3-1998

Houston Mayors: Developing a City

Priscilla Benham

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj

Part of the United States History Commons

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol36/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.
HOUSTON MAYORS: DEVELOPING A CITY

by Priscilla Benham

Towns are developed principally upon the personality and expertise of the leaders of the community. From 1837 to 1857 the mayors of the city of Houston provided excellent leadership. They established roots for the city as they sought to develop a pocket of civilization and a trading center in the new Republic of Texas. What were the social and economic backgrounds of these mayors during Houston’s first twenty years? How did they attempt to improve conditions? Did the community benefit from their efforts? What patterns of actions and attitudes, if any, were developed from their leadership during the early years of Houston?

The mayors came from a variety of backgrounds but all possessed a small businessman’s desire for the furtherance of economic development. They recognized that governmental services which promoted business interests would provide employment and goods and services necessary on the Texas frontier. Like Augustus C. Allen and John K. Allen, the brothers from New York who founded the town of Houston on Buffalo Bayou, the mayors dreamed of transforming their frontier community into a railroad and shipping port. Houston’s location about forty-five miles from the Gulf of Mexico and fifty-five feet above sea level meant it was protected from the worst of the hurricanes and storms which plagued Galveston. With planning and dedicated hard work the struggling new town would become a trading center for the hinterland of Texas.

When the Allens gave the Texas government free lots and allowed credit for rent fees on public buildings, the success of Houston became a reality. Typically, land speculation and the location of the seat of government brought many businessmen to the new community, now advertised as a “city.” Among those was another New Yorker, James S. Holman. With his wife and six children, Holman came to Houston as the agent for the Allens. He witnessed most of their property deed transactions. While serving as Harris County’s clerk, he assisted John Allen in securing incorporation of the city by the Texas Congress, passed on June 5, 1837. After its incorporation, the annual election of mayors began. A candidate had to be a white citizen of Texas, own $100 in real estate for three months, and have lived in Houston for at least six months. From time to time there were amendments to the city charter but these rules provided the basic qualifications for city officials until the twentieth century. Being well-known to Houston’s 1,500 citizens, Holman won election as their first mayor on August 28, 1837, by one vote in a field of three candidates. An ambitious land speculator, he expanded the city’s boundaries to include a tract he owned to improve its market value. Holman was the first of many Houston politicians who combined land speculation with political office. Rather than run for reelection as mayor, Holman ran an unsuccessful campaign for a congressional seat in 1838. For Holman, land speculation both in Houston and other parts of the Republic was more profitable than being privy to govern-

Priscilla Benham lives in Houston, Texas. She is an adjunct instructor at North Harris College - NHMCCD.
ment affairs. He traveled often in search of new buyers and soon had settlers on his town lots. The town, begun as a land speculation project, naturally attracted businessmen eager to distinguish themselves by promoting the city.

The second mayor of Houston was another early arriver in Houston, Francis Moore, Jr., also from New York. In 1836 this twenty-eight year old redhead joined the Buckeye Rangers to help Texans win their independence from Mexico. Despite having only one arm, he also assisted as an army surgeon since he had had training in medicine. Deciding to settle in Houston in 1837, he bought a half interest in the Houston newspaper, *Telegraph and Texas Register*, from Thomas H. and Gail Borden. By 1851 he was the sole owner. Under Moore’s editorship, which lasted seventeen years, the paper became not only the oldest but the most influential paper in Texas. In January 1838, Moore won election as Houston’s mayor. His administrations during 1838-1839, 1843, 1849-1852 demonstrate the power of city government and ordinances in bringing and maintaining civilized behavior on the frontier. During his first term, he appointed a market inspector and approved the construction of a market house. Commerce was the stimulus that kept Houston going. The pattern of trade consisted of merchants who exchanged a variety of goods, including everything from thread to livestock. Though money was scarce, auctioning and even bartering contributed to the brisk trade found in the new market house and the stores and warehouses.

Some visitors to Houston described it as a “hell on earth” where “vice of most every name and grade reigned triumphantl.” Desiring to end the rowdiness and lawlessness such as public drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, thievery, and armed assaults that were a daily occurrence, Mayor Moore established the city’s first police force, which consisted of two constables. Protection was unreliable from these untrained policemen until after the Civil War, as was true for most city police forces. To add to the inconsistency, they rarely worked at night and the public frequently believed them to be lazy louts undeserving of cooperation. Nevertheless, it was a step in the direction of law and order. When criminals were caught and convicted, they were fined and sent to jail, or whipped, or, during the earliest period, branded. Another progressive move in the elimination of crime was a law Moore sponsored which forbade dueling. While both in and out of office, Moore used the editorial page of his *Telegraph and Texas Register* to rail against dueling and carrying weapons in general. “Those carrying weapons insulted a peace-loving community; such ‘blackguards and knaves’ should be ‘frowned down’ by respectable people.” His efforts to put down roots of civilized behavior succeeded. He reported in 1838 that in the preceding three months a dozen challenges were settled without violence. In 1840, as senator in the Fourth Congress, Moore secured the passage of a law not only prohibiting dueling but perpetually disqualifying anyone from holding office who had participated in a duel. By the time of his third term as mayor in 1843, Moore could report that ladies walked down the sidewalks without fear of having to dodge bullets and witnessing brawls.

Politicians frequently led humanitarian movements and Francis Moore was no exception. In line with views of his day, through his newspaper he
called readers' attention to the evils of drunkenness. During his many terms as mayor of Houston he discouraged public and rowdy drunken behavior with fines and time in jail. Moore happily reported in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* that Sam Houston sponsored the formation of the first temperance meeting in the city on February 18, 1839. Local drinking was such a problem that temperance meetings, hosted by itinerant preachers, were organized before a local church of any denomination was established. In addition to curbing violence and lawlessness, mayors had to concern themselves with the city's health. Epidemics such as yellow fever and cholera occurred frequently on the coast. At the beginning of his second term in 1839, Moore organized the Board of Health to prevent the spread of yellow fever in the city.

Since the community was growing steadily, Moore advised the formation of a fire department. He founded Houston's first volunteer fire department to meet the town's requirement for health and safety. Under Moore's direction, the city purchased a town lot for the new department as well as a fire engine and began the construction of a building.

A constant problem of early Houston was to make the Buffalo Bayou a safe waterway to the Gulf of Mexico. The city's empty treasury caused Mayor Moore to call upon businessmen to finance the clearing of the bayou. John D. Andrews, a former Virginian, took on the task of organizing the merchants to remove obstructions between Harrisburg and Houston where navigation was extremely difficult. The group formed the Buffalo Bayou Company and hired L.J. Pilie to clean the channel between Houston and Harrisburg. Buffalo Bayou, located at the head of the tide waters with a constant depth of six feet, allowed steamboat traffic and oceangoing vessels to navigate the five-mile stretch, but below this section the bayou still had obstacles such as tree overhangs and sand bars.

Even though Moore resigned as mayor in mid-1839 to return to New York, the promotion of Houston stayed on his mind. While traveling to New York, he designed the seal of the City of Houston that is still used today. The seal represented the goals of the community: to become a commercial center for agriculture and industry linked together by railroads and steamships. As soon as he arrived in New York, he had a die cast of the seal and presented it to the city council when he returned.

In June 1839, the city elected George W. Lively to complete Moore’s term as mayor. He expanded the Board’s authority to regulate the meat market and other health inspection measures. Numerous bayous around Houston prompted Lively to begin the ongoing project of building bridges to move commerce to the docks on Buffalo Bayou. In addition to improving transportation, Lively sought to increase Houston's spiritual well-being by becoming a charter member of Houston's first Methodist-Episcopal Church, founded in 1840. As the churches expanded beyond house meetings into permanent buildings, lawless conduct began to diminish. Public pressure from organized religion and city government helped stem the tide of reckless behavior. While mayor, Lively also owned and edited the *Weekly Times*, but it was not a rival
to the *Telegraph and Texas Register* since it lasted less than a year. When he failed to win reelection as mayor, he closed the newspaper and accepted an appointment as Texas' commissioner of land titles.14

The next mayor was Charles Bigelow, who defeated incumbent George Lively by one vote in 1840. Bigelow was from Massachusetts and owned a farm equipment supply store and icehouse in Houston. Bigelow decided to finance the dredging of Buffalo Bayou by persuading the Texas Congress to give the city authority to build and maintain wharves. The new docks improved commerce and wharfage fees helped to pay for cleaning of the channel of snags for five miles. Other large expenses for the city were those for streets, salaries, the city hospital, fire protection, sanitation, and market control. Bigelow's friend, Francis Moore, returned with the new city seal which the city council adopted. Bigelow also secured a supplement to the city charter which allowed the division of the town into four wards with each to be represented by two aldermen. He improved public relations by sponsoring dinners in honor of visiting dignitaries such as J. Pinckney Henderson, a Texas diplomat to the United States.15 Bigelow remained in Houston as a businessman and served in the Mexican War in 1846. In September 1849, his wife, Cynthia, was lost at sea when the ship on which she was sailing sank. This tragedy caused him to return to Massachusetts with their two daughters. His Unionist sentiments and dislike of slavery were factors in his decision to remain in Massachusetts.

John Andrews' work on behalf of the Houston’s commercial welfare contributed to his being elected mayor in 1841 and 1842. An affluent slave owner, Andrews, who was forty-two years old, arrived in Houston from Virginia in 1837 with his wife and daughter. He built Houston’s first multiple dwelling unit, a two-story duplex, and purchased seventeen town lots and ten acres in Harris County. He quickly became involved in improvements to the city. When Christ Church (Episcopal) organized on March 16, 1839, Andrews was on the board of vestrymen and helped arrange the location of the church, which remains on the original site.16

The firm of League, Andrews and Company headed the list of $100 contributors in the subscription drive to build a fire engine house and in contributions for the dredging of Buffalo Bayou. Andrews used his slaves to do some of the dredging and allowed merchants to hire them as day laborers. To improve the landing, Andrews led the city council to issue a tax for port improvements which met with citizens approval. Although the wharfage was originally for the benefit of the merchants and wagoners, the money was a main source of revenue for the town until competition from the railroads became too great. The city ordinance established a Port of Houston Authority which controlled all wharves, slips, and roads adjacent to Buffalo Bayou and White Oak Bayou. Harrisburg came under the port authority during Andrews' second term. At Andrews' urging, the Texas legislature granted the city the power to fine owners who did not remove sunken vessels within twenty days. He actively enforced this law since the cheapest method of transportation was by water. The removal of sunken boats, snags, tree overhangs, and a few sand bars was certainly worth the effort.
Before Andrews left office he decided to consolidate various city offices into one place rather than renting space all over town. Since the city owned the Fire Department lot, Andrews ordered an expansion of the engine house to include a council room and city offices. The new City Hall opened in 1842. Being an enthusiastic supporter of Sam Houston, Andrews was offered the position of secretary of treasury in Houston’s second administration but he declined.\(^1\)

Mayors must be aware of the impact of national and international affairs may have on the city. The issue Mayor Moore faced in his third term was the annexation of Texas to the United States. He ardently advocated annexation since he felt the prosperity of the city depended upon being a part of the United States. His persuasive advocacy may have been the reason the City of Houston accepted the proposal in a landslide referendum vote. As Houston’s leading citizen, Moore represented Harris County at the Annexation Convention in 1845.

Official control of Buffalo Bayou and income from the docks helped Mayor Horace Baldwin, elected in 1844, to issue contracts for channel maintenance. As a wealthy merchant and stagecoach line owner, Baldwin recognized that Houston depended upon the Buffalo Bayou as its main connection with the rest of the world. Baldwin had come to Houston from Balwinsville, New York, in 1839, at the urgings of his sister, Charlotte. She had married August C. Allen, founder of Houston. By 1840 Baldwin owned 2618 acres in Harris County and seventeen town lots in Houston. In 1841, President Sam Houston commissioned Baldwin to serve as the Republic’s agent in Houston to preserve the property of the government in the city. That same year Baldwin bought the abandoned capitol building, which he reopened as a hotel. In 1843 Baldwin represented the Fourth Ward and was instrumental in the city’s construction of the first bridge over Buffalo Bayou. Running on a pro-annexation to the United States resolution, Baldwin won the mayor’s race in 1844. He continued to promote improvements in transportation. Shortly after his term, Baldwin died in Galveston following a brief illness. Baldwin’s daughter Elizabeth married William Marsh Rice, importer, railroad entrepreneur, and founder of Rice Institute. Another daughter, Charlotte Marie, married Rice’s brother, Fred Allen Rice. Their son and Baldwin’s grandson, Horace Baldwin Rice, served as mayor of Houston from 1896-1898 and 1905-1913.\(^1\)

In 1845, the business partner of John D. Andrews, William W. Swain, from North Carolina, won the mayor’s race. He had migrated to Alabama in the 1830s and arrived in Houston with his wife and five children in 1840. Third Ward voters elected Swain their alderman in 1841 while the city hall made its offices temporarily in the League, Andrews and Company building. Swain and Andrews also operated a steamboat, \textit{General Houston}, which sank in Buffalo Bayou. No doubt this prompted Swain to run for office. The city council under Mayor Swain decided to grant exemption from wharf fees to ship owners who kept the bayou clear and worked at widening the bayou.\(^1\) The channel was full of the roots of thousands of great cypress trees and while they made the bayou beautiful, no ship owner wanted snags to rip holes in their steamboats. Buffalo Bayou was a crucial artery until the 1870s when railroads expanded the city’s commercial influence beyond the coast.
At the hub of Houston's Buffalo Bayou commerce was the Allen Warehouse on Allen's Landing. Housed in the warehouse was James Bailey's grocery store. Active in civic affairs since his arrival in 1838 from New Hampshire, Bailey won the mayor's race in 1846 by stressing the need for constant improvement in transportation for the great future of Houston. As a friend of Augustus C. Allen he had invested in Allen's Houston and Brazos Railroad, incorporated in 1840. It ran fifty-three miles upon the ridge of land dividing the waters of Buffalo Bayou and San Jacinto. The Houston citizenry also knew Bailey as a charter member and lifelong Sunday School teacher at the First Presbyterian Church, which he helped to organize shortly after his arrival.

In 1840 Bailey served as alderman from the Fourth Ward and in 1844 as chairman of the board of health. It was the board's responsibility to control contagious diseases, inspect the market, keep the streets clean, and maintain a hospital. Of major concern in the summer of 1844 was a yellow fever epidemic. The board of health could do little because yellow fever struck without warning and the victims always died. Though the cause of the sickness was a mystery, observers noted its connection with poor drainage, lack of sanitation, and contact with the disease. For these conditions, the board worked to improve drainage and imposed quarantines.

Having a desire for Texas annexation to the United States, Bailey shared the task of drafting the annexation resolution with Francis Moore, Jr., Horace Baldwin, Francis R. Lubbock, and other prominent Houstonians. The city voted overwhelmingly for annexation and the new state constitution. The Mexican government objected to the annexation and the Mexican War broke out in 1846. The United States government chartered most of the steamboats in Texas for use in the war. Bailey, as the new mayor, faced the loss of city revenues from taxes on boats using Buffalo Bayou. Port fees had long been used to finance other city endeavors. Consequently, municipal funds could not be stretched to include Houston's public schools. Yet, the city did hold a convention for school teachers, the first in the state. Bailey served on the school committee which urged the state legislature to adopt uniform textbooks and state support for public schools. Though not immediately successful, meetings such as this paved the way for state support of public schools. After leaving office Bailey returned to merchandising but moved his store closer to the railroad center.

Guarding the home front during the Mexican War, Benjamin P. Buckner became mayor for two terms, 1847-1848. He had served as chief justice of Harris County from 1839 to 1847. As county judge many of his duties included the same kinds of construction and supervision of roads as that of the mayoral position. He also rendered aid to the indigent and handled all probate business, such as inventories of estates, slave lists, and appointing guardians of orphaned children. The Texas legislature commissioned him, as county judge, to call city elections and swear in elected city officials.

When Texas became a state, Mayor Buckner conducted the census of the city. The population in 1845 numbered 4,737 with 607 qualified voters and 622 slaves. As in the nature of the economy - plantations, slaves, and agricultural products -
so the society had a Southern orientation. Nearly fifty percent of the free inhabitants were born in the South with a large German element from Europe.\(^{21}\)

During Francis Moore's next stint as mayor (1849-1852), he epitomized a characteristic of the early mayors: vast energy for promoting the city. He continued improvements in transportation to the city by organizing a committee of Houston businessmen to raise $150,000 for the Houston Plank Road Company, a proposed toll road. The company secured a right of way along the Brazos River and had raised a third of the money by 1850. Despite these efforts, growing interest in railroads apparently killed the idea. Houston had long had railroad fever but little money to initiate construction. The small amount raised allowed "Dr. Moore's mud road" to become the route for Houston's first railroad, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway.\(^{22}\) Muddy roads, or dusty ones in the dry season, continued to plague Houstonians well into the twentieth century.

With investments from Boston capitalists in 1850-1851, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway was begun toward the cotton fields of the Brazos River Valley. Since enthusiasts for railroads argued that railways provided cheap, fast, dependable service and avoided the entrapments of muddy roads, the new mayor, Colonel Nathan Fuller, a Mexican War veteran, won the 1853-1854 elections by advocating city participation in railroads. He believed that Houston should promote the Houston and Texas Central Railroad as a rival to the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway, thought to be reviving the town of Harrisburg at the expense of Houston. While the Houston and Texas Central Railroad moved successfully toward Cypress, Fuller persuaded the state legislature to appropriate $4000 to dredge Clopper's and Red Fish bars, major obstructions in the Buffalo Bayou route to Galveston Bay. Since commerce was vital to the livelihood of Houston, it was natural that Fuller and other city officials be interested in improving all forms of transportation facilities to the business district of Houston.\(^{23}\) All the paved roads in the city would count for nothing if Houston did not reach to the interior farms and push for faster navigation to the world markets.

The work on the docks and building of various railroads such as Houston and Texas Central Railroad attracted immigrants from all over the world and by the 1850s Houston had a cosmopolitan atmosphere. During Fuller's second term, the German immigrants founded the Houston Turnverein to display their talents at gymnastics and music. Circuses also provided Houstonians with "capital entertainment."\(^{24}\)

Just as the spectator amusements demonstrated the development of urbanization, so also did attempts to curb violence. When Fuller and his family moved from North Carolina to Houston in 1841, this Baptist family immediately organized the First Baptist Church. As might be expected from a staunch member of the church, Fuller secured the passage of the city ordinance prohibiting the use of pistols and rifles within the nine-mile city limits.\(^{25}\)

Discussion and passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 prompted great interest in the building of the transcontinental railroad by the federal
government. Houstonians wanted to build railroads to Houston to be able to tap into the proposed southern route of a possible transcontinental railroad. In 1855 railroad advocates selected a “Railroad” or “Democratic and Anti-Know-Nothing” ticket which included James Stevens as mayor and aldermen nominees William M. Rice and T.W. House. These three energetic merchants and investors won easily.  

James Stevens migrated from Kentucky to Texas in 1845 shortly after the annexation of Texas to the Union. This vigorous twenty-two year old quickly became involved in city politics, serving as representative for the Second Ward from 1847 to 1850. He saved enough money from his $25-a-month wages as a clerk to open his own merchandise store and by the age of thirty was worth $12,000, not an easy accomplishment in a frontier town. When General Sidney Sherman started the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railroad (B.B.B.&C), Stevens was one of the investors. Interested in any movement that would improve transportation to Houston, Stevens also invested in the Brazos Plank Road Company organized by Francis Moore, Jr. and other elite Houston businessmen. Houston gradually became the center of five radiating rail lines. The B.B.B.&C. had completed thirty-two miles of track by 1852 and reached the Brazos River by 1856. Stevens decided to devote all his time to railroading and sold his grocery and general merchandise store in 1853 to his friend and fellow merchant T.W. House, for a sizable profit.  

As mayor for two terms (1855-1856), Stevens obtained permission from the Texas legislature to tap the B.B.B.&C. so that the lucrative cotton trade would flow through Houston instead of Harrisburg. At a cost of $130,000 for seven miles of track, the city-owned Tap Road joined the B.B.B.&C. to form one line at Pierce Junction in October 1856. On July 21, 1856, while still mayor, Stevens died from tuberculosis. The Weekly Telegraph praised him as being “a valuable citizen” and “an able and efficient mayor,” and the Tap Road named their locomotive “James H. Stevens” in his honor. Stevens’ estate was worth over $300,000. He bequeathed $5,000 for the building of an academy whenever Houstonians contributed an additional $10,000 for that purpose. The citizens of Houston met the challenge with $20,000 and the Houston Academy, a small monument to an enterprising leader of Houston, opened in 1858 with Ashbel Smith as superintendent over 140 students.  

After Mayor Stevens died in July 1856, Houstonians elected Cornelius Ennis, merchant and railroad entrepreneur, to finish the term and elected him to a full term in 1857. Ennis had heard about the opportunities in Texas, so he left a wandering life in the Old Northwest and returned to his home in New Jersey to save his money for a move to Texas. He bought a large stock of pharmaceuticals and arrived in Houston in 1839. This twenty-six year old immediately set up a warehouse and store in partnership with George W. Kimball. They branched out into brokering cotton the following year. His cotton-export business suffered pitfalls common to the frontier. Getting the cotton to the Houston market and exporting it was a slow process since there were few bridges and no paved roads. For better transportation, Ennis invested in plank roads and railroads. His plank road went to Hempstead, and he con-
structed the Houston and Texas Central Railroad in 1853 parallel to the old plank route. The Houston and Texas Central reached Cypress in 1856 and Hempstead two years later. With Paul Bremond, William M. Rice, T.W. House, William Baker, and W.J. Hutchins, Ennis served on the railway board of directors for many years. He became the Houston Texas Central's general superintendent and comptroller, and he convinced New York bankers to finance the completion of the railroad. The terminus of the railroad in north Texas was named Ennis in his honor.29

Ennis served as mayor without pay. He supervised the completion of the city-owned Tap Road begun under James Stevens. This tap into the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railroad preserved the Brazos River Valley cotton trade with Houston. He convinced the city to privatize the Tap Road in 1858 and the new owners, including Ennis, renamed the road the Houston Tap and Brazoria. This railway encouraged the growth of the sugar industry by bringing the first carload of sugar and molasses to Houston in 1859. Though the railway went bankrupt during the Civil War, Ennis recouped when it was sold to the International and Great Northern Railroad. His last act in office was the arrest and imprisonment of a band of outlaws that had preyed for years upon shippers and teamsters going to Houston.30 By the end of the 1850s, at least, the lawlessness was on the outskirts of Houston.

Situated in the southwest, Houston exhibited frontier characteristics as little respect for law-and-order, fast growth, and leadership by merchants who concentrated their efforts on moving Texas cotton and other agricultural products through their city to world markets. In the decade before the Civil War, Houston exhibited urbanization characteristics, too. The mayors passed laws curbing violence, establishing sanitation codes, building a hospital and public school, and led in establishing Protestant churches in Houston.

Of the social background of this elected group of Houston's founders, the majority of mayors were Episcopalian. In terms of numerical strength, the Protestant Episcopal Church was the smallest of the church groups. Of course, that was not a prerequisite for running for office since there was one Methodist, one Presbyterian, and one Baptist. Judging from the business ties as well as the religious affiliations, they were friends and encouraged one another to run for office. Their interest in Christianity was sincere because ten of the twelve mayors were founders of their particular church. This religious commitment also demonstrated their leadership since fewer than one-eighth of the white population of Texas by 1845 were members of any church.31

Unlike the majority of the population of Texas who were from the South Atlantic and Old Southwest states, eight of the twelve mayors were from the Northeast. None of the mayors had scratched G.T.T. (Gone to Texas) on their cabin door. They had lived in houses in well-established New England cities and traveled to Houston by steamboat or made the overland trip in well-maintained Conestoga wagons pulled by healthy oxen, a condition for which most immigrants could only wish. Contrary to most immigrants, they brought money to invest in land and businesses. The exception to this rule was James
Stevens, who came from Kentucky with nothing but the determination to make a successful business.

Like the rest of settlers, these future mayors were attracted to offers of large quantities of land for a small fee as compared to land prices in the United States. If they had a satisfying life, why did they come to Texas? With the exception of James Holman, these early mayors were rather restless twenty-and thirty-year-olds, either married with young children or still single. All had business experience and had heard of the opportunities on the Texas frontier from relatives or news accounts. They arrived eager to provide cotton farmers and ranchers with supplies and brokering services, and they had an interest in land speculation. Land titles from the Allen brothers and adjacent Harris County land were secure, contrary to the morass of conflicting claims in the rest of Texas. The establishment of Houston as the capital of the Texas Republic on the navigable Buffalo Bayou made settlement there for these young entrepreneurs a logical choice. Houston was built at the head of navigation where goods had to be transferred from steamboat or wagons. Warehouses and market places were needed for these exchanges. This “commercial break was most important as a foundation for manufacturing and political development.”

It was inevitable that transportation improvements were first on the agenda of these early mayors since commerce was the principle reason they had come to Texas. The dredging, widening, and removal of obstructions from Buffalo Bayou to Galveston Bay was a duty the mayors had to perform at all times. After receiving permission for imposing taxes for dredging purposes and later a port authority for all of Buffalo Bayou, building stable and wide bridges over Buffalo and White Oak bayous were the next priority. This was followed by the construction of public wharves for general commerce. In an effort to prevent sickness as well as promote trade, the mayors built a market center with a board of health to supervise and maintain sanitation. Although there were a few manufacturers, all the newspapers, journals, and actions of the city council demonstrate that trade was obviously the most important activity in the period from 1836-1857.

Difficulties with Texas roads also shaped Houston’s economy. Slow trips to Houston on dusty trails in the dry season and hazardous muddy ones in the winter caused the mayors to give support to efforts to build plank roads into the city. The mayors could do little about roads at first since the revenues they had were focused on bayou improvements; however, after annexation, Houston began a graded road to northern counties. Loss of the Austin trade due to impossible road connections to Houston prompted the city to act.

Despite early interest in a railroad from Houston to the cotton lands, the capital simply was not available in Houston until 1840. After Allen’s Houston and Brazos Railroad completed fifty-three miles of railroad track, future mayoral candidates had to support the advancement of railroads in order to win election. Mayors of the 1850s, Fuller, Stevens, and Ennis, were railroad entrepreneurs and merchants who chartered and operated a city-owned tap road which connected all the five railroads coming into Houston.
The dream of Houston being a railroad center became a reality by 1860. The Houston and Brazos spread out fifty miles to the southwest, the Houston and Texas Central eighty miles to the northwest, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado, seventy-five miles to the west, and two others to the east and southeast. Stevens and Ennis were on the board of directors of most of these railroads. Houston succeeded because it had a favorable location and was developed by energetic capitalists who were also mayors of the city. Their political and business connections allowed them to obtain special considerations for their sites and tax revenues from the government.

While most of the future mayors were laying foundations for potential fortunes, Mayor Francis Moore, Jr. endeavored to bring civilization and moral behavior to the frontier community. Using his position as newspaper editor he crusaded against crime and vice. As mayor, he actively suppressed gambling, dueling, brawls, drunkenness, brothels, stabbing, and the carrying of weapons in the city. Not only did he create the first police force, he organized and equipped the first fire department. Always interested in medicine and public health, he established a meat market inspector and board of health which kept the city clean and labored to hold down the ravages of frequent cholera and yellow fever.

Moore’s vision for the city was expressed in the city seal which he designed. The seal has a plow, a ship, and a locomotive, indicating that Houston would be the commercial and industrial center for Texas trade. His attention included promotion of dredging of the bayou, building the first bridge over Buffalo Bayou, encouraging road improvements such as grading of roads and plank roads, and investing in railways. More than any other mayor, Moore possessed a broader view of the role of mayor and recognized the necessity of law and order if there was to be a community that could grow financially.

By the eve of the Civil War, Houston has progressed from reckless violence and stump-filled streets to a well-established commercial city due to the energetic leadership of the mayors backed by businessmen and church leaders. It had a useful bayou, a network of railroads, and a growing population. The mayors established the pattern of leadership from respected successful men of character who set the basic qualifications for holding political office. These men took the frontier town of Houston on edge of the South and directed it toward a diversified, leading city of the Southwest.

NOTES

2Minutes of the District Court, Book A (March 20, 1837 to March 24, 1838), p. 93; Eleventh Judicial District of the State of Texas; Gammel, *Laws of Texas*, 2, pp. 94-98; 411-413.
7*Telegraph and Texas Register*, (Houston), June 18, 24, 1840; February 9, 1842.
S.W. Geiser, "Note on Dr. Francis Moore (1808-1864)," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 47 (April 1944), pp. 419-425.


*Galveston Daily News*, May 26, 1865, June 1, 3, 1865.


