

When There Were Wards: A Series

Third Ward, Steeped in Tradition of Self-reliance and Achievement

By Ezell Wilson

The historic Third Ward was originally an area east of Main Street, south of Congress Street and extending to the city limits. For the residents of the Third Ward, their identity with the ward went beyond the original intent of its nomenclature as a political division. African Americans in Third Ward identified with the name and the region out of a sense of pride in the history of the area—a history in which Black people were active agents in building an enduring community. Though historically the Fourth Ward and Freedmen’s Town were Black cultural centers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Third Ward grew in prominence, eventually passing Fourth Ward in population and the attraction of Black institutions.¹

Early settlement grew rapidly in the post Civil War era as former slaves from within Houston’s immediate surroundings as well as plantations in Brazoria, Ft. Bend, and other counties settled in the area. Sometimes arriving on foot, they were forced into separate enclaves within each of Houston’s wards that lay on the outskirts of town. As whites moved out, African Americans moved in, establishing neighborhoods and institutions in the process. They came into the city to work as mechanics, wagon and omnibus drivers, masons, and in a number of other professions—much to the chagrin of some whites who feared losing their jobs.²

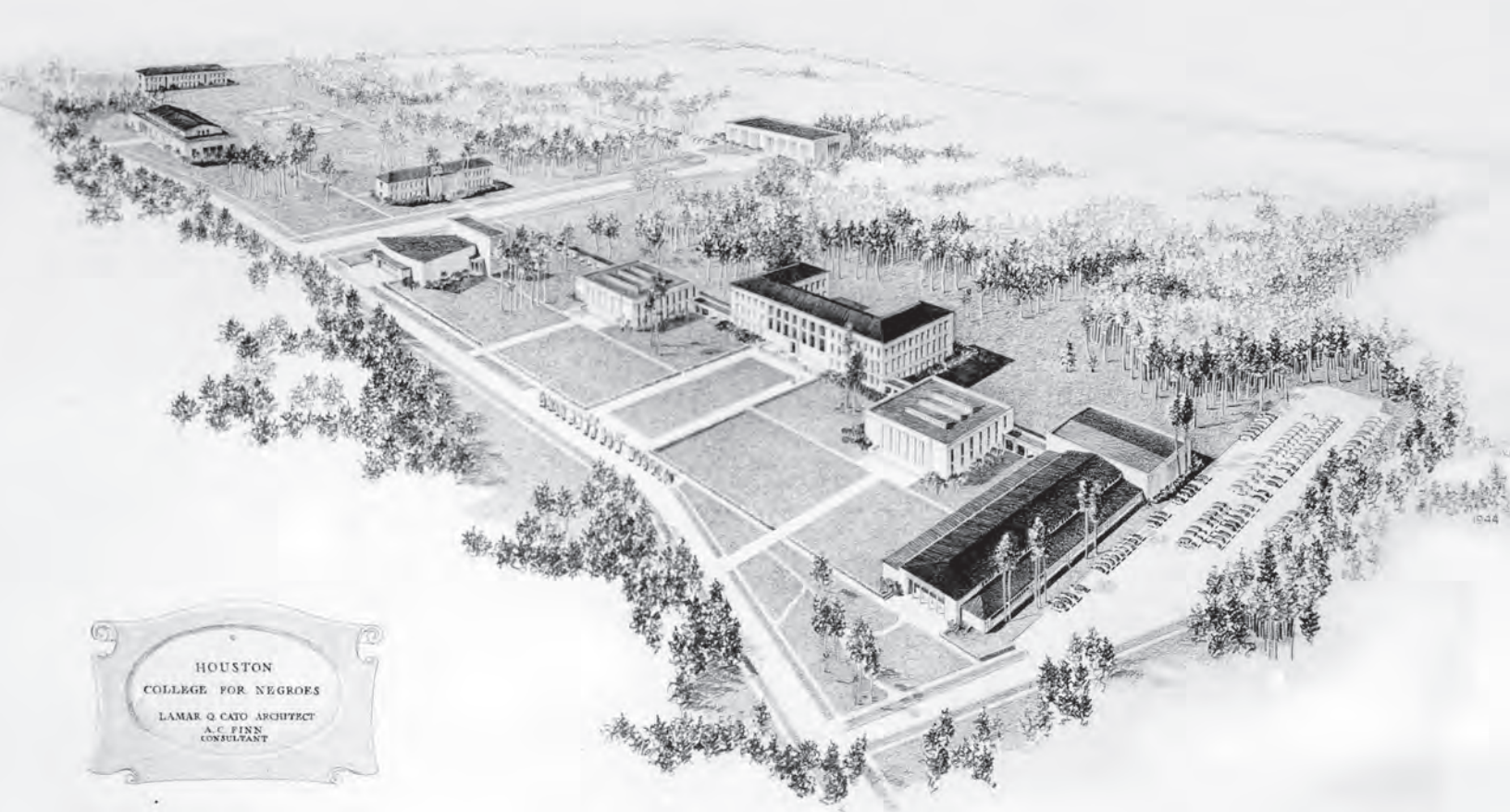
As whites sold land at the edge of town, sometimes on credit, Blacks quickly acquired the property and began to build their own homes in Third Ward. By the 1880s, approximately twenty-five percent of Black households in Third Ward were owner occupied. The homes built in the Third Ward followed a number of vernacular styles, including some that were hybrids—an innovation brought about by the advent of house catalogs, which allowed homeowners to pick the style of house they wanted to build and add on details from other styles listed. This



“Shotgun houses,” commonly seen in Third Ward, are thought to have originated in Louisiana. These pictures illustrate the difference in appearance of homes before (above) and after (below) restoration by Project Row Houses.

Photo by Ashley Clemmer-Hoffman courtesy of Project Row Houses.





Architectural drawing for Houston College for Negroes, now Texas Southern University.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

resulted in the diffusion of regional styles on a national level, including one commonly found in Houston's Black communities: the shotgun house.³

Receiving this name because a shotgun shell fired at the front door would travel through the house and out the back door without hitting anything, shotgun houses were one room wide, one story tall, with the rooms arranged in a row without hallways, and doors at opposite ends of the facade. Though some relate the style to the New York brownstone, the shotgun is believed to have traveled from New Orleans, where such houses date back to about 1800. Others believe it originated in West African house building traditions, while John Michael Vlach writes that the shotgun represents a New World Euro-American hybrid style that came to New Orleans via Haiti.⁴ Ubiquitous throughout the Third Ward, the shotgun house figured prominently in the artwork of Texas Southern University professor John Biggers. Shotguns declined in popularity as the automobile became more prevalent; however, many still remain in Third Ward, most notably those preserved by Project Row Houses, a nonprofit organization dedicated to building community through the celebration of African American art and culture.

Having built their own homes and churches, Third Ward residents willingly accepted government assistance in building educational institutions. The Freedmen's Bureau funded and operated early schools while the American Missionary Association staffed them with northern white missionaries. The Texas Legislature created Black schools in 1870. Third Ward's first school of record was the Third Ward School, located on Walker Street. By 1879, it had 100 students and in 1885, was renamed Douglass (Elementary) for reformer

and statesman Frederick Douglass. Blackshear Elementary, formerly known as Emancipation School, was established in 1916.⁵

The Houston school district established Yates High School in 1926 as the city's second high school for African Americans. (Fourth Ward's Colored High School/Booker T. Washington opened in 1893.) Named for the Rev. Jack Yates, the original Yates High School building at 2610 Elgin now houses James D. Ryan Middle School, designated to honor Yates' first principal. In the 1920s and early 1930s, the school hosted night classes for the Houston College for Negroes, which would later move to its own property and become Texas Southern University.⁶ Founders established the Houston College for Negroes in part through the efforts of Wiley College, which opened in Marshall, Texas, in 1873; its notable debate team was the subject of the Hollywood film, *The Great Debaters*.

An act of the Texas Legislature formed Texas Southern University in 1947, following a decision by the Supreme Court in *Sweatt v. Painter*. Heman Sweatt, a postal worker, filed suit in 1946 after being denied entry into the University of Texas School of Law solely on the basis of his race. Taking the national battle against segregation a step closer to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Court ordered creation of a "separate but equal" school for African American students, which became Texas State University for Negroes.⁷ Despite some initial concern about the viability of another accredited historically Black university so close to Prairie View A&M, TSU's enrollment grew steadily. It received the support of the local community, while bringing in academics from the Houston area

and other parts of the country. Many of these professors and administrators resided in the greater Third Ward area, integrating formerly white neighborhoods like Riverside Terrace in the process. TSU holds the distinction as the first historically Black college in Texas to have a law school, the Thurgood Marshall School of Law. During the Civil Rights Era, TSU students, faculty, and administrators stood at the forefront of many acts of civil disobedience in the struggle for change.

One of the decisive actions against Jim Crow and segregation in Houston was a sit-in at the lunch counter in Weingarten's, a grocery and deli located on Almeda Road. Weingarten's, like many other businesses, allowed Blacks to make purchases but did not allow them to sit and dine with whites. TSU student Eldreway Stearns and other school leaders organized the sit-in a few weeks after the one in Greensboro, North Carolina, that received national attention.⁸ TSU President, Dr. Sam Nabrit, refused to expel students for fighting for their civil rights, despite political pressure. As a result of the sit-in, Weingarten's pulled up all the stools and allowed Blacks to stand next to whites to order their food. Days later, the sit-in movement spread



Oilman J. S. Cullinan contributed \$80,000 to the building of Houston Negro Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Cullinan Papers, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

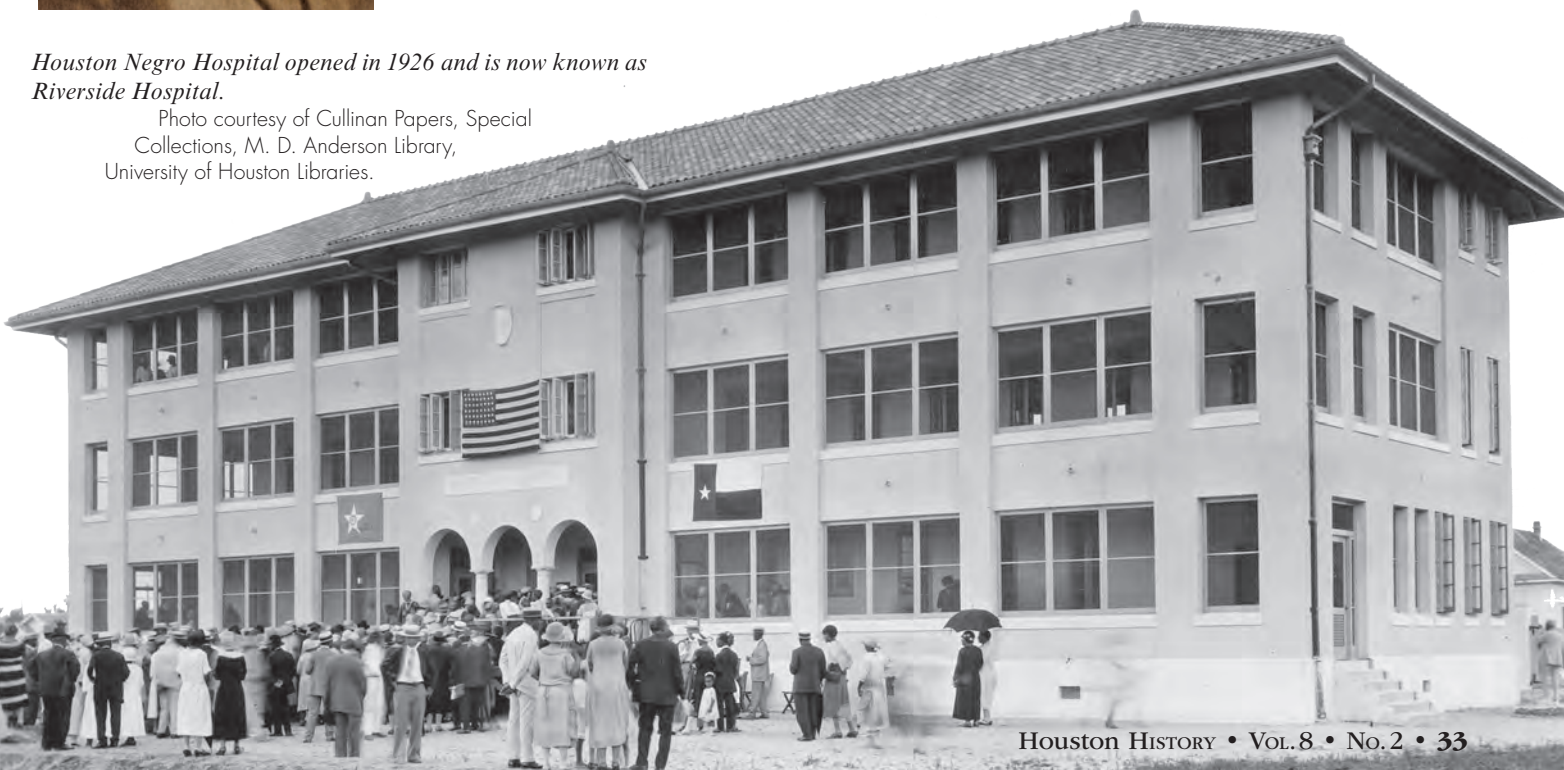
downtown to Foley's and the City Hall cafeteria, helping to end segregation in Houston without the use of violence.

Riverside Hospital, opened in 1926 as Houston Negro Hospital, was one of the first nonprofit hospitals in the city for African Americans. Additionally, it provided a place for Black physicians and nurses to work and train. Houston had eleven hospitals at the time, but none of them provided adequate services to the Black community. Typically, Blacks would be treated in the segregated wards of charity hospitals where Black physicians had no rights to admit patients who then had to endure long wait times to see a hospital physician. The Union Hospital served Blacks but with only six beds and minimal equipment was far too small a facility to meet the community's needs. Founded by Meharry graduate Dr. B. J. Covington, Dr. Rupert Orlando Roett, Sr., and others, Riverside originally operated out of a house, but oilman J. S. Cullinan rebuilt it in a Spanish Colonial Revival style in memory of his son, John Cullinan. As a lieutenant in the Army, John led Black soldiers in World War I, and it is believed that his favorable impression of them may have contributed to the senior Cullinan's donation to construct a Black hospital.⁹

Black churches exerted considerable influence in African American communities, and ministers were often community leaders. More than ninety churches stood in Third Ward, where they served as social and civic centers as well as places of worship. The congregation established Trinity United Methodist Church in 1848 as a mission church. Twenty years later, the Reverend Jack Yates and other ex-slaves founded Antioch Baptist Church in the Fourth Ward. Wesley Chapel AME Church was founded in 1875, and housed in a building designed by William Sidney Pittman, a pioneer African American architect. St. John's Baptist Missionary Church on Dowling Street was founded in 1889. The current building constructed in 1948 with its Ionic Temple style appeared more typical of the 1920s than the decade in which it was built.¹⁰

Houston Negro Hospital opened in 1926 and is now known as Riverside Hospital.

Photo courtesy of Cullinan Papers, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.



As part of its community service, Trinity United played a role in establishing Wiley College and TSU. Many of the early educators and faculty in the Third Ward schools worshipped in the local congregations or served as ministers. Churches provided housing assistance and financial counseling to members when they could. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church helped establish an Upward Bound program at TSU. During the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, churches in Houston—much like Black churches elsewhere in the South—got involved in efforts such as voter registration drives. Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church started a local chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Wesley Chapel AME served as a meeting place for many involved in the civil rights struggle.

Begun in 1893 as *Texas Freeman*, the *Houston Informer* remains one of the oldest Black newspapers west of the Mississippi River. Founded by Charles Love, *Freeman* merged with Carter Wesley's *The Informer* in 1931 to become *Houston Informer and Texas Freeman*. It took an active role in furthering civil rights and supporting the movement's leaders. The paper addressed issues facing the African American community, including the need for better healthcare facilities, which eventually led to establishing Riverside Hospital, and investigated incidents of police brutality, another longstanding issue. During the integration of the Riverside Terrace neighborhood, *The Informer* covered the race-based terrorist bombing of the home of Jack Caesar, the first African American to move into the previously all-white and predominately Jewish neighborhood. In the offices of *The Informer*, NAACP attorney and future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall dictated a brief

for court action that eventually led to Blacks being granted the right to vote. When Richard Grovey helped organize the Negro Democratic Club, *The Informer* gave him space for editorials. The *Houston Defender*, another Black Houston paper begun in 1930 by C. F. Richardson, also took the position of community advocate, calling for equal rights, paved streets, additional parks, more sensitive high school curricula, and anti-lynching laws, among other things. In 1948, radio station KCOH-1430 AM began broadcasting as a classical, easy listening radio station. In 1953, Robert Meeker bought the station, making it the first Black-owned radio station in the state. Now located on Almeda, the station plays gospel, blues, and talk radio programs.¹¹ Much like the Black press, the talk shows on KCOH served as an outlet to discuss community matters.

In 1872, Rev. Jack Yates and other ex-slaves purchased ten acres at the corner of Elgin and Dowling for \$1,000.00. The land became Emancipation Park where former slaves and their descendants would gather annually to celebrate Juneteenth. The holiday on June 19th marks the date in 1865 when news reached Texas that the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves from bondage. For many years, Emancipation Park remained the only local park open to African Americans. It was later donated to the City of Houston.¹²

Although downtown had a thriving Black business district in its north end, a great many businesses run by African Americans lined Dowling Street in Third Ward. Many of Texas' African American barbers were trained at the Tyler Barber College, and professional stylists received training at the Franklin Beauty School, founded in 1915 by



Shown here is one of the big bands that played the El Dorado Ballroom, which hosted legends such as Ray Charles and Lightnin' Hopkins.


Photo courtesy of Project Row Houses.

Madame N. Franklin. Also on Dowling the Watchtower Insurance Company, Huckaby Funeral Home, and Teal Portrait Studio, served the community. Several theaters entertained residents, including the Dowling Theatre, the Holman Theatre, and the Park Theatre, which opened in 1937 and closed in 1969.¹³ Before arriving in Houston, notable businessman of the era, Mack Hannah, operated pool halls, a restaurant, a barbershop, and a funeral home in Port Arthur. In Houston, he started Mack Hannah Life Insurance, the Gulf Coast Mortgage Company, and the Standard Savings and Loan Association.¹⁴

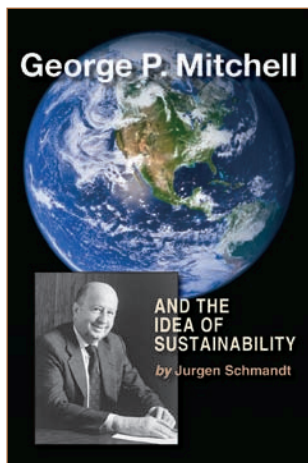
Many social institutions also called Dowling Street home, such as the Professional Amateur Boxing Association (PABA), which Reverend Ray Martin founded in 1969 as a nonprofit organization dedicated to introducing Third Ward youth to the sport as an alternative to delinquent activities.¹⁵ The office of Eldreway Stearns at 2206 Dowling served as the unofficial headquarters of the civil rights movement in Houston with many planning meetings being held there. Built in 1939 on Dowling Street, across from Emancipation Park, stands the El Dorado Ballroom. A regular stop on the Chitlin' Circuit for musicians, it hosted numerous icons like Cab Calloway, Nat "King" Cole, and Ray Charles, as well as local legends like Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins. A genre of music known as Bayou City Blues became popular at the El Dorado and other venues like Miss Ann's Playpen and Etta's Lounge.

Of course, the Third Ward landscape has greatly changed now. Many of the places mentioned in this article are

memories, the buildings closed, and, in some cases, razed. Gentrification has made inroads into some parts of the neighborhood, while other areas are poorly maintained, with empty storefronts, churches, and shotgun houses serving as the hollowed-out markers of their former selves. Drug use, crime, and neglect occur in some areas, while both the University of Houston and Texas Southern University continue to expand their campuses.

People who live in the Third Ward still identify strongly with the neighborhood. This may be due to the rich history here—a history of achievement and self reliance. From the initial settling of those former slaves in the Third Ward, the Black community made many strides towards building a cohesive community in an era of exclusion. They built churches and educated their young. They came looking for work, and many even created their own businesses. They expressed themselves through their art, through their own media outlets, and in their own venues. Since they were excluded from many opportunities, they created their own. What's more, they also took action and ended the de jure exclusion of segregation itself. These institutions make up the fabric of the Third Ward community, a community whose name no longer invokes the dead geopolitical designation it originally had but now stands for a sense of belonging to a tradition of doing for self and others. 

Ezell Wilson is a master's student in history at the University of Houston and a resident of the Third Ward.



George P. Mitchell and the Idea of Sustainability

Jurgen Schmandt

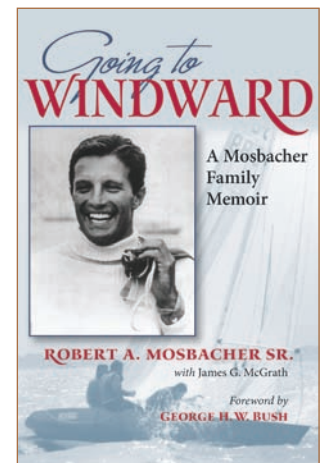
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