
❧ MACGREGOR PARK ❧

AN HISTORIC CONTEXT NARRATIVE

PREPARED FOR THE
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON "OUR TOWN" INITIATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, the University of Houston received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to fund *Our Town Southeast Houston*, part of the Third Ward Arts Initiative, a creative placemaking project led by principal investigator Dr. Carroll Parrott Blue. The Our Town Leadership Initiative is currently working in more than 50 communities around the United States to bring together public- and private-sector partners to strategically shape the character of a neighborhood, town, city or region around arts and cultural activities.

One of the sites located within the Our Town study area is MacGregor Park. In 2012, Dr. Blue commissioned a historical context report for this site in order to provide stakeholders and project participants with a foundation of knowledge to support the future development and revitalization of the area.

The *Our Town Southeast Houston* project is financed in part with Federal funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. The content and opinions expressed in this report, however, do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of the National Endowment for the Arts or the University of Houston, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Endowment or the University.

METHODOLOGY

Archival and historical research conducted for this project utilized a wide range of source materials located through online and physical repositories, including Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, historical photographs, period newspaper articles, architectural publications, local history books and articles, and oral history interviews. Repositories included the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library system, Harris County Public Library system, Harris County Clerk public records archives, University of Houston M.D. Anderson Library, Rice University's Woodson Research Center at Fondren Library, the University of Texas at Austin Architecture and Planning Library, the Center for American History (also at the University of Texas at Austin), and *Houston Chronicle* photo archives.

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OVERVIEW

MacGregor Park is significant for its association with two notable Houstonians: Henry F. MacGregor, a businessman and philanthropist who did much to shape Houston's growth and development in the first quarter of the 20th century, and Olympic champion Zina Garrison, who became a world champion tennis player through John Wilkerson's MacGregor Park junior tennis program in the 1970s.

The original 1936-37 plan for the parkway between the North and South MacGregor Way was created by the renowned landscape architecture firm Hare & Hare of Kansas City, Missouri, which carried out much of Houston's park development in the second quarter of the century. MacGregor Park provides a link to Hermann Park along Brays Bayou and is an important site within the City of Houston Park System.

THE LUKE MOORE LEAGUE

The land on which the Palms Center was built is located in the City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. This part of Texas was first populated by Native Americans – the Karankawa along the coast and the Hasinai and Caddoan tribes in the eastern piney woods – before European explorers from Spain and France arrived on these shores in the 1500s. That brief foray into this territory was followed by several hundred years of little activity; after Spanish and French colonists began to arrive in the mid-17th century, the native tribes were gradually eradicated or, in some cases, relocated inland along with the early Spanish Catholic missions.¹

What is now the State of Texas was variously claimed by Spain, France, and the nascent United States of America. The first permanent colony was established in Texas by Stephen F. Austin, who recruited 300 families, mostly from the American Middle South, to emigrate to Texas in 1824. The lands granted to these colonists, who were known as The Old Three Hundred, were generally located along waterways, such as the Brazos, San Bernard, and Colorado Rivers.² Heads of households who (like Moore) had arrived in Texas before March 2, 1836, could claim one league and one labor of land – a total of about 4,600 acres.³ This allowed the colonist to have a house in town (the labor) as well as farm or pasture land (the league).

¹ T. R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968).

² Christopher Long, "OLD THREE HUNDRED," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/umo01>). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

³ Charles E. Gilliland, David Carciere, and Zachry Davis, "Texas Title Trail," Land Markets Publication 1760, reprinted from *Tierra Grande*, Texas A & M University Real Estate Center, January 2006.

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One of the 300 colonists, Luke Moore, located the claim for his league of land along Bray's Bayou in what is now Harris County. Moore died in 1837, and the land was sold by his estate in 1838.⁴

The Luke Moore League was surveyed in 1838 by H. Trott in two sections, referred to as the East Half and West Half, a division that has carried through to present day maps. Each Half measures 5,000 varas (bars) long and 2,500 varas wide.⁵ The original survey maps⁶ show that the East Half was platted into a grid of 18 generally rectangular sections: 11 123-acre sections, three 156.5-acre sections, and four measuring 134.8 acres, 144.3 acres, 140.5 acres, and one labor, respectively. The West Half is also divided into 18 sections, but their shape and area varies; they range in size from 84 to 210 acres and, where applicable, use the Bayou as a boundary. This plat is still in use today, and MacGregor Park now occupies part of Lots 17 and 18 in the West Half and part of Lot 10 in the East Half.

HENRY FREDERICK MACGREGOR

MacGregor Park was a gift to the City of Houston by the estate of Henry F. MacGregor. MacGregor (1855–1923) was a native of Derry, New Hampshire, and a descendent of the Reverend James MacGregor, who settled Derry with a group of 16 Scotch-Irish families who emigrated from Londonderry, Ireland, in 1718–19.⁷ As a youth, Henry attended the Pinkerton Academy in Derry and graduated in 1871 from the Bryant and Stratton Commercial College in Manchester, New Hampshire.⁸ He then spent two years traveling throughout North America, Mexico, and Europe.⁹

Henry MacGregor traveled by steamer to Galveston in 1873, at the age of 18, and made his way to Houston, where he found employment checking cotton on the barges operating on Buffalo Bayou for the Houston Direct Navigation Company.¹⁰ At the time, the 80-mile-long Buffalo Bayou was the only reliably navigable waterway in Texas, and as a result, much of the state's cotton crop came

⁴ Diana J. Kleiner, "MOORE, LUKE," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fmo34>). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁵ Several 19th-century Spanish units of measurement were used in Texas land grants. Although the term varies across the Southern U.S. and in other countries, in Texas a *vara* is equal to 33.33 inches; 5,000 square varas equals a league. A *league* is a generally square area equivalent to about 4,428.4 acres. A *labor* measures approximately 177 acres.

⁶ Harris County Deed Records, Volume C, page 276 (West Half) and Volume D, page 6 (East Half).

⁷ "Early settlers noted in Derry," *Nashua Telegraph* Bicentennial Edition, April 1976.

⁸ Paul D. Casdorff, "MACGREGOR, HENRY FREDERICK," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fma06>). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁹ *Men of Affairs of Houston and Environs: A Newspaper Reference Work*, Houston Press Club, Houston, Texas, 1913; page 147 of PDF, accessed online at scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/62628.

¹⁰ Steven M. Baron, *Houston Electric: The Street Railways of Houston, Texas* (Lexington, KY: Steven Baron, 1996), 10.

via the Bayou to Houston, where it would be transferred to barges or boats headed to the international port at Galveston. (Eventually, part of Buffalo Bayou would become the Houston Ship Channel.)¹¹

A few years later, MacGregor moved to Galveston, Texas, and joined the Galveston City Railroad company, which operated the island city's streetcar system. He became the company's secretary in 1879 or 1880 and in 1883, with company president William H. Sinclair, bought out the Houston Railroad System of streetcars. MacGregor moved to Houston, assumed the roles of vice-president and general manager, and spearheaded an extensive program of expansion and improvement. In 1903, he left the railroad company to focus on real estate and a variety of other interests.¹² MacGregor lobbied for the improvement of the Houston Ship Channel, which made possible Houston's growth as a major port during the 20th century. He (along with editor Rienzi M. Johnston and G. J. Palmer) managed the *Houston Post* following owner J. L. Watson's death in 1897 until Watson's son Roy was able to assume control in 1918.¹³ He was also involved with the Bay and Bayou Company, the Houston Printing Company, and the South Texas Commercial National Bank.¹⁴

Henry MacGregor married Elizabeth Stevens in 1885. She was the daughter of Otis Erastus Stevens of Vermont and his wife, Mary (Abbott) Stevens, a native of Michigan. The Stevens family moved to Texas in 1859, and Elizabeth, their fifth child, was born in Houston. She was educated at Houston's first high school and graduated from the Huntsville Teachers' College; before marrying Henry, she taught for two years in Kansas and in the Houston public schools.¹⁵ They had no children.

Henry and Elizabeth were active in civic and social affairs. Elizabeth was particularly deeply involved with the construction of the Young Women's Christian Association building in 1920,¹⁶ and Henry was a member of the Z. Z. Club, Thalian Club, Country Club, Caldeonian Society, and the Houston volunteer fire service (Hook & Ladder No. 1).¹⁷ He was also a leader of the Republican Party in Texas.¹⁸ According to deed records, MacGregor was also a trustee of the

¹¹ Marilyn M. Sibley, "HOUSTON SHIP CHANNEL," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/rhh11>). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹² Baron, *Houston Electric*.

¹³ Diana J. Kleiner, "HOUSTON POST," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eeh04>). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹⁴ Casdorff, "MACGREGOR, HENRY FREDERICK."

¹⁵ "Mrs. Elizabeth Stevens MacGregor, A Biographical Sketch by Charlotte Wilcox," no date, MacGregor vertical file, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Charles D. Green, *Firefighters of Houston, 1838–1915* (Houston, Texas: Dealy-Adey Co., 1915), 78.

¹⁸ Casdorff.

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George H. Hermann estate, which oversaw the development of Hermann Park and dedicated land for Hermann Hospital following George Hermann's death in 1914.¹⁹

In addition to all of his other interests, Henry MacGregor was a real estate investor, and he had built several subdivisions in the South Main Street area by 1900.²⁰ Off North Main, just north of Buffalo Bayou, his Glen Park Company sold the land for the Glen Park neighborhood, a community of 85 Craftsman bungalows, constructed in the 1920s.²¹ At the time of his death, he was planning the development of a 40-acre parcel in the Calumet-Binz area, just across Brays Bayou from Hermann Park.²²

DEVELOPMENT OF MACGREGOR PARK

Henry MacGregor died on September 3, 1923, at his summer home in New Hampshire. He is buried in Glenwood Cemetery in Houston.²³ His widow, Elizabeth, with assistance from two of her relatives, spent the next eight years administering his estate. She spent two of those years in Derry,²⁴ where the estate in 1927 purchased a parcel of land on East Broadway Street, the town's main thoroughfare, for Derry's own MacGregor Park and the Derry Public Library. The library building features an exquisite stained glass window from the MacGregor home in Houston, ca. 1890, which depicts the MacGregor coat-of-arms; side panels show claymore swords crossed under shields.²⁵

In Houston, the estate selected a portion of the MacGregor land holdings in Southeast Houston, part of the Jessica Addition (said to be named after Henry's cow) to be used by the City as a public park. The remainder of the Jessica Addition was sold to developers, so that Henry's plans for new subdivisions could be realized.²⁶

In 1924, the City Planning Commission retained the Kansas City, Missouri, landscape architecture firm of Hare and Hare to develop the Houston park system, first envisioned by Arthur Coleman Comey in his 1914 report, *Houston, Tentative Plans for Its Development*.²⁷ Comey's report had recommended creating parks along all of Houston's bayous, in order to make more productive use of that land, provide for improved maintenance of the banks along the bayous, and enhance the

¹⁹ Barrie Scardino, "Hermann Park, A Brief History," *Friends of Hermann Park, Action Plan 2000*, Appendix B, online at http://www.hermannpark.org/pdfs/Scardino_history.pdf.

²⁰ Betty T. Chapman, "Riverside Terrace city's first 'auto suburb' for commuters," *Houston Business Journal*, May 9-15, 1997; Riverside Terrace vertical file, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

²¹ Harris County Appraisal District database, online at <http://www.hcad.org/>.

²² Chapman.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wilcox.

²⁵ "New Hampshire Room," Derry Public Library website, with photo of stained glass window, accessed online at <http://www.derry.lib.nh.us/services/nhroom.htm>.

²⁶ Chapman.

²⁷ Stephen Fox, "Big Park, Little Plans," CITE 3, Spring 1983, 18-21.

value of neighboring properties. The MacGregor estate's donation of land for MacGregor Park, along Bray's Bayou, helped to move the City toward that goal.

The land for the Park was surveyed in June 1926 by R. O. Bosworth of Howe & Wise, Engineers; Hare and Hare's preliminary plans for the park were drawn in July 1929. A revised general plan and a map of the North and South MacGregor Way roadways were produced in October 1936; a planting plan for the parkway between North and South MacGregor Way, from Scott Street to Calhoun Street, followed a year later. These drawings show a marked change from a mostly natural space with trails and picnic areas, to a more designed plan with construction for recreational activities, such as baseball and tennis.²⁸

Over the years, the Park's amenities were expanded to include a recreation center building, pool and bathhouse, baseball field, and two existing tennis courts. In 1961, the architecture firm of MacKie & Kamrath was tasked to add eight more tennis courts (with space for three more in the future) and a new clubhouse, with space indicated for the future expansion of the recreation center.²⁹

The Park includes a stone memorial to Henry MacGregor, designed by Houston architect William Ward Watkin, and a statue of Elizabeth MacGregor that once stood in the Peggy's Point Plaza Park at the corner of South Main and Richmond. One of the provisions of Henry's will had called for a statue to be made of his wife, and the artist Gutzon Borglum (then living in San Antonio) was duly commissioned for the task in 1927, just before he began work on his most famous sculpture: Mount Rushmore. The Peggy statue depicts Mrs. MacGregor as a young woman with an outstretched hand, in bas relief bronze mounted on rough white granite. The statue was restored in 1997 and moved to MacGregor Park by the Houston Municipal Art Commission.³⁰

In 2001, the MacGregor family sued the City of Houston for failing to maintain 47 acres on the east side of the Park and allowing it to become unusable and for selling a portion of it to the State of Texas for development of a highway spur. The City had allowed that section, about 40% of the total park land, to become overgrown and had posted "No Trespassing" and "Do Not Enter" signs to keep the public out. Attorneys for the family argued that the City had wanted to route TX-35 (Spur 5) from the Gulf Freeway to the University of Houston campus through that section of the Park, but were unable to, due to deed restrictions on the property. Instead, the City had encouraged the State of Texas to take 6.7 acres through eminent domain; the State then paid the City \$425,000. A judge ultimately ruled that the City had violated its deed and gave the remaining 40 acres back to the family, which sold it to the University of Houston at an inexpensive price, so that it could be used for a public purpose.³¹

²⁸ Houston Metropolitan Research Center Architectural Archives, Hare and Hare collection, RGD 26, Drawings.

²⁹ Houston Metropolitan Research Center Architectural Archives, MSS 0422, Job 2311/2311-R.

³⁰ *Houston Chronicle*, December 15, 1997.

³¹ *Houston Chronicle*, various articles in 2001: March 24, 29, 31; April 17.

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The remaining 65 acres of MacGregor Park received a \$1 million makeover in 2005, thanks to a grant from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Division, and an additional \$600,000 in improvements in 2009 as part of Houston's Parks To Standards program.³² Park facilities today include a community center building, playground, tennis center, lighted sports field, swimming pool, weight room, meeting room, 18-hole disc golf course, 1.25-mile hike and bike trail, picnic areas, and an outdoor basketball pavilion.³³

RIVERSIDE TERRACE

During the mid-20th century, suburban subdivisions were built around the Park, including Riverside Terrace. Riverside Terrace, developed by Clarence Malone and the Guardian Trust Company in the 1920s,³⁴ was an affluent neighborhood of large homes occupied by some of Houston's most prominent business professionals. Due to a "gentlemen's agreement" by realtors and developers to keep Jews out of the tony suburb of River Oaks, Riverside Terrace became an alternative for families like the Sakowitzes, Weingartens, and Fingers – so much so that it was known as "the Jewish River Oaks," even though the neighborhood was always predominantly Christian. Riverside Terrace's luxurious homes were designed by many of Houston's top architects.

In the 1950s and 1960s, affluent black families were moving out of historically black inner city neighborhoods toward the suburbs. Block-busting campaigns by real estate speculators, designed to frighten white residents into selling their homes at low prices, so that they could be re-sold to black homebuyers for large profits, were waged in neighborhoods like Riverside Terrace, prompting homeowners there to post signs reading, "This is our home, it is not for sale." The neighborhood was rocked by the April 1953 bombing of the home of Jack Caesar, a wealthy black cattleman who in 1952 purchased a home on Wichita Avenue. Although Caesar and his wife and children were unhurt, and the bomber was caught and convicted, the presence of armed black cowboys guarding the house for several weeks after the incident, and the fear of additional violence caused many residents to give in to pressure from the block-busters and sell. Although both white and black residents of Riverside Terrace favored an integrated neighborhood, by 1960 the section of Riverside Terrace north of Brays Bayou was 95% black.³⁵ According to historian Stephen Fox, "In the early 1950s, houses in the older sections of Riverside Terrace, north of the bayou, began to be sold to black families. This coincided with the expiration of deed restrictions in these sections, which allowed strip shopping centers, garden apartments, churches, and motels to be constructed on the sites of many of the larger houses. The southern sections succumbed to real-estate pressure during the 1960s."³⁶

³² *Houston Chronicle*, March 31, 2005; August 15, 2009.

³³ Houston Parks Department website, <http://www.houstontx.gov/parks/communitycenters/cc-macgregor.html>.

³⁴ Stephen Fox, "Riverside Terrace to be subject of film," CITE 8, Winter 1984, 4.

³⁵ "Riverside: Jon Schwartz documents the changes that affect a generation of Houstonians," *Houston Chronicle*, September 13, 1987; Subdivisions – Riverside Terrace vertical file, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

³⁶ Stephen Fox, "Riverside Terrace to be subject of film," CITE 8, Winter 1984, 4.

ZINA GARRISON AND THE MACGREGOR PARK TENNIS PROGRAM

In the early 1970s, black children who lived near MacGregor Park had the opportunity to play tennis under the tutelage of a true visionary, John Wilkerson. Wilkerson, who had taught himself to play tennis, won the 1971 American Tennis Association (ATA) national championship. (The ATA was established in 1916 to provide African Americans with the opportunity to compete in the sport.) After graduating from Texas Southern University, he became the head teaching pro at MacGregor Park. At the time, most of his clients were white; not many African Americans played tennis. Wilkerson thought he could change that by starting a free children's tennis program.³⁷

One of Wilkerson's early students was a young girl named Zina Garrison, who showed a natural ability and athleticism. When she was 11, Wilkerson invited Garrison to join his junior's program, a group of 30 players who practiced for three hours each evening during the week and from 8 a.m. until dusk on the weekends. Also in the program was Lori McNeil, the daughter of a former NFL player. Both McNeil and Garrison would go on to become professional tennis players.³⁸

Lori McNeil played tennis for Oklahoma State University, before going pro in 1984. At one point, she was ranked No. 9 in the world. McNeil won 32 doubles titles, and in 1994 upset defending champion Steffi Graf during a first-round match at Wimbledon. Since retiring in 2002, McNeil has served as a U. S. Tennis Association coach and was appointed assistant coach to the U.S. Olympic team in 2004.³⁹

Zina Garrison's career began with strong performances as a junior player, winning her first national title at the age of 14. In 1981, she won the junior titles at Wimbledon and the U. S. Open and was ranked No. 1 in the world. Garrison played professionally for 15 years, winning at least one singles or doubles title each year, and was ranked No. 4 in the world. She also captured a gold medal in women's doubles and a bronze medal in women's singles at the 1988 Olympics.⁴⁰ In 1993, she established the Zina Garrison Tennis Academy in Houston. John Wilkerson serves as the Director of Tennis, and Lori McNeil is a member of the Board of Directors. Some of the Academy's events have taken place at MacGregor Park.

Over the years, the MacGregor Park Junior Tennis Program changed the lives of many other young people by teaching them a lifelong sport and life lessons for success. A group of program alumni, now successful adults, have formed a non-profit organization to support today's junior players, continuing to give back to their community, just as Henry and Elizabeth MacGregor did through their gift of the Park so many years ago.

³⁷ Zina Garrison, *Zina: My Life in Women's Tennis* (Berkeley, CA: Frog, 2001), 5, 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁹ MacGregor Park Tennis Alumni Association website, Alumni biographies, accessed online at <http://macgregorparkalumni.org/alumni.php>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

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