

From Das Zweiter to El Segundo, A Brief History of Houston's Second Ward

By Thomas McWhorter

Why is it that the wards still persist in our collective consciousness? In the beginning, simple arbitrary boundary lines divided the wards. These sometimes split neighborhoods in half and lacked the finesse of modern day city council districts that have been redrawn and manipulated countless times to reflect socioeconomic, racial, and political concentrations. Second Ward was located east of Main Street, north of Congress Avenue, and south of Buffalo Bayou and extended to the eastern city limit. By 1900, the eastern limit of the Second Ward stood at a point roughly one and one half miles east from the city center, or to the approximate location of modern day York Street. The area was home to the extremely wealthy and extremely poor, bartenders and brewers, renters and ranchers, priests and politicians.¹ The residents lived in a variety of situations ranging from traditional neighborhoods to suburban ranches. The area boasted one of Houston's first churches, several early park and recreational areas, and the city's first suburb.

One of the areas earliest neighborhoods was Frost Town, located in a dramatic bend of Buffalo Bayou about one half of a mile northeast of Main Street. Samuel Frost, fresh from service in the Texas Revolution in 1836, originally purchased the fifteen-acre site from the Allen brothers for \$1,500. Frost set up a homestead and blacksmith shop on his land, but died shortly after of cholera. His brother Jonathan Frost purchased the land from the estate and subdivided it into ninety-six residential lots that became Houston's first suburb.²

Much of the early land ownership in the neighborhood appears to have been speculative. An estimated seventy percent of the Frost Town lots had been sold by 1840, but only twenty-five buildings are shown on the 1869 W. E. Wood map. Some of the early property owners of Frost Town lots included Michael DeChaumes, a French-born architect responsible for one of the early Harris County courthouses; Martin Floeck, a brewer; and William Settegast, a wealthy real estate investor who built a large house on Gabel Street.³

Quality Hill, another early neighborhood that stood in the Harris County Courthouse area, appears to have straddled Second and Third Wards and became home to some of Houston's wealthiest residents. According to the 1860 Harris County census, thirteen heads of household lived in Quality Hill with an estimated personal wealth of more than \$10,000. This figure starkly contrasts with the average Second Ward resident, who reported a total net worth of less than two hundred dollars at that time.⁴

One of these residents was William J. Hutchins, a wealthy merchant from New York and one-time mayor of Houston. In conjunction with his mercantile business, he operated a private bank—a common practice with several Houston merchants at the time. In 1860, his estimated personal assets and real estate were valued at \$700,000.⁵



The Nichols Rice Cherry House, also known as William Marsh Rice House, was formerly located on Congress Avenue across from Courthouse Square. It was moved to 608 Fargo Street in Montrose before being relocated to Sam Houston Park and restored by the Harris County Heritage Society.

Photo by Harry L. Starnes from Historic American Buildings Survey.

William Marsh Rice, a Massachusetts-born merchant and former Second Ward alderman, amassed great wealth investing in the area's first railroad. Rice's home was located on the north side of Congress Avenue across from Courthouse Square. Years later, the Harris County Heritage Society moved it to Sam Houston Park and restored it. The 1860 census estimated Rice's combined personal wealth and real estate at \$750,000. The endowment left by his estate established Rice University.⁶

Not all of Second Ward's well-to-do residents lived in Quality Hill. Robert Lockart was a Pennsylvania-born merchant who owned and operated a steam grist mill on San Jacinto and Franklin Streets. He married the sister of Texas governor Francis R. Lubbock who owned a large tract of land located next door to Lockart's home and which became Lubbock's Grove.



Charles Longcope House formerly located at 102 Chenevert Street in Quality Hill vicinity of Second Ward.

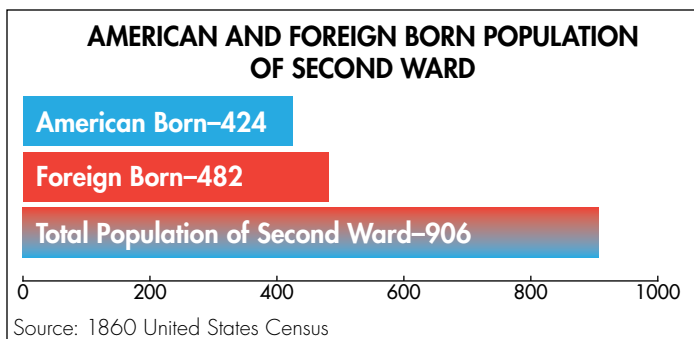
Photo from Historic American Buildings Survey.

In 1860, Lockart had an estimated wealth of \$105,000. His fine double-galleried frame house operated more like a rural plantation than the in-town mansions of Quality Hill. It was set amidst thirty-eight acres on Commerce Street about one mile east of the courthouse near the modern day site of Olshan's lumber yard. Lubbocks's Grove, located immediately to the west at Live Oak and Commerce Street, later became one of Houston's earliest privately owned parks, which was open to the public.⁷

Further to the east lived John Thomas Brady, a Maryland native who came to Houston before the Civil War. Brady was an attorney, real estate investor, Texas legislator, part owner of a railroad, and personally responsible for early improvements to the Houston Ship Channel. Brady's Island located near the Turning Basin bears his name. Brady developed the Magnolia Park neighborhood further east of Second Ward in the 1890s. He married Lenny Sherman, the daughter of General Sidney Sherman, one of the Commanders of the Texian Army at the Battle of San Jacinto. The couple lived in an impressive Greek revival home near the modern day intersection of Milby and Harrisburg. Their son, Sidney Sherman Brady, treasurer of the Cortlandt Place Improvement Company and owner of a brick yard on the banks of Buffalo Bayou, lived across the street in a large brick home at 3805 Wilmer Street.⁸ After the younger

Brady's death, the family land was subdivided as Brady Homes, which featured streets named for family members such as Estelle, Wilmer, Sidney, Sherman, and Garrow.

The church served as an important early influence on the Second Ward. In 1841, Catholic bishop John Odin came to Houston to establish Houston's first Catholic parish, St. Vincent's Catholic Church. Completed in the fall of 1842 at the southwest corner of Caroline and Franklin Streets, the church featured a rectory and a parochial school. It functioned as the hub of Catholicism in Houston until the dedication of the newer, larger Annunciation Church in 1871. After that point, St. Vincent's became a predominantly German-Catholic congregation, while Annunciation Church absorbed the original congregation. The associated St. Vincent's Cemetery was dedicated in 1852 at 2405 Navigation Boulevard.⁹

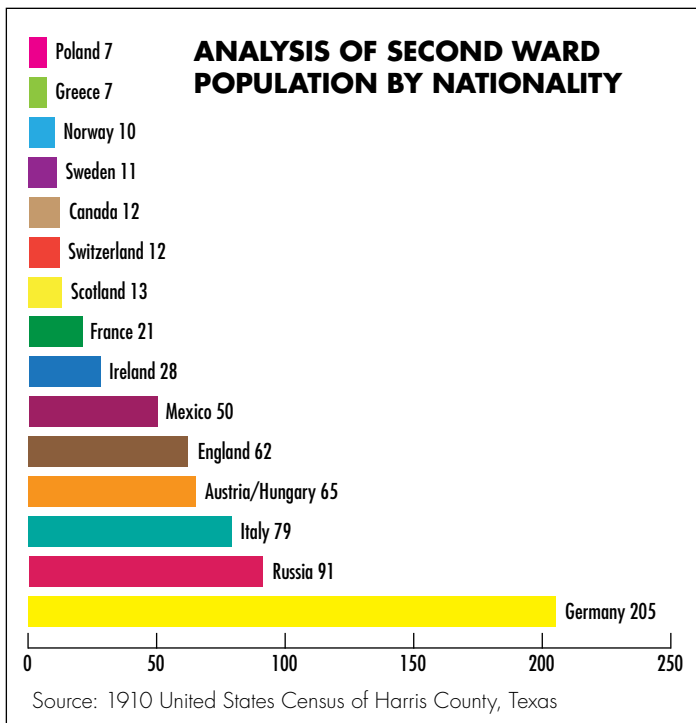


St. Vincent's Cemetery is the final resting place for many of the Second Ward's early prominent residents.

Photo by Thomas McWhorter.

The most notable of those interred in St. Vincent's cemetery is Richard "Dick" Dowling. Dowling, a native of Tuam County, Ireland, rose to celebrity status across the South as the "hero of the Battle of Sabine Pass." He is credited with turning back a flotilla of Federal gunboats attempting to travel up the Sabine River for a ground invasion of southeastern Texas during the Civil War. Dowling was also well known for his "Bank of Bacchus Saloon" located at the corner of Main Street and Congress, which advertised Dowling as "President, Cashier, and Dealer in the following exchanges: Brandy, Rum, Whiskey, Champagne, Claret, and Port." Dowling lived in Second Ward near the present day intersection of Live Oak and Commerce Streets, only five blocks from his final resting place.¹⁰ The September 24, 1867, *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph* reported Dowling died at age twenty-nine during a yellow fever epidemic in the city.

In 1860, the year before the start of the American Civil War, Houston had a population of 4,845. Of that total, Second Ward had 906 persons; 482, or fifty-three percent, were foreign-born from one of eighteen different countries. People coming from the fifteen different kingdoms of Germany, which existed prior to Germany's unification in 1871, represented the single largest nationality. This group made up thirty percent of the total population of Second Ward; however, that figure does not take into account the children of these families born in Texas to German parents. Other countries represented included Ireland, Poland, France, Austria, Nassau, England, Switzerland, Canada, Mexico, Italy, Scotland, Cuba, Belgium, Hungary, and Algeria.¹¹ The Germans settled in virtually every area of Houston, but the Second Ward became an unofficial hub of German-American culture and social life during the nineteenth century.



One of the German families who settled in the Second Ward was that of Joe Merkel. In 1860, Merkel and his wife, Caroline, purchased a 101-acre ranch on Buffalo Bayou, about one and one half miles east of the Harris County Courthouse. It became known as Merkel's Gove, one of the early private parks that ex-



An 1870's studio portrait of Joseph Merkel and his family.
Photo courtesy of Ann Deppenbrock.

isted before the City of Houston Parks System. There the Merkel family built a house, and Joe Merkel raised cattle for his butcher business in the downtown City Market. Merkel was one of many Germans living in the Second Ward who were butchers by trade and, eventually, concentrated along a stretch of road known as Butcher's Row, now Drennan Street.¹²

During the Civil War, Joe Merkel joined a local militia, the Houston Guards, representing Houston's German-American community. From these members, Houston Schuetzenverein formed in 1869 and began meeting at Merkel's Grove. A *schuetzen verein*, which translates to "rifle" or "protection" club, typically featured grounds with shooting galleries with short stair-step shaped ramps from which the marksmen perched and took aim from 150 or 200 yards. Traditionally, the top ranked *Schuetzenkoenig*, literally King Shooter, purchased beer for all of the other members of the club. An 1889 lease agreement between Merkel and the Schuetzenverein specified that the club could utilize Merkel's Grove, which featured a ten-pin alley, dance pavilion, and rifle range. One account of the twenty-second anniversary festivities for the Houston Schuetzenverein described a full day of activities there that began with a prize target shoot, followed by children's games and prizes, a dance contest for the best lady and gentleman dancers, and ten pin rolling for ladies. The evening finished with a concert at 8:00 p.m. followed by a Grand Ball and illumination.¹³

Another German social organization with ties to the Second Ward was the Volksfest Association. Although it organized in June 1860, its annual parade and festival were delayed until 1869 as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In the early years, the association held the festival at Lubbock's Grove, but in 1887, Volksfest purchased its own land for a park abutting the western edge of Merkel's Grove. The thirty-four-and-a-half-acre park was purchased from George Hermann and J. J. Settegast. In an early example of Hermann's philanthropy, five percent of the sales price was donated to the Volksfest Association.¹⁴

An article in the February 23, 1890, *Galveston Daily News* described improvements to Volksfest Park and provides insight into what the park may have looked like more than 120 years ago. Those improvements included a large stage complete with sceneries and targets, bridge repairs, construction of a base-



Modern view of a remnant of Volksfest Park, North York Street at Buffalo Bayou.

Photo by Thomas McWhorter.

ball field, and an area for cultivating indigenous Texas flowers. The Volkfest festival became so popular that the Bayou Street Railway Company established a mule car line to the location in 1889. This was mutually beneficial to neighboring Merkel's Grove, which had opened up its doors to the general public several years earlier.¹⁵

The last German social and cultural group to take root in the Second Ward was the Houston Saengerbund, organized in 1883. *Saengerbunds* were traditional singing clubs popular in areas where Germans settled outside of their homeland. In 1913, the organization purchased the former William Hamblen house at 315 Milby Street in the Second Ward. Later, it bought a large tract of land in the Jackson Hill area that operated for years as Bavarian Gardens and, ultimately, Garden in the Heights, before being sold in 2004.¹⁶ The Houston Saengerbund is now 127 years old and still meets regularly.

In 1917 and 1918, the U.S. government passed the Espionage Act which aimed to prohibit acts or the conveyance of information that could be detrimental to the war effort or promote the success of the enemy. The law's broad interpretation had a chilling effect on the local German population. The anti-German hysteria became so pronounced that, in 1918, the city changed the name of Second Ward's major thoroughfare, German Street, to Canal Street.¹⁷ This one action, however, could not change the German heritage that marked the Second Ward. The area's remaining street names represent a who's who of German Americans living in Houston during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries like Bering, Engelke, Fox, Freund, Rottman, Lemke, Schroeder, Hagerman, and Merkel.

With the dawn of the new century, changes were afoot in Second Ward. The old families who had resided in the neighborhood for decades on large suburban tracts began to sell off their properties. The availability of this land came just as industry began to get a foothold in the East End. Among the first large, semi-urban tracts to be broken up was Merkel's Grove. Joe Merkel died in 1895, and his heirs divided and subdivided the property into Merkel's First, Second, and Third residential additions. A lawsuit forced the Volksfest Association to sell their property in 1894. In 1897, the Houston Packing Company bought the former Volksfest Park and established one of the first large industrial plants, which came to define the East End. The Robert Lockart house and acreage was subdivided for a new

residential addition at the turn of the century. Lubbock's Grove fell to progress in 1902, when the elderly Francis Lubbock subdivided the remainder of his eleven-acre tract on Commerce Street that was then inhabited by his brother, T. W. Lubbock, for a new residential neighborhood of the same name.¹⁸

In addition to the new residential neighborhoods and large industrial operations on the ward's east side, the neighborhoods closer to downtown also became denser and more commercial. By the turn of the century, this part of the Second Ward had experienced a dramatic transformation. The neighborhoods located north and east of the Harris County Courthouse were ultimately transformed into the Warehouse District. The downtown portion of Second Ward became densely populated with new arrivals to Houston, many of whom appear to have been packed into the boarding houses, which often held more than fifteen persons, according to the 1910 census.¹⁹

In 1910, the federal census for Harris County continued to list the population of Houston by ward even though that political division was officially defunct. The enumeration districts for Second Ward simply state: ("Old Ward Number 2"). In 1910, Houston ranked sixty-eighth in the United States with a population of 78,800 people. The population of Second Ward was comprised of 6,814 American-born inhabitants, and 707 residents who claimed foreign birth. At 9.4 percent, this total was down considerably from the fifty-three percent reported in 1860.

Although there were fewer foreign-born residents in Second Ward, they represented a wider spectrum of birth countries compared to the 1860 census data. In 1910, German-born inhabitants still represented the largest foreign nationality in the neighborhood, but their numbers were greatly diluted. Many of the first wave of German settlers had died by 1910, although



Our Lady of Guadalupe was the first church to offer services in Spanish.

Photo by Thomas McWhorter.

the second and third generations of American-born descendants continued to live in the area. The second largest foreign-born population group came from Russia, many of whom were Jewish. A significant concentration of Russian immigrants lived in an area centered between Crawford and St. Emanuel Streets, and between Congress Avenue and Commerce Street. In the early 1870s, the third home for Temple Beth Israel was constructed in this area at the corner of Franklin and Crawford Streets just north of modern-day Minute Maid Park.²⁰

In the 1910 census, fifty people in Second Ward claimed Mexico as their birthplace, but this did not take into account those born in the U.S. to Mexican parents. Some estimates place the overall Mexican-American population in Houston in 1910 at roughly 2,000. In response to the Second Ward's growing Hispanic population, the Roman Catholic Diocese established Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, the city's first church to offer services in Spanish. The church was established in 1911 next to St. Vincent's Cemetery, where it continues to serve the neighborhood's Hispanic population.²¹

The Second Ward became a hub of Mexican American social life. The first acknowledged Mexican-American social group to emerge from the neighborhood was the "El Campo Laurel" chapter of the Woodmen of the World. Established in 1908, the benevolent aid society was the first for Mexican Americans in Houston and drew members from all over the city. This was an important step for Mexican Americans since they did not have an established social network in Houston as found in cities like San Antonio, Laredo, and El Paso. El Campo Laurel existed for many years and became the parent organization for the many Mexican social and benevolent aid groups to form here in the decades to follow.²² Much as Second Ward's German Americans sought to celebrate and share their culture in their newly adopted home in the nineteenth century, El Campo Laurel strived to keep their Mexican culture alive and share it in the early twentieth century.




Colorful mural on the outside wall of the Ripley House building.
Photo by Thomas McWhorter.

The group organized a "Diez y Seis" parade in 1917, one of the earliest public exhibitions of Mexican culture of its kind in Houston. The parade marked the anniversary of the Mexican revolution for independence from Spain, which began on September 16, 1810. The celebration included a downtown parade that lives on today as one of the Fiestas Patrias parades.²³

During the first half of the twentieth century, Second Ward was unofficially segregated between whites and Hispanics. The latter were confined to a small area east to Nagel Street in a former Frost Town neighborhood that became known as "El Alacran." According to Felix Fraga, who is a former Houston city councilman, pioneer affiliate and stalwart advocate of Houston's Ripley House/Neighborhood Centers Inc., and lifelong Second Ward resident, Nagel Street marked the de facto boundary line between Second Ward's long-established white community and the Hispanic and African American areas located closer to downtown.²⁴

One of the most enduring Second Ward institutions to provide services to the area was the Rusk Settlement, which operated out of the former William Settegast House in Frost Town. Twelve well-educated, influential women formed the settlement association in 1907 with Mrs. James A. Baker as their first president. The Rusk Settlement was part of a national trend of settlement associations that sought to provide equal opportunities for healthful and moral living conditions to all people, regardless of social standing. The Rusk Settlement provided daycare and kindergarten for the neighborhood children and took on wider social issues like eradicating vice by attempting to close a nearby, notorious red light district. The successor to the Rusk Settlement, Ripley House, continues to provide services to the area's underserved population.²⁵

World War II was a turning point for Second Ward as many Mexican Americans volunteered or were drafted. After the war, the first Mexican Americans crossed the Nagel Street dividing line between the poorer Mexican section and the older established white section of the neighborhood. This trend continued throughout the late 1940s, and by the 1960s, the area was predominantly Hispanic.²⁶

The Second Ward had a population of 12,447 people in 2000, and projections estimated 14,778 residents in 2008. Of the 2000 census totals, sixty-nine percent claimed Hispanic background although birth country was no longer recorded. The area continues to change and has become a testing ground for urban renewal with the conversion of former Brownfield sites to new parks, schools, a hike and bike trail created from an abandoned railroad bed, and another trail carved from the overgrown banks of Buffalo Bayou. The wards officially disappeared more than one century ago, but the rich cultural experience and identity of Second Ward endures in the shadows of downtown Houston. 

Thomas McWhorter is a native Houstonian and fifth-generation Harris County resident. He has had a lifelong passion for history, which began at age nine with his membership in the Houston Archaeological Society. His professional background is in archaeology and historic preservation where he has worked in both the public and private sectors. He is currently a senior historic planner in the City of Houston's Office of Historic Preservation.