

# Sixth Ward: Carving Out its Own Place

By Janet K. Wagner, RLA

The Sixth Ward began as the north portion of the Fourth Ward. The north and south portions of Fourth divided by an east flowing Buffalo Bayou. About three fourths of Fourth Ward fell south of the bayou. The remaining one fourth to the north resembled a slice of pie, pointing toward the town center and the Harris County Courthouse. Beginning with four wards for Houston government, the future Sixth Ward spent

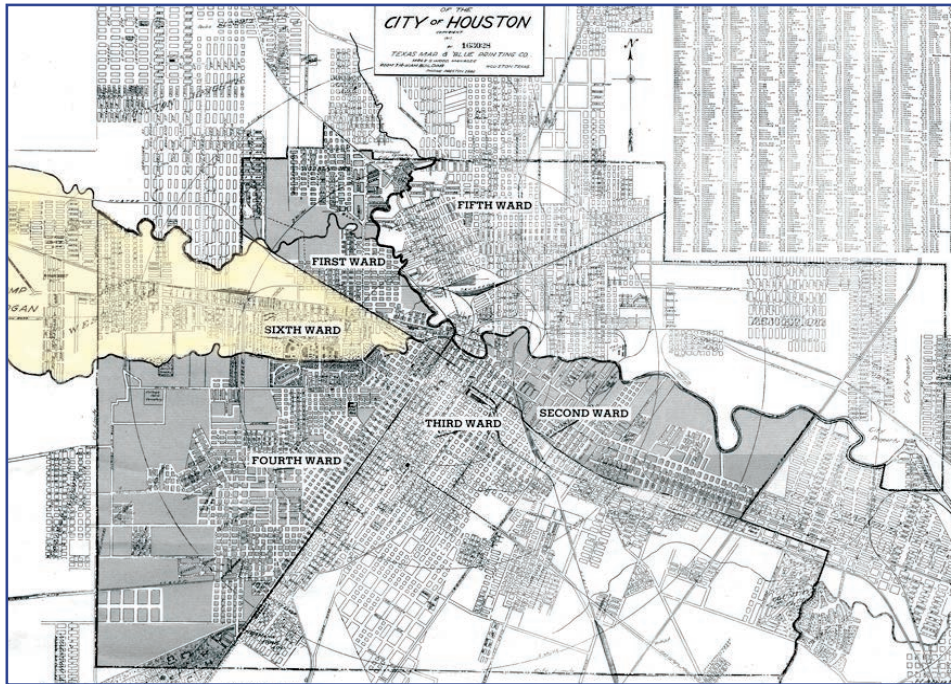
the first forty years as the north part of the Fourth Ward, becoming designated as the Sixth Ward in 1874.

Houston adopted the New York ward system in 1837, allowing ten wards to accommodate the future geographic expansion of the town. The ward system served to provide two elected officials from each ward to serve as aldermen to city government and represent the ward citizens' needs and desires on regulations for the common good.

The city organized on June 5, 1837, and held the first election on August 14. James S. Holman won out with twelve votes for mayor over Francis Lubbock with eleven. Holman took his oath of office on August 28, 1837. A new charter ensued in 1839 with a supplement in 1840 that placed the courthouse in the center of nine square miles of the town. The four wards provided two aldermen from each to serve in the city government. During the next sixty-five years, the city used only six of the ward system numbers before switching to a commission form of government in 1905, eliminating the ward system.<sup>1</sup>

Congress Street running northwest from Main became the division line between the First Ward on the north side and the Fourth to the south of the imaginary line as it crossed Buffalo Bayou ending at the western city limits. As Congress did not constitute a street line after crossing Buffalo Bayou, the line split town blocks and acreage. The local citizens living in the area knew exactly which ward affected their property.

Buffalo Bayou ran through the new town of Houston from west to east, meeting White Oak Bayou nearly in the center of the city at Main Street. A ferry became necessary to carry persons across Buffalo Bayou to the north blocks. Between 1837 and 1860, industry began to settle on the



City of Houston, 1920.

north side of the bayou with town proper on the south. Residential housing, initially built on the south side of the bayou, was scattered around the east, south, and west parts of the central city core within a few years.

Two main roads led from the city to the northwest. One, Spring Street, turned due north through the north side

of Fourth Ward, passing Beauchamp Springs, then crossing White Oak Bayou to continue to the Montgomery Road. The other road became a stage line to Washington on the Brazos, hence the local name, Washington Road. A toll bridge, established by Elam Stockbridge in 1838 at an old Ford or water crossing, served to carry citizens across Buffalo Bayou between the south and north sections of the Fourth Ward. The toll bridge became the entrance to the city from the west, the terminus of Washington Road.<sup>2</sup> As Buffalo and White Oak Bayous acted as water fences, the Stockbridge toll bridge became essential to travelers and industry serving the city and region. Using oxen for power, Stockbridge also operated the only gristmill close to the city, grinding wheat, barley, rye, and corn to produce flour and corn meal. Each time Stockbridge changed his grinding stone, he advertised the dates in the newspaper as customers had favorites among the various grinding stones.<sup>3</sup> Washington Road soon became lined with houses, small shops, grocers, boarding facilities, wagon yards, stables, and campers living in tents.

In late winter of 1846, over 2,500 Indians, including chiefs of the Comanche, Keachie, Waco, and Towanconoes, arrived in Houston crossing Buffalo Bayou on a new bridge north of the old Stockbridge Ford and Bridge.<sup>4</sup> The entire group came to visit at Terry's Trading House in late December. Following a day of trading, rabble rousing, and hard liquor, the local police chased all of the tribes across the bridge and out of the city. The activity has been reported as a common occurrence during the 1840s.

Whereas the bayou water fence assisted cattlemen to hold their beef herds between the major streams, the bayous also brought import and export business to the city. The

same water fence became an impediment and boundary for individual citizens living in the ward system. All cattle were free range in Harris County in the early years. Clear Creek, Galveston Bay, Buffalo Bayou, and the Brazos River served as water fences for a single cattle range south of Houston. North and west of the city, the San Jacinto River, Buffalo Bayou, Spring Creek, and the Brazos provided a barrier for cattle grazing.

Increased population of French, English, Germans, North Americans, a few Spanish, and many free Blacks began to settle in clusters around the town. Between 1836 and 1860 came the largest migration to Houston from overseas. Although Germans continued to travel through Houston during the 1840s and 1850s, many stayed, joining 6,000 Germans by 1847. The Fourth Ward north of

Buffalo Bayou was settled and occupied by German families through Reconstruction. Free Blacks resided in First Ward, north and west of Buffalo Bayou near Beauchamp Springs. Following the Civil War, emancipated Black families lived in Fifth Ward, Third Ward, and the southwestern section of Fourth Ward.

As the city progressed, two aldermen from each ward, plus the mayor, became the major public officials, along with lower officials, some appointed and some elected, such as the hide inspector, wharf master, and sexton.<sup>5</sup> From 1838 through 1856, the city ward system continued electing two aldermen per term. Fourth Ward saw an increase in factories and heavy industry such as iron foundries and brick-yards, mostly on the north side of the bayou.

Having only horse, wagon, and foot transportation, citi-



*The Beazley-Telschow House, built in 1888 on Kane Street, is an L-shaped Folk Victorian home that has seen many add-ons over the years. The Old Sixth Ward Historic District Neighborhood Association notes that the cow on the roof "does not alter the architecture of the house and as such, does not violate the historic preservation ordinance."*

Photos by Barbara Eaves.



*The William Henry Lighthouse residence on Kane Street, known as the "Queen of the Sabine," was the only two-story brick home in Old Sixth Ward. The only surviving home of the ward's wealthier section, it was built in 1906 for William Henry Lighthouse, who managed two brick foundries and owned Lighthouse Brick Company.*



*The Andrew and Josephine Kuhn House, possibly the city's only surviving Queen Anne cross-gable side-hall Victorian cottage, was built in 1883 on Center Street and moved to its current location on Kane to avoid demolition. The house maintains its original color scheme. The rear portion was rebuilt, in part with material salvaged from other Kuhn family homes in 2002 after being damaged in the move.*



*Decorative features on Old Sixth Ward homes range from traditional gingerbread to singular artist's touches, such as that shown here.*

To see the homes on the Old Sixth Ward walking tour and learn more about the neighborhood's preservation work, visit the Old Sixth Ward Historic District Neighborhood Association website, [www.old6ward.org/walk.html](http://www.old6ward.org/walk.html).

zens generally lived within a mile of the city center, purchasing outlots of twelve to thirty-five acres for summer homes in Fourth Ward located on the west side of the city. The north side of Buffalo Bayou rose fifty feet above sea level, thus being the highest point near the city. North Fourth Ward saw industry develop near the center of the city with large acreage lots on the west section. Each acreage lot began as large farms and country estates for city dwellers to escape the summer city heat. Names such as Spring Gardens and Vauxhall Gardens were popular in the area.

Gregor Heiss, a printer by trade, developed a public pleasure garden on six acres north of Buffalo Bayou that copied the famous Vauxhall Gardens of London and New York City. Much like an outdoor evening supper club, Heiss provided food and beer service to customers who came to see the lovely hillside decorated with native sycamores, mulberry, and cherry trees. Oil lamps provided a pleasant lighting with the sea breeze softening the landscape as it crossed the Bayou. Local musicians spiced up the evening conversations.

A large spring outcropped just a few hundred feet west of the Stockbridge land that Dr. Henry Evans purchased in 1837. Evans constructed a home on the edge of the high bank of Buffalo Bayou.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Evans captured the spring into a channel that ran west around the rear or north side of his home just before falling into the bayou, thus creating a lane for irrigating his elaborate garden of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. The spring and homestead was named Evans' Spring Garden for the lavish growth produced on the property. Spring Garden, along with numerous upstream springs, served to provide potable, clean, clear drinking water to the citizens of Houston.

Between 1840 and 1850, the springs provided the safest and purest artesian water for the townspeople until a series of slaughterhouses set up on the bayou west of Houston. Citizens' utilized water from Beauchamp Springs on White Oak Bayou until the city forced the slaughterhouses downstream of Houston. Citizens then began building cisterns and digging water wells for drinking, washing, and crop irrigation. Hand-dug wells excavated from twelve to twenty-six feet tapped the underground aquifers around the city. The Houston Waterworks Company opened in the Sixth Ward in 1879 to serve Houston citizens and hotels with artesian water from deeply dug wells.<sup>7</sup>

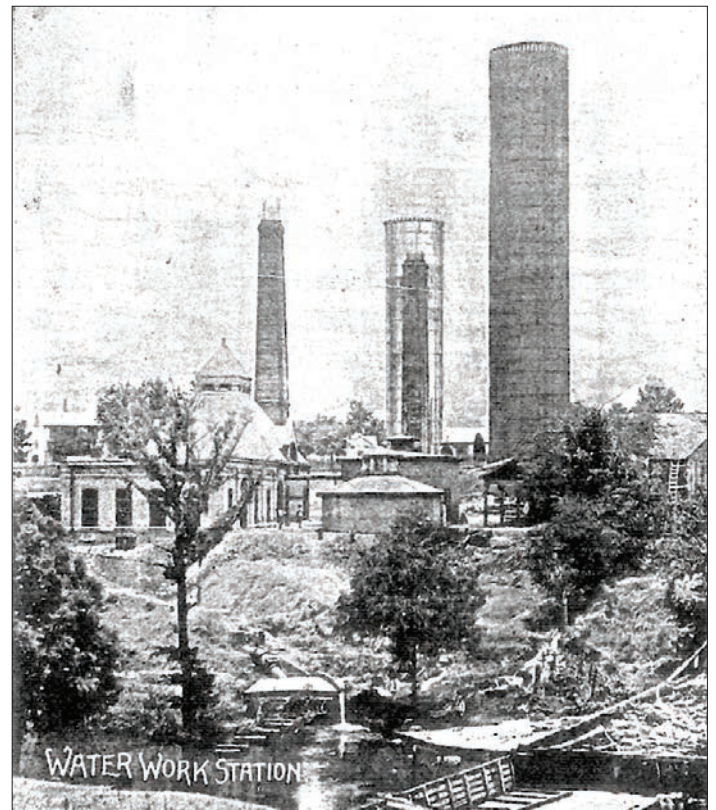
Prior to the Civil War, the arrival of the Houston Texas Central Railroad in the 1850s into the northern portion of Fourth Ward created the need for a new subdivision in First Ward and the north part of Fourth Ward. William Robinson Baker, former Harris County Clerk, platted a large subdivision of over 400 blocks in 1856 to attract railroad workers coming from Ireland, England, Germany, and North American states. According to Baker's map, the western city limits stopped at Sawyer Street on his new Baker Subdivision.

With the advent of the railroad to the Brazos River in 1856, the north side of Fourth Ward became an industrial and manufacturing center for tin shops, iron foundries, railroad car shops, warehouses, small cafes, wagoners, barrel-makers, and gypsies. Indian tribes camped on the high ground of the First Ward with the Gypsies occupying

the nearby "Vinegar Hill" to the south in an area called "Tin Pan Alley," adjacent to the Stockbridge homestead. Vinegar Hill became notorious with Tin Pan Alley as the main thoroughfare. The elevated area of Vinegar Hill emulated from the numbers of "vinegarroons" that infested the place. The site was just north of the Farmers' Market near the Capitol Street Bridge. Queen Caroline, otherwise, Caroline Riley, ruled as the one-eyed terror of the Hill, governing with a rod of iron. Big Foot Jen, Charles Johnson to some, Lillie Rivers, and Julia Baker acted as first lieutenants for Queen Caroline. The dusky Queen and her sidekicks governed the Hill encampment, quelling frequent rebellions with teeth and claws, but using knives and six shooters when necessary. Sadly, to the disappointment of the town, Queen Caroline died and a 300-pound "Auntie" took over the district as the new "Queen" until the land was sold at public auction in 1881.<sup>8</sup>

The Irish constructed the railroad and moved along with the construction out of town. Located in the north Fourth Ward, the Germans came to work in the new railroad yards and local evolving industries that served the railroad.<sup>9</sup> The new industry, residential construction, and noisy railroad traffic forced Vauxhall Gardens to move across the bayou to the south.

Following the Civil War, the western portion of the north Fourth Ward land converted from the Archibald Wynns' Farm to Glenwood Cemetery, a Victorian garden spot for local citizens to spend weekend afternoons and picnic. Farther out Washington Avenue, just south of White Oak Bayou, the Black population created a private garden cemetery, named Olivewood. Washington Avenue became a planked road for travelers.



*Houston's Water Works Station, circa 1880.*

Photo courtesy of Houston Public Library.



*The Cadillac Bar under demolition in 1971. The Cadillac Bar converted an old house into a commercial property on the Stockbridge Ford land near the location of Samuel Stockbridge's home. The building was made of heart cypress or pine planks that were two stories in length. The building was all board and batten construction, solid as a rock, and probably built sometime in the 1840s or early 1850s.*

Photo by Janet K. Wagner.

At the point of the pie shaped north Fourth Ward, brickyards mined the dark red clay outcroppings, moving upstream as the clay played out. Young's Brick Yard at Houston Avenue (then Young's Street) became a baseball ground when the brickyard left. Many years later, the area became a Farmer's Market. King's Brick Yard took over the clay at Sawyer Street and the bayou, making brick for the 1852 Harris County Courthouse. The Houston Brick Company settled at the water's end of Sabine Street, purchased by William Marsh Rice in later years, moving upstream to Memorial Park, the Archery Range, and Brunner Subdivision.

The North Fourth Ward population, generally German and railroad workers, differed greatly from the post-war South Fourth Ward residents composed mainly of Reconstruction workers, freed slaves, and new comers to Houston. Because of the differences in language and occupations, Buffalo Bayou became a stronger dividing line between the southern part of Fourth Ward and the new Sixth Ward, drawn out of the North Fourth.

Sixth Ward was created on April 18, 1874, at a time when industrial activity was on the rise in Houston. The bayou had been dredged to Main Street, and a street rail system opened connecting the Fairgrounds, Main Street, the Market House, and Union and Central Depots. The new rail cars raced along at ten miles per hour, mule drawn. Wiggins & Simpson established a large iron foundry along Buffalo Bayou in the Sixth Ward point. The Foundry had evolved from Simpson Brenard & Company dealing in agricultural implements since 1866. At the first Texas State Fair held in Houston, the foundry provided all the steam power for the entire fairgrounds. The iron foundry burned to the ground in May 1866, rising from the ashes by 1876 to be re-named the Phoenix Iron Works. The Houston Water


Works established west of the old Stockbridge home site and mill in 1876, fire-fighting becoming a major concern to Houstonians.<sup>10</sup>

The Houston Soap Works, established next to the Houston Water Works along Buffalo Bayou in the east point of the Sixth Ward, used a large barn for molding, cutting, and packaging the soap. Johann S. Menger purchased 1.4 acres of the old Nordhausen-Gaucher Brickyard on January 13, 1874, from Lardner Stanley.<sup>11</sup> Three steam-heated vats or soap tanks were wood fired to heat the potash or soda to make lye. The lye would be added to the melted grease, stirred well, brought to a boil, salted, and allowed to settle. After adding more lye and boiling for two hours, the mixture became soap and firm. The use of potash would produce soft soaps while soda produced hard soaps. One tank melted the pure grease that could be bacon, lard, or beef tallow.

Many types of oils and grease can be used to produce soap. During this period, Houston had an abundant supply of beef tallow. Byproducts of slaughterhouses, beef hoofs and tallow, were used mainly for the production of candles and soap. Beef tallow produces a harder soap than most and sometimes becomes brittle upon drying. Its color is off-white or light tan. Pure lard, obtained from the rendering of swine, makes a pure-white, softer type of soap, which explains why some folks used clarified bacon drippings to make their lye soap. During the Civil War, the Houston slaughterhouses gave the beef away to the citizens, since their main product comprised the hides exported to Italy for shoe leather. The Menger family sold the soap works in 1918 having made only laundry and toilet soaps since 1897.<sup>12</sup>

Boarding houses appeared almost overnight and thrived in the Sixth Ward, supported by the terminus of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad Depot. Dora Heinecke converted the old Stockbridge homestead into the Green Tree Hotel and Saloon in the late 1850s, becoming more of a saloon by the 1900s. The Green Tree Hotel, by 1925, became the Preston Hotel and grocery store. The building was demolished in the 1960s. The development of the Houston Heights as a new town in the 1890s finally brought electrified rail service to the Sixth Ward along Washington Avenue.

In 1905, the city resorted to a commission form of government, eliminating all geographic ward designations.<sup>13</sup> The city limits expanded westward to Shepherd Drive and the Brunner District. So accustomed to the use of the Ward terminology in some neighborhoods, the expression remains in use by the local citizenry to the present day.

The Sixth Ward Historic District, located between Memorial Drive and Washington Avenue, designated by the Department of the Interior in 1978, became the first National Register District in Harris County. However, that is another story. 

**Janet Wagner** was responsible for registering Houston's first Historic District, The Old Sixth Ward, and founded the Old Sixth Ward Historical Association. She was instrumental along with Kirk Farris in registering the first City of Houston Archeological Landmark in Frost Town. She recently became the first woman chair of the Harris County Historical Commission.