

# Uncovering the Story of Quality Hill, Houston's First Elite Residential Neighborhood: *A Detective on the Case*

By Sidonie Sturrock

Sometimes the quest to find historical information becomes a story in itself, revealing a different history than expected. My research on Houston's Quality Hill neighborhood began thanks to hints left in unlikely places: two turn-of-the-twentieth-century houses next to Minute Maid Park downtown (a strange juxtaposition visible from Highway 59) and the words "Quality Hill" and "Houston's first elite residential neighborhood" dropped together in an article. Searching for more information and clues to solve the mystery, I imagined that I would eventually come upon a wealth of old, exciting documents that would provide a clear window into Houston's past. But when I searched the keywords "Quality Hill" and found almost

How does an entire neighborhood simply vanish from the historical record? What about the people who lived there?

nothing, I realized things were going to get complicated.

Respected Houston historian Betty Chapman recommended the Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), part of the downtown Houston Public Library, as a place to look for evidence of the area. I went there hoping to find someone who could point me in the right direction, but even the HMRC staff questioned if I would be able to find much information. Two files specifically labeled "Quality Hill" mostly contained articles written about the area when it was being demolished.

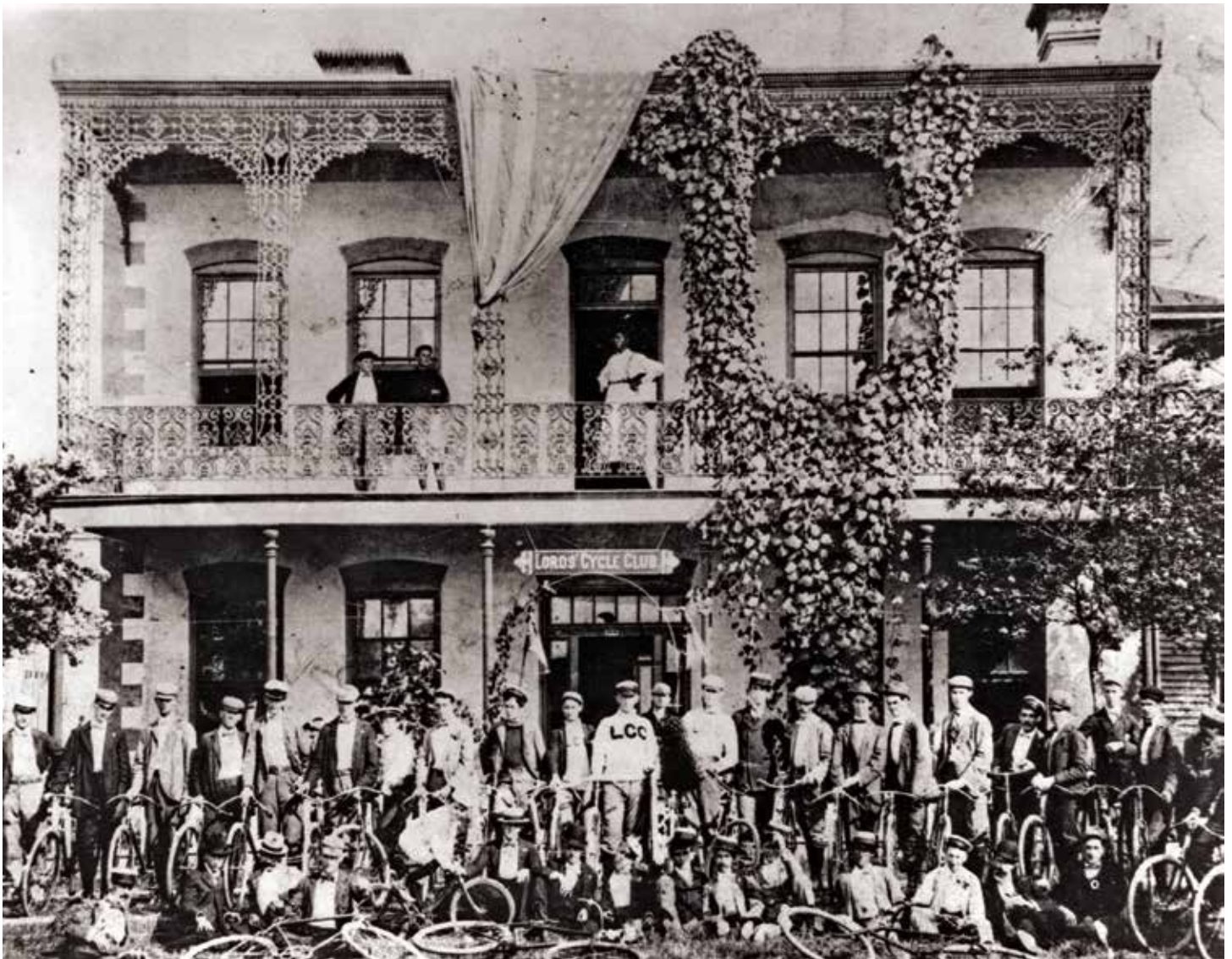
A few names that appeared in the book *Houston's Forgotten Heritage*, a thorough account of early domestic Houston architecture, helped jump-start my project.

*Once a thriving neighborhood for Houston's elite, Quality Hill has been all but lost in Houston's history. Map circa 1873.*

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







Once the home of Houston merchant Charles S. Longcope, this structure became the headquarters for the Lords' Cycle Club in 1897 before being demolished in 1949. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, MSS0248-1935.

William J. Hutchins, Cornelius Ennis, William L. Foley, and Arthur B. Cohn all evidently owned houses in Quality Hill and had a significant impact on Houston's early history. Files on all four of these men explained a good deal about their lives and legacies. While Quality Hill itself remained largely a mystery, a picture of what that neighborhood might have been gradually began to take shape.

The research process differed vastly from what I had imagined. As Betty Chapman suggested, I tried to piece together Houston maps with the information I found in books and articles. Near Buffalo Bayou when the bayou was still a natural part of Houston's landscape, the neighborhood took up, at most, five blocks going east to west and three blocks going north to south. The borders, however, are disputed. *Houston's Forgotten Heritage* states that the neighborhood was located along Commerce and Franklin Streets east to west and Chenevert and Carolina (now Caroline) Streets north to south.<sup>1</sup> A local historian and cotton broker who had an office nearby, Jesse Ziegler indicated in his 1934 book *Wave of the Gulf* that Quality Hill was bounded by Buffalo Bayou and Congress Avenue running east to west and Crawford and Austin Streets running north to south.<sup>2</sup>

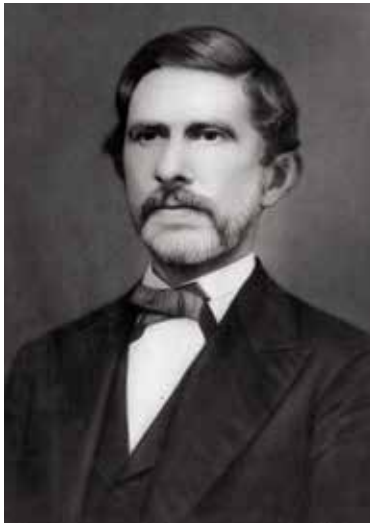
A *Houston Press* article from 1961 said that the area was bounded by Congress, Crawford, Chartres, and Buffalo Bayou.<sup>3</sup> Since the neighborhood existed from approximately 1850 to 1930, changes to the boundaries of Quality Hill's very small area might account for these varied descriptions.

Before 1850, most Houston businessmen lived very close to or in rooms that adjoined their places of work. William Marsh Rice, for example, came to Houston from Massachusetts in 1838 and lived above the Milam House, where he found employment furnishing the establishment's bar with liquors.<sup>4</sup> He did not move into his house on Courthouse Square until around 1850.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first businessmen to build a house in Quality Hill was William J. Hutchins. Although Hutchins was a prominent figure during his time, most Houstonians may only vaguely recognize the name, perhaps in association with Hutchins Street, a modest roadway near downtown. Born in Fishkill, New York, in 1813 and educated in New Bern, North Carolina, he began his career in the mercantile industry in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1835 and three years later began doing business in Houston, where he quickly made a profit in the dry goods business. His reputation for

fair trades and business integrity during the 1840s gained positive recognition for Houston throughout Texas and the northern states.<sup>6</sup>

In 1850 Hutchins built one of the earliest and what was considered one of the finest houses in Quality Hill. It stood on the corner of Franklin Avenue and La Branch Street, near Hutchins's place of business on the corner of Franklin Avenue and Main Street. He constructed the house in a Greek Revival style popular throughout other parts of the South. It featured fluted Ionic columns, a full entablature, and a low-pitched pediment. Its deep moldings, brick fabric, and monumental size suggest just how expensively it was made.



*William J. Hutchins.*

Photo from the *Mayor's Book* courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

During this time in Houston, architects produced drafts of a house's design throughout the building process. The builders themselves took care of the owners' specifications and referenced builders' handbooks to recreate desired details, requiring only rough sketches to get room numbers, sizes, and placements correct. Hutchins's grand house was most likely constructed in this way, indicating the skill and expertise required of its architect-builders.<sup>7</sup>

In 1861, Hutchins started construction on

Hutchins House, the largest contemporary hotel in Texas at the time, which he completed in 1866.<sup>8</sup> His main contribution to Houston's growth was bringing railroads to Texas as one of the original projectors and stockholders of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad. After managing the railroad company for seven years, including the entire period of the Civil War, Hutchins remained involved with the company until 1880, when he disposed of all his interests in it. He held stocks and served as director for many other area railroads, including the Galveston, Houston & Henderson; the Galveston, Harrisburg & San Antonio; the International & Great Northern; the Texas & New Orleans; and the Houston Tap & Brazoria Railroads. Although he served as Houston's mayor for one term in 1861 and as alderman for several terms, William J. Hutchins's main contributions to Houston were made possible through his business successes.<sup>9</sup>

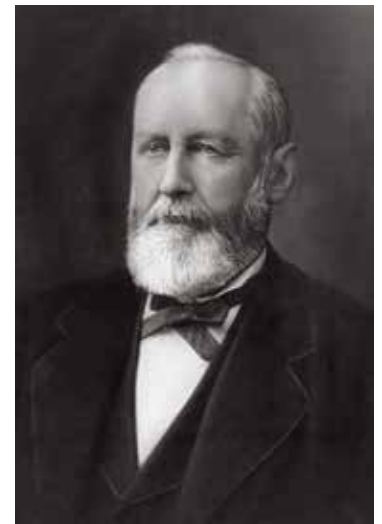
By 1866, the year of Houston's first city directory, other residents of Quality Hill included Charles S. Longcope, another prominent merchant, and B. Tuffly, a confectioner.<sup>10</sup> Longcope, a former Mississippi River steamboat captain, bought a house on Chenevert between Franklin and Commerce in 1865. Originally built in 1859, the house belonged to German baker Michael Floeck before it was deeded to his son, Paul Floeck, and then sold to Longcope who remodeled the house in 1870 as one of Houston's few French Colonial style homes. His additions of expensive, custom-

made iron grillwork from New Orleans, stucco to cover the original brick exterior, and a two-story addition on the back to make space for a ballroom spanning the building's width made Longcope's home a truly impressive addition to the neighborhood. Longcope's office stood nearby on Congress between Main and Fannin, and the *Houston Directory for 1866* lists his profession as "Cotton Factor and Commission Merchant." B. Tuffly's advertisement in the same directory reads: "Manufacturer of all kinds of candies, cakes, etc. Orders from everywhere promptly filled. Franklin Street, Houston, Texas." Tuffly's business on Franklin stood between La Branch and Crawford, and his home was just around the corner on Crawford between Commerce and Franklin.

The earlier families of Quality Hill also included those of James Bute, a paint and oils merchant; Dr. J. Larendon, a druggist; Theodore Keller; W. P. Hamblin, an attorney; and others notable in the Houston community.<sup>11</sup> By 1871, Cornelius Ennis, another important pioneer in Houston's development, moved his family into a Greek Revival house on the corner of Jackson and Congress toward the end of an already long and productive career.

A native of Bellville, New Jersey, Ennis came to Houston in 1839. His determination to reach Texas was brought on by many enthusiastic Texan travelers whom he met in 1837 on a voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as he searched for a place to "apply his energies." Before arriving in Texas, he returned to New York, where he had gotten his start in the mercantile business in 1834, and then went to Galveston with a stock of dry goods and drugs. Finding Galveston "sparsely settled, without a hotel and without wharves," he came to Houston and totally dedicated himself to the city thereafter. He quickly bought a location on Main Street, which he enlarged into a general mercantile and drug business.<sup>12</sup> Partnering with George Kimball of Vermont around the same time that he opened his business, Ennis and his new partner became Houston's first cotton merchants by 1840. After they shipped the first bale of cotton from Galveston to Boston in 1841, Ennis married Kimball's sister, Jeanette Ingals Kimball, and they went on to have two sons and three daughters over their years together. Shortly after Ennis's marriage, his business partner and brother-in-law died at sea on a business trip to New York.<sup>13</sup> Ennis, however, was not discouraged and found success as both a cotton shipper and a builder of infrastructure.

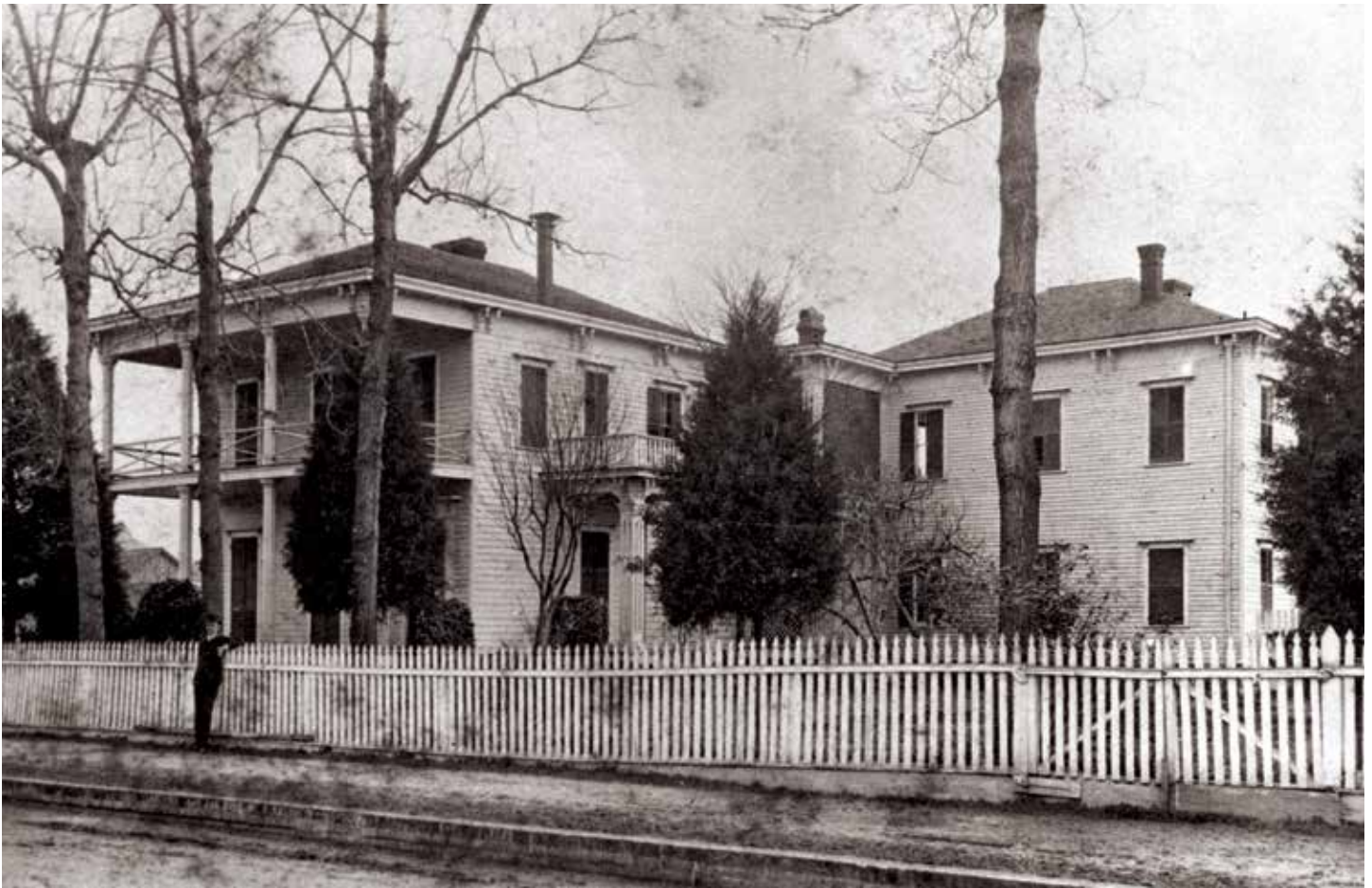
He was an early supporter of the "plank" road connecting Houston with Hempstead, now Washington Avenue, and served as general superintendent and comptroller of the



*Cornelius Ennis.*

Photo from the *Mayor's Book* courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.





*Cornelius Ennis built this Greek Revival home for his family at the corner of Jackson and Congress.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, MSS0248-0189.

Houston and Texas Central Railroad. In addition to building up the International & Great Northern and Houston Tap Railroads while he served as mayor during 1856 to 1857, Ennis devoted his personal energies to protecting Houston's trade with surrounding territories from what he considered Mexican bandits, renegade Americans, and hostile Indians. His success in driving out these groups allowed the city to expand and develop more rapidly. During the Civil War, Ennis devoted personal time and funds to blockade running for the Confederacy. It was after the war that he continued exporting cotton, now with an office in Galveston, and later moved into his house in Quality Hill. He continued to do business until his death, investing in the *Galveston-Daily News*. His daughters all married rising businessmen, though his sons died at very young ages. Ennis and his wife supported Christ Episcopal Church throughout their lives in Houston, as did many other wealthy Quality Hill residents. Mrs. Ennis in particular gave charitably of her time and funds, most notably helping Houston cope with epidemics of yellow fever.<sup>14</sup>

By the time Ennis and his family moved to the Quality Hill area, downtown Houston was already experiencing rapid change. Thanks to businessmen's efforts, those of Hutchins and Ennis among the most significant, families in both Quality Hill and Frost Town, a neighborhood to the east, began to move out of the downtown vicinity to escape the area's industrial development, mostly due to the railroads that pioneer businessmen helped create.<sup>15</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth century, families living in Quality Hill included the Warneckers, Scholibos, Taubs, Milbys, and others.<sup>16</sup> Social activities included going to shows at Bell's Variety Theater in the 900 block of Franklin or walking to "The Circle" and strolling through Longcope Square.<sup>17</sup> As residential areas pushed south, opulent houses and community hubs in this area began to disappear.

Residential areas continued to move farther and farther away from downtown with the development of streetcar suburbs like the Heights, Montrose, and Shadyside, and later residential areas like River Oaks, Washington Terrace, and Riverside Terrace. Today, the small area where Quality Hill once stood contains parking lots and industrial buildings, an image of downtown with which most of us are more familiar. Minute Maid Park, which incorporates into its structure the former Union Station, now stands next to strange remnants of the tail end of the Quality Hill era.

One of those houses belonged to William L. Foley, member of the Foley's Department Store family. An Irishman who came to the United States in 1870 at the age of twenty-five, Foley started his career in dry goods in New York and later moved to Brenham, Texas, in 1871. After coming to Houston in 1872 and working as a clerk until 1876, Foley started his own dry goods business at 214-218 Travis Street. At first employing just five people in a 15x90-foot space, the business grew to support three floors measuring 75x100 feet with fifty to sixty employees. Foley's nephews James A.



*The Foley house (left) has been moved to the corner of Jackson and Texas as part of the plans to expand Annunciation Catholic Church. The Cohn house (right) is slated to become part of the Nau Center for Texas Cultural Heritage.* Photo courtesy of author.

and Pat C. Foley joined their uncle's business early on and in 1900 opened Foley Brothers, which later became Foley's Department Store.<sup>18</sup>

William Foley built his house near Quality Hill on Texas Avenue in 1904. His wife Mary F. Foley (née Kennedy) had died very young in 1886. His daughters Blanche and Rose were educated in Canada, and his son John went to Fordham University in New York. The house, built late in Foley's career, was done in a Victorian, neo-classical style with Corinthian columns and stood on Texas Avenue until forced to move to 704 Chenevert at Capitol Avenue to make room for Union Station. After the sale of Blanche Foley's collection of the remaining family possessions on October 31, 1965, the house was used by a religious organization.<sup>19</sup>

The house that stands next to the Foley house today, also transplanted from its original location, belonged to Arthur B. Cohn. Cohn, originally from Little Rock, Arkansas, came to Houston and eventually became the principal accountant for William Marsh Rice's estate. He built his late Queen Anne style house in 1905 largely as a renovation and addition to structures already on the property. The former structures were built in the late 1860s by Mrs. Winnifred Browne, mother of John T. Browne, who was Houston's mayor from 1892 to 1896. Cohn bought the property and structures on 1711 Rusk the same year that he began reconstruction. He lived in the house until 1909, during which time he worked toward establishing Rice Institute (now Rice University) in 1912. He served as the school's business

manager and was assistant secretary on its board of trustees until 1936.

Cohn's house was sold to Michael Fitzgerald the year that Cohn and his wife moved just a block away to 812 Hamilton. The house later passed on to Cornelius D. Butler, Conrad and Amelia Westling, and finally Thomas J. Martin. After being converted into apartments, the house was purchased by St. Francis Charities in 1964 and refurbished by volunteers. With the help of the Harris County Historical Commission and St. Francis Charities, the Arthur B. Cohn House was designated a national and state monument in its original location on Rusk Street in 1985.<sup>20</sup>

Both the Foley and Cohn houses were moved to a location along Avenida de las Americas in the 2000s. Once scheduled for demolition, the mayor announced plans in 2007 to convert them into a "regional heritage tourism center."<sup>21</sup> The Cohn house is scheduled to become part of the future Nau Center for Texas Cultural Heritage, and the Foley house has been moved a few blocks away to become part of Annunciation Catholic Church.

While these two houses from the outskirts of Quality Hill have been saved thus far, every other house within the original Quality Hill area met a far less fortunate fate. Newspaper articles dating from the 1940s to the 1960s lament the passing of Houston's pioneer era and of individual Quality Hill homes. Many of the houses sat and deteriorated after their original inhabitants died or moved elsewhere. William Hutchins's daughter Ella and her second husband,



Seabrook Sydnor, lived in the house he built until 1914. The house was then left vacant until demolished in 1930.<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Ennis died in 1899, and his wife died a year earlier.<sup>23</sup> Their house was subsequently owned by the Solomon Brown family until 1918, made into rental rooms until 1926, occupied by a furniture company and then by Tampico Café before being left vacant. It was demolished in 1934 or 1935.<sup>24</sup> C. S. Longcope's home became the headquarters for a Progressive Era Lords' Cycle Club by 1897 and was finally demolished in 1949.<sup>25</sup> B. Tuffly's property passed on to L. J. Tuffly, and the original house was divided in two in the 1890s. Two more structures were built on the property in the early 1900s. These structures at 1509 and 1511 Franklin, from the original Tuffly house, and 114 and 116 Crawford all passed into the hands of Joe Tuffly, who sold the property by 1946 to A. R. Hughes to build an "air-conditioned service station." Mrs. Florence Weill, sister of Jules Meyer of Krupp & Tuffly, had lived in the house at 1509 Franklin for approximately forty years and received an eviction notice when the houses were scheduled for demolition.<sup>26</sup>

Not much has been done to preserve the stories of these early Houstonians thus far. "Houston has always been about business, and what you could do to increase business is what you'd do," notes Betty Chapman. "We've never been an old city, and not yet are we an old city, so people have never really seen any value in keeping anything old," she adds. "We always learn from the past. We learn what was done right or what was done wrong, and hopefully we don't

repeat mistakes or we can build on successes . . . The past is important in order to really move forward, and I think some of that is maintaining the built environment that we have. The old and the new can be very compatible . . . We have a past, and we're more aware of it when we can actually see it and experience it."<sup>27</sup>

Without very much physical presence, the story of early Houston has inevitably lost importance and relevance in the minds of modern Houstonians. Though our beginnings are all too relevant to our story today, an urgency to preserve this story, whether by physical or even documentary means, has long been lacking in Houston at large. Betty Chapman thinks we should be more proud of our history. "How Houston grew is a fascinating, fascinating story, and how Houston always just set out to do something that nobody else had done, whether it was building the Astrodome or making a fifty-mile-inland port, one of the biggest in the world, they've taken on projects that they felt like they could accomplish . . . What happened in the beginning is crucial to what we're doing today. It's a whole journey, and you need the whole journey in order to really tell [the story]."<sup>28</sup> Quality Hill is only one small piece of Houston's whole journey, but perhaps it can serve as a lesson not only about our origins but also about the vitality of preservation itself.

**Sidonie Sturrock** is an art and liberal studies major at the University of Houston, where she is a member of the Honors College and volunteers with *Houston History*.

LITTLE RICHARD • SAM COOKE • JAMES BROWN • GLADYS KNIGHT AND THE PIPS  
THE SUPREMES • JACKIE WILSON • LITTLE WILLIE JOHN • ETTA JAMES • CURTIS MAYFIELD  
GRADY GAINES & THE TEXAS UPSETTERS

★ **NEW!**

**"I've Been Out There"**  
*On the Road with Legends  
of Rock 'n' Roll*  
**GRADY GAINES  
WITH ROD EVANS**

Houston blues and R&B legend Grady Gaines speaks candidly about his sixty-year music career and life on the road supporting some of the biggest names in blues, soul, and R&B.  
160 pp. 31 b&w photos. Index. \$23.00 cloth

"Grady Gaines' story—from his first nightclub job in the Fifth Ward to national tours with Little Richard—is the story of blues and R&B in the middle of the twentieth century, a sound that shaped popular music worldwide."

—BILL WHITE, FORMER MAYOR OF HOUSTON, TEXAS

**"Houston's University Press"**

**A&M TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY PRESS**

[www.tamupress.com](http://www.tamupress.com) • 800-826-8911

