

## **JOHN R. HARRIS PARK**

The site selected to be the location of the new John R. Harris Park is about two blocks west of Broadway along Lawndale, which was once named Bowie Street. The park will follow either side of the corridor of Highway 225, the La Porte Highway, to its juncture with the South Loop East. This is a distance of approximately 3327 feet.

Harrisburg, where John R. Harris lived, is still a landmark to many who live in and around the area. Harrisburg lies east southeast of Houston along the continuation of Prairie Avenue on a street named Harrisburg which terminates at Navigation Boulevard, just before reaching the Houston Ship Channel, a short distance above Brays Bayou. Lawndale Avenue is more or less its southern boundary. Brays Bayou forms the north boundary of present Harrisburg and Broadway runs through the center of the once lively community.

John Richardson Harris immigrated to Texas with other Anglo-Americans in the early 1820s. Harris, leaving his wife and four children in New York, arrived in Texas in 1823 in his own boat, *The Rights of Man*, from New Orleans, Louisiana. Harris visited several places before deciding to settle on Buffalo Bayou. He chose a spot near the junction of Buffalo and Brays Bayous, on the crown of a sloping bank on Buffalo Bayou and about one half mile from the confluence of the two waters. He chose this site to build his home and erect a sawmill. John Harris had secured a contract with the Mexican Government to supply lumber from Buffalo Bayou forests to the city of Tampico on the eastern Mexican coast.

Before dredging, Buffalo Bayou historically provided access to vessels drawing five to six feet of water that could transport logs. These sawmills on the bayou were known at one time to have furnished more lumber than any other in Texas. Tie production for railroads continued into the late twentieth century. Early grist and saw mills on were set in the stream bed in order to create water power using waterfalls. Some created water sluices to fill lakes for water power. As soon as steam was available, the mills converted their operations to the higher power machinery.

At this particular time, the place Harris had selected was the “practical head of tide” and navigation on Buffalo Bayou. When he received title to his league of land, 4428 acres, he built a house, a store, and started a shipping business, with schooners sailing between there, Mexico, and New Orleans. In 1826, Harris hired a surveyor by the name of Francis W. Johnson, to lay out a town site. He named the town Harrisburg, in his own honor and after the city by the same name in Pennsylvania, named for his grandfather.

The mercantile business owned by Harris flourished and he soon opened a second store at Bell's Landing in Brazoria County. In 1827, David, his brother, an able ships captain joined him at Harrisburg to help handle his fleet of ships. Later two of his other brothers, William and Samuel joined him in his business ventures. In 1828, J. C. Clopper, along with his father and two brothers formed a trading company, constructing their warehouse in Harrisburg.

In 1829, John R. Harris ordered and was busy constructing a steam-driven sawmill and grist mill on the south bank of Brays Bayou near its junction with Buffalo Bayou. For the effort of adding

these necessities for the benefit of the community, the Mexican government subsidized Harris by granting him another two leagues of land. The sawmill would be the first in Texas. During that same year, J. R. Harris signed what is believed to be the first contract for cotton in Texas, with Jared Groce, owner of the Groce Plantation on the Brazos River. The contract called for Groce to deliver, all of the cotton Groce owned, ninety to one hundred bales annually, to Harris for export from Harrisburg.

During the summer of 1829, John R. Harris found himself in need of some parts for his still uncompleted sawmill. He boarded his Schooner, *The Rights of Man*, and set sail for New Orleans, the center of business at that time on the northern coast of the Mexican Gulf. He would never return. New Orleans at that time was in the grips of an epidemic of yellow fever. John R. Harris contracted the disease and within five days, on August 21, 1829, died from its effects. His widow, Jane Birdsall Harris, did not come to Texas until 1833, at which time her eldest son, DeWitt Clinton Harris, reached an acceptable age to accompany her and the remainder of the family. Jane and DeWitt traveled by stagecoach, canal boat, steam boat, then sailing ship to reach Harrisburg. David Harris had set up residence in his brother's house then on the north side of Brays Bayou in Harrisburg.

Upon her arrival, Mrs. Harris began to construct a home for herself and her family. Although John Harris had died four years prior to her arrival, his estate would not be settled for another five years, owing to the ineptness of the Mexican courts and family disagreements. On 21 March 1836, the home of Jane Birdsall Harris, located in Harrisburg became the Capitol of the Republic of Texas, when the President David G. Burnet with Vice President Lorenzo de Zavala and members of the presidential cabinet met there. The house was not quite suited for this many guests, so the President and Vice President were the only ones afforded beds, while the members of the cabinet had to sleep on the floor. Plentiful Spanish moss was common for mattress-stuffing at this time. The settlers gathered the moss and buried it in the earth until partially rotted, dug it up, thoroughly cleaned the moss, dried and picked over the rest. The balance was shaped into a suitable size mattress and encased in ticking. New wool was layered on top of the moss before the ticking was sewn around the mattress. Other convenient materials utilized included hay, straw or cotton.

During April 1836, the elected officials of the state, along with thousands of other Texans were trying to avoid being captured by the advancing Mexican army under the command of Generalissimo Santa Anna. Shortly thereafter, the Mexican army paid a visit to Harrisburg in pursuit of the renegade officials. The leaders of the state, and the Harris family, along with many others had fortunately retired to Galveston. The Mexican Army torched Harrisburg, threw the local printing press into Buffalo Bayou, and marched east to burn the warehouses of James Morgan at his town of New Washington near the mouth of the San Jacinto River, as it was known at that time. Morgan remarked years later that Santa Anna had burned his town due to Morgan snubbing the Mexican leader at an 1832 dinner party in New York.

After the Mexicans were defeated by the Texas Army near San Jacinto on April 21st, the Harris' returned to Harrisburg, and began to rebuild their home. There was a house left standing, outside the limits of Harrisburg, known as the Farmer House. It was here that Mrs. Harris lived while her residence was rebuilt. The new house, could not be compared to her former residence, but

was built on the same lot. It was built from logs, hewn by Mexican prisoners, since the Harris sawmill had also been destroyed by the Mexicans Army.

On 28 August 1839, an advertisement appears in the local papers for a residence: “Grove Cottage for sale, beautiful residence on Buffalo Bayou, two miles below Harrisburg .....Dwelling house 20 ft x 24 feet, ten foot gallery in front, two gallery rooms in rear of 10 ft x 10 ft, upper room. Four rooms in front dwelling. Sealed and painted. Dining room 8 ft x 24 ft, sealed and painted. Neat kitchens with brick chimneys, stable, oven. Good wharf in front of house. Steamboats land at all times. Handsome garden with fruit trees and summer house. Six acre field which has produced two good crops of corn and melons, plenty of wood. Whole under good palings and fences. Inquire of Andrew Briscoe, Harrisburg.

Since the estate of John R. Harris was not settled and still in the courts, Harrisburg was bypassed by development for the new city of Houston several miles upstream on Buffalo Bayou, five miles by land. The delegates to the Capitol of the new Republic of Texas moved to Houston in May 1837 and Houston became the new Capitol as well as the seat of government for Harrisburg County.

By 1840, the Harris family had regained enough business to remodel their home. Dewitt Clinton Harris was in New York on business when he purchased the doors and windows from the former governors’ home, which was being demolished. These he shipped to his mother in Harrisburg, for use in the enlargement of the family home. This was a time when all fine carpentry came from New York, Boston, or Bangor (Maine). Also in 1840, Andrew Briscoe, a relative of the Harris family dreamed of bringing new life to Harrisburg with the introduction of a railroad. Unfortunately, Mr. Briscoe was somewhat before his time.

Mrs. Harris was a stockholder of the Harrisburg Town Company, which promoted Harrisburg business, and contracted to bring a French Colony to the town in 1843. Several brick buildings were constructed and a number of French immigrants made their way to the town. Parties were given, at which French wine was served, with talk of vineyards surrounding Harrisburg. Most of the French immigrants were disappointed, staying but for a short time, then returned to their homeland. The harsh pioneer life and malaria fever proved too much for the French and the plan failed. Jane Birdsall Harris then turned to operating an Inn at her home and was well patronized. By 1851, Andrew Briscoe’s dream had been fulfilled, as the first railroad in Texas, the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railroad (BBB&C) was being constructed linking Harrisburg with Alleyton on the Colorado River, giving another boom time to Harrisburg. Buffalo Bayou, Brazos & Colorado Railroad Company was headed by Sidney Sherman, a Texas General at the Battle of San Jacinto. The earliest portions of the railroad were in operation by 1853 and after many years became a part of the Southern Pacific Railroad System.

The railroad began in Harrisburg, very near the Harris House, as the Inn was known, and adjacent to the wharves owned by the Harris shipping firm. Travelers changed modes of transportation from steamships to railcars and horse drawn vehicles almost at the door of the of the Harris Inn. Business was brisk and for a time, new life was breathed into Harrisburg. Many prominent personages gathered there, not to mention, the railroad officials on their yearly inspection tours. Just south of Brays Bayou, along the east side of Broadway Boulevard is the

site of the mill and store that was the terminal and depot of the BBB&C railroad. The J. R. Harris 15 horse-powered steam sawmill had an invested capital of \$13,000 by 1860 and processed thirty Pine, Oak, or Cypress logs a day. The sawmill employed fourteen men who produced 1,408,500 board feet of rough-cut lumber a year. The gross value of the mill production annually was estimated at \$24,000.

When the War Between the States broke out, having a seaport connected to the railroad, played an important role to the Confederacy. Arms and munitions were shipped from Houston, with the ships stopping at Harrisburg to take on additional cargo. There were three confederate army camps, one of which was named Camp Van Dorn, established in the immediate area of the town. The bayou at Harrisburg lent easy access for troop movements to the Gulf of Mexico, and eventually to other destinations where they were needed. While the war raged in other parts of the United States, Harrisburg continued to be a quiet, small seaport town. Mrs. Harris opened her home to sick confederate soldiers, who her sister nursed back to health. After the war, the railroad expanded and changed its name to the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railroad (GH&SA). Harrisburg remained an important railroad town. Mrs. Jane Birdsall Harris died at her home in Harrisburg during August 1869. The next year a fire destroyed the railway yards and warehouse, bringing the era of the railroad to an end in Harrisburg. The new rail yards and terminals were built in Houston.

No improvements in the shipping channel had been made below Harrisburg between 1836 and 1845. In 1850, a small amount of improvements were undertaken and by 1872, \$10,000 in Federal money had been allocated to the channel. Deep water efforts began in 1897, promoted by Congressman Thomas H. Ball and received one million dollars in 1902 funded from the United States Congress. By 1904, the funds ran out and the channel depth was only 18.5 feet. The 1910 citizen participation in the project secured the future of Houston as a deep water port, beginning at the point originally chosen by John R. Harris.