



The West Dallas Railroad

Part of the 1891 Murphy-Bolanz map showing a proposed expansion of Oak Cliff by developer Thomas L. Marsalis. The William Myers Section is outlined in green. The solid red line shows the route of the Dallas & Oak Cliff steam railroad along Jefferson Boulevard, built in 1887. Marsalis' proposed extension of Jefferson Boulevard and the train line, incorporated as the "West Dallas Railroad", is shown as a dotted line. It was never completed.

In April of 1892, Marsalis announced a second branch of the "West Dallas Railroad" splitting off along West Main Street, climbing a long diagonal up the north face of the escarpment, passing by the old townsite of La Reunion through the modern Stevens Village subdivision and Beverly Hills, ending up at Mountain Creek. This second part of the West Dallas line is not shown on this map and it too was never built.

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When Jefferson Boulevard Ran Through Kessler Park

by Jim Barnes

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On New Year's Eve 302 acres just east of the Stevens' family farm sold for \$41,925. The very next day the buyer resold it to his own corporation, the North Oak Cliff Company, for \$330,000, more than sevenfold profit. It was 1892; Thomas L. Marsalis was creating Oak Cliff.

A group of Dallas real estate investors had bought out the descendants of William and Mary Myers (the original pioneer homesteaders) back in January of 1887, nine months before Marsalis opened his new Oak Cliff subdivision. But another West Dallas developer, James Flanders, sued, claiming part of the Myers' land should rightfully become his. As the case lingered in the courts, Edward Snodgrass, chief assistant of Thomas L. Marsalis, slowly bought out the interests of the individual investors. In January of 1891, the courts finally ruled against Flanders. Snodgrass waited until the end of that year and then quietly passed clear title to his boss.

Marsalis' dream of Oak Cliff was bigger than the gigantic development he actually built; and his dream included modern Kessler Park. Oak Cliff was connected to Dallas by a commuter train running down the middle of Jefferson Boulevard. An 1893 Murphy-Bolanz map of Dallas shows Marsalis' vision that this transportation spine would be extended north from its original terminus at Tyler Street, making a broad sweep across a new residential district on the relatively flat land of modern Kessler Park. The rail line would descend down the escarpment through the course of the natural drainage-way starting at the north end of modern Kessler Park Methodist Church's property and return to downtown Dallas along a track parallel to the old Fort Worth Pike, crossing the Trinity River onto Main Street. Work to complete this railroad-boulevard loop spine began almost immediately, and people alive today can remember great piles of dirt left in the East Kessler woods from the roadbed construction of the steam railroad train of Thomas Marsalis.

The relationship of the Stevens family to Marsalis is curious. Marsalis had grown up in the sparsely populated Louisiana district where Dr. John Stevens was State Legislator. Mary Stevens' father was a Methodist preacher there (and later here, in Dallas). Marsalis was Methodist. The Stevens clan had moved to Dallas less than two years before young Marsalis arrived in 1872. When young widow Mary Stevens remarried in 1889, she moved to a new house about five blocks away from Marsalis's East Dallas home.

The modern Stevens Park Estates lands were included in the original (though nullified) Incorporation of the City of Oak Cliff; but what exact plans (if any) Marsalis had for the old Stevens family homestead are uncertain. Marsalis may have wisely decided not to become involved in this property because it was embroiled in protracted inheritance litigation following the intestate deaths of Mary Stevens' mother, husband, brother, and father. Before he ever left Louisiana, Marsalis probably knew the principals on both sides of this two decade long feud between Mary Stevens and the family of her deceased step-brother.

Whatever Marsalis and the Stevens thought of each other, there is no evidence that they ever did real estate deals together. Marsalis was overextended and losing control of his Oak Cliff assets even before he purchased the 302 acres adjacent to the Stevens' farm. His North Oak Cliff Company's loans failed within a year. Entitlement slowly stumbled down a cascade of abandoned trusteeships and loan defaults, until a trio of Scotsmen named Martin, Jackson, and MacDonald became rightful owners in June of 1899 when their agent paid \$3,000 at a public foreclosure auction. I am amused that the land presently occupied by Stevens Park Golf Course clubhouse was once owned by capitalists sitting in Edinburgh and Glasgow; but golf has always been some sort of weird Scot thing.

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