

## Into the Mainstream: Early Black Photography in Houston

*Dannehl M. Twomey*

Photographic galleries spread across the United States almost immediately after Samuel Morse brought Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre's invention to America in 1840. By 1843, the daguerreotype had arrived in Galveston, and the process spread to Houston in the early 1850s. Three photographic galleries advertised in the first *Houston City Directory*, published in 1866. The directory also contains the first record of a black in Houston area photography: Mary E. Warren, listed as a photographic printer.

The wording in the *City Directory* does not show her to be employed by any of the three photographers in Houston, but her address places her on the same block of Main Street as their galleries. She may have been an independent contractor who provided processing services for the photographers. Since her occupational listing specifically says photographic printer, not photographer, she could not be considered the first black photographer in Houston. However, she was the first woman, black or white, involved in the process of photography in the city. She does not appear in any subsequent city directories, but her operation of a Main Street business as a black woman in a male-dominated field, however briefly, makes her worthy of note.

Black photographers entered the mainstream of Houston business activity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lucius Harper was the first black photographer to be listed in the business section of the *Houston City Directory*, in the 1905-1906 edition. His studio and residence were at 1107 Andress. Harper came to Houston from Galveston, where he had been a photographer since 1899. Houston must not have lived up to his expectations, for his time here was short. He appeared in the general section of the 1907 *City Directory*, with his occupation listed as photographer, but he did not appear in the business listings for that year. By 1908 he had returned to Galveston.

Harper's business listing in the *City Directory* was an unusual attempt to

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As no black professional photographer worked in Houston at the turn of the century, rising middle-class blacks frequented the available portrait studios. Harper & Co. took this portrait in 1900.

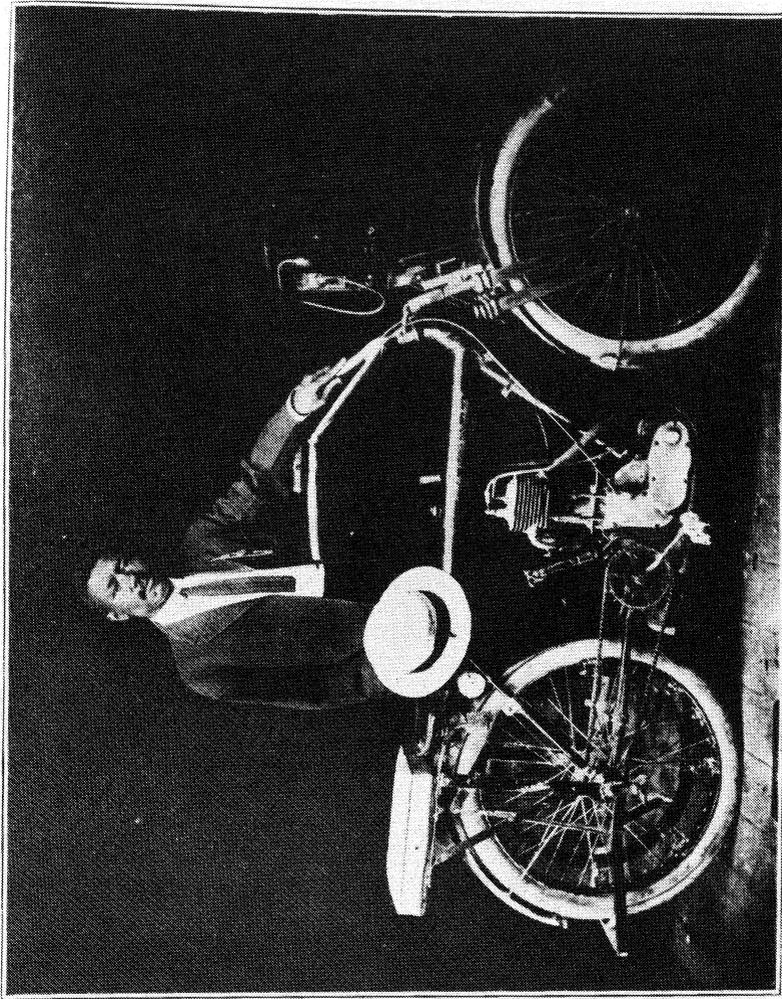
attract clients citywide. Other black photographers served only their own ethnic community, as did many early Hispanic photographers in Houston, and did not advertise their services to the general public. Perhaps Lucius Harper's entry on the list of mainstream professional photographers in Houston encouraged others with the talent to compete successfully to try to broaden their business base. Between 1905 and 1927, ten black photographers advertised in the *Houston City Directory's* business section. Most lasted only a short time, but four of the studios operated over periods ranging from eight to more than forty years.

The second black photographer to list in the business section appeared in the 1907 *Houston City Directory*. Edward M. Robinson opened the Eureka studio at 407½ Travis during 1907, the year he arrived in Houston. He was also a partner with another black, Thomas Lott, in Lott Brothers and Company, a photo enlarging business at the same address. Prior to opening Lott Brothers, Thomas Lott had worked in a Houston woodyard. Robinson's Eureka Studio disappeared by the time of the 1908-1909 *City Directory*. Robinson himself may have left town when the studio closed, since he is not listed in the alphabetical section that year. In 1910 he returned to Houston and worked as a laborer for the Cleveland Compress until 1915.

The third black photographer to advertise, Randolph Brown, began his Houston photography career in 1908 as a photo enlarger. In 1910-1911 he advertised under the photographer's heading in the *City Directory*, and also continued his photo enlarging business, the Big Tree Photo Enlarging House. His studio, enlarging business, and residence were all located at 2819 Nance. Brown moved to 630 San Felipe in 1911, and his wife, Rebecca, opened a restaurant at the same location. Randolph Brown's final *City Directory* entry is in 1912. He is listed as a photographer in the alphabetical listings, but there is no mention of a studio, Rebecca, or the restaurant.

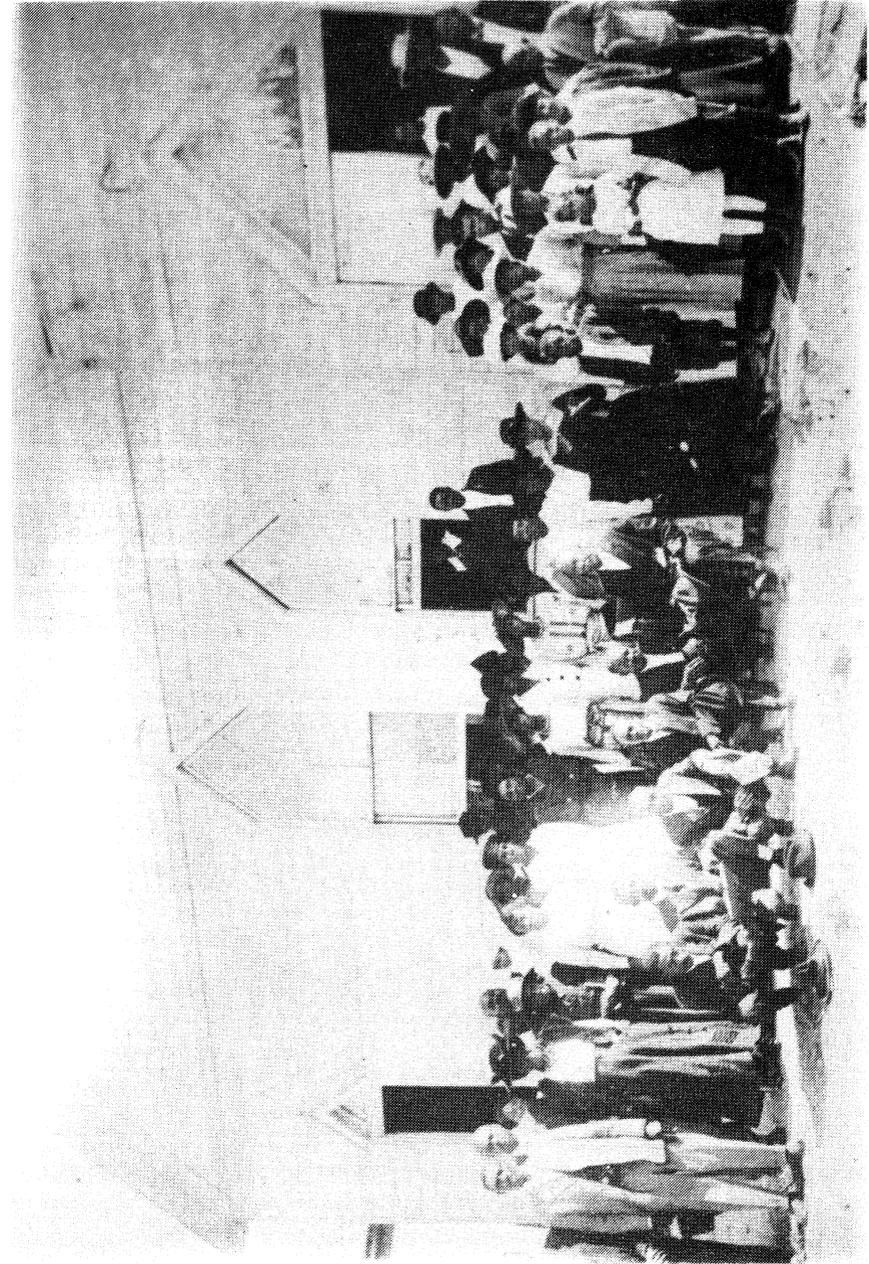
Another black Houston photographer also supplemented his photography earnings with a restaurant. Nicholas Broussard and his wife, Mary, opened a restaurant in 1908 at 2001 Tuam, which was also their residence. In 1910, Broussard listed his occupation as photographer, leaving the management of the restaurant to Mary. As of 1913, Mrs. Broussard and the restaurant were no longer listed. Nicholas Broussard worked strictly within the black community for five years before advertising to a multi-racial clientele in the *City Directory's* business section. He may not have found much response from the general public for his work, for he did not renew his 1915 business listing even though he continued to operate as a photographer in Houston until 1929.

Black photographer Charles G. Harris also placed his name under the photographer's heading in the 1915 *City Directory*, after having been in business in Houston for six years. Harris came to Houston from Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1903, he had opened his own studio there and operated it for six



C. G. HARRIS, "The Camera Man"  
 The obliging and efficient official photographer of the Houston Red Book will answer calls by wheel and make photos anywhere in Harris or Galveston Counties. Satisfaction guaranteed. 811 San Felipe Street, Houston, Texas. Phone Preston 3960.

Charles Harris cut quite a dashing figure with his camera mounted on the front of his motorcycle. This illustration appeared in *The Red Book of Houston*, a 1915 publication by black Houstonians.



The congregation of what is probably the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in the Fifth Ward gathered in front of their building one October morning in 1925 for this group portrait by Charles Harris.

years before moving to Houston. He learned his photographic skills from a Little Rock photographer. Harris was a technical craftsman. Throughout his years as a photographer, he built his own photographic equipment, including his enlargers. The lens and bellows on his cameras were the only parts he did not construct himself.

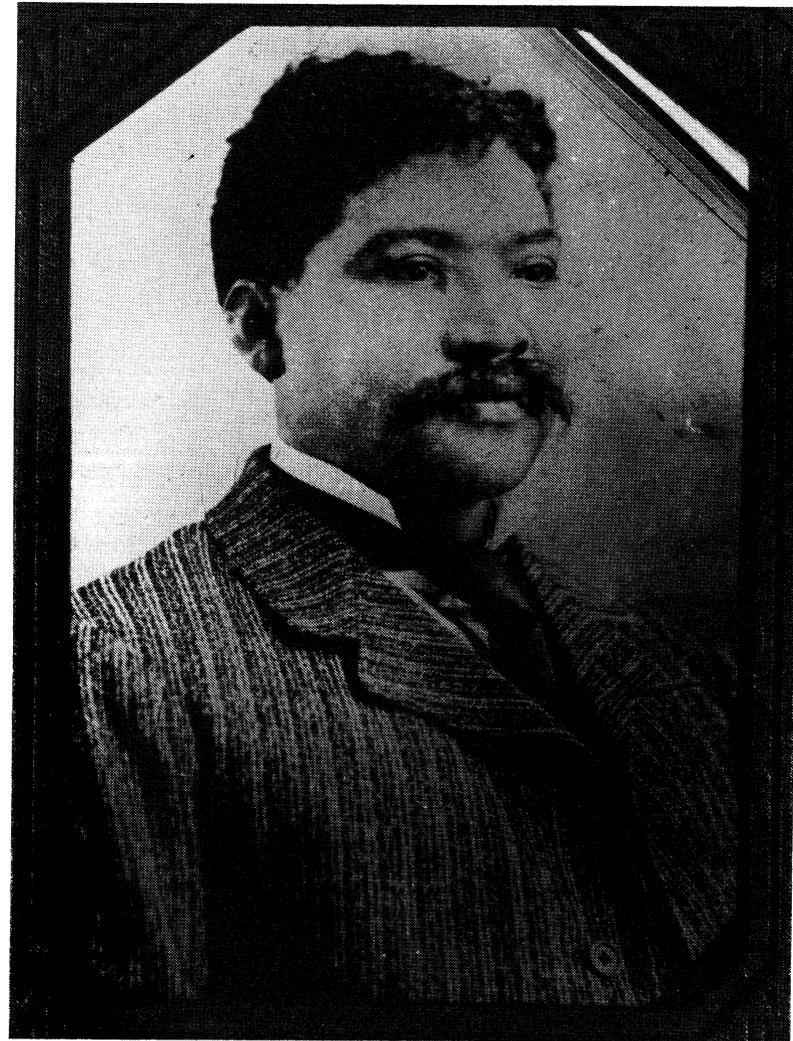
Although he began to photograph within Houston's black community in 1909, it was not until 1915 that he advertised to a multi-racial audience in the business section of the *City Directory*. Perhaps not coincidentally, that year he was also selected as the official photographer of the *Red Book of Houston*, a publication which gave his work increased visibility in the black community.

The *Red Book* discussed the status of blacks in the South in general and in Houston in particular. It is still a valuable source for historians and others who desire to explore the history of black Houstonians. Harris's photographs illustrated the sections of the book that concerned the advancement of blacks in education, occupations, health, and related areas since the end of slavery in 1865. The book's photographs range from pictures of ex-slaves, by then quite old and infirm, to images of the younger generations and their homes. The latter give solid pictorial documentation to the growth of a black middle class in Houston. In addition to articles on the condition of life, the *Red Book* also listed black businesses and services in Houston. It is interesting that although Harris was not the only black photographer active in Houston during that time, he is nevertheless the only photographer listed in that section.

All of Harris's surviving images are exterior shots. Harris took his pictures at the client's location, bringing his camera mounted on the front of his motorcycle. Most of his pictures are church group portraits. They show the pastors, often the most important black community leaders of the time, standing in front of their churches with their congregations. Another large part of Charles Harris's work was providing photographs of the dead. The bereaved family would call him in to take a picture by which they could remember the deceased.

Harris continued to work in Houston through the 1920s. For a short time in those years, his images show a logo reading "Harris & Buckner." During that time, there was no Buckner listed with an occupation of photographer. Buckner must have assisted Harris only part-time and held another job. Harris's logo on other prints indicate that his studio and residence at 811 West Dallas (formerly San Felipe) also served as a hotel. No hotel is listed at that address, but it is likely that the guests were brought in through word-of-mouth. Charles G. Harris continued to photograph in Houston until 1931.

Seth Fitch came to Houston as a chauffeur in 1920. In 1922 he changed occupations and opened a photography studio at 911 Milam. This location was separate from his residence, an unusual and expensive undertaking. Most fledgling photographers operated for many years with their studio and



This portrait of Mr. C. W. Hicks, Sr., was taken by the Teal Studio in about 1927.



**The Teal Studio maintained a reputation for excellent portraits, as this 1927 photograph of John Fletcher demonstrates.**

darkroom facilities in the same location as their residence to minimize expenses. Fitch jumped into his new profession with both feet, advertising his new, separate studio in the business section of the 1922 *City Directory*. Since his studio address had not been used previously as a photographic studio, Fitch assumed an immediate financial outlay to outfit the space with developing equipment, cameras, and other photographic supplies. However, he did not survive as a photographer in Houston; 1922 was his only year in business. He is not listed in the following year's *City Directory*, even in the alphabetical section. He returned to Houston for one more year (1925) as a chauffeur, and then very probably left town permanently. No Fitch images have turned up in any of the major repositories of Afro-American history in Houston, so the quality and scope of his work remain unknown.

One black woman photographer advertised in the *Houston City Directory* during the 1920s. Gertrude Lewis was a music teacher in Houston beginning in 1922. She offered instruction from her residence at 2307 Dowling. In 1925, Miss Lewis shows no occupation in the alphabetical section of the *City Directory*, but listed herself under the heading of photographer in the business section. She must either have been unsuccessful in her new profession or have found that she missed her former calling, because in 1926 she returned to teaching music.

In addition to these short-lived business efforts, the 1920s saw the flourishing of the first black photographic studio in Houston to enjoy a long and successful life. This was the Teal Studio, established by A. C. and Elnora Teal in 1919. The Teal Studio first advertised in the business section of the *Houston City Directory* in 1925, by which time it had earned a reputation as the best black studio in the city. After A. C.'s death in 1955, Elnora Teal continued to run the studio until the mid-1960s. The Teal Studio's high standards of portraiture kept their clients returning and guaranteed word-of-mouth recommendations. The studio's slogan of "Photography of a Better Kind" was applied to a variety of photographic assignments. The firm's images, still extant in both institutional and private collections, range from formal individual portraits to group portraits and candid shots of community activities.

Two main factors worked against the success of the black photographers active in Houston after the turn of the century. The first factor was the separation that existed between the black and white communities by law and by custom. As a consequence, while blacks often frequented white photography studios, the patron traffic did not flow in the opposite direction. The location of their studios was the second obstacle to success. Since the early 1850s, photographic studios had clustered around a few blocks of Main Street, near Congress and Preston. After the turn of the century, they began to scatter, but most studios were still concentrated in the main commercial center.

However, most of the early black photographers operated outside the central business area. Their location further lessened the possibility that white clients would travel to their studios. Not only did these two factors work against cross-over patronage, they also limited the success of black photographers within their own community. Black clients, too, were attracted by the prestigious and centrally located white studios.

Nevertheless, the legacy of these artistic and commercial pioneers is substantial. Without them and their surviving work, our understanding of the history of black Houston—its people and their homes, workplaces, and communities—would be woefully lacking. Without an adequate portrayal of black Houston, our understanding of Houston's history in general would be glaringly incomplete. These early black photographers, as artists and entrepreneurs, opened new avenues for minority opportunity and advancement. Whether or not they themselves succeeded, they helped forge a path for later black photographers to establish themselves and enter the mainstream.