

# Houston Freeways



A Historical and  
Visual Journey



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## A Historical and Visual Journey

Erik Slotboom

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*Dedicated to*

Everyone who has helped build Houston's freeways



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## Preface and Acknowledgements

As I grew up in Houston, I always wondered why no one had written a book about Houston's freeways. I never outgrew my childhood fascination with freeways, and I never stopped thinking about the book. As I drove on Houston's freeways, questions would appear in my mind. What was here before the freeway? Who decided the freeway would be built here? Why was the freeway built with its design? In 2001, I decided to write the book.

As a subject of historical study, the freeway is a unique entity. It's a history we live every day. We see its results. We receive its benefits and suffer from its shortcomings. We build our lives and lifestyles around it. It continues to influence the future, just as much as it has influenced the past.

The influence of the freeway on the development of modern Houston is a central theme of *Houston Freeways*. But behind the freeways are the stories of people—the people who made the freeways happen, and the people who were empowered by the freeways to build something new. Writing *Houston Freeways* has given me a new appreciation for the dedication, vision, and creativity of the many individuals who have shaped Houston through its freeways. Our freedom of mobility is the product of their efforts. The ability to efficiently go where we want, when we want, is something we tend to take for granted, but perhaps we should pause to recognize the efforts of those who made our mobility possible.

Writing a historical book about a recent period of time provides many opportunities. The freeway era has generally been a well-photographed period of history. Many of the key participants in the history are still alive, able to tell their stories. Most documents are still available. But even more important to the writing of this book was the advance of computer and software technology. Just five years ago, it would not have been economically feasible for an individual to write this book. Digital photography with resolution sufficient for document capture has only become available within the last three years. The disk capacity, processor speed, and memory required for processing large digital images has been available at economical prices for less than 5 years. Although production, raster processing, and vector drawing software have been available for some time, recently available powerful packages using the portable document format (PDF) were essential to this project.

Bringing my vision of *Houston Freeways* to reality required the assistance of many. I would like to extend my special thanks to the content reviewers, Chuck Fuhs and Chris Olavson. Both Chuck and Chris have great knowledge of Houston's freeways, and they share my enthusiasm and interest in the subject. Chuck coauthored the Freeway Mass Transit chapter, his area of greatest expertise, and provided many of the photos in the book.

Many others have made important contributions to this book and my research efforts. I won't attempt a comprehensive listing here, but my gratitude goes to everyone who has helped. Two individuals in particular deserve mention: Joel Draut of the Houston Public Library and Anne Cook at the TxDOT library. Without their help, many photos would not have found their way into this book.

The Texas Department of Transportation has been exceptionally helpful in my research for *Houston Freeways*. Every single TxDOT employee I have been in contact with has been cooperative, helpful, and responsive. Many have gone out of their way to provide assistance. The citizens of Texas should be proud of their highway department, both for its accessibility and its work to build Texas' transportation system.

Sometimes I wonder: Hundreds of years from now, how will our freeway era be viewed? Will history say that we lived in an era when cities built great freeway networks to foster an unprecedented level of individual mobility? Will Houston be recognized as the ultimate product of the freeway era, even more so than Los Angeles? As I make a case in the text, I believe that Houston is in fact the world's most freeway-focused city. None of us alive today will know history's judgment of the freeway legacy. But perhaps better yet, we're the ones who are living in it. This important period in Houston's history—and the history of the freeway—has now been documented for the ages. Enjoy your journey through *Houston Freeways*, and enjoy your journeys on Houston's freeways.

# Abbreviations, Definitions, and Explanatory Notes

## Map Legend

 Freeway	 Interstate Highway	 Indicates direction of aerial view
 Tollway	 United States (US) Highway System	 Indicates direction of ground view
 Major Highway	 State Highway System	 Park
 Street	 Logo of the Harris County Toll Road Authority	
 Under construction or planned for near-term construction		
 Long term corridor		

## Houston and Harris County

Houston was founded on August 30, 1836, by brothers Augustus and John Allen. Nearly all of the city of Houston is contained within Harris County.

	Population	Source	United States Rank
City of Houston	2,009,834	2002 Census estimate	4
Harris County	3,557,055	2002 Census estimate	3
Houston Metropolitan Statistical Area	4,669,571	2000 Census	10
Texas	21,779,893	2002 Census estimate	2

## The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and Texas Transportation Commission

The designations TxDOT and Texas Transportation Commission are used for the present-day entities and all predecessors. The previous and current names for these entities are listed in the table below. The Texas Transportation Commission consists of three members appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the Texas Senate. Members serve six-year terms which are staggered so that an appointment is generally made every two years. The Texas Transportation Commission is the governing body of TxDOT, responsible for establishing policy and rules. The commission also decides which highway projects receive funding for construction.

1917-1975	Texas Highway Department State Highway Commission
1975-1991	State Department of Highways and Public Transportation State Highway and Public Transportation Commission
1991-current	Texas Department of Transportation Texas Transportation Commission

## Organization of TxDOT Houston Offices

TxDOT District 12 includes Houston, Harris County, and five adjacent counties (Fort Bend, Waller, Montgomery, Galveston, and Brazoria). The Houston Urban Project Office existed from 1945 to 1984 and was responsible for Loop 610 and all freeways within Loop 610. The Houston Urban Project Office was sometimes called the Houston Urban Office or the Houston Urban Expressways Office. The administrative head of District 12 is designated the “District Engineer”; the head of the Houston Urban Project Office was designated as the “Engineer-Manager.”

District Engineer, District 12		Engineer-Manager, Houston Urban Project Office	
Jim Douglas	1945-1954	William J. Van London	1945-1955
Wiley Carmichael	1955-1973	Albert C. Kyser	1955-1972
Omer Poorman	1973-1986	William V. “Bill” Ward	1972-1984
Milton Dietert	1986-1995		
Gary Trietsch	1995-present		

## Harris County Government

The county judge is the political and administrative head of county government, chosen by public vote. The county judge is not a judicial position. There are four elected commissioners in Harris County Commissioners Court. Commissioners court handles administrative functions of county government; it is not a judicial body.

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## Definitions, Abbreviations, and Acronyms

braided ramp	A design in which entrance and exit ramps are built at the same location, with one ramp passing over the other.
contraflow lane	A lane taken from one traffic direction and temporarily converted for use by vehicles travelling in the opposite direction.
diamond lane	A freeway lane designated for use by buses and high occupancy vehicles, usually marked with a diamond. There is no barrier between the diamond lane and adjacent general-purpose freeway lanes. Also called a concurrent-flow HOV lane.
expressway	A non-access-controlled highway free of traffic lights, but with at-grade intersections.
FM	Farm-to-Market road. Although the areas served by many FM roads have been urbanized, the FM designation has been retained.
freeway	A limited-access highway facility free of intersections.
freeway lanes	The number of general-purpose main lanes in both directions, usually excluding any central transitway lanes. For example, a 10-lane freeway has 5 lanes in each direction.
frontage road	A road on a freeway right-of-way separate from the main lanes but generally parallel to the main lanes, providing access to property along the freeway.
HCTRA	Harris County Toll Road Authority
HGAC	Houston-Galveston Area Council, the regional planning organization
HMRC	Houston Metropolitan Research Center, division of the Houston Public Library
HOV	High occupancy vehicle; a vehicle with more than one occupant.
IH	Interstate Highway. IH is the official designation used by TxDOT, but is not commonly used by the general population. The IH designation is used here to avoid confusion between the numeral 1 and the letter I.
managed-lane freeway	A freeway with certain lanes that are managed to obtain optimal traffic flow. In Houston, managed lanes are planned as toll lanes on the Katy and Northwest Freeways.
Metro	Metropolitan Transit Authority, Houston's public transit provider.
parkway	In the Houston area, the term "parkway" has no meaning. A parkway can be a conventional freeway with frontage roads (e.g. the Tomball Parkway), a tollway (e.g. the Fort Bend Parkway), the frontage roads of a tollway (e.g. the Sam Houston Parkway), a conventional arterial street (e.g. the Lake Houston Parkway), or a parkway in the traditional sense of a limited-access facility in a parklike setting (e.g. Memorial Parkway).
record of decision	An administrative action by the federal government certifying that a project is in compliance with federal regulations and authorizing local agencies to begin construction.
interchange levels	The ground is considered a level. Note that ramps typically do not intersect over a single point, so a level 5 ramp may intersect a level 4 ramp at a point where the level 4 ramp is below its peak.
SH	State Highway, generally a high-volume highway and often a freeway.
spur	A short length of freeway branching from a larger freeway, providing access to a specific area.
stack	An informal name for a multilevel freeway-to-freeway interchange.
tollway	A limited-access highway facility free of intersections and requiring payment of a toll. When referring to the general class of limited-access highway facilities, the term "freeway" is often used to indicate both freeways and tollways. For example, references to regional freeway lane-miles include both freeway and tollway lane-miles.
transitway	A barrier-separated lane, typically in the center of the freeway, for buses and high occupancy vehicles. Also called an HOV lane.
TTA	Texas Turnpike Authority. Created in 1953, it became a division of TxDOT in 1997.
TTI	Texas Transportation Institute, a research organization at Texas A&M University in College Station which performs most highway-related research for TxDOT.
TxDOT	Texas Department of Transportation
US	United States, used to designate a highway in the US highway system