A family business of helping build a city

Hart family celebrates 100 years in Baton Rouge real estate

Alice Hart Singer holds a family heirloom surrounded by Hart cousins Dwight Singer, left, Winder Dunbar, Winder Dunbar Sr., William A. "Drew" Hart Jr., and William A. "Butch" Hart Sr. during a recent luncheon celebrating 100 years of Hart family businesses. The silver pitcher originally was presented to the family's patriarch, Samuel McHenry Hart, by the stockholders of the Baton Rouge Gas & Light Co., in appreciation of his work as Baton Rouge's first fire chief. Silver dollars contributed by the stockholders were melted down for the pitcher.

Today William Hart Realtors is a relatively small operation—downsized into a moon and pop and son company.

But the Hart family, celebrating 100 years in the Baton Rouge real estate market this year, has played a major role in the building of the city.

William A. "Butch" Hart Sr. and his wife Barbara have been joined by son William A. "Drew" Hart Jr. in the family business. Drew Hart represents the fifth generation of Harts in business in Baton Rouge.

On June 19, 1902, Hart Realty was incorporated and capitalized at $25,000, owned by two lots of Third and Laurel streets. The original stockholders were Sophia (Mrs. Samuel McHenry) Hart, widow of the family's patriarch, and sons Robert A., Albert H. and Louis Foulon Hart.

But long before this venture into real estate, the Harts had made their mark on Baton Rouge.

Samuel McHenry Hart, an Indiana native, came to Baton Rouge on a flatboat in the 1840s to sell seed. He evidently found the town of 2,300 to his liking, for he married, fathered nine children and lived here until his death in 1898.

He was a merchant and a banker, founding Hart & Hebert Bank with F.E. Hebert. Hart and his family began acquiring and occupying property in downtown Baton Rouge.

• S.M. Hart & Co. was located at 444 Lafayette.

• Hart & Hebert Bank was first at Lafayette and Convention, then the fourth block of Third.

• In 1894, Hart bought three lots on North Fourth Street (then called Main Street) for $2500 and built a mansion there.

In 1921, according to State-Times managing editor and local historian the late Ernest Gueyraud, the property was acquired by Samuel's son Louis Foulon Hart and sold to the Knights of Pythias lodge, which in turn sold it to St. James Episcopal Church. The church used it as a parish house until 1966, when it constructed a new building on the site.

In his book "River Capital: An Illustrated History of Baton Rouge," Mark T. Carleton said this about Mayor Samuel Hart: "Hart was an honorary title; Hart did not fight in the Civil War."

"The police and fire services served the city at the time of the Civil War," he wrote, "as did the mayor. He was elected by the people, he was the very first fire chief of the city."

Of Samuel Hart's seven surviving children, Robert A. Hart was the best known, and was the Hart who got the family involved in the development of subdivisions, an activity that continues to this day. His initial development effort involved his extensive acreage in south Baton Rouge.

Rutcho Hart said his great-grandfather Robert sold lots in areas off Nicholson Drive for $599 each in the early 1900s, collecting $1 a week from the buyers.

"He was also the first to enter politics, serving on the parish police jury and school board in the 1900s and becoming Baton Rouge's mayor in 1909-1910."

Robert Hart-Carleton wrote that his father as mayor "constitutes a major transition in the city's history. The era of vision and leadership required to lift the town out of the mud and launch it toward a better future of its own making."

In 1999, Carleton said, Mayor Hart and a "small band of progressive citizens" persuaded property owners to approve a series of bond issues for public improvements—a new city hall, Convention Street School, and paring of Third, Main and North Boulevard.

Hart is credited with launching a "new era of city improvements in schools, streets and roads, sewage and other areas."

"During his long tenure on the school board and as chairman of the finance committee, Hart's record of achievement is well-received, and his service as mayor is characterized by his efforts to improve the city's infrastructure."

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Photo provided by the Hart family.