

THE TOWN OF HOUSTON.

SITUATED at the head of navigation, on the West bank of Buffalo Bayou, is now for the first time brought to public notice because, until now, the proprietors were not ready to offer it to the public, with the advantages of capital and improvements.

The town of Houston is located at a point on the river which must ever command the trade of the largest and richest portion of Texas. By reference to the map, it will be seen that the trade of San Jacinto, Spring Creek, New Kentucky and the Brazos, above and below Fort Bend, must necessarily come to this place, and will at this time warrant the employment of at least ONE MILLION DOLLARS of capital, and when the rich lands of this country shall be settled, a trade will flow to it, making it, beyond all doubt, the great interior commercial emporium of Texas.

The town of Houston is distant 15 miles from the Brazos river, 30 miles, a little North of East, from San Felipe, 60 miles from Washington, 40 miles from Lake Creek, 30 miles South West from New Kentucky, and 15 miles by water and 8 or 10 by land above Harrisburg. Tide water runs to this place and the lowest depth of water is about six feet. Vessels from New Orleans or New York can sail without obstacle to this place, and steamboats of the largest class can run down to Galveston Island in 8 or 10 hours, in all seasons of the year. It is but a few hours sail down the bay, where one may take an excursion of pleasure and enjoy the luxuries of fish, fowl, oysters and sea bathing. Galveston harbor being the only one in which vessels drawing a large draft of water can navigate, must necessarily render the Island the great naval and commercial depot of the country.

The town of Houston must be the place where arms, amunitions and provisions for the government will be stored, because, situated in the very heart of the country, it combines security and the means of easy distribution, and a national armory will no doubt very soon be established at this point.

There is no place in Texas more healthy, having an abundance of excellent spring water, and enjoying the sea breeze in all its freshness. No place in Texas possesses so many advantages for building, having Pine, Ash, Cedar and Oak in inexhaustible quantities; also the tall and beautiful Magnolia grows in abundance. In the vicinity are fine quarries of stone.

Nature appears to have designated this place for the future seat of Government. It is handsome and beautifully elevated, salubrious and well watered, and now in the very heart or centre of population, and will be so for a length of time to come. It combines two important advantages: a communication with the coast and foreign countries, and with the different portions of the Republic. As the country shall improve, rail roads will become in use, and will be extended from this point to the Brazos, and up the same, also from this up to the head waters of San Jacinto, embracing that rich country, and in a few years the whole trade of the upper Brazos will make its way into Galveston Bay through this channel.

Preparations are now making to erect a water Saw Mill, and a large Public House for accommodation, will soon be opened. Steamboats now run in this river, and will in a short time commence running regularly to the Island.

The proprietors offer the lots for sale on moderate terms to those who desire to improve them, and invite the public to examine for themselves.

A. C. ALLEN, for
A. C. & J. K. ALLEN.

August 30, 1836.—6m

The Commercial Bulletin, of New Orleans, Mobile Advertiser, the Globe, at Washington, Morning Courier and New York Enquirer, New York Herald, and Louisville Public Advertiser are requested to make three insertions of this advertisement, and forward their bills to this office for payment.

Ad from August 20, 1836, *Telegraph and Texas Register*, promoting the new town of Houston.

The Audacious Launch of the City of Houston: Capital of the Republic of Texas

BY STEPHEN C. COOK*

TOWN OF HOUSTON – Situated at the head of navigation, on the West Bank of Buffalo Bayou, is now for the first time brought to public notice because, until now, the proprietors were not ready to offer it to the public, with the advantages of capital and improvements. . . . Vessels from New Orleans or New York can sail without obstacle to this place, and steamboats of the largest class can run down to Galveston in 8 or 10 hours, in all seasons of the year. . . . There is no place in Texas more healthy, having an abundance of excellent spring water, and enjoying the sea breeze in all its freshness.—*Telegraph and Texas Register*, August 30, 1836

THE AUDACIOUS LAUNCH OF HOUSTON, TEXAS, BEGAN WITH A BOLD newspaper advertisement placed by Houston's founding brothers, Augustus Chapman Allen and John Kirby Allen, formerly of New York. The Allen brothers' claims soon "went viral," to the extent possible in the early nineteenth century. From the beginning, the aggressive marketing of Houston was at best aspirational and often more prone to simple exaggeration. Given the multitude of challenges of the time, it is remarkable that Houston took root.

Today's city of Houston recently celebrated its 180th birthday and has achieved much on a global scale, but there was great difficulty surviving even the first 180 days. The extreme contrast of its uncertain launch and the city that emerged is worth examining and is a testament to the persistence of its founding brothers and to the active support of Charlotte Baldwin Allen, the wife of Augustus, and a leading figure in Houston until her death in 1895. In light of the devastating floods in Houston in August 2017, the history of the site selection for the "Bayou City" also has added relevance.

* This is an adaptation of Stephen C. Cook's Presidential Address on March 3, 2017, at the Annual Meeting of the Texas State Historical Association in Houston. The address was presented in the Crystal Ballroom of The Rice, formerly the Rice Hotel, which was at one time the largest hotel in the South and the location of the capital of the Republic of Texas, beginning in 1837. Mr. Cook is a native Houstonian and president of Fieldstone Partners, a private investment firm in Houston. His great grandfather, Guy M. Bryan, a nephew of Stephen F. Austin, was one of the founders of TSHA in 1897.

Modern-day journalists would no doubt enjoy doing a critical “fact check” of the August 1836 newspaper advertisement that launched Houston. Consider these examples:

“Head of Navigation”: the planned town of Houston, at the confluence of Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou, was not the practical head of navigation of Buffalo Bayou. The more defensible “head of navigation” at that time was the town of Harrisburg at the confluence downstream of a much wider Buffalo Bayou and the Brays Bayou. Over time, the serpentine twelve-mile bayou journey upstream from Harrisburg to Houston was improved, but it was almost impassable in 1836 and 1837. The early trips between Houston and Galveston were not eight to ten hours but often several days in length. Many steamships needed to navigate their return backwards, a procedure used by the steamboat *Constitution* in June 1837, for lack of an adequate turning basin.¹ Even today, the turning basin of the world-class Houston Ship Channel is actually in the vicinity of old Harrisburg, a town annexed by modern Houston, but well downstream from downtown Houston.

“Now for the first time” was an interesting choice of words from the Allen brothers, as they had just purchased the Houston land four days before the advertisement, and the paper was published only weekly. The ink was barely dry on their deeds.

“With the advantages of capital and improvements” must have referred to the capital and improvements that the brothers hoped would be attracted from others over time, for they certainly did not bring any significant capital. The Allen brothers bought the land for a small amount of cash and a larger amount of seller notes from members of the John Austin family, distant cousins of Stephen F. Austin. The cash down payment even had to be borrowed separately. The town of Houston was launched largely on credit and the urgent hope that the town lots would sell quickly.

“There is no place in Texas more healthy” was one of the most extreme assertions, along with “a sea breeze in all its freshness.” Early Houston was neither healthy nor fresh. A yellow fever epidemic in 1839 caused the loss of 12 percent of the population, followed by similar epidemics in 1844, 1847, 1848, 1854, 1859, 1862, and 1867.² Were it not for the correct diagnosis of this mosquito-delivered disease in the late nineteenth century, as well as the arrival of air conditioning in the twentieth century, few people might have remained in Houston.

When Houston was first advertised, there were no houses, roads, port, or churches; there was only a handful of people and an abundance of

¹ *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), June 1, 1837. The steamboat *Constitution* is not to be confused with the U.S. Navy frigate of the same name, otherwise known as *Old Ironsides*.

² David G. McComb, “Houston, TX, *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hdho3>> [Accessed July 24, 2017].

humidity. Houston was simply a concept on a clean sheet of paper, albeit splattered with mud whenever the frequent Gulf Coast rains arrived. The launch of Houston in 1836 and 1837 was improbable at best.

The fragile position of the proposed new town in 1836 should be considered within the context of the equally fragile status of the embryonic Republic of Texas. The Allen brothers completed the August purchase of the Houston land only four months after the Battle of San Jacinto had been won, on April 21, and evacuees from the panic fueled Runaway Scrape were still in the process of returning to their homes, many of which had been burned by the Mexican Army or by the settlers themselves. General Antonio López de Santa Anna remained at that moment a hostage of the Texas Army, held to discourage a renewed attack by the Mexican Army.

The fear of a second war with the Mexican Army was real. *The Secret Journals of the Senate, Republic of Texas* includes a confidential letter from U.S. President Andrew Jackson to Sam Houston, dated September 4, 1836, encouraging Houston to treat Santa Anna honorably, in large part as a form of self-defense for the young Republic:

... his person is still of much consequence to you. He is the pride of the Mexican soldiery and the favorite of the priesthood; and whilst he is in your power the priests will not furnish the supplies necessary for another campaign, nor will the regular soldier voluntarily march when their reentering Texas may endanger or cost their favorite General his life; therefore preserve his life and the chances are you have won.³

When Sam Houston was elected president of the Republic of Texas on September 5, 1836, with 77 percent of the vote, there was also a referendum on whether to pursue annexation by the United States. The referendum passed with 3,277 citizens of the Republic voting for and only 91 against, an affirmative vote of 97.3 percent. The outcome was driven in large part by a desire for protection from Mexico by the United States.⁴ That merger, however, required nine more years to complete, so Texas homeland security remained a constant concern in the early years of Houston.

The potential security threat came not just from the south, but also from the north and the west. The infant Republic was still threatened

³ Ernest William Winkler (ed.), *Secret Journals of the Senate, Republic of Texas, 1836–1845* (Austin: Austin Printing Company, 1911), 12–13.

⁴ Eugene C. Barker, "The Annexation of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 50 (July 1946): 51, 52. As Eugene Barker commented "Whatever individual leaders may have thought about maintaining independence, the people of Texas were never of two minds. They had come from the United States to settle, and, now that the revolution was successful, they wanted to return to the United States, taking Texas with them"; *Ibid*, 51.

by hostile Indian tribes. On May 19, 1836, more than 500 Comanches, Kiowas, and other allied tribes attacked Fort Parker, which was located less than 170 miles northwest of Houston and even closer to other Texas settlements. Five Texas settlers were killed and eleven-year-old Cynthia Ann Parker was famously captured, beginning her twenty-five-years of life with the Comanches.⁵

In many changes of government following a revolution, there is at least a core of political infrastructure left to be assumed and perhaps fine-tuned. In the Republic of Texas, all of that still needed to be defined. Texas had few roads, no mail system, confusion over land titles, and an empty treasury. When the Allen brothers purchased the land for Houston, the first session of the Republic's Congress had not yet been held.

When the First Congress of the Republic finally convened in Columbia, south of Houston, on October 3, 1836, Ira Ingram from Matagorda was elected the first Speaker of the House. His opening comments reflected the mood of the day, with a mix of both anxiety and excitement:

An infant nation, in the cradle of her political being, meeting for the first time, by their immediate representatives, in the midst of a revolution, and on ground but recently marked by the retiring footsteps of a powerful invader, to undertake the discharge of the solemn, the sacred functions of legislators, cannot fail to excite in the bosom of every patriotic citizen, the deepest, the most lively, and the most thrilling sensations.⁶

On the second day of the First Congress, David C. Burnet, the interim president, presented his State of the Republic report to a joint session, with the Texas Revolution still referenced in present tense. These excerpts echo Speaker Ingram:

Among the many revolutions that have varied the political condition of men, few have exemplified more clearly, than that in which we are now engaged, the controlling supervision and the high approbation of a beneficent Providence. . . .

And whether she [Texas] take her station among the illustrious constellation of the North, or revolve on her own axis and within her own sphere, that she may display, not only the goodness of God, but the wisdom and prescience of her early legislators.⁷

⁵ Art Leatherwood, "Fort Parker," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/uef13>> [Accessed July 15, 2017]; Margaret Schmidt Hacker, "Parker, Cynthia Ann," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fpa18>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

⁶ *Journals of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas: First Congress, First Session* (Houston: Office of the Telegraph, 1838), 4. Available online at http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/scanned/CongressJournals/01/HJournal1stCong_1.pdf [Accessed July 25, 2017].

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

Burnet continued in his opening report to summarize recent events and to lay out candidly many of the shortcomings of the new Republic, including these:

The government *ad interim*, over which I have the honor to preside, has hitherto conducted its labors under every imaginable difficulty. . . .

At this gloomy period, the financial affairs of the country were in a condition more deplorable than its military equipments. . . .

Some other course was necessary, and the government resolved to issue script for land, considering the public domain as the most available, and the least objectionable source of public revenue. . . .

The military organization of the country is defective in many respects, and will require your early attention. . . .

The present condition of the Navy is by no means commensurate with the importance of that arm of the public defence. . . .

The judicial department of the government is in a very imperfect state. . . .

The Post Office establishment created by the late Provisional government, ceased its operations soon after the advance of the enemy within our settlements, and they have not been resumed.⁸

Burnet injected a degree of optimism toward the end of his report, although the focus remained first to resolve the issues with Mexico:

There is a multitude of subjects that would naturally present themselves to the legislators of Texas. But they belong to your successors, while to us pertains the arduous task of adjusting the controversy with Mexico. The hand of Providence has been prodigal in its dispensations to our favored land. In its agricultural capabilities it is unexcelled. Its champaign surface invites the construction of rail roads and canals, in all directions; and future exploration will disclose inexhaustible mineral wealth, comprising gold, silver, lead and iron.⁹

In summary, the precarious odds for the new town of Houston were combined with the uncertain odds for the Republic of Texas itself. The multiplication rule of probability requires that if two uncertain events both need to occur for success, those fractional odds need to be multiplied together, thereby reducing the probability of success even further.

⁸ Ibid., 11–18.

⁹ Ibid., 20.



Augustus Allen. MSSo 157-0057, Houston Public Library, HMRC.



John Kirby Allen. Msso 157-0405, Houston Public Library, HMRC.



Charlotte Allen. MS. A. C. ALLEN PORTRAIT Item 853, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

Augustus Allen was an accomplished mathematician and understood the long odds for Houston better than most.

Augustus Allen, known by many of his friends as “A. C.,” graduated from the Polytechnic Institute at Chittenango, New York, at the age of seventeen, and quickly became a professor of mathematics. In 1827, at age twenty-one, he resigned his professorship to enter the world of business, becoming an accountant in New York City.¹⁰

Both Augustus and his younger brother, John Kirby, grew to become able and confident entrepreneurs. John Kirby took his first job at the age of seven as a hotel callboy in Orrville, New York, near Syracuse. He became a clerk in a store three years later, and then partnered with a friend in a hat store in Chittenango. The brothers moved to New York City to join the merchant company H. and H. Canfield in 1827, where they later both became stockholders. They lived in New York City for five years before immigrating to Texas in 1832, settling initially in San Augustine and then moving to Nacogdoches.¹¹ Their time in New York City certainly influenced their views of how a city might be developed.

Augustus Allen married Charlotte Marie Baldwin on May 3, 1831. The daughter of Eliza Warden Baldwin and Dr. Jonas Cutler Baldwin, a physician and successful entrepreneur, Charlotte was moderately wealthy in her own right. She is frequently and appropriately referred to as the “Mother of Houston,” and her continuing influence in Houston significantly outlasted that of both of the Allen brothers. Although it does not appear that any of her wealth directly funded the purchase of Houston, she certainly encouraged and supported her husband’s activities. She was also the primary hostess in the town’s early days.¹²

Charlotte’s upbringing among her father’s business ventures likely contributed to her willingness to see husband Augustus take his chances and depart for the frontier of Texas in the summer of 1832, barely one year after their marriage. Dr. Baldwin had developed in 1808 the Baldwin Canal in Baldwinsville, New York, northwest of Syracuse. The Baldwin Canal was later connected to the Oswego Canal and thus to the Erie Canal. Dr. Baldwin also built a dam across the Seneca River. Charlotte did

¹⁰ Amelia W. Williams, “Allen, Augustus Chapman,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fal17>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., and Nancy Baker Jones, “Allen, Charlotte Marie Baldwin,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fal84>> [Accessed July 15, 2017]. The author would like to pay special recognition to Dr. Ralph Dittman, a descendant of the Allen family, retired surgeon, and amateur historian with an extensive knowledge of early Houston history. His detailed, more-than-700-page historical narrative, *Allen’s Landing*, was a valuable source of insights about Houston, as were our many conversations. See Ralph Dittman, *Allen’s Landing, the Authentic Story of the Founding of Houston* (Houston: A. C. and J. K. Allen Publishing, 1986). The author would also like to thank his sister, Dr. Florence E. “Cita” Cook, for her encouragement and her relevant insights on women’s contributions to early Houston.

not join Augustus and John Kirby in Nacogdoches until two years later, which evidenced significant entrepreneurial tolerance on her part.¹³

Much of the allure of Texas, and its largest single asset at the time, was an abundance of inexpensive land. As with many other early settlers, the Allen brothers began their Texas careers as land speculators and developers. Large Mexican land grants began during Stephen F. Austin's settlements and continued into the Republic of Texas era, particularly for veterans of the Texas Revolution. It is estimated that the Republic of Texas had over 250 million acres of public land in 1836, which necessarily became a form of currency, as well as the ultimate source of Texas debt repayment, funding for large capital expenditures and an endowment for Texas universities.¹⁴

When the Texas Revolution broke out, neither Allen brother joined the Texas Army, but they did help secure and outfit, at their expense, the schooner *Brutus*. They sold the *Brutus*, reportedly at no profit, to the Texas Navy in January 1836. The *Brutus* became the second vessel of the Texas Navy and had an illustrious career after the Texas Revolution, attacking the Mexican coast, including the Yucatán Peninsula, in 1837.¹⁵

After the Texas victory at the Battle of San Jacinto in late April 1836, the Allen brothers went into high gear with their development plans. They scouted land in Galveston, Harrisburg, and elsewhere before focusing on the site of present-day Houston. Given Harrisburg's ideal location on the most navigable part of Buffalo Bayou, with its easy connection to Galveston, it was the most logical and least challenging alternative.

Harrisburg had served for less than a month as provisional capital of the interim Texas government, shortly after the declaration of independence at Washington-on-the-Brazos. After the fall of the Alamo, Santa Anna diverted briefly from his pursuit of the Texas Army to capture and burn much of Harrisburg on April 19, 1836. Aside from the challenge of rebuilding the town, there were significant title issues on the larger Harrisburg tracts, and there was no clear indication that the Harris family was willing to sell the land. Litigation between Jane Birdsall Harris and Robert Wilson also clouded some of the larger land titles of Harrisburg.¹⁶

Robert "Honest Bob" Wilson was born in Maryland on December 7, 1793; the same year as both Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin. Prior to coming to Houston, Wilson had partnered with William Plunkett Harris

¹³ Jones, "Allen, Charlotte Marie Baldwin"; Dittman, *Allen's Landing*.

¹⁴ Aldon S. Lang and Berte R. Haigh, "Public Lands," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/gzpo2>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

¹⁵ Thomas W. Cutrer, "Brutus," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qtbo2>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

¹⁶ Andrew Forest Muir, "Harrisburg, TX (Harris County)," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvh27>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

to operate steamboats along the Mississippi and Sabine Rivers. He then joined William's brother, John Richardson Harris, the husband of Jane Birdsall Harris, in the early development of Harrisburg in 1827, including a joint investment in a gristmill and a sawmill. Wilson was almost forty-three at the time of the land transaction, and considerably older than Augustus, who had just turned thirty, and older still than John Kirby, at age twenty-six. Wilson was a veteran of the War of 1812, a proven entrepreneur, and had five more years of experience in Texas than the Allens.¹⁷

In offering an alternative to Harrisburg, Wilson played an integral part in helping the Allens secure their land upstream in the new town of Houston. He helped them identify the land and negotiate the purchase. The Allen brothers scouted the Houston location and decided that they could make it navigable. On August 25 and 26, 1836, they purchased 6,642 acres for \$9,428, or only \$1.42 per acre, mostly with seller financing. The land was purchased in two transactions, one from John Austin's widow, Elizabeth Parrott, and the other from John Austin's father. Wilson reportedly received 10 percent of the overall land, including some of the blocks in the planned town center.¹⁸

It is not clear when or even whether General Sam Houston granted permission to use his name for the new settlement. Some historians suggest that Charlotte Allen personally made that request in Nacogdoches, but the detailed record shows that she was not even in Texas in August 1836. In any case, Sam Houston was a recent hero and received the overwhelming vote to become the first president of the Texas Republic. His name certainly added marketing gravitas, and there is compelling evidence that he quietly received a full block in the new town, potentially gifted in part for "naming rights."¹⁹

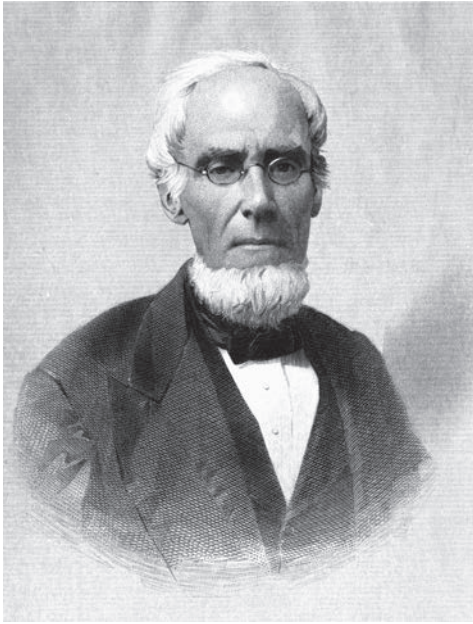
While the Allen brothers did not have much capital with which to promote the city and were competing with a number of other emerging and ambitious towns in the new Republic, the brothers were unusually clever, persistent, and organized. The prompt advertisement in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* on August 30, 1836, was one example. The *Telegraph* was the only active newspaper in that part of the country at the time.²⁰

¹⁷ Leslie H. Southwick, "Wilson, Robert," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fwi56>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].

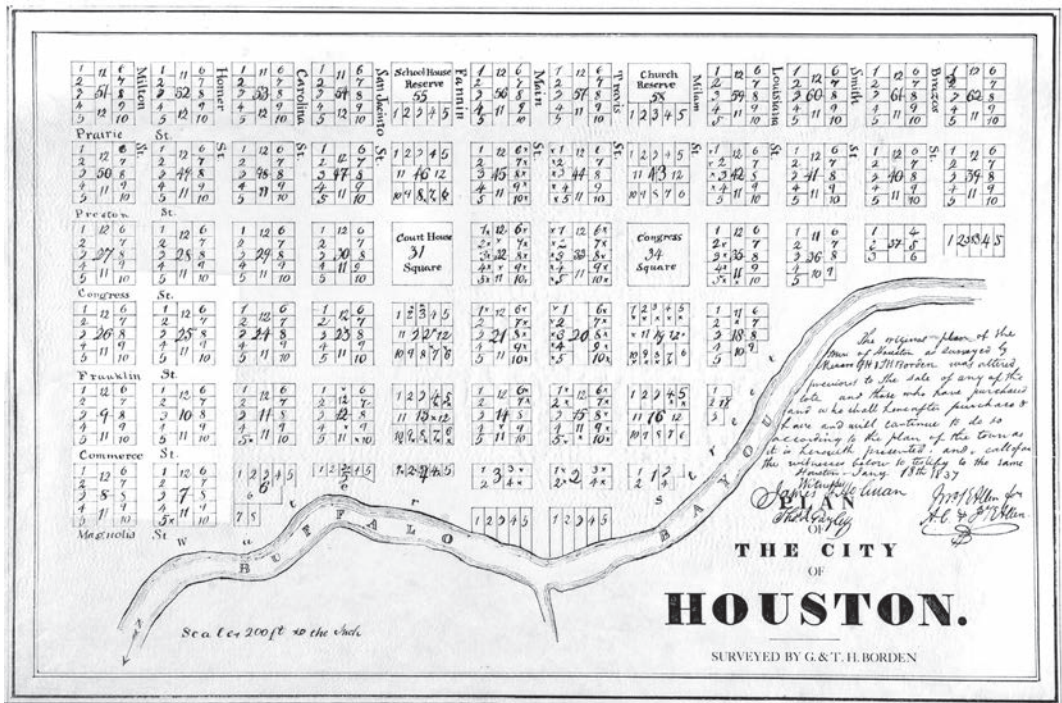
¹⁸ Sam Houston to Robert A. Irion, Feb. 2, 1837, in Eugene C. Barker (ed.), *Writings of Sam Houston* (8 vols., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1938–43), II, 48. Barker mentions the 10 percent ownership by Robert Wilson in *ibid.*, 21–22n2. See also James L. Glass, "The Original Book of Sales of Lots of the Houston Town Company from 1836 Forward," *Houston Review: History and Culture of the Texas Gulf Coast* 16, no. 3 (1994): 174.

¹⁹ Among these sources detailing how Houston got its name is James Perry Bryan Sr. (ed.), *Mary Austin Holley: The Texas Diary, 1835–1838* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 81.

²⁰ "Telegraph and Texas Register," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/eeto2>> [Accessed July 15, 2017].



Gail Borden Jr., from by James Grant Wilson and John Fiske (ed.), *The Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, revised edition (1918).



The newspaper was founded and owned in part by their friend Gail Borden Jr., who had been a trusted surveyor and secretary for Stephen F. Austin and who later became one of the great inventors and entrepreneurs in Texas history. He owned the newspaper jointly with his fellow surveyor brother, Thomas. In the late 1850s, he invented a process for condensing milk in a vacuum, which prospered during the Civil War and became a key component of the Borden Milk Company, founded in 1857. The company still operates today, as privately held Borden Dairy.²¹

In addition to publishing the advertisement for the new town, Gail Borden and his brother were immediately retained by the Allen brothers to lay out the original street grid, which defines much of downtown Houston today. The street grid was completed in October 1836. Most of the field work was performed by Moses Lapham, a long-time surveyor partner of the Bordens.²²

Note that the ambitious Allen brothers asked Gail Borden to entitle the document, "Plan of the City of Houston." Texas had no true cities during the mid-nineteenth century. San Antonio, founded almost 120 years earlier in 1718, grew to a population of only 3,488 by 1850, as recorded in the first federal census for the State of Texas. Galveston was formally founded only in 1838, and yet had the largest population of the state in 1850 of 4,117. Dallas was not laid out as a town site until 1844 and had a population of only 430 by 1850. The Allen brothers were focused on planning what they hoped would be the first recognized city of Texas.²³

No element of the launch of early Houston was more important than its selection by the First Congress as the capital of the Republic of Texas. That selection caused the population of the nascent town to grow from 12 to 1,500 in the first six months of 1837.²⁴ If Houston had not been selected as the capital, it is not clear whether the town would have survived, much less prospered.

When time came for a congressional debate on the selection of the capital of the new Republic, the presence of young John Kirby Allen loomed large. The minimum age for House members was twenty-five. John Kirby was twenty-six. He was elected to the Texas Congress easily on September 5, 1836, becoming one of its twenty-nine House members, accompanied

²¹ Joe B. Frantz, "Borden, Gail, Jr.," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fbo24>> [Accessed July 15, 2017]; Joe B. Frantz, *Gail Borden: Dairyman to a Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951).

²² Frantz, *Gail Borden*, 122–123. See also Joe B. Frantz, "Moses Lapham: His Life and Some Selected Correspondence, I," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 54 (July 1951): 326–327.

²³ Population figures derived from the United States Census and found in the *Texas Almanac*, <<https://texasalmanac.com/sites/default/files/images/CityPopHist%20web.pdf>> [Accessed July 25, 2017].

²⁴ In *The Handbook of Texas Online*, David McComb states that "On January 1, 1837, the town comprised twelve residents and one log cabin; four months later there were 1,500 people and 100 houses." See McComb, "Houston, TX."

by fourteen members of the Senate.²⁵ Selection of the initial capital was not the highest priority of the new Congress and was not resolved until November 30, 1836, a full two months after the opening of congressional activities.

There was considerable debate throughout November about competing locations, and a decision was made to select an interim capital for a period of only four years, after which it or another site could be made the permanent Texas capital. A joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives was convened to finalize a decision on November 30. Every member of the Texas Congress had the right to nominate locations. The nominations included fifteen towns (in alphabetical order): Bexar, Brazoria, Columbia, Fort Bend, Goliad, Groce's Retreat/San Jacinto, Hidalgo, Houston, Matagorda, Nacogdoches, Oromimbo, Refugio, San Patricio, Velasco/Quintana, and Washington.²⁶

Not surprisingly, many of these nominations were simply in loyal support of the congressmen's hometowns, and in fact, five of the nominated locations received no votes on the first ballot. On that ballot, Houston pulled into the lead, but was well short of the required twenty-one votes for selection as the capital. A total of four ballots was required before Houston reached the needed majority.²⁷

Matagorda was a significant competitor to Houston and in many ways would have been a more logical choice by the Texas Congress. It had been founded in 1827 on Matagorda Bay, near the mouth of the Colorado River, and was the largest port city in Texas at the time, prior to the founding of Galveston. At the time of the vote, Matagorda already had a population of over 1,800. Had the Allen brothers applied their ingenuity and marketing to expanding Matagorda, it might now be a leading city rather than a secondary resort town with a population of only 503 in the 2010 census.²⁸

Washington, later to be known as Washington-on-the-Brazos, was the strong runner-up. It was centrally located, conveniently on a large river, had a better climate, and was familiar to the congressmen from the time many of them had spent there in early March, both for the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the drafting of the Texas Constitution. It did not have a marketing campaign and a comprehensive plan rivaling that of Houston, however.

²⁵ Only forty were present to vote for the choice of capital. See Ralph W. Steen, "Congress of the Republic of Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/mkco1>> [Accessed July 16, 2017].

²⁶ *Journals of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas: First Congress, First Session* (Houston: Office of the Telegraph, 1838), 211.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 211–213.

²⁸ Population of Matagorda from *Texas: 2010*, <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-45.pdf>, p.53 [Accessed July 25, 2017].

November 30, 1836	First Ballot	Second Ballot	Third Ballot	Fourth Ballot
Houston	11	17	19	21
Matagorda	8	7	7	4
Washington	7	13	13	14
Nacogdoches	4	0	1	0
Bexar	3	0	0	0
Velasco and Quintana	3	0	0	0
Highdalgo	1	0	0	0
Refugio	1	1	0	0
Goliad	1	1	0	0
Fort Bend	0	1	0	0
Groce's Retreat/San Jacinto	0	0	0	0
Columbia	0	0	0	0
San Patricio	1	0	0	1
Brazoria	0	0	0	0
Orozimbo	0	0	0	0
Total	40	40	40	40

Congressional Voting for the Interim Capital, November 30, 1836. Data from *Journals of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas: First Congress, First Session, 211–213*.

The Allens upped the ante at the last minute by offering to build a large two-story capitol building at their expense and rent it to the government at a nominal price, in addition to building other lesser buildings. John Kirby Allen also hung a copy of the proposed Houston street grid on the wall of Congress, as further evidence of the grand plan.²⁹ In poker terms, the Allens were “all in.”

The extent of the Allens’ effort to secure support for the plan is also reflected in the number of donations of land they made to friends, relatives, and even prominent congressmen and other government leaders. The extent of those donations would ordinarily be very difficult to research, but for the fact that the Houston Town Company’s *Book of Sales* was discovered in the storage files of the law firm of Baker Botts LLP in the early 1990s. The law firm, which traces its roots to 1840, donated the priceless document to the Houston Public Library in 1994, which recently made all of the contents available online. Although a number of pages are missing, it remains a treasure trove for early Houston history and is a testa-

²⁹ Frantz, *Gail Borden*, 122–123.

ment to the importance of digitizing and publishing similar documents.³⁰

The *Book of Sales* lists the sales and donation of each lot on each block during the first few years of Houston, before county deed records took over. The available remaining pages list donations of fifty lots to thirty-seven different individuals or organizations, including the Presbyterian Church. Donations of land were not at all uncommon in the early days of emerging communities, and some were made to Allen and Baldwin family members.

Although there are generally no dates included in the *Book of Sales*, the document reveals that lots were donated to five of the twenty-one congressmen who ultimately voted for Houston. Of those, three voted for Houston on all four ballots: Edward Thomas Branch, a representative from Liberty County who became chair of the Ways and Means Committee; Claiborne West, a representative of Jefferson County; and Sydney Oswald Penington, a representative from Shelby County.

Two of the four important swing votes on the third and fourth ballots may have been inspired by gifts of lots. The page shown listing the sales of lots in block 33 clarifies that lots 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 were all donated to prominent individuals. These lots all fronted Travis Street directly across from Congress Square, which later became Market Square, and thus were considered prime “front row” locations.

Lot 8 of block 33 was donated to Representative Thomas Jefferson Green, a representative of Bexar County, who was one of two to change his vote on the third ballot. Thomas Green was a distinguished graduate of West Point and a brigadier general in the Texas Army, and thus a possible magnet for others considering lot purchases. Lot 8 might simply have been a gift after the vote, but was a gift nevertheless.³¹

Lot 7 of block 33 was donated to Representative John Austin Wharton, who was one of two to change his vote on the fourth ballot. Wharton represented the county of Brazoria, and was also a first cousin of Thomas Green’s wife, Sarah. Representative Wharton was another attractive potential resident for Houston, having been a hero at the Battle of San Jacinto and one who helped secure the Twin Sisters cannons for the Army. David

³⁰ T. M. Bagby, with contributions by Augustus C. Allen and John Kirby Allen of the Houston Town Company, *Houston Town Company Book of Sales*, 1837, p. 16, Houston Area Digital Archives, Houston Public Library, <http://digital.houstonlibrary.org/cdm/ref/collection/books/id/825> [Accessed June 25, 2017]. A thorough discussion of the history of the Book of Sales is included in an article by James L. Glass, “The Original Book of Sales of Lots of the Houston Town Company from 1836 Forward,” 166–194. The author would like to thank William Barnett, former managing partner of the law firm Baker Botts, for his first-hand account of the gift of the “Book of Sales” to the Houston Public Library, which he helped facilitate. The author would also like to thank Thomas Eubank, a retired partner of Baker Botts, for his first-hand account of the history of Block 57, which was the location of the Capitol Building in 1837 and later the Rice Hotel.

³¹ Glass, “The Original Book of Sales of Lots of the Houston Town Company from 1836 Forward,” 178, 180. See also Robert Bruce Blake, “Green, Thomas Jefferson,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgr39>> [Accessed July 16, 2017].

Burnet delivered the funeral oration when Wharton died in December 1838 and described Wharton as “the keenest blade at San Jacinto.”³²

The *Book of Sales* and other title records in Harris County reflect the details of one other transaction of more monetary significance, in which Robert Wilson seemed directly involved. As shown in the *Book of Sales*, the entire block 43, consisting of twelve lots and also at a prime location in town, was apparently originally sold to Robert Wilson for the sum of \$6,000, although that might well have been an allocation of land out of his 10 percent share.³³

Further research shows that block 43 was actually donated to none other than President Sam Houston, and yet that was not among the other fifty donations recorded in the *Book of Sales*. In Houston’s published letters, this is confirmed in an intriguing excerpt from a note he sent to Senator Robert Irion on February 2, 1837:

Allen left for Houston, and says it is a clever place. Two days since refused \$6,000 for the present there that Wilson made me after Congress rose, of the 12 lots in the town. 30 sold for \$15,000 a few days since. Some at \$1,000 each!³⁴

This may simply have been an honorary gift made by Wilson after “Congress rose.” Perhaps by today’s standards of the value of “naming rights,” this vacant block of land would be a small consideration and not noteworthy. The Harris County deed records make the transaction more interesting, however.

The deed records have a contradictory entry, suggesting that title to Sam Houston of Block 43 resulted from a purchase from the Allens, rather than a gift. The records indicate that, on January 21, 1837, all of the lots in block 43 were actually purchased by Sam Houston from “A. C. and J. K. Allen for and in the consideration of \$6,000, the receipt of which we acknowledge, have bargained, sold and delivered possession to Sam Houston, his heirs and assigns.”³⁵ Even more curious, while most deed entries at that time were recorded within thirty days of a transaction, this entry was not recorded until August 2, 1843, over six and a half years later and late in Sam Houston’s second term as president of the Republic.³⁶ All of

³² Robert Maberry Jr., “Wharton, John Austin [1828–65],” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fw04>> [Accessed July 16, 2017].

³³ Bagby, *Houston Town Company Book of Sales*, 1837, p. 19.

³⁴ Houston to Irion, Feb. 2, 1837, in Barker, *Writings of Sam Houston II*, 48.

³⁵ Deed of Property Sale, A. C. and J. K. Allen to Sam Houston, Jan. 21, 1837, Harris County Deed Records (located through Court Record Research, Inc.). The author would like to thank Robert Wright, a retired real estate partner from the Baker Botts law firm, for his assistance in searching the Harris County deed record and for providing other counsel on applicable real estate and probate law.

³⁶ Thomas H. Kreneck, “Houston, Samuel,” *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fho73>> [Accessed July 16, 2017].

this was likely a frontier town attempt to document the curiously undocumented, perhaps to facilitate a sale of the property by Houston.

We may never know the full story behind the influences that enabled the town of Houston to receive the needed votes to become the interim capital, but that selection was unquestionably a critical pivot point in its early development. The Allens had also promised to have the capitol building completed and ready for business by April 1, 1837, in time for the Second Session of the First Congress, which was scheduled to begin April 30.³⁷

The enterprising Allens began selling lots as quickly as they could, beginning in January 1837, in part to amass the funds to fulfill their various commitments. Perhaps because of the time needed to collect funds from lot sales, it was not until February 18, 1837, that they signed a \$15,000 contract for the capitol's construction, paid in installments, which was more than 150 percent of the amount paid originally for all of the raw land in Houston. The selected contractor for the capitol building was the Colonel Thomas "Peg Leg" Ward, a noted veteran of the Texas Army who had lost his leg during the Siege of Bexar.³⁸

Some records indicate that construction of the capitol building did not commence until April 1, 1837, which allowed only one month in which to erect a large two-story building. On May 1, 1837, the opening of the Second Session was postponed, as there was a building, but not yet a roof or a quorum. Congress finally opened on May 4, with a quorum but still not a roof and with much construction still underway. President Houston gave a stirring address to a joint session of Congress, despite the open-air conditions.³⁹

Aggravating the rocky start of the deliberations, torrential rains arrived on May 9 and both houses of Congress had to adjourn, "the floor being flooded with water." Adding more drama, Colonel Ward tried to curtail a late-night May 13 gathering of congressmen, featuring both abundant candles and even more abundant local grog whiskey, which Ward deemed to be a dangerous combination. An altercation ensued and Colonel Ward challenged his adversary to a duel.⁴⁰

³⁷ The commitment on the part of the Allen Brothers to construct a capitol building is confirmed in a number of sources, including a report from the Congressional Reporter, M. J. Falvel. See Ernest William Winkler, "The Seat of Government of Texas. I. Temporary Location of the Seat of Government," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 10 (October 1906): 170n4.

³⁸ David C. Humphrey, "Ward, Thomas William," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tsha-online.org/handbook/online/articles/fwa52>> [Accessed July 16, 2017], and Humphrey, *Peg Leg: The Improbable Life of a Texas Hero, Thomas William Ward, 1807–1872* (Denton: Texas State Historical Association, 2009), 43–45.

³⁹ *Journals of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Texas, At the Second Session of the First Congress, Held by Adjournment at the City of Houston* (Houston: Telegraph Office, 1838), 9. Available online at <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/scanned/CongressJournals/01/HJJournal1stConAdj.pdf> [Accessed July 25, 2017].

⁴⁰ Humphrey, *Peg Leg*, 42, 43. See also Andrew Forest Muir (ed.), *Texas in 1837: An Anonymous Contemporary Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958), 38–39.

The duel was held on May 15, 1837, just down the street from the capitol building. First-round shots fortunately missed their targets. One of the second-round shots hit Colonel Ward in his wooden leg, and the combatants decided to call it a day. On May 16, 1837, the *Telegraph and Texas Register* made note of the episode: "If all duels were merely shooting at blocks, instead of blockheads, the practice would be far more consonant with the dictates of wisdom and justice."⁴¹

Another view of those early days in Houston is found in the diary of the esteemed artist, John James Audubon, who passed through Houston with his son on the same day as the duel. President Houston gave Audubon a tour of the capitol building and then invited him for a visit across the street at the "Executive Mansion," crossing the street through knee deep mud. Audubon later wrote in a diary that the capitol was "without a roof, and the floor, benches and tables of both houses of Congress were . . . well saturated."⁴²

There are very few visual images of Houston in its early days, the most noted being a series of sketches published by Mary Austin Holley, a first cousin of Stephen F. Austin, after she visited the town in December 1837. Included in the sketch is the completed capitol, at the corner of Main Street and Texas Avenue. Holley's indication that the capitol was 70 feet across on Main Street and 140 feet in depth, made it by far the largest building in Houston and likely in all of Texas.⁴³

The only other known images of Houston through 1868 were published primarily in Europe. Remarkably, a series of similar depictions show Houston's Buffalo Bayou surrounded by significant mountains, a topographical fantasy that even the Allen brothers would not have had the courage to claim. This unusual portrayal began with a lithograph commissioned by Matilda Charlotte Houstoun after her visit to Houston in 1842. It may have been her attempt to market property that she and her husband had purchased in Texas.

The 1837 marriage of the Republic of Texas Congress and the town of Houston was short lived. The frequent rains and deep mud in the unpaved streets and the generally unhealthy conditions quickly eroded the patience of the forty-three members of Congress, many of whom were from more pleasant climates. As early as September 28, 1837, the respect-

⁴¹ *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), May 16, 1837.

⁴² Ben W. Huseman, "Audubon, John James," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fau02>> [Accessed July 16, 2017]. Thanks to Ron Tyler for guidance on other Audubon sources, including *The Life and Adventures of John James Audubon, the Naturalist* (London: Sampson, Low, Son, & Marston, 1868). This book was published with the assistance of the Audubon family after John James Audubon's daughter destroyed many of his journals.

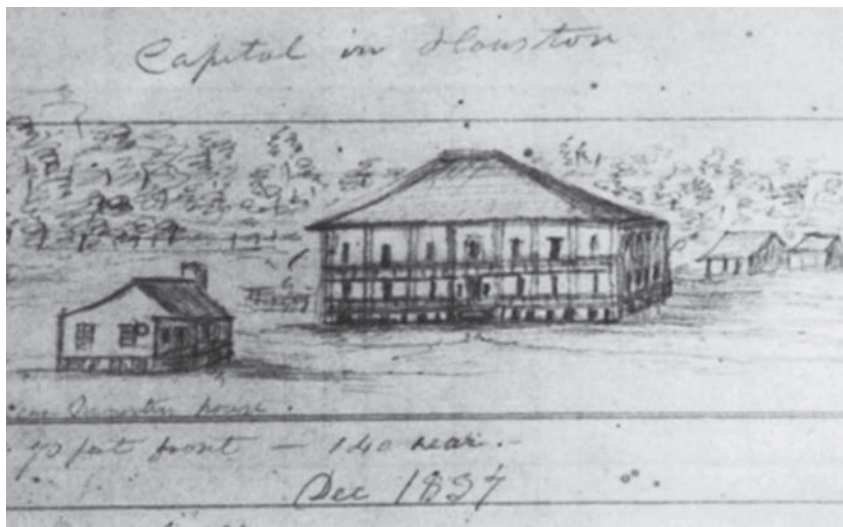
⁴³ Mary Austin Holley sketch of Houston from Bryan (ed.), *Mary Austin Holley*.



Texas State Library and
Archives Commission

EXECUTIVE MANSION AT HOUSTON 1837-8

Executive Mansion of the Republic of Texas in Houston, 1837-38. 1/103-507B, *Places Collection, Prints and Photographs Collections*. Archives and Information Services, Texas State Library and Archives Commission. From <https://tsl.access.preservica.com/file/sdb%3AdigitalFile%7Cae6123c6-17cf-4aa9-b332-13abob66ga28/> [Accessed July 25, 2017].



Mary Austin Holley Sketch of the Capitol Building, December 1837. From James Perry Bryan Sr. (ed.), *Mary Austin Holley: The Texas Diary, 1835-1838* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965).



City of Houston, Texas, lithograph by Day and Haghe from Matilda Charlotte Houstoun's *Texas and the Gulf of Mexico; or Yachting in the New World* (1844).

ed congressman, Thomas J. Rusk, introduced a resolution that a committee be appointed to oversee moving the capital.⁴⁴

Presidential politics also proved unfavorable for the town. Based on the constitution of Texas, the first presidential term was for only two years, and presidents could not serve for successive terms. As a result, Mirabeau B. Lamar, the vice president, was the leading candidate in the September 3, 1838, election. President Houston and Vice President Lamar were not aligned politically. Houston was determined to shepherd a combination with the United States. Lamar wanted Texas to remain independent and even to expand farther to the west. Houston wanted to enter into treaties with the Indians. Lamar wanted to make war with most of the Indians and push them out of Texas. Houston very much wanted to keep the capital in his namesake town. Lamar wanted to relocate it as quickly as possible to a more central and drier location.⁴⁵

In one of the more unusual elections in Texas history, the only surviv-

⁴⁴ *Journal of the House of Representatives, Republic of Texas, Called Session of September 25, 1837 and Regular Session, Commencing November 6, 1837* (Houston: National Banner Office, Niles & Co. Printers, 1838), 10. Available online at <http://www.lrl.state.tx.us/scanned/CongressJournals/02/journalsHouse2Con.pdf> [Accessed July 25, 2017].

⁴⁵ See, for example, James L. Haley, *Sam Houston* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 200–208.

ing opposition to Lamar was Senator Robert Wilson, who was defeated soundly. Two additional candidates, Peter W. Grayson and James Collinworth, each committed suicide prior to the election. Grayson was serving as attorney general under Houston, but had a history of mental illness. Collinworth had served as interim secretary of state. His death is less understandable and apparently resulted from his jumping off a steamboat in Galveston Bay. He was also, coincidentally, the recipient of a donated lot in block 33.⁴⁶

On December 10, 1838, at the inauguration of President-Elect Lamar, President Houston requested the opportunity to make a farewell address to the public, which he did from the balcony of the capitol building overlooking Main Street. Dressed in colonial costume, evoking George Washington, Houston spoke for over three hours, extolling the successes of his term as president. A very frustrated Lamar exited the building and had his carefully crafted fifteen-minute speech read by his assistant.⁴⁷

With the active support of Lamar, a bill was approved to move the Republic's capital to Waterloo, on the banks of the Colorado, which was renamed Austin in memory of Stephen F. Austin. Waterloo had been a site favored by Lamar, as he had remembered shooting a buffalo there some years before, above the banks of the river. In early October 1839, the archives and other materials from the capitol building started their trip to Austin. Mirabeau B. Lamar arrived at the new capital city of Austin on October 17, 1839.⁴⁸

The relocation of the Texas Congress and the related staff was a significant setback for the town of Houston, but not as much as the yellow fever epidemic of 1839 and subsequent epidemics. The capital returned to Houston very briefly in 1842, when Texas was again threatened by the Mexican army, but the prevailing sentiment remained with Austin.

The vacated capitol building, at the northwest corner of Main Street and Texas Avenue, became a boarding house and later the Capitol Hotel, owned initially by the Allen family. It took several decades and the growth of the cotton export and railroad industries before Houston regained its momentum. In later years, Houston became "where 17 railroads meet the sea." Those growth components were compounded by the great Galveston hurricane in 1900, the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901, and the construction of the Houston Ship Channel in 1912.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Leslie H. Southwick, "Grayson, Peter Wagener," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fgr29>> [Accessed July 23, 2017]; Joe E. Ericson, "Collinworth, James," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fc097>> [Accessed July 23, 2017].

⁴⁷ Haley, *Sam Houston*, 208.

⁴⁸ Ernest William Winkler, "The Seat of Government of Texas," *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 10 (January 1907): 234.

⁴⁹ See, for example, McComb, "Houston, TX."

During this growth phase, a second, larger Capitol Hotel was built on the same corner in 1881. That Victorian hotel was purchased by William Marsh Rice in 1883 and then gifted, with most of his other assets, to a trust for the proposed Rice Institute, later to become Rice University. The trustees changed the name to the Rice Hotel after Rice was murdered in New York City in 1900. A second Rice Hotel, the largest hotel in the South, was built on the same block in 1913 by Jesse Jones. He later bequeathed it and most of his other assets to Houston Endowment, which in 1971 gave the hotel to Rice University. These examples of major philanthropy, all at the historic epicenter of Houston, became part of the city's character.

Houston is ranked today as one of the leaders in total charitable contributions of all cities in the United States, due to its energy wealth but also to the long tradition and even expectation of philanthropy among its civic leaders. As a result, Houston has developed a world-class symphony, ballet and opera, as well as globally recognized museums, universities and hospitals.⁵⁰

The contrast between Houston today and its precarious beginnings is rather extraordinary. Greater Houston, centered in Harris County, now spans parts of nine counties and is the fifth largest greater metropolitan area in the United States, with a 2010 population of almost 6.5 million. The population in 1850, during the first federal census after statehood, was only 2,396. It might have been much larger had it not been for the 1839 relocation of the capital and the impact of four yellow fever epidemics in Houston's first fifteen years.

Houston is now widely recognized as the capital of the global energy industry and is the headquarters location for forty-nine of the Fortune 500 companies, second in number only to New York City. The Texas Medical Center in Houston is the largest medical complex in the world, serving both clinical and research needs, which includes Texas Children's Hospital, the world's largest children's hospital, and M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, the world's largest cancer hospital. The Port of Houston, accessed by the Houston Ship Channel, is one of the largest ports in the United States, second in terms of total shipping tonnage. It is surrounded by one of the largest petrochemical complexes in the world, which continues to grow due to the availability, proximity, and low price of natural gas.⁵¹

Houston has also been considered "Space City" since the founding of the Manned Spaceflight Center in 1961, which was later renamed the

⁵⁰ Houston has ranked among the top cities in the country for charitable contributions for many years. See, for example, Charity Navigator's 2017 Metro Market Study at <https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=studies.metro.main&categoryid=9> [Accessed July 25, 2017].

⁵¹ Texas Medical Center data from <http://www.tmc.edu/about-tmc/facts-and-figures/> [Accessed July 25, 2017]. Port of Houston data from: https://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov/bts/files/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_01_57.html [Accessed July 25, 2017].

Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center. John F. Kennedy first set forth the audacious lunar challenge at Rice University's football stadium on September 12, 1962, with the memorable words: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard."⁵²

These words embracing difficulty would no doubt resonate with the Allen brothers, as there was nothing easy about the launch of Houston 180 years ago. Nevertheless, from the serpentine twists and turns of upper Buffalo Bayou to a few important twists of fate, the Allen brothers and other Houston founders managed to build a lasting city, with its own unique character.

⁵² "John F. Kennedy Moon Speech – Rice Stadium," <<https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>> [Accessed Aug. 1, 2017].

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