

Cradle of history

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Section G ★★★

THIRD WARD: EPICENTER OF HOUSTON'S FIGHT FOR RACIAL EQUALITY



Project Row Houses is the brainchild of artist Rick Lowe, a resident of the Third Ward. He hopes to transform the community through the celebration of art and African-American history and culture.

Gary Coronado photos / Houston Chronicle

Editor's note: This is the third in an occasional series about early Houston's six wards.

By Claudia Feldman

The Rev. Bill Lawson has championed the fight for civil rights virtually all of his 86 years. Except once.

In March 1960, when a group of black Texas Southern University students asked him, their campus minister, for help in planning a sit-in at a "whites-only" lunch counter, he said no.

Lawson thought about the parents of those Texas Southern students, many of whom worked two jobs to send their children to college. Lawson also worried about the futures of the young activists, who almost certainly were going to be arrested and jailed.

Looking back on that pivotal moment, the pastor says he was wrong.

"I had no idea that a page in history had turned, that



Ryan Young has his hair and beard trimmed by barber Richard Roberts at 3rd Ward Finest Kutz. Roberts is worried about rising property taxes.

the civil rights movement had shifted and was there at my doorstep," he says.

That doorstep was the Third Ward, home to Houston's epic struggle for racial equality:

• In 1872, four influential African-American ministers and businessmen pooled \$800 to buy 10 acres of land along

Dowling Street. That was the birth of Emancipation Park, a safe place to celebrate Juneteenth and freedom from slavery.

• TSU, still thriving in the Third Ward today, got its start as the Colored Junior College in 1927. In the next 25 years, the school would grow into a four-year university with its own 53-acre campus and

law school. But the intent of state leaders at the time was to preserve segregation and the notion of "separate but equal" in higher education.

• The Third Ward grocery store and luncheonette that was the site of Houston's first sit-in is long gone, replaced by a post office. At the edge of the parking lot is a state historical marker that describes the students' nonviolent protests, which eventually led to the peaceful desegregation of lunch counters, department stores, movie theaters and other local businesses.

"I realized fairly soon that ignoring these students was not the best thing to do," Lawson says. "Part of my calling as a minister was to be concerned about the vulnerable. It was not to maintain the standards of the powerful, which included the Ku Klux Klan."

Art blossoms

The Third Ward still is a real place in the hearts and *Neighborhood continues G2*



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At this site, students from Texas Southern University staged Houston's first lunch-counter sit-in in 1960. Their nonviolent protest would eventually lead to the desegregation of Houston restaurants, businesses and movie theaters.

Gary Coronado photos / Houston Chronicle

Neighborhood concerned about

future

Neighborhood from page G1

minds of most of its residents and former residents, including the self-proclaimed "queen of the Third Ward," Beyoncé. No matter that the geographical and political demarcations that established four wards in 1839, then a fifth after the Civil War and a sixth in 1876, were essentially erased in 1905.

At that time, the city covered only 16 square miles, and none of the wards extended much more than two miles from the intersection of Main and Congress. Roughly, most of the historic Third Ward extended south and east from that dot on the map. Today, what is known as the Greater Third Ward has more than doubled in size and extends south to Old Spanish Trail and east to the University of Houston.

Roger Wood, an author, teacher and student of the Third Ward, can rattle off so many things to do in his neighborhood that it would take visitors days and weeks to do it all.

He mentions the Heinen Theatre, a jewel on the campus of Houston Community College, Central that has a stained glass Star of David on the ceiling. That's because it served as Congregation Beth Israel from 1924 to 1967.

The stained glass windows at Trinity United Methodist Church are also a must-see. The windows depict black leaders including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King.

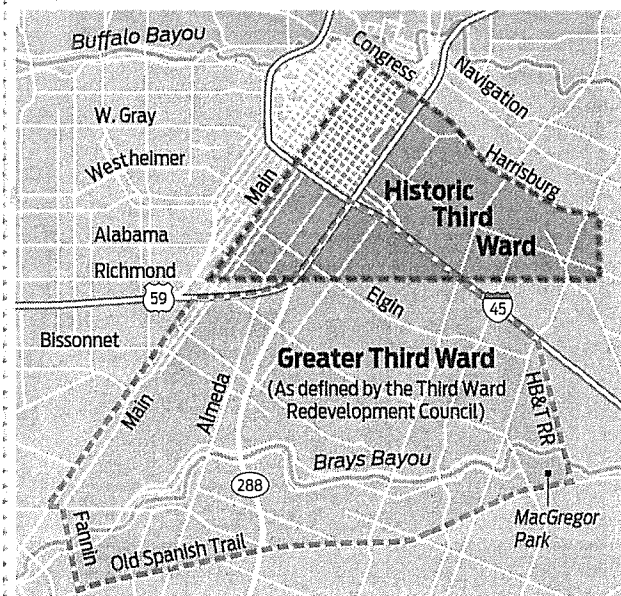
The area is rich in museums, and a few not constantly mentioned are the Holocaust Museum Houston, Houston Buffalo Soldiers National Museum and the Houston Museum of African American Culture.

Project Row Houses is another landmark in the neighborhood. Founder Rick Lowe began by giving new life to a few battered row houses on Holman Street in 1993, and his vision has morphed into a one-of-a-kind community resource that combines art, historic preservation, community development and neighborhood revitalization. Today Lowe counts 71 structures that are a part of the project, including the Eldorado Ballroom on Dowling. Many a Third Ward musician played the Eldorado, then went on to national fame.

The list of famous jazz and blues artists who considered the Third Ward home include Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, Arnett Cobb, Conrad Johnson, Johnny Copeland, Albert Collins, Johnny "Guitar" Watson and Little Joe Washington.

"I'm a realist about these things," says Wood, who has written about many of the jazz and blues greats, "and everything has its season; nothing stays the same. Not all but many of the great Houston blues artists are memories now, and I don't see them being replaced."

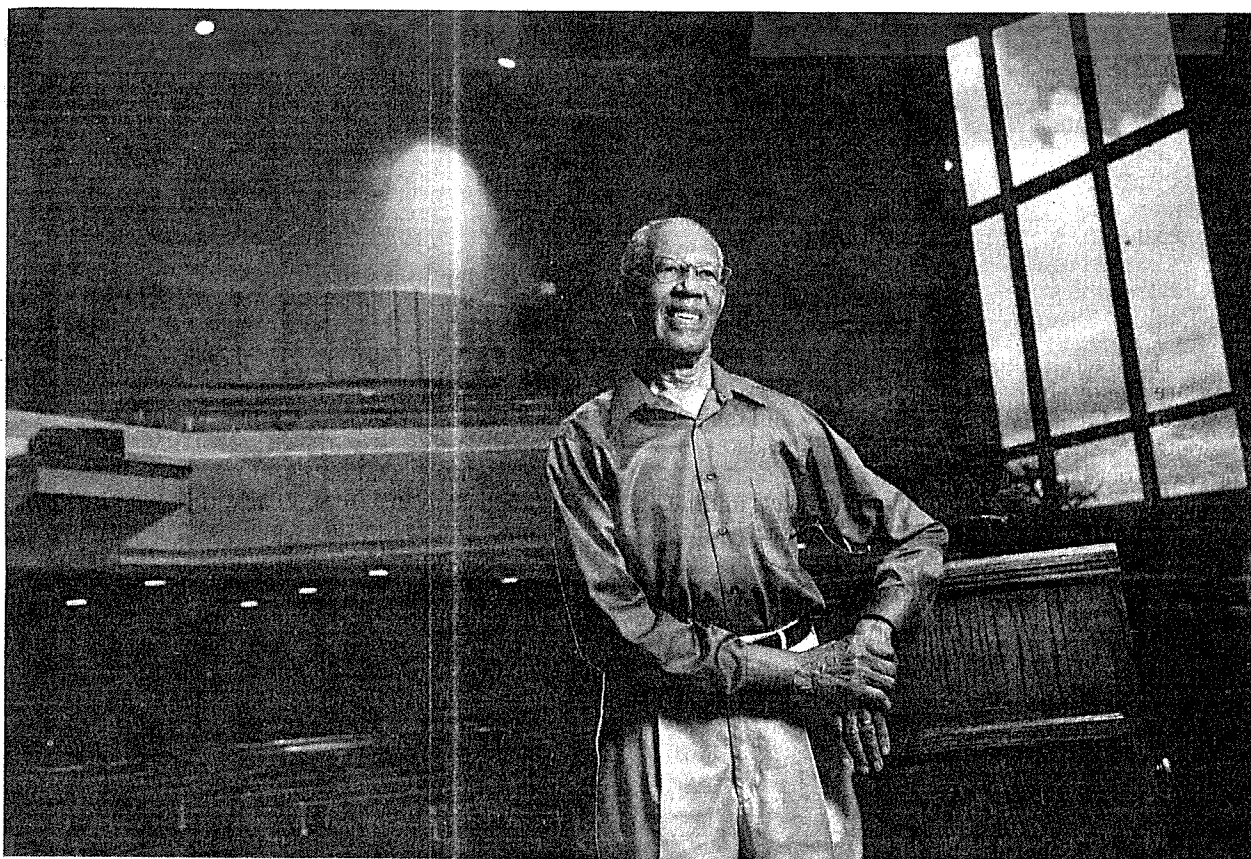
Wood mentions Jewel Brown as a beautiful exception. At 76, she is alive and well and still living in the Third Ward. Her singing career is bustling



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Mapping it out
» For an interactive map of Third Ward sights, see HoustonChronicle.com/ThirdWard.

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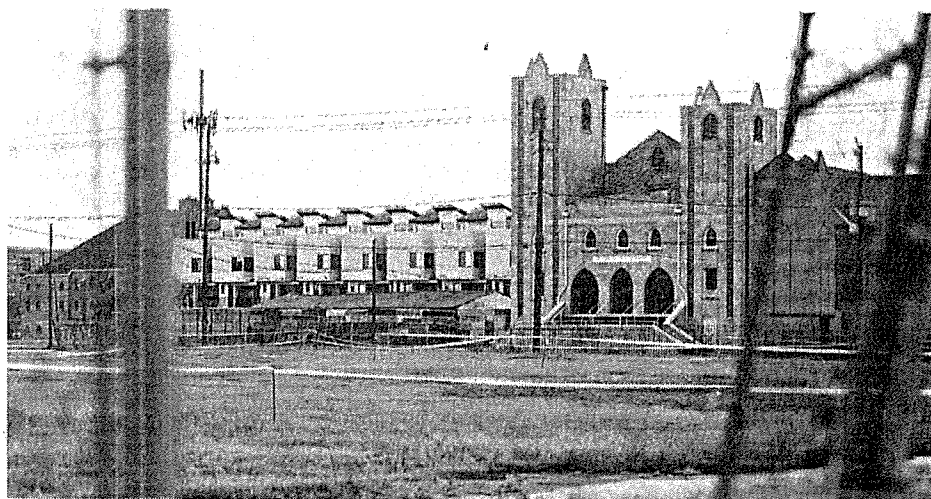
The Rev. Bill Lawson founded Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in Houston's Third Ward in 1962. The church immediately became a meeting place for those engaged in the struggle for civil rights.

along, too.

"I grew up at 2904 Anita, in the bottom (poorest section of the Third Ward)," she says. "I remember everything vividly. My mom and dad were such hard workers, we didn't have time to have a hard time. When my daddy retired, they had to hire three people to take his place."

Over the years, Brown sang with Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie and Lionel Hampton.

"I had what you call a little clout," she says.



New homes seem to be encroaching on St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

Brown took a break for several decades to care for her mother and father in their old age and work in the beauty and insurance businesses. But she is back to the musical career she loves, and she just finished a recording session in Japan.

"I can still sing in the same key as I did when I was 16," she says. "If you take care of yourself and respect what God gives you, he lets it last."

Lizette Cobb, Arnett Cobb's daughter, spends much of her time doing oral histories with Houston musicians. "What I'd like everybody to know," she says, "is that my dad loved what he did and he loved the people he did it for. He was proud to be an ambassador of the Third Ward, Houston, Texas."

The conversations Cobb has recorded are available in the Texas room of the Julia Ideson Building, which is part

of the Houston Public Library.

Gentrification worries

Problems. Issues. Controversies. Certainly there are plenty in the Third Ward.

Brown says rising property taxes are making it hard for her to stay in her beloved neighborhood. "Those taxes are making it hard for everybody. I don't know if they're trying to push us out."

State Rep. Garnet Coleman is worried about the most often discussed problem in all six wards — gentrification. He welcomes new residents who want to become part of the neighborhood and respect the Third Ward traditions and culture.

For those moving in only because "they're dying to get to downtown as fast as they can," forget it, Coleman says. "We don't need more three-story

boxes, either."

Coleman grew up in the Third Ward and so did consultant and volunteer Sylvia Brooks. These days she spends some of her time on Emancipation Park, which is undergoing a \$33.6 million renovation. The park should be one of Houston's premiere attractions when it's finished at the end of 2015.

Theola Petteway, one of the driving forces behind the park redo, acknowledges that some people ask if the green space is being redone for the people who live in the Third Ward now — or the people moving in.

It's for everybody, she says, past, present and future.

Rev. Lawson still is working on important Third Ward issues, too. The founder of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church does not consider the fight for racial equality finished.

He can't be done, he says, when minorities are disproportionately arrested and sentenced to Texas jails and prisons. Also, he says, he is working to get University of Houston and TSU to work cooperatively. While UH is so focused on Tier One and academic excellence, he says, it's easy for them to forget the minority students and minority contractors who might need a helping hand.

Like Brown and Coleman, Lawson also is worried about gentrification and high property taxes and long-time residents being forced out of the neighborhood.

"Everything is changing, as it has been for a long time," Lawson says. "I'm not sure how much longer we can think of it as our Third Ward."

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