

Historic Preservation

by Minnette Boesel

“Houston historic preservationists have two tools; cajoling and bartering.”

This statement made by Donna Kristaponis, director of the City of Houston Planning and Development Department in the early 1990s resonated with the audience. She made it while addressing a group of preservationists as they were struggling to pass Houston’s first preservation ordinance. It was true! Houston, unlike almost every other municipality in the nation, had no public policy legislation that protected historic landmarks until 1995.

Nevertheless, as in other communities across the country where efforts were made to preserve historic buildings, Houston citizens over a 50-year period worked diligently, despite the many obstacles in their path, to ensure that its architecturally significant patrimony has remained.

Early Years and Post World War II

The first U.S. cities to recognize the larger vision of community management and protection of historic resources in the form of preservation ordinances were Charleston, South Carolina, in 1931 and New Orleans in 1936.

The postwar 1940s not only brought national prosperity but a new patriotic ethic toward the historic past. In 1949 the U.S. Congress chartered the National Trust for Historic Preservation in order to elevate the protection of our nation’s historic resources. In response,



there was a proliferation of local, non-profit organizations dedicated to preserving history in the 1950s.

Houston was no exception. Along with other venerable organizations such as the San Antonio Conservation Society and the Galveston Historical Foundation, the

Harris County Heritage Society was organized in 1954. Its original inspiration was to protect the 1847 Kellum-Noble House from destruction. Located in Sam Houston Park, Houston’s first park established in 1899, this house remains on its original site and has served as the catalyst for the

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in Houston...a History?



The Harris County Heritage Society was organized in 1954 to protect the 1847 Kellum-Noble House from being demolished. This house remains on its original site and has served as the catalyst for the Heritage Society to acquire eight other buildings and move them into the park as part of an interpretive center of Harris County's history.

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Early leaders of the Heritage Society included architect Harvin C. Moore, arts patron Ima Hogg, Faith Bybee, Hugh Potter, landscape architect Pat Fleming, and Marie Lee Phelps McAshan.¹

1960s: Activism Begins

The predominant trend in preservation in the 1950s and 1960s was to save and preserve individual landmarks. In 1966

Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act. For the first time a process was established whereby buildings, sites, objects, AND entire districts could be designated as part of a national inventory to be called the National Register of Historic Places. This inventory was to be maintained by the National Park Service within the U.S. Department of Interior with states having their own offices to help administer the program.

In Texas, a stand-alone agency was created, the Texas Historical Commission, ably lead by veteran state legislator Truett

Latimer as the first Texas State Historic Preservation Officer. County Historical Commissions were set up to help administer the Recorded Texas Historic Landmark program. In the Houston area, the Harris County Historical Commission (currently Chaired by Al Davis) is the local agency of the state commission that facilitates this historic designation process.

The first major postwar preservation issue in Houston occurred in the 1960s over the fate of Market Square bound by Milam Street, Congress Avenue, Travis Street, and Preston Street. When Houston was founded by brothers Augustus C. and John K. Allen in 1836, the square was originally named Congress Square anticipating that the capitol building of the Republic of Texas would be built and remain there. After the capitol was built at the corner of Texas Avenue and Main Street instead, the square was renamed Market Square. A public market was built on the western side and four city hall buildings were built (as each burned in succession) with the last one, complete with a gorgeous Seth Thomas clock in a tower, built in 1904.

By the 1960s, the 1904 City Hall and adjoining Market Building had suffered a fire, leading to the removal of its clock tower and a second tower. The decapitated building was relegated as a bus station and finally torn down. A new City Hall had been built a few blocks away in 1939. Mayor Lewis Cutrer and the city leadership considered selling Market Square to a hotel chain. Leaders of Houston's community such as Faith Bybee, a proponent of the arts and Texas' heritage, actively opposed this idea and proposed a park instead. Mayor Cutrer stated that, "A park would be just a tombstone...a gathering place for soapbox orators and crackpots..." and rejected the



Market Square (originally designated in 1836 as Congress Square and intended for the capitol building of the Republic of Texas) became the site of four of Houston's city halls, the last of which was built in 1904. Demolished by the city along with the adjacent public market building in the 1960s, the Seth Thomas clock (see photo above) disappeared until it was discovered in a northeast Texas amusement park in the 1980s. In 1996, thanks to the generosity of the Sol and Elaine Friedman and Frank K. Meyer families, the clock and one of the original city volunteer fire bells were reinstalled in a new tower emulating the original, designed by architect Barry Moore, at the corner of Congress Avenue and Travis Street.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library



proposal.² Hamilton Brown, a local architect, was also involved in the important preservation movement to save Market Square as well as Allen's Landing, the birthplace of Houston at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous.³ Finally, the city leadership yielded to the public square proponents and kept Market Square in city hands.

By the mid-1960s, the historic Market Square district became THE place to be. Clubs and restaurants burgeoned with musical talent. Tourists and residents alike visited the district, which even included an "underground" of shops. Outdoor art shows were set up. Even a newspaper called the *Market Square Gazette* was published. The attraction, of course, was Houston's pedestrian oriented historic buildings. Such preservation enthusiasts as young architecture graduate Bart Truxillo and preservation advocate Barrie Zimmelman began their involvement with historic preservation at Market Square. Although the square had been saved from developers, it was later turned into a

parking lot to accommodate the increase in visitors to the area.

1970s and Early 1980s: Prosperity Hurts

The 1970s and the early 1980s brought unparalleled prosperity to Houston. A massive building boom was fueled by the success of the energy industries and a large in-migration of job seekers to the city. The downtown skyline, primarily south of Texas Avenue and the Market Square historic area, became a sea of cranes as developers such as Gerald D. Hines and others created a new skyline designed by internationally acclaimed architects such as I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson.

Amidst this prosperity, preservation seemed to be left behind. As more and more class A office space became available, the downtown historic area became less desirable to tenants. With no zoning or public policy in place to protect older or historic areas, neighborhoods on the fringes of downtown felt more development pressure. Texas Eastern Corporation bought scores of blocks on the east side of downtown in an effort to assemble land for

future office tower development. Dozens of turn-of-the-twentieth-century houses and buildings were razed in this process.

In response to this, a handful of dedicated citizens began to organize, realizing the history of Houston's built environment was disappearing before their eyes. In 1978, several members of the Harris County Heritage Society felt there was a need for a stand-alone entity dedicated to preservation and formed the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (GHPA). Bart Truxillo and Beverly Pennington were early leaders of this group. Walking tours of the Market Square area and a book, entitled *Last of the Past*, focusing on downtown historic architecture were some of this group's first projects.

The fledgling Preservation Alliance also led a successful decade-long effort to save from demolition one of Houston's oldest commercial buildings, the Pillot Building (circa 1860), which had been purchased by Harris County as part of an office expansion program. This significant building, across the street from the old



The Pillot Building, one of Houston's oldest commercial buildings located at the corner of Fannin Street and Congress Avenue, was saved after a multiyear effort by members of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. The building with its cast iron ornamental detailing collapsed during renovation by The City Partnership, a private development company, and is mostly a reconstruction. The building reopened with a restaurant and offices in 1990.



Harris County Courthouse, has cast iron detailing including columns, lintels, and sills. Harris County Commissioner's Court signed a long-term lease with a development company, The City Partnership, led by Richard G. Knight, to renovate the building for use as commercial office space and ground floor retail. After years of renovation and reconstruction, the building reopened in 1990.

The 1976 United States Bicentennial also brought increased attention to Houston's heritage. The Junior League of Houston as a Bicentennial gift to the city raised several hundred thousand dollars to convert Market Square from a parking lot into a grassy park with large oak trees on the perimeter. As lakes and an underground parking garage were being constructed in conjunction with another new downtown park, Tranquility Park, dirt excavated there was brought to Market Square to create gentle berms⁴ in the landscape design.

Neighborhoods near the edge of downtown, such as the Sixth Ward, formed their own organizations. Old Sixth Ward Association worked hard with historians Janet Wagner and Stephen Shannon to have the neighborhood (bound by Houston Avenue, Washington Avenue, Memorial Drive, and Glenwood Cemetery) designated as the first National Register of Historic Places district in Houston in 1978. The Houston Heights Association was formed in 1973 to promote and protect Houston's first "suburban" neighborhood. In 1983 and 1984, the Heights Association succeeded in having 95 individual buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a Multiple Resource Area. An additional 31 buildings

have been listed since, albeit there is no protection for National Register designated properties, resulting in eight of those being demolished. The most recent loss was 1801 Ashland, which housed the popular Ashland Tea Room.

Neighborhood groups in Broadacres near Rice University and Courtlandt Place, two small early twentieth century elite neighborhoods, had their areas listed as historic districts in the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

The Market Square district also formed its own organization called the Houston Old Town Development Corporation in the late 1970s. This group focused on the historic designation of the area and hired Minnette Boesel and architectural historians Barrie Scardino and Stephen Fox to compile the necessary documentation to have what became the Main Street/Market Square Historic District, bound roughly by Buffalo Bayou, Milam Street, Texas Avenue, and San Jacinto Street, listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1983.

African-American preservationists banded together to protect landmarks such as the late nineteenth-century Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest African-American Baptist church in Houston, located downtown at 500 Clay Avenue. When developers purchased blocks of property to create and build the Allen Center office complex, Martha C. Whiting, great-granddaughter of Rev. Jack

Yates, the congregation's first pastor, twice persuaded church members to reject offers from developers and saved the church from destruction by refusing to sell. Its architectural beauty and tranquil site offer a respite to the office buildings around it.

The Winds of Positive Political Change

The new federal tax legislation passed in 1976 with revisions in 1981 and 1986 provided historic investment tax credits for qualifying rehabilitation expenditures for commercial, income-producing structures that were listed in the National Register (the current version allows a 20% investment tax credit). The work must adhere to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. These tax incentives have led to an incredible renovation boom across the country. The single largest historic tax act project in the 1980s took place in Houston. Texas Commerce Bank restored and renovated the fabulous Art Deco Gulf Building originally built in 1929 by "Mr. Houston" Jesse H. Jones and designed by Kenneth Franzheim and Alfred C. Finn.

Local legislative change in Houston was led by Houston's first female councilmember, Eleanor Tinsley. Among quality of life issues such as parks, no smoking, and billboards, preservation was an important topic for Mrs. Tinsley. Her political courage led to the passage in the mid-1980s of a city tax exemption ordinance for Houston buildings listed in the National Register that were rehabilitated. She also

helped establish and appoint the Houston Archaeological & Historical Commission in 1984, an advisory body to the Mayor and Council. Preservation advocate Barrie Zimmelman became the city's first historic preservation officer.

Late 1980s: The Downturn Has a Silver Lining

The economic downturn related to the oil bust of the mid and late 1980s was brutal in Houston and throughout Texas. At one point Houston unemployment reached a near-record 10%. Thousands of foreclosure postings were made by Harris County each month. The quip "Barely alive in '85, no quick fix in '86, chapter 7 in '87" seemed to ring true for many Texans. The massive

building boom of the previous decade seemed to grind to an abrupt halt. The federal government set up offices for the Resolution Trust Corporation just for the state of Texas to dispose of foreclosed-on real estate. Joel W. Barna's book, *The See-Through Years*, chronicled the speculative real estate ventures that left a plethora of empty commercial buildings "seen through."⁵

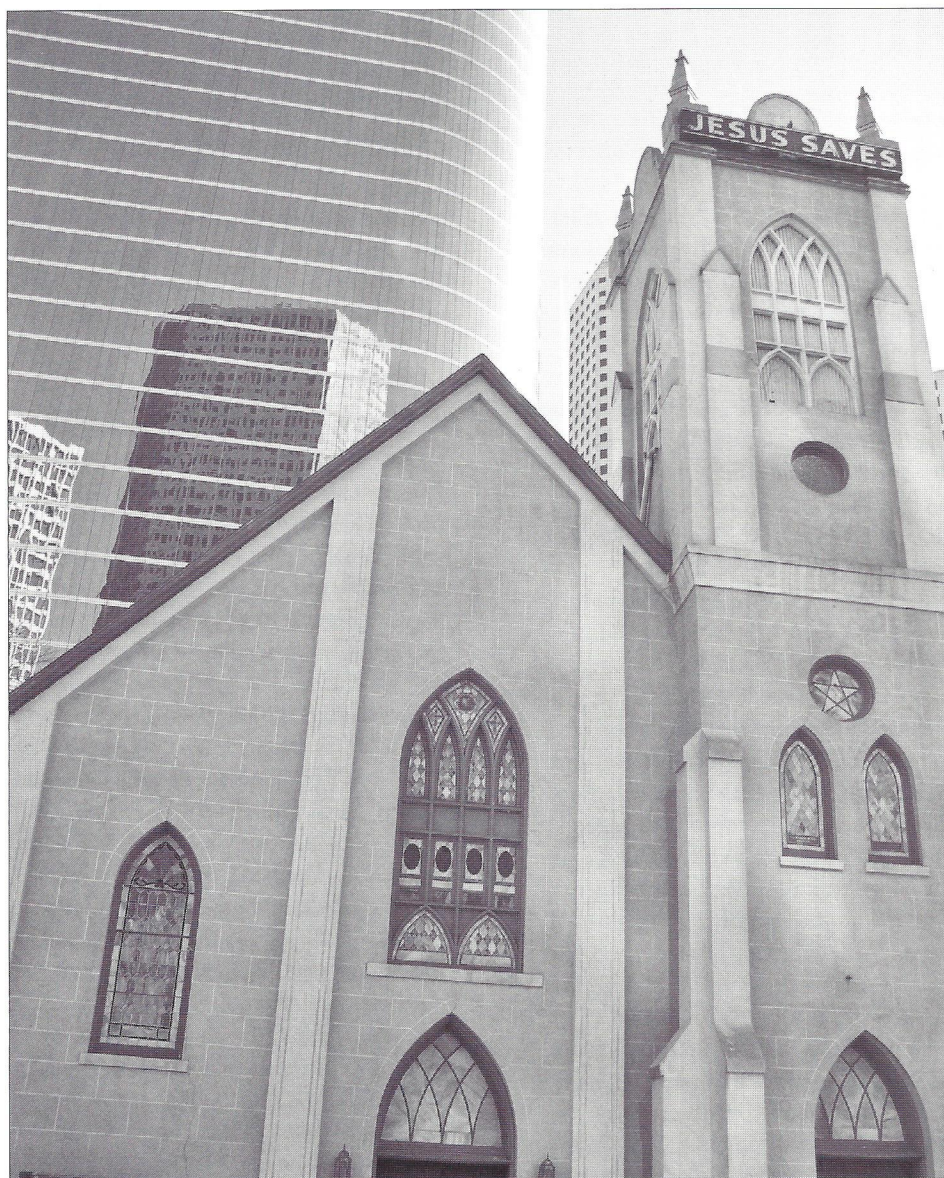
The good news for preservation was that historic buildings and neighborhoods were not as threatened by rising property values and new development. The citizens of Houston had to pay attention to improving and enhancing their city. Too

busy with a robust economy, Houston's leadership had never fully utilized or developed the kind of economic and development programs and tools that other American cities had been using for decades.

In Houston's trademark fashion of rising to the occasion, many of the city's residents formed organizations to enhance economic development and quality of life issues. Houston Proud organized in 1986 and garnered thousands of volunteers to help with special events, clean up parks and roadways, and help with neighborhood revitalization and other tasks. Trees for Houston formed to plant thousands of trees throughout the city. The Houston Economic Development Council (now a part of the Greater Houston Partnership) formed to help diversify the economy and attract new businesses.

Historic preservation benefited from these efforts. The Greater Heights Chamber of Commerce launched a division focusing on the neighborhood's 19th Avenue historic commercial corridor which had mostly vacant storefronts. This successful program became a participant in the Texas Main Street Program, a popular revitalization initiative of the Texas Historical Commission and the National Trust for Historic Preservation's nationwide Main Street Program. The first restaurant to open in the restored 1921 Simon Lewis Building was Carter & Cooley Deli, still in operation, by Neil Sackheim and Randy Pace. Successes of the program included the rehabilitation of 33 buildings, 27 new businesses established or expanded, and approximately 148 new jobs with a total private sector reinvestment of over \$2 million. The city granted the Heights Chamber of Commerce a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) to help administer the program. The area remains today as a successful and fun place to visit and shop.

Although buildings in neighborhoods like the Main Street/Market Square Historic District were not torn down for new construction, preservationists had the new challenge of encouraging property owners to keep their historic buildings standing, in many cases empty, so that when the economy did turn around they could be redeveloped into historic pedestrian areas. In an effort to encourage the revitalization of the Main Street/Market Square Historic District, the Downtown



African-American preservationists banded together to protect the late nineteenth-century Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, the oldest African-American Baptist church in Houston. When developers purchased blocks of property around the church, church members led by Martha C. Whiting, great-granddaughter of Rev. Jack Yates, the congregation's first pastor, saved the church from destruction by refusing to sell. The church is a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.



The Kennedy Corner Building (c. 1860) served as a Confederate arsenal during the Civil War. GHPA and the Downtown Historic District group persuaded the city to commit \$126,000 to the owner who, unfortunately, tore the building down anyway in 1991. It is now a vacant lot. Left to right: Jill Sewell, Past President of the San Antonio Conservation Society; Kent Millard, Greater Houston Preservation Alliance student intern; Margie Elliott, first Executive Director of Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, Guy Hagstette, architect; and Minnette Boesel, Executive Director (at the time), Market Square Historic District Project, Downtown Houston Association (later incorporated as Downtown Historic District, Inc.) Photo taken in 1990.

Courtesy Greater Houston Preservation Alliance

Houston Association and Diverseworks Artspace teamed up with the Parks and Recreation Department to redesign Market Square and erect artwork by international artists who collaborated on an urban design that spoke to the importance of preserving the area. Fragments of demolished buildings were inserted into the walkways and local photographer Paul Hester made photo tiles for the benches that depicted the loss of Houston's historic buildings.

In 1988, the Downtown Houston Association, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, Central Houston, the Rice Design Alliance, and other organizations held a preservation conference entitled, "It's Time to Capitalize on Our Historic Assets." The main focus was on the

Main Street/Market Square Historic District and how it would be saved and preserved. Experts were brought in from around the country. Following the conference, architect Guy Hagstette helped compile drawings and information on the historic neighborhood's future into a publication.

It was determined that a stand-alone organization was needed to help with the revitalization. The Greater Houston Preservation Alliance in partnership with the Downtown Houston Association launched the Market Square Historic District Project in 1991. This program began as part of the Downtown Houston Association and after three years of fundraising,

included a Community Development Block Grant from the city and acceptance into the Texas Main Street Program. With two fulltime staff, including Minnette Boesel, the project was later incorporated as the Downtown Historic District, Inc. Over half a million dollars was raised through the generous support of the Houston Endowment and other sources for a façade grant program. Matching grants of up to \$10,000 were given to owners rehabilitating the exterior of their historic buildings. Special events were held to promote the area and a committee was formed to promote business in clubs and restaurants. These efforts helped fuel millions of investment dollars in new residential, restaurant, and entertainment businesses and the renovation of over 30 buildings.

The 1990s: Resurgence Begins

As the economy began to improve in Houston in the mid 1990s, the city's preservationists began to see more positive change. First and foremost was public policy. The 1993 fall election had a zoning referendum on the ballot. After several years of work, mapping and scores of civic meetings throughout the city, this referendum of "Houston Style Zoning" as it was called, was defeated by a thin margin of 51%. The ordinance would have had a preservation component.

With the encouragement of Planning and Development Department director Donna Kristaponis and Mayor Bob Lanier, a stand-alone preservation ordinance was drafted by the city's legal department for consideration. The GHPA led the charge and appointed a special committee to work on educating the public at large, councilmembers, and planning commissioners on the merits of such an ordinance. After many meetings and multiple public hearings, Mayor Lanier appointed a special task force comprised of preservationists, developers, and others to study the issue. Chaired by Marvin Katz, the chair of the Planning and Development Commission, the task force finally came to a consensus and in March 1995, city council passed the ordinance.

A companion ordinance was also introduced by Mayor Lanier changing Councilmember Tinsley's original tax exemption ordinance to a more favorable

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the funding source many other southern cities used to destroy the comparable neighborhoods in the 1950s and 1960s.

TO: Despite the importance of this neighborhood, opposition to its preservation continued from developers as well as local government.

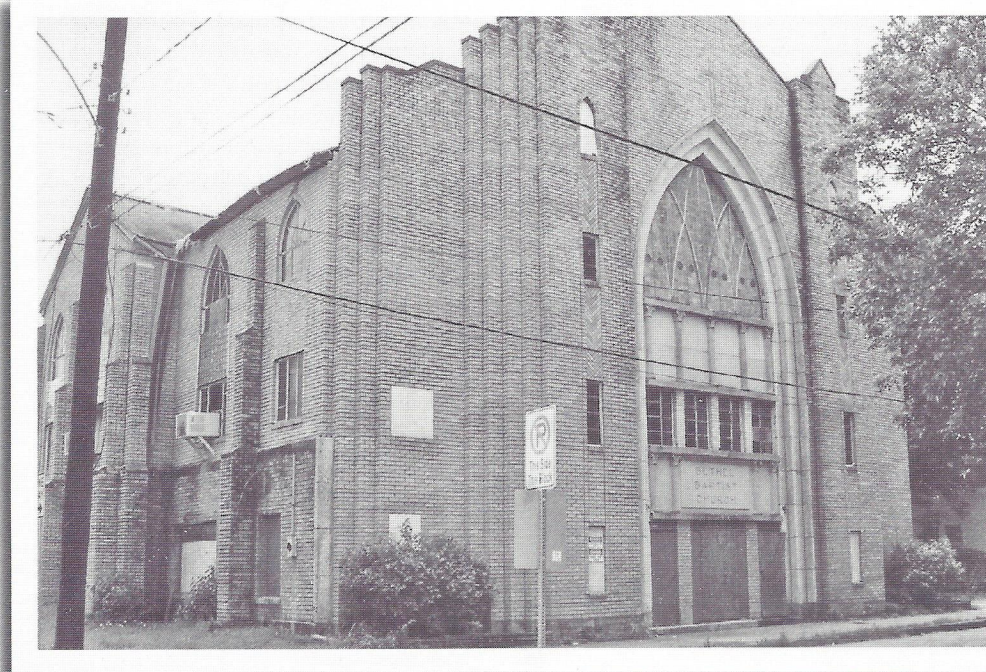
SF: The powers that be were never willing to concede that Fourth Ward had any cultural importance; that buildings, streets, the people who lived there in any way contributed to the identity of Houston. There was never any opportunity at the top to address the situation in a positive way. They—city officials, officials of the public housing authority, prominent citizens involved with a series of redevelopment initiatives—were all so sure that they could come in and sweep everything away. When they encountered resistance, they would never make any substantive compromise to achieve what they wanted... It was very frustrating; the unwillingness of the city government and the civic elite to revise their

conviction that Houston had no history worth preserving and that if it did, it wasn't to be found in Fourth Ward.

TO: Do you see any success in Freedmen's Town?

SF: For the most part, no. I'm too aware of what was lost. I guess the good thing is the city maintained the historic widths of the streets, one of the most unusual features of Fourth Ward, rather than widening them. In other nineteenth-century Houston neighborhoods, you find isolated instances of unusually narrow streets, but no other neighborhood where all the streets were consistently narrow. Some houses and institutional buildings in Fourth Ward have survived. The Housing Authority of the City of Houston created a "historic district" of moved and rehabilitated houses in the 1500 and 1600 blocks of Andrews Street. The Rutherford B. H. Yates Museum, a non-profit neighborhood preservation group begun by Catherine Roberts, has succeeded against great odds and

continuing tribulations in preserving several significant buildings and carrying out archaeological and historical research. But tragically, the Freedmen's Town Historic District has lost its integrity. This is not simply an issue of the loss of buildings but of a cultural landscape preserved by generations of Houstonians of color who made Fourth Ward, in the words of writer Olive Hershey, the "soul of Houston." ♦



Bethel Baptist Church on Andrews St. was founded by Rev. Jack Yates in 1891. The current structure was erected in 1923 and over seventy years later was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Over the past several years, the church has fallen into disrepair as the congregation's members could not afford the upkeep. On January 24, 2005, fire gutted the already damaged church and the wrecking ball quickly arrived. Community and church leaders immediately stepped in and saved the building's walls from total demolition. Efforts continue to create a feasible plan that would preserve this historic structure.

Courtesy Tim O'Brien

Freedmen's Town in the 1920s has been described as Houston's Harlem. Restaurants, jazz spots, and night clubs dotted the landscape, and were frequented by Houston's white citizens as well. The main commercial strip was along West Dallas Street.

Since its heyday, most of Freedmen's Town, like the Rainbow Theatre seen here at 907 W. Dallas St., has been demolished.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

