

Benito Juarez Hall



1. (c) Gerald Moorhead FAIA

The Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez Hall at 7320 Navigation was the first purpose-built non-religious public institution built in Houston's East End by and for Mexican-Americans. The Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez formed in 1919 in Magnolia Park as a mutual aid society for Houston's rapidly growing Mexican-American community. The Society's two-story wood-frame social hall, built in 1928 and often referred to as 'El Salon Juarez,' provided a location for theater performances, dances, and community events for Houston's Mexican community for many years.

In 1910, only 2,000 Houstonians were of Mexican descent, a mere 3% of the population. During the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1920, many Mexican immigrants began to arrive in Houston, drawn by the availability of jobs at the railroads and the new Houston Ship Channel, which opened in 1914. Most settled in the Near Northside, Second Ward, and in the new City of Magnolia Park near the Turning Basin. By 1930, Houston's Mexican population had increased to 14,500 out of a total city population of 300,000.

Organizations such as the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez helped address some of the problems the immigrant community faced through fostering grassroots self-improvement and providing a social and cultural outlet. Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez sought members from everywhere and helped to make Magnolia Park into a center of Mexican Houston culture. By the time Magnolia Park was annexed into Houston in 1926, it was surrounded by refineries, factories, textile mills, industrial plants, and wharves, and had become Houston's largest Mexican neighborhood.

In 1928, the Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juarez built its hall on Navigation Boulevard, where a business district catering to the East End's Mexican population had developed with drug stores, restaurants, offices, grocery stores, and a Spanish talkie theater.

The frame of the building was constructed from treated lumber purchased from local railroad companies. Although the Sociedad ran into financial troubles in the early 1930s and lost control of the hall, the building continued to be used for dances, wedding, quinceaneras, political events, community meetings, theater and film screenings for many years. The YWCA leased the building in the late 1940s and 1950s before moving into its own building on Navigation, and the hall was leased to a church in the late 1960s. Unfortunately, the wood-frame building deteriorated greatly over the years, and despite its historical and cultural significance to the East End, was demolished in 2009.