

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR – A Flooding Timeline that Keeps on Growing



*Debbie Z. Harwell, editor.*

In the aftermath of local storms, many Houstonians claim the frequency of flooding has increased, raising the question: how accurate are those statements? The city's first flood occurred in April 1837, just eight months after Houston was founded at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous. Six months later another flood found Main Street under

four feet of water. But Houstonians persisted – and so did the flooding. In Houston's first 100 years, it experienced thirty-six floods; in the next eighty-three years, it has seen an additional 146, or four times as many floods as in the first century. One might think the tropical systems that come ashore are to blame for this phenomenon, but they accounted for only 15 percent (27) of these events. The other 85 percent (155) were caused by rain that fell in large quantities in a short period of time or lingered for multiple days, including twenty-two winter storms.

Except for the 1900 Storm, which hit Galveston but also caused fatalities and flooding on the mainland, Houston's worst early floods occurred in 1929 and 1935, causing multiple deaths and taking out homes, businesses, bridges, and the main water plant. With two back-to-back floods of this magnitude it was time to act. During the New Deal era, the federal government put the Army Corps of Engineers in the flood control business, and Houston received funding for the Barker and Addicks Reservoirs, which were completed in 1946 and 1948 respectively. Although the original plan proposed additional drainage channels north and south of Buffalo Bayou that were never built, the reservoirs brought some flooding relief along Buffalo Bayou.

Somewhat notoriously, Houstonians resisted control over development and voted down zoning four times between 1927 and 1962, which some argue exacerbated flooding. Developers also fought against the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), passed in 1968, because it required them to modify their practices and disclose to buyers if a property was in the 100-year floodplain. Nevertheless, county residents, weary of flood losses, supported NFIP participation four to one.

As Houston grew, so did its flooding problem across all twenty-two Harris County watersheds. The Texas Medical Center and areas along Brays Bayou flooded in 1976 after thirteen inches of rain. By 1983, floods regularly left thousands of homes inundated. In 1994, ninety subdivisions, including 3,400 homes, flooded around Houston. Many Kingwood residents considered this flood their benchmark,

while residents of other neighborhoods looked at Tropical Storm Allison, which brought thirty-eight inches of rain in 2001, to calculate their flood risk. Thus, many across the region who thought they were safe had no flood insurance when Harvey hit.

Today some people point fingers at flood victims, saying their problems are their own fault because they built or bought a house in the floodplain. In reality, their homes are located in areas that did not have a flooding problem years earlier; rather, development around them or upstream spawned the flooding. This has been documented in Meyerland with three floods in the last five years, and the recent floods in Kingwood's Elm Grove make a similar case. The latter had never flooded, but it flooded twice in four months in 2019. Development on Elm Grove's northern border, just across the Montgomery County line, is believed to have created the flooding, and, now, Harris County is working to acquire that land for a detention facility. Sadly, it is too late for residents who lacked flood insurance because they believed they were safe after escaping Harvey.

The list of area floods demonstrates that Houston has experienced more frequent flooding of an increasing severity, overburdening our infrastructure. Everyone thought Tropical Storm Allison was "off the charts" until Harvey hit. Although not as bad as Harvey, 2019's Tropical Storm Imelda became the nation's seventh-wettest rain event in just two days. Major floods in four of the last six years demonstrate that the old ways of addressing flooding a little at a time, or doing nothing at all, are inadequate.

In the aftermath of Harvey, the University of Houston's Center for Public History (CPH) developed the oral history project, Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey, to explore Houstonians' experiences. Over three years, CPH faculty trained their students in conducting oral histories, editing video, creating webpages, and writing history. Students and faculty gathered stories from over ninety Harvey survivors, responders, and volunteers, which will eventually be available to the public through Special Collections at the University of Houston Library. Students created a website with an interview map and short videos of their interviews, and they produced the content for this magazine. CPH director Monica Perales, and my colleagues Julie Cohn, Mark Goldberg, Wes Jackson, Todd Romero, and Sherridan Schwartz also provided invaluable assistance in seeing this project through from concept to fruition.

Hurricane Harvey was a massive event, and many more stories remain to be told. We hope that you find these articles and neighborhood narratives informative and inspiring, and that you will visit our website at [www.uh.edu/class/documenting-hurricane-harvey/](http://www.uh.edu/class/documenting-hurricane-harvey/) to meet these gracious participants who symbolize resilience.