginia, where they farmed jointly-owned land. When George and John Heinrich (who became known as Henry in America) received a letter from a brother in Germany telling them the whereabouts of their seafaring brother, Johann, they made arrangements to join him on Brays Bayou, hoping to establish their own farms. By the time Henry and George arrived in 1845, John was thirty-three years of age and had acquired additional acreage as well as 100 head of cattle. Henry and George, age twenty-four and twenty-



Siblings George Justus Kuhlmann and Adele Kuhlmann Schmeltz, grandchildren of John Heinrich Kuhlmann.

Photo courtesy of Gordon Nettles.



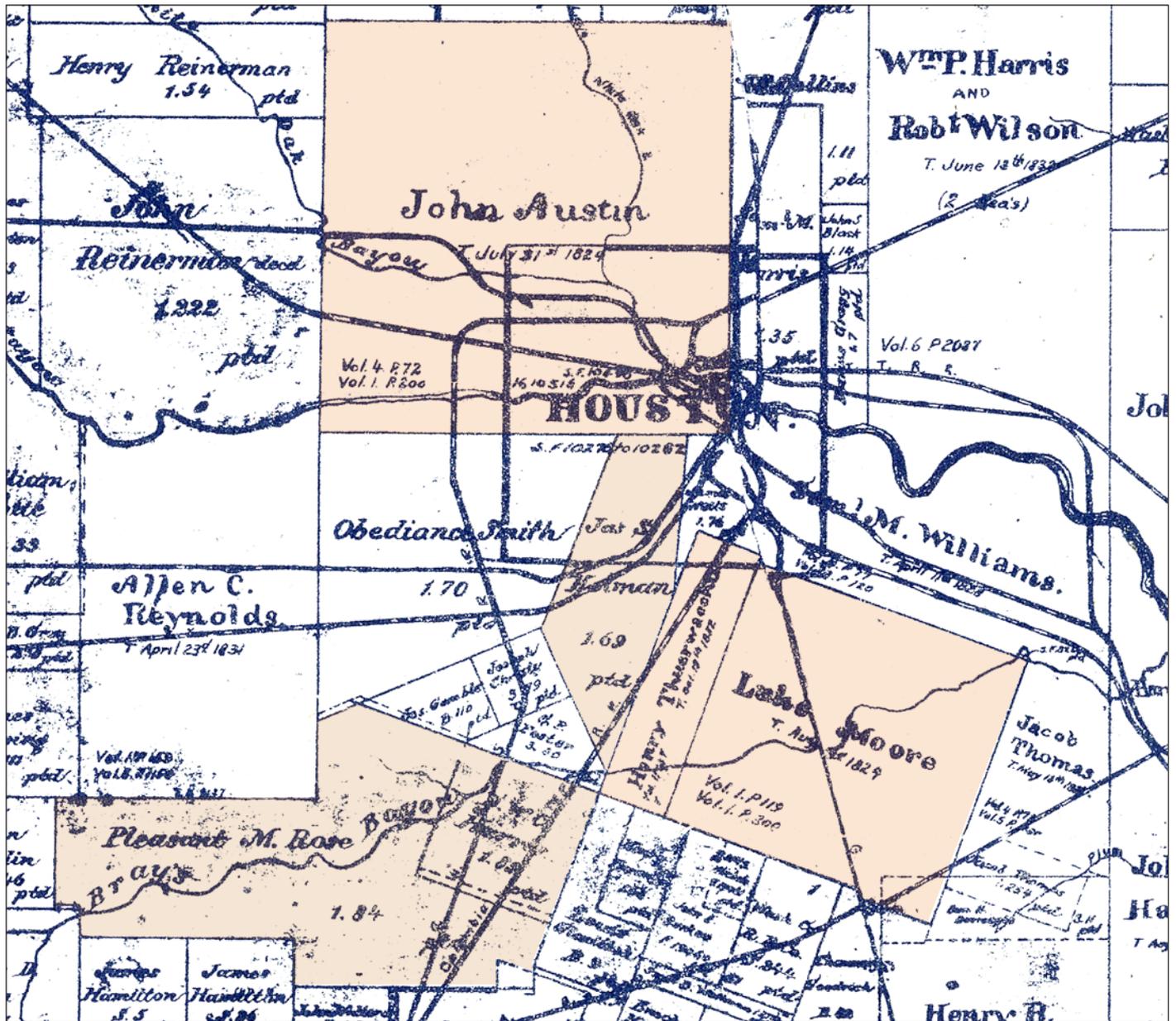
August Louis Kuhlmann, grandson of John Heinrich Kuhlmann.

Photo courtesy of Gordon Nettles.

ty-two respectively, soon bought land of their own. After settling into farming his land, Henry met Sophie Henrietta Ulzfeld, who had come to Houston from Germany in 1846. After marrying in 1848, Henry and Henrietta set up housekeeping in a two-room log cabin along the bayou. George returned to Virginia and married Katherine Ann Truslow, whom he brought back to the farm land he had purchased. This was the beginning of a Kuhlmann family compound that a century later was considered a part of Southeast Houston.²

Very few Germans settled in Texas during the Spanish and Mexican periods. Stephen F. Austin wanted to bring Germans into his colony because he admired their character, their industry, and their opposition to slavery. Austin, however, claimed he was only able to recruit five Germans for his colony because of the weather. This reality changed during the early years of the Republic of Texas when German immigration substantially increased. Although many immigrants came through an organized effort by groups such as the *Adelsverein* (The Society of Noblemen), others were doubtless drawn to Texas by the writings of visitors like Gustave Dresel, who spent the years 1838 to 1840, much of it in Houston, extolling the virtues of living in a place where a “love of freedom and the fair prospect of gain” dominated the landscape. Although no exact figures exist on what percentage of Houston’s early population was German, an 1840 estimate placed it at twenty percent. The availability of land and the prospect of becoming a landowner were obviously significant attractions for these Germans flowing into Texas. This was certainly true for the Kuhlmann

brothers. John, in particular, purchased and sold land for the next four decades, becoming one of Harris County’s largest landholders.³



This detail from an early Harris County map shows many of the areas around Houston where the Kuhlmann family owned pieces of land in varying sizes, including John Kuhlmann's first purchase in the Luke Moore League.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, Houston, Texas.

Following his original purchase, John acquired more land on both sides of Brays Bayou. Realizing the value of property near a stream like Brays Bayou, he extended his land investments to property located near Greens, White Oak, and Buffalo Bayous. During the 1840s John bought nearly 3,000 acres out of the old Pleasant M. Rose Survey, the Brown Survey, and the J. S. Holman Headright. These purchases enabled John to help fifty immigrant families obtain land by providing loan money for them to establish their own twenty-five-acre farms in the area where Fannin Street crosses Brays Bayou today. He also apprenticed some young men in the basics of farm operation. Several of the Kuhlmann land owners expanded their agricultural pursuits by establishing dairies. Brothers August Louis (Gus) and George Justus Jr., grandsons of Henry, formed Kuhlmann Bros. Dairy

on the east side of Chocolate Bayou, three miles south of Brays Bayou. They operated it for many years, but when the city began to encroach on their pastureland they sold it for \$45 an acre and became contractors, participating in the building boom that accompanied Houston's population growth in the twentieth century. At the same time, their cousin, Christian Kuhlmann, operated a dairy nearby where grazing fields were plentiful.⁴

As the brothers farmed along Brays Bayou, their families grew. The 1850 census revealed that John, Henry, and George had six children between them, and more children followed. Other families also settled near the Kuhlmanns. The 1854-1855 Harris County Scholastic Census reported almost forty potential students in the vicinity of the Kuhlmann farms. Since these families lived far outside Houston's boundaries, they organized

a school for their children. Named the Brays Bayou Community School, it became part of the county school system. According to the Scholastic Census, the enrollment of School District 3, which included Brays Bayou, equaled twenty percent of the total number enrolled in all Harris County public school districts.⁵

John did not limit his real estate holdings to rural property. Deed records reveal that he also purchased town lots. Some of this property was in Houston's business district. In 1856 he purchased a store at the corner of Congress and Travis Streets fronting on Market Square. When an 1860 fire damaged the existing building, Kuhlmann constructed a handsome two-story building that initially housed a liquor, cigar, and wine store. At the same time he reconstructed the fire-damaged building adjacent to his that belonged to widow Eliza Stephanes Fox, who had operated a bakery there. Completed in 1866, the new double building became known as the Fox-Kuhlmann Building and survives today as a City of Houston Protected Landmark at 305-307 Travis Street.⁶

While many of the Kuhlmann family members continued in agricultural pursuits, still others became involved in Houston's business community. Kuhlmann Floral Co. was a thriving business on Main Street when the massive 1915 hurricane destroyed all of its greenhouses. The business had been established by Henry J. Kuhlmann, but was under the direction of his son, Henry Jr. in 1915. Henry managed to recover from the storm damage,

which was placed at \$100,000, and by 1920 had located his business in the Rice Hotel. Other businesses were Kuhlmann's Wood Yard; Kuhlmann's Hay and Feed Warehouse; Star Bottling Works, manufacturer of soda, sarsaparilla, ginger ale, and mineral waters; Reichardt & Schulte, Dealers in Seeds and Fertilizer; and Walter Kuhlmann's Laundry Machinery Co. Others pursued independent vocations. Theodore Henry Kuhlmann, a grandson of Henry, was a carpenter. In 1907 he built a home for his bride in the Kuhlmann neighborhood near Scott Street on what became MacGregor Way. When Theodore decided to develop the property in the mid-1930s, he had his home moved three blocks to where it stands today on Charleston Street. Still others through the years were engaged in teaching, ranching, milling lumber, railroading, bookkeeping, and clerking.⁷

In 1871 another young German immigrated to America with the hope of starting a grocery business in Galveston. When that plan failed, the ambitious twenty-one-year-old Henry Henke moved to Houston and met Henry Kuhlmann's daughter, Katherine, whom he pursued and soon married. Henke was also successful in pursuing his own business. With very little capital, he opened a grocery store across from Market Square. When he hired a young bookkeeper, Camille Pillot, and made him a partner, the firm of Henke & Pillot was born. The Kuhlmann farms frequently provided produce for the stores and several family members were longtime em-



The Fox-Kuhlmann Building, completed in 1866 at 305-307 Travis Street, is a City of Houston Protected Landmark.

Photo courtesy of Mike Vance.



The home Theodore Henry Kuhlmann built in 1907 near Scott Street and what became MacGregor Way was moved to Charleston Street in the 1930s. Photo courtesy of Jon Fairchild.

ployees. Charles Heinrich Kuhlmann had a fifty-two-year career with the grocer, while his son, Charles Louis, was the manager of the large South End store for many years. Many long-time Houstonians remember buying groceries from Henke & Pillot, which evolved into a chain of nineteen stores in Houston and eight more in nearby towns. The local name disappeared after Kroger Corporation acquired the chain in the 1950s. Sophie Reichardt, a granddaughter of John Kuhlmann, also married a promising young businessman, Frederick Boettcher. After their marriage in 1887, the couple lived in Weimar for several years. In 1903, they moved to Houston where Frederick opened Boettcher Produce. A year later he partnered with C. L. Desel, forming Desel-Boettcher Produce Co., which became one of the largest businesses of its kind in the Southwest by purchasing goods from vegetable commission companies and then selling to retail grocers. As boats came into the Main Street landing of Buffalo Bayou, a large sign painted on the Commerce Street building façade greeted them. Desel-Boettcher survived as a major produce source for many years; it was still a thriving operation when Frederick died in 1934.⁸

During the city's formative years, the most important society for the German population was the Houston Turnverein, and Charles H. Kuhlmann served as its vice-president in 1910. Established in 1854, the organization occupied an entire block on Texas Avenue where the Turnverein club focused on German ethnic and cultural identity. They sponsored elaborate festivities involving not only athletic and military drills but also balls, concerts, and banquets. By 1869 the Turnverein was organizing the city's Volkfest each year on their own festival grounds where speeches, gymnastics, music, dancing, and baseball contests entertained those attending. The Turnverein also sponsored German Day, an event held on October 6 each year to commemorate the 1683 arrival of the first German colonist in America. The main event on German Day was a parade featuring elaborate floats.⁹

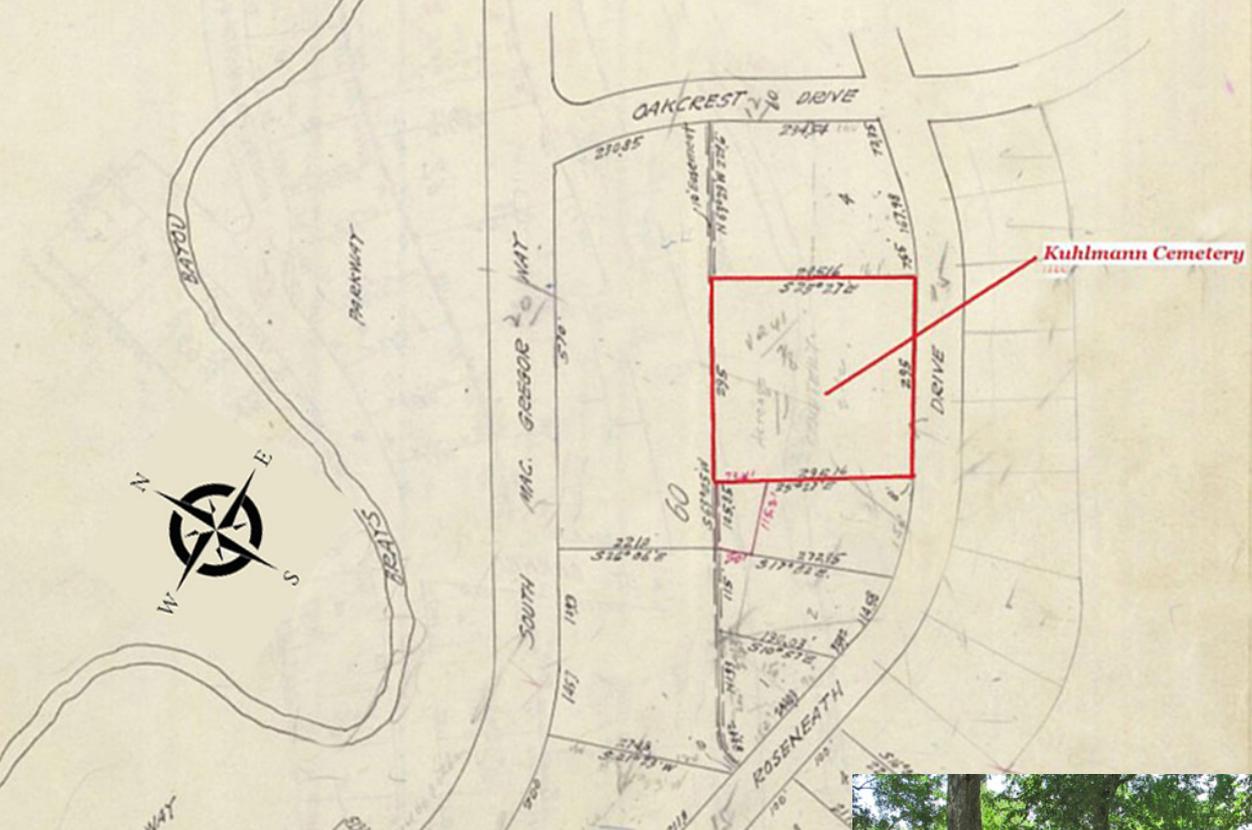
As the promise of land ownership in the newly-opened Texas fueled a wave of German immigration in the 1840s, the religious life of the resettled Germans was

paramount in the minds of church leaders in Europe. As a result, a missionary school in Basel, Switzerland, sent eight ordained Lutheran ministers to Texas in 1850 and 1851. These men, led by the Reverend Casper Messon Braun, organized the first Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Texas. On July 1, 1851, Rev. Braun founded the Erste Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische Kirche (First German Evangelical Lutheran Church) in Houston. The church was officially issued a charter by the state of Texas two months later. In 1854 the congregation purchased a lot and built its first church on Texas Avenue near Milam Street. A building behind the church was used for a day school. Records do not reveal how active the Kuhlmann families were in those early years. After all, filling a wagon with children, large and small, to make the journey into Houston in all kinds of weather would not have been an easy task. It is obvious, however, that nearly all of the Kuhlmann families considered themselves to be communicants of this little frame church throughout the nineteenth century because burial records show that Rev. Braun, who remained the minister of First German Evangelical Lutheran Church for three decades, held funeral services for family members. In 1902, having outgrown its earlier building, the congregation built an impressive Gothic-styled brick structure on Texas Avenue at Caroline Street where Kuhlmann families worshipped.¹⁰

In 1878 when John sold his Brays Bayou farm to his brother, Henry, two acres of the property were dedicated as a family cemetery. The deed cites the cemetery is to be used by the "Kuhlmann (family) or whoever owns or occupies the farm land." The first recorded burial was that of Mary Ann Heitman Kuhlmann in 1860. Years ago many of the graves were moved to a large Kuhlmann plot at Forest Park Lawndale Cemetery, but family records indicate at least nine burials likely remain in the family cemetery, including John, Mary Ann, and Sarah Kuhlmann, and several of John's grandchildren. After the death of his first wife, John had married Sarah Stroud Williams and fathered seven more children. The two-acre tract, surrounded today by the homes in Riverside Terrace, was designated in 2004 as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.¹¹

The land around Brays Bayou remained a rural environment occupied by farms and dairies until the city of Houston began to expand in the 1920s to accommodate its rapidly growing population. In order to provide services for new residential enclaves, the city extended its boundaries in 1927. By 1930 Houston encompassed 72.8 square miles, an increase of forty square miles over the decade. The once-distant Brays Bayou farmlands were now officially part of the city.

Henry MacGregor, a land developer who wanted to extend Houston's residential area by building subdivisions southward along Main Street, had begun residential development of this area as early as 1900. MacGregor died before he could fully pursue his plan, but his wife, Elizabeth, followed the instructions in his will, giving acreage for MacGregor Park and donating land along



Map from Assessor's Block Book of Harris County.

Henry Kuhlmann designated two acres of the family land to be used for a cemetery, shown here. Most of the graves were later moved to Forest Park Lawndale Cemetery, but some family members remain buried there.

Photo courtesy of Jon Fairchild.



Brays Bayou for a scenic drive. The remaining land was sold to other developers who pursued MacGregor's vision. In 1924 three subdivisions were started surrounding the bayou: Riverside Terrace, Washington Terrace, and Riverside. A lot measuring 50x100 feet sold for \$1,800—a sharp contrast to the \$1 per acre paid by the Kuhlmann brothers a century earlier. Sales brochures emphasized the suburban garden atmosphere of the subdivisions, yet observed that they were only three miles from the courthouse, long considered the center of Houston. Automobile travel had replaced the tiring wagon trips endured by the Kuhlmanns. What had once been unadorned country habitation was replaced by urban living with many amenities such as sidewalks, gutters, paved streets, electric lights, and telephones.¹²

Although most of the farms disappeared, many Kuhlmann families continued to be Southeast Houston residents. They, undoubtedly, were one of the largest extended families in the city. Elouise Schmeltz Loonam, great-granddaughter of Henry Kuhlmann, recalls growing up in the 1920s on Griggs Road surrounded by dozens of cousins. She walked one mile to Southland Elementary School, moved on to Johnston Junior High School, graduated from San Jacinto High School in 1939 and from Rice Institute four years later before beginning her teaching career. By then the neighborhood was changing rapidly, yet an article in *The Houston Post* in 1951 reveals that the area's rural roots were still deep. The reporter visited Elouise's parents, Adele and Henry Schmeltz, at their "farm in the city," noting that their acreage housed cows, chickens, and sheep. In fact, during his visit the sheep were fed fresh squash, corn, and cucumbers grown on the Schmeltz's "real farm" on Chocolate Bayou Road, which Henry, a retired rural mail carrier, claimed he only farmed

as a hobby. The *Post* reporter described the family's homestead as "a mecca of quiet and well-being in the midst of a snarling clash of civilized noise and motion." And, indeed, while their neighbor on one side was family—Aunt Amelia Kuhlmann Serface and Uncle George Kuhlmann Jr.—the neighbor on the other side was a bustling supermarket, whose incinerator bumped their fence. Adele commented in the article that "things are getting altogether too crowded." This area, however, had been home to scores of Kuhlmanns for several generations and so they stayed.¹³

The three Kuhlmann brothers—John, Henry, and George—who chose the Brays Bayou territory as their home 175 years ago knew they were choosing fertile land for farming their crops. They probably never imagined that the family roots they were planting would also cultivate the area and help it blossom into a twenty-first-century community for future generations.

Betty Trapp Chapman is a historian who researches, writes, and lectures on Houston history. Although she delves into all aspects of local history, her special areas of interest are women's history and historic preservation. She is past chair of the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission.