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Decorative Arts Museum
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“Map of the City of Houston”

1,250 words

Map of the City of Houston: Flooded but Flourishing

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Few cities in the United States surpass the nation's fourth largest, Houston, Texas, in diversity, economic growth, or opportunity. Founded by brothers Augustus Chapman Allen and John Kirby Allen in 1836, the town boasted incredible potential from the two visionaries, yet lacked initial appeal. Within Houston Baptist University's Decorative Arts Museum lies a large map of the city, created from the surveys of W.E. Wood in 1869. The map was gifted to the museum by the Morris family, with only a few copies known to exist.¹ The map tells a much larger story than the mere snapshot of roads and rail lines among the newly established bayou city. It is a memorial to the rich history and humble beginnings of Houston. While the observer may notice intricate pictures around the map, the eyes are immediately drawn to the blue and seafoam-green dividing lines, separating the city's five historic wards, met in the middle by two joining bodies of water. These two pillars of the city's epicenter, Whiteoak Bayou and Buffalo Bayou, are a testament to what birthed one of the most booming cities in America amidst the turmoil of the Civil War. This map draws attention to how water has been such an integral part of Houston's history, as both its strongest asset and greatest enemy.

A physical description of the map is necessary to understand the larger story of Houston's history. The map is roughly 5'9" by 6'4", outlined in a simple wooden frame which protects the integrity of the paper. Atop the map lies a small, yet intimidating portrait of Sam Houston, watching over his namesake city. Underneath the Battle of San Jacinto's hero, credits are noted to the lithographer, W.H. Rease, and images by J.P. Blessing, both local Houston artisans.

¹ "Map of the City of Houston," paper, 1869; 301.300, Decorative Arts Museum, Houston, TX.

Framing the map are numerous landmark buildings such as The Old Capitol, Christ Church, and Pillot Building, a few of which still stand as historic preservations or recreations. Most noticeably, the map is distinctly divided into five wards.² It is worth noting that only the first, second, and fourth wards contain marked cemeteries according to the map, likely due to the high slave population within Houston, which will be discussed further. The map offers a visual representation of Houston a little over three decades after the city's founding. Yet the many city streets and commerce the map displays are vastly different than their humble beginnings in 1836.

In the 1830's as the Allen brothers began building Houston, they appealed to the government and American masses by boasting of the opportunity which lay within the wet marsh of southern Texas. The two saw the potential of the city, and recognized its distinct advantage over other southern cities: the water access. They advertised the easy accessibility for boats to sail up Buffalo Bayou for trade and enter the port of Galveston. Yet upon the first settlers' arrival, in the steamboat *Laura* in 1837, they were unimpressed, met with a barren "city" and debris in the bayou which made passage nearly impossible. One of the boat's passengers Francis R. Lubbock noted the bayou was "choked with branches and the town almost invisible."³ This simple image is difficult to imagine, even looking at the 1869 map, as in 32 short years, Houston was already expanding and flourishing. By spring of 1838, the city's population would grow to roughly 2,100...an incredible feat for less than two years.⁴ The bayous would expand and become a central connection to Galveston and shipping trade with the rest of the United States and the world. After the death of John Kirby Allen, a group of men obtained a charter to increase

² "Map of the City of Houston," Decorative.

³ David G. McComb, "Houston, Tx," Texas State Historical Association, June 15, 2010, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdh03>

⁴ Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *The Port of Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas, 1968), <https://books.google.com/books>

the economic and commercial establishments of the city.⁵ This group would begin the full expansion of Houston, one of which was E.S. Perkins, whose home is depicted in the second image on the top of the map.⁶

Yet the Bayou City was not just a humid utopia, but one of dark enterprise and victim to destructive natural disaster. Houston followed the rest of the South in participating in the slave trade, the port of Galveston offering easy access to this horrific method of cheap labor. By 1860, nearly 22 percent of the city's population was made up of slaves.⁷ The railways and waterways made transport of slaves convenient for the South, and made Houston an ideal hub for slave transport. While Houstonians chose to partake in the horrors of slave trading, there was a natural threat which could not be predicted. Foreboding and unpredictable, hurricanes have always plagued the south, and Houston in its beginning was no exception. The original settlers attempted to drain the water from the city with little success, as rain relentlessly pounded the city year after year. Between 1836 and 1936, the city would withstand 16 major floods, most devastating being the Galveston Storm of 1900 which claimed the lives of nearly 8,000 people.⁸ The bayous and waterways which offered so much hope and wealth to the city, would also claim life and test the perseverance of Houstonian residents.

As the city progressed through the Civil War, Houston continued to thrive despite the country's demolished state. Due to its geographical separation from the war zones, and close access to the Galveston port, the city continued to boom. While the Civil war tore the country

⁵ Marilyn McAdams Sibley, *The Port of Houston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas, 1968), <https://books.google.com/books>

⁶ "Map of the City of Houston," Decorative.

⁷ Levenson, 403.

⁸ "Harris County's Flooding History," Harris County Flood Control District, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://www.hcfcfd.org/flooding-floodplains/harris-countys-flooding-history/>

apart, “the wartime economic boom attracted so many laborers [to Houston] ...that the city experienced a net population increase of almost 100 percent...[F]rightened by the island city’s vulnerability to attack, merchants and affluent Galvestonians began to relocate inland.”⁹ When W.E. Wood’s surveys led to the 1869 map’s creation, the country was only four years removed from one of the bloodiest wars in American history. An inscription in the left top corner of the map notes the city population at roughly 15,000 and total real estate value at \$7,000,000.¹⁰ These numbers testify to Houston’s innovation and prosperity, even among destruction. The city’s connection to water is undeniable, and stands forever commemorated through the 1869 map.

The two bayous which intersects Houston’s city center are an integral focal point of “The Map of the City of Houston” from W.E. Wood’s surveys, and speak to the power behind Houston’s unprecedented growth and power. Water is essential to the story of Houston’s past and is what set the city apart from the rest of the south. This map is a representation of Houston’s strong economic past, one that is filled with passion and perseverance in the wake of post-Civil War reconstruction. The city stands as a testament to the American dream, one formed from humble beginnings and small victories. This 1869 map of Houston stands as a physical representation of Houston’s standing as a microcosm of the American dream, through its citizen’s dedication to innovation and opportunity.

⁹ Paul A. Levensgood, “In the Absence of Scarcity: The Civil War Prosperity of Houston, Texas,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (1998): 401-426, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30239127>, 407.

¹⁰ “Map of the City of Houston,” Decorative.

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