



Galveston, Texas

*The Oleander City:
Researching the History and
Culture of the Island*

Shelley L. Steward

Marymount University

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“People are not supposed to live on a sandbar, and the fact that they choose to live on this one tells you something about the collective psyche. These are people who like to be different, who see themselves as select, and maybe even a little invincible. There is an unmistakable attitude of tolerance on this Island, too, similar to the liberal atmosphere one experiences in San Francisco – another seaport that survived a devastating natural disaster at the turn of the century.”

- Gary Cartwright from Galveston: A History of the Island

Officially recognized as the Oleander City, Galveston, Texas has earned several monikers over the course of its history. From “Isla de Malhado” (the Island of Back Luck) to the “Wall Street of the South”, through prosperous times and war, the inhabitants of the sandy, flat, narrow barrier reef island have been consistently described as independent, resourceful, and resilient with lifestyles and livelihoods inherently defined by water. To understand the culture of today’s Galvestonians, one must understand the place, people, and events that shaped the island city.

The Place

Located 50 miles southeast of present-day Houston, Galveston Island runs parallel to the Texas coastline and is only two miles across at its widest point. With a total land area of just 46.15 sq. miles, Galveston is bordered on the northeast by Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico to the southwest. The natural harbor of Galveston Bay has provided an ideal port for trade and its 32 miles of beaches and temperate weather have contributed directly to the continual interest in maintaining a community on the island.

The People

The first inhabitants to appear in the recorded history of Galveston Island were the Karankawa Indians. Known to other native populations as “the people who walk on water”, the Karankawa tribes roamed the 350-mile coastline from the Rio Grande River to Galveston Bay. Strongly self-reliant, the men of these tribes were described as tall and well-built with lighter skin tone and cinnamon red hair. Skilled archers, the Karankawa men would fish using tall bows of red cedar. They travelled with small, barkless, fox-like dogs, which most likely resulted in the ascription of the Native American words karan meaning “dog” and kawa meaning “to love”. Although aware of agriculture from inland tribes, they rejected outside practices and generally avoided association with external cultures.

Encounters with European explorers and conquistadors began in the 16th century. On November 6, 1528, Cabeza de Vaca and survivors of the failed expedition of Don Pánfilo de Narváez washed ashore after more than two weeks at sea on a crudely constructed barge. Although initially accepted by the Karankawa Indians, most survivors succumbed to the starvation and unfamiliar elements. By 1785, Galveston Bay had been charted by Spanish navigator José de Evia and named in honor of Don Bernardo de Gálvez, the viceroy of Mexico. But it wasn’t until April 1817 that a regionally recognized port was established on the island.

Privateer Jean Lafitte set up the fortress town of Campeachy on the east end of the island as a Mexican republican court of admiralty and buccaneer commune for trading captured Spanish merchandise including silver, cotton, sugar, coffee, gold, and “black ivory” (slaves). Mexico officially designated Galveston as an entry port for colonization in 1825 and by 1830 a customs house was built on the island.

The Events

During the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836, Galveston served as the port of the Texas Navy and temporary capital for the Texas government. With the defeat of Mexican dictator Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto and the quasi-legal transfer of 4600 acres of land grants, the Galveston City Company was founded. New York surveyor John D. Groesbeck was hired to survey the eastern half of the island and the resulting city plan established a precise grid of blocks oriented north to south. East-west streets were designated as avenues alphabetically beginning with Avenue A on the bay (north) side of the island. The shorter north-south streets were assigned numerical names and terminated with views of the Gulf of Mexico to the south and Galveston Bay to the north. The highest and most valuable real estate in the city lined Avenue J (Broadway). This “spine” literally divided the island; distinguishing the gulf side from the bay side.

Since the founding of the city itself, the single most defining moment in the communal history of Galveston was the Hurricane of 1900, the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. On September 8, 1900, a Category 4 hurricane slammed the island with winds estimated at 130-140 mph. With little warning and no means of evacuation, more than 6000 people (estimates range from 6,000 to 12,000) were killed by the storm surge. Two-thirds of the buildings on the island were obliterated with the remaining third suffering at least some extent of damage. According to Shirley, a professional tour guide and staff member of the Galveston Island Visitors Center (1-888-GAL-ISLE), Galvestonians define their city’s history as “pre-storm” and “post-storm” although “tenacity remained a constant”.

Galveston Pre-Storm

Prior to the hurricane, Galveston claimed to have more millionaire residents per capita than any other U.S. city in the late 1800s. And with that concentration of wealth, the city was, by default, the region’s principle banking center. The Strand (Avenue B) centered in the heart of the commercial district was considered the “Wall Street of the South”. The city benefitted from this wealth in the form of early adoption of technological advances including telegraphs, telephones, and electric-powered house, streetlights, and trolleys. Galveston’s shipping industry was also exceptionally strong in the latter years of the 19th century. The port led the world in cotton exports and was a key exporter of wheat. Major imports included sugar and European immigrants. Galveston was second only to Ellis Island as a hub of immigration.

Galveston Post-Storm

After the hurricane, city engineers constructed a 17-foot high, 3-mile long concrete seawall (breakwater) along the gulf side of the island and raised the elevation of the city. The project to alter the grade lasted seven years. During that time, buildings were systematically lifted on stilts and the space below filled with dredged material from the bay. Sediment from the bay was chosen because removing sand from the gulf was considered harmful to the beaches and fill from the mainland was too expensive. Additionally, dredging the bay would provide the subsequent benefit of deepening the ship channel which would allow the passage of larger steamships. A concrete bridge connecting the island to the mainland, once opposed by railroad executives, was deemed necessary and built to facilitate future evacuations.

With the completion of the 50-mile Houston Ship Channel, the shipping-related industries lose prominence in Galveston. Understandably, the medical and insurance industries were strengthened in the years following the storm. Finance, tourism, and marine (oil field) industries round out the top economic drivers. In recent years, Galveston has become home port to several commercial cruise line vessels.

Architecture, Historic Preservation, and the Districts

Galveston has four locally protected historic districts – two of which are also National Historic Landmark Districts. As of September 3, 2010, 67 properties and districts are listed in the National Register of Historic Places in Galveston County, Texas. Three additional structures were destroyed by Hurricane Ike in 2008 and were therefore removed from the list January 8, 2009 (reducing the total from 70). Galveston maintains one of the most intact collections of late 19th century architecture in the country, predominately from the 1870-1900 time period.

The Galveston Historical Society (now the Galveston Historical Foundation) was chartered on August 3, 1871. As Texas's oldest historic preservation group, current and past members are directly responsible for preserving and revitalizing Galveston's historic buildings and neighborhoods. The group operates a salvage warehouse and provides the public with a research facility that offers historic property research, neighborhood information, and technical rehabilitation guidance.

The Galveston Historical Foundation has divided the city into nine geographic districts that roughly reflect the architectural styles and economic development of the city.

- Downtown/Central Park -- Located on the bay side of the island, this district encompasses the area most associated with port-related industries. The largest concentration of late 19th century commercial buildings were preserved or restored in this district. Notably, in the 19th century, the backsides of buildings along the bay-side of Water Street (Avenue A) opened directly to the bay.

- East End -- Located on the bay side of the island, this district is predominately wealthy residential structures. Also known as “the fire district”, 40 blocks were burned (500 houses destroyed) in the Great Fire of 1885. Although rebuilt within a year, the fire results in significantly stricter building codes for the city as a whole. The Strand National Historic Landmark District is situated within this geographic district.
- UMTB/East End Flats -- Located on the bay side of the island, this district includes the site of the Medical Department of the University of Texas. When opened in 1891, the medical complex was once on the periphery of the city. (Developed blocks ended at 8th Street.) Beginning in the 1940s, the eastern low-lying marshes were systematically filled in as an extension of the original city grid. Post World War II development began incorporating some common 20th-century suburban standards.
- San Jacinto -- Located on the eastern end of the gulf side of the island, this district was known as “the working man’s part of town”. Due to the lower topography, the buildings in this district were mostly worker’s cottages and rentals. The exception is the professional’s enclave now designated as the Silk Stocking Historic District.
- West End – Also located on the gulf side of the island, this district contains a broader mix of architectural styles mostly due to later (early 20th century) development. Originally the location of outlying estates for the wealthy elite and large educational facilities (e.g. the Barnes Institute, The Ursuline Convent & Academy), the two oldest houses in the city can be found in this district. The district also encompasses an African American neighborhood dating to before the Civil War.
- Factory District -- Located on the western end of the bay side of the island, this district was primarily industrial and port activities. As home to the laboring classes, poor immigrants, and transient workers, the properties were typically poorly maintained rentals (mostly late 19th century small to medium-sized vernacular houses). By the 1940s much of the area had been converted to public housing projects and a large portion of the older structures were demolished in code enforcement programs of the 1960s.
- Denver Resurvey -- Located on the gulf side of the island, this residential area was developed between 1900 and 1950. Real estate developments resulted in the filling of McKinney’s Bayou and subdivisions of low-profile houses that break from the city’s grid. Auto-oriented, this district is typical of 20th century commercial corridors.
- Seawall Boulevard -- Located along the gulf side of the island, this district is considered the seaside resort area. Taking cues from Coney Island and Atlantic City, this area encompassed the primary entertainment and tourist venues, including bathhouses, piers, and grand hotels.
- Offatt’s Bayou/West Beach – Located on the far western end of the island, this district encompasses the periphery 1960s era resort subdivision developments. In this district, open landscapes still dominate. The major exception is the 142-acre Moody Gardens, Galveston’s late 20th century ecological theme park. (Note: West Beach includes the 20 miles of beach between the end of the seawall and San Luis Pass.)

Local Idiosyncrasies

Galvestonians have several quirks of speech and writing that reveal locals from tourists. For example, they prefer to be referred to as “Islanders” and regularly utilize the word Island in place of Galveston (i.e. “I’m going to the Island this weekend” as opposed to “I’m going to Galveston this weekend”). Native “Islanders” will also be referred to, without explanation, in local publications as BOI. This is short-hand for “born on the Island”. Locals also commonly call Galveston’s streets by names other than their numerical or alphabetical designations (e.g. Avenue B is “The Strand”, 23rd Street is “Tremont”). Good guidebooks will list both the official and local names.

Luxury Hotels in Galveston

- Hotel Galvez (1911) – “Queen of the Gulf” at 2024 Seawall Blvd.; Old World Charm and Historic Elegance.



- Harbor House – Pier 21 (bay side); Waterfront Warehouse Inn located near the Historic Wharf.



- The Tremont House – 1879 Leon & H.Blum Building; Elegant European style hotel in The Strand Historic District



- Moody Gardens Hotel – Hotel, Spa and Convention Center; Tropical Surroundings and Pyramids of Moody Gardens



Conclusion

From the earliest inhabitants to today's residents, Galvestonians have both suffered and prospered by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Their self-reliance, tenacity, and resilience have been proven time and again, both in their communal concern for preserving the beauty and character of the city and their resolve to rebuild and reclaim their culture when nature or war descends on the island. The drive to do what needs to be done "with full awareness of the choices and responsibilities of living on the island" (Matt, Preservation Coordinator, Galveston Historical Foundation, 409-763-8655) unites a friendly, pragmatic, sea-loving community.

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