

Walking in the Footsteps of Houston Women: A Historic Tour of Downtown Houston

by Betty Trapp Chapman

In 1836, two brothers from New York founded Houston on a meandering bayou in the new Republic of Texas. Over the next one hundred and fifty years this frontier community grew and became the fourth largest city in the United States. Most of the written narratives of this progression tell of the exploits of Houston's male population, but we know that women were also participants and that their experiences shaped much of the city's history. Women's efforts profoundly affected benevolence, political action, education, and creative expression in Houston. A walk through the oldest section of downtown Houston will reveal this frequently ignored, integral part of the city's history.

The tour that follows invites the reader to take an approximately one-mile walk through the heart of Houston's downtown historic district. Since there are few steps and no inclines, this is not a strenuous walk, and there are opportunities to rest in the courtyard at Christ Church (location 4), and at Market Square Park (location 9).

1. JULIA IDESON BUILDING, HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

(500 McKinney Avenue; open Monday–Saturday 9–6)

Women were instrumental in founding the Houston Public Library in 1904. The city's educated female populace had long recognized the need for a library to serve the community. In 1900, a group of clubwomen formed the Houston City Federation of Women's Clubs to create public support and to raise money for the



Julia Ideson in her office on the second floor of the Julia Ideson building. Ideson planted firm roots for the Houston Public Library system and was active in civic and political groups. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

project. They succeeded in persuading city government to allocate funds for library operations, and the first Houston Public Library opened in 1904 in a new building located at Travis and McKinney, about two blocks east of the Julia Ideson Building. The city quickly outgrew the first building. In 1926 the Julia Ideson Building replaced it and served as the city's central library for over fifty years. When the current

central library was built across the plaza in 1976, the Ideson Building was renovated to house Houston Public Library's historical collections.

The building is named for Julia Ideson, who served as head librarian from 1904 until her death in 1945. The Julia Ideson Building is one of Houston's architectural treasures and it also contains numerous works of art created by local women artists. On the first floor are three murals by Angela McDowell, with Spanish themes typical of her style: "Avila," "La Rabida," and "Toledo." There is also a water fountain with marble sculpting by Penelope Lingan. Another mural on the stairway landing at the east end of the building is the work of Ruth Uhler, depicting "The First Meeting of the Houston Lyceum." Above the arch and straight ahead as you reach the second floor is a portrait of Julia Ideson.

Emma Richardson Cherry, a popular local artist of the early twentieth century, painted the landscapes that are mounted on the walls of the rotunda on the second floor. The scenes commemorate Southern heroes: the Republic of Texas Capitol and President's home; Beauvoir, the home of Jefferson Davis; and Arlington, the home of Robert E. Lee. A replica of the Venus de Milo is also located on the second floor. It was a gift to the library in 1904 by the Public School Art League, a women's organization that is recognized as the parent of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. On the stairwell leading to the third level is an 8' x 8' needlepoint tapestry, designed and stitched by the Lone Star Chapter of the American Needlepoint Guild in 1986 to commemorate the city's sesquicentennial.

Women have remained active in the life of the Houston Public Library as librarians, board members, and patrons. Today there are ten library branches named for women who were leaders in the community.

2. ESPERSON BUILDINGS

(800 Block of Travis with side entrance on Walker; accessible during business hours)

After her husband's death in 1922, Mellie Esperson planned a structure to honor him and the oil industry in which he had worked. In 1927 the 32-story Niels Esperson skyscraper was completed, becoming the tallest building in Texas at that time. Esperson used the finest materials to construct the Italian Renaissance structure, whose temple-like tower is a distinctive element of Houston's skyline. The interior is noted for its unique white bronze elevator doors and the Esperson coat-of-arms found throughout the building. Mellie Esperson managed her vast business holdings from her 25th floor office. Her holdings included the city's first industrial



Mellie Esperson shows off the pneumatic tubes in the new Neils Esperson building to Mayor Oscar Holcombe and other dignitaries. Holcombe is left front, looking down. The tubes conveyed messages between the Esperson building and the Harris County Courthouse a half-mile away. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

park on the Houston Ship Channel, a 16,000-acre ranch in Liberty County, interests in Reed Roller Bit Company, and the elegant Majestic movie theatre, which she had built in 1923 around the corner on Rusk Avenue. In 1941, Esperson erected the Mellie Esperson Building adjacent to the earlier structure. It was 19 stories in height and considerably less ornate in design. Mellie Esperson's portrait hangs in the building's foyer.

3. SITE OF CHARLOTTE BALDWIN ALLEN'S HOME

(Corner of Main and Rusk; currently, JP Morgan Chase Bank Building)

Charlotte Baldwin Allen, wife of Houston founder Augustus C. Allen, is believed to have used some of her inheritance to provide the money her husband and his brother needed to purchase the land where Houston would be located in 1836. Although Charlotte and Augustus Allen separated in the early 1850s and Augustus left the city, Charlotte remained in her home at this location until her death in 1895. She was active in civic, religious, and business activities, and she was considered Houston's "grande dame" during her long life. Her home was razed in 1915. The JP Morgan Chase Bank Building occupies the site today.

4. CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL

(1117 Texas Avenue; accessible at selected times)

Much of women's first activism outside of the home was focused on their churches. Women expanded their role in the life

of the congregation through organizations within the church.

One of the earliest women's church groups in Houston was the Ladies' Sewing Circle at Christ Church, founded in 1848. The Ladies' Sewing Circle did much more than sew. They raised money to meet basic needs of the church, including providing space for a Sunday school, making repairs on the church building, and paying the minister's salary. When the present Gothic-styled building was completed in 1893, the women of Christ Church made a heavy contribution to retiring the congregation's indebtedness. These actions not only benefited the entire congregation, but also established a female voice in church affairs.

The women of the church soon expanded their concerns to the larger community. In 1893, the Ladies' Parish Association at Christ Church organized the Sheltering Arms Association to provide a home for elderly women. Now a United Way agency, Sheltering Arms Senior Services has provided support for Houston's older population for more than a century.

5. HARRIS COUNTY COURTHOUSE

(Block bounded by Fannin, Congress, San Jacinto and Preston; public building)

Houston women registered to vote for the first time in 1918 at the Harris County Courthouse. The Courthouse resides on the Court House Square allocated on the original plat of Houston, where it occupied the center of the town. The current building was constructed in 1910. Its traditional dome and grassy lawn still looks its part as the seat of county government even though its location no longer marks the center of the city.

Annette Finnigan organized the Houston Equal Suffrage League in 1903. For almost two decades the League kept up the pressure in the Texas legislature to achieve a woman suffrage amendment in Texas. In 1918, Texas granted female citizens the right to vote in primary elections. This was a limited but significant victory since the one-party politics in Texas meant that most elections were decided at the primary level. On June 27, 1918, women lined up at the entrance to the Harris County Courthouse to register to vote in the upcoming primary. Registrars moved tables into the lobby to accommodate the unusual crowds of registrants and onlookers. Houston Equal Suffrage League President Hortense Ward, famous because she was the first woman in Texas licensed to practice law, stood at the head of the line. When registration closed two weeks later, 14,750 Harris County women had signed the voting rolls for the first time. It was another two years, August 26, 1920, before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted full voting rights to all U.S. women.

Although women had gained a voice at the polls, entry into the political arena as elected officials was another slow process. Women were elected to the Houston Independent School Board in the early 1920s, but it was not until 1966, when Barbara Jordan was elected, that a woman from Harris County won a seat in the Texas legislature. There were no female judges in Harris County until Ruby Sondock was appointed to a domestic relations court in 1973. It would be another thirty years before a woman, Sylvia Garcia, was elected to serve as a Harris County Commissioner.

6. SCANLAN BUILDING

(405 Main Street; accessible during business hours)

In 1909 Kate Scanlan and her six sisters erected this building in memory of their father, T. H. Scanlan, who had been Houston's Reconstruction-era mayor. They retained noted Chicago architect, Daniel Burnham, to design the structure, which exhibited finely crafted classical ornament at the base and a series of terracotta wreaths between its uppermost windows. The building became a popular location for business firms and professional offices. The Scanlan sisters operated a religious goods store on the first floor. The Scanlan Foundation was established after the sisters' deaths to benefit Roman Catholic charities. Their legacy is also carried on in the Scanlan Building, which still occupies this busy corner.

7. FIRST DOWNTOWN YWCA FACILITY

(310 1/2 Main Street; private)

The Houston branch of the Young Women's Christian Association was organized in 1907 as the first unit in Texas. The YWCA's initial purpose was to provide a suitable environment for young workingwomen who had moved to Houston from rural areas. The YWCA established a residence that offered affordable and safe living quarters for women workers. It also leased the second and third floors of the 310½ Main Street building for a lunchroom, gymnasium, and rest rooms with couches and reading materials to use during the noon hour. In addition to serving as toilet facilities, rest rooms were invented in the 1890s by women for the purpose of providing a space to relax for women coming to town for the day to shop and do business. Rest rooms became increasingly useful as the number of women working downtown increased. Women worked downtown as stenographers, real estate agents, sales clerks, journalists, insurance agents, telephone operators, and cashiers.

By 1912 the YWCA had fourteen hundred female members in Houston and the organization became active in promoting laws to regulate wages and hours. At the time, women's wage-earning opportunities consisted of jobs with long hours, wages as low as \$3-\$5 per week, and poor working conditions. A coalition of middle-class clubwomen and labor activists successfully lobbied for legislation that restricted the work week to a maximum of fifty-four hours and established a minimum wage. The YWCA also advanced female employment by creating professional positions for women in its organization.

8. MAJESTIC METRO (formerly Ritz Theater)

(911 Preston Avenue; private)

In 1926 Kate Scanlan built this structure, which is located a short distance away from the Scanlan Building. She hired Rice Institute architect William Ward Watkin to design a theater, which she named the Ritz. Watkin placed delicate classical ornamentation, which is still visible, on the building's stucco façade. Although the marquee is a new addition to the building and the sign shows a different name, the current building looks very much as it did originally. The Ritz entertained movie audiences for several decades and is one of two extant older theater buildings in downtown Houston (the Isis, now the Mercury Room, is on

Prairie just off of Main). Today it is named Majestic Metro and the interior has been transformed into a party venue.

9. MARKET SQUARE PARK

(Block bounded by Congress, Travis, Preston, and Milam)

This block became the center of commercial activity soon after Houston was founded. Many women assisted with family businesses, frequently living above the establishments. Some women were early owners of property around the square and some of these pioneering females established successful businesses. Pamela Mann operated her Mansion House hotel on the north side of the square, and Eliza Fox sold groceries from her shop on the east side. The Fox building was rebuilt by Mrs. Fox after a fire in 1860 and is still standing across from Market Square Park at 305-307 Travis Street.

The Market House on the square provided work for a variety of women. Farmwomen sold their produce in stalls on the ground floor. Numerous women worked as telephone operators in the local exchange at the top of the building's tower. Working conditions were usually poor in this area and crusading clubwomen moved to correct them. One group named their club the Home Improvement League and provided a rest room for women in the Market House since there were no statutory requirements for separate toilet facilities until 1918.

Market Square remained a busy commercial area until the mid-twentieth century. Today a park occupies the site and many of the photographs lining the center of the park show the variety of ways that women contributed to social and business life in Houston.

10. SITE OF MAJESTIC THEATER (later named Palace Theater; then, Nuevo Palacio)

(800 block of Texas Avenue; currently, the Chronicle Building)

On a warm Sunday afternoon in June 1913, thirty-five musicians presented a concert in the Majestic Theater and brought into being the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Out of a fervent desire to create a permanent orchestra in the city, members of local women's music clubs had been instrumental in staging the event. For decades prior to that day, groups like the Woman's Choral Club, the Treble Clef Club, and the Girls' Musical Club had organized performances by visiting artists. The success of the June 1913 concert led to the formation of the Houston Symphony Society. In 1917, Ima Hogg succeeded Katherine Parker, the society's first president, and for almost sixty years she remained a strong voice for symphonic music in Houston. In the 1930s, female supporters of the orchestra formed the Symphony League to assist in fundraising. Today it continues as a vital part of the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

The Chronicle Building, currently on the site, expanded in 1949 and wrapped itself around the Majestic Theatre (then the Nuevo Palacio), leaving evidence of the old building in the form of short stairwells where the buildings were joined.

11. SITE OF ODD FELLOWS BUILDING

(500 block of Louisiana Street)

The parking garage at the southwest corner of Louisiana and Prairie is the former site of the Odd Fellows Building, an important center of activity for black Houstonians in the 1930s. The



The 1937 graduates of Franklin Beauty School took classes in the basement of the Odd Fellows Building. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.



Nina Vance on stage at the Alley Theatre on Texas Avenue. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

building housed a variety of businesses, professional offices, and community organizations. The Franklin Beauty School occupied the basement. Its founder, Nobia Anita Franklin, had opened it in 1918 as one of the first beauty salons in Houston for African American women. Franklin soon expanded her enterprise to include training beauty operators. Scores of young women were trained here, and the school's graduation exercises became a widely anticipated event each year. Franklin Beauty School is still in existence today under the direction of Madame Franklin's descendants at a location on Martin Luther King Boulevard.

While the Franklin Beauty School was operating in the basement, the first floor housed a cafeteria and activity rooms for the Blue Triangle Branch of the YWCA, which had been organized for young African American women in 1918. Throughout the 1930s, as the Depression affected economic conditions, the YWCA served as an employment center for these women.

The upper floors of the Odd Fellows Building provided office space for professionals. Dr. Thelma Patten, one of Houston's first African American female physicians, was among those officed there. The building was razed in the 1960s.

This site is at the center of Houston's downtown performing arts district and remains a busy corner today as the 1000-car Alley Theatre Center parking garage.

12. ALLEY THEATRE

(615 Texas Avenue)

In 1947 a young drama teacher at San Jacinto High School named Nina Vance sent 214 penny postcards to persons she thought might be interested in paying a dime to become members of a new theatre group. The response was favorable and production immediately began on a play that was presented in a cramped dance studio off of a Main Street alleyway. That was the beginning of the Alley Theatre, which was the first resident professional theatre of its kind outside of New York City. The Alley moved to the Texas Avenue location in 1969 and erected a state-of-the-art building in which to stage a wide range of plays, from contemporary works to world-renowned classics. Nina Vance, an innovator who introduced theater-in-the-round to Houston audiences, continued as artistic director of the Alley until her death in 1980.

13. JESSE H. JONES HALL FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

(615 Louisiana Street)



Edna Saunders in her office surrounded by pictures of the stars she brought to Houston. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

For almost a century this block has been the site of many pleasurable experiences for Houstonians. Jones Hall was preceded by City Auditorium, which opened in 1910. A young woman named Edna Saunders accepted the position of booking agent for this new venue in spite of her father's admonition that it was "no job for a lady." In a city without professional performing groups, Saunders was faced with the formidable task of bringing cultural events to Houston. Over the next half century she became recognized as the most successful impresario in the Southwest. Among the performers appearing under "Edna Saunders Presents" were Enrico Caruso, Serge Rachmaninoff, Fritz Kreisler, Marian Anderson, John Philip Sousa, Will Rogers, and Katherine Hepburn. In addition, companies such as Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Metropolitan Opera became annual visitors to the city. Houston's present-day Society for the Performing Arts evolved from the precedent set by Saunders' dedication in providing Houstonians with the very finest in cultural events. Edna Saunders' contributions were recognized in 1966 when the Green Room in the newly opened Jones Hall was named for her.

Congratulations on completing this brief tour of women's history through sites in downtown historic Houston. These sites are just a sample of the many locations in the city that mark women's significant contributions to social, cultural, economic, and political life in Houston.