



Courageous Galveston

It takes more than just a little water to beat this Texas town

by Libby Boren McMillan

Galveston Island has long been a summer playground for Texans who like seafood, suntans, and unique entertainment. Sunny beaches beckon many to make the quick, forty-minute drive from Houston to this friendly Gulf of Mexico destination, which also boasts one of America's finest collections of nineteenth-century architecture. But what visitors don't count on is discovering perhaps one of the most amazing stories in American history.



Europeans "discovered" the island in the late 1500s, when it was inhabited by Indian tribes. In the coming centuries it would be ruled or claimed by Spain and France, become a part of Mexico, and be lorded over by famous pirate Jean Lafitte. During Lafitte's stay in the early 1800s, Galveston was home to a shipyard, pool halls, saloons, gambling houses, and a bustling slave trade. Texas eventually gained its independence from Spain and Mexico, without Lafitte's help, but at his forced departure, he allegedly left behind treasure. By 1836, Sam Houston prevailed, and the City of Galveston was soon founded by ten wealthy investors.

As a port of entry, Galveston soon became the fourth-largest city in Texas and a major American financial center. It claimed the first law firm west of the Mississippi, the state's first customs house and post office, its first gas lights, and the first hospital and private bank in the state, even the first use of the telegraph and telephone in Texas. Population in "The Wall Street of the Southwest" swelled to 37,000, including many fabulously affluent residents seriously attempting to outdo each other. The results of all that unbridled competition are the architectural treasures lining historic Broadway Street. Each magnificent home stands, however, as testament to man's fortitude in the face of nearly insurmountable odds.

It was September of 1900 when the



A Galveston surf pier (top) glows in the setting sun, and a pair of carefree visitors enjoy a bike ride (bottom).

deadliest natural disaster in the United States hit Galveston Island. A tidal surge not unlike Katrina's swept across this thirty-two-mile-long island, but with no warning. Six thousand lives were instantly lost, and the most important city in the west was left in ruins. More than 3,600 buildings were simply washed away, and a full one-third of Texas' sophisticated port city was destroyed. Many of Galveston's breadwinners, and those who would have helped rebuild her, were lost forever. Those who had loved them were suddenly homeless and heartbroken.

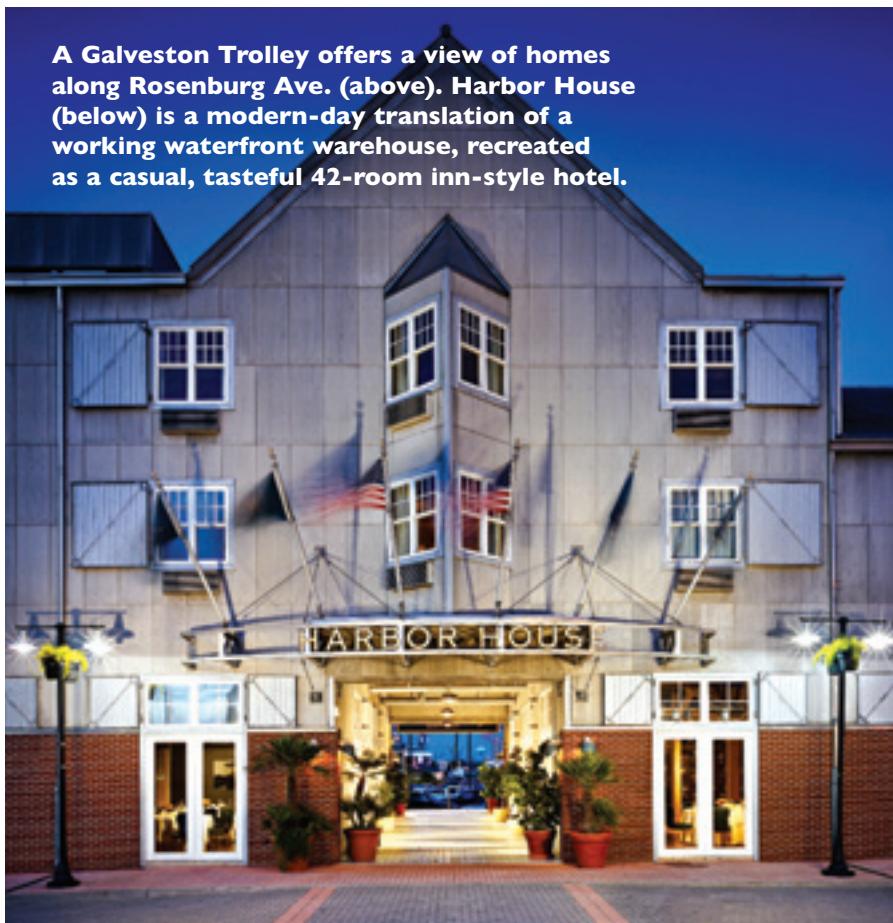
It's said that everything is bigger in Texas, and while that's always up for debate, the surviving Galvestonians



certainly make the case. The resolve that they showed, and the hope that they summoned in the face of utter despair and shock, is nearly impossible to imagine today. For not only did the surviving residents choose to stay and rebuild, they constructed a fifteen million dollar seawall seven miles long and seventeen feet high. But that protective barrier is not the main triumph of the Galvestonians, however, for they also

chose, in the year 1902, to raise nearly their entire city by four to six feet. Think about *that* for a moment.

The City of Galveston was first dredged with countless canals, and residents had to navigate their way from point to point via wooden catwalks. Dozens of men synchronized their jack's turns to the beat of a drummer—one beat, one predetermined turn of the jack—so that Galveston's remaining



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A Galveston Trolley offers a view of homes along Rosenburg Ave. (above). Harbor House (below) is a modern-day translation of a working waterfront warehouse, recreated as a casual, tasteful 42-room inn-style hotel.

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(Above) The Momus float in the annual Mardi Gras parade in late January. **(Right)** Galveston's grandest and best-known building, the Bishop's Palace was cited as one of the most important buildings in America. **(Bottom)** The gorgeous Gulf-front Hotel Galvez, circa 1911.



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homes and commercial buildings, many of which were enormous, were ever so slowly raised so that fill could be added underneath. Over the course of eight years, residents filled in their canals and successfully completed raising five hundred city blocks of Galveston to a new level. The project required not only an incredible amount of fill but immeasurable willpower.

Today, Galveston has a full fifteen hundred buildings registered nationally within its historic districts: the East End, the Silk Stocking District, the Central Business District, and The Strand. The Strand's Victorian, iron-fronted commer-

cial buildings, home to successful galleries, restaurants, and an appealing hotel, compose one of the country's finest architectural collections of commercial treasures. A documentary about *The Great Storm* is shown daily, on Pier 21.

Galveston Island Trolley tours provide a charming way to get oriented and learn details about the island's illustrious history at the same time. The trolleys, built in the same turn-of-the-century style as the historic vehicles that preceded them, cover eight miles of the island for only \$1.25. Visitors also love the Galveston Sightseeing Train, which passes the shrimp fleet, the "Broadway Beauties," the Strand, the remains of Fort Crockett, Jean Lafitte's home, and scores of other landmarks on its hour-and-a-half tour of the island.

No visit to Galveston would be complete without a day spent exploring its West End attractions. Adjacent to Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa, and Convention Center are Moody Gardens' colorful pyramids, which hold a

massive aquarium, tropical rainforest, 3-D IMAX theater, and an IMAX Ridefilm Theater. Nearby, families also enjoy the Schlitterbahn Waterpark. The Offshore Drilling Rig and Museum, Lone Star Flight Museum, tall ship *Elyssa* and Seaport Museum, Railroad Museum, more than twenty antique stores, and dolphin-watching harbor tours round out the many entertainment options available, in addition to the city's beaches. Anglers should pack their favorite gear.

Romantics, history buffs, and anyone who appreciates architecture will enjoy touring the twenty-eight-thousand-square-foot limestone-and-brick Moody Mansion, which was allegedly bought after the big storm for ten cents on the dollar, by one of Texas' most powerful families. Other must-see attractions include Ashton Villa and the ornate 1988 Bishop's Palace, cited by AIA as one of the one hundred most important buildings in America. The gorgeous Gulf-front Hotel Galvez, circa 1911, is a feather in the city's cap; stay there if you can.

If partying is more your thing, consider visiting late January through early February for Mardi Gras; Galveston attracts 250,000 revelers to the city. Elaborate masquerade balls, parades, art



shows, and live entertainment heat up this longstanding winter tradition. The 1894 Grand Opera House is a memorable venue offering top-notch entertainment, and big-name acts also perform at Moody Gardens. The city's historic Balinese Room, once Texas' finest nightclub and casino, hosted the likes of Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Bob Hope, Groucho Marx, Jack Benny, George Burns, Tony Bennett, and Gene Autry during its heyday in the '40s and '50s. Today it's been renovated and reopened in its original location on the pier; the occasional live band plays in the bar.

High season in Galveston is May through August, but a full slate of special events fills the annual calendar for this charming Victorian city. There's no bad time to visit a place that inspired such an unbelievable tale of triumph. ☺

Libby Boren McMillan is a freelance writer for Times of the Islands.

If You Go

LODGING

Hotel Galvez, 2024 Seawall Blvd., 1-800-WYNDHAM, www.hotelgalvez.com

The Tremont House, 2300 Ship's Mechanic Row, 409-763-0300, www.thetremonthouse.com

DINING

Benno's on the Beach, 1200 Seawall Blvd., 409-762-4621

El Patio Café, 1220 23rd St., 409-762-0503

Joe's Crab Shack, 3502 Seawall Blvd., 409-766-1515

Leon's Finest In & Out Barbecue House, 5427 Broadway, 409-744-0070

Yaga's Café and Bar, 2314 Strand, 409-762-6676

SHOPPING

Simply Art Gallery, 2425 Strand, 409-762-4700

Peanut Butter Warehouse (antiques), 100 20th Street, 409-762-8358



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