The Trinity: Myth, Vision, and Form in Dallas's River

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ABSTRACT

The thesis explores the planning history of the Trinity River in Dallas, Texas. It examines the dramatic physical changes that have occurred in a particular area of the river adjacent to downtown, referred to as the Trinity Banks District (TBD), between the years 1840 and 2015. The thesis explores how the TBD has occupied a place of the "frontier" in the minds of Dallasites for over 175 years. The thesis finds that the visions and physical form of the TBD during these years derive from a collectively held urban myth—the frontier as a "tabula rasa." This myth repeatedly allows city builders to accept visions for the Trinity River that are untethered to reality of the alluvial river. The thesis argues that urban planning in the TBD repeats a cycle, which begins with the collectively held myth of the frontier; the creation of physical plans by outside experts; incomplete implementation of those plans; physical stagnation of the TBD; and finally, a re-mythicizing and re-visioning among civic elite. In light of the most recent controversy regarding the Trinity River Toll Road through the TBD, the thesis concludes that both the myth and this cycle persist in planning the Trinity Banks District in the contemporary era.

Research was carried out at the Dallas Public Library History and Archives Division and interviews were conducted with stewards of the Trinity River, city planners, architects, and urban designers.

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PROLOGUE

The Trinity River as Monster

"Hold your noses, girls!" my dad warned each time we approached the bridge to cross the Trinity River in the back of his silver truck. It was springtime in Texas, and between its wide levees, the Trinity River was swollen from heavy rains. As we neared the levy, the River announced itself gently at first. Then came a pungent jab at our nostrils as it wafted all around us. My sister and I strained towards the windows to watch the river pass below. I pressed my nose against the truck window so that I could both block the odor from my nostrils and look for the source of the smell. *Here* was The Trinity River: our only river, sitting with us briefly in the truck. It reeked of raw sewage and looked nothing like the rivers on television.

I imagined the giant Trinity River Monster who lived below the bridge, a terrifying blend of Oscar the Grouch and Nessie the Loch Ness Monster. The river smelled because the monster lived in a constant pattern of eating its trash and defecating in its waters. I can't recall if I made up the Trinity monster myth or if my dad did. It was a convenient myth for a child to explain away the drab reality of the brown, stinky river that was so inaccessible and scary to me.

Crossing the second levee, my sister and I would gasp for air and laugh. In the clear, we were on to some concrete place. Passing over it for years, the Trinity remained a mystery to me. I wondered, if this was *nature*, was I *inside* or *outside* of it?

In bright, hot Dallas places of concrete, I dreamed of a day when my dad would pull the truck over near the levees and tell us that someone had slain the Trinity River Monster. We'd walk down to the river, swim with other kids along its banks, and picnic on the tall levees. There was a rope swing, just like in the movies. The water would run clear, and I would hold my breath long enough to race across it. We would fish and float under handsome Live Oaks. To know the Trinity was to know nature, and in the unbearable Texas sun, driving from one concrete space to another, I longed for both.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> "To speak of the city in terms of its myth or in terms of its reality: such a choice suggests for most of us a glorious dream against the drab actuality, the idyllic against the grim. But no such simple contrast encompasses the totality of the city. It is much more complex. No doubt hundreds of ways exist of looking at a city; and each perhaps has its uses. The city as an expression of myth is only one of these."[1]

Locating the Trinity River

The Trinity River—"La Santisima Trinidad," as the Spanish called it—is a perpetual mystery to Dallas natives. Not unlike its namesake, the Judeo-Christian "Holy Trinity," it is the confluence of three singular river bodies into one. The Spanish looked out upon it inquisitively and chose to name it not after a man, woman, or a saint, but after their God. Perhaps they viewed it with mixture of awe and fear. In a similar tradition, the Trinity River represents contradictions that people struggle to understand, but still accept. Most months of the year, the Trinity is but a thin artery, not the full body of water or omnipotent presence worthy of a name like The Trinity. It is a literal mystery to most Dallasites since so few have seen it up close, felt its waters, or heard it flowing. The Trinity's mystery is also figurative. Staring out at its vast landscape, it is hard to believe that this river has been the centerpiece of life in the region for thousands of years. Its slimness offers few clues to the richness of histories, meanings, species diversity, human energies, and urban planning episodes that have all centered there. The Trinity's alluvial flatness belies a depth of spatio-temporal dynamism. Disconnected as most Dallasites are from the river, there is an undeniable sacredness to it; both life-sustaining and destructive.

In describing the impetus for the American western expansion, Frederick Jackson Turner explains how each frontier could "furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past."[2] As the centerpiece of ecological and human history in north central Texas, the Trinity River embodies one such "field of opportunity."[3] Its headwaters form in the North Central Prairie, Cross Timbers, Grand Prairie, and Blackland Prairie regions of the United States. The middle and lower portions of the Trinity watershed are

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[1] Cowan, Donald. "The Myth of Dallas." In *Imagining Dallas*, 1–14, 1982.

[2] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1920), 38.

[3] Humans have roamed the River and its tributaries for an estimated 12,000 years. Bands of nomadic Comanche controlled the River territory for hundreds of years before the French found it in 1690 and Spanish explorers named it "la Santisima de la Trinidad." The Comanche, Apache, French, and Spanish traded along the River throughout the 18th century. Throughout the 1820s and 1830s, Anglo-American settlers populated the area. Battles for independence were fought, passing control of the River from Spain to Mexico and then to the Texas Republic. Pratt, James, *Dallas Visions for Community: Toward a 21st Century Urban Design.* (Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1992), 2-11.

situated within the Texas Claypan and Bottomlands regions. Traversing these various ecological regions, 423 miles south of where it begins, the Trinity drains through the Coastal Prairie and Marshlands to the Gulf of Mexico. [4]

The Trinity is an alluvial river assumed to be self-formed: its physical shape determined by the magnitude and frequency of flooding and runoff across the flat prairielands that surround it. The River has experienced many channel shifts over time and its shape is in constant flux. No single variable determines its form; it is influenced by a range of factors including geology, Holocene sea level rise, climate, precipitation, and direct human influences. The area known as the "middle Trinity" is a vast watershed of over 6,100 square miles.[5] It is a backbone of species diversity in the region, the center of a "large fertile hinterland" extending northwest from the Rio Grande to the Red River.[6] As a visiting Englishman described the Trinity's blackland soils, "It is universally admitted to be the finest soil in the country, equaling in fertility the rich alluvial bottoms of the great Mississippi valley." [7] These claims were and still are unsubstantiated and certainly not universally admitted—others contend it is impossible to grow anything but cotton there. Such were the earliest impulses towards exaggeration with little basis of fact.

For hundreds of years before there were towns along the Trinity River, its watershed and forest were sacred to Comanche and Apache native peoples. In addition to a water source, the River provided them food: it was roamed by black bear, buffalo, and deer.[8] As the Trinity increasingly drifted from the nonhuman world, it became the subject of narrative and visual language. The native peoples signaled the River's importance to

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[4] Phillips, Jonathan D. "Relative Importance of Intrinsic, Extrinsic, and Anthropic Factors in the Geomorphic Zonation of the Trinity River, Texas." *Journal of The American Water Resources Association (JAWRA),* August 2010. 46(4): 807-823.

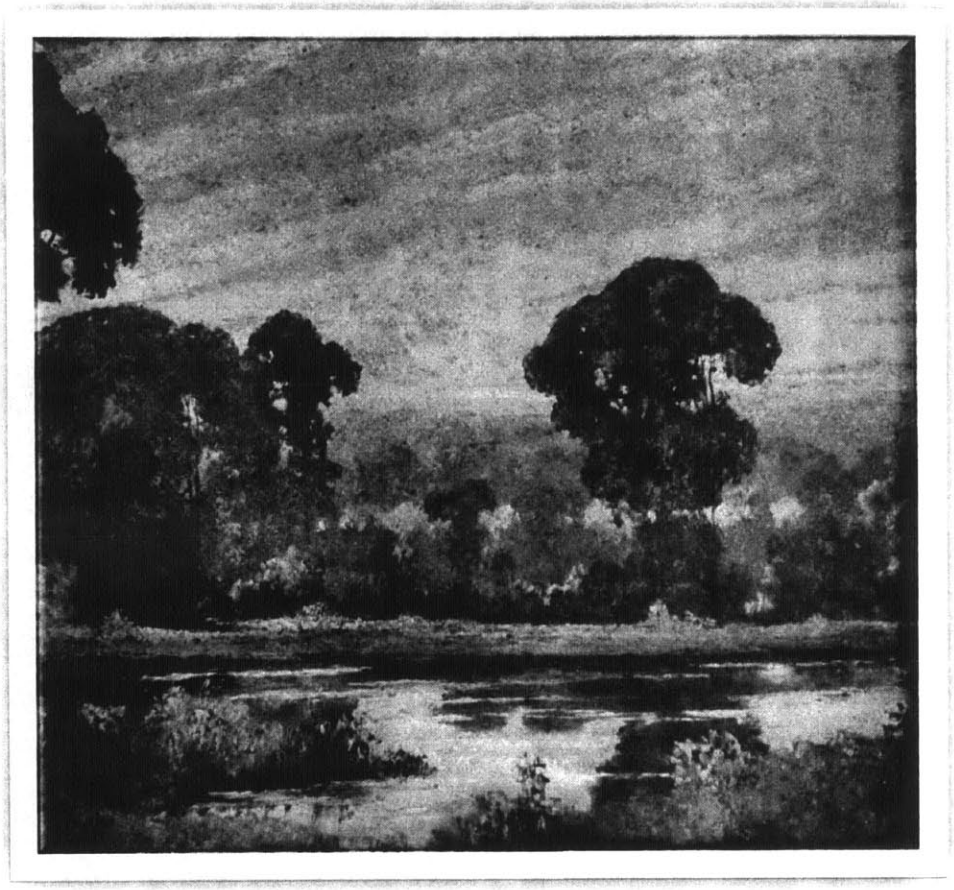
[5] As Furlong, Ajemian and McPherson describe, the Trinity River Drainage area is larger than the entire state of Connecticut and larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Furlong, John, Greg Ajemian, and Tommie McPherson. "History of the Dallas Floodway." Lecture presented at the ASCE Texas Section Meeting, Westin City Center, Dallas, September 26, 2003.

[6] Patricia Evridge Hill, *Dallas: The Making of a Modern City.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), xxi.

[7] Edward Smith, "Account of a Journey Through North East Texas." (London, Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1848), 11-12. Michael Hazel, *Dallas: A History of "Big D."* Fred Rider Cotten Popular History Series 11, (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997), 1.

[8] Building on Carolyn Merchant's essay, "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative," some of these early narratives were "edenic" in nature—a pristine river, roamed by wild animals, and with the entry of humans, particularly the pioneer. Man compromises this nature to build the city, leaving the river lifeless and imprisoned by the sprawling city around it. William Cronon, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 133-157.

survival by bending native hardwood trees elongating their shape horizontally.[9] This was the first man-made visual language at the Trinity. The Trinity spoke to many cultures and people over these years, peoples of different customs and needs increasingly used its resources and human purposes.



Artist Hale Bolton's Vision of the Trinity River as it appeared in 1855.
Photo from *Dallas Visions for Community*

[9] As Steve Houser, Trinity Forest expert describes in an interview, despite many clear cuts, some of these sacred marker trees are still visible along the Trinity. Steve Houser, "What Is an Indian Marker Tree?" Indian Marker Trees. Texas Historic Tree Coalition. Accessed September 29, 2014. http://www.txhtc.org/trees/indian-marker-tree/indian-marker-trees/.

Dallas: The City Without History, Just a Future

Like most origin narratives, the story of Dallas's origin is a blur of history and myth. Many have scoffed that "Dallas has no history." Historians have called it a city that was "built from nothing" on the western frontier; a place that has "no real reason to exist."[10] Local historian A.C. Greene says it well: "Dallas, do not forget, was *created*, purely and simply...it sprang from people's minds."[11] In his seminal work on Dallas, historian Harvey Graff asserts that Dallas has been complicit in deconstructing its own urban history, having repeatedly "obliterated and denied its own past."[12] Indeed, most Dallasites know little of how the city of Dallas came to be.

To say that Dallas does not know or accept its history is true, but this has never stopped Dallasites from searching for an urban identity. There is a certain collective image consciousness unique to Dallasites, evident in their preoccupation with luxury cars, huge homes, plasticity and other symbols of an affected people. Dallasites are known for a willingness to follow any trend and to tear down the virtually new for something entirely new. This infatuation with big, fancy things is more of a track record than an urban history. Nevertheless, it is deeply imbedded in the city's culture. Graff describes the modus operandus of Dallas: "striving to be different from other cities and to emulate them, all at the same time."[13] In so striving for distinction, Dallasites have embraced exaggeration and the "everything is bigger in Big D" stereotype. Even this mantra was self-imposed—not made up by an outside observer!

Dallasites have always cast both their history and their future with a clever mix of exaggeration, boosterism, and self-promotion. Despite an incessant longing to be different, Dallas is not unique. If the city is truly distinct in any way, it is a collectively-held belief that *anything is possible.* This mentality pervades the city's culture, drives a hunger for legacy-making, and makes for interesting, if not disturbing, planning outcomes. To probe this part of the urban psyche, this thesis examines a particular geographical area of Dallas where the belief that "anything is possible" repeatedly manifests in physical space.

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[10] Harvey Graff, *The Dallas Myth : The Making and Unmaking of an American City.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 64-65.
[11] Graff, *Myth*, 33-34.
[12] A.C. Green, *Dallas U.S.A.* (Houston: Gulf Publishing, 1986), 236-239.
[13] Graff, *Myth,* 34.

Urban Myth

Perhaps it is a human impulse to construct myths to fill the gaps where facts or evidence are unavailable. Such is the very basis of mythology: to help people understand their place in the world. Extending this notion of myth, urban myths contribute to what medieval cultural historian Gervase Rosser calls a "shared urban identity, located on common ground."[14] In *The Dallas Myth,* Harvey Graff explores rhetorical and ideological claims that Dallas sprung from "nothing" and contends that "myth-making marks the key moments of Dallas history from its founding."[15] For Graff, these urban mythologies, replete with exaggeration, lore, and a colorful cast of characters have high value for a people seeking to understand their place in a city. His is a significant contribution to cultural history and historical geography for the city and deconstructs notions of self-made city. This thesis seeks to build upon Graff's work but also to frame a new myth as core to Dallas's spatial development in the urban core.

In a spatially, racially, and economically segregated city like Dallas, shared urban myths remains one of the few things that binds the people together. To disregard myth and search narrowly for historical facts is to ignore the much more interesting history of a city that is so frequently accused of having none. This thesis contends that myth, vision, and city form are deeply intertwined in Dallas. Each is a human construction that impacts the others across time and space, blurring the historical linearity and continuity, and deepening its spatio-temporal dynamism. Urban myth and vision are more than abstractions: they have contributed significantly to the transformation of the physical environment, perhaps more than in other cities. Using the lens of urban planning, this thesis explores the persistent mythicizing of a place over time, and how several generations of people articulated visions for that place that derive from a singular myth: the "tabula rasa" or blank slate. Finally, the thesis calls for renewed understanding of how myth and vision can and do shape city form.

Structure

This research developed out of an interest in better understanding how people have tried to impress their visions upon the Trinity River for over 175 years, adding to its spatio-temporal dynamism of the river over a broad time span. It is a tale of many, very different suitors, vying for their vision of Dallas in one particular part of the river, which I call the Trinity Banks District (TBD). The visual landscape of the TBD is loaded with remnants of many urban planning episodes. Consistently a target of planning "visions" for the future of

[14] Graff, *Myth,* 49.
[15] Graff, *Myth,* xxii.

Dallas, the TBD has been morphed to correct for perceived aesthetic and practical deficiencies across every era of urban planning, between 1846 and 2015.

To better understand these histories, I began by asking the following questions: How have people spatially reconfigured the TBD over time? What larger forces motivated the reshaping of this area and how does it reflect the planning "mode" of the time? What does this persistent reshaping tell us about the collective modus operandus of Dallasites?

I undertake a study of this single physical area, through a historical tracing of its uses and purposes. Intertwining the physical and spatial with economic and cultural histories of Dallas' development, this thesis aims to achieve a more cumulative understanding of the relationship between the river and urban planning, past and present. This thesis does not attempt to treat the Trinity River exhaustively; its aim is to call attention to the TBD as a fertile field for investigation.

The thesis is structured in the following way. Chapter one introduces the overarching myth of the American western frontier—the "tabula rasa"—and how it inspired visions of an inhabitable place in the area that would come to be known as Dallas. This chapter explores the Trinity River as the ecological centerpiece of the region, introduces the concept of the Trinity Banks District (TBD), the landscape of the TBD as it appeared to Dallas's earliest settlers, and how they acted on the TBD to grow a town. Finally, it argues that in the late 1800s, the people of Dallas faced conflicting desires to protect and separate themselves from the river and created new visions for Dallas's future.

Chapter two describes early efforts to tame an unruly river and to create a navigable canal and gateway to the Gulf of Mexico. If Dallas was to compete with rival cities and live up to its booster visions, it would have to deal with the volatility of the Trinity. The TBD inspired a new myth, that of a navigable Trinity, which shaped visions for new physical planning.

Chapter three analyzes the George Kessler Plan, to understand how the TBD changed in the early 1900s, culminating with the straightening, channeling, and leveeing of the River—the physical manifestation of a long-held, collective myth and vision. This chapter argues that in moving the river further west, city builders constructed the physical walls to match the mental barrier they had already built between themselves and the river.

Chapter four describes how the city builders continued to put up walls from The Trinity, separating the central business district (CBD) and TBD through successive planning for highways and flood control. Subsequently, the Trinity River was closed to the public, further degraded environmentally, and forgotten. This chapter argues that this prolonged period of stagnation led city builders to consider new visions for the Trinity.

Chapter five analyzes how city leaders have renewed interest in the Trinity River as the physical spine of the City. Exploring how civic elite "re-mythicized" the TBD, and created new visions for the area which resulted in a series of large urban planning projects which have only been partially implemented.

CHAPTER ONE

The Frontier as "Tabula Rasa"

> "There is no tabula rasa. The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious sums to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier." [16]

Early Motivating Forces

In the American westward expansion, *land was king*—cheap, inexhaustable land. Settlers were drawn to the Republic of Texas in the mid-1800s by the availability of free land, unhindered by the laws and customs of the east, its prime location to prairie hinterlands. These settlers found the Trinity River at the center of an ecologically diverse region, surrounded by areas rich in agricultural potential and growing industries: timber and cotton to the east, corn to the north, cattle further west. With timber, oil, cotton, and wheat increasingly in demand, the Trinity River was a natural location for a trading post to connect these products to their respective growing markets. For many reasons, it must have been a relief to find a stable source of water in the wide flatness of the Blackland prairie. The myth of the "tabula rasa" was visible in the landscape they found; it awakened their perception to patterns that they needed for survival, and inspired visions for settling there.

John Neely Bryan's Vision

While there is much debate among historians about how "Dallas" came to be, there is general consensus that the Trinity River was a primary impetus for building an inhabitable place.[17] John Neely Bryan, credited as Dallas's founder, came to the area in 1840.[18] Bryan's vision was conditioned in his previous experiences in Arkansas and Tennessee. He was part of the westward settling movement that had left Arkansas searching for opportunity in the Republic of Texas. He was in search of the frontier—the tabula rasa. In a practical sense, he also understood that the pioneers in the west needed the resources of the coasts, and trading posts were

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[16] Turner, *Frontier,* 38.

[17] Hill, *Dallas,* xvii.

[18] Borrowing from Peck's description of the waves of frontiers, Bryan was part of a second wave of men settling the American West. Whereas the pioneers depends on natural growth of vegetation and hunting, the second wave of emigrants "purchase the lands, add field to field, clear out the roads, through rough bridges over the streams, put up hewn log houses...." Bryan did all of these things. J.M. Peck *New Guide for Emigrants to the West.* Enlarged edition. Boston: Gould, Kendall, & Lincoln, 1836. Also, see Turner, *Frontier,* 19-20.

vital connections and infrastructure in the prairie.[19] The Trinity River was an enormous backbone, connecting areas west, south, east, and north across a fertile region.

Locating the Trinity Banks District

As the story goes, in surveying the Trinity, John Neely Bryan was dismayed by many miles of wide, flat, muddy, riverscape. Curiously to Bryan, at a certain point, the Trinity broke with this pattern, narrowed significantly and bent sharply to the east. At this place, a limestone ridge distinguished the Trinity banks from its muddy parts north and south. Here, the river carved out a one-half mile straight path before bending sharply back to the west. He had found a natural place for a river crossing. With an eye toward the future, Bryan looked past the current muddy condition of the alluvial lands. In visualizing a trading post there, Bryan had brought the myths and visions of the American western frontier with him: in the Trinity River, he believed that nature could be tamed and shaped into something lucrative. Such were the earliest "planning" impulses of the American west—to find, acquire, and create value from open land.[20] The promised rewards of settling the west were never easy to come by, but an optimistic, unwavering vision for a new future in the Republic of Texas certainly gave Bryan a leg up.

Bryan's choice of this particular part of the Trinity, upon which he built his log cabin and a trading post, shaped the core of the city that would grow in all directions.[21] Motivated by trade potential, he quickly set about creating many commercial enterprises, a trade post, and a crude ferry crossing. While others focused on homesteading, "clearing land for crops, building pens for animals, and erecting homes," Bryan was preoccupied with how to transport goods and people to and from Dallas.[22] In a sense, Bryan was always downstream from his homesteading contemporaries: his visions of a new western prairie town on the Trinity River were wielded as the sole argument over what Dallas should *look like,* and are a credit to him as the first "planner," while those around him were more "builders" or just plain "farmers."[23]

It has been said that Dallas was "born urban." Bryan wasted no time in connecting his vision with physical form. With the arrival of his contemporaries, the Trinity River was endowed with new economic, political, and cultural significance and the natural state or nonhuman condition of the Trinity River had passed. Bryan

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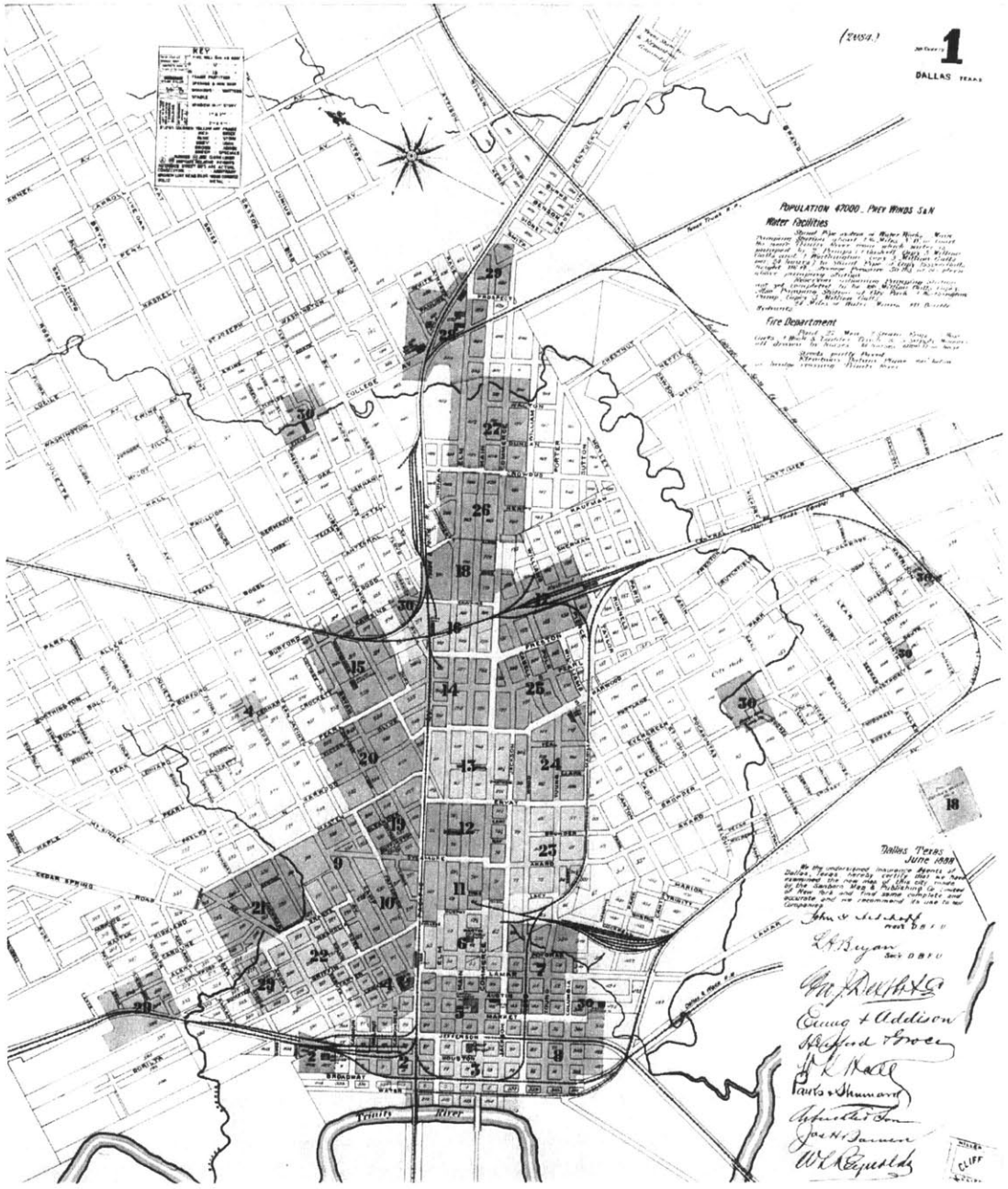
[19] Turner, *Frontier,* 24.
[20] As Turner describes, these homesteaders were uninterested in a system of laws so much as they wanted land.
[21] Hill, *Dallas,* xvi-xvii, xxi, 117.
[22] Graff, *Myth,* 64-65. Bryan later left Dallas for the California gold rush in 1849. Even the name "Dallas" is of unknown origins; some say it was named, simply, after Bryan's friend, Dallas.
[23] Hazel, *"Big D,"* 8.

began the long pattern of disrupting the river's natural state, and reconstructing it for distinctly commercial purposes, articulating new social and economic significance of this alluvial land.

There was no name for this particular geography of the Trinity where he focused his early efforts. To begin to bring into sharper focus the significance of this particular area of the Trinity River in Dallas's development, the area will be referred to as the Trinity Banks District (or TBD).[24] This nickname—TBD—is also offered in recognition that the mystery and power of this space lies in its ability to consistently, across 150 years of planning, inspire Dallasites toward greater, *still* "to be determined," purposes.

[24] The TBD encompasses the River and its banks on its east and west, as well as the area between the river and the original Central Business District (CBD).



Sanborn Fire Insurance Map depicting central business district and Trinity River, 1888. Part of the TBD is visible at the bottom of the map, where river meets the street grid.

But for the fortuitous location and physical conditions of the TBD, Dallas may never have become a place. What exactly did Bryan *see* there? We can only speculate, but he wrote of a natural limestone ridge that distinguished the TBD from the other muddy parts of the river. These materials were strong communicators: limestone conveying solidness, as well as a familiar material from his previous life in Arkansas. From a practical perspective, limestone in the TBD was a solid foundation for a river crossing and trading post. Symbolically, the material was a link to other cities and great civilizations—the Egyptian pyramids, the Greek Parthenon were all built with limestone.[25] In the TBD limestone, Bryan found a material that matched his ambitions: not just a trading post, but a proper *town.* A year after he arrived, Bryan laid the first town grid. Bryan's contemporaries extracted limestone from the TBD to serve many purposes in the founding years of Dallas.

Overlaying a grid pattern on land and reforming the underlying land to meet the constraints imposed by that grid: this was planning in its most simple form.[26] To the east of the TBD, Bryan further articulated his commercial aspirations, laying three commercial streets, Main, Elm and Commerce, perpendicular to the river and overlooking the river bottoms. These were not new names, but rather evoked distant commercial successes, what Massey describes as "reinserted as a self-conscious building-in of local character."[27] These streets formed the burgeoning Central Business District (CBD). Oriented towards the natural path of the river, they were the physical platform by which a few early settlers could use the natural assets of the River—its bottomland hardwood forest, grazing wildlife, and water—to grow a trading post and town.

Other human stamps soon marked the grid, both visible and invisible. Dallas became the county seat in 1850, and in 1856, when it was chartered as a town, its official boundaries encompassed Bryan's original one-half square mile survey.[28] Already experienced in commerce, Dallasites established the requisite courts, courthouses, and laws to match, what Hazel calls "part of the civilizing process of the frontier was the gradual imposition of law and order."[29] The areas surrounding the TBD were settled quickly, part of what Turner

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[25] Doreen Massey, "Places and Their Pasts." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 39 (1995): 182–92. As Doreen Massey suggests, "places, in fact, are always constructed out of articulations of social relations (trading connections, the unequal links of colonialism, thoughts of home) which are not only internal to that locale but which link them to elsewhere;

[26] J.A. Lahde, *Planning for Change: A Course of Study in Ecological Planning.* (New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University, 1982), 15.

[27] Massey, "Places," 187.

[28] Hazel, *Big D*, 9.

[29] Hazel, *Big D*, 9.

calls the "final rush of American energy upon the remaining wilderness."[30] Even in just a few short years, Dallas and the TBD was already layered with many histories.

Artist Giraud's depiction of Bird's-eye view of the expanding city, 1892.
Photo from Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

Retreating from the Frontier and Shaping the River

If creating an inhabitable place from the prairie wilderness was a challenge, turning a profit there would define the struggle of the age—to tame and profit from the American west. The Blackland Prairie environs could be harsh. A humid subtropical climate offered almost all precipitation as rain. Spring flooding episodes were often followed by long summer droughts, before the late-summer floods returned. Its muddy condition exemplified how unworkable the river was; the inherited conditions of the alluvial riverscape—both life-sustaining and destructive.

Fears of the Trinity's unpredictable nature were well founded: Winding east to west, its banks frequently lapped the CBD, a nuisance to businesses located there. The River at their doorsteps, businessmen and boosters of Dallas deemed the Trinity a nuisance, but also recognized its value to them. The River was visually deceptive: its wide watershed boasted a width of five miles in some areas, but muddy bottomlands belied a *very* shallow river. There was no crevice, ridge, or valley to shape it; rather, it was self-shaped by historical floods. In the wide Blackland Prairie, the Trinity could have formed almost *anywhere.* When its flows were low, the river's curves were barely visible, nestling huge swaths of trees and prairie grasses. At its height, swelling to depths over 50 feet, it flooded and threatened life in every direction. [31] Then, when flooding receded, the River had morphed to take new shape around huge oak trees. Across the flatness that

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[30] Turner, *Frontier,* 90.

[31] "Trinity River Corridor Project Chronology." U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2010. http://www.swf.usace.army.mil/Portals/47/docs/PAO/DF/PDF/Dallas_Floodway_Timeline_1908-2013.pdf.

defines Dallas, it would seem that the Trinity River longed to be *everywhere,* unsatisfied with any one shape, depth, or angle for a long period of time.

The conditions of the western settlements were difficult, but those who believed in the "tabula rasa" myth—of Texas, of the west, and now of Dallas—kept coming. Boasting few unique resources of its own, Dallas was in direct competition with other towns on the prairie. What it lacked in native resources, it made up for in location: the city was at the center of a rich agricultural region, a literal crossroads of commodities in high demand. As John Gunther describes, Dallas was "the pivot in the richest region in America in regard to four prime commodities—wheat, cotton, cattle, oil."[32] Dallas need not *produce* these to profit from their trade. At the same time, as Turner contends these western settlers "needed the goods of the coast" and rapid expansion of railroad system in Dallas was necessary to achieve these ends. The city boasted the "largest inland cotton exchange in the country," yet another unsubstantiated claim.[33]

Bold Claims

To keep Dallas growing and competing with its prairie rivals, cities of similar size and age, would require propagating new myths.[34] Graff contends that "the frequency and the intensity of Dallas's repeated claims to difference distinguish it more than its material achievements."[35] As historian Douglas Fairbanks describes: "Boosters often merged civic motives with private ambitions as city builders." As historian Robert Fairbanks describes, "Dallas has a long history of civic boosters, leading citizens who provided money and leadership to guarantee the city's growth at some crucial time."[36]Dallas's boosters aimed to distinguish it from the others by touting a uniqueness that it never actually possessed.

The myths these boosters propagated worked. Commercial expansion following the Civil War gave rise to serious growing pains. As the local news complained, "While our granaries are teaming with the wealth of the finest soil in the Union, they remain land-locked and their treasures literally rotting from the want of consumers and the proper mode of transportation."[37] As the town of Dallas grew, new uses expanded along the river and in the TBD. A commercial cotton gin, a carriage factory, and lumber mills were built there

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[32] John Gunther, *Inside U.S.A.* (New York: Harper, 1947), 815. Graff, *Dallas,* xix.
[33] Robert Fairbanks, *For the City as a Whole: Planning, Politics, and the Public Interest in Dallas, Texas, 1900-1965.* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 37-39.
[34] Hill, *Dallas,* xiii.
[35] Graff, *Dallas,* 157.
[36] Robert Fairbanks, "The Great Divide." *Legacies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015), 48.
[37] Hazel, *Big D,* 11.

between 1846 and 1852. These activities continued to draw upon the natural assets of the river, accelerating ecological change there. The city successfully convinced the federal government to invest in more railroads in Dallas, which compounded the physical fragmentation of the TBD.

In building this infrastructure, the TBD was further degraded by a series of hardwood forest cuts and the cut and fill required to build new railroads each reconfiguring the land to accommodate a growing center of transit. Cutting the hardwood forests down in the TBD further pushed back the frontier line. The resulting condition of the TBD was a barren flood plain, a clear-cut swath of land. In depleting the TBD of these resources, however, town builders created a new problem: they initiated a long process of environmental fragmentation; the conversion and disruption of natural systems to urban conditions, including the loss of area-sensitive species and predators such as black bears. This could not be reversed. As city builders cleared the physical TBD, a thicket of competing economic, political, and cultural forces emerged to. Forces of capitalism and traditions of rugged individualism led many different suitors to offer their views on what the future of Dallas should look like. In doing so, they fostered a new myth: that the city is the physical separation of humans and nature; consciously and subconsciously, the people of Dallas began to build walls—not literal walls but the walls that William Cronon calls "the artificial mental wall between nature and un-nature."[38]

[38] William Cronon. *Nature's Metropolis.* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 18.

CHAPTER TWO

Control of Nature

> "Tradition has set the city against nature, and nature against the city. The belief that the city is an entity apart from nature and even antithetical to it has dominated the way in which the city is perceived and continues to affect how it is built."[1] Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden*

By 1880, the population of Dallas exceeded 11,000 people. By 1890, the population tripled to over 36,000 people, making Dallas the largest city in Texas.[2] In addition to profitable industries like grain milling and lumber planing, an expanding railroad system enabled highly profitable distribution of agricultural equipment and commodities.[3] Rail transport was an economic engine for the growing city. The TBD was a vital point of exchange and transport, where stagecoach routes and cross-country railroad routes all converged.

Dallas in the late 1800s was booming. It was also a paradox. As Michael Hazel describes, the city "boasted most of the trappings of a major urban center: public utilities, public schools, daily newspapers, the State Fair."[4] It was still very much a frontier for those seeking to capitalize upon its political and economic openness. Dallas had no zoning and no planning.[5] There was only one paved road.[6] Trains and streetcars offered new spatial mobility for people, stretching the city limits and demand for resources in all directions. The Trinity River bottoms were home to thriving industrial uses as well as wildlife, with "vicious animals still appearing in the city by night."[7] While boosters touted its beauty and resources, the Trinity River simultaneously earned its reputation for industrial "smoke and dust" and seasonal flooding.[8] The city lacked the administrative or planning capacity to keep up with or direct its own growth.[9]

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[1] Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden : Urban Nature and Human Design.* New York: Basic Books, 1984.
[2] Graff, *Myth,* 284.
[3] Hill, *Dallas,* xxii.
[4] Hazel, *"Big D,"* 26.
[5] Hazel, *"Big D,* 31.
[6] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 11.
[7] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 11.
[8] Hazel, *"Big D,"* 31.
[9] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 15.

Categorizing the TBD

As Dallas grew in every direction, what kind of river had the Trinity become? The *Dallas Morning News* captured its condition well "At present, the Trinity is not one of the show areas of Dallas."[10] Boosters saw an ugly river in the core of the city as a threat to Dallas's economic interests, and calls to improve the river's conditions began.[11] The river's cycles of flooding and droughts frustrated city builders but also inspired new ideas for the River. Literally stuck in the mud, if the TBD was to become more useable for human purposes, it would have to be approached through design.

Having already secured an abundance of railroads for transport, boosters turned to the untapped potential in creating a navigable river channel to the Gulf of Mexico. The United States was full of successful river cities, and Dallas fancied an economic future as one of them. By 1890, the concept of leveeing the Trinity in the TBD was part of the public conversation for how Dallas should fix the river problem.[12] Advocacy among the civic elite swelled in these years. Theirs was a vision of a channeled, navigable Trinity—shared by boosters, men of commerce, and investors alike. Dallas could be an inland port to the Gulf of Mexico. Realizing this vision meant carefully engineering the regulation of water flow to allow for barges to pass.

To plan the vision, civic leaders recruited a host of experts on the subject of river navigation, including boatmen and engineers. Their findings were not surprising: the river rose and fell frequently and if it was too high, carriers would not pass under its bridges; when it was low, it revealed a river bottom lined with fallen hardwood trees, rocks, and snags.[13] A range of catastrophes befell many of the boats that attempted to navigate the river. Yet, the myth of a navigable river and an inland port city persisted, aided by *The Dallas Morning News* and booster optimism. The economic lure of a navigable, commercial connection from Fort Worth and Dallas through Houston to the Port of Galveston and the Gulf of Mexico could not be ignored.

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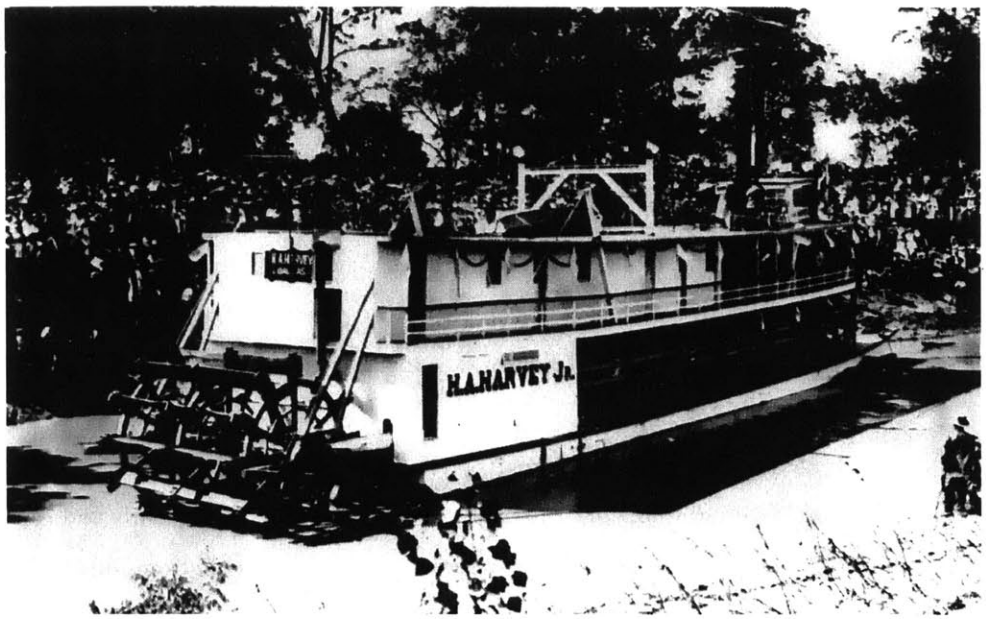
[10] "San Antonio to Straighten River Bed." *The Dallas Morning News*. November 22, 1912.

[11] M.C. Wolff, known to the public as "Trinity River Wolff" had been the so-called *lone wolf* in advocating the navigation of the river "when nearly everybody else hooted at the idea." He circulated a petition for state appropriations of $35,000 for that purpose. As the *News* recalled, "That was the year that Texas had the railroad craze and charters were issued to thirty-seven railroads. The petition was lost in the shuffle and nothing more was done..." "Trinity River Wolff." *The Dallas Morning News*, September 10, 1894. Page 8.

[12] A daily brief in the Dallas Morning News, entitled "The Trinity River" began in 1885. Information in the briefs relates to the condition and news along the Trinity River. "The Trinity River," Dallas Morning News, June 7, 1890, p. 1. Also, Fairbanks "The Great Divide," 48.

[13] For a complete anthology of carriers and their catastrophic ends, see "Steamboating the Trinity," and "Trinity River: What an Old Steamboat Man Has to Say of the Early Days--River Can Be Navigated." *The Dallas Morning News*. October 28, 1901. Page 4.

In 1893, the dream gained currency when a group of men successfully reached Dallas from Galveston after a sixty-seven day journey on the H.A. Harvey steamboat.[14] The steamboat men were greeted by a large public celebration at the foot of Commerce Street.[15] The H.A. Harvey steamboat arrived just a few days after another steamboat, called *Dallas* sank in the Trinity River. Harvey's successful arrival was proof positive that navigating the Trinity was possible. Dallasites quickly forgot the many failed previous attempts, again convincing themselves of the myth that controlling the river for navigation purposes was possible.[16]



H.A. Harvey Steamboat arriving in Dallas, 1893.
Photo from Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

[14] Graff, *Myth,* 284.
[15] There is some debate among historians about whether this journey was even possible, or if it was cleverly staged by town boosters. As one Trinity River expert told the Dallas Morning News in a 1900 editorial, "One experienced "There never was such an occurrence as a fit boat plying up the river. That is an impossibility." Whereas areas in the middle and lower Trinity had seen steamboat traffic since the 1860s, navigating a boat up river to Dallas was considered much more difficult. S.C. Van Devender, *The Dallas Morning News,* "Trinity River." Also see, "Steamboating the Trinity" DMS, January 9, 1900.
[16] "The Trinity River: Falling Yesterday but Likely to Rise Today--Inquiry for Hard Wood." *The Dallas Morning News*, May 12, 1893. Page 8.

As evidenced by many newspaper articles and editorials, the city became wholly preoccupied with the dream of a navigable Trinity.[17] An editorial in 1900 by an old Trinity River steamboat man, S.C. Van Devender states:

> "I am strongly of the opinion that if a suitable appropriation were made by congress to clear out the river of the embedded logs and other obstructions, and cut away the overhanging timber, and locks and dams put in at places where needed, that the river could be navigated the year round. Such a thing is practicable. Then water rates could be had from Galveston to Dallas. That is as reasonable as tunneling the Thames."[18]

Like many editorials of these years, Devender's reads like propaganda. Newspapers in these years show very little of the dissenting opinion on the matter.[19] In addition to a blitz of media, boosters pursued more pragmatic channels. They helped form the Trinity River Navigation Company and hired Captain James H. McGarvey to study navigation. McGarvey concluded, "there is generally plenty of water in the upper river with the exception of points where land slides have formed bars and choked up the channel, and these can be easily removed by the use of a water jet thrown by a powerful pump." McGarvey also reported with confidence that not many dams would be necessary.[20]

Civic leaders were amassing the requisite voices to sway the citizens of Dallas, but they still needed the financing. Building upon the success of the H.A. Harvey Steamboat, *The Dallas Morning News* reported that civic leader Mr. A. B. Blevins had been busy in St. Louis and Peoria, raising $100,000 for locking and damming the upper Trinity. As Blevins told the *News:* "The capitalists of St. Louis and Peoria, who will advance the money, will be here in about a month and I want them given an excursion down the river on the steamer Harvey."[21] An editorial to the *News* implored:

> "If Congress will make a reasonable appropriation for the general improvement of the Trinity River, there will be nothing to keep down a good trade and establish water rates of freight to Dallas. The time has been in past years when there was a lucrative trade on the Trinity, and the same can be had again."[22]

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[17] A total of 800 articles in *The Dallas Morning News* between 1893 and 1908 refer to a navigable Trinity River.

[18] "Trinity River: What an Old Steamboat Man Has to Say of the Early Days--River Can Be Navigated." *The Dallas Morning News.* October 28, 1901. Page 4.

[19] The editor of the Dallas Morning News, George Bannerman Dealey, also owned property along the river.

[20] "Trinity River Navigation." *The Dallas Morning News,* January 26, 1893. Page 3.

[21] "The Trinity River: A Gentleman Who Says He Has Raised $100,000 for Its Improvement. *DMS,* September 10, 1893. Pg. 16.

[22] "Trinity River: What an Old Steamboat Man Has to Say of the Early Days--River Can Be Navigated." *The Dallas Morning News.* October 28, 1901. Page 4.

By the turn of the 20th century, Dallasites were preoccupied with a vision of an economic future that would distinguish them from other prairie cities. This future depended upon a navigable Trinity. It also ignored the facts on the ground: the river bottom was full of snags, the river flows uncontrolled, and seasonal floods unpredictable. That the vision persisted in the face of so many challenges is a credit to the overarching myth of the tabula rasa—that anything was possible in this place, if one could just work out the engineering.

Devastation in the TBD

Historic flooding in May of 1908 wreaked havoc on the city, with the river rising over 52.6 feet, the highest since 1822.[23] The river took five lives, and left 4,000 people stranded and homeless. It was blamed for millions of property losses.[24] It swallowed all of the bridges between Dallas and Oak Cliff. In hindsight, the facts look so clear: the river could not be tamed. Yet, the events further hardened local opinion that it was Dallas's destiny to tame it.

Having convinced themselves, they now needed to convince Congress. In 1910, the Honorary Dudley G. Wooten left Dallas for Washington, D.C., for his first term in Congress. In parting, he told *The Dallas Morning News,* " Of course the matter of first importance to my people, especially in Dallas and along the Trinity River, is the appropriation for the improvement of that stream." [25] The previous Congress approved a sum to begin the work on the Trinity, and the freshman Congressman was preparing to lobby for more. Optimistically, he told *The News:*

> "I believe we will get what Dallas and the whole of North and Central Texas, as well as the States and Territories north of us, are hoping for, namely, the establishment of a water route and water rates through the interior of this State and bringing the Gulf 500 miles nearer to the markets, jobbers and customers of a vast region of country, thus breaking the quarantine of heavy railroad freights, and opening up the internal commerce of Texas and the Northwest."[26]

In attempting to distinguish Dallas from its prairie rivals, Dallas had long-ignored environmental and geographical realities. Dallas was neither hilly nor coastal. It was not known as a river city, had no natural lakes, no tall pine forests, no desert colors to draw upon. Its landscape would hardly enthrall those used to the rolling hills and lush woods of the northeastern towns. What it lacked in natural assets, city builders had

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[23] The historic flood of 1822 called the "Big Flood" is a matter of Native American legend; no records exist as to the flood stage of the River.
[24] "Trinity River Corridor Project Chronology." U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2010. http://www.swf.usace.army.mil/Portals/47/docs/PAO/DF/PDF/Dallas_Floodway_Timeline_1908-2013.pdf.
[25] "Mr. Wooten Leaves: New Congressman from This District Departs Today for National Capital." *The Dallas Morning News,* May 21, 1910. Page 6.
[26] "Mr. Wooten Leaves: New Congressman from This District Departs Today for National Capital." *The Dallas Morning News,* May 21, 1910. Page 6.

always made up for with sheer boosterism, using Dallas's greatest asset, its location, to grow a city.[27] City builders found new frontiers on the periphery of the city. By the turn of the 20th century, Dallas's time as a prairie market town in the western wilderness had passed. Even as it shed its prairie town identity to embrace its place as a booming city in the region, Dallas did not lose sight of the tabula rasa.

Confronting a host of urban problems such as sanitation, congestion, and inequality, city builders held onto their belief that anything was possible and that Dallas's problems in the TBD were treatable. This belief is emblematic of the progressive era, which sought to cure urban ills. However, this ethos manifests in a different way in Dallas during these years. Whereas other cities struggled with sanitation and labor rights, and a slew of anti-vice campaigns, Dallas showed nothing but optimism for its future in these years—a blithe disregard for urban ills. Rather, they projected all of the city's problems on the Trinity River, and the TBD in particular, and focused all of their energies toward reshaping it.

Aerial Photo of 1908 floods, looking west from central business district.
Photo from Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

[27] Graff, *Myth,* 20-36.

CHAPTER THREE

Reclaiming the Trinity Bottoms

By 1910, Dallas was a couple of generations removed from its pioneer roots. Its leaders were men of "capital and enterprise," intent on profiting, rather than being punished, by the Trinity River. [28] Like many western American cities, Dallas was shaped by rugged individualism and the desire for land. Such was the energy of the time, as William Cronon asserts, "The west wanted land, not a system, or an administration, or a body politic."[29] Yet, the civic elite—self-made men—were now confronting the necessity of systems large-scale public planning, what Western writer Wallace Stegner describes as "a society to match its scenery. [30] Dallasites complained that city growth was now impairing prosperity, dismayed by "traffic congestion and creeping blight" of the CBD. Zoning laws were unconstitutional in the state of Texas, and property owners had enjoyed their own version of the tabula rasa.[31]

By 1910, there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm for planning as an answer to the problems of unbridled growth, an unruly river, and an unattractive urban core. The local newspaper printed 800 articles and illustrations on city planning between 1909 and 1910.[32] In an appeal to urban planning, *The Dallas Morning News* reported, "Persons who have made a study of the growth of cities and the proper planning for their development assert that there are three things upon which the development and prosperity of a city depend. These things are good roads, good railroads, and good waterways."[33] Dallas had already invested heavily in railroads and roads infrastructure, so boosters looked to the Trinity River for water transport.[34]

TBD as Panacea

Calls to "reclaim" the Trinity Bottoms proliferated in the news. Boosters claimed it was essential for Dallas' growth, among many other benefits, said Edward Titche,--described by *The News* as a merchant, capitalist, and civic leader:

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[28] J.M. Peck, *New Guide for Emigrants to the West.* Enlarged edition. Boston: Gould, Kendall, & Lincoln, 1836. Frederick Jackson Turner echoes Peck in suggesting these mean of capital and enterprise represent a "third wave" of emigrants, preceded by pioneers and those who purchased lands for early town-building. Also see Turner, *Frontier,* 19-20.

[29] Cronon, *Uncommon Ground,* 22.

[30] Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water.* New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

[31] "Kessler's Ideas Are Worked Into Dallas City Plan." *The Dallas Morning News.* March 25, 1923.

[32] The DMN self-reported this statistic in 1910 in an article. Head, Louis P. "George E. Kessler Employed in 1910 to Make City Plan." *The Dallas Morning News.* December 23, 1924.

[33] "City Growth Depends on Three Conditions: Roads, Railroads, and Rivers Essential Elements." *The Dallas Morning News.* December 10, 1913.

[34] Fairbanks, Robert. "The Great Divide." *Legacies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 48–60.

> "None can say the new viaducts, the industrial boulevard and the removal of the unsightly river bottom district and its transformation into an industrial area, with room for parks, parkways and public playgrounds, is anything less than a benefit, and a vast benefit, to all of Dallas."[35]

"Reclaiming" the river bottoms would also "unite Dallas, physically, linking the east and west together...as one city," and if successful, would "insure the continued growth of Dallas and its position as metropolis of the Southwest," said Titche. It would open up more commercial land in the TBD, secure the business district against flooding, eliminate blight, provide a traffic outlet," and boost commercial trade and connectivity for all of Dallas.[36] Such was the long list of expectations that Dallasites had for the new TBD. It was to be a panacea that would solve all of the Dallas's urban ills. The TBD, boosters urged, could become "nearly the center of a great city" and "form the base line from which all civic improvements are protected."[37]

Recruiting Experts

A collective vision in mind, leadership came from the educated, elite, capitalists of Dallas. George Bannerman Dealey, publisher of *The Dallas Morning News* and well-known citizen leader, urged recruiting George Kessler, a renowned city planner whose work included city plans for Kansas City and St. Louis.[38] Kessler's was a tall order: a managed growth plan that would help boosters attract federal and private capital, eliminate all major urban ills, and also add aesthetic appeal to Dallas's core. He signed a one-year planning contract with the city for $5,000.

George Kessler's credentials were the right mix of academic pedigree, cosmopolitan experience, and native Dallas knowledge. He was born in Germany, had spent part of his youth in Dallas, and was educated in landscape design in Europe. He had worked in New York City developing parks, was the landscape architect of the St. Louis World's Fair, and had a national reputation.[39] Despite having only spent a few years in Dallas as a child, boosters claimed him as a local, but they also knew they'd brought in the "big guns." *The Dallas Morning News* called his return to the town of his youth an "epochal event.[40]

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[35] "Wide Benefits Seen for State in River Work: Reclamation Preliminary to Canalization Plan to Gulf," *The Dallas Morning News*
[36] Quote article from DMN
[37] "City Growth Depends on Three Conditions,"
[38] Fairbanks, 48; Hazel 34
[39] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 26.
[40] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 26.

George Kessler played the visionary role very well. Called a "born diplomat," Kessler spoke eloquently and frequently to the newspapers and was repeatedly quoted about the future of Dallas, his name appearing daily in the newspaper. Kessler appealed to the need for better urban planning, "Within another quarter of a century, Dallas will be a city of half a million people, provided only that the underlying basis of the growth of the city is kept sound by proper planning now—not only city planning, but county road planning, railroad planning, and all the rest." He offered clues as to his purposes with the levees, even though it had yet to be memorialized in an actual *plan,*

> "The plan to levee the course of the Trinity River through the city and reclaim much land that is now underdeveloped is one of the most important. In this connection, I wish to point out a very definite danger that confronts Dallas—that of developing two separate cities, Dallas and Oak Cliff, as distinct and unlike as are the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn....due to the great undeveloped area in the Trinity bottoms."[41]

His overarching goal was to create a "homogenous whole" not a fragmented city. "That can only be done by eliminating the barrier of the river bottoms by leveeing and canalizing the channel and developing the land that is now unused."[42]

The Kessler Plan for Dallas

Kessler's City Plan for Dallas was completed in February of 1912. Kessler first addressed the Board of Commissioners and Board of Park Commissioners, justifying the need for planning: "The need for a city plan would not become evident unless both the commercial and social life of the community seriously felt the hampering effects of the existing natural and artificial barriers preventing rational expansion of business and residential districts." [43] He was speaking to the business audience that had commissioned him—civic elite, boosters, and investors. The plan wastes no time identifying the Trinity as a barrier: "the two dominant factors governing the direction of growth of Dallas and alike hampering it are the Texas and Pacific Railroad right-of-way along the north and the Trinity River plus the several railroads now occupying the left bank of the river on the western border of the business district.[44]

Curiously, for a planner whose work was characterized in the mode of City, the City Plan for Dallas diverges from this mode.[45] Its core recommendations were not for parks or public spaces, but for a transportation

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[41] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911.
[42] "Zoning and Levee Plans Are Urged: George Kessler Impressed with Need for Action Without Delay." *The Dallas Morning News.* November 10, 1921.
[43] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911.
[44] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911. Page 7.
[45] *The News* even called him "an engineer."

network and systems fit for a growing city. Unlike the Boston Fens, Kessler did not seek to recreate the look of a "natural floodplain." "George Kessler's vision," *The News* recalled, "was for an expanding Dallas."[46] The main recommendations are ordered as follows: proposed levees are the biggest ticket item, followed by railroads, Union Station, freight terminals, a civic center, grade crossings, street openings, parks, parkways, and boulevards, and lastly, playgrounds. Perhaps not surprisingly, given who hired him, the engineering aspects of the plan were prioritized over all others. "The building of levees in the Trinity bottoms and the straightening of the river, providing a 1,200 foot wide basin extending from the mouth of Turtle Creek southward approximately three and one-half to four miles, thereby securing flood protection to the entire city. Such a basin would become the city harbor for the Trinity River canal and loading facilities along its banks would include municipally owned railroad tracks, facilitating freight distribution. The filling of the low lands outside and adjacent to these levees would provide additional room for railroad terminals and switching properties."[47] Rather than adapt to the natural processes, the Kessler plan sought to subdue them.[48]

Kessler's topographical study concludes that the city had already "unconsciously and along natural lines begun to segregate its lands for varying uses." From the lower river lands to the highest residential areas was a rise of only 225 feet. "The lower lands," he assured, "are at present subject to overflow, but, as will be shown later, this can be overcome in a large measure by the building of proper levees, the improvement of the flood channel, and the filling of the remaining low ground."[49]

Kessler shaped a bold, visionary plan for the city. "Dallas could have whatever it wanted if it wanted it badly enough," he said.[50] Perhaps the most radical proposal was not the elaborate levee system, but the physical displacement of the river, away from the CBD. He proposed moving the present channel of the River to the west and to "confine it there by means of levees approximately 25 feet high and 1200 feet apart." Kessler argued that this would improve the connection between Oak Cliff to the West and Dallas and the CBD to the east, "The river, instead of remaining upon the western border of the city and a constant menace to it,

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[46] "The Kessler Vision"
[47] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911. Page 9.
[48] In contrast to what Anne Whiston Spirn describes as one of the most valuable lessons of civic improvements in the era of City Beautiful was that they acknowledged that "Environmental problems provoked by the conflict between human activities and natural processes were resolved by adapting to those processes rather than by trying to subdue them." Spirn in *Uncommon Ground*, 307.
[49] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911.
[50] "Trinity River Levee Is Coming: Reclamation of Bottoms in City Will Be Great for Dallas." *The Dallas Morning News*. January 2, 1921.

would, in such a case, become nearly the center of a great city, with Oak Cliff and West Dallas integral parts instead of segregated units." [51]

In suggesting that the Trinity be straightened and encased by tall levees, it is easy to see why Kessler thought this would strengthen the spine of the City. He also cautioned that Dallas not mistakenly encourage new commerce to develop opposite the River, in Oak Cliff. From these words, it is clear that Kessler sought to create a homogenous, more unified whole, but also to make sense of a visually incoherent space. If the River could be moved, and its former bottomlands categorized and developed for new commercial purposes, the plan would have added significant value to the city form and function. "Not only does such a project suggest itself from a utilitarian standpoint, but, as well, from the standpoint of enhancing the attractiveness of the river as a resort."[52] As *The News* later recalled, referring to Kessler's vision, "The city planner can not think in terms of narrow interest. George Kessler's vision was for an expanding Dallas."

When Kessler submitted the Plan for the City of Dallas, the advocacy campaign was already well under way. As *The News* summarized Kessler's view on the river, "The Trinity River bottom, with its wide floor area, together with the railroads on its left bank, strongly illustrates the barriers surrounding the business district of Dallas."[53] These words would have concerned the business community and any doubters among them. Never to be "enclosed" from the frontier of opportunity, they rallied and organized. As historian Douglas Fairbanks describes, Dallas established the political infrastructure to give "organizational expression to the City Beautiful movement" and to serve "as an important clearinghouse for planning and other city beautiful measures."[54] They organized a Levee District *prior* to breaking ground on any levees. Not surprisingly, the group charged with exploring the levee proposals reported that a flood like that of 1908 was bound to recur, "the waters of the river would extend up Elm Street to Murphy Street, and only by the levee system proposed can such a danger be obviated," they urged.[55] Failure to build a levee system would mean catastrophe:

> "West Dallas would be absolutely cut off from communication with the balance of the city; the Dallas Power and Light Company plant would be put out of commission; the Oak Cliff water plant would be flooded out; the first floor of the Union Station would be under water, and a great number

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[51] George E. Kessler, "A City Plan for Dallas." Published Report. Dallas: Dallas Park Board, 1911. Page 11.
[52] "Plans of Kessler for River Bottom." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 20, 1912.
[53] "Plans of Kessler for River Bottom." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 20, 1912.
[54] Fairbanks, "The Great Divide," 26.
[55] "Trinity River Levee Is Coming: Reclamation of Bottoms in City Will Be Great for Dallas." *The Dallas Morning News.* January 2, 1921.

> of the business houses within the district would have water in their first floors, and every large building within the district would be subjected to damage."[56]

In the years following, the plan for leveeing the river would meet many challenges. World War I and concerns over costs "blunted enthusiasm" for the reclamation plan.[57] The plan fell stagnant for the next eight years. The newspapers and leaders did not give up the vision, but little action was taken. Local voices abhorred the stagnating politics that undermined the "holistic" approach that Kessler's plan called for. As the planning writer for the *News,* K.K. Hooper said in 1918, "It is my candid opinion that with two bit politicians in authority in city hall we never will get anywhere. With real big men at the head of government we ought to be able to accomplish really big things. I am convinced that the city hall crowd has no conception of the importance of city planning and I do not believe that they have the mental caliber to ever appreciate it. I am in favor of ousting the whole bunch and putting in a city manager under the direction of some of the big men of our city." [58] Local government was fragmented and siloed; they failed to pass the needed bond package, and a series of turf battles ensued. If the comprehensive nature of the plan could not be afforded, civic elite would see to it that their own interests were protected, lobbying for particular parts of the plan that addressed their geographies of concern. They believed in Kessler's words, that "Dallas could have whatever it wanted if it wanted badly enough."[59]

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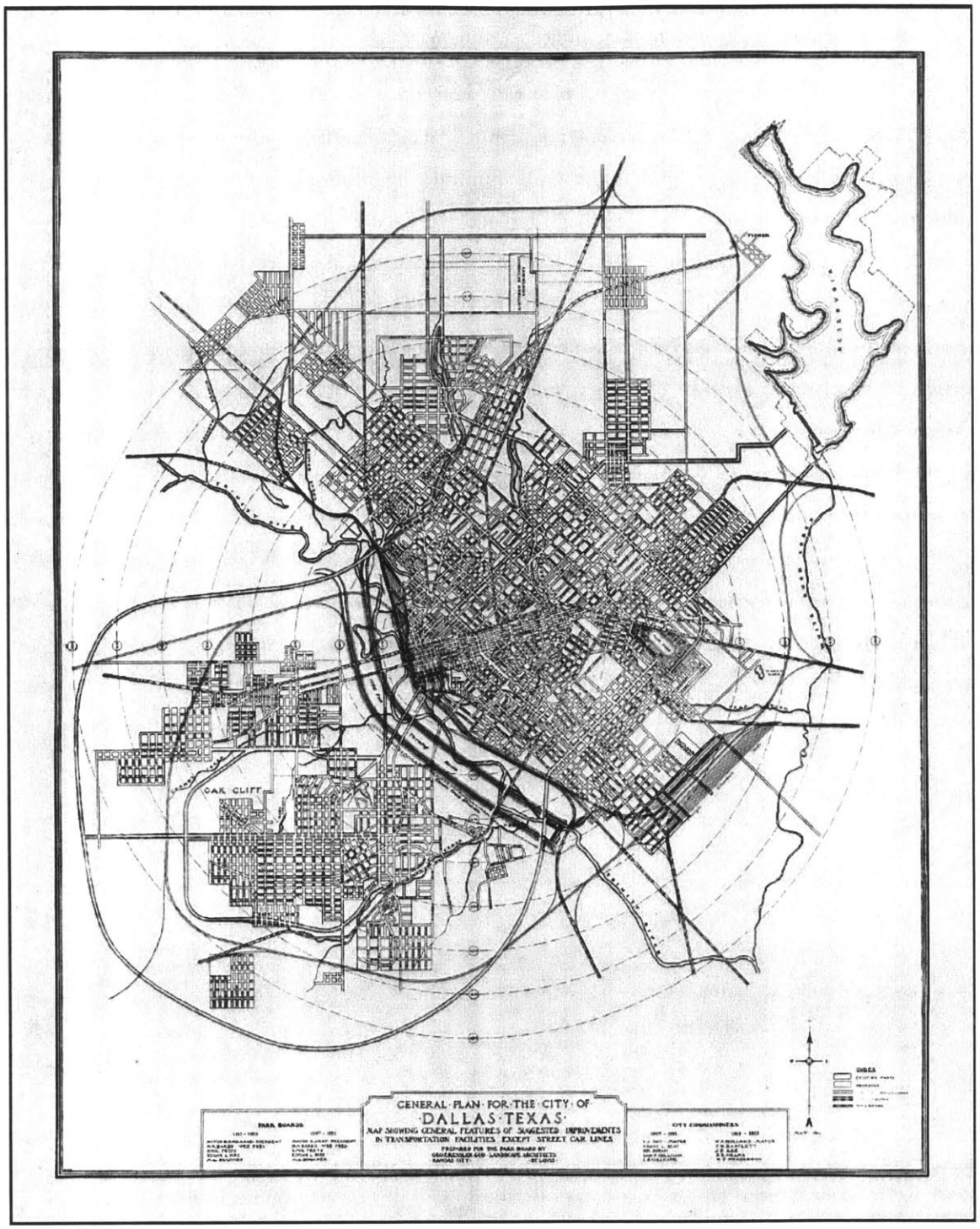
[56] "Trinity River Levee Is Coming: Reclamation of Bottoms in City Will Be Great for Dallas." *The Dallas Morning News.* January 2, 1921.
[57] Fairbanks, "The Great Divide," 48.
[58] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 30-31.
[59] "Trinity River Levee Is Coming: Reclamation of Bottoms in City Will Be Great for Dallas." *The Dallas Morning News.* January 2, 1921.



Map depicting Trinity River canalization as part of Kessler Plan, 1911.
Plan accessed through Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

Revisiting the Kessler Plan

Not until 1919 did the city revisit the Trinity levee project proposed by Kessler. In that year, they invited George Kessler back to Dallas to update the plan, with particular emphasis on the portions related to the Trinity Bottoms and river reclamation, to reopen 5,500 acres of river bottomland.[60] The revised plan emphasized reconnecting the City, dealing with the "great divide caused by the meandering Trinity River that separated Oak Cliff and West Dallas from the rest of the city through moving and straightening the river, building levees, and constructing additional viaducts over the tamed river."[61] To push this agenda, civic leaders formed the Dallas Property Owners Association (DPOA). Their efforts, however, were thwarted due to costs and public opposition. Seeking a new plan, they formed the Kessler Plan Association (KPA), led by George Bannerman Dealey. The KPA did what other planning efforts had not previously done: reaching out to citizens "with various geographical and political affiliations" to join the KPA Board. The civic elite's desire to see the levee project was so strong that "the leveeing of the Trinity River would never be put over by a sectional organization," said civic leader John Surrat.[62]

Editorials flowed into the news, ridiculing the Trinity levee doubters, "Occasionally one still meets a man who ridicules the idea of Trinity navigation as preposterous and who solemnly declares there is not water enough in the river at Dallas to float an alligator."[63] Many city organizations were created with the goal of realizing the Trinity River components of the Kessler Plan. Including the Levee Improvement District, the Canal Commission, the City Plan ad Improvement League, the Kessler Plan Association. The Army Corps of Engineers issued a number of studies and reports about the feasibility of the canalization and it became the most widely studied and discussed vision in Dallas's history. Boosters spoke with absolute certainty about the viability of the project, calling it "entirely feasible," with "no engineering difficulties expected."[64] A bond program was devised to fund the levee project and the City formed a new levee district in 1926. Each attempt to fund the project resulted in strong political tensions, culminating in a political stalemate about how to raise taxes.

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[60] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 50.
[61] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 50.
[62] Fairbanks, *For the City,* 50.
[63] "Improving Texas Waterways: Canalization of the Trinity Is Not a Chemical Project." *The Dallas Morning News,* May 7, 1909.
[64] "For the Trinity River: A Valuable Map Being Prepared by the United States Engineers." *The Dallas Morning News.* October 15, 1901.

In 1928, construction began on the floodway improvement portion of the project, employing 1,000 men for a duration of 700 working days. The Army Corps of Engineers reported that "up to 15 draglines, working 24 hours a day," moving the "22 million cubic yards of dirt" needed to build the levees. They successfully moved the river a half mile west. It must have felt triumphant. Floods could no longer stop their city's growth and progress. The people basked in what they believed was a successful taming of the Trinity. They set their sights on a gateway to the Gulf.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frontier of Failure

By the late 1920s, the river was far from its original bottoms. Straightened and channeled toward the western edge of its original floodplain, its land had been cut and filled to embank the river with levees and was stripped barren of its native hardwood forest. The city built bridges across the river that would accommodate large barges, and began construction on a large turning basin. The new levees blocked the old drainage system, "so that water ran off into the hydraulic fill area, making it useless to reclaim unless moved under the levees into the river." However, with the onset of the Great Depression, operations and maintenance of the levees and TBD were seriously impacted.[1] The city estimated another $1.1 million to build a new pressure storm sewer and the threat of higher taxes, at the height of the Great Depression infuriated citizens. An angry crowd of 1,000 people protested the tax increase, even though it was critical to the sale of bonds for the levee district. By the mid-1930s, the Trinity River levees had "polarized the city," both literally and figuratively.[2]

The citizens of Dallas had been promised a navigable canal to the Gulf of Mexico. Government engineers had boasted it was an uncomplicated project. Captain Ritche, and teams of United States Engineers inspected, mapped, and studied the River, claiming there would be "no engineering difficulties to be overcome in the work," and it could "be made navigable in less than three years."[3] The Army Corps' work to "turn the river into a freeway for barges" in these years has been criticized as overly-aggressive, called "an obsession it has been pursuing on virtually every large river in the country."[4] As Marc Reisner describes the ambitious attempts of the Army Corps at controlling rivers in these years:

> "The Corps drains channels and wetlands—it has ruined more wetlands than anyone in history...Its range of activities is breathtaking: the Corps dams rivers, deepens rivers, straightens rivers, ripraps rivers, builds bridges across rivers, builds huge navigation locks and dams, builds groins on rivers and beaches, builds hatcheries, builds breakwaters, builds piers...[5]

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[1] "Trinity River Corridor Project Chronology." U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2010 http://www.swf-usace.army.mil/Portals/47/docs/PAO/DF/PDF/Dallas_Floodway_Timeline_1908-Patrons, The Great Divide).pdf.

[3] "For the Trinity River: A Valuable Map Being Prepared by the United States Engineers." *The Dallas Morning News.* October 15, 1901.

[4] Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water.* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 134.

[5] Reisner, *Cadillac Desert, 173.*

Congress was complicit in the vision, too, devoting financial support to the canalization efforts and supporting the military's construction arm Trinity Farmers had been promised "enhanced price of their products consequent on the cheapened freight rates" and water transport that would be open "year's end to year's end."[6] City officials pointed out that the territory that would benefit from the canal extended far beyond Dallas, encompassing "270,000 square miles in which live 5,716,000 people, and which produces in excess of $2,000,000,000 in new wealth annually.[7] The attitude that this was Dallas's destiny remained, as the *News* reported:

> "When the railroads of Texas began their inland march, there was no available tonnage wherewith to justify their expenditures of vast sums. There was no available tonnage to justify State and Federal subsidies in the form of lands and cash and credits and grants. But the railroad empire builders, and the statesmen who provided the land and credit wherewith the builders built, looked beyond the narrow confines of the present. They knew that in the wilderness the railroads conquered men and women would build towns and cities and put the plow to virgin acres; they knew that only by building beyond the needs of the immediate present could the promise of the future be realized."[8]

Dispelling the Myth

Decades of boosterism, bond programs, and engineering studies had kept the myth of a navigable Trinity River alive. But this myth was only viable in these years because of a greater, underlying myth of *unbridled growth*. Perhaps inherent in the western mindset, this collective notion that men and women of the frontier equated to destiny was also bound up with capitalism and the growth. As Donald Cowan describes, "finance was quickly at the heart of the Dallas myth, and a daring, bold financing it turned out to be."[9] Commercialism was at the core of how Dallas had come to be. City builders had always tried to "build beyond the needs of the present to achieve the future."[10] Despite a flat, open prairie, Dallas was never without geographic constraints. But in building a boundless city—no zoning, no laws regarding private development—they consequently created a new set of physical constraints in these years.

The Trinity River was now a solid, straight spine, with hard edges abutting the downtown. Now labeled as a river of *transport,* the waters upstream of the TBD were depleted by unregulated growth and development.

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[6] George Gray, "Conquering Nature for Dallas' Growth." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 9, 1931.
[7] Perhaps this was yet another curious case of exaggeration of the effects of a canal. The Dallas and Fort Worth areas combined contained only 530,000 persons at this time. Carl Mosig, "Trinity River Canalization Is Feasbile Engineering Project, Army Study Shows." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 8, 1935.
[8] Carl Mosig, "Trinity River Canalization Is Feasible Engineering Project, Army Study Shows." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 8, 1935.
[9] Gale Thomas, ed. *Imagining Dallas.* Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture, 1982. Page 7.
[10] Carl Mosig, "Trinity River Canalization Is Feasible Engineering Project, Army Study Shows." *The Dallas Morning News.* August 8, 1935.

Most months of the year, the Trinity could literally not float a boat. The TBD was a wide swath of open, graded land in the shadow of the CBD, one of Dallas's many "non-communicating fragments."[11] The former river bottoms—that boosters had prized as prime developable land—became home to only more marginal, industrial uses. The city had successfully "reclaimed" 10,533 acres—almost 17 square miles—of land but the these lands failed to increase in value as they had hoped. Commercial uses began to migrate away from the CBD, as Kessler had warned.

Like other outside experts before them, the Army Corps of Engineers departed. The Port of Dallas was a failure, the canalization of the river a massive defeat of engineering and planning. In moving and straightening the river, Dallas was left with a wide, desolate, muddy river channel embanked by two tall levees. In the TBD, city builders again had a tabula rasa. Ambition was constrained by economic realities.

It was 1935, like many cities during the Great Depression, Dallas pursued a jobs project. The city used funds from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) project to create a western automotive gateway to downtown Dallas and the central business district. This gateway funneled Bryan's original three streets—Main, Commerce, and Elm, through a triple underpass beneath the railroad. The underpass occupied a sloping open space along the original riverbank, which flanked the Dallas County Courthouse descending west towards the river. Adjacent to the courthouse and overlooking the TBD, the city planned a public park upon land donated by Sarah Cockrell, a businesswoman and philanthropist. At the height of the Great Depression, the park was built "as a symbol of optimism," replete with marble columns surrounding a green sloping park and water features, all in the Art Deco style.[12] Dallas now had its automotive "gateway" to the downtown and the TBD had its first formally planned public space, Dealey Plaza, both emblematic of the planning mode of the time.[13]

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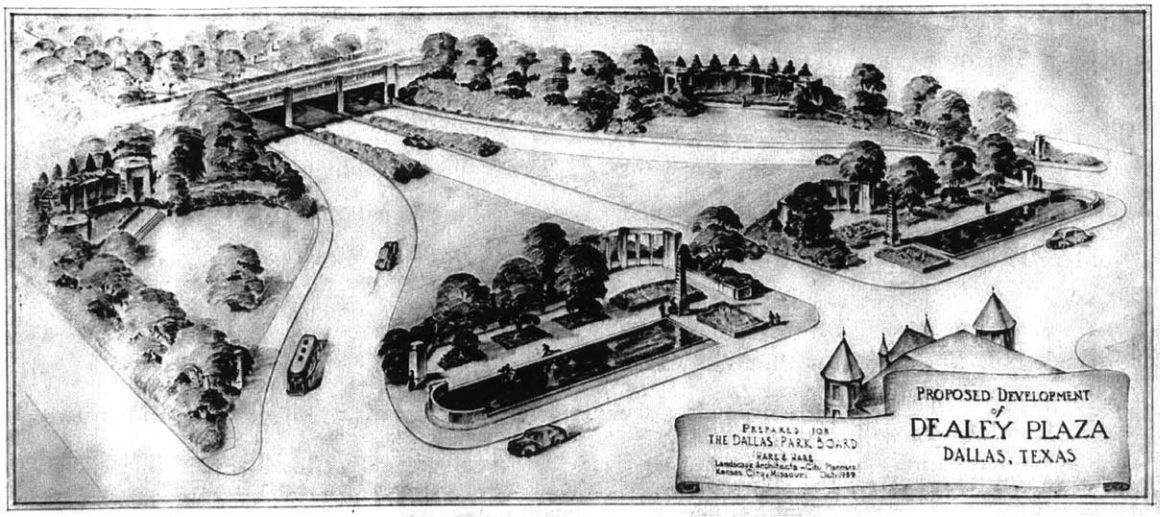
[11] Graff, *Myth,* xxiii.

[12] Jimmy Stamp, "The Architectural History of the JFK Assassination Site."*Smithsonian Magazine*, November 21, 2013. http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-architectural-history-of-the-jfk-assassination-site-180947802/?no-ist .

[13] Dealey Plaza was named for George Bannerman Dealey, editor of *The Dallas Morning News* and influential citizen. Dealey also owned property in the TBD.



Rendering of proposed Dealey Plaza, 1931.
Courtesy of Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library

Viewed together, these two projects offer insights into Dallas's early relationship with the automobile. The road and park projects in the TBD also represent the earliest example of two competing views of the TBD. Whereas the park serves as a setting for human interaction and reflection, the triple-underpass served an expanding city and the increased mobility of people across urban space. Ironically, this new mobility served to erode the vibrancy of the CBD and set a new trajectory for the TBD. Aided by the automobile, the subsequent years proceeded with the requisite narratives of white flight, suburbanization, and ambitious highway development. Booster visions of a gateway to a thriving CBD dissolved alongside the public use of Dealey Plaza.

The Bartholemew Plan

A lesser-known and referenced plan for Dallas was devised in the 1940s. The City hired Harland Bartholomew of Hare and Hare Landscape Architects to develop a city plan. He designed a series of parkways and highways including a central expressway that would run from the Trinity River to the city center. At the northern tip of the TBD, the highway swung to the east, bypassing the western side of the CBD. The plan did nothing to address the TBD itself, emphasizing beautiful landscaped parkways and new entrances to the city, miles from the TBD.[14] Rather than design a series of parkways that would enable an appreciation of the Trinity River, the roads became a new barrier to access the River.

[14] Dallas Visions for Community, 23.

Tragedy in the TBD

Of course, the American public came to know Dealey Plaza at a most horrific time in the nation's—and Dallas's—history: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. As the presidential motorcade descended down the original slope of the Trinity River, the First Lady spoke her last words to her husband: "It will be cooler in the shade," she said, referring to the Triple Underpass of Commerce, Main, and Elm Streets. The moment that followed would shape the next fifty years of Dallas's history. The TBD was the world's stage for the most shocking event in American history.

When the shock and investigations resided, Dealey Plaza and the TBD remained untouched. The Kennedy memorial was not built there, but rather two blocks away on land donated by the County. New crowds came daily—tourists and conspiracy theorists—filling the space with *new myths.* Against the backdrop of grim reality, the TBD now imprisoned Dallas's psyche as a space of hate.

A growing sense of urgency to reverse the image of Dallas inspired the Dallas Citizens Council to produce the "Goals for Dallas" vision plan, spurring developments across the city, but none in the TBD. Dallas got a new city hall, a convention center, a new central library, and the beginnings of a new international airport. Stanley Marcus, well-known Dallas entrepreneur and civic leader, captured the sentiment of the period following the assassination: "we are still a young city and much of our time and energy has been devoted to physical growth which has been phenomenal. Now the time has come when more attention needs to be paid to the quality of our endeavors than the size of them."[15] He cautioned the city not to be preoccupied with its tarnished image, "Dallas should forget about its 'civic image' as such. The best public relations come from doing good things and by not doing bad things."[16] Dallas would have to prove that it was not backwards or ugly, but the city could not overcome its tarnished reputation in the TBD.

Years of Concrete/Dallas Imprisons Itself in the TBD

It has been said that we get the cities that we think we deserve. In the years following the Kennedy assassination, the TBD was degraded, forgotten, except for Dealey Plaza which remained, as one researcher described, "frozen in time as if awaiting for a final pardon."[17] Perhaps there was a collective desire to forget

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[15] Stanley Marcus, "What's Right with Dallas?" *The Dallas Morning News*, January 1, 1964. Stanley Marcus Collection, DeGolyer Library, SMU.
[16] Stanley Marcus, "What's Right with Dallas?" *The Dallas Morning News*, January 1, 1964. Stanley Marcus Collection, DeGolyer Library, SMU.
[17] Alice Brooks Davis. "JKF Memorial + Dealey Plaza." Massachusetts Institute of Technology, May 12, 2014.

that November day. Optimism for the future of Dallas no longer was centered in the TBD, or the downtown area, generally. To Dallasites and outsiders alike, the space was stigmatized within the broader structure of the city. The canalization plan failed at the polls in the 1970s and Dallasites turned their back on the TBD.

The Trinity Bottoms

There is a wealth of academic literature on the role of urban bottom lands" in cities.[18] Applying theories of classification of topography and wealth in cities, one can gleam insights into how the TBD was perceived spatially in these years. The low-lying areas around the Trinity had been called the "bottoms" for over 100 years, but in moving the river west, the City had expanded the bottoms, unveiling the original river bottom in the TBD. It was muddy, sloping, and determined unfit for non-industrial uses. Promises of park space and quality commercial uses here had never come to pass.

By 1970, the TBD was the site of several incomplete urban interventions for flood protection and sewer overflows as well a road and highway system that further divided the structure of the TBD. Each was a major urban project in its own right. In adding layer upon layer of urban interventions, the TBD became a new kind of nexus point—one of distinctively *urban*, not natural systems—a mix of roads, walls, drainage, fences, and marginalized industrial uses built over several technological eras. Together, these further stigmatized the river in the minds of locals, most of whom had no purpose for going there. These were still alluvial lands, and Dallas was still a flat city, with few distinguishing topographical features. The highest ground was, in fact, the levees, which created an uneven physical landscape in the TBD, and, in effect served as a physical and visual barrier to accessing the river. The levees were "high ground" among otherwise flat, sunken former river bottoms in the TBD.

Immediately east and west of the levees Moreover, the Trinity was dry many months of the year, captured upstream for urban water usage. Thus, the levees and the blank land between and around them created a visual landscape of emptiness—something was missing. The width of the levees implied they were home to a broad, strong river where there was often none visible. The height of the bridges suggested that barges could pass there, but no boat had been there in decades. Driving across the bridges inspired by Kessler, one found the western side of the River to evoke the severe economic unevenness that Kessler had warned of. The river bottoms lacked vegetation and were either muddy or extremely dry most of the year. There were no upscale

[18] See Anne Whiston Spirn, Irving Allen Lewis, and Larry Millet's work on urban bottoms.

"waterfront" destinations. If the Trinity lacked all of these assets associated with typical urban "waterfronts" and rivers, what kind of a river was it?

The city pursued new projects that further compounded the stigmatization of the TBD. At the edge of the eastern levee overlooking the river, the county built Dawson State Jail in the late 1970s. This large, brutalist concrete block has been called a "dystopian Lego project" and remains a curious visual beacon at the tip of Main Street. One writer describes it: "the functional viability of the county courthouse was dependent on its symbolic visibility; the idea that the justice it served was both present and accountable to the population."[19] In completing this prison complex, the city had strayed far from the optimism of the original Dealey Plaza and Kessler's visions for the Trinity River. Referring to its architect, George Dahl, "one does not need to vilify Dahl to read in the scope of his firm's work a deterioration in the relationship between justice and the built landscape."[20] Industrial uses continued to occupy the TBD, many lured there by city incentives. It is also emblematic of the time: in many ways, the city was closing itself off from the Trinity River. They constructed miles of overlapping highways in the original river bottoms of the TBD. These layers of highway lanes allowed for easy commuting to the newer northern suburbs. The highways further separated the downtown from the River and marginalized areas to the west, which were occupied almost entirely by poor communities of color.

Dallas successfully snuffed out remnants of the original natural river bottom, stitching it with concrete in every direction: highways, roads, levee reinforcements, drainage systems, and retaining walls. Walls and fences came to dominate the visual landscape of the TBD, a metaphorical graveyard of planning ideas past. The River continued its cyclical flooding patterns, never full enough to support the barges that boosters once dreamed it could float. In concrete forms, we see both freedom and its opposite: the highways once intended to move people quickly across the metroplex was now embroiled with traffic. In these ways, the City continued to create physical, psychological, and visual barriers to the TBD.

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[19] Mark Lamster, "Dallas Needs to Heal the Broken Relationship Between the Built City and Its Promise of Justice." *The Dallas Morning News*. October 3, 2014. http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/sunday-commentary/20141003-mark-lamster-dallas-needs-to-heal-the-broken-relationship-between-the-built-city-and-its-promise-of-justice.ece.
[20] Ibid.

The TBD as Pressure Relief Valve

In many ways, politics, planning, and engineering had all failed to sustain positive public purposes. These were grim years for the Trinity River, but they also show the great degree to which the city, and not private interests, exercised control over shaping TBD. Public Access to the River and the TBD was severely restricted by the city through a system of fences, walls, and highways. The city in these years turned its back on *physical needs,* focusing instead on a TBD that would solve the urban dilemmas of the day. To relieve the pressure of a growing population on the sewage system, a combined sewage overflow system was instituted with outflows to the Trinity River. To accommodate the need for prison space during the popularized "war on drugs," the city built an elaborate system of county, state jails and associated functions sprung up nearby—bail bondsmen, low-cost attorneys, ample daytime parking lots. To prepare for a growing metroplex, the city invested heavily in road infrastructure. In an attempt to draw capital back to the CBD, the city built a large arena complex and infinite parking spaces. The city shaped a TBD where physical access was neither feasible nor desirable. The TBD had become a space of containment.

However physically restricted and contained the TBD was, visual access remained: the tall bridges over the Trinity preserved the visual links between the water and the TBD. With visual access still intact in these years, the TBD gave way to new experiences and interpretive *access* to the river. Perhaps more in the 1970s and 1980s than other periods considered in this thesis, the TBD was layered with many meanings and failures. Its stagnant condition offered clues to city priorities and self-consciousness of history. Though most Dallasites were *not looking,* a few were, and like others before them, they were both dismayed and inspired with new visions in the TBD.

Depiction of the downtown Dallas prison complex in the Trinity Banks District, by Paloma Rodriguez. Image courtesy of The Dallas Morning News, 2014

CHAPTER FIVE

Reimagining the Trinity Banks District

Kevin Lynch contends: "We might assert that open space is the most impressive feature of all in the cityscape."[21] His is a clever turn of phrase suggesting that open space is not only awe-inspiring, but also actively impresses itself in the mind of the beholder. The openness of the TBD had impressed itself on the imagination and vision of Dallas's early founders. Imagination—the kind that John Neely Bryan and George Kessler brought to Dallas—had been largely missing in Dallas's planning and physical form for several decades. This was most evident in the TBD in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Three decades of enclosing the River with highways. Dallas engorged its growth machine, pursued highways and urban renewal projects that destroyed the fabric of urban neighborhoods. This trajectory strengthened the power of certain groups while simultaneously disempowering city planners, relegating them to technocratic status. Architects, not planners, had become the de facto voice for the urban fabric and public space, deploring most everything the city was doing throughout the 1970s.[22] City agencies had turned their back on the urban core, were sorely lacking vision, and in financial distress.

Enter, a New Civic Leadership

In the 1970s and 80s, a new civic leadership emerged in Dallas. A curious blend of corporate leaders, philanthropists, oil money, and arts patrons had long-comprised the oligarchy operating the city in the "Dallas Way." Dallas was not a small city, but it was widely acknowledged that decisions were made under an oligarchy of sorts, with private interests playing a huge role in local decision-making, especially related to growth. Historian Harvey Graff calls this part of the "Dallas Way."[23] There was not a politician or city planner among them, but arguably many were gifted diplomats, fundraisers, and businesspeople. They spoke many languages—the arts, real estate, religion. Whereas some would credit the physical plans for a renewed interest in the Trinity and TBD, this thesis argues that myth and vision again came first, paving the way for change in the physical form of the city.

Since the 1980s, this group of private citizens has successfully expanded notions of what the TBD could be, not only as a physical space, but also as the space it occupies in the minds of Dallasites. They formed groups like the Texas Committee on the Humanities, the Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture, the Center for

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[21] Lynch, *Image of the City,* 195.
[22] Insert still from "The Walls are Rising," Dallas AIA film.
[23] Graff, *Myth,* 35-75.

Civic Leadership, the Pegasus Foundation, the Trinity Trust and several other organizations concerned with issues affecting quality of life in Dallas. Their motivations are highly differentiated, but for the past several decades, they have been tied together in a long-term philosophical struggle over the future of the Trinity River.

An Appeal to the Humanities

A renewed dialogue about the Trinity River began, in earnest, in the 1980s among this civic elite. This dialogue did not begin among city planners, or a city department—both lacked agency in the Dallas polity. Rather, it was The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture that began to talk about a new future for the Trinity River. Led by Gail Thomas, this group set out in 1980 to "study seriously the life of the city and to provide a center of learning open to imagination." Their stated purpose was to create a shared "understanding of the major values of Western Civilization, discovered through careful examination of the Greek, European, and American political and cultural traditions,"–which would strengthen public responsibility." In these early years of the organization's formation, they offered broad strokes for Dallas's future, one in which Dallas would, they hoped, "recover our connection with the city" and "attempt to recover a language which contains our urban experience...a language of imagining, a poetics—a way of seeing that reconnects, remembers, revivifies."[24]

What was this group trying to reconnect, remember and revive in Dallas? They were searching for the soul of the city to reconnect its citizens to the city. As Donald Cowan implores in his essay "Imagining Dallas," "The City is worth looking at, worth knowing. Something that lies very deep within us, our psyche, our soul, identifies with a place and a community."[25] These words may seem obvious enough to us today, but to Dallasites who had long turned their backs on the central city, in the 1980s, these words must have seemed curious.

How does a group of citizens seek out the soul of a city? They opened the dialogue by evoking Aristotle: "The soul never thinks without an image" and "the image, then, would come first, followed by thinking and planning." *Image first, planning last.* Their task was not to rationalize and solve Dallas's problems. Rather, the impulse was towards imagination, first. The Dallas Institute published essays, lectures, and thought papers by

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[24] "Imagining Dallas" xi
[25] Cowan, *"Imagining Dallas,"* 2.

over 75 authors on behalf of the Dallas Institute for the Humanities. These earlier writings in the late 1980s echo similar distrust of urban planning and "managers,"[26] which Gail Thomas describes best:

> "Imagining has to do with making connections, with remembering, with apprehending, with reflecting. It takes courage to imagine one must "let go" of preconceived ideas and allow new forms to develop. At a time when objective directed thinking prevails, when 'planners,' 'managers,' and 'directors' chart the course of our lives using goals and objectives, and these procedures failing, seeking the visions of 'mystics' and 'seers,' imagination offers a middle ground."[27]

This new civic leadership recognized imagination as a vast intellectual territory that could improve the city's image and form. *Imagination*, *vision*, and *recovery* were core themes of the publications and discussions. At first, the dialogue was very abstracted and academic. However, in the course of their dialogue and thinking about design and city form, they did, indeed stumble on Dallas's lost soul—it was the Trinity River. By 1990, their charge was to connect imagination and vision to the river itself, at the heart of the city.

Bold New Visions for the TBD

The experiences of the new civic leadership in Dallas polity had proven their ability and influence to affect change there. The TBD—though they generally refer to it as the Trinity Corridor—is a recurring theme in their publications and dialogues throughout the 1980s and 1990s. There are many reasons for the Trinity's lingering hold on their imagination: the more philosophical among them deplore it as the city's most noticeable and ugly reminder of environmental fragmentation, aesthetic deficiency, and spatial, racial and ethnic divisions. Others see a flooding and sewage problem. To others still, a real estate opportunity. Others imagine a road that better connects north and south Dallas than the existing freeways. At the same time, however, the Trinity River and TBD stand out more in the minds of this civic elite than for most Dallasites who have ignored the Trinity for years.

These influential Dallasites called for a different look at the role of nature in the city: "Dallas has sometimes perceived itself as thriving here in spite of nature. Yet nature is a fundamental component of distinguished American cities: the Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, the Rock Creek Parkway in Washington, D.C., and

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[26] This is an attitude that was with many other cities that had grown up during urban renewal in the 1960s. Thomas Campanella describes the roots of this attitude as the "great cultural shift that occurred in planning beginning in the 1960s. The seeds of discontent sown then brought forth new and needed growth, which nonetheless choked out three vital aspects of the profession — its *disciplinary identity, professional authority* and *visionary capacity.*" Campanella, Thomas. "Jane Jacobs and the Death and Life of American Planning."*Places Journal,* April 2011.

[27] Gale Thomas, ed. *Imagining Dallas.* Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture, 1982. Page 1.

Lakeshore Drive in Chicago are integral to those cities."[28] The Trinity River was a significant part of their discourse, and they expressed concerns as diverse as its damaged ecological conditions, better connectivity to its marginalized west side, and the challenge to replace industrial uses with more human-centric, if not profitable, ones. On a more philosophical level, Kevin Lynch's theory of "waste spaces" is also relevant to understanding their efforts. Like Lynch's counsel to planners in the face of change, theirs was a call to "accommodate it, to express it, to celebrate it"[29] As Gail Thomas stated in an interview, "Nobody has loved the Trinity River for a long time."

Love? Mythology? Were these the serious appeals of city-builders in Dallas? There has been little written about the role of this group and Gail Thomas in particular, in shaping the future of Dallas. Dallas has never had a reputation for progressive city planning or intellectualism. More frequently, Texas is often criticized as being proudly anti-intellectual, the city repeatedly living up to its reputation as a harbinger of bigotry, racism, and radical conservatism. Much to the dismay and shame of many Dallasites, all of this is unfortunately, accurate. However, it is only one way of making sense of more complex mix of actors. Some typically overlooked individuals—intellectuals, artists, and philanthropists—came from across the city to participate in articulating thoughtful agendas for Dallas's future. It was the beginning of a more pluralist dialogue, which would prove integral to reshaping the identity of the TBD in contemporary Dallas.

In 1998, these visions began to take shape as voters approved a $246 million bond referendum to fund ten years of planning and engineering in the TBD. The funds were intended to be used both for levee improvements, a new ten-mile toll highway inside the existing levee, man-made lakes within the levees, new bridges, and forestland improvements, and recreational facilities. The most important goal of this work, however, was flood control. Dallas again sought outside expertise to formulate these plans the Trinity River.

These early efforts were not without controversy. Mayor Laura Miller privately funded an effort to hault what was the beginning of a movement to place a toll road through the levees. With the help of Gale Thomas, Dallas hired Alex Krieger of the Harvard Graduate School of Design to produce the *Balanced Vision Plan.* The "balance" in this plan was intended to be giving people access to public park space in the Trinity River floodplain.

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[28] Pratt, *Dallas Visions for Community*, 28.
[29] Lynch, *City Sense and City Design,* ix.

The other aim of this plan was to solve Dallas's flooding problem and to reconnect the northern and southern parts of the city, to reestablish downtown as the city's economic and cultural core. The park versus road debate created a huge rift in Dallas polity that has lasted for almost ten years. In an interview, Alex Krieger stated, "the idea that through a road one can gain a substantial public space is hard for people to accept. There is a lot of skepticism."[30]

The Enduring Pegasus Myth

Dallas erected a large Pegasus in 1934 to celebrate the American Petroleum Institute's annual meeting. For years, it was a fixture of the downtown Dallas skyline. It was the enduring symbol of the Exxon Mobile Company, and most every Dallasite recognized it as such until it was removed in the 1990s. At midnight on December 31st, 1999, I was driving with my mom in downtown Dallas. The city's big New Year's event was the resurrection of the Pegasus atop the Magnolia hotel, overlooking the Trinity River and the TBD. We couldn't find parking, so we were in the car when the clock struck midnight. As we rounded the corner, near Dealey Plaza, I caught a glimpse of the restored Pegasus, shining bright red in the sky. I didn't think much of it—I wished I could have been in a city like New York, where I'd never been, for this big New Year's celebration.

Years later, during the course of this research, I learned a different story behind that Pegasus.
In an interview, a retired city planner and neighbor shared a fascinating story with me. "You know why they did that, right?" he said, referring to the restoration of the Pegasus. He relayed a story:

> "The myth of the Pegasus says that the tip of the hoof touches the ground and from that place, all of the muses spring—literature, the arts, etc. City leaders—led by Gail Thomas—paid to restore that Pegasus, and when the clock struck midnight, the shadow of the hoof touched upon the square. And that was supposed to signify the rebirth of the arts and humanities in Dallas. They've been pumping money into the arts here ever since—more than any other city during the economic downturn, too."

Whether this is true or not is difficult to know. It was a useful reminder that sometimes, objects belie a much more interesting and subversive mythology. More importantly, the Pegasus is a reminder of Dallas's enduring history of how top-down planning misses the mark.

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[30] Interview with Alex Krieger, March 12, 2015.

"Dallas Doesn't Want to be Known as a One-Horse Town"[31]

The Pegasus is both the genesis of the mythological muses, but it is also an enduring symbol of America's—and Dallas's love of oil. The physical Pegasus in Dallas is actually two Pegasus' in one: two identical horses, spaced 14 feet apart, each measuring 40 feet in length and 32 feet in height.

Dallas's "Flying Red Horse" looks like one horse from the ground, ***but it is actually two separate horses.*** There is a much deeper irony here: When Dallas leaders relit the Pegasus to symbolize the rebirth of art and humanities, the redesign of the Trinity Banks was at the top of their agenda. The era of wealthy arts patrons donating parks and civic spaces never ended in Dallas; these same actors have been trying to create a beautiful urban park in the TBD, hiring the world's best planners, designers, and architects. The other face of the Pegasus is *oil.* There is still a contingency in Dallas that sees the TBD and the River as a very different kind of frontier: a Toll Road. Dallas's preoccupation with the automobile persists and continues to pervade decision-making. The irony—perhaps more than the plans themselves—is imperative to understanding what is happening in the TBD. The contradictions are just telling as the grand visions. As planning historian Donald A. Krueckberg describes,

> "Life is full of contradictions. A history that ignores them ignores something central to the human condition. They are among the most valuable lessons of history, in that they provoke thinking and learning without presumptive prescription."[32]

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[31] Harold Wineburgh, the owner of the Textile Company is credited for having said "Dallas doesn't want to be known as a one horse town" in response to the question of why the Pegasus has two faces.

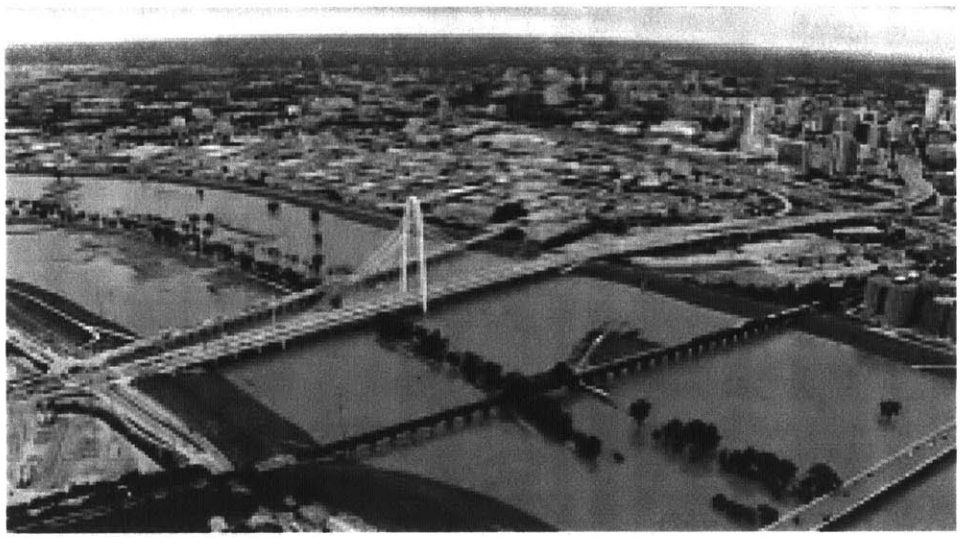
[32] Donald A. Krueckber, "Planning History's Mistakes," *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997): 269–79.

The Dallas Pegasus, 2012.
Photo Courtesy of The Dallas Morning News

CONCLUSION

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
— T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

The Texas sun could not return fast enough in May of 2015. After days of torrential rains, the Trinity River in Dallas swelled to over 43 feet, its seventh highest level in history. For days the rains tested the fortitude of the new levees and flood improvements in downtown, costly investments the city has been working on for almost a decade. There was some good news: storm water that once would have destroyed the city's core seemed successfully contained between the Trinity's levees, sparing the central business district and areas east of the river. Other areas of Dallas experienced flooding like they always do—homes and businesses in west Dallas were under water, lakes and reservoirs reached record highs. The area between the levees—a $609 million urban park in the making—was submerged.



Aerial photo of May 2015 floods beneath Santiago Calatrava Bridge.
Photo courtesy of Dallas Morning News.

For over a month, the Army Corps of Engineers struggled to strike balance between a managed river in the most visible areas—the commercial core—and overflowing lakes and reservoirs downstream. City officials applauded the new infrastructure and largely ignored the lowland flooding occurring across the city; Dallasites

have come to expect the annual flooding of these areas. A month later, the river was still in flood stage and considered unpredictable. All of this in a city that anticipates running out of water by 2025.

Such were the facts on the ground in May and June 2015. The events sharpened already tense disagreements about the future of the Trinity River. Dallas has been battling over two very different visions for the Trinity River. One faction has doggedly pursued the development of a road in between the Trinity's levees. Its downtown levees, they argue, are an ideal, linear, undeveloped swath of land for a new twelve lane, privately funded toll road connecting north and south Dallas. The other faction has worked since the 1990s to create the nation's largest urban park between the Trinity's levees, through philanthropy and fundraising. As designed, the two plans cannot co-exist. These contrasting visions for the urban spine of Dallas both reflect ambitious if not impractical visions for a river that refuses to be tamed. Yet, these are just two visions in a long history of debates over how to control the river for the benefit of the citizens of Dallas. Though they differ in scope and purpose, all of these visions share a common belief: that people can control what happens in the Trinity River floodplain, and therefore, anything is possible there. It is an intoxicating myth—that anything is possible in a particular space—harkening back to the original lure of the American west. For almost 175 years, Dallasites have owned this myth lock, stock, and barrel. The Trinity River is just one lens to explore this modus operands of the city.

As this thesis has explored, the myth of the tabula rasa is devoid of fact, history, or reality. But there is much to learn from a myth untethered to reality and the misshapen history it has provoked in the TBD. Every year when the seasonal floods reside, Dallasites remain lashed by a desire to control the river. Floodplain facts cannot drown out the myth that anything is possible between these levees. George's Kessler's words still ring true, "Dallas could have whatever it wanted if it wanted it badly enough." For almost 175 years, Dallas has squared up to pursue their vision in the tabula rasa; accelerate it, and raise it to an entirely new level. In Dallas, this tabula rasa is the myth, the vision, and the form in Trinity.

In 2015, the TBD is again a place of dilemmas and paradoxes, reminding us how we have used and abused it in the past, but offering no answers for how to adjudicate among the different visions for its future. The tabula rasa offers no such answers. In deciding what to build there, we face a now 100 year old-dilemma: park versus road; park with road; parkway-like road; or road to a park. The two faces of the Pegasus still rotating while Dallas awaits some version of a rebirth in the TBD. The myth of the tabula rasa lives on in the TBD, but it is not assured under any vision past, present, or future. It's not that the plans are too grandiose or that their cost is beyond the city's ability to pay, or that the proposals for roads or parks wouldn't serve some

communal good. It is that all of these ambitions and plans are service of the same underlying myth: that people can control what happens in this floodplain. This is the unexamined portion of Dallas's planning history that demands greater attention, lest we continue to repeat the same mistakes there.

As planners, we must look more critically at what Donald Krueckeberg calls the "flawed models of our craft."[1] To focus too narrowly or exclusively on planning methods, procedures, or outcomes is to miss the lessons of the TBD's misshapen histories. All of the stagnation and failed implementation of plans has resulted in a TBD where many eras of planning history and mistakes are actually *visible,* layered in physical space in the TBD. In failing to cover up or fix these mistakes, Dallas has actually given itself a great opportunity: to see its history through the TBD examine the paths that planning has taken there, and to forge an entirely new path. Dallas need not relinquish the myth of the tabula rasa, but rather to accept it as the *ends*, not the means. Thus, the new path is simple: allow the TBD to be perpetually at a crossroads, in stagnation.

[1] Krueckeberg, Donald. "Planning History's Mistakes." *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997): 269–79.

Aerial photo of May 2015 floods in the Trinity Banks District.
Photo courtesy of Dallas Morning News.

View of the Trinity River and Trinity Banks District from west Dallas, atop the levee.
Photo by Callahan Seltzer, 2014

EPILOGUE

Standing by the Trinity River in 2015, it is hard not to be preoccupied with the present. Dallas is always at a crossroads in the TBD. Bulldozers frozen in situ, awaiting resolution of The Road impasse. New pedestrian trails and other trimmings of an urban public park. A view of the rush hour gridlock just beyond the levees. The shimmering Santiago Calatrava Bridge. I scan my surroundings unsure of where to place awe, disgust, or fear. Standing there is something I could not have done just a few years ago, so I felt no nostalgia. The river is as clear as I have ever seen it, its Live Oaks strong. Standing between its wide levees is like looking up from the bottom of a huge bathtub. For the first time, I decide to go swimming.

I believe Dallas has a second (or tenth?) chance to set things right in the Trinity Banks District and that doing so *demands no future planning action.* Rather than trying to extinguish these histories by creating something new, what if we just left the TBD alone? What if there is no "ought to be" imperative in the TBD? What if it is neither a paradise lost nor a paradise to be regained? What if we stop using the TBD to defend our respective corners of Dallas's future? What if we stop trying to order and arrange it, to cover past planning mistakes in service of a new vision for Dallas's future? What if we stop looking for new answers and instead listen to answers the Trinity River has already given us? What if we just let it sit there, some parts broken, some shiny and new, others unfinished, as the urban frontier? If we did this, could we begin to see what is already good here and acknowledge what is wrong without trying to fix it ? What could we learn from its graceful decline and the incomplete implementation of our planning? Rather than try to nurture what is already good, could we instead allow it to nurture us?

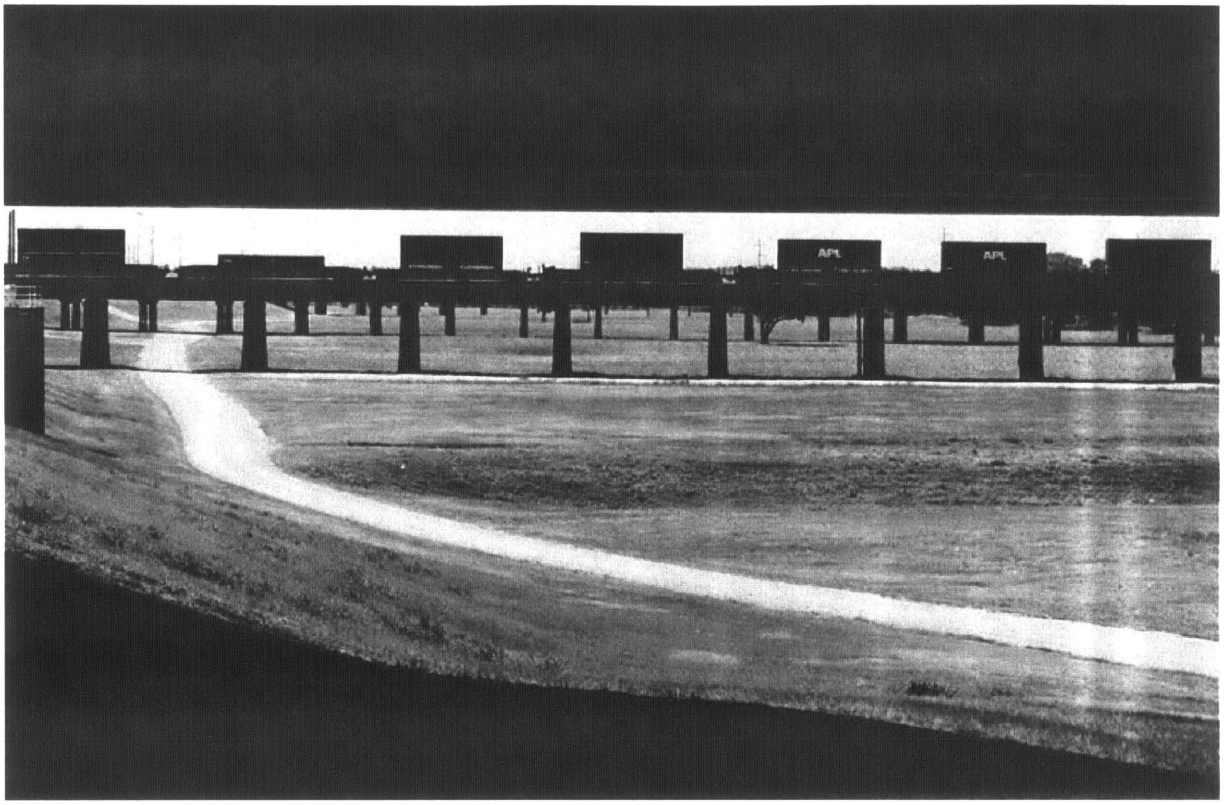


Photo of Trinity River beneath bridge, 2014. Photo by Callahan Seltzer.

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