



Houston History covers for the past twenty years illustrate its diverse subject matters.

Our goal ... is to make our region more aware of its history and more respectful of its past; we hope to contribute to the development of a stronger historical consciousness in Houston.¹

— Joe Pratt, on establishing the Houston History magazine

Celebrating Twenty Years Discovering the Past at Houston History Magazine

By Debbie Z. Harwell

In 1999 one door closed on Houston history and a new one opened thanks to the vision of Joe Pratt, then the University of Houston's (UH) Cullen and National Endowment for the Humanities Chair in History and Business, and Marty Melosi, director of the Institute for Public History, now the Center for Public History (CPH). When the Houston Public Library ceased publication of its academic journal after twenty years, Pratt reimagined it as a popular magazine that could be combined with an oral history project and an archive to gather, store, and disseminate the information under one roof, known as the Houston History Project.

First called *The Houston Review of History and Culture*, now *Houston History*, the magazine debuted in fall 2003. It was the only publication devoted exclusively to educating and entertaining readers while exploring aspects of the region's past. Pratt contended, "Much of the detail we know about the evolution of Houston first came to light in these articles." By presenting rigorously researched material in a "lively, illustrated style," he believed the magazine could reach beyond historians to attract a public audience. Melosi suggested Pratt look at *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, which had a similar format to what he envisioned.²



Joe Pratt and Marty Melosi taught and led public history initiatives at UH for over thirty years, earning a local and global reputation for the Center for Public History.

All photos courtesy of *Houston History*, unless otherwise noted.

CPH, established by Melosi in 1984, offered the magazine critical administrative support and a base of operations. In reflecting on the magazine's importance to CPH's endeavors, Melosi noted, "I've always been a great believer and advocate in the maintenance of the magazine. Without it, we'd be something different. We'd be something less."³ A generous grant from Pratt's friend, civic leader Ben Love, helped get the magazine started, while Pratt's endowed chair provided longer-term support. Pratt served as editor/editor-in-chief while community historians contributed articles, public history students assisted with writing and editing, and CPH staffer Christine Womack acted as business manager.⁴ The UH printing department handled design and production.

A native of Port Neches, Texas, Pratt grew up in the region and graduated from Rice University. He earned a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins and taught at UC Berkley, Harvard, and Texas A&M before coming to UH in 1986, where he found his calling. A refinery worker's son who worked in a refinery himself on school breaks, he is passionate about the area's history and telling stories of people left out of traditional historical narratives. This made him a perfect fit to lead a publication exploring under told stories about Houston "broadly defined." Pratt observed, "[Houston] is a city of opportunity. Of everything else, that's what defines us from other cities. ... It's particularly an opportunity for working people, an opportunity to make something for your kids." He wanted to inspire others to care about the past, saying, "I'm a committed teacher of history and this is an effort to teach to a broader classroom."⁵ Pratt quickly developed a reputation as someone who loved Houston, history, and conversation.

Evolution

Those early issues of *The Houston Review of History and Culture* looked like a magazine but still read like a journal, with many articles as long as book chapters. Printed in black ink with a single-color cover, the magazine documented important and overlooked elements of Houston history: notable women, civic leadership, the Texas Medical Center (TMC), World War II veterans, migration and immigration, and Houston's fraught relationship with historic preservation.



Mayor Annise Parker declared December 11, 2012, Houston History Day, recognizing the magazine's tenth year "present[ing] original research ... and feature articles of people and communities who might otherwise be neglected from the historical record." Left to right: Council Member Ed Gonzalez, UHAA president Mike Pede, Mayor Parker, and magazine and CPH staff members Debbie Harwell, Aimee Bachari, Wyndham Bailey, Anne Lynd, and Natalie Garza.

Photo by Jeff Sutton courtesy of UH Alumni Association.

Members of Houston's historical community served on the advisory board, including David Bush, Audrey Crawford, Barbara Eaves, Steven Fenberg, Cliff Gillock, Will Howard, Harold Hyman, William Kellar, Louis Marchiafava, Marty Melosi, Mary Shiflett, Elizabeth White, and Cary Wintz. Crawford and Eaves served as guest editors for the "Women" and "San Jacinto" issues, respectively. Kellar, executive director of the UH Scholars' Community and visiting assistant professor in History, was guest editor for the TMC issue before volunteering to assist Pratt as editor.⁷ Another board member, Betty Trapp Chapman, remains a stalwart friend and one of the magazine's most prolific authors.

The magazine's evolution to its present form began when it shifted to full color and incorporated more images for the fall 2006 issue, "The Arts in Houston." Color enabled people to fully appreciate the images and enhanced the reading experience.

In 2007 the name changed to *Houston History*, shedding the journal's final vestige. The magazine continued its thematic approach but incorporated "department" articles on preservation, museums, culture, communities, and, later, archival collections. The latter is done with UH Libraries Special Collections. At subscribers' requests, the articles' length shrank, making them easier to read in one sitting. In 2010 the magazine launched its website to highlight the current issues and make back issues freely available as a community service.

A Training Ground

As part of CPH, *Houston History* has always served as a training ground for students who learn to conduct academic research combined with public history methods to write in a style with broad appeal. Kellar recalled Pratt "constantly found energetic, talented students to work on the magazine

staff. Early on it was Jenna Berger [Leventhal] and Leigh Cutler [Tucker] who brought creativity and energy to the editorial team ... Later, Kimberly Youngblood, Katy Oliveira, and Diana Sanders worked long and hard to ensure the high quality of the articles and that the magazine was published on time."⁷ These students set a high standard, earning the respect of community members and libraries that added the magazine to their offerings.

History Ph.D. student Debbie Harwell joined the staff as managing editor in 2009, working under Pratt's tutelage to manage the daily operations just as Pratt became interim dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS).⁸ Operating on a lean budget, Harwell and associate editor Aimee Bachari began hiring undergraduates through the government's College Work Study (CWS) program and recruited volunteers to meet their staffing needs.

Relying on students to produce *Houston History* became a cornerstone of UH public history pedagogy. Graduate and undergraduate students receive real-world experience researching, conducting oral histories, writing, editing, selecting images, preparing content for publication, proof-reading, creating webpages, making design recommendations, and representing *Houston History* at public events. Equally important, they gain experience working on a team that is productive and fun while creating published magazines to include on résumés.



A student in Harwell's first *Houston History* class, Aaron Goffney, who joined the magazine staff, based this 2013 article on an oral history he conducted with activist Bobbie Lee. Lee's thoughts about the importance of keeping Black history alive inspired Goffney, and he now teaches history at Tarrant County College.

When Harwell completed her doctorate in 2012 and began teaching *Houston History* in the UH History Department and Honors College, the magazine emerged as a key training ground for undergraduates. She requires students to write an article for the magazine and conduct an oral history or produce a short film on their topic, creating a pipeline for magazine articles while teaching students valuable skills. Harwell has since developed other classes that also feed into the magazine.

Challenges

Funding always presented the greatest challenge to the *Houston History* Project, especially the magazine.

Nevertheless, Melosi contended that despite the time and money it took to produce an issue, the cost-benefit analysis proved fruitful: “[M]y conviction was that the magazine was always a stalking horse for the center that is our identity. How people got to know us was going to develop first through the magazine and then through other things.”⁹

While Pratt provided the bulk of the funds, the Houston History Project also received early funding from the Brown Foundation, the Joe B. Foster Family Foundation, the Albert & Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation, Houston Endowment, Ben Love, the Summerlee Foundation, Tenneco through the Kenneth W. Reese Library Fund, the West Endowment, and individual donors.

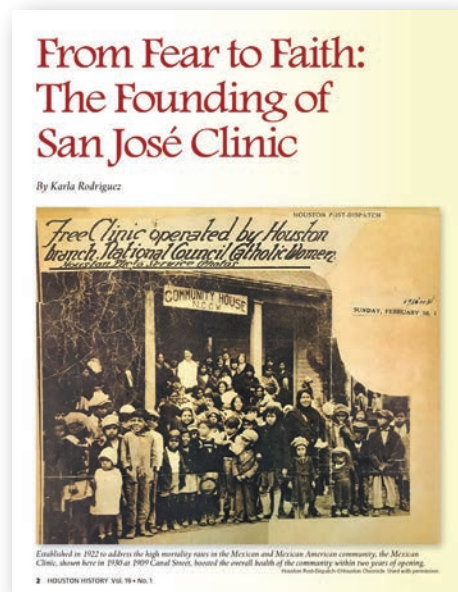
In 2014, CPH received a generous gift from business leader and 1949 UH graduate Welcome Wilson, Sr., under which the Houston-related projects became the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative. In announcing the gift, Wilson said, “Tracking the history of Houston has been a passion of mine since I came here for college 68 years ago [now 77 years]. I am very honored that this important UH endeavor will bear my name.” Melosi called it “the most important financial gift that the center has yet received by an individual synonymous with the history and heritage of the University of Houston and our community at large.”¹⁰

Although recognized as a valuable training platform and an engaging publication, the magazine lost the funding from Pratt’s chair when he retired. Thus, CPH sought new partnerships to keep the magazine in print. CLASS, under Deans Antonio Tillis and Dan O’Connor, invested in student research and training and the magazine’s community outreach. The Summerlee Foundation provided grants for students as well as production costs for specific issues, such as the one on Hurricane Harvey (2020). *Houston History* collaborated with community partners like Houston Fire Department Emergency Medical Services (2016), Offshore



Houston History held its first Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative launch in 2014 at the Buffalo Soldiers National Museum for the issue, “Military Might.” Shown left to right are Joe Pratt, museum founder Captain Paul Matthews, and donor Welcome Wilson, Sr.

Students in the Oral History Methods and Public History Writing classes conducted thirty oral histories and wrote articles for a comprehensive history of the San José Clinic, for its centennial. Houston History followed this prototype for histories of Houston EMS, Hurricane Harvey, and the University of Houston.

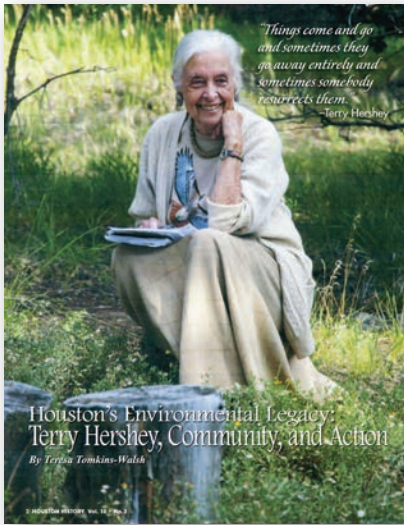


Technology Conference (2018), and San José Clinic (2021) to produce magazines about their organizational histories. Additionally, UH Office of the Provost programs like Cougar Initiative to Engage (CITE) and Research for Aspiring Cougars in the Humanities (REACH) support student co-curricular activities on specific projects.

From 2020 to 2023 the Center for Public History took the lead on the 100 Years of Stories: Documenting a Century at the University of Houston project, funded by a grant from Carey Shuart and done in partnership with Houston Public Media (HPM) and UH’s MD Anderson Library. Then CPH director Monica Perales observed that the collaboration “really raised our profile.” Speaking about the hallmarks of public history, she added, “True collaboration means working together, sometimes compromising, sometimes pivoting, learning how different groups work and respecting that, [and] it’s been a success.”¹¹

Financials involve more than generating income; they often include cutting expenses, usually payroll. The oral history director’s position, held by graduate students Ernesto Valdes and then Natalie Garza, was eliminated in 2014. They collected oral histories that provided the basis of many magazine articles; most noted are Valdes’s interviews on Houston’s response to Hurricane Katrina and Garza’s work documenting the Mexican American community. Garza said conducting interviews made her realize “how much information is available from the people that’s not necessarily in the archives.”¹² Now, CWS students prepare oral histories for the archives, albeit sporadically.

Lack of funding also led to elimination of the Houston History archivist position in Special Collections held by environmental historian and certified archivist Teresa Tomkins-Walsh for seventeen years. Beginning in 2005, she processed oral histories and collections focused on energy, environment, and diversity that researchers used in several magazine articles. She recalled, the initial processing was a massive undertaking in the days before digitization, with 500



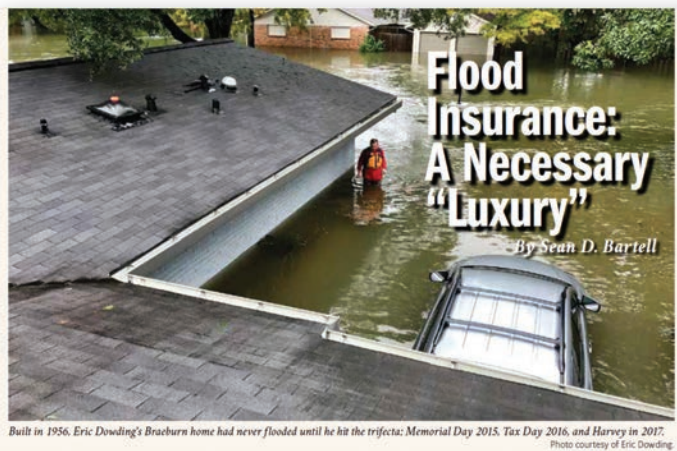
Environmental historian and archivist Teresa “Terry” Tomkins-Walsh wrote this article about Terry Hershey who became a leader in Houston’s environmental community when she led a movement to protect Buffalo Bayou. Tomkins-Walsh worked closely with Hershey for many years to accession and process her papers.

interviews coming in the first batch, some with six cassette tapes.¹³ Other archivists now oversee these collections.

Today, the magazine’s graduate student position is filled only when funds become available through grants for that purpose. Thus, *Houston History* still relies heavily on undergraduate CWS students and volunteers to provide the labor required to produce the magazine and classes to produce the content.

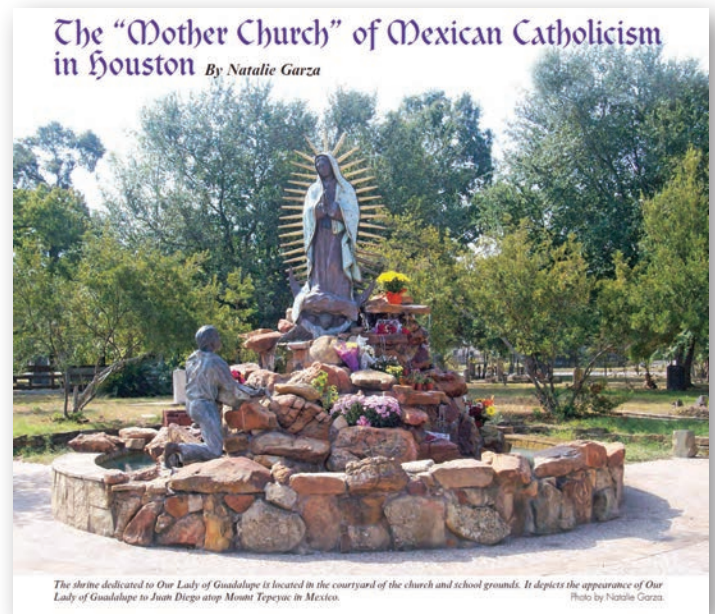
Opportunities

Although Pratt retired in 2016 and Melosi retired two years later, the spirit of what they initiated remains a guiding light for CPH and the collaborative. In following Melosi as CPH director, Monica Perales sought to build on their success “because they did so much to create the foundation for the center, particularly Joe Pratt with the Houston history piece ... doing public history for and with the community about the community, and Marty Melosi with his interest in the research.”¹⁴



Students conducted over ninety oral histories and wrote articles for a full magazine devoted to the Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey project, which offered a unique experiential learning opportunity. Stories came from responders, volunteers, and storm survivors like the magazine’s designer Eric Dowding, whose home flooded three times from 2015 to 2017.

Perales also considered “how to prioritize research that is useful to the wider world, so that it’s not just academics who are looking at each other’s work.” It requires asking, “What are [the community’s] needs in telling and capturing their histories, and how can we help them do that?” For Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey, a three-year project that collected over ninety interviews and produced a magazine, Perales observed, CPH fulfilled the historian’s responsibility to ensure society remembers events, to help people recall their experience and see the value of their memories, and possibly impact future policy.¹⁵ Although CPH has succeeded in getting people interested in the center’s work, a stable funding source that includes paid student internships would allow more students to take part and enable CPH to better serve the community.



While oral history director for the collaborative, Natalie Garza also wrote several articles for the magazine and served as guest editor for the 2011 issue, “Houston: Nuestra Historia,” in which her article on Our Lady of Guadalupe Church appeared.

Program director, Wes Jackson, who joined the center in 2015, assists in promoting the work being done at CPH and the collaborative. He plays a key role in enhancing the center’s profile, on and off campus, through social media strategies and supporting Harwell with magazine events, subscriptions, and staffing. With great vision for the future, Jackson also takes the lead in working with UH Development on fundraising and processing grants.

Reaching a Milestone

“As we approach the twentieth anniversary of Joe Pratt’s bold move to bring the *Houston Review* to UH,” Kellar reflected, “it is important to note how his vision for a ‘new’ look publication proved to be so successful.”¹⁶ First, the magazine, through CPH, has promoted student success by offering students opportunities to hone their skills as public historians and publish their work. Through the fall 2023



For the 2015 issue “Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures,” *Houston History* collaborated with *The Heritage Society* on a museum exhibit that featured artifacts representing the cultures discussed in the articles. The magazine staff strives to choose locations that add to the launch experience.

issue, the magazine has published 50 magazines with 463 total articles – 200 of those written by students, including 128 written by undergraduates in the last ten years.

Few universities have a resource like the magazine to offer their students. After completing her Ph.D., Garza joined Houston Community College as a professor. She explained the collaborative’s work is critical because “Houston [history] is not as studied . . . so it is important to continue to document it and bring those stories to life. It’s important for the community, the people who read the magazine; it means a lot to them. . . . There’s a service in doing that. It’s important to the university, and it’s definitely important to the students who work [there].”¹⁷

Garza pointed out, “We’re training historians, and we’re training people to go out in the workplace. Even if you just write an article for the magazine, that is marketability.” Using herself as an example, Garza credits her work as guest editor for the “Houston: Nuestra Historia” issue (2011) and her numerous articles with helping people discover her scholarship, leading to speaking engagements and the City of Houston choosing her to write historical panels now installed at Guadalupe Plaza Park.¹⁸

A second goal of *Houston History* is to broadly share its content with the public. Since 2011, the magazine website has provided free downloads of its back issues and most of the Houston Public Library’s journal articles. Additionally, the magazine sends 200 subscriptions to Houston area schools. Whether online or in print, the magazine provides a valuable resource to students, teachers, and anyone who is curious about Houston – especially since no overarching history of Houston has been published since 1981. Subscribers eagerly await new issues, and Kellar observed, “In this way, Houston’s past is also a vibrant part of Houston’s present and a valuable resource.”¹⁹

For each new magazine, *Houston History* and the CPH Lecture Series host a launch event to highlight that issue at a related venue, a trend started by the magazine’s first graduate

students. In 2018, panel discussions were added to include the history makers and experts in the field. With audiences ranging from sixty to two hundred people, attendees enjoy these experiences and the opportunity to converse with panelists. Thus, *Houston History* brings information out of the academy and to the public, the definition of public history.

Beyond its content, *Houston History* can trace its success to the amazing designers and printers at UH Copy and Print Services, directed by Nalan Giannukos, who have produced the magazine since its inception (except 2007-2008). They continue to improve its professional layout and make it look sensational. Designers Eric Dowding and Marsha Van Horn have given *Houston History* its artistic flair, and the printing staff led by Sami Snelling make it flawless, aligning colors, matching photos across a fold, and binding and trimming it with perfection. The whole team devotes much time and care to the magazine and working with them is a joy.

Today, our goal at CPH and *Houston History* is to carry our founding traditions forward while changing with the times. We do this by training students for careers in the public humanities, by documenting our history in public-facing projects like the magazine, and by presenting public programming. The magazine’s content frequently focuses on people who do not appear in mainstream historical narratives but whose stories are critical to understanding the region’s past and present. *Houston History* remains the only publication dedicated to documenting Houston in this way and is proud to celebrate twenty years preserving Houston’s past with this, its fiftieth issue. 🇺🇸



Graduate students Jenna Berger Leventhal and Leigh Cutler Tucker played a critical role in getting early magazines ready for publication and writing articles, including one on war memorials. They also initiated the tradition of launch events for new issues, the first one held at the Holocaust Museum Houston in 2005.

Photo courtesy of Holocaust Museum Houston.

Debbie Z. Harwell, Ph.D., is the editor of *Houston History* and an instructional assistant professor in History and Honors at UH. Since 2009, she has worked on 38 *Houston History* issues, edited 337 articles, and written or cowritten 21 articles.