The Desegregation of the Galveston Fire Department

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The history of desegregation, like all histories, is subject to selective generalization. The historian consumes details and necessarily returns summaries. Relevant to civil rights equality, three types of generalizations stand out. First, our widely held understanding relies on the aggregation of thousands of local events into one broad national movement. The figures and roles of national leaders receive appropriately thorough studies, but a huge majority of local ordeals receive scant attention. Second, in discussing the era of desegregation, we focus on a narrow time period. Major turning points of the 1950s and 1960s overshadow earlier developments that marked significant changes and later events that demonstrate the movement's sustained relevance. And third, in exploring the experience of men and women at the center of desegregation efforts, we select a few cases to serve as representatives. Each community adds a few of its own local examples to our nationally famous stories, but most cases undergo little if any study. The project of collecting accounts is gargantuan. Considering the layers of social and municipal interaction in each city across the South and the rest of the country, it's probable that millions of color barriers have been broken. Each case merits recognition yet most will never receive any. In exploring the desegregation of Galveston's fire department, we take advantage of one opportunity to highlight a local case, to examine the events that preceded desegregation, and to relay the individual experience of one of the barrier breakers.

The Galveston community developed a reputation for having a relatively progressive approach to civil rights during the middle of the twentieth century. But like other Southern communities, island institutions established and strengthened practices of strict segregation after the city's founding in 1839. Church organizations exemplify the earliest movements to formalize racial separation. In 1840, the Anglo First Baptist Church congregation formed the Colored Baptist Church (CBC) to provide religious services for the enslaved African Americans. The CBC later spawned the Avenue L Missionary Baptist Church which survives as one of the city's major religious institutions. The white Methodist Episcopal Church established its own slave congregation in 1848. Following the Civil War, Saint Augustine of Hippo Episcopal Church (1884) and Holy Rosary Catholic Church (1886) formed as the oldest historically black parishes of their respective dioceses.[1]

Following the Civil War, the Freedmen's Bureau organized the first means of formal education for the city's black residents. The bureau operated schools inside churches and houses for a period of five years after the Civil War, educating a total of 300-400 black students.[2] In

operating the schools, the bureau hoped to establish a self-sustaining educational system for black students. The first permanent African American school was the Barnes Institute launched in 1869. In the 1880s, three more schools formed. One of them, Central High (1885) was the first African American high school in Texas.[3] The Reconstruction Era also saw the inclusion of African Americans into the city police department. Major General Charles Griffin ordered the city to hire black officers in 1867.

In the last decades of the century, black labor groups joined churches and schools as the city's major black-only institutions. In 1879, black longshoremen formed the Cotton Jammers Association (CJA) after their white colleagues refused cooperation. Under the leadership of Norris Wright Cuney, the CJA became successful competitors of the white group. Later, in 1883, Cuney created the Screwmen's Benevolent Association No. 2 to secure work for black cotton workers.[4]

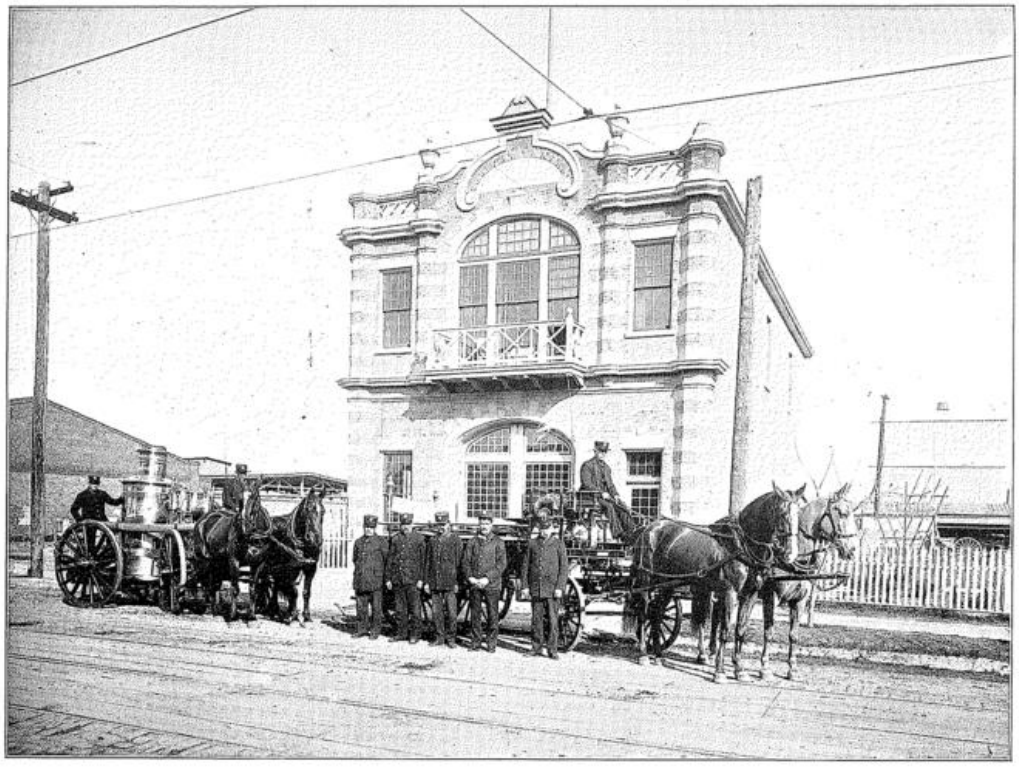
In addition to their restriction to separate churches, schools, and labor groups, black Galvestonians had limited access in all other areas of municipal life, including the city fire department. The city's first fire protection outfit, known as "the Hook and Ladder Company," formed in 1843 as a volunteer service. Between 1848 and 1866, the company operated from a building on 20th Street between Mechanic Street (Avenue C) and Market Street (Avenue D). This location straddled the boundary between the downtown business district based and the residential district to the east where many of the city's elite business figures resided. Following the Civil War, the Hook and Ladder Company relocated twice, first to a building at the corner of 17th and Mechanic and later to a building on Postoffice Street (Avenue E) between 23rd and 24th streets.[5] In each case, the location of the company facilitated quick response to properties and interests associated with wealthy, and typically white, residents.

Additional volunteer companies formed in the following decades: the Washington Fire Company in 1847, the Island City Fire Company in 1856, and the Star State Company in 1859. In the cases of the Washington ((Mechanic Street between 21st and 22nd streets), and Island City companies (the intersection of Mechanic and 17th streets), locations further demonstrate a focus on properties in the business district and the eastern residential areas.

A group of volunteers established the Star State Company (later known as Engine House No. 3) in 1859 after the City of Galveston purchased a new piece of fire control machinery. The group's earliest leaders were foreman Victor J. Baulard, a successful paints merchant with an

office and store on the Strand, and first assistant Aloyise M. Kleiber. Charles H. Leonard, a former mayor, served among the original group of volunteers, all of whom were white. In 1860, the company constructed its first permanent facility. Located at 2512 Church Street, the station was the first in the city to be located west of 25th Street.[6] The choice of location was likely motivated by a desire to protect the cotton and factory district along the harbor to the north. As a secondary matter, the station became the fire protection service closest to a primarily black neighborhood north of Broadway (Avenue J) and west of 25th Street. Though geographic segregation in the city was not strict, the north side residential area was the neighborhood most clearly associated with African Americans. Businesses catering to black customers concentrated along Market Street (Avenue D).[7]

In September 1885, the City of Galveston organized a professional fire department. After an uneasy transition, the new city service took control of the existing fire protection equipment and facilities.[8] Engine House No. 3 remained in operation at 2512 Church on the eastern edge of the cotton and factory district until the 1900 Hurricane destroyed the building.

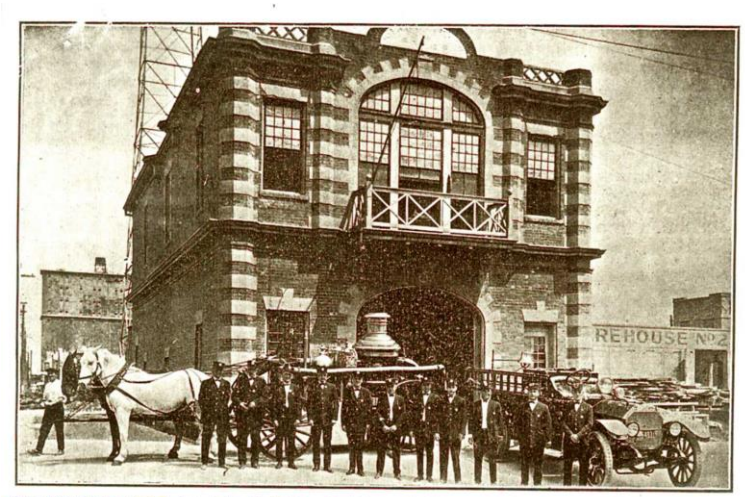


ENGINE COMPANY NO. 3, JOSEPH M. EICHLER, CAPTAIN, STATIONED AT 2828 AVENUE D

Figure 1 – *The earliest known photograph of Engine House No. 3 and at 2828 Market Street, taken in 1906. Despite being the station closest to the predominantly black north side neighborhood, the No. 3 station housed only white firefighters until 1957. (History of the Galveston Fire Department, 1843-1906. Galveston: F.J. Finck Stationary and Print Company, 1906. Available at the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas).*

In 1903, during an era of comprehensive rehabilitation of city infrastructure and restructuring of local government, the Galveston City Council voted to replace the lost No. 3 engine house with a new station at 2828 Market Street. To design the building, the city hired architect George B. Stowe, who was the most active architect in the area west of 25th Street and north of Broadway (Avenue J).[9] Despite the earlier transition from volunteer to professional firefighters, the engine house continued to carry the traditional name "Star State Company No. 3" in the form of an inscribed marble plaque near the building's cornice. The more generic names "Fire Station No. 3" and "Engine House No. 3" eventually gained preference.

When the new Engine House No. 3 opened at the corner of Market and 28th streets, the station and the fire department as a whole was exclusively administered and served by white firefighters. There were no formal rules precluding the employment of blacks; the city's initial system of segregation was customary rather than statutory. In 1906, however, the white city government began to codify the status quo through ordinances mandating segregation of local transportation and beach facilities. The move coincided with the beginning of an era of unprecedented racial tension. The violence reached an apex in April 1917 when black residents clashed with white soldiers stationed at Fort Crockett on the south side of the island. The conflicts concentrated in the "restricted district" which included houses of gambling and prostitution and was located adjacent to the black north side neighborhood.[10]



FIRE STATION NO 3—Left to right: W. P. Boss, H. Schirmer, A. Nelson, J. McNamara, J. Lynch, C. Hageman, E. Hanson, W. H. Short, G. Schmidt, R. Berg, Captain V. Depuglio, Captain Wm. Finch.

Figure 2 – A photograph of Engine House No. 3 taken in 1921, six years prior to the first published references to the potential involvement of African Americans in the station's operation. (A.V. Smith. *History of the Galveston Fire Department, 1843-1921*. Galveston: Oscar Springer, 1921. (Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas).

The issue of segregation dominated the political landscape through the end of the 1920s. A 1928 public referendum resulted in the segregation of public parks.[11] The previous year, mayoral candidates attempted to use the issue as a wedge to determine the outcome of the election. The tightly-contested election pitted incumbent Jack E. Pearce against fire and police commissioner R.P. Williamson. African-American voters tended to favor Williamson and some actively supported his candidacy by distributing information cards on his behalf.

On April 8, a *Galveston Daily News* article reported that Pearce's allies had promised to "turn fire station No. 3, located at Twenty-ninth and Market streets, over to the negroes, and that the entire personnel of this station would be made up of negroes."[12] The next day, Walter T. Smith, an ally of Pearce and himself a candidate for commissioner of fire and police, responded with a letter that seemed to acknowledge his role as an unnamed source for the article. In a letter published on the first page of the paper, Smith claimed that the newspaper had misrepresented him. He ended his letter by stating, "…at no time has the Galveston city party *[the group behind Pearce]* placed any proposition before me regarding the Fire Station No. 3 at Twenty ninth and Market, and I feel sure that the colored citizens of Galveston have no such idea. I consider your article in this respect as absolutely preposterous, and simply as cheap campaign bait."[13]

The era's complicated racial politics casts some doubt on any interpretation of the article and Smith's subsequent letter. Multiple scenarios are possible. If the initial article was accurate and Smith's response was inaccurate or dishonest, then Pearce indeed attempted to peel away Williamson's support among African Americans by promising control in the fire department. If the initial report was inaccurate—"cheap campaign bait" in Smith's words—then the report constitutes either an attempt by Williamson supporters to disassociate their candidate from the city's black community or an effort by Pearce's group to insinuate support for African Americans while avoiding explicitly campaigning for their votes.

Whatever the truth behind the accounts, the event demonstrates important links between Engine House No. 3 and the city's African-American community. If the story was a fabrication, then it was at least plausible enough to have an impact on the public. Conversely, if Pearce's party had indeed offered to give control of the fire station over to African-American residents, then the affair marks the first known attempt to give black Galvestonians any role in the fire department. The selection of the 2828 Market station, located on the edge of the predominantly black north side neighborhood, is significant.

Jack E. Pearce won the election but any promises he made to the African-American community concerning a future role in the fire department were not kept. The station continued to operate with exclusively white personnel throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In November 1938, the city completed a renovation of the building. The project including the application of a coat of stucco obscuring the building's characteristic Queen Anne masonry details.[14] Following the repairs, the role of the station as a community resource expanded. By 1941, the station became the polling location for Precinct 6 which included the north side neighborhood.[15]

During the middle of the century, the pursuit of equal civil rights for African Americans gained momentum across the country. At the heart of the movement were hopes and demands to desegregate public institutions, including transportation accommodations, educational facilities, and city services. In Texas, the state branch of the NAACP provided leadership and legal assistance for local campaigns, contributing to some notable successes during the 1950s. In Beaumont, a court order ended segregation of public parks in 1954. Corpus Christi voluntarily desegregated the city's public pool two years later. While informal segregation of Houston's public transportation system continued throughout the 1950s, the city at least stopped enforcing the rule after 1954.[16]

In Galveston, civil rights efforts began to find success in the forties. In 1943, the black teachers' union won a lawsuit gaining pay equal to that of their white colleagues. In 1949, the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston admitted its first African American student.[17] Three years later, the Galveston Bar Association admitted the first African American attorney.[18] And by the end of the 1940s, the Galveston Police Department included 15 black officers.[19]

Despite these successes, progress towards the desegregation of public accommodations was not all-inclusive. In 1949, Galveston voters passed a $4 million bond to fund the construction of separate high schools for black students and white students. The schools opened in 1954, the same year that the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision ended "separate but equal" arrangements. The school system announced plans to integrate the schools beginning with the 1956-57 school year but no black students attended the (white) Ball High until 1968.[20]

Figure 3 – *The earliest known photo of Engine House No. 3 at 2828 Market Street with the stucco in place on the south façade. The date of the photo is unknown, but the vehicles visible in the photo appear to date to the late 1940s and early 1950s, a few years before the city's first three black firemen began serving at the station. The stair structure abutting the east façade is a training tower. (Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas).*

On November 2, 1957, nearly thirty years after the earliest reports of discussions to include African Americans, the fire department announced its intentions to hire African Americans to serve as firefighters for the first time. In a statement to the *Daily News*, Police and Fire Commissioner Walter B. Rourke Jr. explained that, pending approval of the city budget, he planned to hire eight men in total—five white and three black—to serve as "hose and laddermen at Station No. 3, 29th and Market." As part of the preparations for the new personnel, the station added separate quarters, and in some cases separate equipment, for the new black firefighters. When asked about Rourke's motivations, Lucious Pope, one of the three African Americans that Rourke hired, surmised that it was likely a political decision. During the previous election, Rourke promised to hire black firemen in an effort to secure black support. Pope recalls that the strategy was successful as African-American voters were largely supportive of Rourke's candidacy.[21]

Three weeks after Rourke's initial announcement, the fire department formally hired eight new firefighters. Among them were Pope, Leroy Small, and Genoice Walker, all black residents of Galveston. The five white men joining them were Conrad Pierce, Jesse W. Gully, J.F. Charpry, Alfred A. Coppalo, and Donald Jack. A *Daily News* article explained that the Pope, Small, and Walker would work separate shifts at Engine House No. 3 so that no two black

firefighters would be working at the same time.[22] The justification for stationing the men Engine House No. 3 station was apparent. As Pope recalls, "I assume that they put us in the area where we were most familiar with and maybe where we would not suffer so much rejection."[23]

Pope's insights on the fire station's desegregation are particularly valuable as both Walker and Small are deceased and there are no published accounts of their experiences. Available records yield limited biographical detail. Genoice Laurice Walker was born February 14, 1939, in Grapeland, Texas. He was the fourteenth child of Samuel and Angie Brown Walker. He spent his childhood in Grapeland before leaving his parents to settle in Galveston at the young age of 16. Two years later, Rourke hired him to work for the fire department. Following a hiatus to serve in the U.S. Army, he returned to the No. 3 Station to serve as a training officer and then captain. He designed the first Fireman Training Field to train firemen in life support and rescue technologies.[24]

Pope remembers Walker as a gregarious man and Walker's varied activities outside the fire department support that characterization. He earned his GED from Central High, became a licensed mortician working at Green's Funeral Home (602 32nd Street), and owned his own Conoco Service Station. Upon his retirement from firefighting, he continued to work various jobs, including stints at the Galveston County Sheriff's Office and running his own private business, Emergency Service Company. He died in Galveston in 2005.[25]

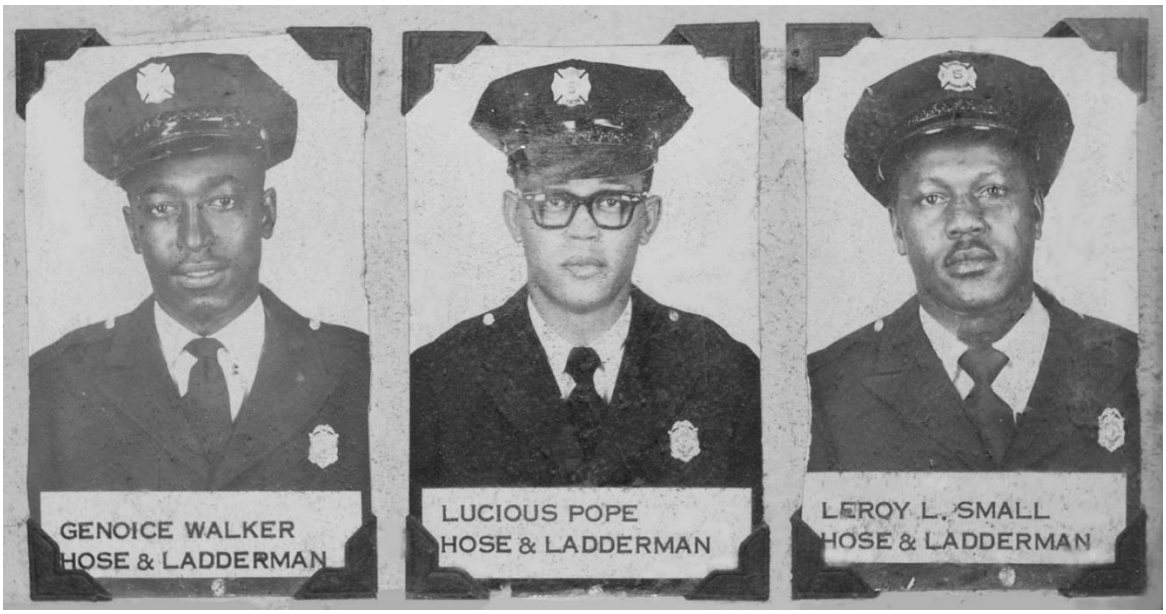


Figure 4 – *The Galveston Fire Department's first three African American firemen were Genoice Walker, Lucious Pope, and Leroy Small. (Courtesy of the Galveston Fire Department).*

Leroy Lawrence Small was born May 29, 1931, in Galveston. Whereas Pope and Walker were both teenagers when they came to the fire department, Small was in his late twenties. Little is known about Small's life and his fire department career. Pope remembers him as a quiet man who tended to stick to himself. He died December 9, 1995, in Portland, Oregon.[26]

Lucious Trust Pope was born January 15, 1938, in Ringgold, Louisiana, where his parents worked as sharecroppers. In 1955, his father took a job at Scholes Field—Galveston's airport—and the family relocated to the Palm Terrace neighborhood in Galveston. Pope graduated from Central High in 1957 and worked as an attendant at a Texaco Service Station at the corner of 23rd Street and Sealy Avenue (Avenue I). From his home in Los Angeles, Pope remembers the encounter with a black police officer that precipitated his tenure with the fire department.[27]

> *"I happened to be walking down the street somewhere on 29th near H, and I ran into a black police officer and I think I was inquiring of him if he knew where I could find a better job. And he said to me 'Police Chief Rourke…made the campaign promise that if he won he would hire some black firemen,' he says, 'he won so why don't you go down and put in an application.' And that I did. Little did I think I would pass it, but I did."*

At that time that Pope, Walker, and Small began their fire department careers, shifts lasted 24 hours. Each firefighter would work a shift and then have 48 hours off duty. Pope remembers their initial schedule in detail: he worked the "A" shift, Walker the "B" shift, and Small the "C" shift. When Pope arrived for his first day in late November 1957, he found that the white firefighters had prepared for their arrival with the construction of a separate kitchen and separate sleeping quarters.[28]

> *"Much to my surprise, they showed me to the back of their kitchen they had built a new kitchen for me, or for us. And so, I had a separate kitchen. They had given me a refrigerator, a stove, dishes, everything. That was where I ate my meals—in 'my kitchen,' I called it. And upstairs there was a large section for the men to sleep. Many cots, many beds. And to my further surprise, they showed me my bedroom.*

They had built a new bedroom in the back upstairs, where I was to sleep. There were three beds in there I recall, one for each of us."

In the initial configuration, the path from the black quarters to the fireman's pole necessitated that Pope, Walker, and Small run through the whites' bedroom when an alarm sounded. Soon, fire department leaders built a second pole in the back for the black firemen to use.[29]

Pope remembers that despite the separate accommodations white and black firemen got along well enough. When it came to interacting with white residents, the onus was on him, Walker, and Small to recognize and respect boundaries. He recalls one instance from later in his tenure that exemplified the dynamic.[30]

"I was on the back of the truck and they stopped on their way back from the fire to eat at a restaurant. And at that time there were two blacks…on my truck. So, we all went in, we all sat down, and the waiter came over to see what the guys wanted and he said, 'Now, you all understand I can't serve these boys.' And so, my thing was I didn't say anything, but I wondered, 'would you have stopped us from putting out a fire if your place was burning down?' I thought, 'I better hold my peace.'"

For Pope, the biggest source of frustration was the lack of opportunities for career advancement. Walker and Small, who declined to take promotion exams, participated in annual training programs at Prairie View College. Pope, who chose to take the exams in hopes of career advancement, was not permitted to join them. He believes his exclusion from the training programs was due to his proactivity.[31]

Pope worked at Engine House No. 3 for three years before leaving Galveston to serve in the U.S. Army. He trained as a psychiatric specialist at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and then served at William Beaumont General Hospital in El Paso. He was discharged in February 1964, and returned to Galveston and the fire department. During his absence, the city had reached additional milestones in civil rights, including the desegregation of the municipal golf course (1958), the election of Thomas D. Armstrong as the first African-American city councilman (1961), and the end of lunch counter segregation (1961).[32] In the last event, a group of students from Central High, led by Kelton Sams, organized sit-ins at a series of department

store lunch counters. In response, black and white city leaders intervened to arrange a peaceful transition towards the desegregation of restaurants and other businesses throughout the city.[33]

Upon Pope's return, he found that racial separations in the fire department had also eased. Black and white firemen had begun to eat together and to sleep in the same bedrooms. The second, black-only firemen's pole was removed. And the fire department hired more African Americans to work from other stations in addition to Engine House No. 3. Nonetheless, Pope still felt that opportunities for career advancement remained limited. He left Galveston for Los Angeles in April 1965 to pursue a music career. He later sold insurance for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company and organized the Greater New Vision Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles. He continues to serve as a pastor there.[34]

Engine House No. 3 continued to provide protection service for the north side neighborhoods through most of the 1960s. At the end of the decade, a department-wide reorganization effort culminated in the closure of the 2828 Market facility. First, in 1965, the department relocated station No. 1 to a new facility at 2514 Sealy. The city formally closed the 2828 Market Street fire station in 1967.[35] In name only, a new Engine House No. 3 at 5001 Avenue Q ½ replaced the station. Coverage of the north side neighborhood was actually the responsibility of firefighters at the new No. 1 station at 2514 Sealy.

Following the departure of the fire department, the City of Galveston continued to own and maintain the property.[36] The building initially housed offices of the water department. Later, the public works department used it for storage. In 2008, damage from Hurricane Ike rendered the building unusable. Repairs to the building stalled and the conditions worsened. A few years after the storm, portions of the roof collapsed, badly damaging the interior of the second story and destroying any remnants of the building that may have demonstrated the details of desegregation.

Of the innumerable color barriers broken in Galveston, in Texas, and throughout the U.S., the desegregation of Engine House No. 3 merits consideration as an acknowledgment by city government leaders that the increased political power of African-American residents entitled them to roles in municipal services. The scandal of the 1927 Pearce-Williamson mayoral election confirms that the role of the black electorate was significant though effectively suppressed by segregationist attitudes. The eventual desegregation of the fire department thirty years later did not stem directly from widespread protests, from the requests or demands of African-American

leaders, nor from progressive attitudes of white officials. The most significant factor in the department's desegregation was the recognition that, for white candidates, the advantages of gain the support of the black electorate outweighed the disadvantages. When Walter O'Rourke promised blacks a role in the fire department, he saw their support as more valuable than that of staunch segregationists. Desegregation in this instance represents a victory of the city's black population as a whole, but the brunt of the experience belonged to Walker, Small, and Pope, who quickly recognized that many victories were yet to be won.

Figure 5 – *The south and east facades of Engine House No. 3 in 2017. During the early twentieth century, neglect and storms caused damage to structural components and interior spaces. Galveston Historical Foundation acquired the building in 2017 and began a project to interpret the building's history and reinforce the front façade. (Preservation Resource Center, Galveston Historical Foundation, Galveston, Texas)*

Author's note: This article is expanded from an application for a state historic marker at the site of Engine House No. 3. Jami Durham and W. Dwayne of Galveston Historical Foundation assisted with the research. The study relies upon an account kindly offered by Lucious Pope via phone interview from his home in May 2017.

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[29] Ibid.
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