

Houston, Capital of the Republic of Texas

Houston was founded at the headwaters of Buffalo Bayou in 1836 by two real estate brokers and brothers – John and Augustus Allen – who paid \$1.40 per acre for 6,642 acres of land near Buffalo Bayou. Allen brothers named their town after Sam Houston and persuaded the Texas Congress to name the site as the temporary capital of the new Republic of Texas. President Sam Houston ordered the government to move there on December 15, 1836. The legislature first met in Houston on May 1, 1837. Houston was capital from April 19, 1837, until 1839.

The promoters, Allen Brothers, offered lots and buildings to the government free or at low cost. On January 1, 1837, the town comprised twelve residents and one log cabin; four months later there were 1,500 people and 100 houses. Gail and Thomas H. Borden surveyed and mapped the town in typical gridiron fashion, with broad streets running parallel and perpendicular to the bayou. The early settlers used lumber to build frame houses, ditches for drainage, and pigs to clean the streets.

Yellow fever struck periodically (in 1839, 1844, 1847, 1848, 1854, 1858, 1859, 1862, and 1867) until it was controlled by quarantine of the coastline. In 1839 the disease killed about 12 percent of the population. Despite the efforts of Masons, the Presbyterians, and the Episcopalians who formed churches in 1839, the town remained infamous for drunkenness, dueling, brawling, prostitution, and profanity. Since many of the first Houston settlers were from the South, they endorsed the slavery-plantation system and used urban slaves for menial tasks.

The Texas government left Houston for Austin in 1839, and the city settled into an agricultural center. Activity was greatest during harvest and marketing times, while the rest of the year was spent in sending supplies to farmers. Oceangoing ships brought cargoes of cloth, flour, whiskey, gunpowder, iron castings, lead, coffee, sugar, nails, books, and hundreds of little items to Galveston. Small river steamships took the goods from Galveston to Houston. This was an overnight trip of almost twelve hours. Merchants then sent them by ox wagon to the farmers out on the prairie. From the blackland prairie farmlands came cotton, corn, and hides through Houston to Galveston and on to New Orleans, New York, and Europe.

The Telegraph and Texas Register moved to Houston and began its publication there on May 2, 1837. The Houston Morning Star started on April 8, 1839. These early newspapers reflected the local interests in cotton production, roads, railways, and bayou clearance.

(Source: adapted from text about Houston in the Handbook of Texas Online, accessed October, 2007)