

Home in the Pines: Creating The Woodlands

By George T. Morgan, Jr. and John O. King with Joseph A. Pratt



This 1973 scale model of The Woodlands illustrates the desire to incorporate the new city into its natural surroundings and provide opportunities for outdoor recreation. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-1973-0334N08.



Galveston-born oil magnate George Mitchell embodied the vision of a more environmentally friendly answer to Houston's explosive, madcap growth.

In my adult lifetime, I have watched Houston spread in every direction. People migrated to the region seeking jobs. The circles of highways around the city grew from one to three; the spokes in the wheel of freeways reached farther and farther out onto the flat prairie stretching toward Galveston, Freeport, Baytown, Sugar Land, Huntsville, Jersey Village, Katy, and other suburbs. New, affordable homes sprouted up along these roads, attracting more and more migrants to the jobs and the new neighborhoods that sprawled across the Houston metropolitan

region. The Houston suburbs looked much alike, with the same stores, the same developers, the same interchanges and highway signs. But one major suburb, The Woodlands, remains somewhat distinctive. Since opening in 1974 it has grown dramatically as a distant suburb where people can live and work without commuting daily to downtown Houston. It has partially fulfilled its aspiration to be an environmentally friendly place to live for people from all economic strata of life, with housing for the rich, the middle class, and those of low and moderate incomes.

These early goals for The Woodlands emerged from its unusual past. They reflected the vision of Houston oilman George Mitchell—as filtered through the demands of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (H.U.D.), which seeks to address mounting shortages of housing for the poor and minorities. Although H.U.D. loans helped finance the early development of The Woodlands, its partnership with Mitchell Energy and Development soon soured. Even after H.U.D. funding disappeared, The Woodlands nevertheless emerged as a vibrant center of population and business growth and a major city in its own right.

Mitchell's ideas for building a new community reflected his own background. The son of Greek immigrants who worked their way up the economic ladder in early twentieth-century Galveston, Mitchell grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. Imbued by his parents with a strong work ethic, a respect for education, and optimism about life, Mitchell succeeded in almost every endeavor he undertook. He paid his way through Texas A&M by waiting tables and graduated with a degree in petroleum engineering. He proved to be an entrepreneur of the first class, using this knowledge, insight, and inner confidence to build a superior independent oil and gas company, Mitchell Energy. Although his historical claim to fame will be as the “father of modern fracking,” he also filled his life with a commitment to his large family and with good works ranging from a leading role in the restoration of Galveston to the financial support of Texas A&M, the University of Houston, and many other worthy causes.¹



Jim Veltman with a 1974 environmental assessment of the future Woodlands suburb.

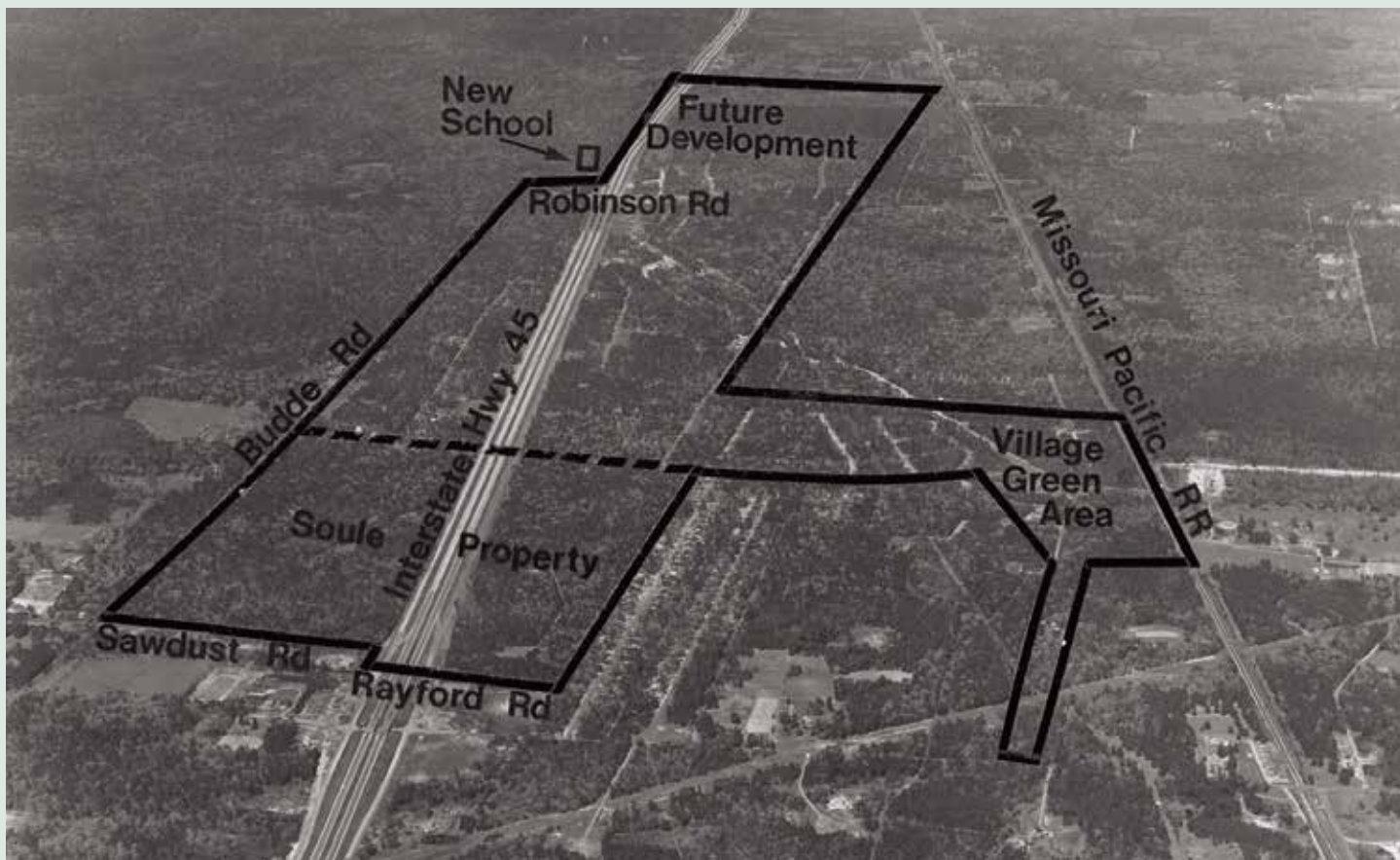
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RG0006-1974-2439N07.

One such cause was environmental stewardship, an unusual passion for an oilman of his time. This interest spilled over into his work on The Woodlands, which he hoped would become a model for a new type of community. His vision for this development rested in his growing dissatisfaction with the quality of life in Houston during its rapid, chaotic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s. Like many other oilmen of the time, Mitchell had moved his family into the Memorial area west of Houston as he built Mitchell Energy. Drawn by the beauty of the area's stately homes and mature trees, he became disillusioned as rapid, careless, and unplanned development gradually altered the look and feel of the area. In an interview in 1979, Mitchell recalled that Memorial had become the victim of “helter-skelter, fragmented development.” Discouraged that the developers had not made the best use of the natural beauty in the area, he saw his task in The Woodlands as finding the answer to an interesting question: “If you were going to take Memorial and wipe it out and do it over again, how would you do better?”²

His concern about city life in Houston extended past environmental issues to social problems. He felt uncomfortable with the growing congestion and pollution in the city. Migration to the city seemed to be outrunning the capacity of its infrastructure to absorb and provide services to its booming population. He disliked the urban blight of the city's unplanned and undermanaged development, and he feared the consequences of the gap between the haves and the have-nots in his city. With many other Americans, he struggled to understand the causes and implications of a wave of urban riots that wracked the nation in the 1960s. Surely, he thought, a new type of city could be designed to create a more harmonious relationship between its citizens and nature and to foster a sense of community among people of different economic classes and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Was this a utopian vision? Given Mitchell's background and his innate sense of optimism that practical people could make needed changes, perhaps not.

But could such a city be built and sustained in a real world setting in which costs and profits compete with the vision of a better way to live? Mitchell had a keen sense that the social responsibilities of businessmen went beyond making a profit while creating jobs and obeying the law. He felt strongly that there was more to a life well-lived, and he believed that environmental stewardship was compatible with the profit motive. The Woodlands became his trial case, and he pursued his vision of a better city with all the commitment and resources he could muster.

He also recognized clearly that his own self-interest supported his efforts. He had operated a successful oil and gas company for decades, and he understood all too well the industry's volatility. Sharp fluctuations in oil prices and unexpected and unmanageable geopolitical crises could quickly depress profits; a large, successful real estate development might serve as a counterweight to downturns in oil and gas. His company already had a record of acquiring large blocks of land for drilling and for development, and it had completed numerous real estate ventures in its past. A development on the scale of The Woodlands could push its real estate development business to a new level of investment that might make a more significant impact on its bottom line.



Aerial photograph of the site of the future development of The Woodlands, June 2, 1970. The overlay identifies Rayford, Sawdust, Budde, and Robinson Roads, Interstate 45, and the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-0103.

Mitchell looked near home for the right place for such a development. He knew that Houston historically had expanded to the east along the ship channel from the 1920s forward, and that in the 1950s and 1960s growth had been pronounced to the southeast towards Clear Lake and to the west toward Memorial and points beyond. He saw greater signs of future growth to the northwest in northern Harris County and southern Montgomery County. Here, development had accelerated in the 1960s with the building of the Champions subdivision, which featured quality homes built around an outstanding golf course and country club. Other subdivisions rapidly followed. Mitchell bought large blocks of land near Champions, but after becoming disgruntled with the look and the tone of the crowded developments in the area, he moved his focus north to southern Montgomery County. He made his first major land purchase there in 1964, when he bought 500,000 acres of timberland from the Grogan-Cochran Lumber Company. He had what he had been looking for, a location for his development that had ample stands of mature trees and enough space to build a city with large tracts of green spaces and big lots for homes and apartment complexes. He increased his original parcel of land through purchases and trades, and by the late 1960s he was ready to start planing his new city.

The location had an interesting history of growth fed by a variety of economic activities. Over time it also had established transportation and business ties to Houston. Founded in 1837, the small town of Montgomery had served as a regional center of commerce for an array of small

farmers for decades. Ten miles to the north was the county seat of Conroe, a larger town. Twenty more miles or so to the north sat Huntsville, a town about the size of Conroe, and one that had developed significant historical ties to the Houston legal and banking community. In this region



Willie Nelson (center) smiles after a successful shot during a 1978 celebrity golf tournament at The Woodlands Country Club. He was joined by University of Texas football coach Daryl Royal (left) and actor James Garner (right.)

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-1978-1883N19.



The freestanding chimney was a fashionable architectural choice in Woodlands homes going up in the 1970s.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-19791195N11A.

family farming made room for large cotton plantations in the years prior to the Civil War. After the war, cotton remained important, although tenant farmers steadily replaced plantation-level cotton production. Nonetheless, cotton shipped by wagon to Houston and Galveston established ties with merchants, lawyers, and bankers on the coast. These ties became much stronger with the discovery of a major oil field near Conroe in the 1930s.³

Over the long run the steady development of improved transportation between the hinterland and the central city proved more important in tying the region to Houston. The late nineteenth century brought the coming of numerous railroads to the region. Cotton and timber now had a more efficient means of transport to processing plants and shipping facilities on the coast, and goods from distant points had much easier access to regional markets. The twentieth century saw an even more important development for the region, the creation over decades of a much improved highway system that became the key connector of Montgomery County to Houston. In the mid-twentieth century Highway 75, the key transportation corridor between Houston and Dallas, passed through the region. Then with the financing of the interstate highway system after 1956, the construction of Interstate 45 along much of the route

of Highway 75 placed the region near a modern divided four-lane freeway between the two largest cities in Texas. The subsequent construction of the Hardy Toll Road from the inner loop (I-610) north of Houston to the southern edge of The Woodlands opened another important corridor to downtown for those commuting there to work. The opening of Houston Intercontinental Airport (now George Bush Intercontinental Airport) in 1969 some twenty minutes south of The Woodlands by car gave nationally and internationally active companies another incentive to locate offices in the development.⁴ As Mitchell planned The Woodlands, he had good reasons to be confident of future growth in the region.

With growing excitement, in the early 1970s the project moved from a soft sense of what might be done to the drawing board. Mitchell's wife Cynthia suggested the name "The Woodlands," and her husband moved cautiously in his search for designers and builders who shared his vision and could help make it a reality.

After rejecting traditional architects, Mitchell chose Robert Hartsfield of the Houston architectural firm of Caudill, Rowlett, Scott as director of planning and design. Hartsfield recommended his mentor Ian McHarg, a Scottish landscape architect who had built a reputation as a creative, environmentally conscious designer and urban planner. His influential book, *Design with Nature*, argued strongly for greater concern for preserving natural beauty in design and construction. As a consultant to Mitchell Energy and Development on environmental planning for The Woodlands project, he put forward a plan that set aside large areas of green space and featured big lots and villages designed to avoid cutting mature trees whenever possible. Mitchell found much to like in this approach, and he valued McHarg's advice as planning moved forward. Mitchell also consulted other environmentally friendly architects and a variety of experts on other social aspects of the project.

From this complex planning process emerged the basic approach still evident in the modern Woodlands: a residential area with a country feel stretching over 28,000 acres, complete with all the trees that could be preserved and still allow the development to be profitable. Residents could enjoy ample green space in every direction, as well as first-class amenities for sports and entertainment. Holding it all together was a long-term plan to manage both population growth and the gradual, phased introduction of commercial and business activity.

As Mitchell searched for capital to finance the project, he examined the new cities program of H.U.D. Laws passed in 1968 and 1970 that gave H.U.D. authority to make loans of up to \$500 million for projects to build innovative new developments featuring designs that included housing for low and moderate income families. The goal was to address growing concerns about inequality of income, white flight, and the shortage of affordable housing for the poor and for minorities. New cities at Reston, Virginia; Columbia, Maryland; and other locations had blazed this trail for The Woodlands, which could learn from both their successes and failures. Mitchell's vision included concern for the social issues originally stressed by H.U.D., and he applied for and received funding for his project.

As construction began on Grogan's Mill, the first village



Market Street, an example of Mitchell's vision for a community with all the amenities of Houston.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Coyne.

in The Woodlands, numerous tensions had to be addressed. First on the agenda were efforts by the neighboring town of Conroe to protect its own self-interests against competing claims by the potential giant to its south. At the top of its list was the willingness of The Woodlands to grant extraterritorial claims to Houston, giving the big city the potential to expand its presence gradually over The Woodlands, with the distinct possibility of annexation down the line. After calming these fears, The Woodlands also had to address numerous challenges from its neighbor to the north over issues as varied as school systems, drainage, and water use.⁵

Tensions with H.U.D., whose focus and management changed with the political winds, also hampered the project. Even in the early years when the agency encouraged the growth of new cities, its political support and funding was by no means secure. During the 1970s H.U.D. became an increasingly unreliable partner for Mitchell Energy and Development as it sought to make The Woodlands a long-term success. According to the authors of the early history of the project, numerous disputes with H.U.D. at one point drove The Woodlands to the “brink of insolvency.”⁶ H.U.D.’s leadership and focus had changed as the new cities program as a whole began taking on water. One of its officials summarized the situation as follows: “The blue sky thinking and the dreaming has ended and the reality has set in that this is just a damn difficult mode of development from a management standpoint.”⁷ The access to capital and credit of George Mitchell and Mitchell Energy helped pull the project through this crisis, and it finally cut the cord with H.U.D. in 1983. One casualty of the divorce with H.U.D. was the reinforcement the original agreement had given to the social goal of diversity in housing.

A long-term goal of George Mitchell to house a major university campus within The Woodlands ultimately faded

away due to tensions with the state coordinating board for higher education. Mitchell initially gave the University of Houston 400 acres on which to develop a new campus. The university was quite eager to expand and Mitchell assumed that the presence of a university would contribute to the prestige of his project while also attracting substantial numbers of potential homebuyers. After much haggling with authorities, this campus failed to materialize. Ultimately, the coordinating board proved more interested in curbing the rising costs of higher education in the state and in protecting the interest of flagship universities in Texas than in the expansion of the University of Houston. The management of The Woodlands later succeeded in creating the Houston Area Research Council, which included all major universities in the area and focused in large part on cooperative research on environmental issues.⁸

Not surprisingly, tensions also grew between those in Mitchell Energy and Development Corporation who worked in oil and gas and those whose job was to develop The Woodlands. In an era of great uncertainty for oil and gas prices and domestic production, the growing budget and staff in real estate development raised a red flag for those who cared first about the company’s traditional strengths in energy. By the late 1970s, the resulting tensions within the company became so pronounced that George Mitchell himself took greater control over the management of The Woodlands.⁹ The sharp rise in oil prices after 1978 dampened such tensions, but they remained until the 1980s, when The Woodlands could generate enough profits on its own to support long-term, sustained growth. The ultimate resolution of these tensions came in 1997 with the purchase of The Woodlands Corporation by a joint venture of Morgan Stanley and Crescent Real Estate and the sale of Mitchell Energy to Devon Energy in 2002.

More fundamental tensions shaped the evolution of The

Woodlands in the past and will continue to affect its future. Built into Mitchell's vision of a better way to live were two sources of potential conflicts: the commitment to environmental stewardship as a defining goal of a profit-making project and the commitment to diversity in the access to housing in an upscale development built far from the city.

Ian McHarg, who preached the gospel of designing with nature, had this practical response to residents of The Woodlands who protested the building of concrete trails instead of walking paths with wood chips: "It would be very nice if the forest remained a forest, but if it remained a forest it would not be a new city." He defended his overall advice to the builders of The Woodland with a simpler quote that his major contribution was to help builders learn that "they could love money and trees at the same time."¹⁰

Statistics suggest that the project was less successful in achieving its goal of attracting economic diversity in its residents. In 2010, for example, The Woodlands population was about 94,000, with 2.4 % African Americans and 12.3% Hispanics. It proved hard to transplant diversity into an upscale community in a traditionally rural community away from a major city.¹¹

The Woodlands had no such problem sustaining steady population growth over its history. By 1980, its population was about 7,800; by 1990, more than 29,000, making it the largest city in Montgomery County; by 2000, over 55,000; by 2010, almost 94,000; and in 2015, over 100,000. This expansion helped spur the growth of Montgomery County from almost 50,000 in 1970 to about 294,000 in 2000.¹²

Forty years after its opening, The Woodlands experiment has been a partial success against great odds. It is not an ordinary suburb. It is greener and it has attracted more jobs that do not require a long commute than most Houston suburban subdivisions. By all accounts it is a better place to live than many options in the region, in part because of its location among the pines and in part because of its environmentally friendly design. Residents also have access to first-class facilities to hike, play golf and tennis, swim, and attend concerts. Above all, it allows many to live near work and shopping with excellent schools nearby for their children.

That said, it is hard to visit The Woodlands today without thinking of George Mitchell's question about starting over in designing Memorial. For those who commute to Houston or who drive the streets of the development, traffic congestion remains a serious problem. The original goal of economic and ethnic diversity has been illusive, and The Woodlands is much closer to a refuge for affluent whites than a reflection of the growing diversity of the Houston region. And yet, the original design of The Woodlands seems capable of absorbing the future growth in population and commercialization that seems destined for most of the Houston region. If George Mitchell did not completely realize his ambitious vision, he at least gave people a choice of a somewhat better place to live.

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George T. Morgan, Jr. and John O'King coauthored *The Woodlands: New Community Development, 1964-1985*. (See Endnotes, no. 2.)

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