



## **The First Ward and Richard Brock Park**

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Houston's original First Ward was created in 1839 when the city was divided into four wards for representation in city government. The area quickly became known for produce production and commerce as well as a source of drinking water from its free-flowing springs near the juncture of White Oak and Little White Oak Bayous. In the mid-1800's, most of the ward's land outside the business district downtown was laid out in farms with goods destined for sale on the city's Produce Row. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a grand railroad depot was built on Washington Avenue and a public transit system using cars pulled by mules included a five-mile route on the same street. The neighborhood became a typical working-class community with businesses such as grocery stores and boarding houses, as well as a brick yard, ice-making plant, iron foundry, and carriage-making firm. In the early 1900's, most residents were employed by commerce, service-oriented jobs, or the railroad.

The neighborhood now contains a mix of industrial buildings, storage facilities, historic homes, new condominiums, artist studios, and small businesses. The remaining historic houses of the First Ward are Queen Anne cottages and Craftsman bungalows built between 1890 and 1930. The High First Ward (west of Houston Avenue) was designated as a City of Houston Historic District in 2014. Portions of the First Ward (as well as the Sixth) are also part of Arts District Houston, a state-designated cultural district. The boundaries of today's First Ward are generally recognized as Washington Avenue to the south, Interstate 10 to the north, Interstate 45 to the east, and Sawyer Street to the west.

One of the First Ward's most accomplished residents has been Richard Brock, a formerly enslaved man and blacksmith who went on to become one of Houston's first black aldermen in 1870 and was crucial to the establishment of many beloved community institutions. These include two of Houston's oldest African American churches, the city's first Masonic lodge for black men, Olivewood Cemetery, Emancipation Park, and the First Ward Colored School (now the site of Richard Brock Park). Olivewood Cemetery, west of today's First Ward, sits on land used to bury enslaved people that was purchased by Brock in 1875. It opened as a cemetery for black Methodists in 1877 and was the first burial ground for African Americans within Houston's city limits.

In 2007, the park at the corner of Bingham and Sabine Streets was renamed in honor of Richard Brock, thanks to efforts led by First Ward resident and community leader Cleola Williams. Williams and her husband both attended the school that formerly stood where the park is today.

Sources:

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This document was produced as part of the *Performing History* project in 2021, funded by Humanities Texas, Texas Commission on the Arts, and Fresh Arts, with special thanks to students from the University of Houston Center for Public History.