

II.6. HOUSTON

They Call It Heavenly Houston

“Historic Houston not only sounds good, but is the truth; being the first civic effort of the Republic of Texas, by General Sam Houston and the Allen family after the battle of San Jacinto, when Texas licked the Mexicans in 1836. Owing to a disagreement the Harris family located Harrisburg and the Allens located Houston, and today it is said that Harrisburg is about the same size, and now a suburb of Houston. Read of the advantages of Houston and one would almost think the sun rose and set in Houston. Largest inland cotton shipping port; largest banking center in the Southwest; largest oil development; largest lumber business; largest industrial and manufacturing enterprises; and so on and so forth. Its hotel facilities are unsurpassed, and it claims the record in sky scrapers.”

G. A. MacNaughton, *The Meridian Road in Texas*, 1916

The story of Houston and the Meridian Highway is a complicated one of ever-evolving highway routes and designations. As originally conceived and promoted in 1911, the Meridian Highway entered Houston by way of Waller, Cypress, and Fairbanks, then continued on to Galveston through Genoa, Webster, League City, Dickinson, and La Marque. The segment that extended through Houston was part of the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway in Texas,²⁹² and it followed the Houston and Texas Central Railway (H&TC) northwest to Bryan. The Meridian Highway, including the Gulf Division, was part of the original SH 2, which the Texas Highway Commission designated in 1917 for the original state highway network. After the establishment of the federal highway numbering system in 1926, the Gulf Division lost its affiliation, and segments extending through Houston became part of other highways. The segment between Hempstead and Houston was designated as SH 6 while the stretch between Houston and Galveston became part of US 75. These designations effectively severed the association of the Gulf Division route from the Meridian Highway. In 1939, the Hempstead–Houston Road was re-designated as US 290, and SH 6 was re-routed from Hempstead to Alvin and Sugarland but reconnected with US 75 at Virginia Point, just north of the Galveston causeway.

At the time of the establishment of the Meridian Highway in 1911, Houston was a growing and vibrant city with a robust economy that had surpassed Galveston as a harbor and shipping port. The discovery of oil in nearby salt domes similar to the famous one at Spindletop oil field in Beaumont led to the construction of oil refineries along the Houston Ship Channel and the rise of giant oil companies that established operations in and around Houston.

Houston’s origins date to 1836, when the Allen brothers settled the area and ran an advertisement in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* offering

lots for sale. Construction on the H&TC Railway began in 1853 and reached Millican by 1861, when the Civil War halted its construction. Work resumed after the war, and the railroad extended its line further north. The railroad was particularly important for the Meridian Highway because it became the corridor used to develop what came to be called the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway. The railroad tapped rich agricultural lands in Central Texas and was used to ship agricultural goods to port facilities on the Gulf of Mexico. Galveston was the primary designation but several ambitious Houstonians sought to compete with Galveston. In 1876, a 12-foot-deep waterway was constructed on Buffalo Bayou to Clinton, a port town below Houston, and provided new shipping facilities. The waterway was expanded over time and in 1914, the Houston Ship Channel opened. With port facilities in Houston, the H&TC Railway and other railroads extended into Houston, and land along the ship channel developed into one of the nation's largest and most significant industrial zones. With the Meridian Highway and other roadways emanating out of or extending through Houston (see *Figure 154*, to follow), trucking and wholesale distribution expanded in the intervening years after the opening of the ship channel.

Besides the Meridian Highway, other highways converged in downtown Houston, and included the Old Spanish Trail and Exall (also X-all or Xall) Highway, Gulf-to-Colorado Highway, and the Lone Star Trail (see *Figure 155*, to follow). The Old Spanish Trail was among the most important because it was an early transcontinental highway that extended from St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego, California. It was designated as SH 3, and later became US 90. It entered Texas at Orange and continued through Beaumont, Houston, San Antonio, Del Rio, Van Horn, and El Paso. The Exall Highway, later US 75 and eventually IH 45, was the primary highway connecting Dallas to Galveston (south of Dallas it merged with the Meridian Highway). Together, the highways worked in conjunction with the railroads to transport goods from the Houston Ship Channel to various parts of the state. While the railroads were able to transport larger items and greater quantities at a time, trucks utilizing the highway system were able to respond more easily to changing economic and market conditions. Therefore, the use of the highway system complemented the use of the railroad. As a rapidly growing city with a diversified economy and a broad industrial base, Houston became an important transportation hub and was a logical place for the Meridian Highway to extend. For the same reasons, the routing of the Meridian Highway through the city also had less of an impact on its physical character than it did on smaller, less-established cities with fewer transportation arteries.

One of the earliest sets of travel guides published to help motorists navigate through Houston was the Goodrich Texas Route Book of 1915. This guide included a trip to provide directions for travel between Houston and Waco. This route, which would more or less become the

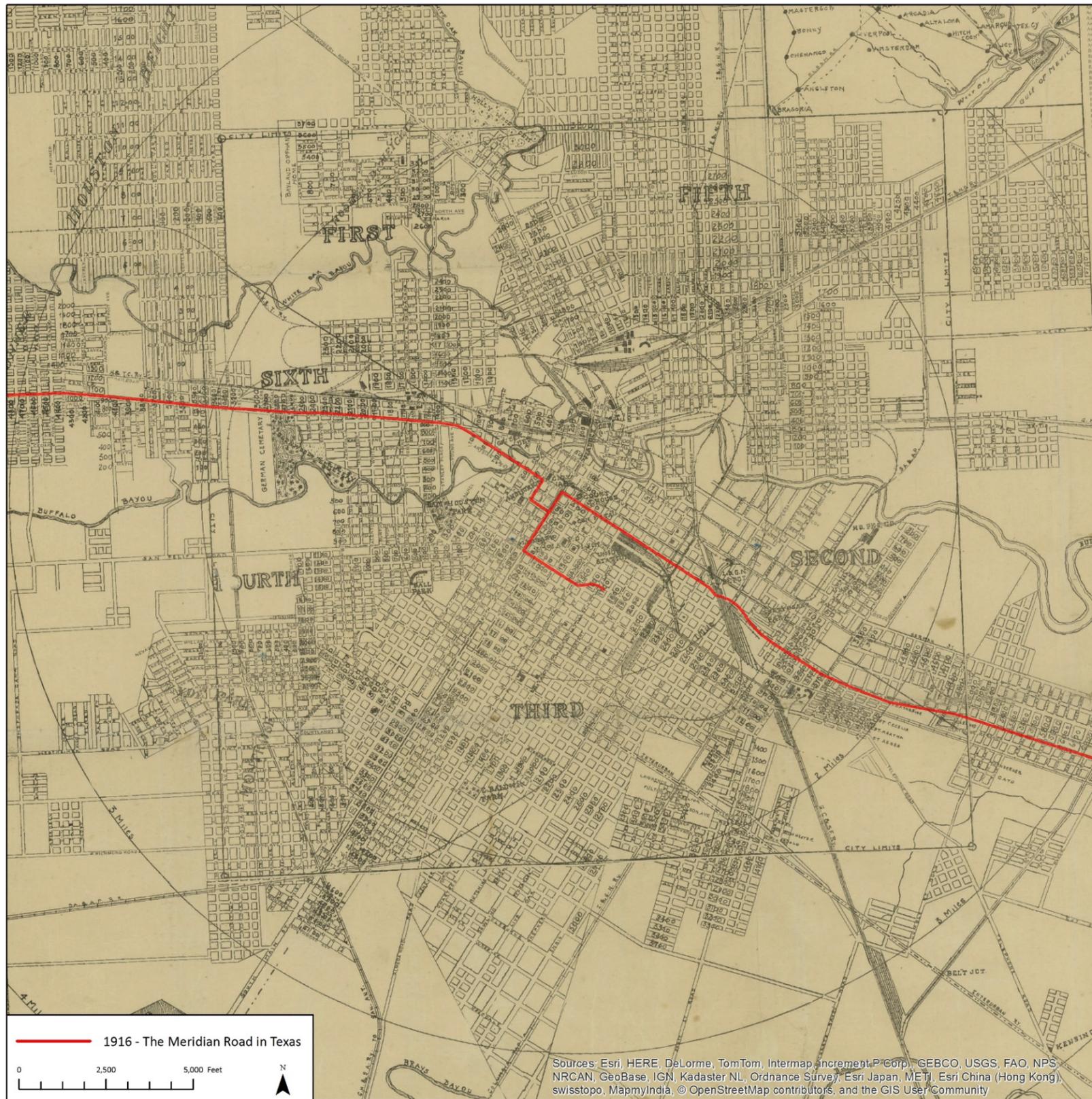
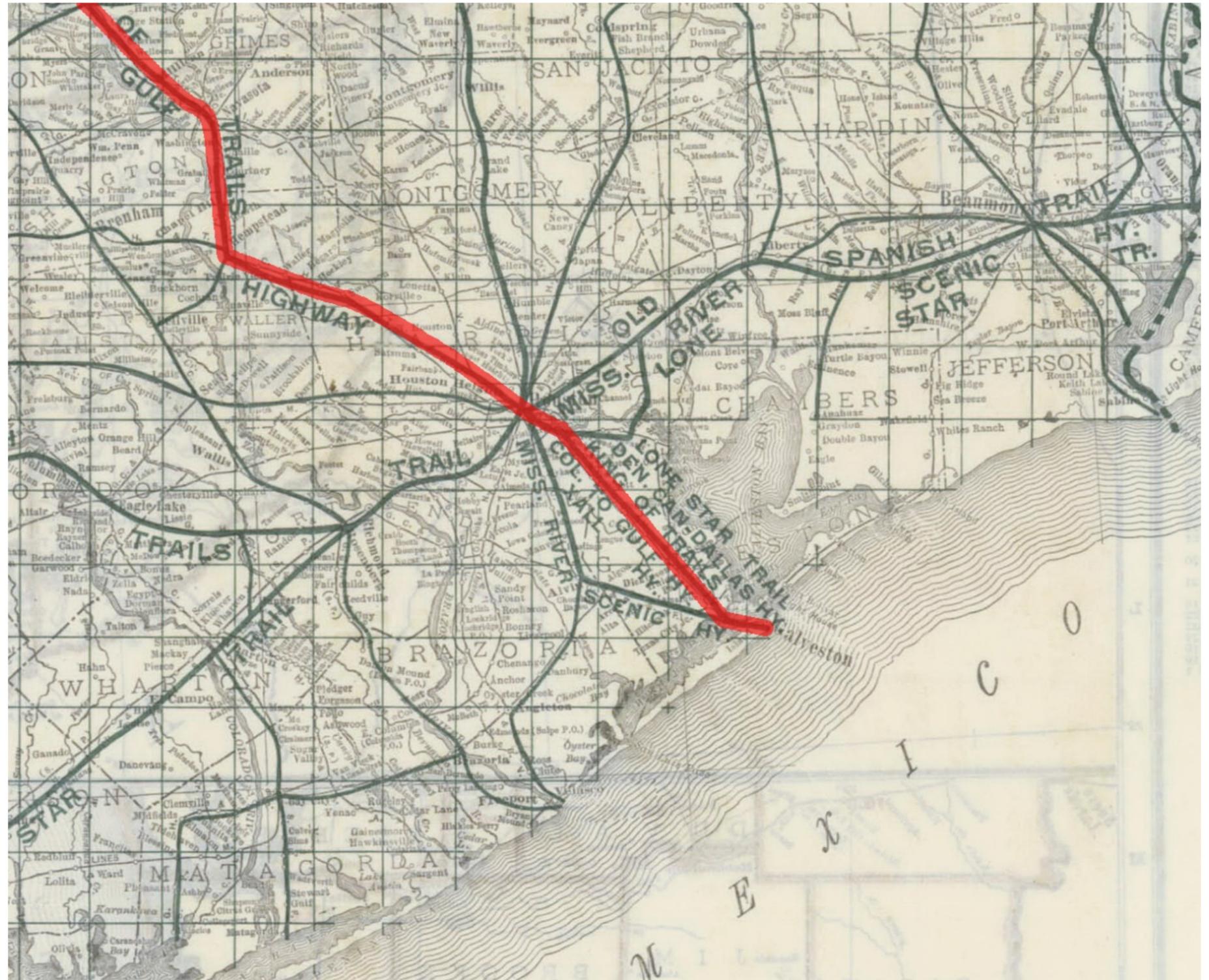


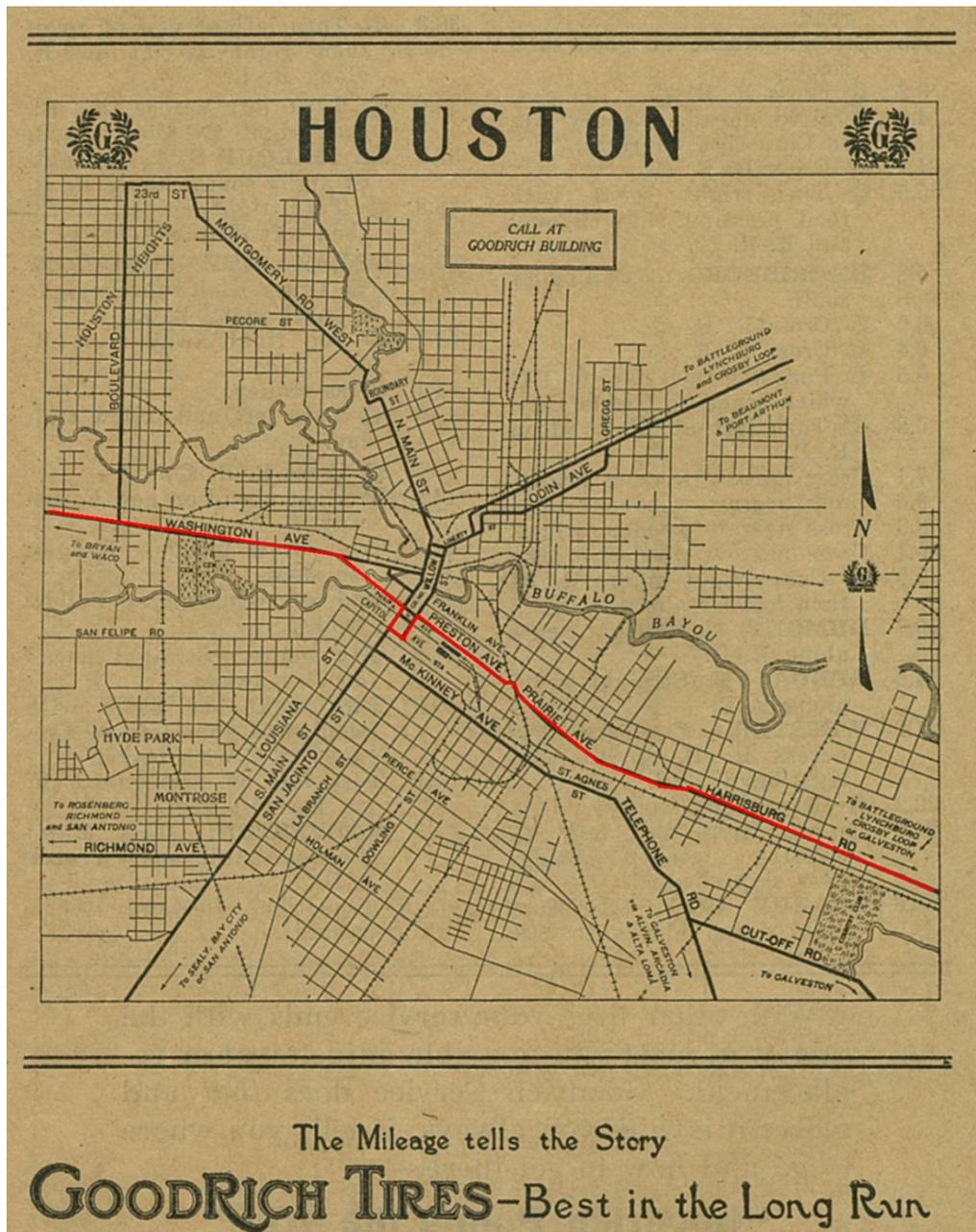
Figure 154. Houston Street Guide, J. M. Kelsen, 1913. This map depicts Houston's street network during the early years of the Meridian Road. This map shows streets that were part of the Meridian Road (noted in red) as it extended through Houston; however, the route is not identified by the name. The Meridian entered Houston from the west along Washington Avenue and turned south on Main Street. It continued east along Preston and Prairie avenues and Harrisburg Road. The map also shows how residential areas developed along railroad corridors, which also influenced the evolving highway network. Such a trend is particularly obvious on the city's east side in areas identified as Central Park and Magnolia Park. Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

Figure 155. Detail of Highway Map of Texas, with the Meridian Highway in red. This map shows how Houston was an important crossroads within the early history and development of the state highway network. It also identifies the major auto trails that passed through Houston. Among those noted included the Meridian Highway, Old Spanish Trail, Colorado-Gulf Highway, King of Trails Highway, Exall Highway, Mississippi River Scenic Highway, and the Lone Star Trail. Many of these auto trails extended along the same path as they passed through Houston; however, they deviated from one another at other locations. Source: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.



path of the Meridian Highway, started at the Goodrich Building (1114 Prairie Avenue) and extended west for two blocks, then traveled north on Main Street for 0.3 miles before turning west on Franklin Street (listed as a brick road), north on Louisiana Street, then west on Washington Street (now Washington Avenue). The guide directed motorists to continue along Washington Street out of Houston, paralleling the H&TC Railway (see *Figure 156* below). The travel guide also provided instructions for travel to Galveston. Beginning at the same start point, the Goodrich Building, a motorist traveled northeast on San Jacinto Street to the courthouse, then turned right on Preston Avenue (listed as a brick road) and followed the road out of the city.

Figure 156. Houston Map, 1915. This illustration comes from a 1915 travel guide published by the B. F. Goodrich Tire Company. It shows early highway routes through the city including segments of the Meridian Highway (noted in red). Source: Martha Doty Freeman, personal collection, Austin, Texas.



The earliest map depiction of the Meridian Highway through Houston is found in *The Meridian Road in Texas* (see *Figure 157*, to follow). The route followed the H&TC into Houston and extended along Washington Avenue. The route extended through downtown to the Rice Hotel, arguably Houston's largest, most modern and best known hotel. In fact, the highway seemed to make a deliberate one-block side-step to extend to the front of the hotel (see *Figure 158*, to follow). Constructed in 1913, the Rice Hotel was a downtown Houston magnet. The hotel boasted the first air-conditioned public room in Houston and hosted many public events and notable guests through the years. From downtown, the Meridian Highway left the city on Harrisburg Boulevard, turned south on Broadway Street, and then followed the path of the Galveston, Henderson, and Houston Railroad along the Old Galveston Road to Galveston. Today, several downtown hotels, including the Rice Hotel, and a ca. 1920 gas station are among the few remaining auto-related properties from this early period of the Meridian Highway heading south out of Houston (see *Figure 159*, to follow).

As the state's third largest city by 1924 and a hub for transportation, Houston had 18 railroads, and multiple interstate highways traversed the city. Houston also was home to the Motor League of South Texas. Advertising itself in the 1924 *Automobile Red Book*, the Motor League had offices in the Hotel Bender, which was on the Meridian Highway at Main and Walker streets. Also known as "The Homey Hotel," the Hotel Bender contained 285 rooms and a café and catered to tourists and other travelers visiting Houston. Other nearby auto-related businesses noted in the Red Book included Hotel Cotton, one block off the Meridian Highway at Fannin and Rusk streets, as well as the Serv-U Shop and Garage.

Sanborn fire insurance maps from this period also show the impact of the Meridian Highway along the portions of the route through the city. The 1924 edition of the map includes a series of sheets (Volume 2) covering the area between downtown and Houston Heights. These maps depict conditions along Washington Avenue, the inbound route from Hempstead, as a thoroughfare with an eclectic mixed-use character with stores, residences, and a few light industrial complexes. The number of businesses catering to automobile owners and travelers was minimal when compared to similar urban areas, such as Broadway Street in San Antonio. Blocks near the former H&TC depot at Washington Avenue just east of the intersection with Preston Avenue contained several hotels, but the Sanborn maps show only a small number of gas stations, such as the one at Washington and Houston avenues (see *Figure 160*, to follow). Noticeably absent along the inbound route of Washington Avenue were any tourist camps, which were commonplace in the outlying areas of other communities on the Meridian Highway. For inbound travelers from the northwest, the downtown contained concentrations of auto-related resources and

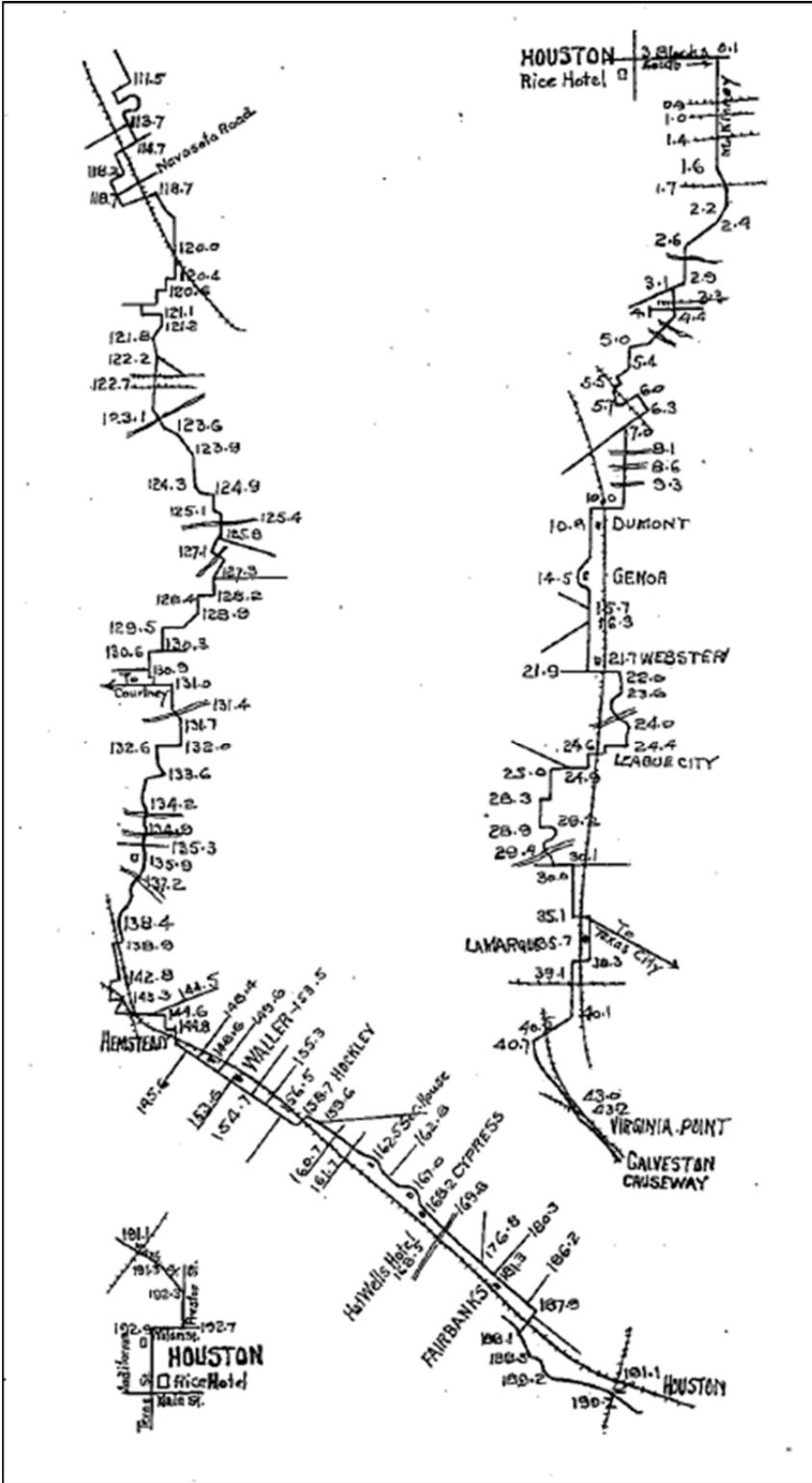


Figure 157. Detail from the 1916 guidebook, *The Meridian Road in Texas*. This map shows a portion of the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway as it extended through Houston on its way to Galveston. Note how the route extends to the Rice Hotel, which was a great source of pride among Houstonians at the time. Source: David Colp Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.



Figure 158. (Top left) Rice Hotel. The Rice Hotel has been an important physical, cultural, and architectural landmark since its opening. Early travel guides directed traffic to this well-known hotel, and these publications almost always included photographs and illustrations. Source: Boston Public Library.

Figure 159. (Below) The former Porter and Heinse Auto Filling Station on Harrisburg Avenue. This building is one of the oldest remaining gas stations along the Meridian Highway in Houston. Photo by HHM.



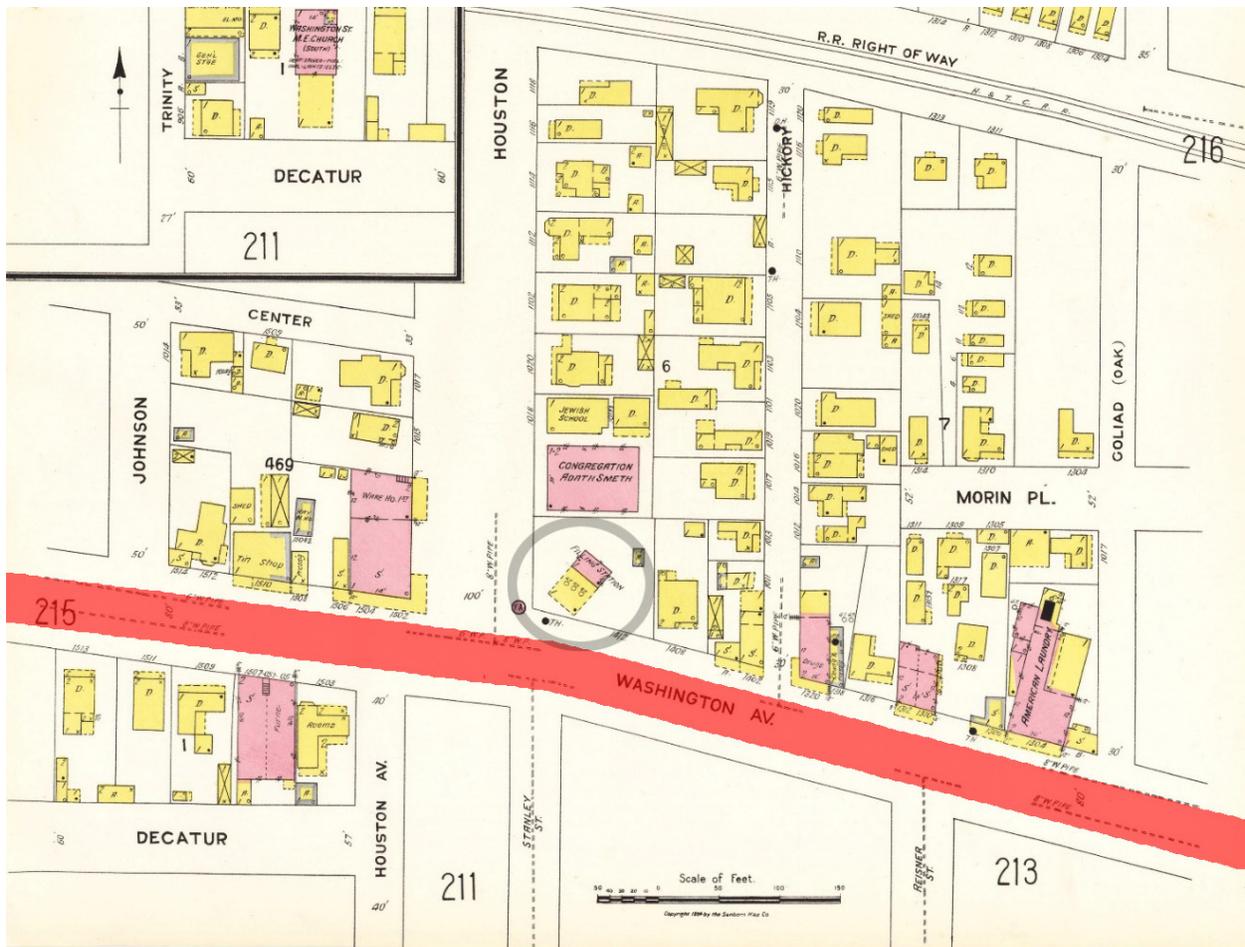


Figure 160. Detail, Sheet 215 Sanborn fire Insurance Maps of Houston, 1924. The “filling station” noted at the northwest corner of Washington and Houston avenues (circled in gray), was one of the few gas stations documented in the 1924 edition of the Sanborn Maps, which documented the near northeast side of Houston. Despite its location on the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway (shown in red), Washington Avenue contained a relatively small number of auto- and tourist-related business at that time. Source: Perry-Castañeda Library, The University of Texas at Austin.

overnight options, such as the Preston Hotel. A notable surviving example is the Knapp Chevrolet dealership on Houston Avenue, just off Washington Avenue (see Figure 161, to follow). A similar pattern existed on the outbound route immediately east and southeast of the downtown area. However, the greater the distance from downtown, the density of auto-related businesses diminished and property fronting onto the road assumed a greater residential character.

During World War I, two important military facilities were located on the Meridian Highway within the vicinity of Houston: Camp Logan and Ellington Field. Both installations reflect the strategic military significance of the Meridian Highway, a quality that influenced the roadway’s history and development. Camp Logan, an army training facility, largely included an area that lies within present-day Memorial Park. Camp Logan is best known as the site of the famous Houston Riot of 1917.²⁹³ After the war, the land on which Camp Logan operated was



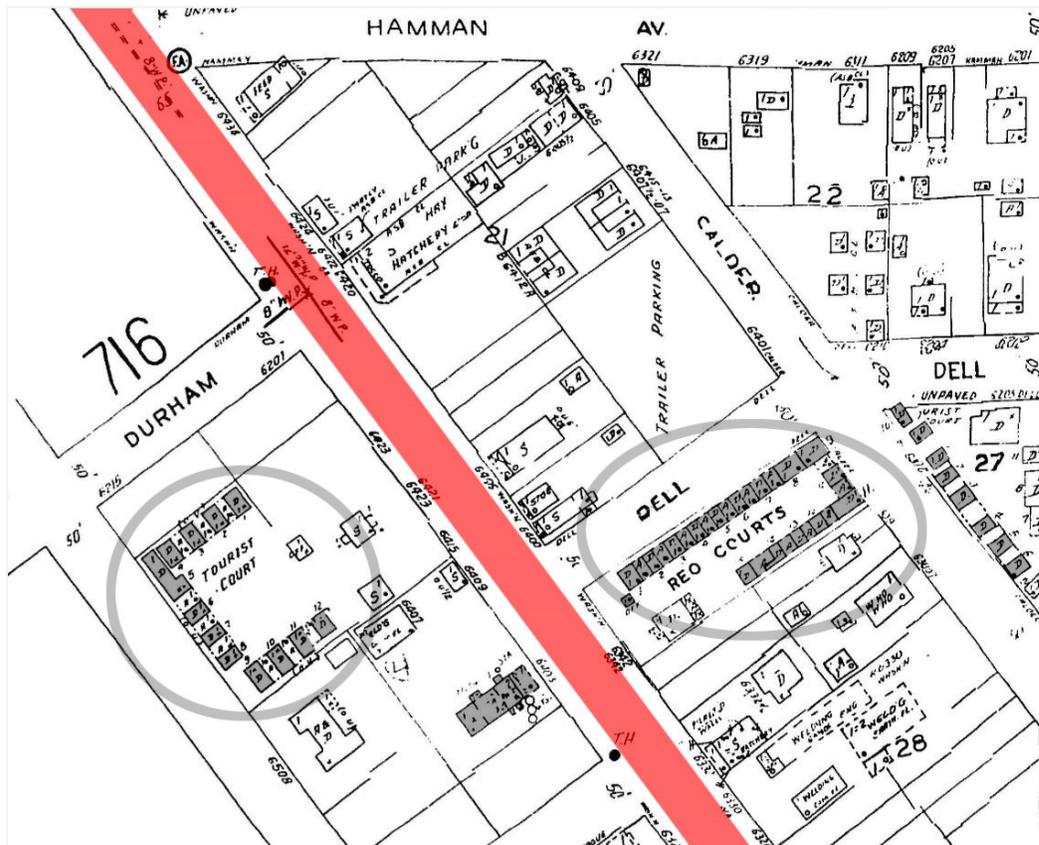
Figure 161. The Knapp Chevrolet dealership on Houston Avenue. By 1951, according to Sanborn maps, most of the residences that had lined Washington Avenue in the 1920s had been removed and replaced with a mixture of industrial and commercial buildings. Among the commercial buildings, a number of 1930s and 1940s gas stations, restaurants, and automobile dealerships helped transform the roadway into a major commercial thoroughfare within Houston. Among the new businesses that opened during this period was Knapp Chevrolet. Just south of Washington Avenue on Houston Avenue, the dealership opened in 1939 on the site of a former church and residence. Within less than 30 years, the routing of the Meridian Highway along Washington Avenue, as well as the military presence (Camp Logan and Ellington Field), transformed this particular segment from residential to commercial, in part to meet the needs of automobile travelers. The 1939 Moderne Style Knapp dealership remains in operation today, a legacy of this piece of Meridian Highway history. Photo by HHM.

purchased by William C. Hogg and his brother Mike, who conveyed the property to the City of Houston, which in turn established Memorial Park.²⁹⁴ Ellington Field, an army training facility where pilots trained for combat, was located between Houston and Galveston near Genoa, Texas. After the “Great War,” the National Guard established an aviation squadron at the base and used the facilities until 1927, when the field was rendered obsolete. The following year, a massive fire engulfed the vacant base and consumed all remaining structures, leaving only concrete foundations and a metal water tower. For the next 12 years, the vacant land was leased to local ranchers for pasture. The outbreak of World War II saw a resurrection of Ellington Field and new infrastructure was constructed. After the war, the base sat vacant for two years prior to being reactivated and renamed Ellington Air Force Base in 1948. In 1959, the Civil Air Patrol moved its national headquarters from Washington, D.C., to Ellington, and the base was transferred from active duty to an Air Force Reserve facility. In 1962, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) established an astronaut flight-training program at the base. Ellington Air Force Base was finally deactivated in 1976, although the Texas Air National Guard continued to use it. In 1984, Houston purchased Ellington Air Force Base for use as a third civil airport and renamed it Ellington Airport; it also operates as Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base.²⁹⁵

Soon after the establishment of the two military facilities, the Meridian Highway became an important transportation corridor that connected Camp Logan with Ellington Field. This led to a great increase in truck traffic between the two bases, which quickly degraded the existing road surface of oyster shells and bituminous concrete. In response to this, Washington Avenue was reconstructed with reinforced concrete pavement in 1918.

Until the early 1930s, the route of the Meridian Highway from Houston to Galveston was the primary local road with a hard (oyster shell), concrete surface. Prior to the paving of the remainder of the city with concrete, Houston was known as “an island in an ocean of mud” during periods of bad weather.²⁹⁶ Roads of better materials constructed during the 1930s brought more travelers to Houston, which spurred the establishment of tourist courts and motels along the Meridian Highway on what was then the far northwest side of the city, such as the ones at Washington Avenue and Dell Street just south of the intersection with present-day IH 10 (see *Figure 162* below). In contrast, the outbound route toward Galveston contained still fewer numbers of tourist courts and other short-term lodging accommodations, perhaps because Galveston, a major tourist destination, was only a short drive away. Based on historic photographs and postcards, the route of the Old Spanish Trail (SH 3/US 90) along South Main Street contained the city’s most significant concentration of tourist courts and motels from the 1920s to the 1950s. This trend likely stemmed from that route’s tourist-based function and Houston’s role as a way station for travelers heading to destinations farther east and west. The Meridian Highway, in contrast, appears to have had a more commercial- and trade-based role (see *Figure 163*, to follow).

Figure 162. Detail, Sheet 716 Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Houston, 1924 (updated 1950). The tourist courts in the 6300–6400 blocks of Washington Avenue (shaded and circled in gray) provided lodging for inbound travelers entering Houston from the northwest along the Meridian Highway. This was one of the few nodes of such lodging accommodations along this section of the Meridian Road. Source: Perry-Castañeda Library, The University of Texas at Austin.



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Figure 163. Industrial and Highway Map of Houston, 1935. This map presents the highway system that served Houston at that time. The Meridian Highway route (shown in red) entered Houston from the northwest along SH 6 and extended into downtown on Washington Avenue where it intersected with US 75. The route took a one-block jump to the south on Main Street and proceeded to the east as US 75 along Preston and Harrisburg Boulevard. The map shows a heavy industrial component along US 75/Harrisburg Boulevard that included the “Ford Plant,” the Hughes Tool Co. (owned by Howard Hughes), multiple compresses (presumably cotton compresses), and other industrial concerns. The map also shows the proximity of the route to the Houston Channel; when it turned south onto Broadway, the highway was adjacent to the waterway. Source: Texas State Library and Archives, TSLAC map 0436.

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In 1942, the workers of the Writers' Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Texas published a book entitled, "Houston: A History and Guide."²⁹⁷ One section of this book highlighted various points of interest in the city, many of which were located on the route of the Meridian Highway. The Scanlan Building (located at 403 Main Street), the site of Congress and Market squares (located between Preston and Congress avenues), and Memorial Park are three such examples. In addition, the guide also mentions the Rice Hotel. Even though the hotel was no longer on the route of the Meridian Highway (by 1940 the route had straightened and followed Preston Avenue through the downtown area), its listing still shows the importance of the hotel within the context of the city.

For much of Houston's history, local civic leaders welcomed growth and recognized that an improved highway system would facilitate that growth and show how the city embraced change and increased economic opportunities. In 1930, for example, local oilman Ross Sterling, who also served as chairman of the Texas Highway Commission, advocated the construction of a super highway between Houston and Galveston, citing traffic congestion on the existing system.²⁹⁸ When elected as Texas Governor in 1932, Sterling tried and failed to implement his plan due to the effects of the Great Depression. However, the idea of a super highway took hold, and support for the proposed highway reemerged in the late 1930s. Houston Mayor Oscar Holcombe announced that the City of Houston would acquire the right-of-way of the former Galveston–Houston Electric Railway (GHE) and advocated the use of this 60- to 100-foot corridor for a six-lane super highway with frontage roads. The start of World War II prevented this plan from being fulfilled as funds to purchase additional right-of-way along the corridor could not be obtained. Despite this, planning for the freeway continued and in 1943, the Texas Highway Commission signed an agreement with the City of Houston and Harris County to develop the highway, ultimately bypassing the Meridian Highway (US 75) to the west.²⁹⁹ The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 provided funds for the project, and in early 1946, the Texas Highway Department released drawings of the highway's proposed design. Noted as the first freeway in Texas, the section from downtown Houston to Telephone Road opened to the public on September 30, 1948, and was named the Gulf Freeway.³⁰⁰ The remainder of the highway was finished in 1952 and took on a "mild dog-leg form," as it was believed that straight highways over long stretches were monotonous and created "laxness" (the previous US 75 route was straight).³⁰¹ The shift of the freeway from its original route to the west meant that all auto-related services established along the Meridian Highway were bypassed. Consequently, as businesses along the highway closed their doors and disappeared, new development (often in the form of nationwide chains) began to appear on the Gulf Freeway (see *Figure 164*, to follow). The Gulfgate Shopping Center, opened in 1956 on the new freeway, was the first



Figure 164. This former Howard Johnson opened in 1970 on the Gulf Freeway and is representative of the development trends happening along the roadway during this period. The Howard Johnson chain was one of the country's largest restaurant and motel chains, thanks in part to the use of a highly recognizable building design and color scheme travelers associated with quality. In the 1990s, as trends shifted away from the restaurant-motel combination, and fast-food restaurants and newer motels became more popular, Howard Johnsons across the country closed their doors. This example is one of the few that avoided demolition, and remains an excellent landmark from a specific era of automobile travel.

shopping mall in the Houston area and reflected the shift from centralized commercial activity to nodes of commerce outside of the downtown on the city's many highways (see *Figure 165*, to follow).

Among all of the cities along the Meridian Highway, Houston contains among the lowest number of historic auto-related resources on a per capita basis. Such landmarks as the Rice Hotel figured prominently in early marketing efforts, and it remains an important building in the downtown with significance that extends to, yet transcends, the Meridian Highway. The city's continued growth and extensive redevelopment efforts have resulted in the demolition of a significant number of historic properties in all parts of the city, including the historic path of the Meridian Highway. Some gas stations, garages, auto-dealerships, and repair shops survive, and many have been subject to extensive change or have been converted to new uses. The construction of the Gulf Freeway as the first completed expressway in the state redirected auto-related businesses to the thoroughfare. However, increased traffic and further expansion of the highway has led to the demolition of many historic businesses along even this relatively new route. Although the Meridian Highway is largely forgotten in Houston today, it played a pivotal role in the history and development of the local transportation network. (See *Figure 166* for a map showing the Meridian Highway over time through Houston.) A few gems, such as the Rice Hotel and Knapp Chevrolet dealership, remain as tangible links to this important chapter in local history.



Figure 165. The Gulfgate shopping mall marked a new chapter in the retail sales history of Houston. Its opening in 1956 was part of a nationwide trend that provided an alternative to downtown shopping where traffic congestion often made it difficult for consumers to patronize department stores and other retail shops. With ample space for parking and a convenient location adjacent to a freeway, this automobile-friendly center proved to be an immediate success and led to the construction of other shopping malls and centers along the Gulf and other freeways in Houston.³⁰²

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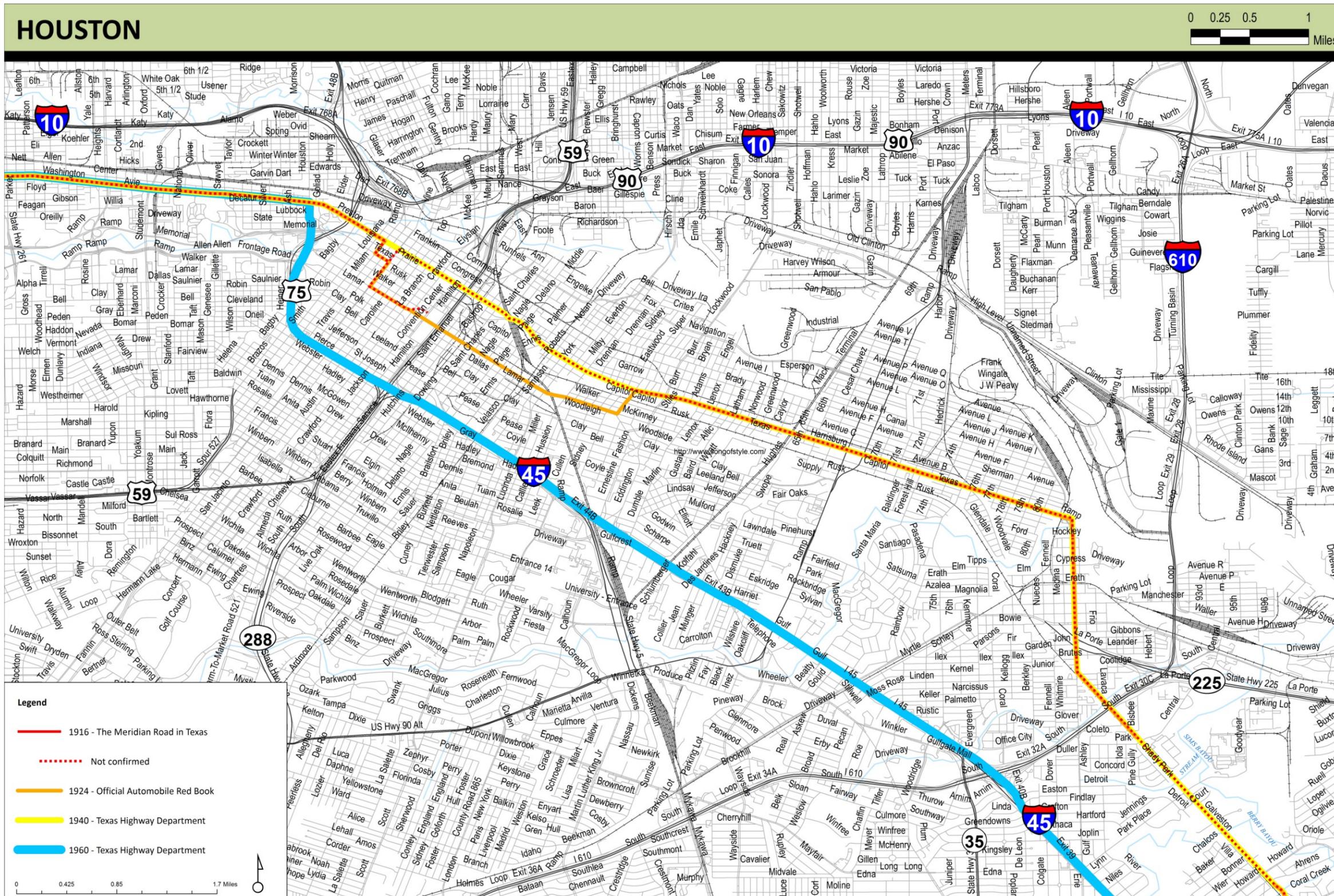


Figure 166. Map showing the Meridian Highway and its successors through Houston over time.

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²⁹² The Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway covers the section of the highway from Waco to Galveston.

²⁹³ In July 1917, a battalion of African-American soldiers was sent to Houston to guard the construction of Camp Logan. The following month, police arrested one of the soldiers for intervening in the arrest of an African-American woman. That afternoon, a corporal from the base attempted to inquire about the arrest of his soldier and was also arrested. This led to a race riot involving 156 armed African-American soldiers who marched on the city, and left 20 people dead after it was over.

²⁹⁴ Claudia Hazlewood, "CAMP LOGAN," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qcc26> (accessed May 20, 2015). Uploaded June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

²⁹⁵ Erik Carlson, "Ellington Field: A Short History, 1917-1963."

²⁹⁶ P. J. R. MacIntosh, "Concrete Roads to Houston," *Texas Monthly* (Texas Monthly Inc., Dallas): 394.

²⁹⁷ Found on Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph5865/m1/7/?q=houston%20guide>.

²⁹⁸ Sterling was also one of the founders of the Humble Oil Company, now Exxon; however, he sold his interest in the company in 1925.

²⁹⁹ The original US 75 route subsequently became SH 3.

³⁰⁰ "Gulf Freeway, Interstate 45 South," *Houston Freeways*, pp. 144-149, http://freeways.azurewebsites.net/houston-freeways-book/Gulf_Freeway_72ppi.pdf.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² "Bayou City History," <http://blog.chron.com/bayoucityhistory/2009/06/gulfgate-mall-in-pictures/> (accessed May 20, 2015).

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