

Take A Walk In Houston's Historic First Ward

By Sandra Lord

ORIGINAL WARD BOUNDARIES

1st Ward, West of Main, North of Congress

2nd Ward, East of Main, North of Congress

3rd Ward, East of Main, South of Congress

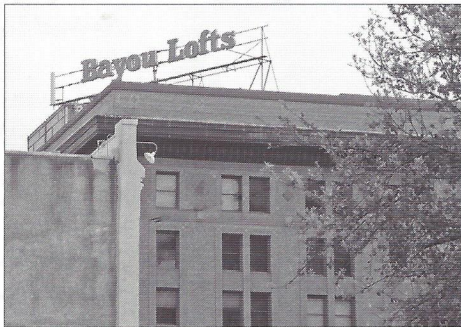
4th Ward, West of Main, South of Congress

In 1840, Houston's 62 blocks were divided into four political wards, governed by a mayor and up to eight aldermen—two from each ward.

This walking tour takes you past two sides of one block in Houston's original First Ward. Start your walk inside the Franklin Street Coffeehouse at 913 Franklin.

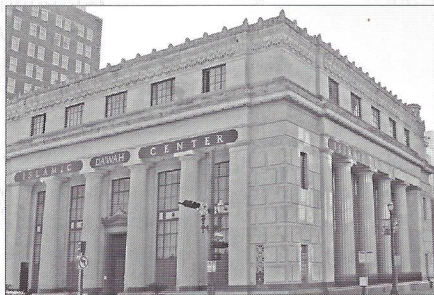
By 1873, Houston's growing railroad system had integrated with the national network. The Southern Pacific Railroad arrived in Houston in 1881 and, by 1912, was the city's largest local industry, employing over 6,000 people. In 1911, the general offices of the SP's Sunset Limited line moved into the Southern Pacific Building at 913 Franklin, designed by Chicago architect Jarvis Hunt. Hunt decorated the ninth floor façade with turquoise insets to remind customers that the Sunset Limited traveled through the Southwest.

Today, as the Bayou Lofts, the building houses 106 condominiums, as well as the Franklin Street Coffeehouse. The coffeehouse occupies space that was once home to Corrigan's jewelry store, as evidenced by the 1870 safe still residing in the ladies restroom.



The Islamic Da'Wah Center at 202 Main Street occupies Texas Governor Ross Sterling's 1928 Houston National Bank Building. With its eight imposing Doric columns facing Main and Franklin, the building resembles the Lincoln Memorial, which had opened six years earlier.

Inside, lavish Sienna and Belgian marble adorns pillars, counters, and railings, while Roman travertine and black Belgian marble cover the floors. A five-story vaulted ceiling soars 56 feet above the center of the lobby; it is covered with intricate tile designs accented by extensive gold leaf.



The mezzanine, with its original arched marble railing, overlooks red rugs covering a central prayer hall. In the basement, an open bank vault holds an Islamic library.

The six-story, 1904, neo-classical, limestone-faced Commercial

Bank Building located at 917 Franklin, is the oldest of the three remaining bank buildings occupying the Main and Franklin intersection, once the hub of Houston's financial district.

In 1886, with capital of \$500,000, Commercial became Houston's second national bank, with William Chew and John Dorrance as the main stockholders. Chew was also involved in cotton, wholesale grocery, dry goods, printing, railroads, and shipping, and served as vice president of the Driskill Hotel Company in Austin. Dorrance founded Dorrance & Co., one of Houston's oldest cotton firms.¹

On the Franklin Avenue and Main Street façades, notice the Ionic columns on either side of the curved gray-granite entry and the two trios of recessed arches simulating huge three-story windows on the third through fifth floors. A sixth floor was added later.

The Commercial Bank Building currently contains 40,000 square feet, has 15-foot ceilings on the first floor, and 11-foot ceilings on the remaining five floors.

Three buildings dating between 1872 and 1903 fill out the west side of the 100 block of Main Street.

The 1903 Italian Renaissance Dorrance Building at 114 Main Street is named after John W. Dorrance.

The building was originally home to the Postal Telegraph Co. and several banking companies, including Jesse Jones' National Bank of Commerce. Other tenants included William Marsh Rice and, after his death, the first offices of Rice Institute, the law offices of Baker & Botts, and the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. In 1915, Western Union, the successor to the Postal Telegraph Co., took over the building as principal tenant until 1970.

Early photos show that the façade of the 1876 Raphael Building at 110 Main Street originally matched that of the neighboring Brewster Building.

In February 1991, the three-story, 1872 Brewster Building at 108 Main Street was purchased by brothers-in-law John Anderson and Dave Edwards (not the same Dave Edwards who owns The Mercury Room).² Serving early Houston businesses as an office/warehouse building, this slim Italianate structure is Anderson's and Edwards' proudest possession. ■◆

