



## The Galveston Hurricane

By the start of the twentieth century, Galveston had become the state's leading port and one of its largest cities. By 1900, about 37,000 people lived in Galveston, and the city was often referred to as the "Queen City of the Gulf." The prosperous city enjoyed such luxuries as gas streetlights and theaters, funded by the commerce gained from being one of the nation's leading ports and from the investments flowing through its twenty-three stock companies. Until a few years earlier, it had the largest population in the state, briefly edging out San Antonio. Galveston reflected the optimism of the time. It had been hit by hurricanes in 1867 and 1875 but continued to rebuild and thrive, despite dire warnings about future storms.

The storm that hit on September 8, 1900, proved to be more powerful than any before, producing winds of 120 miles per hour and a fifteen-foot storm surge on an island whose highest point was only nine feet above sea level. The storm killed about 6,000 people and destroyed 3,600 buildings—more than half the buildings in the city.

After the devastation created by the hurricane, residents feared that Galveston would suffer the same fate as Indianola, which went from being the second-largest

port in the state to obscurity after being hit by storms in 1875 and 1886. In response to the crisis, the citizens of Galveston created a new system of government designed to facilitate the rebuilding. Under the so-called Galveston Plan, the city was initially governed by five commissioners that were partly elected and partly appointed by the governor, although later the legislature modified the system to require citywide election of all commissioners. Commissioners were chosen citywide to promote cooperation across parts of the city and minimize the corruption brought by localized "bosses," who might dispense jobs in return for political support. Collectively, the commission wrote the basic policies of the city as did other city councils. However, in addition to these general duties, each commissioner administered a specific portion of the city's functions, such as safety or public works.

The city's recovery under the Galveston Plan was considered remarkable. The city constructed a seawall seven miles long and seventeen feet high. Thirty million cubic yards of sand were pumped from the Gulf of Mexico to raise the ground level of the city by seventeen feet, and the houses that survived the storm were raised and placed on

new higher foundations. These preparations would help the city survive subsequent hurricanes in 1909 and 1915.

The Galveston Plan became one of the most widely adopted reforms of the Progressive era. Houston adopted the system in 1905, and, by 1917, about seventy-five Texas cities and 500 cities nationwide were using the commission form, which was embraced by reformers, including presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Ironically, the Galveston Plan can no longer be found in Galveston or anywhere in Texas. The city, like many others, has adopted the council-manager form of government. Economically, Galveston lost much of its luster after Houston succeeded in dredging a ship channel that allowed it to create a port that brought railroads and ships together in a safer inland location. While Galveston's charming historic residences and buildings have kept it a popular tourist destination, the city is no longer a major commercial center. In addition, Galveston is once again facing a challenge as recent surveys have indicated that the island is gradually sinking, meaning that the city will once again have to band together to hold off the sea.