

Reclaiming the Swamp The East End Flats 1833 – 1954

Oil terminals of Gulf Refining Company (middle foreground; top) and Mexican Petroleum Corporation (middle foreground; bottom) ca. 1940s.



The East End Flats, the low, marshy lands that lay to the east of Sixth Street in Galveston, have a fascinating history that goes back to Mexican Texas. To understand its history, attention must first be focused on the changes in land ownership that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In January 1833, Juan N. Seguin, a citizen of San Antonio, applied to Veremendi, governor of the State of Coahuila and Texas, for a grant of one league and one labor of land (approximately 4,600 acres) on the east end of Galveston Island. Seguin did this at the behest of Michel B. Menard, his attorney and the future founder of the city of Galveston. Veremendi granted the land to Seguin.

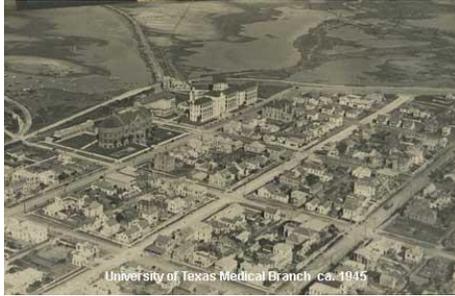
Michael B. Menard, an adopted citizen of Mexico, acquired title to Seguin's land in July 1834. Menard needed to have the land grant confirmed under the new government of the Republic of Texas. This the first Congress of the Republic of Texas did in an act approved December 9, 1836, granting Menard a league and labor of land on the east end of Galveston Island in exchange for a \$50,000 payment. Sam Houston, the Republic's President, signed the deed, January 25, 1838, granting the land to Menard. Menard, Thomas F. McKinney, and others also established the Galveston City Company in 1838. Menard served as president. The company began selling its first lots that April.

In 1898, the federal government sought to build a fort on the eastern end of Galveston Island. On March 12, 1898, the Galveston City Company's directors voted to approve the federal government's request for their organization to grant land on the east end of Galveston Island. The government needed land for Fort San Jacinto. The Galveston City Company stipulated that the federal government had to use the land "for fortifications, posts or other military purposes... for the defense of Galveston harbor." If the government failed to develop the property in accordance with this stipulation, then the land would revert to the Galveston City Company's ownership. The land transferred by quit-claim deed amounted to thousand acres.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Galveston's populace held two opposing views of the East End Flats. In the early 1900s, it perceived the Flats as unsightly and worthless because the marshy land attracted garbage and vermin. This perception continued into the 1940s. During the late teens, another perception emerged that the Flats were property that could in fact be developed. Local officials and residents thus perceived the East End Flats as a thorn in Galveston's side, as well as boon to its future expansion.

Beginning in 1909, the East End Flats became the city's trash dump, linking them in the public's mind with filth and disease. In December 1909, Charles M. Trueheart, city health physician, reported to the board of commissioners that the Flats were the 'least objectionable' site for disposal of garbage. A roadway was built to enable wagons to enter the area and dump trash. Dr. Trueheart reported a problem with individuals who deposited their own trash. These people

tended to leave their garbage closer to the city and the hospitals at the medical school. He recommended the city hire a night watchman.



The East End Flats, which were unprotected, were subject to erosion by waves from the Gulf of Mexico, thus posing a potential threat to the Galveston channel. In July 1916, Congress authorized the construction of a Seawall extension, beginning at Sixth Street and proceeding east to Fort San Jacinto. Its decision reflected a recommendation made three years earlier by a special board of engineers to build an eastward extension of the Seawall, with the aim of

protecting the East End Flats.

Maco Stewart, the largest private landholder in the East End Flats, had a strong interest in the construction of an eastward extension of the Seawall. He served as president of the Galveston City Company in the early 1900s. Stewart proposed transferring 600 acres of his own property on the Flats adjacent to the Fort San Jacinto Military Reservation to the federal government if the federal government would construct the Seawall extension. A deed dated May 11, 1917, today preserved at Stewart Title in Galveston, completed his donation.

Construction of the east Seawall extension started in June 1918, but a labor shortage and delays in receiving construction materials impeded progress. Another obstacle occurred when the hurricane of September 14, 1919, enlarged a pit near the newly-constructed Seawall to ten times its original size. The Galveston Daily News termed this the Atlantic Hole. The danger was that the pit would grow, creating a channel traversing the East End Flats. An estimated 40,000 cubic yards of material would be needed to fill it. In November 1919, the federal dredge Sam Houston dredged silt from the Galveston channel, which was transported by pipe to fill the hole. A trestle had to be built across it to transport materials for constructing the Seawall extension since the silt deposited in the Atlantic Hole lacked resilience.

In August 1919, the *Galveston Daily News* announced the impending development of two adjacent oil terminals on the East End Flats. Including the excavation of slips and the building of piers, the costs of these projects were estimated to total \$1 million. One installation belonged to Gulf Refining Company, which leased property equal to ten city blocks from the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway. Mexican Petroleum Corporation, which leased an equivalent of seven city blocks from Maco Stewart, owned the other. The oil terminals were completed in 1920 - 21.

The East End Flats stopped being a trash dump when construction started on the eastward Seawall extension. The public, however, continued to associate the Flats with filth and pestilence, for they attracted litter, as well as rats and flies. As a result of the accumulation of stagnant pools of water, mosquitoes bred in swarms and were a source of aggravation to patients at John Sealy Hospital and St. Mary's Infirmary. The *Galveston Daily News* periodically took editorial stands against this ongoing problem. Begun in the 1920s, mosquito eradication continued to be a priority during the 1930s and 1940s. Local authorities tried a variety of corrective measures, including spraying with oil and carbolic acid, burning grass, digging drainage ditches, and installing drains.



Despite these countermeasures, filling was the best way to rid the Flats of their nasty character and turn them into potentially productive land. This approach, however, was fraught with political tensions between the common good and individual self-interest. How to fund the filling

process was also problematic. A win-win solution that supporters and opponents of filling the East End Flats could both agree on proved elusive.

The eastward extension of the Seawall to Fort San Jacinto reached completion in March 1921. The federal government's portion ran 7,000 feet and cost a little over \$1 million. Galveston County's part comprised 3,300 feet and cost \$420,000. The United States Congress approved a second extension, which progressed to the South Jetty, in March 1922. The newly paved East Seawall Boulevard, which ran to the South Jetty, opened with fanfare on July 4, 1925. These improvements reinforced through coming decades a general perception that the East End Flats were prime property that awaited development.

In July 1926, Gulf Refining Company offered to fill the Flats with spoil removed from the slip at the company's tank farm at the foot of Sixth Street. Maco Stewart denied the company permission to deposit silt on his land just east of the tank farm occupied by the Mexican Petroleum Corporation. He was concerned about local residents discharging sewage into Galveston harbor, which contaminated silt. He believed instead that spoil should be dredged from the Gulf of Mexico.

Stewart was vehement: 'I protest most vigorously at having the property made a mere receptacle for the depositing of silt.' Stewart believed that Gulf Refining Company should deposit its silt on his property, rather than land close to John Sealy Hospital. He spoke of the need to eliminate 'the mosquito farm east of Sixth Street.'

In May 1929, voters approved a \$75,000 bond proposal to address this problem. The result would be the first major filling of the East End Flats. Because of litigation, funds approved in the 1929 election did not become available until 1931. Private individuals and the Sealy & Smith Foundation owned the land that was to be filled. The area lay between the old Seawall, which ran along Sixth Street, near John Sealy Hospital and the newly-completed Seawall extension. The initial contract was awarded to John Jacobson, a local contractor, but later reassigned to Gulf Coast Dredging Company, which completed the filling in October 1931 with 358,000 cubic yards of spoil. The fill was raised to a height of 14 feet behind the Seawall, sloping gradually downwards.

A \$350,000 bond proposal to fill the East End Flats came about in May 1941. Its supporters called for its passage to sustain the city's expansion. Local businessman I. H. Kempner noted that the bonds would 'convert a practically worthless asset and mosquito infested marsh', as he termed the Flats, eventually into a local tax generator through the development of lots for residential purposes.



Mayor Brantly Harris

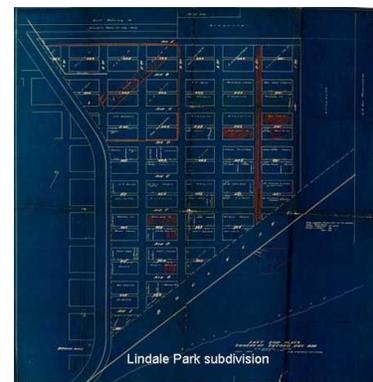
Voters rejected the bond proposal. Mayor Brantly Harris saw their refusal as a hindrance to future growth. He called it 'the biggest backward step taken by Galveston during the past ten years.' The mayor blamed the failure to approve the proposal on a general misunderstanding that only a small number of private landowners would benefit from the filling. At the end of World War II, returning soldiers sought affordable residential housing for themselves and their families. The East End Flats presented an opportunity to expand Galveston eastward and develop new neighborhoods. However, this could only be achieved through further filling. In November 1945, Galveston voters considered a \$380,000 bond proposal for this purpose.

During October 1945, Dr. Chauncey D. Leake, vice president and dean of the University of Texas Medical Branch, spoke on the proposal's behalf. In his opinion, it would eliminate the threat of mosquitoes, which bothered hospital patients; as well, it was an important step toward the medical school's future expansion. Dr. Leake believed, too, that undertaking this measure would prevent an effort then underway in the state legislature to relocate the University of Texas Medical Branch to another city, such as Austin or San Antonio, by constitutional amendment. His comment that the East End Flats were a 'present danger to the health and welfare of the city by virtue of their use as a dump' reflected the public's perception of the Flats' undesirable nature.

Voters, however, turned down the bond proposal. In a letter dated September 13, 1945, which the *Galveston Daily News* printed three days later, resident Charles Lawson may have voiced the suspicions of many. He commented that "Galveston is well stocked with egotistical, self-appointed planners and brain trusters, who are always ready to furnish the scheme if taxpayers can be deceived into putting up the cash." He titled his opinion piece "Warning to Taxpayers." Opponents were convinced that private land owners in the East End Flats — not local taxpayers — should pay for the filling of their own property.

The city made a final attempt to pass the \$380,000 bond proposal in January 1946. Mayor George W. Fraser called it "the biggest bargain ever offered to the taxpayers." He framed the importance of passing the proposal by ranking its urgency on a level with the 1900 hurricane. Voters nonetheless defeated the bond proposal by a margin of two to one. The turning point came in April 1946 with the establishment of a reclamation district for the East End Flats, which made it possible to fill and develop the western portion of the East End Flats — those lots that belonged to private property owners. On April 4, 1946, Galveston city council approved an ordinance establishing Galveston County Water Control and Improvement District No. 9. The district would enable the filling of the westerly East End Flats, with the expense being paid by private landowners. This was the win-win solution that drew the endorsement of persons who had previously supported or opposed the bond proposals.

The westerly East End Flats were filled by early 1949. The Sealy & Smith Foundation, which owned nine blocks in the East End Flats that were not part of the district, filled those blocks at its own expense. Until the filling that took place in 1948 - 1949, little construction had taken place on the western portion of this wasteland. In 1949, the Sealy & Smith Foundation had erected four apartment buildings for the medical school at a cost of \$1 million. Lindale Park, a subdivision, was announced later that year. It comprised of 182 low-cost residences, which were constructed on eight blocks in the north part of the East End Flats. This was the Flats' first residential subdivision on filled land. In the *Galveston Daily News*, September 24, 1950, Plantowsky's Furniture touted its furnishings on display in Lindale Park's model home.



Construction began in 1952 on San Marino, a subdivision which was to feature seventy homes. San Marino's cost was \$1 million. The *Galveston Daily News* announced a third subdivision — Harbor View — in July 1954. Herbert Skogland of Houston planned this subdivision, which embraced 63 lots and offered a direct view of Galveston's harbor. In November 1954, the *News* announced Lyncrest Manor, a fourth subdivision. E. W. Neumann & Sons were contractors. They planned to build residences on property bounded by San Marino to the south and Ferry Road to the west. The transformation of the westerly East End Flats from wasteland to developed property had begun.

However, the thousand acres on the easterly portion of the Flats that were donated by Maco Stewart to the federal government so long ago in 1917 are still a story without an end. In future decades, they would be subject to unsuccessful litigation by the city of Galveston. The United States Army Corps of Engineers, which owns this property, would use it for depositing dredged spoil. Today those thousand acres remain an unfulfilled expectation, continuing to beckon to Galveston's future expansion.

Credits

The author wishes to thank Mr. Roger Shows, Manager, Real Estate Information, Sales and Service, at Stewart Title in Galveston. Mr. Shows provided copies of several pertinent documents in his company's archives and checked this article for accuracy. Galveston is fortunate to have his extensive knowledge.

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