

Chase building hits 75th anniversary

CAROL E. VAUGHN, Copyright 2004 Houston Chronicle



Jan. 8, 2004

In August 1929, [Houston Philanthropist Jesse H. Jones](#) published an editorial proclaiming that like Houston, the newly built, 36-floor Gulf Building was "essentially modern."

Today the worn divots in the terrazzo floor of its lobby tell stories of generations of Houstonians who have come into the bank on business or to glean a peek at history.

For 30 years, the building held the notoriety of being the tallest in Houston. With its elaborate, four story lobby with gold-leafed detailing, the art deco building with gothic ornamentation was considered Jones' statement on modernization.

"When it was built, it was the tallest building west of the Mississippi," said [David Bush](#), director of programming and information at the [Greater Houston Preservation Alliance](#). "Jesse Jones was the driving force behind this building and his idea was that this building would put Houston on the map."

Even today, the JP Morgan Chase Building at Main and Travis is ensconced in grandiosity as it celebrates its 75th anniversary.



The building took a little more than year to build after being designed by famed architects [Alfred Finn](#) (San Jacinto Monument), Kenneth Franzheim ([Foley's](#) downtown) and J.E.R. Carpenter of New York. Polished nickel plating admonishes entryways, mailboxes, vaults and bank tables. The lobby was built to tell the public that the bank was stable and prosperous as deposits weren't insured in 1929.

An \$80 million restoration of the building's exterior and interior in 1989 by then-owner [Texas Commerce Bank](#) ensured that history would live on.

The more recent restoration of the terrazzo floor in the bank lobby has generated a second commendation from the nonprofit Greater Houston Preservation Alliance as JP Morgan Chase receives the 2004 Good Brick Award. The award commends the company for preservation, restoration and enhancement of Houston's architectural and cultural heritage.

As the last of Houston's historic banking halls, the building that was originally [Jones National Bank of Commerce](#) has been involved in mergers but has never forsaken its banking roots.

"The award has two purposes," Bush said. "It gives public acknowledgment of the extreme good care that they have given this building over the years. It's also a way for us to educate the public about preservation in Houston."

` Essentially Modern'

In celebration of the building's rich heritage, the *Essentially Modern Exhibit* hosted through Jan. 30 in the building's Heritage Hall at 707 Travis from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday, unveils relics from the past.

Sponsored by [Houston Endowment](#), [San Jacinto Museum of History and Story Sloane Gallery](#), the rare collection of photos and documents offers a personal glimpse into Houston's beginnings.

Houston Endowment, a philanthropic organization developed by the Jones in 1937, the exhibit includes 12 original portraits of heroes of the Texas Revolution by artist [Lajos Markos](#).

Fenberg also is the producer and writer of *Brother, Can You Spare a Billion*, an Emmy Award winning documentary about Jesse Jones, which is narrated by [Walter Cronkite](#). Jones was a financier and publisher of the [Houston Chronicle](#).

"The building is (the) pinnacle of Jones' building career," Fenberg said. "He built around 80-90 buildings through his career and of all, this was the building he was most proud of."

Jones had come to Houston in 1898 when there were 40,000 people here. Within 10 years, he had built the tallest buildings on Main Street, Fenberg relates.

Then came the opening of the international Houston Ship Channel, positioning the city as an international force.

"I think the building epitomizes the growth and expansion of Houston in a very short amount of time," the historian said.

Enduring tough times

As the \$4.5 million building opened, the stock market crashed and tough times ensued. Jones, said Fenberg, never fired an employee during the Great Depression and was known for his compassion as tenants asked for reprieve on their rent.

On the top floor of the Gulf Building, a most significant meeting of the century was hosted by Jones in October 1931 in a three-day meeting marathon with area businessmen that saved two banks in Houston from failure. The measure was also cited as saving other linked banks from domino demise.

Jones had convinced business leaders that they had to be their brothers' keepers and as result of his efforts, none of Houston's banks failed in the aftermath, Fenberg says.

JP Morgan Chase Bank President [Phil Conway](#) offices in one of the finely detailed rooms in the executive quarters, where he says he is humbled by the building's rich history.

Ornately carved oak abounds and a storybook hidden room can be accessed behind a wooden bookcase. Architecture like this is unmatched in modern-day renderings, Fenberg says.

"The building reminds me that history is still alive," Conway said.

Memory making

People come into the bank lobby sharing their memories of past events held in the bank lobby, of power meetings hosted in the offices. For the 57th year the bank choir has performed in the lobby at Christmas.

In 1929 when the building was founded, the bank lobby was a focal point, Chase media relations liaison [Greg Hassell](#) says. Over the years lobby carpeting had been added to aid aching foot pads and soften the clatter of clicking heels. Most recently the terrazzo was unveiled again and revived.

Bush says the building is a national historic civil engineering landmark because of its innovate design.

"Typically, Houston is not known for its preservation efforts," a historically minded Bush said. "A lot of people don't think of skyscrapers as historic, but this year the building is 75 years old."

Written By

[Maggie Galehouse](#)

chose Secretary of Commerce. Roosevelt wrote to Jones, thanking him for his years of government service. It was a bitter blow for Jones. In 1947, he returned to Houston for good.

Helping people, making money

Back home, Jesse and Mary Gibbs Jones focused on philanthropy, creating scholarships for men, women and minorities.

To formalize their giving, they had already started Houston Endowment in 1937, which has donated more than \$1.5 billion to the community to date.

Jones transferred his businesses and buildings to the foundation in the 1940s. In the '50s, the couple gave \$1 million to the University of Houston, \$1 million to Rice University and large sums to the medical center.

By the time Jesse Jones died in 1956, at age 82, he had sent more than 500 kids to college.

"He set a tone of philanthropy in the city," Glick notes. "If you're a civic leader in Houston, what do you do? You follow in Jesse Jones' footsteps."

Today, Jones' name appears on too many Houston buildings to name, though in his lifetime he never put his name on anything he built, Parsons says.

The entrepreneur, politician and philanthropist brought Texas to the nation, playing host and forging allegiances beyond the lines of north and south. He appreciated the positive role of government and understood it could be a catalytic force for progress.

"Today, as we grapple with the role of government and economic recovery, the story of Jesse Jones remains relevant," Fenberg says.