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Fretz Construction still building history after 86 years

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In 1923 Edmond Fretz founded a construction company in Houston and immediately began contributing to the city's rapid growth with his building skills. Fretz had no way of knowing then that his fledgling company would be in business 86 years later and that the reins would still be held by his descendants.

Fretz Construction Co.'s story is historic in every sense of the word.

As a young child, Edmond A. Fretz emigrated with his parents from France, settling in North Dakota. After graduating from Marquette University at the age of 17, he received a degree in civil engineering from the University of Wisconsin. Coming to Houston in 1913 as a bridge designer, he was the resident engineer on the first wharves built for the newly-opened Houston Ship Channel.

After serving as City of Houston Engineer for 10 years, Fretz founded the Standard Construction Co. He changed the name of his firm to Fretz Construction Co. in 1932. Today, Edmond's grandson serves as president of the company. Many of the company's early structures still stand as originally built while others have received a restoration or additions.

Fretz worked with prominent builders and architects, including Jesse Jones, John Staub, Maurice Sullivan, Joseph Finger and



Alfred C. Finn. An innovative project in the late 1930s was the River Oaks Community Shopping Center, the city's first development of its kind. Occupying both sides of W. Gray near Shepherd Drive, the complex was one of the first auto-centered, suburban shopping centers in the nation. Its Art Deco architecture became a significant signature for the city, although a portion of the center has been demolished by its owner.

Other Fretz buildings have survived in their entirety and have been restored or adapted for a different use. One such project is Byrd's Department Store, constructed at the corner of Main Street and Prairie Avenue in 1934. Following a 10-year vacancy, the Fretz company renovated the former retail business in 2006 as Byrd's Lofts (pictured). The upper floors are residential while the ground floor will contain a grocery store and restaurant.

Fretz also returned to one of its original projects when the firm built a parish hall and priory for Holy Rosary Catholic

Church in 2005. The company had erected the church in 1933 using an Indiana limestone. When the new construction was planned, Fretz was able to contact the same quarry and, 75 years later, secure the identical limestone for Holy Rosary's companion building, creating a seamless transition.

The company has possibly completed more religious construction than any other firm in the Texas Gulf Coast region. It

also has a record in this field of repeating work for their clients. In 1930 Fretz built a school for St. Anne's Catholic Church on Westheimer. The firm built the landmark church for St. Anne's in 1939. Then, 60 years later, the company completed the parish activity hall for the congregation. In much the same manner, Fretz has built three major expansions for Saint Agnes Academy, a century-old high school for young women.

Other educational institutions built by Fretz include John H. Reagan High School in the Houston Heights in 1926, Incarnate Word Convent (now part of the Episcopal High School campus) in 1931 and St. Thomas High School on Memorial Drive in 1940.

Texas Aggie alumni will know the historic Jack Williams Systems Administration Building at the east entrance to Texas A&M University in College Station, built by Fretz in 1932. The company also built sports facilities, including Robertson Stadium at the University of Houston in 1941.