

### **White Oak Bayou: History of a Houston Waterway**

Ever since John and August Allen founded Houston at the confluence of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous in 1836, the bayou has played an important role in the city's history. The Allen brothers believed that the bayous would bring ships to Houston and transform the sleepy town into a great trading emporium. Over the next one hundred years, Buffalo Bayou became the center of commercial activity in the busy young city. But White Oak Bayou, and the residential communities along its banks, largely escaped the ravages of the early industrial period. The county around the slow flowing bayou was heavily wooded, and provided some small respite from the city's swampy atmosphere. Images from the early 20th century display the stream's extraordinary biological richness.



The image on the left shows White Oak Bayou circa 1900, courtesy of Rice Digital Scholarship Archive. The right image was taken in 1955, shortly before channelization, courtesy of HCFCD.

In its early history, White Oak Bayou provided a wealth of recreation opportunities to Houston residents. Shortly after the city was founded, Thomas Beauchamp established a hotel and saloon at a small spring along White Oak Bayou, close to modern day Stude Park. Guests enjoyed Beauchamps Springs as a park, swimming hole, and source of fresh water until the 20th century, when development and interstate highway construction eliminated the Springs. Read more about Beauchamp Springs [here](#).



Pleasure boating on Buffalo bayou. Image courtesy Rice Digital Scholarship Archives

Attempts were made to capitalize on the recreational value of White Oak Bayou in the early 20th century. In 1903, to accompany the opening of its upscale development in the Woodland Heights neighborhood, the Houston Electric Company dammed Little White Oak Bayou near the spot of Beauchamp Springs and created Woodland Park along the shores of the new lake. The park's numerous attractions, including a cafe, zoo, gun range, and water slide, led a Galveston newspaperman to praise it thusly:

Nestled between the hills fifty feet below the cafe and buffet building, with the rays of the sun glittering and sparkling upon its clear transparent surface is a lake of exceptional beauty and picturesqueness. Surrounding the lake on all sides are comfortable tree seats and rustic benches where the pleasure seekers, wishing to rest, may have ample opportunity. Special arrangements have been made with the United States Government whereby 50,000 fish, including the big-mouthed bass and trout, are to be shipped from the United States fish hatcheries at San Marcos to stock the waters of the lake and bayou [...] A few yards from the edge of the lake is an artesian well 478 feet deep, which has a flow of 75,000 gallons daily, furnishing patrons of the park with pure crystal mineral water. The water was tested by a chemist and found to contain a certain per cent of lithia, thus giving it curative properties of exceptional value. Arc lamps are distributed throughout the grounds, and thousands of incandescent lamps are suspended from wires overhead, lighting up the lanes and places of amusement and sparkling like millions of fireflies in the darkness. The surface of the lake, shining and glimmering in the moonlight, reflects the myriad electric lights, the pleasure boats with their gay occupants and the shadows of the great pine trees lend a touch of mystic enchantment to the scene.

The site was purchased by the City of Houston in 1915, and renamed [Woodland Park](#). Although the park still remains, the lake and its pleasure boats have long since been removed.





The lake at Highland Park along Little White Oak Bayou. Image courtesy Rice Digital Scholarship Archives



The lake at Highland Park along Little White Oak Bayou. Image courtesy Houstorian.com

White Oak Bayou boasted a number of other attractions during this time. An entrepreneur named E.L. Coombs operated an amusement park at Heights Boulevard which boasted a hot air balloon and a 3200 square foot natatorium. Further down the bayou, at Houston Avenue

south of Woodland Park, Luna Park offered a number of attractions, including a carnival show and a 110-foot roller coaster. Known as the “Coney Island of Texas,” Luna Park drew thousands of visitors everyday until its closure in the 1930s. You can read more about Luna Park [here](#), thanks to researcher Henry Chavez. The combined shocks of the Great Depression and rapid post-war urban growth largely put an end to pleasure seeking along the bayou. Most of these idyllic spots along White Oak Bayou have been paved over by flood control chutes or Interstate highways, leaving only pictures to remind us of their former beauty.



The image on the left shows the Coombs Park natatorium, courtesy of [Houston Heights Association](#). The image on the right was taken in Luna Park, courtesy of Rice Digital Scholarship Archive.

The waters of White Oak Bayou, which gave such joy to Houston pleasure seekers, also had deadly potential. In the first 100 years of the city’s history, Houston suffered 16 major floods, some cresting at more than 40 feet. Two particularly bad floods, which inundated downtown Houston in 1929 and 1935, finally galvanized a local and federal response. The Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) was founded in 1937, and with the help of the US Army Corps of Engineers the district began altering the bayous to maximize their drainage potential. Stormwater management philosophy at the time called for channelization, a process in which the stream was widened, deepened, and lined with a layer of concrete, in order to stabilize the streambanks and reduce friction with flowing water. This policy maximized the volume of floodwater carried by the stream, but unintentionally ignored the social, environmental, and economic benefits of a natural waterway. By 1950, the District had channelized 1260 miles of streams in Harris County; Lower White Oak Bayou was completely encased in concrete by 1971. Yet Houston has continued to grow at rapid rates, increasing impervious ground cover and leading to larger stormwater runoff volumes. Even HCFCD’s massive channelization projects have failed to keep up with urban sprawl, and the city continues to experience devastating floods. What at the time seemed like an appropriate management decision has, in hindsight, impaired valuable ecosystem services without completely alleviating Houston’s drainage problems. As Ann Riley, director of the Waterways Restoration Institute, writes, “the engineering solutions for controlling flood damage and erosion used since the late 1930s to accommodate new development for our growing population continue to be in direct conflict with



our needs for environmental education and all the other values we assign the natural environment.”



This image, taken in 1955 during the channelization of White Oak Bayou, bears witness to the extent of alterations made to the natural landscape. Image courtesy HCFCD





White Oak Bayou between Studemont Street and Houston Avenue, before and after channelization. The stream's course was straightened and most of the riparian vegetation corridor removed. Historic image courtesy of HCFCF.