

Deep Water Houston: From the *Laura* to the Deep Water Jubilee

By James E. Fisher

In 1836, an early advertisement entitled “The Town of Houston” indicated, “Tide water runs to this place and the lowest depth of water is about six feet.” The ad continued, “Vessels from New Orleans or New York can sail without obstacle to this place,” and it declared Houston the “head of navigation.”¹ With this campaign, the Allen brothers presented their vision of Houston’s future rather than simply describing the present reality.

The Allen brothers’ mission to create a city where none had been before was fueled by the same philosophy that led to Houston’s long-term success: dream big and do everything possible to realize your vision. The realization of Houston and the Houston Ship Channel is a tale of promotion, ingenuity, and decades of dedicated effort by civic leaders. This story also demonstrates the leaders’ ability to create a coalition of local, state, and national governments to fund their endeavors.

Notwithstanding the “head of navigation” declaration, Buffalo Bayou was not fully navigated to the makeshift town of Houston until January 1837 when Captain Thomas Wigg Grayson guided the *Laura*, a small paddlewheel steamer with a draft of over five feet, from Galveston Bay to Harrisburg, and then to Houston. In his memoir, Francis R. Lubbock describes his transfer from the *Laura* to a yawl that sailed past Houston’s landing site. “We backed down the bayou, and by close observations discovered a road or street laid off from water’s edge. Upon landing we found



stakes and footprints, indications that we were in the town tract.”² Today that area at the foot of Main Street is known as Allen’s Landing.

This navigational feat opened Houston’s “deep water era.” The journey from Harrisburg to Houston covered a mere twelve miles, but the crew of the *Laura* labored three days to traverse this winding, overgrown section of Buffalo Bayou. An influential group of dignitaries accompanied A. C. and J. K. Allen on this defining voyage, including Gen. Moseley Baker, Judge Benjamin C. Franklin, and Lubbock, the future governor of Texas. After years of work on the part of city and state officials to create an inland port, an ordinance officially established the “Port of Houston” on June 10, 1841, and created the position of wharfmaster, who could collect wharfage and police the waterfront.³ Charles T. Gerlach was the first to serve in this position.

On January 29, 1842, the Republic of Texas passed an act granting the city the right to remove obstructions from the bayou and otherwise improve navigation.⁴ The dream now had a legal foundation.

RECONSTRUCTION ERA DEVELOPMENT

After the turmoil of the Civil War, development of a deep water channel from Galveston to Houston began anew in 1866 with the establishment of the Texas Transportation Company. Headed by John T. Brady, the company intended to dredge the channel to the Constitution Bend, where Brady later established the town of Magnolia Park.



The steamship Laura became the first ship to navigate the winding waterway up to Houston in 1837.

Photo courtesy of the Port of Houston Authority.

Under Brady, the Texas Transportation Company’s projects met with limited success. In 1869, the Buffalo Bayou Ship Channel Company was organized. This company successfully lobbied Congress to designate Houston an official U.S. “port of delivery” in July 1870.⁵

In 1872 Galveston, Houston’s main competitor, received an appropriation of \$25,000 to improve the channel in Galveston Bay and the upper stream, bringing “deep water” to its port.⁶

Texas Transportation Company redefined its objectives in 1876 when shipping pioneer Charles Morgan took the lead. Over the next two years, Morgan dredged the channel up to sixteen feet, ending at the town of Clinton, by the mouth of Sims Bayou.⁷

Thanks to Morgan, the *Clinton* became the first ocean steamship to navigate Buffalo Bayou from Galveston Bay to Clinton, reaching the town on September 22, 1876. Houston businessmen hailed its arrival. Freedom from paying Galveston’s escalating wharfage and transfer fees for ocean vessels was in sight, although Houston lagged behind Galveston in reaching a twenty-five-foot channel clearance.⁸

In September 1890, after much debate and rumor of a presidential veto, funding for the final step in Galveston’s deep water plan became reality: Congress approved a \$25 million Rivers and Harbors appropriation bill that provided Galveston with \$500,000 for the next fiscal year and authorized the government to contract for the completion of the Galveston jetties.⁹ With a stroke of President Benjamin Harrison’s pen, Galveston’s deep water port was secured.

Following an impromptu celebration of the news, the city organized a formal celebration for November 18-20, 1890, designating it the Deep Water Jubilee, a title that resurfaced years later in Houston. In the 1890 Deep Water Jubilee,



The last No-Tsu-Oh Carnival in 1915 crowned Robert E. Paine king and Marion Holt Seward queen. Laura Winstead was maid of honor, Estelle and Jane Garrow were the queen’s pages, and Imola Link (left) was dream queen. Smiling on the far right is Mrs. Minnette (Robert E.) Paine. The king’s necklace and other No-Tsu-Oh artifacts are on display at The Heritage Society.

Photo courtesy of The Heritage Society Permanent Collection given in honor of Jane Heyck Gaucher Montgomery.



In 1910 segments of the Houston Ship Channel looked more like the serene bayou from which it was carved than the bustling shipping center it would become. Photo courtesy of James E. Fisher Collection.

Galvestonians took excursions on the steamer *Comal*, attended parades and banquets, and even witnessed former governor Lubbock win the Champion Oyster Eater prize.¹⁰ As Galveston leaders reveled in their gains, it seemed the city was destined to reign as the number one port in Texas.

U. S. government appropriations for Galveston continued through 1896, and as the nineteenth century drew to a close, Galveston's waterways reached a navigable channel depth of twenty-five feet, enabling the port to accommodate cargo ships and international vessels.

A deep water channel, however, was not the only element in the equation for a dominant port. In the 1890s, following decades of rail development, Houston sought to establish itself as an essential destination for rail shipments to and from the Gulf Coast. This notion gave birth to the slogan "Houston: Where Seventeen Railroads Meet the Sea."¹¹ Linking rail and ocean transport gave Houston a significant advantage over its coastal rival.

PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE

Local businessmen continued promoting the city as a viable inland port and developing the infrastructure it required. Civic leaders needed Houstonians to buy into the vision and ultimately approve port bond proposals. Another problem, however, remained: attracting the interest of the leading industries of the day: cotton, lumber, tobacco, and other agricultural products.

In 1896, the Business Men's Carnival Association organized Houston's Grand Carnival to be held December 16-19. It promised "more amusements and greater fun than any former carnival." The new carnival built upon several aspects of the German Society's *Volksfest*,

Houston's most successful annual event. The Grand Carnival's Railway Rate Committee secured an agreement with the railroads to provide uniform round-trip rates for points within two hundred miles. Attendees were treated to "Illuminated Street Parades" with floats representing Houston's business interests, football games, street concerts, pyrotechnic displays, and balloon ascensions. Organizers asked local citizens to enhance the illuminated parade by "burning colored fire in front of their premises while the parade [was] passing."¹² The flames of patriotism burned brightly in the city that year, as did the desire to showcase the city's business and industry.

On the national front, Houston's deep water channel found support in Washington, D.C., when local congressman Thomas H. Ball became a member of the fifty-fifth Congress in March 1897. He soon joined the Rivers and Harbors Committee as the only member from Texas. Ball's predecessor, Congressman Joseph Chappell Hutcheson, had labored to secure this committee's support for Houston during the previous session and mentored Ball. Ball's appointment allowed him to finalize Hutcheson's work, securing funding for the ship channel's expansion to a depth of twenty-five feet from Galveston Bay to a turning basin. The project also provided for "a light-draft extension of this channel, 8 feet deep and 40 feet wide, through Buffalo Bayou from the turning basin to the foot of Main Street."¹³

The twenty-sixth and final *Volksfest* Festival was held on July 4, 1897. On the first page of the festival newsletter, a poem entitled "Houston a Seaport" appears. Although the poet's name and the first stanza of the poem are missing on the only known copy of the newsletter, the second stanza conveys local sentiment quite well: "The streets, yes, are still muddy, The sidewalks often green; But soon they will look pretty And fine as ever seen. We fought about amendments, But over is the row, For Houston on the Bayou Becomes a seaport now."¹⁴

In 1897, Houston's Grand Carnival became the Texas Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Festival, taking center stage December 6-11. This version of the carnival expanded on earlier themes, featuring an "Industrial Houston" exhibit in the Market Hall and a Deep Water Convention held on the second day. The greatest attraction of the opening "Parade of Plenty" was a "beautiful steamboat on a decorated wagon drawn by four black horses," a vessel "made to represent an ocean freight boat." It displayed many inscriptions, including "24 feet of water at Sabine Pass: best port on the gulf."¹⁵ The competition was not just between Houston and Galveston.

The 1899 Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Festival introduced the most iconic component of the carnival, a visitor from the East known as "King Nottoc." In a fit of promotion cloaked in mystery, the organizers touted King Nottoc's ceremonial arrival in his capital city of



This invitation to the No-Tsu-Oh Carnival Ball highlights the importance of the arrival of King Nottoc V, from the realm of Tekram, as attested by Samb, the event's official spokesman.

Photo courtesy of James E. Fisher Collection.

“No-Tsu-Oh.” The *Houston Chronicle* reported that King Nottoc’s royal representative in Houston, “Samb,” was fond of telling the “Legend of No-Tsu-Oh.” On November 20, 1899, Samb drew hundreds of citizens to the Cotton Exchange to become “brethren of the royal order of the Princes of No-Tsu-Oh,” a group that included many Houston businessmen. As the festival drew near, Samb provided cryptic reports regarding the king’s pending visit from his home in “Tekram.”

Each year one prominent businessman was chosen to wear the crown of King Nottoc and rule over the “Kingdom of Sexat” and its capital city of No-Tsu-Oh in the realm of Tekram. These names, No-Tsu-Oh, Nottoc, and Tekram, when reversed, revealed the phrase “Houston Cotton Market.”¹⁶ The fabricated ceremony allowed Houstonians to reverse the constraints of the work-a-day business world, enjoy themselves, and celebrate Houston’s prosperity. The fourth and final Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Festival was held in 1900. The following year, the festival became the Grand No-Tsu-Oh Carnival.

GALVESTON FACES A NEW CHALLENGE

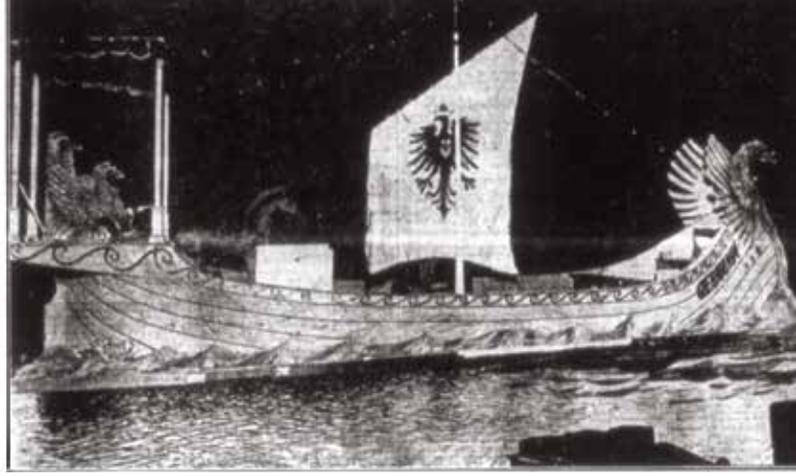
On September 8, 1900, the fates of two cities took a sudden turn when a powerful hurricane struck Galveston, resulting in the loss of between 6,000 and 12,000 lives. The storm destroyed over 3,600 homes and damaged \$20 million worth of property, without adjusting for inflation.¹⁷ Galveston rose from the devastation by organizing two massive engineering projects to rebuild and protect the city from future storms. The first project consisted of a sea wall to be built along the island’s Gulf Coast, and the second concerned “grade raising.” This called for filling in low-lying areas behind the sea wall and elevating buildings. Though Galveston made haste to overcome the disaster, the city’s port was set back by nearly a decade. Houston now had an opportunity to seize port dominance.

Houston’s effort to surpass Galveston as a deep water port gained momentum, but the task was not easy. The 1900 Storm caused damage across the coast, necessitating recovery efforts throughout the region. While Galveston suffered most, Houston’s dredging efforts also faced setbacks. By 1909 Houston had dredged the bayou to only eighteen and one-half feet.¹⁸

Four months after the hurricane, on January 10, 1901, oil was discovered near Beaumont at Spindletop, the first oil field on the Gulf Coast. At that time the Lucas gusher became the largest in the world. It gave birth to a boomtown of new enterprises, and Houston’s rail industry took full advantage of these opportunities.¹⁹

In 1909 Mayor Horace Baldwin Rice presented the River and Harbors Committee with a creative new funding plan called the “Houston Plan” to secure federal government assistance for additional ship channel development. The city proposed the government and the public share the cost fifty-fifty. The committee accepted the plan on June 25, 1910, giving congressional approval for an expenditure of \$2,500,000, one half of which would be the responsibility of the newly formed Harris County, Houston Ship Channel Navigation District.²⁰

Passage of the Houston Plan energized Houston’s civic leaders, who immediately “launched a campaign such as the



The above photo appeared in the Houston Post on November 8, 1914, in advance of the Deep Water Jubilee. The caption indicates that the German float will be one of the entries in the upcoming Tuesday night parade and will be escorted by many local German Americans in festive costumes.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center from Houston Post.

county had seldom, if ever, seen before.” Businessman Jesse H. Jones met with local bankers and in less than twenty-four hours arranged for their acceptance of local bonds totaling \$1,250,000. On January 10, 1911, Harris County voted 16-1 in favor of the bond proposal, the final step in dredging the ship channel to twenty-five feet.²¹

A SECOND DEEP WATER JUBILEE

Far from the Gulf Coast, an important international milestone occurred on August 15, 1914. After a decade of effort by the United States, the Panama Canal opened, joining the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. Houston civic leaders realized that this vital shipping lane provided many new opportunities for Texas ports.

Less than one month later, on September 7, U. S. superintendent engineer, Charles Crotty, completed the dredging of the deep water channel to Houston.²² The formal opening of the ship channel was scheduled during the annual No-Tsu-Oh festival in November.

The *William C. May* was the first ship to deliver its cargo via the newly dredged channel, arriving on September 26, 1914. The *Dorothy* was the second, arriving in October. Both ships docked in Clinton. Their arrivals revealed a less desirable reality: Houston’s city council and harbor board had not selected the site of the first city wharf and warehouse, and funding for these items depended on the passage of a pending bond election.²³

During this period the No-Tsu-Oh Carnival was among the state’s most popular and innovative events, albeit sponsored by a city of fewer than 100,000 people. The early twentieth century introduced two key transportation innovations to the nation, the automobile and airplane, and the city strategically used these novelties as centerpieces in the annual carnival. Houston attracted eager visitors from across Texas and neighboring states. But could the carnival committee garner the same enthusiasm for the finished port on a body of water that had been under the public eye since 1836?

Local businessmen faced a similar challenge. In order to acquire land and build new roads, wharfs, terminals, and facilities for the port, they needed support for the upcoming bond proposal. The three-million-dollar bond election,

which would pay for necessary infrastructure, was scheduled for October 28, 1914.

Promoting the port bond issue met with other challenges. Newspaper space for the bond topic was limited with war in Europe, concerns over cotton prices, the death of local philanthropist George H. Hermann, and even the pending



The member pin for the 1914 Deep Water Jubilee.

Photo courtesy of James E. Fisher Collection.

visit of Helen Keller and her teacher dominating the front pages of the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle*. The *Houston Chronicle* editorialized that the festival was too raucous and ought to end. The paper relegated news about the ship channel, the bond election, and No-Tsu-Oh to the “Magnolia Park News” section, far from page one. Complicating the businessmen’s predicament further, a group of citizens sought an injunction through the courts to stop the bond election.²⁴

The city planner’s optimism shone through nevertheless. They repurposed the 1914 No-Tsu-Oh Festival and dubbed it the “Deep Water Jubilee.” King Nottoc gave way to “King Retaw,” for “water” spelled backward. The festival’s planners envisioned a six-day, Texas-sized celebration specifically featuring Houston’s new deep water ship channel. The Jubilee allowed Houston to announce its inland port to the world, but, more importantly, it gave a promotional lead-in that could secure favorable bond election votes.

On October 8, about a month before the festival, the Houston Chamber of Commerce loaded 225 local voters on an excursion boat to view the ship channel and Turning Basin. Other tours followed, eliciting positive comments from newspapers, politicians, and individuals such as John Kirby who spoke in favor of passage of the bond sale and the potential for wealth extending from the port’s development. An ad in the *Houston Chronicle* by the Magnolia Park Land Company boasted “Deep Water Will Make YOU Rich,” and a full-page ad in the *Houston Post* warned, “We cannot allow foreign wars and temporary depression to stop the upbuilding of this city.”²⁵

On October 29, one week before the festival, the “wharf bonds” were approved three-to-one.²⁶ One can only imagine the mood of the festival had the bond issues failed, but they



At 11:00 a.m. on November 10, 1914, the daughter of Houston’s mayor, Miss Sue Campbell dropped rose petals onto the water and christened “Port Houston.” Photo courtesy of Story Sloane Gallery.

did not, and Houston’s 1914 Deep Water Jubilee heralded Houston’s birth as a major inland port.

The official opening of the Houston Ship Channel was the highlight of the festival, but from November 9-14, the Deep Water Jubilee also featured various water-themed parades and festivities, embracing a new commercial era.

On November 6, Houston welcomed Eugene A. Hudson, “King Retaw I,” to his realm. The Houston Ship Channel formally opened on November 10 in a national event reaching to Washington, D. C. and the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson.

Spectators wishing to view the ceremony could board a train from Houston’s Grand Central Depot and travel to the site for a round trip cost of twenty-five cents. A water parade of pleasure and racing boats, decorated launches and representative boats from all Texas gulf ports formed a “Pageant of Boats” to accompany the event.

Dignitaries included Governor Oscar B. Colquitt, Governor-elect James E. Ferguson, Lieutenant Governor-elect W. P. Hobby, Mayor Ben Campbell and Mrs. Ella Campbell, and their daughter Miss Sue Campbell. At 11:00 a.m. local time, President Wilson excused himself from a Cabinet meeting to press a remote button that communicated a telegraph signal to Houston, firing a cannon located at the ceremonial site.²⁷

As the boom of the cannon faded in the distance, Miss Sue Campbell dropped white rose petals onto the water and said, “I christen thee Port Houston; hither the boats of all nations may come and receive hearty welcome.”²⁸ Strains of the “Star Spangled Banner,” a twenty-one gun salute, and an outpouring of shouts, ringing bells, whistles and songs sprang from the thousands of participants and viewers assembled at the Turning Basin. Houston’s Ship Channel officially became the head of navigation, a modern, deep water port.

In the days that followed, the Deep Water Jubilee’s nautical theme remained on full display. A “Ships of the Nations” parade in downtown Houston included twenty floats, with more than 400 horses and mules to draw the floats and carry mounted escorts, 150 musicians, and 300 citizens representing the nationalities of each ship’s origin. The planning committee estimated the parade was “about



For the ship channel’s fiftieth anniversary, Miss Campbell’s granddaughter, shown here, reenacted throwing roses into the water. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.

two and a half miles in length.”²⁹ A dream founded almost eighty years earlier had finally come to fruition.

ONE ERA ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

One day after the close of the 1915 No-Tsu-Oh Carnival, the *Houston Chronicle* published an editorial entitled “Let It Be Our Last Carnival.” The article suggests that “Houston, metropolis of the Southwest, railroad center for this great and growing section of the county, should offer something by way of an annual exhibition other than tin-horn parades and garrulous horse-play.”³⁰ With this sentiment, the popular No-Tsu-Oh Carnival came to an end.

The “first full year of exportation from the Port of Houston” came in 1920. The 1920 edition of Frank Waterhouse & Company’s *Pacific Ports Manual* described Houston Port facilities: five municipal wharfs, a cotton wharf, and a warehouse. The manual noted that Houston’s municipal facilities did not charge dockage or wharfage fees. An accompanying ad in the publication boasted, “An inland harbor. Safe from storms and tidal waves. Fresh water to clean the barnacles. Seventeen railroads radiating to all

parts of the country.”³¹ The world now embraced the Allen brothers’ dream of a major inland port for their city.

Those familiar with No-Tsu-Oh a century later may know of its flower parades, Mardi-Gras-style galas, and events such as football games between the University of Texas, Texas A&M, Rice Institute, and TCU. What they may not realize, however, is how many chapters in this region’s history were written during these turn-of-the-century, mid-winter festivals, including the official opening of what became one of the nation’s busiest waterways and one of the world’s largest ports.

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The “Port Arthur” Whale



Captain Cott Plummer’s *Olga*, 1910.

Photo courtesy of Story Sloane’s Gallery.

In November 1910, the schooner *Olga* slowly made her way up Buffalo Bayou to Houston. Its cargo was unusual for the ships of that time, or any time since. Onboard the ship was a large sperm whale.

Captain Cott Plummer had “captured” the sixty-three-foot-long whale on March 8, 1910, when he found it near Sabine Pass struggling in an off-shore conglomerate of sea weed, silt, and petroleum called the “oil pond.” In the weeks that followed, over 20,000 viewed the whale in Port Arthur, many paying a \$2.00 round-trip rail fare from Houston to view the spectacle.³² The *Houston Post* then reported its arrival at the foot of Travis Street in Houston on March 28, where it remained until the stench of the decaying carcass prompted its removal.

One might sense that Captain Plummer would have simply disposed of the massive curiosity in the Gulf, but he had a different plan. Having successfully charged Houstonians as much as fifty cents each to view a decomposing whale, the removal called for a new arrangement, and it did not involve a burial at sea.

Plummer asked Robert George James, a resident of Harrisburg and a skilled taxidermist, who acquired this expertise in Galveston prior to the 1900 Storm, to apply his tal-



Length—63 feet 6 inches. Breadth of tail—36 feet 4 inches. Weight—100 tons. Height of flat end of snout—10 feet 4 inches. Circumference back of eye—37 feet. Length of lower jaw—front tip to angle of mouth 10 feet 10 inches. Angle of mouth to end of snout—47 feet 1 inch.

Port Arthur Whale postcard, 1910.

Photo courtesy of James E. Fisher Collection.

ent to the whale. In the months that followed he skinned the whale, and stretched the skin over a wooden frame. He even designed a doorway as an entrance on one side of the shell. In the Texas sun, the smell remained a problem, and his wife did not always allow him in the house after a day’s work.³³

Upon the project’s completion, the whale was exhibited near the San Jacinto Street Bridge during the 1910 No-Tsu-Oh Festival. In his diary John Milsaps writes, “A barge with a roof overhead lay below. . . . Noticing women and men picking their way down step uncertain trails and go aboard I did the same, paying 25 cents for the privilege.” The *Houston Post* reported that as part of the festivities Captain Plummer invited fourteen friends to a luncheon held inside the whale. The banquet “bore not a vestige of any discomforting smell,” proving what a fine job James had done creating this wonder of the age. Following its Houston exhibit the whale was displayed around the country, including a stop in an amusement park near Chicago in June of 1914.³⁴ Sadly it never made an encore appearance for the Deep Water Jubilee.