



The Gragg Building

Gragg Park sits in the pleasant shade of moss-draped oaks at the intersection of South Wayside Drive and Wheeler Street. It is not large by the standards of, say, Memorial Park, but it has spacious lawns and picnic tables under the trees, and a ball field invites players.

On the edge of the park, facing onto South Wayside, is an office building made of intriguingly green stone. It is the home office of the Parks and Recreation Department, but its long history involved astronauts and space scientists before the horticulturists and groundskeepers moved in.

Fifty Years and a Few Earth Orbits Later...

In 1956, the post-World War II boom was in full swing. American families were busily making up for lost time, setting up spotless suburban households and filling them with babies and shiny modern conveniences. Businesses were making the most of freewheeling international trade and abundant domestic consumer dollars. Construction was rampant.

The Farnsworth & Chambers Company, a construction firm based in Houston, chose the trend-setting architectural firm MacKie & Kamrath to design its new corporate home. It was to be built on 46-acres of undeveloped land near that automotive marvel, the Gulf Freeway, in the midst of the suburbia popping up around those ultra-modern shopping destinations, Gulfgate Shopping City and Palms Center.

The building they came up with was everything new and exciting about architecture in the '50's. It consisted of sleek horizontal lines Frank Lloyd Wright would have envied, some at surprisingly jaunty angles. It was built with air conditioning and walls of glass looking out on a lush interior courtyard. And, the stonework was green.

Construction was completed in 1956. In 1961, the green stone building was bought as a real estate investment by W.D. York and Gragg Drilling Company.

Enter the Astronauts...

The astronauts moved in during 1962. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, dedicated to beating the Soviet Union to the moon, was transferred to Houston from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and it set up shop in the Gragg Building. The Mercury Program was already underway, having sent 2 men into space and back again in 1961, and in February 1962 John Glenn proved that Earth orbit was a

practical goal. The rest of the Mercury flights were planned by the engineers and scientists at the Gragg Building.

Houston was wild with pride and excitement. The future was ours, and the whole world knew it! We were Space City, USA! We were the epicenter from which scientific discovery radiated! Unfortunately, the Gragg Building didn't have the necessary office space for that much science. Additional offices were leased all over town. As NASA geared up for the next phase of the space race, the Gemini Program, work progressed on a huge office complex that would become its permanent home, the Johnson Space Center at Clear Lake. They moved there in 1964.

In the ensuing years, several fine companies leased space in the green stone building. W.D. York and Gragg Drilling purchased 11-acres farther down Wheeler toward Telephone Road.

In 1976, 30 years after it was built, the Gragg Building was bought by the City of Houston, and the surrounding acreage was donated to the Parks Board by L.O. Gragg and his family for use as a park. That property became Gragg Park when it was transferred to the City, and the Parks and Recreation Department moved in January 1977. In 2000, the 11 additional acres were purchased by the city and their development is being planned.

The Interstate 610 South Loop was built down the road, and, mercifully, the original stretch of the Gulf Freeway was totally rebuilt in the '70's. Gulfgate and Palms Center have seen massive redevelopment. But the green stone building stands serenely in Gragg Park, a monument to another age.

Fifty Years of History, Many More of Promise...

On October 5, 2006, the Parks and Recreation Department plans to honor the 50th anniversary of the Gragg Building with a day of celebration and reflection. Representatives of NASA and the Gragg family are expected to attend, as will city officials and authorities on Houston architecture.

Unlike many buildings that have stood for so many years, the Gragg Building has not suffered from ill-advised modernization, but it does bear a few nicks and dings from long use. A renovation is planned to begin in 2007 to bring it up to mint condition for the next 50 years.