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THE ARCHITECTURE OF GALVESTON'S GOLDEN AGE:
CAST IRON FAÇADES IN THE STRAND DISTRICT

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
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ABSTRACT

The Architecture of Galveston's Golden Age:

Cast Iron Façades in the Strand District

Carol Y. Shanks

In the nineteenth century, Galveston was a highly successful port city; it capitalized on the production and shipping of Texas cotton. The commercial buildings erected during the heyday of its prosperity, many of which still exist today, embody the sense of civic pride the Galvestonians held for their city.

Architectural cast iron had been touted and utilized heavily in the Northeast, especially New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Rapidly expanding, provincial cities around the country adopted the material to give their new buildings instant flair, yet allow them to adhere to an established architectural vocabulary. While some of Galveston’s iron fronts resembled those adorning buildings in other American cities, the overall look in Galveston was distinctive because it was based on Galveston’s unique circumstances and good Texan practicality. This thesis will treat these several topics in detail.
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Thanks to my mother and my family for support above and beyond the call of familial duty and for the appreciation and encouragement when I needed it most. I want to dedicate my thesis to my mom, my dad and my grandmother for instilling the will in me to seek higher knowledge throughout my life. It is what got me through this to the end.

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"A city is to be judged by the public spirit manifested by its citizens. This evinces itself in various ways, but in nothing more plainly than in the extent and style of the public and private buildings. Public spirit will, in a greater or less degree, actuate the citizen who feels pride in the aspect of the city, when he is planning the erection of a residence or building block. He finds that public opinion enters more or less into his calculations, and, having the beauty and welfare of the city at heart, he consults it as well as his own private views."¹

Chapter 1 — Introduction

Galveston, Texas was a successful, wealthy city in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the city's heyday, the national press referred to it as the 'new New York,' and its main business thoroughfare, the Strand, as the 'Wall Street of the Southwest.' Using commercial buildings of the Strand district as illustrations, this exploration will focus on how the citizens of Galveston sought to shape a cosmopolitan image for their city.² While the showy homes along Broadway exemplify Galvestonians' love of conspicuous consumption, the buildings that housed the businesses were decorated as well. Both the population and the economy of the state of Texas grew immensely in the nineteenth century, and the architecture of Galveston, its largest and most prosperous city at mid-century, reflects the increased civic pride at the time. One might see the interest in beautifying the business district as having the city's vitality reflected physically for the citizens themselves as well as to arriving visitors.

Cast iron fronts were widely employed as decoration for the otherwise bland

¹"Galveston Prosperity," Galveston Daily News, 18 August 1871, p. 3.

²Initially, a particular point needs to be clarified. The business district is the only focus, not the wealthy residential neighborhoods, although the two essentially abutted each other. Many books on the mansions have been produced over the years. In comparison, relatively little scholarly writing has been devoted to the commercial areas.
businesses (figure 1). At the time when Galveston was growing most rapidly, the fashion of adding iron façades to architecture was also spreading from the Northeast to outlying American cities. The city’s builders embraced the new material as a symbolic and tangible expression of how cultivated their provincial city was becoming.

In order to place the Golden Age of Galveston in the proper frame of reference, it is valuable to examine its growing prosperity and population in the nineteenth century. The Republic of Texas confirmed the Galveston City Company’s charter in 1838, and thus the city was born. This company, organized and led by Michael Menard (one of the founding fathers), was created to sell lots in the newly formed city. Initially, Galveston started out as a dreary place full of rough citizens. The motley assortment of immigrants noted by a visitor in 1839 included English, Americans, Germans, Dutch, Italians, Mexicans and Africans. In the 1840s, Galveston’s population had grown to 4,000; and immigrants kept pouring in. By 1880, the population of Galveston had tripled from what it was before the Civil War — from 7,300 to 22,240.³

Concurrent with the increase in the city’s size was its expanding wealth. Galveston became the second richest city in the United States in the third quarter of the nineteenth century: only Providence, Rhode Island, had a higher per capita income. At this time, as many as two dozen millionaires had offices on the Strand. The wholesale firms of P.J. Willis and Leon Blum monopolized dry goods and made fortunes stocking visiting ships and sending goods into the interior. The Sealy brothers, John and George,

made a great deal of money in banking, and even more by monopolizing the Galveston
wharves, while Colonel William M. Moody and others made theirs by controlling the price
of cotton. This was a new mercantile and landowning class of Texan, a hybrid of the
original frontiersman that had settled the West. The money was provided mainly through
port activities -- either imports were shipped inland from Galveston, or produce (mainly
cotton) was brought to Galveston on river steamers or by rail to the wharves, stored and
moved out in deep water ships to New York, New Orleans or England. Other local
exports included hides, sugar, molasses, cattle, pecans and cottonseed. The port was third
in the nation in 1877, with the value of exports exceeding that of imports by ten times. 4

This immense wealth, however, was concentrated among only a few families; it
was estimated that the top twenty-four households were one hundred times richer than the
next twenty four. The economic hierarchy spawned a new social elite class; this wealthy
class in retrospect seemed both worldly and down-home. In general, they were better
educated, and more genteel than the profiteers roaming the city, although they were equal
in ambition. They were very concerned with importing luxury items, some of which were
clearly for show only. Even the finest British wools were imported to this climate that
rarely experiences winter freezes. 5

The city developed faster than its Texas neighbors, and the success of the city was
manifested in many ways. It was tangibly illustrated by five of the largest banks in Texas

4Cartwright, p. 119; McComb, p. 47; The Industries of Galveston (Galveston: The Metropolitan
5Cartwright, p. 120.
located on the Strand, as well as six public squares, two parks, two miles of esplanades, street railways drawn by horses, thirteen hotels (the largest being the Tremont), three concert halls, and an opera house. Galveston had the first gaslight, the first electric light, the first telephone, the first hospital, the first law firm, and the first trade union in Texas. There were Mardi Gras parades, some of them costing $10,000 or more, an interesting embodiment of both civic pride and conspicuous consumption. Luxury shops sold fine English carpets, French china, wine and brandy, and German-made rosewood pianos. As Galveston was becoming an important center for communication, a crossroads linking overseas news with news from the interior as well as generating its own noteworthy material, it is hardly surprising to find that the city was home to eight newspapers. Early wharves were constructed at the foot of 18th, 20th, 21st, and 24th Streets; about 225 ships visited the port each year. A regular steamship service ran from Vera Cruz, Tampico and Havana as well as one from New Orleans.7

Galveston is an optimum example of how a dissemination of fashion spread into architecture, in this case cast iron, and thereby created a wide market for iron manufacturers. There were several large foundries in and around New York and Philadelphia that produced catalogues of cast iron from which clients around the country could order for direct shipping. However, a quick survey of several local buildings’ iron components illustrates how varied were the sources for the façades. The builders of two of the rare full-fronted iron buildings, in which iron covers the face of all four floors,

6Ibid., p. 118.
7Ibid., p. 77.
imported their cast-iron from Philadelphia. An account of another building’s progress notes that the Galveston agent of a New Orleans foundry had been dispatched there to place an order for its front. The foundry stamp on the front of a third advertises a firm from Baltimore. And within the city of Galveston itself, a successful foundry, Lee Iron Works, also produced iron façades for nearby buildings. While most foundries in the United States mainly produced large, heavy-duty industrial machine parts as their major source of income, during the time of architectural cast iron’s popularity, they often added cast-iron fronts to their advertisement of goods.

The Galveston businessmen creating new buildings at this time generally confined the utilization of iron to the first floor. The reason seems to stem from a combination of social and economic factors. Since the city grew into such an important Gulf seaport, the men commissioning these new structures (or rebuilding after one of many fires that decimated large portions of the commercial district) were concerned with a fashioning of the city image. The rejection of the traditional full front would seem an attempt to create a style unique to Galveston, or at least not exactly like New York. Even as they strove to formulate the look developed back East, the men commissioning the buildings may have wanted to develop a local version. The addition of iron elements made a block of

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8 Figure 2 is an example of the type of foundry stamp often affixed to iron-fronted buildings by the specific suppliers. This particular one is from George Cronan and Sons in New Orleans.


10 In the Northeast, typical usage of iron was either a veneer of cast iron components covering all floors of a multi-storied building, or an iron façade directly bolted on to an interior iron skeleton.
otherwise severe structures into strings of sophisticated buildings at an affordable cost.

An important aspect of the modifications in iron-front style is in the nature of the casting. Foundries created separate pieces that could be bought in a whole set, or matched together by the client from a wide variety of choices. Originally the majority of styles used may have been suggested by architects or designers, but the foundry men themselves soon began creating their own capitals, columns, dentils, cornices, and other façade elements. Although the foundry men may have studied the catalogues and shipped fronts from the East, the implication is that the local craftsmen created whatever they wanted without any formal knowledge of architectural history. No designers except the casters themselves were involved with the creative process, which seems to indicate yet another type of diffusion from the purity of the original.

Galvestonians seemed relatively unconcerned with a specific plan for how their city should grow. Different parts of the city developed at different rates, and prevalent fires seemed always to be altering the face of the various neighborhoods. Furthermore, while each individual builder may have had a sense of wanting to beautify the city in his own way, no overall program was developed per se. In the end, Galveston did not suffer the overkill of cast iron ornamentation that other cities were subject to. One reason may be that Galveston has few buildings that occupy a full block (the most notable exception being the Tremont Hotel) and so has a different overall sense of layout than is typical in other cities. A discussion of how cast iron evolved as both a structural and an ornamental material is essential in order to understand how the style of the cast-iron front came to Galveston.
Chapter 2 — History of Cast Iron

The story of how cast iron came into popular usage in nineteenth-century architecture begins with one American, James Bogardus, even though it had its roots in Europe. The particularly innovative use of iron in 1800 resulted from the structural needs of commercial buildings. During this time, English textile mills were created with cast-iron stanchions (or posts) as weight-bearers across the width of the factory; in combination with wrought-iron spanning members, they helped support brick arches that carried the floors. The slender pillars, cruciform in cross-section, were cast to replace wooden columns, partially to help with fire-resistance. The result was increased overall unobstructed space. In this way, the expanse needed for the large looms and other machinery involved with the textile industry was successfully achieved. Although cast-iron proved to be quite brittle — its tensile strength was precarious — the compressive strength of cast-iron columns was excellent for situations where open space was the most important factor. Also, notably, in combination with either wrought iron or timber spandrels, cast-iron columns were substantially fireproof. The mill-owners had their own particular concerns about the fire-resistant quality of the new material, since they worked with such flammable materials.

Yet in the 1850s in England, there was an increasingly general realization that unprotected iron was not as fireproof as had been supposed.\footnote{The fireproof quality of cast iron is a most important and puzzling point of dissent among architectural scholars. Hitchcock acknowledges Bannister as his main source of information about facts such as the London Fire Department refusing to enter buildings with iron internal skeletons for fear of their collapse (Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958], note 2, pp. 446-7). From this angle, cast iron never proved itself} Then too, a sharp shift in
taste led to a predominant preference for the massively plastic in architecture, so that the
delicateness of the iron and glass structures like Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace (1851)
made way for a new fashion in iron use. In lieu of using iron fronts as a part of an entire
fire-prevention system, so-called metallic veneering became high fashion.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a New Yorker named James Bogardus
championed the use of cast iron on the entire exterior of a building and helped build an
appreciation for the new medium. Neither an architect nor an engineer, Bogardus was an
inventor and promotor of sorts who believed whole-heartedly that cast iron was the
material most suited to commercial building. After a visit to England in 1836, where years
before the British had found a method for producing structural cast iron in quantity at a
reasonable cost, he developed, early in his career, his own plans for cast iron usage.13
Throughout his professional development, he became directly involved with the utilization
of cast-iron components more than in the actual building process; he chose mass-produced
castings which he then modified himself. By 1847, Bogardus had created a model of a

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to the extent that Bogardus claimed, and the material is relegated to merely a fad that never worked
out. On the other hand, Margot Gayle (the president of the Friends of Cast Iron) in many of her
writings on cast-iron architecture, touts the nonflammability of iron through raging fires (see
figure 3). She states that the iron components were actually dragged down by their surr-
roundings in a fire, although they had fully withstood the heat themselves. Most tellingly, she relates
that those whose iron-fronted buildings were destroyed in the great Chicago fire of 1871 rebuilt with
cast-iron façades again after the fire, apparently satisfied. See the introduction of Daniel Badger,
*Badger’s Illustrated Catalogue of Cast-Iron Architecture* (New York: Dover
Publications, 1981), p. vi for Gayle’s insistence that the material has a great resistance to fire. Also
refer to her introduction in *Baltimore’s Cast-Iron Buildings and Architectural Ironwork*, edited by

12Hitchcock, p. 115.

13Daniel Badger, Bogardus’ rival and the founder of the Architectural Iron Works, actually erected
the first cast-iron storefront in Boston, in 1842.
building to be constructed completely of iron. His own factory was completed in 1849, a complete iron structure according to Bogardus.\textsuperscript{14} He had no doubt latched onto the idea of an incombustible building after two great fires in New York, one in 1835, and another in 1845.\textsuperscript{15}

His building and his treatise, \textit{Cast Iron Buildings: Their Construction and Advantages}, address the prejudices that had, according to Bogardus, arisen unfairly. The pamphlet evidenced his passion and convictions concerning this new material. Within the text, he defended the fact that the structure, as completed, was so secure and stable in its bolted parts, that even if a part were “removed or destroyed by violence” — excepting the four corner columns — the building would remain firm, and the taller the building, the firmer it would stand.\textsuperscript{16} He also expounded on the compressive strength of iron columns, “vastly superior to granite, marble, freestone or brick, . . . and thereby [any builder] would be enabled to erect a tower or building many times the height of any other edifice in the world, which would be perfectly safe to visitors,”\textsuperscript{17} since naysayers had feared an iron building might crush itself under its own weight.

In his treatise, Bogardus speaks of cast iron’s durability. He does not back up his claims with any particular evidence, but claims that cast iron will last longer than other

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14}Due to a street widening ordinance in 1859, the building was dismantled — piece by piece in order to illustrate Bogardus’ claims of reusability — but was never re-erected.


\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 8.
\end{flushleft}
materials:

Unlike wrought iron and steel, it is not subject to rapid oxidation and decay, by exposure to the atmosphere. And whatever tendency it may have of slowly imbibing oxygen in a moist atmosphere, can easily be prevented by a proper coating of paint; and thus, at a very small expense, it may be made to endure a thousand years, unaffected by the winds or the weather. On account of this quality, cast-iron houses do not tax their owners with the cost and trouble of repairs, which are incident to other buildings, in consequence of their perishable character.\(^\text{18}\)

Bogardus also mentioned that persons in cast-iron buildings had nothing to fear from thunderstorms; seeing as how metal was such a good conductor of electricity, any lightning bolts would be conducted “silently to the earth.”\(^\text{19}\) Further, cast-iron was touted as being heat resistant by Bogardus, unaffected by either the climate or by the heat generated by any machinery housed within the building. He directly addressed the fear of fire, and how cast-iron was invincible to it: “Cast-iron is perfectly fire-proof. Were such a building as Mr. Bogardus’ factory filled with the most combustible goods, such as cotton or resin, and its entire interior to burn until the whole was consumed, the building itself would remain unimpaired.”\(^\text{20}\)

Although he was not the first to create architectural iron fronts or the first to

\(^{18}\text{Ibid., p. 9. Although Bogardus refers to houses here, he is speaking of commercial buildings, i.e. ‘houses of business.’}\)

\(^{19}\text{Ibid., p. 14.}\)

\(^{20}\text{Ibid., p. 12. Bogardus’ book is written in the third person, although the authorship is credited to Bogardus himself. Hence the awkwardness of this quote.}\)
complete an all-iron structure, Bogardus will historically be mentioned as the man who raised the public consciousness, and perhaps began the trend of cast-iron façades in America.

In a contemporary article extolling the virtues of this type of façade, no doubt inspired by Bogardus, a hint of whether the iron additions were structural or merely ornamental emerges: "[the fronts] may be taken down, removed, and put up again in a short time . . . nearly three feet of room is gained over buildings put up with brick. They admit more light, for the iron columns will sustain the weight that would require a wide brick wall." The iron façades, replacing the part of the structure that previously had been made of stone or brick, opened out the store front allowing an unprecedented quantity of light to enter. Although these buildings consisted of iron in a partially structural mode, other, later commercial buildings variously utilized iron to a greater or lesser degree, according to their specific needs or to fashion. Some iron fronts seem to be at times solely ornamental, while others help to support the weight of the building and are

21 Architectural scholars also tend to disagree on whether or not James Bogardus was an actual engineer or merely a promoter. In terms of Bogardus' involvement in these buildings, the castings were subcontracted out to several foundries, and his role seems to have consisted of supplying the patterns and superintending their erection. For a complete analysis of James Bogardus' role in cast-iron usage in the nineteenth century, see Turpin C. Bannister's article "Bogardus Revisited, Part I: The Iron Fronts." In his article, Bannister investigates the chronology of the rise of the cast-iron front in America thoroughly.

22 Thomas U. Walter added to the fervor when he designed the new dome of the Capitol building in Washington DC in the 1850s. Cast iron was employed throughout the construction for the additional strength it provided, which was needed to stabilize the marble utilized in the structure. Such a grand public building clearly could have influenced national trends and increased the popularity of the new material's usage.

23 Bannister, p. 13. Also, see footnote, #14.
therefore load-bearing.

Bogardus pointed to certain aspects of decorating with cast iron that extolled iron’s usefulness. The economics of ornamentation were such that if decoration could be added cheaply, more new buildings might be built incorporating some form of it. He noted that “the most elaborate carvings, and the richest designs, which the architect may have dreamed of, but did not dare represent in his plans, may be thus reproduced for little more than the cost of ordinary castings.”\(^2^4\) A coat of paint on an iron front solved the problem of grime quickly and economically, much more so than cleaning the entire stone surface of a building or completely replacing carvings.

The non-structural iron front constituting the exterior decoration of a building was actually created out of a multiplicity of parts, each cast separately in a sand mold. First, a wooden pattern was carved for each section. Once this pattern was created, countless impressions could be made from it, and identical iron elements would therefore be available. The pattern would be pounded into moist sand to create a mold for the molten iron. After removing the pattern, the molten iron would be carefully poured in the sand mold. The art lay in gauging the degree of shrinkage as the metal cooled, and in the “draw” of the pattern from the delicate sand mold. After being machined to assure levelness, polished to a state of smoothness, and assured of a perfect fit, the entire front was laid out piece by piece on the floor of the foundry so that all parts could be numbered and checked for fit. A coat of primer paint was the last step before shipment, whether

\(^{2^4}\)Bogardus, p. 9.
locally or overseas. Delivered to a construction site, the façade elements were lifted and bolted into place onto the waiting, multi-storied building, conventionally constructed with front, side and rear walls of brick. The decorated walls thereby become a play of textures, lights and darks where before could have been a blind, flat front.

Ornamentation using cast iron components in a mix-and-match method was easy. The ease of creation with sand molds (as opposed to labor-intensive stone carving) contributed to the evolving variety of architectural elements. Since stone was a more prestigious material, the iron façades directly strove to emulate that look. Decorative components were cast to appear as stone elements, with Renaissance, Baroque and Classical motifs being most popular; the early iron fronts were often modeled on Italian Renaissance palaces. Simulation of stone impelled the initial phase of cast iron; during the 1840s and 50s, the iron fronts were painted like brownstone, sandstone, or marble and were even roughened to feel like stone. The addition of marble dust or sand to the paint of a cast-iron façade gave the surface not only the color of marble or granite, but also imitated the texture.

The latest styles of iron fronts became available simultaneously due to the

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27 Donald Martin Reynolds, Nineteenth-Century Architecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 55. In several sources, the suggestion is made to the reader to carry a magnet along to determine which façades truly contain iron components, since either through the masking of the material or through multiple layers of paint, the iron is not always easily discernable.
proliferation of trade catalogues, mostly, but not exclusively, out of the Northeast. The majority of the designs were not custom-made creations, and were not supplied by architects, but were probably created in the foundry by the maker of the casts.\footnote{Diana S. Waite, ed., \textit{Architectural Elements: The Technological Revolution} (Princeton, NJ: The Pyne Press, n.d.), p. 6.} This led to a standardization of designs, since foundrymen were not particularly interested in being designers. Regional foundrymen who later created their own casts either copied what had been shipped and what was illustrated in iron catalogues, or else created their own variations with only slight changes. Architects and designers played no role in the fabricated designs for the most part.

People building in cities embraced this new material for decoration and on occasion for structural purposes as well. Combined with affordability, durability, fireproof and even lightning-proof qualities, the lure was that the pre-fabricated parts could be erected more quickly than ever before, using fewer workmen and lowering costs. In addition, the wealth of choice when selecting components was staggering (figure 4). Naturally, the building would reflect the tangible success of the owner, because he was able to use the most up-to-date materials.

Cast-iron fronts across the country became a fashionable way for a rapidly expanding, provincial city to instantly be as attractive and fashionable as New York. The rapid expansion of commerce in the United States created a powerful demand for commercial structures such as wholesalers’ warehouses and retail stores. The iron front could be cast while the rest of the building was under construction, and then easily
brought in for a quick assembly at the end. Classical columns, cornices, arcades, pediments, keystones, dentils and all manner of other details would have cost an exorbitant amount if commissioned in stone, or wood to simulate stone. Cast iron, painted to resemble these other materials, rarely weathered or deteriorated to the same extent, and was easily freshened by a new coat of paint.
Chapter 3 — Cast Iron as a Material for the Age: Ruskin vs. the Popularity of New Material in Architecture

Iron became a powerful symbol of a new age in the nineteenth century. It had been used sparingly in architecture of the past; but an effort to use the material in innovative ways led to its growing popularity. The Industrial Age, escorted in by the new possibilities of iron, was heralded by many people in the western world, who recognized what progress could be made with this new usage. It was embraced in certain architectural schools, especially in England, France, and the United States. However, it was never universally accepted. A certain British faction longed for the nostalgia of simpler times, and to them the progress of their times — especially in the form of iron — was anathema.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was one of the foremost of these British writers and critics concerned with the spiritual development of his fellow citizens. Throughout his career, he commented on the state of art and architecture of his time.29 His essays, lectures and books were well received, especially early in his career, and had a certain amount of influence on the general public. One of his strongest-held opinions concerned

29 Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, a noted French architectural theorist, also contemplated the contemporary development of architecture, and the use of new materials like cast iron. He espoused Structural Rationalism in his *Entretiens sur l'architecture* (1863-72) as his solution to correcting the path of prevailing architectural styles. His two main criteria were to match the program and the methods of construction of a building with its purpose. He advocated the usage of various materials in effective building method that would exhibit both a sense of *zeitgeist* and a national style. In this way, these American cast-iron façades might be seen as unifying the country in a particularly American way — even as the outlying cities did strive to look more like New York. So although Viollet-le-Duc professed an aversion to the idea of a false iron front of non-structural material added to a commercial building as merely frivolous ornament, there is an element of national unity through those same fronts that resonates with a portion of his theory.
the spiritual and cultural direction of the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically, morality and architecture. All good architecture must have been produced from a moral state of mind. To hold this belief and formulate his arguments, he obviously made assumptions about the lives of those past architects and craftsmen involved in the historic buildings he admired most. His concern was for the direction of design toward which builders were moving during his own lifetime; he compared his contemporary time to the high Gothic, a period that to him signaled moral purity and simplicity of life. His *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1848) was a detailed discourse on architecture's merits and a guide for architects building in the mid-nineteenth century. In it, he spelled out pitfalls to be avoided and revealed his opinions on contemporary constructions.

He had a particular abhorrence for the growing preference and use of cast iron, spelled out extensively and specifically in chapter two of the *Seven Lamps*, "The Lamp of Truth." Interestingly, Ruskin began the chapter by emphasizing painting as a most truthful endeavor. Instead of understanding the concept as an attempt to deceive the eye

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30A.W.N. Pugin was one of the first theorizers of this school of thought, believing in the need for a return to the spiritual values and the accompanying architectural forms of the Gothic age. In 1836, he wrote *Contrasts: or a parallel between the noble edifices of the 14th and 15th centuries and similar buildings of the present day*. His conservative beliefs were widely read and influential; although Ruskin never acknowledged any influence from Pugin’s writings, the possibility cannot be ruled out. Pugin espoused a form of functionalism, whereby the beauty of a building’s design was in its appropriateness, that its style must accurately correspond with its purpose. He also felt that the boldness of execution created by inspired craftsmen was lost when using substitute materials like cast iron. The mechanical coarseness of the resulting product was unacceptable.

31The points made in Ruskin’s writings often are not consistent. Kenneth Clark (*Selected Writings: John Ruskin* [London: Penguin Books, 1991], p. 132), relates how in the *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin alters the definition of his terms concerning how beauty relates to nature three times on a single page. The three conflicting angles of approach seem to change from idealism to personal experience to a form of raving.
into believing a flat, two-dimensional space is a window into a three-dimensional world, he based his argument on the imagination. The apparent existence of the fantasy world that the painter created does not infringe on any assertion of actual existence.\textsuperscript{32} However, in terms of architecture, Ruskin had a specific issue with both the nature of the material and/or the quantity of labor involved. He did not seem to have a problem with whether the end result was beautiful or inventive as much as whether it was honest. He divided his "Architectural Deceits" into four categories: false suggestion of support; false decoration consisting of painting, i.e. marbling; false addition of sculptural ornamentation; and cast or machine-made ornaments in general.\textsuperscript{33}

Ruskin felt a particular disdain for iron in any or all of its forms. He based his feeling on the claim that iron was a relatively recent innovation in terms of building, and that architecture had steadily developed in forms conducive to more rudimentary materials: namely clay, stone, or wood. Because iron did not conform to the first principles of architecture, and was rarely used in ancient buildings, he felt that it had no place in contemporary architecture either. He therefore thought that the models of the past should be emulated as ideal; and the established norm is what he used as his measuring stick. However, any truth about any previous era is destined to be manipulated, for no one knows with certainty the actuality of any aspect of the distant past. To Ruskin, Gothic architecture created by the noble and moral craftsmen were models to be emulated


\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., p. 62.
in his own day. He admitted that his feeling about iron was a prejudice, but felt strongly that the populace would and should agree with him. Even more revealing, he felt that the cast-iron spire of Rouen Cathedral, as well as certain railway stations and churches in England were not architecture at all.

As Ruskin narrowed his argument, he acknowledged that iron did have a place within the architectural sphere, but as the cement to hold parts of a building together, as in nails or rivets. As soon as iron was used in any supportive aspect, the edifice ceased to be true architecture. By using terms like, ‘dignity’ and ‘honesty,’ he connoted the moral overtones of using materials that would seem not to have divine blessing.

Later in his life, Ruskin’s strong convictions were gradually relaxed, and his idealism fell to his real-life experiences. In his Val d’Arno (1874), Ruskin gave a definition for architecture and how ornament related to it. He wrote,

Architecture consists distinctively in the adaptation of form to resist force; — that, practically, it may be always thought of as doing this by the ingenious adjustment of various pieces of solid material; that the perception of this ingenious adjustment, or structure, is to be always joined with our admiration of the super-added ornament; and that all delightful ornament is the honouring of such useful structures; but that the beauty of the ornament itself is independent of the structure, and arrived at by powers of mind of a very different class from those which are necessary to give skill in architecture proper.

Without differentiating between certain types of decoration, i.e. stone vs. iron, he seemed

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34 The crux of the argument also made by Pugin against the developments of architecture at the time.

35 Ibid., p. 70-72.

36 Clark, p. 227.
more intent now on describing how beautification of a building can raise the spirits of those admiring it. This larger idea dovetails with the concept of civic pride (in relation to nineteenth-century Galveston), regardless of any particular moral intent.

Ruskin’s beliefs are worth exploring for several different reasons. First, he was quite popular in his day, and highly respected as well.\(^{37}\) He was inspired by intense moral sentiment, how nature and architecture related to human principles. Most importantly, his writings (and that of a few of his contemporaries) are so contrary to the fashion of cast iron façades that it becomes interesting to speculate about the intellectual conversations of the times.

For Ruskin and his followers, the final test of the excellence of any ornamentation was both the force and clarity of the presentation. Just as he asserted: "Nobody wants ornaments in this world, but everybody wants integrity,"\(^{38}\) he went on to declare: "[T]he right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: Was it done with enjoyment - - was the carver happy while he was about it? It may be the hardest work possible, and the harder because so much pleasure was taken in it; but it must have been happy too, or it will not be living."\(^{39}\) The expression of moral sentiment felt by the craftsman as he created his masterpiece through difficulties would show itself to those who gazed upon it.

In conjunction with this, Ruskin spoke of false ornament as a lie, or a sin. He

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 124. Clark notes that Ruskin’s fellow authors Wordsworth, Tennyson, Charlotte Brontë, and George Elliot (among many others) were impressed by his first major book.

\(^{38}\) Ruskin, p. 97.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 316.
aimed his ire particularly at cast iron:

[O]ne thing we have in our power — the doing without machine ornament and cast-iron work. All the stamped metals, and artificial stones, and imitation woods and bronzes, over the invention of which we hear daily exultation — all the short, and cheap, and easy ways of doing that whose difficulty is honor — are just so many new obstacles in our already encumbered road. They will not make one of us happier or wiser — they will extend neither the pride of judgement nor the privilege of enjoyment.⁴⁰

Honest, hard labor was ideal for instilling good morals for Ruskin. Not only the worker would feel a religious fervor, but anyone looking at his handiwork would experience it as well.

As the businessmen in cities ordered and added iron façades to their buildings, there clearly must have been a heightened sense of emotion throughout the citizenry. Peoples’ appreciation for the beautification of their streets could be considered a larger positive theme paralleling Ruskin’s moral bent. If Ruskin was convinced that architecture could raise the morals of man, why would not ornamentation on an otherwise bland building be a good thing? It would translate into a tangible method for helping the citizens of a city like Galveston raise their spirits and perhaps their morals as well. A pride in one’s city can manifest itself into larger deeds of benevolence. Pride of place can translate into the desire to improve public, shared spaces.⁴¹

Henry van Brunt (1832-1903) was a noteworthy American architect who weighed

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 317.

⁴¹Architecturally, personal pride due to wealth or family might be understood in regards to the palatial mansions built by some of the Galveston elite. This type of pride is not necessarily the same as that of civic pride.
in on the opposite side of the aesthetic spectrum from Ruskin. In a lecture given to a meeting of the American Institute of Architects in New York in 1859, he turned his entire focus to "Cast Iron in Decorative Architecture." His resounding support of iron as the material for this age of progress is inspiring even today. He proclaims: "They have called this in derision 'a cast iron age.' What if it is? Let us then make a cast iron architecture to express it; and if we set about it earnestly and thoughtfully, it is certainly within the bounds of possibility to ennoble that much reviled material."42 As he formulated his argument against the ideas put forth by Ruskin specifically, van Brunt redefined our modern age as having separate and different needs and goals from ancient times. He articulated that now "the age which we are called upon to express is not one of individualities, but of aggregates. It is not one of barbarous sacrifice either of time, labor, money or material, but of wise economy."43 Van Brunt was by no means alone in his sentiment, as the prevalence of iron fronts will attest.

Ruskin’s utopia, embracing the sentiment of a simpler time, was essentially the opposite of the young, vibrant, capitalist America. The ideas of the sacredness of craftsmanship, the accompanying pride of work by masters, and the creation of the total work of art by the skill of hands was a throwback to the supposed purity of olden times. It is a nostalgia that departed from the real truth, a special form of idealism that could never be reasonably achieved.


43Ibid., p. 81.
Although not all architects favored the use of iron, new urban centers embraced the trend. Also, although iron as ornament was a fad that passed relatively quickly, iron as a structural material led directly to the skyscrapers that changed the face of cities dramatically. In *The Great Industries of the United States*, Horace Greeley states:

The progress of civilization may be said to be over iron; for iron is not only a column upon which civilization rests, but literally lies along the road, like rails, upon which it moves; and there can be nothing more pleasing to the student of the arts, or the lover of humanity . . . than the subject of iron in its millions of ramifications.\(^{44}\)

Ruskin’s dream of a more uncomplicated time came on the heels of rapid industrialization as well as rapid urbanization. The makeup of cities changed, while in the United States, people began to settle farther from the established East. As they built their new provincial cities, they tended to pattern their cities after other, eminent urban areas. Ruskin’s preaching was no match for this progression in the long run; nevertheless, his voice was both heard and considered during his time. Van Brunt’s call for acceptance of this new material provided a compelling counterpoint, and clearly resounded as inspiration: “Let us not, then, shrink from cast iron as too base and cheap to be translated into a noble architecture, as too common for such elegant uses; but as this art is our symbolic and monumental language, let us rather consider that the more common and available its elements are, the more truthful and just will it be in this high capacity.”\(^{45}\)


\(^{45}\)Coles, p. 84.
embraced these sentiments in many buildings in its commercial district, many of which remain for us to study today.
Chapter 4 — Cast Iron in Galveston and Catalogue of Selected Buildings

As stated earlier, cast iron was embraced avidly in the United States, beginning in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. But urban areas far from the Northeast were also anxious to appear as cosmopolitan as those stately cities. Provincial cities around the nation felt the need to keep up with the latest design developments. Human desire (in terms of fashion) is to seek out the new, and those most innovative ideas using cast iron were wholly embraced by outlying cities like Portland, Oregon; St. Louis, Missouri; and Galveston.

Portland, Oregon experienced a popularity of cast iron paralleling Galveston; actually, the citizens of the former embraced cast iron more extensively than the latter. Both cities are ports, and both profited from a growing economy at the time of the fad of iron façades, so an effective comparison logically can be drawn between them. Portland used iron for the first time in 1842, whereas Galveston did not see cast iron until 1858, almost two decades later. The earliest use of architectural iron in Portland is noted as a grouping of pilasters, each with a Corinthian capital and a crest midway up the shaft.\footnote{William John Hawkins III, \textit{The Grand Era of Cast-Iron Architecture in Portland} (Portland, OR: Binford & Mort, 1976), p.16.} The initial evidence of exterior cast iron in Galveston could be seen in two buildings: the free-standing Corinthian columns of the U.S. Customs house (figure 5) and also the Warehouse for E.S. Wood & Sons (figure 22). Portland buildings exhibit cast iron fronts that were relegated to the first floor like the majority of Galveston examples. There are, however, many more buildings in Portland that have full iron fronts; they often cover both
sides of a multi-storied, large corner building or block (figure 6). This level of employment never caught on in Galveston; therefore, there was not a uniform practice initiated by the Northeast. Also, although the majority of people in Portland hailed from the New England states, their first iron components were all imported from the foundries in San Francisco. Clearly, shipping iron by sea was much easier than any overland route. The citizens’ origins probably did have an effect on how they wanted to shape the visual image of their city, and why they used cast iron as widely as they did.

Unlike Bogardus’ dream of an all-iron building trend, Galveston buildings consistently use iron decoration merely as a veneer. In New York, the revolutionary aspect of iron as a building material allowed for increased shop-window size, and an opening of the ground floor space for larger showrooms and sales areas. The difference was that in New York, the iron front of the building was an integral part of the whole. In Galveston, however, the exterior cast iron was not structural. The outer iron façade was not consistently a weight-bearing part of the whole in Galveston buildings. For many, the cast iron ordered was merely bolted on the existing brick structure, providing no more than a decorative aspect to the edifice. The design preference was to combine iron columns with iron cornices, and smaller decorative elements (such as dentils, medallions and banding around the columns) providing a focus for the first floor shop windows. In order to preserve an overall unity, small iron components often highlighted the upper-story windows. Either cast-iron sills or caps set off each window and provided harmony and horizontal focus, meshing the upper brick-dominated stories with the iron front below.

\[47\text{Ibid., p. 12.}\]
(figure 7). The roofline was often topped with a galvanized sheet-iron cornice or, on occasion, a mansard roof.

Iron did play one major role in the interior structure. Cast-iron columns can be seen throughout the interiors of the first floors of buildings in the commercial district, regardless of whether iron is present on the exterior or not. A particularly good example is the Hendley Building (1855-58), housing one of the first businesses on the Strand and having some of the earliest iron usage. Its exterior is constructed of brick and cement, forming a long, low, uninterrupted front along almost an entire block of the Strand (figure 8). The designer, now unknown, utilized cast iron columns in its interior. All of the building materials were imported from Boston by the Hendley Line ships — from the bricks to the granite pilings.\footnote{Barnstone, p. 35.} The innovative method of opening up the interior with slender iron columns could have been initially brought in at the same time. One theory is that iron architectural components were brought from the Northeast in the empty ships as ballast. The ships would return to their home ports laden with cotton from the wharves of Galveston.\footnote{This is hard to prove since the details of some of the original foundries are sketchy. There were documented foundries in New Orleans, Galveston, Houston and other Texas cities at that time. So while the trade of ideas and materials seems logical, the specifics are not well known.}

Although the majority of iron façades were erected after the Civil War, the city did have some antebellum examples. The Galveston Customs House (1858-61) is the most noteworthy example of early cast iron decoration in the city. This iron usage is mainly exterior columns, with cast-iron columns combined with wrought iron structural beams in...
the interior.\textsuperscript{50} 

The League Building\textsuperscript{51} (1872), located at 2301-2317 Strand (figure 1), is a well-preserved representation of how buildings in the latter half of the nineteenth century employed cast iron fronts, and will serve as the model for a study of the circumstances and methods of many Strand buildings. The building was erected after a fire on December 2, 1869 destroyed the Moro Castle, (previously on the site) and the square mile surrounding it. While the building was noted as "ready for occupancy" by January 1872, the cast iron façade was not installed until October of that same year. The structure was built of Houston brick, with the iron casting completed by George Cronan and Sons of New Orleans.

Although it is difficult to define a 'typical' use of iron on the façades of Galveston commercial buildings, the League Building is characteristic of Galveston cast-iron front usage. Its façade runs along two streets, with the major utilization of iron confined to the ground floor. Its pilasters, decorated with a raised pattern of lines, support depressed archways and form a running arcade along the street level of each side. The posts are of brick with iron components bolted on three sides; in the same manner, the iron archways have been bolted on, piece by piece. The cornice lining the top of the arches contains dentil accents, set off by consoles flanking each arch. Windows on the upper two stories reflect the façade's regularity by incorporating cast iron caps and sills. Iron mouldings


\textsuperscript{51}This building is alternately known as Mrs. Esther G. League's Building, or The League-Blum Building.
trim each window, extending down along the sides in a swag motif. The overall effect of graceful simplicity and elegance is further enhanced by a pale stucco finish, applied to the underlying brick. While the building used to have a cornice along the roofline, it was lost in an earlier hurricane.

The interior also illustrates the typical format of commercial buildings. The ground level space is opened up by the use of cast-iron columns as the major load-bearing elements, with a minimal use of brick (a single interior brick supporting wall). The building rests on a concrete slab; the site is filled in with sand for stability, in combination with deep sunk concrete pilings. Interestingly, the upper stories are completely fabricated of timber -- both the floors and the columns -- in conjunction with the brick outer walls stabilizing the wood construction. The roof is fabricated from wood.

Using the League building as a standard for the iron-fronted buildings in Galveston, we can see that two specific issues concerning the material were not priorities for local businessmen. The potential for corrosion from the salt-laden air was not an apparent concern. Bogardus had addressed it in his treatise, declaring that a coat of paint would seal the iron indefinitely. As the existing iron will attest, his claim has held true for over one hundred years. Any cracks in the paint have resulted in rust (figure 9) but through sanding and resealing the iron components regularly, they have lasted remarkably well. The fireproof quality of cast iron in buildings does not seem either to be one of the concerns involved in Galveston's embrace of the material. This question is a thorny one, mainly because of the arguments both for and against cast iron as a stabilizing material in
the event of fire.\textsuperscript{52}

Thomas Jefferson League was responsible for the League Building. He was an example of a typical Galveston businessman constructing a building along the Strand, an attorney (and later, a judge) who managed the large real estate business left by his father Thomas Massey League. His family had come to Texas from Baltimore, arriving in 1839. In the case where the building is referred to as Mrs. Esther G. League's Building, T. J. League is cited as the agent working for his mother in erecting the building. Whatever the case may be, the son was the supervisor of the construction; and he "apparently selected a popular style [of iron front] and had various craftsmen erect it" without consulting an architect on the design.\textsuperscript{53} The building first housed three businesses: a stationer and bookseller, a cotton factor and commission merchant, and a reputable clothing firm, Bernstein and Co., which moved into the space in 1874.\textsuperscript{54}

A summary of a few other representative examples of cast iron utilization is useful when looking at Galveston architecture. Here, the catalogue consists of buildings that are presently standing, with a single exception, in order to offer tangible samples for the reader.

\textsuperscript{52}See footnote #11.


Merchant's Mutual Insurance Company Building (ca. 1870), 2317-2319 Strand (figure 10)

Architects: Donald McKenzie and Fritz Weinherner

This building is a copy of the original which burned in 1869. It retains its Mansard roof, in contrast to so many of the other commercial buildings that suffered such major losses as roofs and entire upper stories in various hurricanes that have swept through Galveston. Its front is made up of seven cast-iron columns (ornamented on the lower half with decorative banding) with arches in between, flanked by pediment-topped entries (figure 11). The cornice along the ground floor has dentils along its length, also included within the pediments. Consoles highlight the center of each archway, creating a visual rhythm below the cornice line with floral medallions in the otherwise empty space. Placed onto the masonry walls above, the window mouldings of the upper two stories are also iron. Since it is in particularly good condition today, as noted in a comparison to a historical photograph (figure 12), it is a good reference point from which to envision the past. In both the Merchant's Mutual and the League buildings, a particular Galveston style is evident; their elegance lies in the understated simplicity; that is, there is enough decoration to add style to the entire block, yet not overwhelm it, which is the opposite effect of examples in other cities. It was one of four buildings that made up Insurance Square.

Greenleve, Block and Company (1882), 2310-2314 Strand (figure 13)

Architect: Nicholas Clayton

Nicholas J. Clayton (1840-1916), the most famous architect in Galveston's Golden Age, infrequently used iron in his buildings, but when he did, it was as a delicate accent, not a
huge and overwhelming repetition of elements. This building is a beautiful example of Clayton’s use of cast iron, and how he took the trend and defined it in a unique ground-floor utilization. The architect consciously attempted to differentiate it from the other iron fronted buildings along the Strand, which were generally two-dimensional and flat. He lightened the entire façade by pulling the columns apart into alarmingly thin supports — seeming weightlessness in contrast to the typical use of heavy piers (figure 14). These slim columns open up the space for multiple entrances and windows. Between the two supports, iron filigree in quatrefoil and ovate shapes create an airiness that defies the masonry on the upper stories. The cornice was lost in the Great Storm of 1900, and the original fourth story was dismantled by a supply company that occupied the building for many years.\(^5\) The proportions therefore seem a little truncated as seen today. The iron columns on the exterior were cast locally, by the Lee Iron Works of Galveston. The building was erected for Greenleve, Block and Co., a wholesale dry goods business. The initials of the firm’s principals: Abraham Greenleve, Louis Block, Louis Michael, and Leopold Oppenheimer appear in shields along the upper stories.

**Trueheart-Adriance Building** (1882), 212 22nd Street (figure 15)

Architect: Nicholas Clayton

This building is an example of the exuberance of Victorian architecture. It exhibits the same semi-detached columns with the same iron filigree as the Greenleve, Block and Co.

building; with similar geometric decoration halfway up the columns on the outside. The columns here, however, are part of a lush combination of styles that includes a Greek pediment crowning the roofline cornice, Romanesque arches on the top story, and richly decorated capitals. Clayton was careful to take advantage of the decorative potential of iron as a medium, yet not to extend it into baroque extravagance. The idea of ‘less is more’ seems to be the guiding principle that Clayton followed in the Greenleve, Block and Co. Building’s use of iron as well as this one. In other stone buildings designed by Clayton, he relies on massive pillars and archways for the sake of grandeur, whereas in these two buildings, a light airy quality is the ground-floor impression. Their delicateness is appropriate, especially for the modest scale of the Trueheart-Adriance Building. It was built for one of the oldest real estate firms in Texas, founded in 1857.56

**W.L. Moody Building** (ca. 1884), 2202-2206 Strand (figure 16)

**Architect: Nicholas Clayton**

Here Clayton has taken a different slant on how to add ornament. Its rows of detached columns face both streets of the corner lot, and are ornamented in an unusual manner. The columns themselves stand on square pedestals, emphasizing their grand height. The bottom third of the shaft is decorated in a cross-hatch design, contained within banding, with fluting both above and below this separate region (figure 17). In contrast, the cornice above the columns is plain to the point of severity, including the area that descends to join the columns above their capitals. The corner piers have iron components.

56bid.
that resemble heavy rustication. The iron façade is simple enough to complement the intricacy of the masonry; the brickwork above has been augmented by terra cotta inserts. Again, Clayton decorates without overwhelming. What now stands as a three-story building once had an additional, fourth story with a massive cornice, lost to the storm of 1900 (figure 18).  

Rosenberg Building (ca. 1870), 2309-2311 Strand (figure 19)

Architect: P.M. Comegys

This building and the one next to it, the Magale Building, were both built by the same architect, and are almost identical in their façades. The front is made up of seven square pilasters, brick with flat iron components bolted on each of three sides. The iron front forms an arcade made up of a flattened arch between each pair of pilasters. The ornamentation is simple, a raised line design on the shaft with a flat floral medallion in place of a capital. Each pilaster is accented by a console, with smaller consoles alternating between them. The cornice line is stark, dramatically separating the iron from the masonry above. The two stories above have six windows on each floor mirroring the arched doorway and windows below, and the ornamental iron above each window is modest, a slight curve to beautify the otherwise drab masonry walls.

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57 In the argument of simplicity vs. excessiveness, one must not lose track of the fact that often the detailing, especially of the capitals, may have either been removed over time or been destroyed by inclement weather.
**J.F. Magale Building** (ca. 1870), 2313-2315 Strand (figure 19)

Architect: P.M. Comegys

Very similar to its neighbor, the Rosenberg Building, the iron veneering of both buildings might well have come from the same foundry.\(^{58}\) Both the Rosenberg and Magale buildings contain six pilasters along the front of the first floor, but the Magale Building forms only five arched window and door openings in between the pilasters. This small discrepancy forms the only major difference between the two buildings. Otherwise, the pattern of decoration is identical. Both buildings were erected at the same time, with the purpose of appearing as a single building, or at least, as a long, unified public front.\(^{59}\) The façade exemplifies the technique of iron components clearly bolted on the existing brick piers. The architect used the same iron window caps and pilaster decorations, merely altering the rhythm of the windows and first floor archways slightly to subtly remind any passerby that while the impression was of a single building, the two were technically separate. An interesting nuance is therefore set out. While the two businessmen each invested in only one part, they both benefit from the impression of a larger, grander building. The effect from the street was of a more compact massing, with less distracting variations competing with each other.

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\(^{58}\) Coulter, p. 63.

\(^{59}\) Cheryl A. Giritz, "Cast-Iron Facades in Texas" (Master's thesis, North Texas State University, 1978), 56.
**J. S. Brown Building** (ca. 1878), 2111 Strand (figure 20)

Architects: Clayton and Lynch

The small front of this building is a straightforward example of much of the iron front usage in Galveston. It illustrates the ease of beautifying an otherwise practical building, in a simple and economic fashion. The five square pilasters along the ground floor have a linear design on the front, with similar design on the capital. The cornice has dentils along it, with a console topping four of the five pilasters. The two sets of windows on the second floor have large mouldings surrounding them. They seem heavy for such a modest building which is logical, because originally, this narrow building was four stories tall. The window caps may have been mail ordered, without any particular customization. Coulter notes that since the pilasters and “window lintels” have been seen on other buildings, he postulates that they were “probably” ordered out of a catalogue.\(^{60}\)

**Mrs. Clara Lang Building** (ca. 1878), 2109 Strand (figure 21)

Architect: John Moser

Although this building bears a resemblance to the J. S. Brown Building next door, they do not share the singleness of purpose of the adjacent Rosenberg and Magale Buildings. Mrs. Lang’s Building today is a modest two-story building (its third floor was lost in the Storm of 1900), composed of five pilasters and four openings on the ground floor with little ornamentation. The linear design on the shafts of the pillars is similar to many others. Its decorative capitals show a bit of distinctiveness however, in line with the jaunty brick and

\(^{60}\) Coulter, p. 68.
stone decoration on the second floor. The difference of this type of modest building 
employing some iron decoration, as opposed to retaining a plain brick front, should not be 
underestimated. The desire to add style was not confined to grand edifices like the Moody 
Building, it is as if everybody pitched in to add to the larger beautification of the city. The 
smaller buildings tend to compete or clash less in their ornamentation. The fact that a set 
of buildings was created to match each other (as in the Magale/Rosenberg combination) is 
an unspoken testament to the greater good. Again, in other cities, the visual cacophony of 
ornate styles and ornamentation appeared as an overabundance that assaulted the senses.

**Warehouse for E.S. Wood & Sons** (1858), 302 Twenty-third, demolished 1962 (figure 22) 
One noteworthy building needs to be included in the list, although, having been a victim of 
progress in the 1960s, it is no longer standing today. This building was a stunning 
example of the few full iron fronts that graced Galveston’s commercial district. The 
façade was imported from the foundry of Sanson and Farrand, in Philadelphia, who were 
also responsible for six other iron fronts in Galveston. Situated on the corner of Mechanic 
Street (Avenue C), and Twenty-third, the building had a peculiar orientation. As noted by 
Barnstone, the iron front, which should always be placed on the public side, faced toward 
the lesser street, Twenty-third, with the exposed brick side wall facing the major street, 
Mechanic.\(^{61}\) Another unusual detail was that the orientation led to the west sun shining 
directly into the front windows, an uncomfortable problem. It seems clear from these

\(^{61}\)Barnstone, p. 57.
aberrations that no local architect was involved. It presented quite an ornate display, with an oversized first floor dominated by Corinthian columns and topped with an arcade (figure 23). Floral motifs filled every conceivable space, in a sort of *horror vacui*. The first-story cornice appeared quite heavy, with fancy dentils along the bottom edge and massive consoles flanking the edges of the building. The elaborate design continued into the upper three stories, with another cornice capping off the building. It was a larger façade than any standing today in Galveston, with nine arches along each floor. Barnstone likened it to “a portion of a four-tiered Roman aqueduct covered with flowers.” Since Galveston businessmen did not choose to decorate many buildings in such a detailed fashion, it is easy to imagine this building standing out among its neighbors in a striking manner.

Although these ten buildings make up only a portion of the buildings in the commercial district, their variety in iron decoration and size produces a reasonably representative list. They both signified an desire for beautification and symbolized a feeling of pride felt by Galvestonians toward their prosperous city.

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62Ibid. The architect is now unknown.

63Since the building has been demolished, and there is a dearth of information on its details, the assumption can be made but not easily proved, that iron columns were used in the interior of the first floor, as in the majority of the other buildings.

64Barnstone, p. 57.
Chapter 5 — Civic Pride as an Image Builder

The fierce independence of Galvestonians, people who chose to settle on a precarious barrier island, cannot be underestimated. The threat of hurricanes was seemingly of little consequence to them. Kenneth Frampton, in his book *Modern Architecture*, quotes Jean Starobinski in a way that might apply directly to the citizens of Galveston: that their architecture “manifested the will of man, isolating clearly the presence of human reason in the midst of the irrational domains of freely growing vegetation... thus establishing the distance between man and nature.”65 Their belief was that the natural deep-water harbor of Galveston bay formed an ideal port, and that the city was destined to become the major port of Texas and the Midwest. As the port successfully attracted business from the Northeast, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Europe, the wealthy citizens developed a desire for the cosmopolitan life.

Stubbornness often accompanies pride. By the 1870s, other American cities were industrializing, while Galveston lagged behind. No outside investors had chosen Galveston in which to build new factories, and even local businessmen invested elsewhere. The reason, ironically, lies in its position on the coast. In the decade of the 1870s alone, the island had been buffeted by several relatively small hurricanes, but ones that nonetheless managed to beach large ships and flood the city. As a newcomer to Galveston wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Galveston Daily News*, he had heard the word in the commercial circles of New York, Philadelphia and Chicago that they felt the risk of flooding in Galveston to be too high to invest there. He noted, “There are to-day untold

millions of Northern capital looking southward for investment, of which Galveston would receive her legitimate proportion if we could offer a reasonable argument that the island will not one day be washed away.\textsuperscript{66} There was a degree of industry: small plants producing iron, flour, ice, cottonseed oil, and textiles, but not on the scale of any other American city after the Civil War.\textsuperscript{67} It would seem that Galvestonians had full and complete faith that their harbor would suffice to keep them in a superior position. As Henry Seeligson, a local banker, commented, "Deep water alone can solve the future of Galveston, and will invite to our port the deep water vessels of all nations, and cause the terminus of the railroads of our State to center at Galveston."\textsuperscript{68} At any rate, the citizens did not necessarily want to share the wealth, and so did not instill a campaign to attract outside interest.

The need for high style spread from personal lives to the business realm for prosperous Galvestonians. Originally, the commercial district had been populated by utilitarian structures: plain, flat-fronted warehouses. The ground floor of these buildings was typically rented out to a wholesaler, with the upper floors containing the offices of firms such as cotton brokers or attorneys. Hardy citizens like those of Galveston might have wanted their city to both reflect the traditional powers — New York, Europe — yet embrace the newest fashions of those regions as well. Using strong sentiments like the


\textsuperscript{67}McComb, p. 49.

opening quote, a voice like the *Galveston Daily News* might have spurred individuals into actively seeking out grand façades for their business houses. But why didn’t the business district look like a miniature SoHo?

The answer may be as varied as the personalities of Galveston businessmen themselves. Some traveled extensively, some never did. Some felt a strong sense of the importance of Galveston, and wanted the city to grow with an elegant demeanor, befitting its reputation as the largest and wealthiest city in Texas, and one of the busiest ports in the Gulf, or even all of America. Iron, as a new building material, was perfect for all these citizens’ needs. As described earlier, the material had many attractive qualities that made it feasible for Galveston. It allowed the wealthy businessmen building commercial warehouses to add elegance and individuality to their otherwise mundane, utilitarian structures. True to their conservative ways, the style embraced most in Galveston was to decorate only at street level, where it would be most appreciated. Also, the openness and additional light was an asset to the stores occupying the first floor.

At its height, Galveston was more elegant than any other city in Texas. In the decade before the civil war, it began to embody the polish of a refined city. John D. Groesbeck, a transplant from New York, laid out the city in a gridiron system, in emulation of Philadelphia and New York itself.\(^{69}\) Avenues running parallel to the bay were given letter names, while cross streets were numbered. In the early days of development, most citizens settled on the bay side of town, and the system reflects that. The first street, Avenue A, is shown on early plans as a short expanse along the bay itself, with the

\(^{69}\)McComb, p. 43.
shoreline abbreviating its length. The numbered streets began along the mud flats at the
easternmost part of the island, extending to Fifty-fifth Street at the western edge of the
city defined by the Galveston City Company’s claim.

Also early on, renaming of certain streets, for example Broadway and the Strand,
made for a heightened sense of refinement. Originally, Broadway was known as merely
Avenue J. The designation of the main commercial street (Avenue C) was changed to the
Strand, a name taken from the more famous street in London to add an element of
importance and elegance. Merchants began importing ornate iron fronts for their
buildings shortly thereafter, and the town council constructed sidewalks, installed
gaslights, and paved primary streets with shell, all impressive civic improvements. For the
first time the Strand began to resemble a modern eastern city.

Galveston and its ornate Victorian buildings were the envy of other cities. All of
this beautification did not go unnoticed by the rest of the country. A reporter from the
New York Herald visited in 1874 and dubbed it “the New York of the Gulf,” while another
reporter wrote that “this is one of the richest cities of its size on the continent.” The city
had become the largest and most important between New Orleans and San Francisco.

One visitor chronicled his visit to Texas in a book, and was quite impressed by
what he experienced in Galveston. He noted:

70 Until Avenue A was filled in to become Front Street, it was essentially under water and part of the
bay; the buildings on the Strand backed up to it, allowing for shipping and receiving from their rear
doors.

71 Cartwright, p. 72.

72 Ibid., p. 119.
The 'Strand,' the main business thoroughfare, has been twice ruined by fire, but has sprung up again into quite a magnificence of shop and warehouse; and Tremont, and other of the commercial avenues, boast of as substantial structures as grace the elder Northern cities. There is a network of wharves and warehouses, built boldly out into the water, in a manner which recalls Venice even more forcibly than does the approach from the mainland.\textsuperscript{73}

A major factor in appreciating the architectural growth of a city like Galveston is the consideration of the ravaging effects of several major fires. In the nineteenth century, many cities in the U.S. and abroad had substantial portions decimated by quickly spreading fires that burned out of control through widespread areas. Galveston was certainly not immune to this, and the close proximity of the buildings in the business district suffered the consequences, most especially from one great fire in 1869.

Certainly, written materials played an important role in establishing and maintaining local pride. The \textit{Galveston Daily News} had a wide circulation. Founded in 1842, its sphere of influence crossed the bay onto the mainland. Peppered through its local stories were proud reports of new buildings being erected in Galveston, with summaries of the beautifying details spelled out. As an attempt to both build and elevate local civic character, the writers of the articles in the \textit{News} seemed to take their jobs very seriously. For example, after the \textit{News} was forced to move their offices to Houston during the Civil War, the staff was quite relieved to return back to Galveston. The resulting announcement reads like a cheer for the city itself:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{73}Edward King, \textit{Texas: 1874} (Houston: Cordova Press, 1974), p. 16.
The improvements we have made in the "News" are but a beginning. We intend it shall fairly represent the importance and progress of the city and of the State. . . . It is needless for us to say anything about the character and prospects of Galveston. There can hardly be a more favored spot on earth for an important city; and now that it is taking a fresh start, if every citizen will feel himself personally responsible for the suggestion and maintenance of a high standard in everything pertaining to the public welfare, the advantages of the place and the favorable feeling towards it entertained throughout the State will result in the establishment of one of the most enlarged and beneficial reciprocities of town and country, to be witnessed anywhere in the Union.74

Throughout the local section of the News is a regular and continuous flow of how beautifully the recently erected buildings accentuate the city. An item titled "A Fine Building" illustrates the point: "There is now complete one or two (just as you may please to call it) of the finest buildings in Galveston. . . . At present it is used as one by Messrs. Greenleve, Block, and Co. . . . Every detail of workmanship is perfect. . . . The supporting columns are of iron, and the whole expanse is an unbroken display of goods of every style, variety and kind."75 Another article mentions the character of the builder in relation to his edifice: "two [new buildings] are three-story bricks with iron fronts, corresponding with his own elegant building, of which [they are] a continuation, [and] were built by Mr. T.E. Thompson, one of our most public-spirited and energetic citizens."76 Even articles that only obliquely refer to the visual richness of the city hammer home the point, as in the article of September 1871: "The handsome building [the Marx and Kempner Building on the Strand] is an excellent change from the old tumble-down


sharties whose place it occupies.” Terms like “fine,” “well-finished,” “well-proportioned,” and “substantial” are seen repeatedly in these articles, as the business district steadily added new buildings.

One particular article, written in 1871, sums up the mindset of the *Galveston Daily News* writers, whether they are reflecting popular sentiment or shaping it.

One of the most cheering signs of the present and faith in the future prosperity of Galveston is afforded by the solid and substantial improvements that are constantly being made in various parts of the city. Most of these are of a substantial, permanent character, affording evidence of good taste in their appearance and costing large sums. All of this shows that our solid men have not lost their confidence in the fortunes of the Island City. No more pointed illustration of the justness of these observations is presented that the building that is just commenced by Messrs. Moody & Jemison, on the corner of Strand and Thirty-Second streets.

The paper does take on a preachy tone at times, as if it takes its job of shaping the public persona very seriously. As an example, a small item titled “Nuisances” plays on the consciences of its many readers: “The casting of all sorts of refuse and garbage on the streets, is an act of barbarity which Christians should shame to commit. . . . Attention to this matter will improve the appearance of our streets and promote our comfort, and improve the general health.” Although mentions of iron fronts begin as far back as 1857, as more façades appear on buildings, more complementary and enthusiastic articles appear in the paper.

Other written materials also illustrate the sense of progress that steered the town.

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A book titled *The Industries of Galveston*, published in 1887, chronicles the various prominent businesses and businessmen in town, including a distinctive set of descriptions from which later historians are able to glean a sense of how cosmopolitan the city had really become. Its descriptions match the *Galveston Daily News*. It claims:

> [t]he architecture of the city is varied and striking. ... The manner, mode of life, and recreations of the people are significant of the metropolitan spirit, also plainly apparent in business life. Art, science and the higher culture receive sufficient patronage to show that refinement is not lacking in the community. ... The result is seen in a public sentiment elevated in tone and characterized by an uncommon freedom from religious and political intolerance, and from sectional and national prejudices.⁸⁰

Although the book is written as a formal record of Galveston, it manages to color its listing of figures with proud declarations. In terms of population, retail, and tax value numbers, they are cited "simply to remove uncertain impressions that have been entertained abroad as to the city's future." Likewise, the book touts the safeness of the barrier island thus: "Galveston has the safest harbor in the gulf because the island is too far east to be seriously affected by the Equinoctial cyclones ... Sun stroke has killed more people in St. Louis or New York than pestilence here. In comparison with the Charleston earthquake, Galveston's past experiences have been the merest incidence in the rise of a great city."⁸¹

Pride in one's city is difficult to define. Galvestonians were confident that their city would grow and prosper continuously. Playing on that potential for a grand, enduring

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⁸⁰ *The Industries of Galveston*, p. 34.

city, businessmen used the iron to instantly embellish a block, or add to the larger image one building at a time. Since they were fighting the image of a city buffeted by the elements as well as being situated far from the cosmopolitan Northeast, it is easy to see why the cast iron was a perfect medium by which to establish immediate distinction.

Emulation of an earlier time period or style is integral to understanding the styles chosen to adorn the front of the buildings. A conscious patterning after established districts befitted a city that grew so much as the economy boomed. Inasmuch as one type of New York City’s cast-iron façade style emulated Renaissance palaces (in a full-front usage), Galveston strove to copy that city, and whether consciously or not, therefore to emulate both the image of the Renaissance and of the fashionable East Coast. The architecture and the city image were part of a larger marker of the economic and perhaps social success of the provincial city. The architecture of the Renaissance has called forth a sense of power, prestige, wealth, importance and endurance as time has progressed. It has been emulated throughout Western society since the original buildings were erected. In nineteenth-century New York, casting iron in this revered style might have served the dual purposes of quick acceptance by the public of the new material and evoking the same vocabulary with the guise of age to attain high stature architecturally. The iron-fronted building became a bastion of industry, much as the palace was a bastion of power itself. Galveston, therefore, borrowed the image once removed, and made it its own. The cast iron façades embodied a mixed set of emotions that mixed a sense of nostalgia with one of progress, an odd but powerful juxtaposition.
Chapter 6 — Conclusion and Summary

Galveston’s late nineteenth-century architecture is an apt example of how cast iron, added to façades of commercial buildings, was disseminated as a material successfully throughout the United States, as a pervading fashion for commercial building façades. The local builders utilized iron in its cast form from the late 1850s until about 1883, when the style quickly went out of fashion all over the United States. In the Strand District of Galveston, observers can see how applied architectural elements were used to embellish the severity of the otherwise utilitarian edifices. Decoration in an earlier era had been fashioned by craftsmen of stone or wood, in an increase of the cost of both the labor and materials. And, as the building aged, the wood or stone invariably wore down or chipped. The cast-iron elements, often molded and painted to pass as these other materials, maintained sharp edges and generally weathered well.

Through Bogardus’ promotion, the public realized that the casting process made the richest aristocratic styles available to the middle-class, and in no other age has architectural respectability been more avidly sought. As for the structural aspect of commercial buildings, Galvestonians seem to prefer brick and/or stone to the all-iron skeleton touted by Bogardus. Because of the constant threats of storms off of the Gulf of Mexico, the strength of masonry or brick might well have seemed comforting to those creating the new buildings. The aforementioned use of iron columns on the ground floor

82Giritz speaks of how contemporary newspapers equated “brick” with “substantial,” echoing the desires of Texas businessmen in describing their buildings. She feels they were making a concerted effort to move away from the “shanty-buildings” that might have been typical of provincial or frontier buildings toward a new type of elegance. She notes: “There was enough brick to assert the importance of the building, with enough cast-iron supports to give the structure style and
interior is one basic usage embracing the potential strength of the new industrial material.

While other buildings, mainly in New York, consist of entire iron skeletons, whereby the iron façade is bolted directly on the structural elements, the examples in Galveston use the material less extensively. Metal veneering is confined to the ground floor, often in combination with iron interior columns, also restricted to ground floor usage. Therefore, a structural discussion of iron in terms of Galveston architecture is not a relevant one. They continued to build mainly with timber and brick as weight-bearing elements.

The fashion of cast iron had run its course by the 1880s. Cities around the country had heavily decorated their downtown areas with iron fronts, and simplification or removal of the ornamentation became the new preference. Also, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the erroneous assumption that cast-iron was impervious to fire had been proven nationwide. Most importantly, in 1885, steel was introduced as a more versatile metal to be used in large-scale construction. Even more cost-effective and strong, steel superseded cast iron quickly and effectively. Although it was mainly used in a structural capacity, steel completely eclipsed cast iron, which was no longer widely used as either a structural or an ornamental material.

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83 See footnote # 11.
It is important to note that Galveston followed the fad of cast iron in terms of timing; they did not employ iron fronts after the fashion had passed across the country. With the nationwide advent of steel and the new construction techniques, cast iron, both structurally and ornamentally, suddenly became outdated. Although the skyscraper was the next development to affect downtown city districts, Galveston, for various reasons, went into a decline and did not flourish in either an economic or architectural sense as it had in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. What remains to us today is a result of a city that stood still, or worse, regressed in the face of a progress most cities enjoyed at the turn of the twentieth century.

In the overall scheme, Galvestonians should be seen as only partially responsible for their city’s decline. Geography, weather, and the burgeoning system of railroads were not controllable. In the trend of transcontinental, east-west train lines, Galveston could only thrive within a north-south orientation for its shipping. Additionally, as the economy of the nation as a whole turned from agriculture towards an industry-based program, Galveston could no longer compete. Houston, a constant rival, came up with a plan and a protected Ship Channel to attract more business. The consequence of Houston’s success, however, was the loss of many of its own buildings predating the age of the skyscraper.

Galveston’s iron-clad commercial buildings served, and still serve, as a reminder of its golden age as a commercial port before the eclipse by Houston and the Ship Channel. Part of the most important revitalization of Galveston today involves the reworking of the usage of these same buildings, but now as part of a historical district for a recreational purpose. Here, Galveston’s civic pride is again illustrated.
Figure 1  League Building, 1872
Figure 2  Example of a foundry stamp
Figure 3  The Wanamaker Building after a massive fire gutted it
Figure 4 A page of various window caps from the Buffalo Iron Works Catalogue
Figure 5  United States Customs House, Galveston, 1858-61
Figure 6  Ainsworth Block in Portland, Oregon, 1881, demolished 1955
Figure 7  detail of the League Building
Figure 8  Hendley Building, 1855-58
Figure 9  detail of League Building showing rust
Figure 10  Merchant's Mutual Insurance Company Building, ca. 1870
Figure 11  detail of Merchant's Mutual Insurance Company Building
Figure 12  early picture of Merchant’s Mutual Insurance Company Building
Figure 13  Greenleve, Block and Company Building, 1882
Figure 14  detail of Greenleve, Block and Company Building
Figure 15  Trueheart-Adriance Building, 1882
Figure 16  W.L. Moody Building, ca. 1884
Figure 17  detail of W.L. Moody Building
Figure 18  early picture of W.L. Moody Building
Figure 19  Rosenberg Building (left) and J. F. Magale Building, both ca. 1870
Figure 20  J. S. Brown Building, ca. 1878
Figure 21  Mrs. Clara Lang’s Building, ca. 1878
Figure 22  Warehouse for E. S. Wood & Sons, 1858 (demolished 1962)
Figure 23  detail of Warehouse for E. S. Wood & Sons
BIBLIOGRAPHY


