

# When There Were Wards: A Series

## IN **THE NICKEL**, HOUSTON'S FIFTH WARD

By Patricia Pando

*And stay off Lyons Avenue street  
And don't go down on Jensen nowhere  
Because you're living on luck and a prayer.<sup>1</sup>*

Weldon “Juke Boy” Bonner, performing at Club 44 sometime in the late 1960s not far from that notorious intersection, had the facts straight (albeit incomplete) about Houston’s Fifth Ward neighborhood, sometimes known as “Pearl Harbor, the Times Square of the Bloody Fifth” for the high possibility that someone in the wrong place at the wrong time would meet with a sudden demise. Many musicians were willing to take that nighttime risk just for the chance to perform at Club 44 or at Club Matinee, premier gathering spots. Other great musicians—Illinois Jacquet, “Gatemouth” Brown, Arnett Cobb, Goree Carter, “Lightnin’” Hopkins (usually associated with the Third Ward), and “Ivory Joe” Hunter—joined “Juke Boy” in this lively jazz community.<sup>2</sup>

By day, from the 1920s through the 1950s, Lyons and

Jensen were busy commercial streets, home to everything from drugstores to lumberyards and repair garages. Predominately African American, blue-collar and middle-class neighborhoods offered stability and traditional values. In one such neighborhood, a recent graduate of Phillis Wheatley High School and Texas Southern University, where she had been a national-champion debater, looked forward to attending law school in Boston. Nearby, a teenage boy prepared to enter Wheatley where he would become a sports star before studying pharmacy at Texas Southern. Another Fifth Ward teen saved himself from slipping into a life of crime by taking up boxing; he was good—he won a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics. Barbara Jordan, Mickey Leland, and George Foreman always proudly recalled their Fifth roots.<sup>3</sup>

When Houston first established political wards, it designated only four; the Fifth Ward did not exist. Following the Civil War, the population of Houston soared with many of the new residents, particularly African Americans, moving beyond the established city to the north of Buffalo

*Bustling traffic at the busy intersection of Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive in 1956. Photo courtesy of Houston Chronicle Photo Library.*







Today, the crowds and the buildings are gone, and the Houston skyline looms over the empty field bordered by Lyons and Jensen.

Photo by Patricia Pando.

Bayou and east of White Oak Bayou. In 1865, the Reverend Toby Gregg established a church, the oldest institution in what would become the Fifth Ward. The active congregation at Mount Vernon United Methodist Church continues today. By 1866, the large and growing population of the area led the city fathers to realize that these Houstonians needed representation; they decreed the area “across” the two bayous to be the Fifth Ward. The new Houstonians elected an alderman, and the area attained a new nickname, one that persists today, “The Nickel.”<sup>4</sup>

The Fifth continued growing, growth accelerated by the expansion of the railroad industry in the city. Starting in the 1850s and continuing through the 1880s, Houston became the top rail center in the Southwest. Its support system of foundries and railroad shops, mainly in the Fifth Ward, flourished, providing jobs for the residents and attracting new jobseekers. In 1870, of the five Houston wards (the Sixth had not yet been created), only the Fifth had more African Americans than whites, and the majority was slim: 578 African Americans to 561 whites.<sup>5</sup>

The city granted The Nickel an alderman and accepted its tax dollars but gave little in return. Historian David McComb recounts how Houston was long considered “a huddle of houses arranged on unoccupied lines of black mud.” The Fifth’s streets ranked among the muddiest. City services persisted at such a low level that in 1875 the

residents, demanding paving and upgraded utilities, threatened to secede and set up the “City of North Houston.” In 1883, came another threat of secession; this time, the city appeased the residents with the construction of an iron drawbridge at the foot of San Jacinto Street.<sup>6</sup>

Early in the twentieth century, residents of The Nickel

and the country enjoyed some Fifth Ward fun. Famed temperance crusader Carrie Nation visited Houston and judged that the city badly needed the prohibition of alcohol. During her visit to make a speech and sell souvenir hatchets, she became outraged upon hearing a bar in The Nickel was named “Carrie Nation Saloon.” She got the owner to make a promise he didn’t keep—he would change the name. Nation returned to the Bayou City in 1905 only to learn that the Carrie Nation, now under new owners, still served drinks, literally under her name. She did not merely sell hatchets this time. She took herself straight into the bar and did almost a thousand dollars of damage. The owner promptly and thriftily changed his sign to the “Carnation.” The building still stands on the northeast corner of Wood and North San Jacinto.<sup>7</sup>

In 1927, as in 2005, disaster victims from Louisiana found early refuge and, later, permanent homes in Houston. The massive Great Flood of 1927 that submerged the Mississippi River Valley left many Creoles of French, Spanish, and African descent homeless and jobless. They headed out for



Hungry Fifth Ward residents and visitors alike often end up grabbing lunch at The Nickel Sandwich Grill near the intersection of Lyons Avenue and Lockwood. While The Nickel features barbeque, the house specialty, naturally, is “The Nickel Burger.”

Photo by Patricia Pando.





*An inferno of flames raced across The Nickel on February 12, 1912, when a lamp turned over during a fight in an abandoned saloon and rooming house. The wind spread the blaze over 40 blocks before it reached the Cleveland Compress where it destroyed 35,000 bales of cotton. Dawn's light made the loss clear: 166 boxcars, 9 oil tanks, 13 industrial plants, St. Patrick's Catholic School and Church, along with hundreds of homes.*

Photo from the the George Fuermann "Texas and Houston" Collection, courtesy of Special Collections, Digital Library, University of Houston.

Houston and the Fifth Ward where they claimed the area around Erastus and Collingsworth Streets so completely that it became and remains "French Town." These industrious folks, including carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers, and mechanics, quickly found jobs. Many went to work at the nearby Englewood Yard of the Southern Pacific Railroad, others in Ship Channel industries.

Hardworking as they were, the French Town folk had time for two favorite activities: church and music. Most Creoles were devoted Catholics. Attending St. Nicholas Church, the nearest black Catholic Church, meant a tedious journey across town; the Hispanic Our Lady of Guadalupe was walking distance, but that church had the practice, unacceptable to the proud Creoles, of seating them on the last rows and inviting them to confession and communion last. Quickly they formed their own church. After a frenzy of fundraisers including zydeco dances and gumbo, boudin, and praline sales, they broke ground for their new church when French Town was but a year old. With over 200 founding members, Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church officially became a parish on June 30, 1930. That fall the church opened a school. It charged tuition—ten cents a week. Our Mother of Mercy continues to serve French Town and the entire Fifth Ward.

It is no surprise that zydeco dances made good money for the church fundraisers, for the words "zydeco" and "creole" are practically synonymous, and, for many associated—strongly associated—with the Bayou City. This French music, amalgamated with country and western and blues, got a new twist in French Town. The rafters rang at the Continental Lounge and Zydeco Ballroom on

Collingsworth and the Silver Slipper over on Crane Street, as well as many parish halls, long before zydeco entered the American music mainstream in the 1980s.

French Town, while still a Fifth Ward presence, has lost part of its distinctiveness. The children and grandchildren of those early settlers married non-creoles, and many moved out of The Nickel as they prospered financially. The soft sound of Creole French has become infrequent, and the founding residents who made the journey away from their Louisiana homes have diminished to zero. Those early ones clung to their language. Omowale Luthuli, a community organizer in the 1980s, recalled how the French-speakers solved a problem for him. Once again, the Fifth Ward became a refuge as Haitians, fleeing trouble in their homeland, settled here. Those trying to help them, including Luthuli, spoke no French. The Haitians spoke no English. Help was, however, at hand. Creole-speaking seniors happily translated the Haitian French into American English.<sup>8</sup>

The Fifth Ward thrived. In 1925, over forty doors were open for business along Lyons Avenue. Fire Station Number 19 offered protection from 3315 Lyons. Several drugstores and grocery stores offered staples, and Rosetta Williams provided furnished rooms for travelers and the newly arrived. Late in the decade, Phillis Wheatley High School bragged that with a student body of more than 2,500 taught by sixty faculty members it was one of the largest black high schools in the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Community services in other areas came more slowly. In the early 1940s, Houston's African American population topped 100,000, but the city offered fewer than 200 hospital beds to serve them. Catholic Charities of Houston,





*Community volunteers and Menil staff joined community coordinator Mickey Leland (second from the right) in converting the abandoned De Luxe Theater into an art oasis in 1971.*  
 Photo courtesy of the Menil Archives, Menil Collection, Houston.

along with the Missionary Sisters of the Incarnate World Healthcare Society, sought to remedy this. On May 18, 1947, sixty-bed St. Elizabeth's Hospital opened its doors with a bi-racial staff. Today, the facility houses Riverside Hospital's Barbara Jordan Health Care Center. Shortly after the close of World War II, Kelly Courts, the city's second African American public housing project, opened its doors; Finnegan Park and Julia C. Hester House, a community center, also began to welcome Fifth Warders.<sup>10</sup>

One night in 1947, Texas blues guitar great "Gatemouth" Brown stood up in the Bronze Peacock Nightclub on Erastus Street and borrowed a guitar. He proceeded to give a knockout performance. "I made \$600 in tips in 15 minutes," he later recalled. Bronze Peacock owner Don Robey, realizing he had a good thing going, signed "Gatemouth" to a management contract. In 1949, Robey established Peacock Records specifically to record Brown. Peacock, located at 4104 Lyons, became a force in the world of the Fifth Ward and on the national music scene.<sup>11</sup>

During the 1950s, The Nickel came into its own. As the population zoomed, businesses opened to serve it. Historians Cary Wintz and Howard Beeth observed that Fifth Ward and Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive had eclipsed Fourth Ward's San Felipe Road (now West Dallas)

as the African American "downtown." By day, shoppers filled the streets visiting the Twentieth Century Gift Shop or Platt's Department Store, Number 1, having their pictures taken at Jiffy Studios and grabbing a bite to eat at Tommie Mae's Tea Room or the Blue Shoe Café. By night, sounds of music, fun, and laughter rang out as crowds caught a movie at the De Luxe or Roxy and thronged to Club Matinee and Club Paradise. The nearby and luxurious Crystal Hotel welcomed visiting musicians and other prominent African American visitors to Houston who were not welcome, not allowed, in the "white" hotels. The Nickel reveled in its heyday.<sup>12</sup>

Two forces came to play in the 1960s. The legislation, court rulings, and social changes that racial integration brought to the nation and to Houston had great overall benefits, but to the Fifth Ward, the news was not all good. As white-owned stores welcomed their new black customers both downtown and in the beckoning new shopping centers, Nickel retailers lost out. At the same time, new neighborhoods and integration of existing ones attracted many younger, more prosperous families. Meanwhile, freeways came. I-10 and U.S. Highway 59, in the words of historian Joe R. Feagin, "literally crucified the area by creating large freeways in a cross pattern through its heart." Not only



did families and businesses suffer displacement because of construction, the freeways separated residential areas from the business district, which was further harmed by the lack of an exit to Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive. Linda Brown, who grew up in the Fifth Ward, commented that the highway system caused a “disappointing loss of the economic community,” recalling that her mother protested when the exits were changed again in 1994.<sup>13</sup>

The decline was slow; businesses did not disappear overnight. Nevertheless, by the late 1960s, the Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive intersection was all but abandoned except for the still booming nightclub activity; that is when “Juke Boy” Bonner issued his warning about avoiding Lyons Avenue. Things, however, are never all bad. A 1979 article in *Texas Monthly* painted a grim picture of the “crowded and poor” Fifth Ward, but the author also commented that he had found “a community determined that life should win over death, hope over despair, pride over poverty.” He also noted that while poverty remained pervasive, it was not omnipresent. Indeed, in stable residential communities, well-fed and nurtured children went to Sunday school, attended school, proudly joined the high-stepping, well-known Wheatley band, and went to college. Churches of various denominations offered myriad activities, both religious and social.<sup>14</sup>



Located near the intersection of Lyons Avenue and Jensen Drive and adjacent to Crawford Elementary School, “The Fruits of the Fifth” mural welcomes visitors to the Ward and features 21 individuals either from *The Nickel* or strongly associated with it. Reginald Adams from the Museum of Cultural Arts Houston directed Phillis Wheatley High students in building the mural in 2006.

Photo by Patricia Pando.



In 1992, Ernest McMillan, founder of the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, brought young members to Evergreen Negro Cemetery to help clean and maintain it as a service project.

Photo courtesy of Fifth Ward Enrichment Program.

Many worked to remedy problems, or at least assuage them. The City of Houston might provide the area with poor streets and sewers, but beginning in 1967 it did offer HOPE (Human Organizational Political and Economic Development, Inc.). HOPE served in many ways: a newspaper, job training, tutoring. Working with HOPE, local art benefactors John and Dominique de Menil, with the help of Mickey Leland, organized an exhibition of both black and white contemporary artists in the abandoned De Luxe movie theater. When the show closed, the Menils and Fifth Ward leaders created the Black Arts Gallery of the Black Arts Center in the De Luxe.<sup>15</sup>

Teenage pregnancy plagued the Fifth Ward as it did so many cities and neighborhoods. Many social programs addressed the problem by working with girls. In the mid-1980s, community worker Ernest McMillan developed a new approach. He established the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program for boys, most from single-parent (usually female) homes. There the boys attended after-school programs staffed by African American men teaching life-skills and guiding behavior. FWEP has flourished and continues offering programs to boys from elementary school through high school.<sup>16</sup>

While FWEP focuses on individuals, Habitat for Humanity, organized in Houston and the Fifth Ward in 1987, sights in on families and on helping them to live in their own homes. The first Habitat houses in the Fifth went up in 1991 and 1992 on Rowley Street off Waco. Jimmy Carter chose *The Nickel* as the site of his first domestic projects to build 100 houses in a week. Habitat remains committed to the Fifth. New homes are planned in the foreseeable future; the organization has a new emphasis on renewal projects, helping families repair and renew their older houses.<sup>17</sup>

Habitat and FWEP are but two of many programs aimed at shining up *The Nickel*. Churches sponsor programs, such as the Fifth Ward Missionary Baptist Church Multi-Service Center, for their members and the community. Civil organizations, outreach programs from Houston churches not in the ward, community volunteers—the list grows. Like Barbara Jordan and Mickey Leland, other notables who grew up in the Fifth Ward—such as Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University; Beneva Williams, who as a teenager helped bring integration to Houston schools; musician Joe Sample; State Representative Harold Dutton; former Representative Al Edwards; County Commissioner El Franco Lee—are among the many who proudly claim to hail from *The Nickel*.<sup>18</sup> 🍷

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