



CHAPTER 1

Path of Confusion

“The hurricane which visited Galveston Island on Saturday, September 9, 1900, was no doubt one of the most important meteorological events in the world’s history.”

—ISAAC M. CLINE,
GALVESTON
WEATHER BUREAU

Just twenty-four hours before Harry struggled home, the sun shone on Galveston, Texas. There were few signs a monster storm was on the way.

Katherine Vedder, almost six, lived in the city with her parents and her older brother and sister. Her father had heard rumors about bad weather approaching. Yet when Katherine looked out the window at five o’clock on Friday, she saw no sign of trouble. “It was a

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perfect late summer afternoon, the day clear blue and cloudless.”

Isaac Monroe Cline, Galveston’s chief weather observer, was also scanning the sky about that time. In fact, he’d been staring at the waves and the skies all week. He was hoping to make sense of the pattern, the way you look at pieces in a jigsaw puzzle and try to figure out where they fit.

But so far, the picture wasn’t clear.

Isaac Cline was thirty-nine. He and his wife, Cora, had three children, with a new baby on the way. Isaac was a rising star in **meteorology**, the study of the atmosphere and weather. Since being appointed head of the Galveston weather station seven years earlier, he’d become a valued member of the community. Isaac had a lot in common with his adopted city. Both were ambitious and optimistic.

Today, just as in 1900, the city of Galveston sits on Galveston Island, a long finger of land, twenty-seven miles long and no more than three miles wide, that

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lies just off the coast of Texas. The brackish waters of Galveston Bay, an estuary, are to the north, and the Gulf of Mexico is to the south. Houston is about fifty miles inland; a railroad trestle across the bay was completed in 1860. (Today, a highway bridge connects Galveston with the Texas mainland.)

Founded in the 1800s, Galveston was a busy entry point for immigrants from Germany, Scotland, and Eastern Europe. Some called it the Ellis Island or New York City of the West. With its population of European immigrants, Latinos, and African Americans, Galveston was a multicultural port city. The city boasted a bustling waterfront. Trains brought cotton, wheat, and corn from inland farms to be shipped around the globe.

Grand mansions lined Broadway, Galveston's main thoroughfare. The city boasted a host of activities for residents and visitors alike. People flocked to restaurants, concert halls, and hotels, including the beautiful five-story brick Tremont Hotel. Surrounded

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by sparkling water and festooned with white oyster shells, Galveston was a glittering symbol of success, poised for the new century ahead.

Galveston's leaders had established a streetcar system and electricity services. They'd also built new houses. Isaac and Cora Cline lived in one of them, at 2511 Avenue Q, just three blocks north of the Gulf.

Not everyone lived in a new or sturdy home. As the population grew during the late 1800s, small structures sprang up on both the front streets and back alleys of the city. Some of these "alley houses" became rental housing for itinerant laborers who came to Galveston for short periods of time to work. Many became home to African American families and were built after the Civil War by Black carpenters, including Horace Scull, Ralph Albert Scull's father.

Hoping for new opportunities, Horace Scull had brought his family to Galveston in 1865, when Ralph was just five. In June of that year, a momentous event took place.

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Major General Gordon Granger of the Union Army arrived in Galveston bringing official word to Texas that the Civil War was over and formerly enslaved people were free. President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation (which had freed any enslaved persons in Confederate states) had never been enforced in Texas.

Today, Juneteenth is celebrated on June 19 to commemorate emancipation. Juneteenth has been an official state holiday in Texas since 1980. In 2016, at the age of eighty-nine, activist Opal Lee, known as "Grandmother of Juneteenth," first walked from her home in Texas to Washington, DC, in an effort to get Juneteenth recognized as a national holiday. And on June 17, 2021, the ninety-four-year old Lee was able to celebrate. On that day, President Joe Biden signed legislation making Juneteenth a federal holiday.

In the decades after the Civil War ended in 1865, formerly enslaved people faced prejudice and huge obstacles when trying to get an education, a good job,

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or to own a home. Horace Scull worked building alley houses on leased ground, meaning the landowner usually rented out the house. In 1867, Horace built a house for his own family too. But he was forced to move the house twice because the landowner either changed his mind or refused to sell the land under it to Horace because he was Black.

The small, simply built structures available to Black families weren't as big or sturdy as the houses many white families were able to afford. These homes would not be able to withstand tremendously strong floods and winds like those of America's deadliest hurricane.

Around 1900, African Americans made up about one-fifth of the city's population of nearly 38,000. In addition to working in construction, some African Americans had jobs on the docks, thanks to Norris Wright Cuney, one of the most important Black leaders of his time. He served on the Galveston city council and helped create more job opportunities for African American workers on the waterfront. In 1889, he was appointed

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the United States Collector of Customs, making him the highest-ranking appointed Black federal official in the country.

Other African Americans began their own small businesses. Robert “Bob” McGuire ran a busy taxi service with a horse and buggy. He earned enough money to buy land near the shore, and built a bathhouse there that Black residents could use. He also served as a police officer.

The children of these early Black entrepreneurs went on to make a mark in their community. Horace Scull’s son, Ralph, became a teacher. In the same way, Jessie McGuire Dent, daughter of Bob and Alberta McGuire, attended Howard University and then returned to Galveston to teach.

In 1943, while teaching in the Galveston schools, Jessie realized that Black teachers were paid less than whites. She fought and won a case in federal court to require equal pay for African American public school teachers. To honor this family’s contributions to Galveston, educator and author Izola Collins became

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the driving force in establishing the McGuire-Dent Recreation Center in Galveston.

Before 1900, other Black-owned shops and businesses grew up in the area around Bob McGuire's bathhouse between Twenty-Seventh and Twenty-Ninth Streets. In segregated Galveston, Black families often didn't feel welcome elsewhere. Izola Collins wrote, "White owners of businesses on the sand did not want their patrons to be turned off by the presence of former slaves in the water with them. Such owners, and sometimes even police, told them to move on, that they were not allowed to swim in those areas."

Despite facing many obstacles, Galveston's African American community grew to include thriving churches as well as popular restaurants and clubs. Galveston's Central High was the first African American high school in Texas, founded in 1885. However, there were separate sections for Black residents in theaters, on the beaches, and on the trolleys. Galveston was still a segregated city.