

Charles H. Milby: The Man and the School That Shaped Harrisburg

By Braden Dodson and Winnie Wong



Charles H. Milby Senior High School as seen from Broadway in 1926. This portion of the building will turn 100 in 2026.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, Milby High School yearbook, 1926.

Resourcefulness, persistence, and kindness towards his fellow citizens remain bright spots in Charles H. Milby's legacy. For generations, the Milby family played a vital role in supporting the Texas community. Charles's father, William P. Milby, moved to East Texas from Delaware in 1842 and served in the Republic of Texas Legislature. Born on August 29, 1852, in Indianola, Texas, Charles Henry Milby was the youngest of William and his wife Mary's seven children. After finishing his public education, the young Milby arrived in Houston in 1872. The following year, he relocated to Harrisburg, where he managed a small market and country store, the first in a long line of successful enterprises.¹

In 1879, Milby and his friend, Andrew Dow, formed the firm Milby and Dow, purchasing coal holdings in Oklahoma. The same year, he married Maggie Grant Tod, the daughter of Texas Navy commodore John Grant Tod. The newlyweds moved into a home built by the commodore at 614 Broadway and Elm, which became known as the Milby House. They had two daughters and one son.²

Milby and Dow were true-blue entrepreneurs, dabbling in coal, real estate, banking, factories, brickyards, and other industries. Milby also owned the Milby Hotel Company, which included the Milby Hotel. When the Southern Pacific shops suddenly moved from Harrisburg to Houston, Milby curbed panic by providing residents steady employment in his brickyards. Milby served as a Harris County commissioner and committee member promoting construction of the Harris County Courthouse.³ Throughout his life, he displayed a noble and consistent desire to improve his community by bettering Harris County's religious, political, economic, and educational facilities.

As chairman of the Harris County Citizen's Committee, Milby and other impassioned citizens, particularly U.S. representatives Thomas Ball and Joseph C. Hutcheson, spearheaded the initiative to develop the Houston Ship Channel as a deep-water port, situated in the Harrisburg area. Milby supported trips to Washington to convince the federal government to agree to the committee's plans and secure the rights-of-way. The channel became a driver of the region's economic development, which benefited the city and Milby, who owned several surrounding industrial properties.⁴

On July 19, 1925, Milby passed away while on vacation in Colorado Springs. His widow, Maggie, a devoted church member, continued to teach Sunday School at Milby Memorial Methodist Church and lived at the Milby House until she, too, died in 1941.⁵

A year after Charles Milby's passing, controversy swirled around what to name Harrisburg's new high school, until someone suggested Milby's name. The school board voted

unanimously to name the school for Charles H. Milby, beloved by residents across the county. Replacing the former Harrisburg High School (1911-1926), Charles H. Milby High School opened in March



Charles H. Milby.

Photo courtesy of the Charles H. Milby Alumni Association.



Built in 1885, the Milby House stood faithfully on Broadway Boulevard until it was demolished in 1959. The property overlooked Buffalo Bayou, where one could observe the development of the Houston Ship Channel from the porch.

Photo courtesy of the Houston History Research Center, MSSo248-2124.

1926 and became part of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 1927, ushering in a new era of opportunity for Houston's East End.⁶

Milby Senior High School welcomed 1,225 students and thirteen faculty members into its halls upon opening. The beautiful campus contained eleven classrooms, laboratories for science and home economics, an auditorium, cafeteria, library, and offices for faculty and staff. With growth continuing and increasing demand for quality education, voters approved a bond to build new schools and renovate existing ones. Allotting just over \$113,000 (\$2.5 million in 2024), the board revitalized Milby by adding a new building with eight classrooms, a multi-purpose room, and a swimming pool. By 1936, Milby had over 1,600 students with twenty-four faculty members⁷

Milby gained notoriety for its curriculum, partnering with nearby industry, and for its student engagement efforts. Extracurriculars included a beloved football team complemented by the Milby COED Cadettes drill team, and leadership-based organizations such as the French Club, Youth for Christ, and student government. These groups provided space for friendship, service, and community building for students and alumni.⁸

Demographically, Milby has been a product of Harrisburg and the Greater East End since the beginning. In the 2021-2022 school year, Milby hosted just over 2,000 students, with people of Hispanic descent making up almost 95 percent of the student body.⁹ Originally, however, the neighborhoods surrounding Milby were predominantly Anglo. As Houston's demographics began to change in the 1940s so did Milby's,

The new Milby High School building includes multiple large and small gathering places for students to meet and study. The additions are state-of-the-art with homage to the school and community's history, including the timeline shown here.

Photo courtesy of Slyworks Photography.

and more Hispanics, who were considered White, enrolled. Following HISD policy, the institution did not begin admitting Black students until the mid-1960s.

Moving into the twenty-first century, Milby needed a makeover. After HISD voters passed a \$1.69 billion bond in 2012, Milby received an \$81.9 million renovation and rebuild designed to connect the past, present, and future. The investment centered around the Petroleum Engineering Magnet Program and creation of new Career and Technology Education (CTE) programs that place students in learn-where-you-work environments such as cosmetology, food service, HVAC repair, and printing. To maintain extracurricular excellence, improvements were made to the auditorium, gymnasium, and theatre black box.¹⁰

Kirksey Architecture, the firm tasked with rebuilding the school while preserving original features, did not take the historical and cultural significance of Milby lightly. The stunning front façade was maintained, along with repurposing the decades-old gym floors as social gathering steps in the new main dining area and using the floor logo as an art piece in the gymnasium foyer. Finding the meeting point of the Roaring Twenties and twenty-first century modernism, HISD and Kirksey ensured natural light flows freely through the hallowed halls and classrooms to enhance collaboration, community, and the wellbeing of students and faculty.

Just as Charles H. Milby left behind a strong legacy of giving back to Harris County and Harrisburg, Milby High School maintains the core of this tradition, striving to excel in both academics and compassion. Today, Milby is a Texas Education Agency recognized high school, with programs that offer career certification, and STEM magnet, college preparatory, advanced placement, and dual credit courses, proving itself as one of Houston's premier high schools. **HH**

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