



While the nineteenth-century bookstores may be a thing of the past in Houston, one can still locate books from that era, such as these at Becker's Books, owned by Ann and Dan Becker.

Photo courtesy of Ann Becker.

The Evolution of Houston Bookstores

By Aric Richardson

An often overlooked and swiftly fading part of our regional culture is the Houston bookstore. In the 1860s early bookshops in Houston were not only purveyors of books, but were also the main source of printing, news delivery, and music. But what has happened to the bookselling industry between then and now? Today Houston's brick-and-mortar bookstores still provide a unique sensory experience, but many have come and gone, leaving little or no legacy.

Over the past decade, the internet and the relatively unimpeded growth of players like Amazon have pressured bookstores across the country to adjust their approach to bookselling. Recent statistics from the American Bookseller Association show that print sales increased by \$10 million to \$1.02 billion in 2015.¹ This national trend will hopefully bode well for a Houston industry.

Presently, the state of the Houston bookstore industry, while not exactly thriving, is as diverse as the population, catering to the needs of many cultures. Salvaging the history of early bookstores in Houston offers an interesting way to understand how culture, entertainment, and information proliferated in the city's younger days through its transition to a megalopolis.

"A place isn't a place until it has a bookstore."

—Gabrielle Zevin,
The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry

History of E. H. Cushing

Scouring across old *Houston City Directory* archives reveals few details on bookstores. However, one watershed moment came with the arrival of Edward Hopkins Cushing, father of Texas A&M founder E. B. Cushing and one of Houston's early boosters. Cushing was born June 11, 1829, in Vermont and

showed an early interest in learning and books. At sixteen years old he entered Dartmouth College and graduated in 1850. Shortly afterward he moved to Houston to begin a teaching career. Six years later he became editor of the *Houston Telegraph* and remained there for thirteen years. By 1866 Cushing's early love for books prompted him to open his own bookstore, and he became one of the city's first established booksellers. With the help of the *Houston Telegraph*, Cushing supplied schools with a series of Texas readers and spelling books; he later added bookbinding and bookselling to his services.

Cushing was a steadfast booster of Houston with a wide-range of interests: Southern manufacturing, railroads, education, Texas authors, horticulture, and scientific agriculture. He promoted and published books from an array of Texas authors, such as Mollie Evelyn Moore Davis, Maud



Early Houston booster and bookstore owner Edwards Hopkins Cushing and his wife Mary Burke Cushing.

Photos courtesy of Ann Becker.

Jeannie Young, and John Sayles. Also a passionate horticulturalist, Cushing had the country's best floral collection at his estate, Bohemia.²

Houston Booksellers in the Twentieth Century

In the 1920s Mexican Americans also opened bookstores in the Mexican business district in downtown around Congress Avenue, among furniture stores, cafes, drugstores, barbershops, photography studios, and professional offices. *La Librería Hispano Americana*, owned by brothers José and Socorro Sarabia, sold a variety of items such as curios and printing services, along with literary works, magazines, and Spanish-language newspapers. The business district declined during the Depression, however; and by the mid-1950s the growing Mexican American population began moving to outlying areas, taking businesses with them.³



José (left) and his brother Socorro Sarabia owned and operated *Hispano Americana* bookstore at 1811 Congress Street in the Hispanic business district downtown.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0282-047-001.

African American business registries such as the *Red Book of Houston* do not specifically mention black-owned bookstores, but it is likely books were made available through other merchants who carried a variety of items, mail order services, or traveling salesmen like Lorenzo Greene who came to Houston to sell history books in 1930. Greene commented in detail on the thriving African American business communities in Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards, calling the people he met “the most enterprising and most appreciative groups of race people in the South.”⁴

A wealth of information on white-owned Houston booksellers in the twentieth century can be found in Larry McMurtry's *Books: A Memoir*. McMurtry, later a Pulitzer Prize winner, recalls his time in Houston as a rare book scout out of Stanford. Teaching night school at the University of Houston in 1958, McMurtry bussed across Houston's Fifth Ward daily and observed, “Fortunately, for a time all three of Houston's main secondhand bookstores were downtown, reachable without even changing buses.”⁵ He later opened his own bookstore, Bookman, in 1971.



Advertisements for printing and music shops in the nineteenth century declared they stocked books at prices below their Galveston competitors. This twentieth century advertisement demonstrates that booksellers specialized in and sold other goods as well.

Photo of Houston City Directory courtesy of Johnny Zapata.

McMurtry anointed Houstonian Herbert Fletcher as “Dean of Houston Booksellers.” As a bookseller and publisher, Fletcher owned one of the three main secondhand bookstores in downtown Houston. Fletcher moved to Texas in 1925 and married San Antonio bookseller Thelma Rawls. After moving to Houston, Fletcher established Fletcher's Book Store on the corner of San Jacinto and Rusk Streets. By 1929 he created the Anson Jones Press, which favored publishing books about Texas. The avant-garde magazine *The Gargoyle* published a column written by Fletcher entitled “In the Offing.” He later contributed regularly to the *Dallas Times Herald's* column “Bibliomania.”⁶

By all accounts Fletcher was a colorful figure. Described as “irascible and peevish” by his friends, he boasted in a 1950 *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* article that he had sold two million books, more than half at ten cents each. When he could not find a buyer for a prized Texas books collection, he said it was because “oilmen (of Houston) are not interested in anything that will not give them at least a hundred thousand dollar tax deduction.” After volume one of a two-volume historical set was stolen from his store, Fletcher placed a newspaper ad requesting the thief return to steal the other.⁷ Following Fletcher's death in 1968, his wife took over the business, now located in Salado, Texas.⁸

Another Houston bookstore mainstay of the 1950s was Brown Book Shop. Brown still operates today and is an

example of how independent bookstores shifted their focus towards a target market to stay profitable. In the late 1940s the original owner, Ted Brown, capitalized on the oil and petrochemical companies that inhabited the Houston Ship Channel by selling expensive, in-demand technical tomes. The store, originally built on Fannin Street, focused on art, cooking, and rare and expensive classics. At the time, technical books made up only ten percent of Brown sales. Brown, according to McMurtry, did not entirely shirk the antiquarian book market and, by the mid-1950s, “always kept a wall of fancy books, first editions, bindings, and press books for his rich customers from River Oaks and the Memorial district, where Ted himself lived.”⁹



Brown Book Shop, established in 1946, advertises it is “the only brick-and-mortar technical bookstore in America. Trade books for engineers, welders, pipe fitters, electricians — standards and codes — technical manuals and more” can be found there.

Photo courtesy of Brown Book Shop.

J. W. Petty Jr. owned and operated the third Houston bookstore, The Book Mart, which stayed in business from 1936 until Petty moved to Victoria, Texas, in 1956. Sigmund Byrd of the *Houston Chronicle* lamented the loss, describing Petty’s bookstore as a “rendezvous for book-lovers—both readers and writers—for so many years.” Tom Mulvaney, book reviewer for the *Chronicle*, reiterated, “Houston will be different with Joe Petty’s Book Mart gone. The old hang-out of the intelligentsia has become a virtual landmark over on Capitol near the Post Office. It was always a nice place where one could drop in and meet stimulating people...and then there was always the master of the house to do battle with.”¹⁰

In 1975 Houston’s rare book trade was dismally characterized by Texas librarian John Payne in a *Texas Monthly* article intended to garner regional support for book dealers. Payne described Houston’s love for book collecting as lackluster and dormant but mentioned several profitable Houston bookstores that existed during the sixties and seventies: Frank Gilliam’s Brick Row Bookshop and Dorman David’s Texas Bookman. At the height of the Depression and within a year of the original owner’s death, Gilliam purchased Brick Row from a group of Yale men and moved

back to his home state of Texas. The Houston branch of Brick Row closed in 1971, moving to San Francisco where it operates under new ownership as one of the oldest antiquarian bookstores.¹¹

C. Dorman David’s short, yet eclectic history as a Houston bookseller began in the sixties after he received trust money from his father, Henry David. Dorman completed a short apprenticeship with a renowned, affluent West Coast bookdealer, Warren Howell, and then returned to Houston where he designed a magnificent bookstore. McMurtry recalls, “The main room was a great cube, with shelves going way up to the ceiling. There was a humidior room, in which Dorman planned to sell rare tobaccos. For a safe he had the boll of a Louisiana gum tree: striking, and also fireproof. The house was on San Felipe, not far from the de Menils and other grandes.”¹² Dorman’s business acumen proved to be erratic. Threatened with bankruptcy, he fled to Mexico and Texas Bookman went up for auction. Grace David, Dorman’s mother, along with the help of the Yount family of Beaumont, came to the bookstore’s aide in their own way. Grace, not having much interest other than to help her desperate son, immediately hired Larry McMurtry to help organize a massive donation made by the Yount family from their personal library.

For book collectors enthusiastic enough, but ill-equipped with the real estate, they can turn to an aptly titled network called “The Book Hunters Club.” Started by Kurt Zimmerman, The Book Hunter’s Club is a group of rare book collectors, sellers, and librarians who reside in the Houston area.¹³

Effect of E-books and Online Sales

By 2005 e-commerce caused independent bookstores to rethink their strategy. The internet gave book buyers instant access to millions of books, driving down the price of used books. Amazon’s Kindle, launched in 2007 offering a wide inventory of digital books, created another significant impact on bookstores. Surprisingly, despite gloomy publishing



Becker invites writers to read and sign recent or past works. Former notable guests of the store include Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, shown here with Dan Becker, Nellie Connally, Marvin Zindler, Connie Lapallo, Leon Hale, Winston Churchill’s great grandson Jonathan Sandys, and H. R. Cullen’s granddaughter Alison Baumann.

Photo courtesy of Ann Becker.

industry predictions, the e-books never became the nadir of print that booksellers initially feared would drive bookstores out of business.¹⁴

By 2007, Amazon had already established a profitable business model selling books online, while attracting millions of tech-savvy book buyers. The focus of discussion in the book industry was how this new, aggressively marketed concept would affect brick-and-mortar stores. As Amazon's authority grew, book prices plummeted and the marketplace shifted to equate lower values to books. With some reservations, Houston's own Becker's Books began to use the internet as a viable, alternative revenue source. At first selling only rare, fine arts, and history books, Ann and Dan Becker eventually moved on to sell much more of everything, as most of the stores that successfully kept their doors open had done.¹⁵

Bookstores across the country started to feel the repercussions of the digital age. Brazos Bookstore owner Karl Killian took on program director duties at the Menil Collection in 2006, leaving the store's future in doubt. Luckily, a group of thirteen Houstonians, led by Edward R. Allen III, purchased the store and saved it from the growing list of defunct bookstores. By early 2015 the list of owners had grown to twenty-seven.¹⁶

In 2011, the closure of several corporate stores in the Houston area appeared to forecast more financial doom for the Houston book industry. With the help of an increase in demand for children and young adult books, sales rebounded, giving smaller bookstores an edge with the ability to cater to their customers, while providing an intimate shopping experience.

Becker's Books

To learn more about these changes taking place in Houston book business, I spoke with the owners of Becker's Books, one of the most unassuming bookstores in the Houston area. The store is located at 7405 Westview Drive, a nostalgic throwback to an older age of Houston booksellers, one of the few independent bookstores left in Houston that has adapted to the post-Amazon era. Dan Becker is a writer and historian who attended the Honors College and the Law School at the University of Houston. Dan is president of the Harris County Historical Society and vice president of the La Porte Bay Area Heritage Society. Ann Becker is a graduate of the University of New Mexico. She and I first met at the 2015 Houston History Conference where Ann had a booth displaying portions of her store's Texana book collection. She congenially chatted with new and familiar customers alike, one of the more pleasurable aspects of running your own bookstore. The author of several books on Houston history, Ann is a member of many local historical organizations including the Harris County Historical Commission, vice president of the Harris County Historical Society, and treasurer of the La Porte Bay Area Heritage Society.¹⁷

The Beckers' descriptions of the Houston independent bookstore scene mimic that of the rest of the country: Sparse, steadily thriving on an underground network of enthusiasts and book scouting regulars. Becker's Books falls under a unique model of bookstores that still stock used



Located in west Houston, Becker's offers book enthusiasts a selection from any genre they might desire in a warm and cozy atmosphere.

Photo courtesy of Becker's Books.

books—antiquarian, out-of-print, and the odd and interesting items that make old book shops fun to browse. Kaboom Books, another successful bookstore, moved to the Houston area after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Colleen's, a beloved bookshop like Becker's, was located near Hobby Airport from the 1950s to the 1990s. Award-winning *Houston Chronicle* journalist Leon Hale wrote frequently about visiting Colleen's.¹⁸ After talking with several independent Houston bookstore owners and attending several book fairs, I realized the community felt more like a knowledgeable network of people who love books.

The Beckers began selling books in 1988 and, seeking a more stable selling environment, bought a house and turned it into a gorgeous bookstore. "Amazon, in a way, has become all of our bosses," Ann says. She discusses Amazon's meteoric rise and how the state of survival of independent bookstores is intertwined with its success. The Beckers refuse to call themselves business savvy, but no other word describes how in 1992, based on the advice of fellow Galveston bookstore owners, they decided to go against their gut feelings and begin selling on the internet. Twenty years later the idea sounds almost draconian, but the boost from selling online has kept many local vendors from going under. Certainly Becker's Books is in no danger of closing any time soon. Dan and Ann hope that the keen interest and involvement of son Charlie, who recently published a book on River Oaks and helps run the University of Houston's SURE™ Program, will ensure the store's continuation with a new generation of Houstonians

The future of independent bookselling is unclear, but its historical ties are carried on today by a steadfast group more than willing to share their past. Houstonians can help keep independent booksellers around for future generations by following a time-honored tradition of choosing to shop for books through local vendors, whether online or in person.

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