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THE FOURTH CHOICE

PAPER CITIES ON THE BAYOU

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“THE ALLEN BROTHERS.” That’s how the story always starts.

It has often been written that the Allen brothers arrived in 1836 on the banks of what would become Houston’s Main Street dock, landing here as discoverers in a virgin land. John Vanderlyn’s 1847 work *The Landing of Columbus* comes to mind. That’s the conventional history of Houston’s start that we learned as youngsters or newcomers. Not much more was taught, as that might distract us from the tasks of progress. Fast-forward 176 years and, well, here we

are, working away with heavy machinery, building a great city, and moving forward to a bigger and better modern world. The Allen Brothers. Was it really that simple?

Resources made available by universities and digital public archives now give us all the ability to delve into Houston’s rich past, and when we dig deeper, more reveals itself. Recently, a critical mass of projects on Buffalo Bayou, including Buffalo Bayou Partnership boat tours, public improvements in the Greater East End Management district, the Navigation Street and Harrisburg projects, and efforts by Houston Arts + Media, are bringing long-overdue attention to this truncated history of Houston’s start. These and many more resources introduce us to some of the hundreds of community builders active in the area previous to the Allens’ arrival.

Counter to our assumptions, the site for a major port of entry for Texas on the Gulf Coast was not by default Galveston Bay and Buffalo Bayou. Eighteenth-century Spanish explorers spent decades exploring the fluvial openings along the Gulf, considering the Sabine, Neches, Colorado, and Red Rivers, but they never established a primary port capable of handling seagoing vessels due to the inconsistent water elevations and shifting sandbars on those Texas rivers.

Also, we know that Jean Lafitte established an enterprising career as a smuggler and privateer in Galveston and the bay leading to Buffalo Bayou between 1817 and 1820. In violation of Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. importation bans, Lafitte supplied Texas and Louisiana with slaves and other goods by smuggling them through vague ports of entry avoiding

the taxation that came with more traditional lines of distribution. Lafitte also worked as a mercenary or subcontractor for governments, monarchs, and private investors, securing the weapons, durable merchandise, and currencies of sailing ships against the will of their owners or chartered transporters. One could argue that Lafitte was one of our region’s first and better-known independent contractors.

The settlers of Austin’s Colony found the fluvial plains of the Brazos River valley excellent for farming, and by the 1830s the area was thick with cotton



Houston was among several attempts to build a port city on Buffalo Bayou.



FROM LEFT: Workers handle cotton at the port; “Houston Ship Canal: Loading Oil,” a 1941 painting by Jerry Bywaters; barge loaded with pipe.

and sugar plantations worked by thousands of slaves. The 1850 U.S. census shows that the areas along the Brazos, including present-day Austin, Brazoria, Colorado, Fayette, Fort Bend, Washington, and Wharton Counties, held only 8 percent of Texas’ white population at the time but 21 percent of the state’s slave population.

As early as 1825, the colony had grown profitable and required quick transport for its agricultural goods to markets beyond the Gulf Coast. To their disappointment, efforts to move cotton, corn, livestock, sugar, and molasses downstream on small steamboats, sailing on the Brazos River from San Felipe de Austin to Valesco, were just as poorly realized as the efforts to move imports upstream for inland trading. The river route had severe limitations. The Brazos bent tightly for 840 miles, and was deep in some places, but braided and shallow in many other places. Shifting sandbars were a constant unknown, log and debris jams from vegetation were thick, and seasonal rain patterns made water levels inconsistent from month to month, which was typical of all Texas rivers at that time.

One of the first settlers to explore an alternative port of entry was Tennessee transplant and investor Nicholas Clopper. Clopper established a competitive route in 1826 that would take goods from local plantations by land, hauled in oxen carts along what was known as the San Felipe Road, and load them onto barges on Buffalo Bayou at Harrisburg. Clopper’s ultimate plan was to run cattle by land from the Brazos to his holdings at Clopper’s Point (later Morgan’s Point), slaughter them there, and then load the beef on outbound ships.

Between 1822 and 1840, numerous settlements grew up along the banks of Buffalo Bayou and along the San Felipe Road, progressing further and further inland and toward the west in an attempt to reduce the transit time between Galveston Bay and the Brazos River Valley. In the midst of this aggressive expansion of settlements, the 1835-36 Texas Revolution and its war for independence against Mexico flared, though it appears that the war was a critical but fleeting inconvenience for most of the ambitious capitalists. They simply evacuated their towns and settlements until a battle had moved through the area, returning when they could to pick up the pieces.

Hardly operating in a lonely, desolate setting, the Allens were one of the many, many land speculators and business operators who established towns along Buffalo Bayou in the hopes of creating the preeminent port that would expedite the movement of goods between the Gulf of Mexico and the Brazos River valley. The fact that Buffalo Bayou has a measurable tide, rising and falling 6 to 12 inches as far upstream as Shepherd Drive, meant that their belief that the bayou could provide a river-like passage was not unfounded; the bayou’s value as a trade route was acknowledged by many of the skilled boat pilots of the time.

Each municipal development corporation along the water touted its own appeal to attract settlers, investors, and businesses. The Harrisburg of John Harris was one of the oldest establishments, dating from before 1825. Burned to the ground by Santa Ana during the Texas Revolution in 1836, it attempted to rebuild and promote its traditional and reliable connection between Clopper’s Point to the east and the San Felipe Road leading to the Brazos River valley to the west. It also offered credit to customers on its exceptional selection of goods brought from the East Coast. Later, James Morgan’s city of New Washington (on Morgan’s Point) boasted a store and warehouses in the hopes of creating a commercial hub. We can only imagine what was offered in Pockersville.

ENTER THE ALLENS: the two brothers, Augustus and John, and Charlotte, Augustus’ wife, facilitated the primary deal that netted the city of Houston in 1836. Originally from New York, the Allens had worked for a number of years in Texas land offices, selling land certificates throughout the eastern part of the state, so it is reasonable to assume that they had a fair amount of knowledge of tract statuses along the Gulf Coast. Charlotte joined her husband in Texas in 1834, and it was her financial contribution from an inheritance, Augustus’ business acumen, and John’s salesmanship and zeal that synergistically sealed the deal when they purchased 6,600 acres for \$5,000 from Elizabeth Parrot, John Austin’s widow, in August 1836. Our local legend has suddenly grown from two founders to three forward-thinking investors. By early 1837, “Team Allen” had grown to ten with the addition of parents and

siblings. The Allens.

Before 1836, Augustus, Charlotte, and John Allen had considered no fewer than three sites for their new town. The Austin parcel was their fourth choice. They actively pursued Galveston, Morgan’s Point, and Harrisburg, but deals failed to materialize due to legal issues with the parcels or the Allens’ low offering price. When one offer was unsuccessful, they simply looked upstream for the next property owner willing to sell at their price.

The Allens played the marketing equivalent of a royal flush by promoting their new city in the region’s newspapers only five days after the land purchase, naming it in honor of the then very popular San Jacinto war hero Sam Houston. Today, that ubiquitous advertisement can now be viewed in print and digital resources. It mentions that the land was surveyed, platted, and ready for development; that it provided a reliable waterway connection with the Gulf and a land connection with points inland; and that by the end of September 1836, it could publicly claim to be the Capital of the Republic, albeit temporarily, remaining so until 1840. The Allens ran advertisements for months starting in the August 30, 1836, issue of the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, a weekly that had commenced publication after a four-month hiatus during the Revolution. The Allens used the media skillfully, and by continuously advertising their product, they made it distinct from the offerings of other land speculators. The Houston tradition continues as we expect nothing less than a constant flow of real estate advertisements with dreams of our new lives appearing in the form of wide-angle, photoshopped views with promises that the commodity is “ready for . . .” —you name it.

The definitive milestone to the Allens’ success was that by 1839, Houston was a city of 2,500 to 3,000 inhabitants and a port located at the narrowest point between the Brazos River and the Gulf. Today, it’s difficult to imagine the multi-day travails of moving cash crops in the 1800s when the distance between the Houston city limits at Grand Corner Drive and the banks of the Brazos River at River Cliff in Richmond now is a mere nine miles. On the other hand, it’s not so difficult to see that we live in the spirit of the early entrepreneurs, whether it is Lafitte’s aggressive trafficking or the Allens’ bold claims. 🌊