

South Freeway, SH 288

As Houston's freeway construction machine was running at full speed in the early 1960s, the highway engineers at the Houston TxDOT office may have had a song chiming in the back of their heads. As Frank Sinatra sang it: "The best is yet to come."

In the 1960s engineers watched as many of their new freeways became clogged with traffic only a few years after opening. These 6- and 8-lane freeways were hopelessly inadequate, and due to the limited right-of-way width of the freeway corridors, it would be difficult to expand these freeways to more than 10 main lanes. By the mid-1960s, TxDOT had a vision of the freeway of the future, and it could be best described by a saying that rings true especially in Texas: "Bigger is better."

Houston's highway engineers had studied freeway designs around the country. The Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago, opened in 1962, was influential in the design of large freeways, and Houston's engineers paid particular attention to California. Houston had equaled California standards with the inner loop section of the Katy Freeway, which began construction in 1965. But the South Freeway would exceed anything California could offer and would propel Houston to the top in terms of freeway design. The South Freeway would be not just one freeway, but two freeways in one—a "dual freeway" with a regular freeway on the outside and a wide median for a future express freeway on the inside. The initial phase of the freeway would include only the outer section of the dual freeway. Nevertheless, this would be a highly impressive facility. The wide freeway right-of-way corridor required for the facility would make the South Freeway one of the most distinctive in the nation.⁴⁴

But just as the South Freeway represented the vision of the freeway of the future, it would also be intertwined with perhaps the most dramatic story in the history of race relations in Houston. It's a story of integration, white flight, and urban transformation. And it's a story where the South Freeway would have the final word, at least in terms of ground zero for the events that would unfold over a 15-year period.

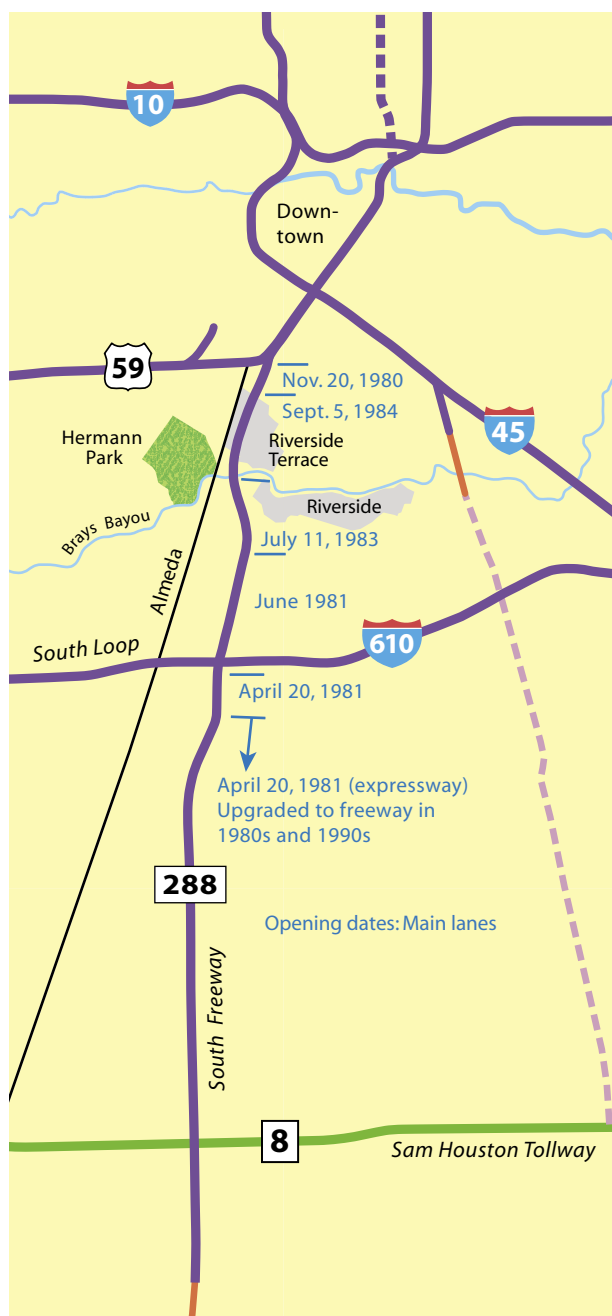
Neighborhoods, Integration, and the Freeway

The Riverside Terrace neighborhood was initially developed in 1924 and included a selection of housing for the mid-range and affluent markets. Just to the south of Riverside Terrace on the south side of Brays Bayou was Riverside, an exclusive community including many estate homes that rivaled Houston's elite River Oaks neighborhood. Jews had been denied housing in River Oaks in that era, and many of Houston's wealthy and prominent Jewish families resided in Riverside. Riverside Terrace and Riverside were the heart of the Jewish community in Houston.

The year was 1952. Successful black cattleman Jack

South Freeway

Designated as freeway	1953
First freeway section open	1980
Freeway complete	1984 (expressway south of Loop 610)
Reconstruction	none
Max traffic volume, 2001	161,000 vehicles per day
Future construction	Freeway upgrades south of Beltway 8



Caesar was looking for a nice home to match his success, but found that his options were limited because blacks were restricted to black neighborhoods. He set his sights on a nice brick home on the south side of Houston in the Riverside Terrace neighborhood, but there was one problem—it was in a white area. Caesar arranged to have his white male secretary purchase the home. The home title was then transferred to Caesar. He and his family moved into the home in the middle of the night in 1952.

After Caesar moved into Riverside Terrace, there was unease among the white residents. However, Caesar and his family maintained a low profile, so the neighborhood residents generally adopted a “wait and see” attitude. That all changed in the early morning hours of April 17, 1953. A bomb consisting of four sticks of dynamite was exploded on Caesar’s porch. The bomb blew out the windows and destroyed the porch area, but there were no injuries. The bomb seemed to be intended to frighten rather than to kill.

If the bomber had intended to frighten Caesar, it had exactly the opposite effect. Caesar would stay, and nervous whites began selling their homes. There was talk among white residents of formulating an agreement not to sell to blacks, but neighborhood transformation had begun and “white flight” was underway. As whites moved out, many of the homes on larger lots were torn down and replaced with low-quality apartments, many without air-conditioning. The predominantly black, low-income residents of the apartments were forced onto the street at all hours of the day and night in Houston’s warm, humid climate. Homes along the main streets in the neighborhood were converted to businesses. The character of the neighborhood changed, accelerating white flight and sending the neighborhood into a downward spiral.

While this process was in progress, local planners were reexamining the alignment of the South Freeway. The original alignment along Almeda Road was shifted eastward in late 1959, sending it through the eastern end of Riverside Terrace. Jack Caesar’s house would be in the path of the freeway.

Riverside Terrace would become nearly entirely black by the early 1960s. Residents of the exclusive Riverside neighborhood adjacent to Riverside Terrace felt that the bayou separating the two neighborhoods would be a barrier to further southward black migration, but by the mid-1960s white flight was in full progress in Riverside. Unscrupulous real estate agents fueled the fire by playing on the fears of white residents and actively soliciting sellers. Many of the white residents banded together to state their commitment to the community and their openness to an integrated neighborhood. These residents posted signs in their yards stating, “This is our home, it is not for sale,” openly defying the real estate agents promoting white flight. It was a nice morale booster, but the transformation of the neighborhood continued. Black professionals, many of them professors at nearby Texas Southern University, took advantage of the collapsing real estate prices to move into the beautiful neighborhood. By the early 1970s the



Moved by the freeway: When Jack Caesar first moved into Riverside Terrace, he did it quietly in the middle of the night. His arrival launched the transformation of the neighborhood. But in the end, the South Freeway would have the final word. The home Caesar moved into, as well as many others, was displaced to make way for the freeway. (Photo: *Houston Chronicle*)

posh old homes along Brays Bayou were occupied almost entirely by blacks, with only “one or two” whites remaining, according to a real estate agent interviewed for a 1971 *Houston Chronicle* report. Riverside became to the black community what it formerly was to the Jewish community: the center and focus of the community’s leaders and prominent citizens.⁴⁵

In the late 1960s right-of-clearance for the wide South Freeway corridor was underway. Jack Caesar’s house was relocated to south Houston and occupied by another owner. For Houston it was perhaps a fitting end for the home that unleashed the storm—the freeway had the final word.

Origins

The South Freeway was part of Houston’s original freeway plan formulated in the early 1950s and was included in the plan presented to the Texas Transportation Commission in July 1953. On September 23, 1953, TxDOT entered into an agreement with the city of Houston and Harris County to further the development of three proposed freeways, including SH 288 from downtown Houston southward to the Fort Bend County line—the South Freeway. In the agreement, TxDOT would define the freeway routes and pay for construction, while the city and the county were responsible for right-of-way



(Opposite page) **The freeway and ground zero:** This view shows the South Freeway corridor in June 1972, looking north. Right-of-way clearance had begun in the late 1960s and was nearly complete at the time of this photo. The location of Jack Caesar's house at the southeast corner of Wichita and Hutchins is indicated in red, and is now approximately in the center of the freeway. Caesar's house became a flash point for racial integration in Houston in 1952 when Caesar and his family became the first blacks to move into the all-white, heavily Jewish Riverside Terrace neighborhood. In April 1953, a bomb exploded on Caesar's front porch. The bomb caused only minor property damage and no injuries, but it launched full-scale white flight from the Riverside Terrace neighborhood. (Photo: The Positive Image)

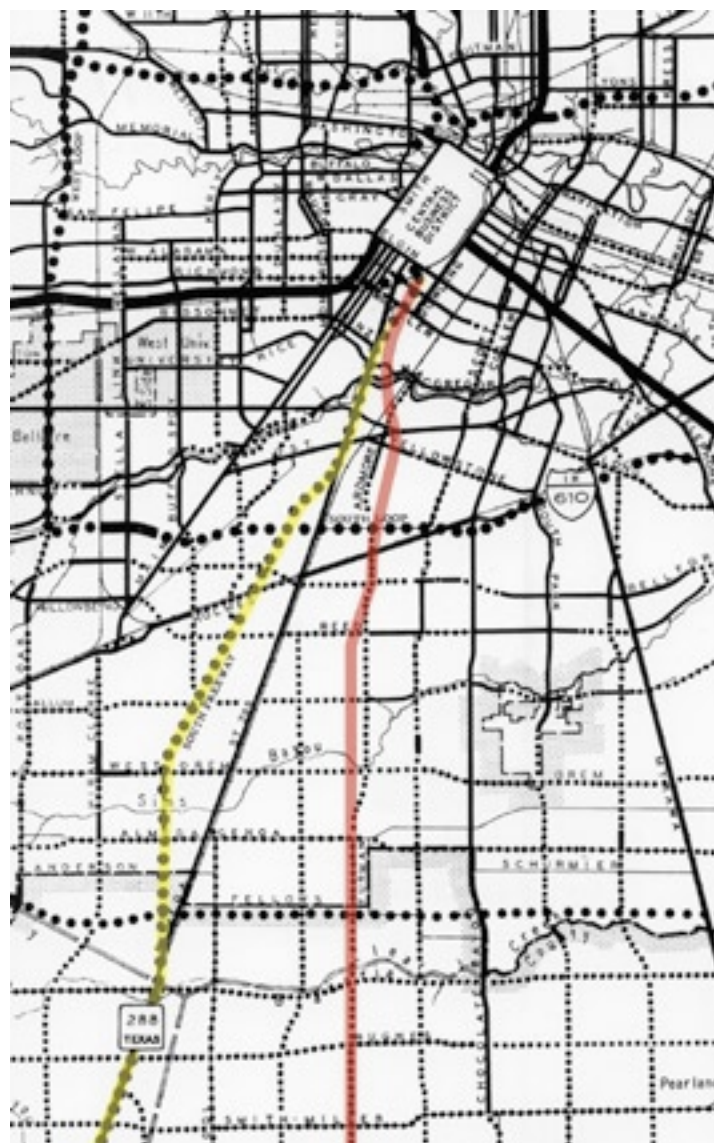


acquisition. The South Freeway first appeared on the city of Houston's *Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan* in 1955. The original alignment showed the freeway following Alameda Road southward out of downtown, veering west of Alameda Road just north of Loop 610, and then rejoining Alameda Road near Beltway 8.⁴⁶

In the 1950s planning efforts were focused on Houston's more rapidly growing areas and the freeways serving those areas, especially the Southwest Freeway and the West Loop. The South Freeway corridor was largely rural and devoid of any significant population, so it took lower priority. Little—if any—work had been done on the South Freeway when in March 1959 City Planning Director Ralph Ellifrit proposed an eastward realignment of the freeway. The main reason for the re-alignment was to shift the freeway closer to the Gulf Freeway to relieve some of its traffic. The new alignment would also avoid an oil field, prevent the need to displace either a hospital or a biscuit factory on Alameda Road, traverse less-developed land, and be situated closer to development in southeast Houston. Ellifrit's alignment still used Alameda Road for most of the route inside Loop 610. Near Old Spanish Trail it veered east from Alameda Road rather than west.⁴⁷

On May 22, 1959, TxDOT authorized a full restudy of the South Freeway alignment. In late 1959, the South Freeway relocation study was complete and recommended a new alignment entirely to the east of Alameda Road. This would become the final freeway alignment with only slight modifications. On August 14, 1963, TxDOT held the first public meeting for the freeway alignment. The *Houston Post* reported that "protests were negligible," with most comments coming from landowners in the south part of the corridor. The newspaper report mentioned only one homeowner who spoke up at the meeting, and apparently the subject of impacts on the Riverside Terrace neighborhood never arose. The public also got its first glimpse of the big plans for the freeway at the 1963 meeting. The schematics on display showed the eight-lane freeway and its wide center median. A second meeting was held on July 21, 1965.⁴⁸

The full details of the proposed freeway design were presented at a public hearing on January 27, 1966. The head of the TxDOT Houston Urban Project Office, A. C. Kyser, provided a summary of the design from downtown to south of Loop 610. The freeway would be a dual freeway, which meant that TxDOT would be putting "two freeways on one right-of-way." On the outside would be a regular 8-lane freeway with entrance and exit ramps. A



Alignment shift: This view from the city of Houston's 1959 *Major Thoroughfare and Freeway Plan* shows the original alignment of the South Freeway, highlighted in yellow. The original alignment was along and west of Alameda Road. The revised alignment, shown in red, was defined in a special study completed in late 1959. The South Freeway is Houston's only freeway to sustain a major realignment. (Map: HMRC)



Freeway construction in slow motion: This September 1976 photo shows the cleared right-of-way corridor north of Brays Bayou. Right-of-way clearance began in the late 1960s and was complete by 1972, but the corridor sat vacant for more than five years due to funding shortfalls at TxDOT. The existence of such a wide corridor of clear land so close to the central business district for most of the 1970s was a remarkable novelty and is something that will probably never again be seen in any city in the United States in the context of freeway construction. (Photo: Chuck Fuhs)

new feature of this freeway would be the numerous “criss-cross” entry and entrance ramps, where one ramp would be constructed over the other, a design which is now called a braided ramp. On the inside would be a 6-lane express freeway with no entrance or exit ramps between Loop 610 and downtown. The entire freeway, inside and outside, would be depressed below grade for nearly its entire 4.7-mile (7.5 km) length inside Loop 610. The initial phase would construct the 8-lane outer freeway, leaving a wide median for the future inner freeway. But with the space reserved for the inner freeway, the design would accommodate a freeway with 14 main lanes. “This freeway is being designed, as far as ultimate capacity, [to] probably exceed the capacity of any freeway I know of, anywhere,” said Kyser.⁴⁹

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TxDOT Houston Urban Project Office head A. C. Kyser, at the public meeting for the design of the South Freeway, January 27, 1966

Building the Freeway

If there was one thing an observer would notice about the plans for this freeway, it was its width. The right-of-way corridor would be approximately 500 feet (152 m) wide. At the January 1966 public meeting Kyser stated that the right-of-way cost for the freeway was estimated at \$12 million, and the cost of actual construction for the large freeway was estimated at \$10 million. Purchasing and clearing the right-of-way for the freeway was expected to cost more than the freeway construction itself. Kyser reported that right-of-way had already been acquired for the southern section. The real challenge in terms of right-of-way would be the northern half, which traversed through the Riverside Terrace neighborhood.

A key event in the construction of the freeway was the passage of a Harris County bond referendum on January 29, 1966. The bond issue provided funds for the county’s 50% portion of the right-of-way acquisition cost. Without passage of the proposition, the project would not have been able to move forward, and any delay may have had unknown consequences for the future of the freeway. The window of opportunity for building large freeways through inner-city neighborhoods was rapidly closing, not just in Houston but nationwide. New policies would soon take effect and the political environment would soon



Construction finally gets underway: After a delay that lasted for much of the 1970s, construction of the South Freeway was finally making progress by the late 1970s, as shown by this May 1978 photo. (Photo: TxDOT)

change to be much less favorable to this type of freeway. A two-thirds majority was needed to approve the bonds, and voters passed the proposition with 72% of the vote. The South Freeway project would proceed.

The right-of-way clearance for the north section of the South Freeway and adjacent section of US 59 was one of the largest right-of-way clearance events in the history of Houston's freeways. It took place over approximately five years from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. The final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the South Freeway, completed in 1974, reported that 295 families were displaced for the South Freeway. But the EIS also reported that "a large majority [of those displaced] agreed that they now have equal or better facilities than they had before displacement." The transition from neighborhood to freeway is not always an orderly process, especially when the process plays out over many years, as was the case for the South Freeway corridor. The scene can take on a surreal look, with some houses still standing among vacant lots, houses in various states of demolition, and piles of rubble

scattered about. The South Freeway right-of-way clearance spawned small industries in salvage, demolition, and relocation as it reached its peak around 1970. Scavengers sifted through the remains of buildings looking for valuable materials or collectibles. Transients occupied abandoned buildings. The scene generated a unique ecology as the forces of displacement played out.⁵⁰

By 1972 the right-of-way for the South Freeway was clear from downtown to Brays Bayou. In the past, right-of-way clearance was promptly followed by freeway construction, but in the budget-constrained 1970s work would proceed much more slowly. For several years the wide right-of-way stood vacant, a remarkable novelty in a close-in urban area and a scene that will likely never again be seen in a major urban area in the context of freeway construction. A well-known example of a similar situation took place on the corridor for the Century Freeway (IH 105) in Los Angeles, which is about 7 miles (11 km) south of downtown Los Angeles. The 18-mile (29 km) Century Freeway corridor stood vacant for years as the California



Complete: The final section of the South Freeway was formally opened on September 5, 1984, with a ribbon cutting ceremony. Holding the ceremonial scissors is Bob Lanier, who was chairman of the Texas Transportation Commission at the time and would later serve as mayor of Houston from 1992 to 1998. Also participating in the ribbon cutting are representatives from the Houston Citizens Chamber of Commerce. From left to right are Al Calloway, president; Lanier; Lorene Lancelin; and Ernest Clauser. Clauser is holding a certificate conferring the “Road Hand Award” to him. The Road Hand Award recognizes individuals whose efforts promote Houston-area road projects. (Photo: HMRC RGD6).

Department of Transportation dealt with financial problems and litigation. In 1975 the *Los Angeles Times* described the right-of-way strip as “largely a wasteland.” The Century Freeway would not be completed until 1993. Right-of-way corridors cleared for freeways that were never built still exist in a few places around the United States, but in terms of its sheer width and closeness to the urban center, the South Freeway corridor was perhaps the most distinctive.⁵¹

Finally, on September 22, 1975, a ground breaking ceremony was held for the first actual construction on the South Freeway—the frontage roads at Brays Bayou. The first section of main lanes, a short segment just south of the US 59 interchange, opened in November 1980. The four-lane divided highway south of Loop 610 opened on April 20, 1981. Inside Loop 610 work proceeded slowly on small segments. A section of freeway immediately north of Loop 610 was completed in June 1981, and the previously completed interchange at Loop 610 was fully

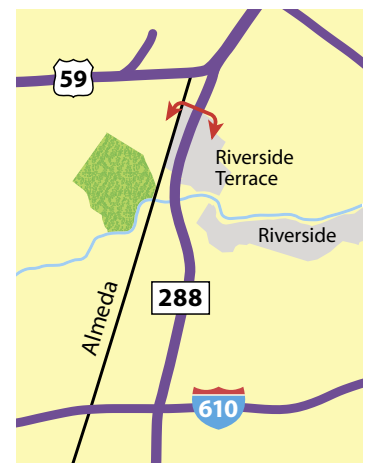
Key dates in the history of the South Freeway

1953	The South Freeway is proposed as part of Houston’s freeway master plan.
1959	The South Freeway is realigned.
1963	Plans are unveiled for the dual freeway design.
1968-1972	Right-of-way is cleared through Riverside Terrace.
1975	Construction begins.
1984	The freeway is completed, but is only an expressway south of Loop 610.
1980s, 1990s	Expressway sections south of Loop 610 are upgraded to full freeway status.

opened to traffic. On July 11, 1983, a section of freeway from Brays Bayou to Yellowstone, just south of Old Spanish Trail, was opened, providing a continuous facility from downtown southward. However, traffic still had to use the



Room for the interior freeway: This view shows the South Freeway as it passes through the Riverside Terrace area. The South Freeway is depressed below grade for nearly its entire length inside Loop 610. The wide median is reserved for future express freeway lanes which are part of the “dual freeway” design developed for the freeway in the early 1960s. It remains to be seen if the interior freeway lanes will ever be constructed. As of 2003, there appeared to be no need for the interior freeway based on long-range demand estimates. The downtown freeway interchange complex may not be capable of handling the additional vehicles that the interior freeway would deliver. (Photo: James Lyle, TTI, June 2001)



frontage roads for a one-mile (1.6 km) section north of Brays Bayou. The closure of this last gap took place on September 5, 1984, and the freeway was complete. The expressway south of Loop 610 was upgraded to freeway standards in the 1980s and 1990s.

On its completion, the South Freeway appeared to be the last, all-new inner-city freeway to be constructed in Houston. It was an impressive facility. Even though only the eight-lane outer freeway was constructed, the wide center median reserved for the future inner freeway and high design standards distinguished the South Freeway as one of the best in the nation. In 2000, plans were formulated to extend the Hardy Toll Road inside Loop 610 as a toll-free facility with an estimated completion date of 2007, adding one final new freeway inside Loop 610.

Expansions of the North Freeway and the Eastex Freeway in the 1990s increased the corridor widths of those freeways to the range of 350–400 feet (107–122 m). The planned expansion of the Katy Freeway will have a corridor width averaging 475 feet (145 m) between Loop 610 and Beltway 8. With its right-of-way typically 500 feet

(152 m) wide, the South Freeway will still reign as the widest freeway corridor in Houston and will probably never be dethroned.

Perhaps the most interesting question to ponder is the future of the wide freeway median. Will the inner freeway ever be built? As of 2003, TxDOT had no plans—not even long term—to construct the inner freeway. Although the South Freeway corridor has been slow to urbanize, development has accelerated in recent years, prompting TxDOT to initiate a corridor feasibility study in 2003 to determine future improvements to meet the transportation needs of the corridor. The South Freeway inner freeway is also included on a list of potential toll corridors to be considered by the Harris County Toll Road Authority. Only time will tell if the freeway demand will support the extra capacity of an inner freeway or tollway. If and when the need ever arises, Kyser’s dual freeway design will have the potential to “exceed the capacity of any freeway, anywhere.”



No frontage roads: The South Freeway is the only freeway in Houston constructed without frontage roads for most of its length. (Photo: September 2002)



Lake 288: This view shows the South Freeway after Tropical Storm Allison in June 2001. In its early years the South Freeway was susceptible to flooding caused by water from Brays Bayou backing up into the freeway drainage system. Modifications to the drainage system and more powerful pumps alleviated most flooding but were not enough to prevent flooding during Allison. (Photo: Jonathan Miller)



The freeway beginning: This view shows the start of the South Freeway at its interchange with US 59 just south of downtown. The South Freeway branches to the left, and the Southwest Freeway branches to the right. This interchange normally has a backup of vehicles trying to get on the Southwest Freeway, as this photo shows, but motorists typically face no delays as they enter the South Freeway. This interchange was completed on November 20, 1980. The Southwest Freeway through this location opened in 1974. (Photo: May 2003)

