

Why Houston,

Below: Harrisburg's depot station served as an important hub for early railway transportation in Texas.

Photo courtesy of Ken E. Stavinoha.

Mine it was,
as the elder sister,
the right, since founding,
to be what she is.

Not Harrisburg

It was I who bore this state's first railway.
It was I who fought to secure our right to be.

It was I, not Her.

So why was I the one,
To be forgotten,
To cease to be,
To be rendered a dim stud on *Her* crown.

Why Houston, and not me,
Harrisburg.

By Ariel Peña

Why indeed? No one at the time of founding would guess that the runner-up town of Houston would supersede the notable town of Harrisburg. However, such was the fate of Harrisburg; a promising town with enormous potential became just another acquisition of the younger, more accomplished neighboring city of Houston. Harrisburg once stood poised for greatness with its strategic positioning that complemented trade and commerce, its role as a nexus for burgeoning industries, and its pivotal part in early Texan history. Nevertheless, Houston ultimately emerged as the Lone Star State's prominent metropolis.



This diorama of the John R. Harris home, created by Edward Wilkinson and staff in 1935 as a Public Works Administration (PWA) project for the Texas centennial, can be found at The San Jacinto Museum of History.

Photo courtesy of Wally Gobetz, Flickr.



Founding

Anglo Americans who sought opportunities to build their wealth and legacies founded both towns early in the settlement of the land that later became known as Texas. Moses Austin negotiated a deal with the new Spanish government to become the first Anglo American empresario in the territory of Texas. However in 1821, he died of pneumonia in Missouri, and, on his deathbed, he asked his son to fulfill his vision in Texas. Stephen Fuller Austin finalized the deal with the newly established Mexican government.¹

On August 16, 1824, the Mexican government granted John Richardson Harris land, adding him to the original Old Three Hundred of Texas, which were actually 297 grantees of 307 parcels of land in the territory of Mexican Texas. Upon this land, situated along the meandering Buffalo Bayou, Harris established the Town of Harrisburg in 1826, christened after his family and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.²

With this act, Harris imbued his fledgling community with a sense of legacy. Harrisburg emerged as a beacon of promise on the Texas frontier, and Harris became emblematic of the potential opportunities by how he ran his burgeoning metropolis. He wore many hats in his town: founder, businessperson, and even judge – holding court in his own home. However, favor soon left both him and the town that bore his name. Harris traveled to New Orleans aboard his ship, *Rights of Man*, to acquire materials to build the first sawmill in Texas. While there, a yellow fever outbreak hit the city and took the life of John Richardson Harris on August 21, 1829. Many of his affairs were left in a state of disorder, chief among them was the deed to Harrisburg.³

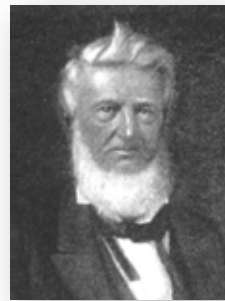
Harrisburg's Potential Cut Short, Once



Disarray and confusion describe the state of Harrisburg and Texas during this time. The Mexican government's abolishment of slavery and increased centralization did not sit well with the *Texians*, Anglo Americans living in Texas.

John Richardson Harris had the foresight to establish a mercantile community in Texas but did not live to see the vision fulfilled.

Photo in the public domain.



David G. Burnet (left) and Lorenzo de Zavala (right) served as the first interim president and vice president of the Republic of Texas, respectively. They helped select Harrisburg as the republic's first capital.



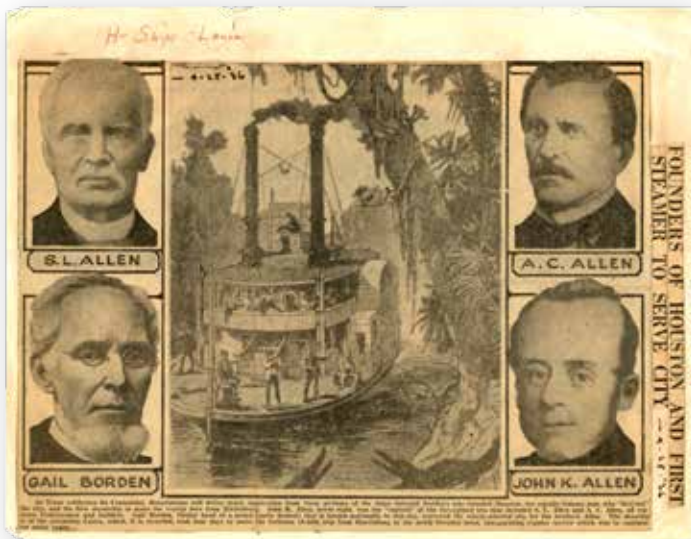
Photos courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Moreover, the *Tejanos*, Mexicans living in Texas, were fewer in number and influence; yet they held citizenship and rights that the American immigrants did not. Everything culminated in 1835 with the Texas Revolution.⁴

In the midst of the revolution, Harrisburg was strategically situated and served as the capital and seat for the provisional government of the new Republic of Texas. Thinking that General Sam Houston resided in Harrisburg with his army, Mexican leader Antonio López de Santa Ana burned Harrisburg to the ground on April 16, 1836. The Texas government had fled for safety just hours earlier. Soon after, the Texas Revolution ended on May 14, 1836, when Santa Ana signed the Treaties of Velasco, which assured Texas's victory and the full surrender and retreat of Mexican forces. Harrisburg's role in the struggle for independence was cemented alongside the birth of this new republic; however, Harrisburg did not see its title of capital returned to it, as a newer, unscarred town rose up alongside it.⁵

Houston Taking Her Place

A second choice – that was how the Allen brothers, John Kirby and Augustus Chapman, saw Houston. Earlier, the Allen brothers had sought to purchase land that included Harrisburg to conduct business in the new Republic of Texas. However, John Harris's death left the deed to the land in question, and being unable to purchase it, the Allens went with their second option. On August 26, 1836, they bought



Celebrating Houston's first centennial anniversary, the *Houston Post* featured the founders of the second-choice town, alongside the first of many ships to sail from Harrisburg to Houston through the bayou waters that later became the Houston Ship Channel.

Photo courtesy of the Houston History Research Center, Houston Public Library, hmrcvf-001-01.

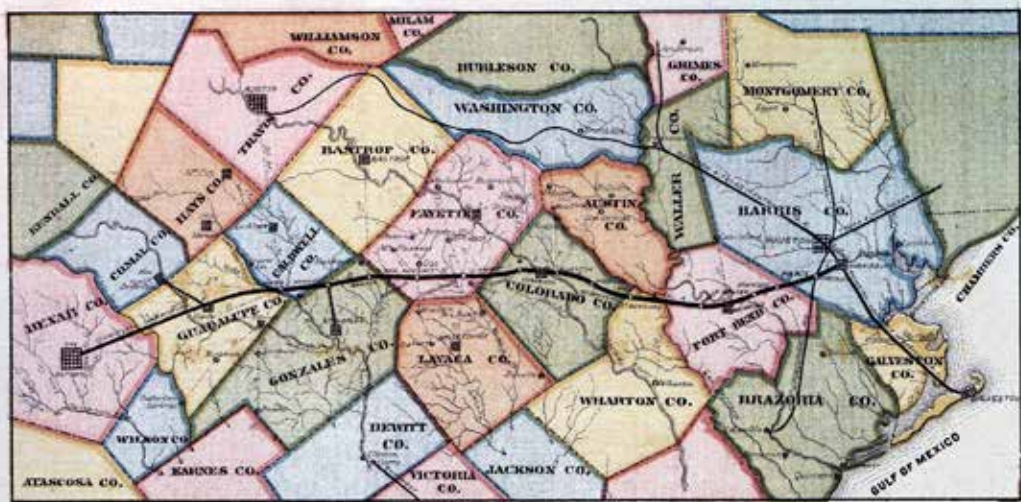
land farther up the bayou from Harrisburg and named it Houston, honoring one of the heroes of the revolution. Quickly, the brothers advertised the town as full of commercial potential and perfectly positioned on the coast. Houston, more inland than coastal, grew, nonetheless. Furthermore, the brothers successfully convinced the government leaders to name Houston the temporary capital of the republic, which enticed more people to settle there.⁶

Harrisburg's Potential Cut Short, Twice

While Houston's meteoric rise continued, Harrisburg had not fallen yet. Houston may have had many attractive facets, but it lacked a key piece of infrastructure, the lifeline on which nineteenth-century trade relied: rail. In 1847, Texan General Sidney Sherman purchased the land set aside for the failed Harrisburg and Brazos Railroad and established

Created in 1876, this map of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio railway pinpoints towns along the "Sun Set Route" and was distributed to encourage use of the train system. The G.H.&S.A. railroad was previously known as the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway and the Harrisburg Railroad.

Photo courtesy of The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries Special Collections and Wikimedia Commons.



Texas's first successful railroad, one of only two railroads west of the Mississippi River.⁷ With this, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos, and Colorado Railway was formed, with its primary station in Harrisburg and going by the name Harrisburg Railroad. Naturally, this brought business and notoriety to Harrisburg. With its potential revived once more, Harrisburg was rejuvenated with more commerce and people flocking to settle and establish themselves in this blooming town.

As the Civil War raged on, Harrisburg remained an important rail town, serving as a key station for the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railway. However, Houston, the major hub for all forms of transportation and communications in the region, was chosen as the main headquarters for Confederate General John B. Magruder. And like clockwork, Harrisburg's good fortunes fell further still. In 1870, a devastating fire swept through the town's railyards, reducing them to ashes and crippling the economy. Despite efforts to rebuild, Harrisburg struggled to regain its former glory. Meanwhile, Houston seized the opportunity, capitalizing on Harrisburg's misfortune. The railyard, once the beating heart of Harrisburg's commerce, relocated to Houston, where it was reconstructed and expanded.⁸

Willful Denouement of the Elder Sister

As Houston rose to become the darling city of trade for the state and the country, Harrisburg fell deeper into a decline. Leaders saw potential in Buffalo Bayou for shipping. They widened and dredged it, creating the Houston Ship Channel by the early twentieth century. This channel became vital for trade, connecting Houston to the Gulf of Mexico. With its inaugural ceremony in 1914, initiated by President Woodrow Willson, the channel established Houston as a major player in global commerce, handling a wide range of goods. Ironically, the new deep-water Port of Houston's Turning Basin sat in the Harrisburg area, near where John Richardson Harris began shipping goods a decade before Houston's founding.⁹

The expansion and dredging of the Houston Ship Channel further diminished Harrisburg's significance. Having a population of less than two thousand, and the dredging of the channel



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF TURNING BASIN

A 1908 promotional brochure selling the Port of Houston as a business destination highlights the Turning Basin in the Harrisburg area.

Photo courtesy of the George H. Fuermann, "Texas and Houston" Collection, Digital Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

attracting industry, many of the citizens left Harrisburg. In December of 1926, Harrisburg met its definitive end when it was annexed by the City of Houston, effectively extinguishing its independent identity. This decision, driven by local business interests seeking the advantages of association with Houston, was ratified through a democratic process, with petition signatures from Harrisburg landowners culminating in a decisive vote for annexation.¹⁰ The relocation of the railroad to Houston, coupled with a decline in population and relevance, left Harrisburg with little choice but to acquiesce to its fate.

The younger town, the second choice, the city of Houston, now sits atop the country as a beacon of progress and diversity – a city that is at the forefront of innovation and embraces the rich multiculturalism that makes up its population. Its sprawling suburbs, historic sites, and business centers all reflect this fact. From its inception, Houston had a diverse make up with Anglo Americans from a variety of European heritages, Hispanic Tejanos, Indigenous groups, and African American people all found in the city.¹¹

Fast forward to the present day, and Houston stands as a shining example of the American melting pot, where people from all walks of life come together to create a vibrant and inclusive community. Houston welcomes newcomers from all over

the world, from Asia and Latin America, Africa and beyond. Houstonians celebrate their shared humanity and embrace their differences in a city where more than a quarter of the population is foreign-born and where over 145 languages are spoken.¹² From the vibrant festivals and cultural events that fill the calendar to the thriving culinary scene that showcases flavors from around the world, this spirit of unity and collaboration is evident in every part of the city. The resilience and tenacity of Houstonians can be seen in the city's efforts to promote cultural diversity and mixing. For everyone who wants to build a better life for themselves and their families, the city continues to be a beacon of hope and opportunity. The American dream is alive and well in Houston thanks to the vibrant mix of cultures and neighborhoods that make this city unique.

The demographic landscape of Harrisburg has changed, indeed, throughout its nearly two hundred years of existence. In exploring its heritage, echoes of immigration patterns start to show in its current and past inhabitants, in its art and culture, and in its relationship with the rest of the city of Houston. A tight-knit community with strong neighborhood loyalty is found across the Greater East End of Houston, which includes Harrisburg; from the Third Ward to Magnolia Park, this characteristic prevails as integral in the region's identity. In its earliest records, Anglo American settlers, who laid the groundwork for the town's development, predominantly inhabited Harrisburg.¹³ However, nestled within this Anglo American majority lay a smaller population of Mexican Tejanos, whose presence added depth and diversity to the fabric of Harrisburg's society. As time marched forward, Harrisburg experienced its own waves of immigration and settlement, albeit on a smaller scale compared to its metropolitan neighbor.

Harrisburg's population continues to change with the ebb and flow of migration patterns and shifting economic landscapes, even though its demographics may not boast the same diversity as the city of Houston as a whole. Today, Harrisburg exemplifies the enduring spirit of its inhabitants, who have persevered through the tribulations of history

The City and The Neighborhood: Compared

Ethnicity Demographics	Houston 2000	Houston 2019	Harrisburg/Manchester 2000	Harrisburg/Manchester 2019
Year	2000	2019	2000	2019
Non-Hispanic White	31 %	24 %	5 %	2 %
Non-Hispanic Black	25 %	22 %	6 %	12 %
Hispanic	37 %	45 %	88 %	86 %
Non-Hispanic Asian	6 %	7 %	0 %	0 %
Non-Hispanic Other	1 %	2 %	0 %	0 %



The Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railroad purchased its second locomotive, the Texas, in 1856. Later, its bell served Harrisburg as a school and church bell before moving to Milby in 1931.

Photo by Rowena Verdin courtesy of Milby High School Library.

and accepted the challenges of change. In 2019, the majority of the neighborhood, 86 percent, claimed a Hispanic identity, with many tracing their families back generations in Harrisburg.¹⁴ Harrisburg’s residents cherish their heritage and traditions, passing them down from one generation to the next. In celebrating the diversity of Harrisburg, we are reminded of the beauty of cultural exchange and the richness of human experience. While the town may not boast the same cosmopolitan flair as its metropolitan neighbor, its residents embrace their differences and find strength in their shared history. In Harrisburg, the American dream lives

The original ship canal went to downtown Houston proper. This 1910 postcard highlights how active Houston’s port had become before dredging the channel and relocating it for deep-water access.

Photo courtesy of the George Fuermann “Texas and Houston” Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, Location 1970-001, box 3, item 311.



on, woven into the fabric of its neighborhoods and etched into the hearts of its people.

The tale of Harrisburg, Texas, is one of ambition, resilience, and the relentless march of progress. Once a promising frontier town with dreams of greatness, Harrisburg saw its fortunes rise and fall, succumbing to the ever-changing tides of history. Despite its meteoric rise as a strategic point in the Texas Revolution and its moment in the spotlight, Harrisburg ultimately faded, overshadowed by the ascendant metropolis of Houston. Yet, Harrisburg’s legacy lives on as a testament to the indomitable spirit of its residents and the enduring power of community.

As we reflect on Harrisburg’s journey, we are reminded of the countless lives touched and stories of this historic town. From its humble beginnings along the banks of the Buffalo Bayou to its annexation by Houston in 1926, Harrisburg’s story is one of triumph and tragedy, of hopes dashed and dreams realized. And as we look ahead to the bicentennial anniversary of Harrisburg’s founding in 2026, we honor the legacy of those who came before us and celebrate the rich tapestry of history that continues to shape our lives today. In the end, Harrisburg may have been overshadowed by its more illustrious neighbor, but its spirit lives on in the hearts of those who call it home. As we mark this milestone anniversary, let us remember the lessons of the past and embrace the challenges of the future with courage and determination. For in the story of Harrisburg, we find echoes of our own journey—a testament to the enduring resilience of the human spirit and the timeless pursuit of a brighter tomorrow. **HH**

Walter Ariel Peña earned his bachelor’s degree in 2024 at the University of Houston where he majored in history and philosophy. Having interned with the Houston Public Library, he hopes to become a research archivist.