

# The Past is Still Visible: The McKnight Building

By: Brenda Lincke Fisseler



The two brothers considered their options as they strolled around the Lavaca County Courthouse square that December morning. 1892 was coming to a close and they realized that vacant lots on the square were becoming scarce. They needed to make a decision. The men stopped in front of a building on the south west corner of the square. It was a two story brick building erected by the two brothers in 1891 for the Von Rosenberg family. They turned and walked a few steps to their left until they were standing in front of a vacant lot. The lot had potential; to the right was the Von Rosenberg building, to the left was the lot owned by the jeweler Andrew Stankiewicz. They looked at each other and nodded, silently agreeing that they had made their decision. It was time to approach the Von Rosenberg Brothers to see if they could strike a deal. The brothers were Matthew Alvin McKnight and his younger brother James Fulton McKnight partners in the contracting firm of McKnight Bros. The two men were the sons of Thomas William McKnight, a rock mason and contractor, who emigrated from Ireland in 1849. Prior to their current endeavor, the brothers

had a long list of successful building contracts including the Levytansky building, the Masonic Hall, and the Von Rosenberg building in Hallettsville

On January 18, 1893 the McKnight Bros. purchased part of Lots 1 & 3 in Block 7 from the Von Rosenberg Bros. In the deed, the Von Rosenberg Bros. also granted the McKnight Bros. the privilege of joining to the wall of their two story building on the east side and allowing the McKnights to wall up to the second story windows when they erected their building.

The very next day the Hallettsville Herald reported that a substantial building boom was to be inaugurated in Hallettsville with four and possibly more mercantile building to be erected. The paper reported that the McKnights had purchased property on the south side of the square adjoining the Von Rosenberg Bros. property and that they would erect a one-story building designed for mercantile purposes.

After the purchase was complete, J. F. returned to Beaumont where he was supervising the erection of a building. I know this is a big project, James told his brother Matthew, but I promise to return as soon as the building operations have begun and I will remain in Hallettsville during the entire construction.

In the February 2, 1893 issue of the Herald, an article stated that the newspaper had learned, from an authentic source that work on what would be the McKnight and Stankiewicz buildings would commence at an early date, as early as the following week. Their source was correct because on February 6, 1893, Andrew Stankiewicz entered into a contact with the McKnight Bros.

It was popular knowledge that Stankiewicz had purchased part of two lots on the south side of the square in August of 1891 from Wm. Von Rosenberg

When asked about the newspaper article, Mr. Stankiewicz said that since the McKnights had purchased the property between him and Von Rosenberg, and had announced that they were erecting a one story building designed for mercantile purposes, I decided it was time for me to erect my new building as well.

The intention was to design the buildings to be similar to one another. Both buildings will be 23 ½ by 80 feet, one story in height. The walls will be brick and the front of the buildings composed mainly of iron and glass. The front doors will stand inward about four feet from the sidewalk creating a vestibule at the entrance. The front of the buildings will be adorned with architectural frills and furbelows and cornices of elaborate design.

By June, 1893 the two buildings were ready for occupancy. Stankiewicz moved his merchandise into his building while the McKnight Bros. building was operating as a drug store.

During November of 1897, M.A. approached his younger brother J.F. about acquiring his interest in the lot and building. In exchange for his cooperation, M.A. would deed his interest in the McKnight homestead in Hallettsville to J.F. The McKnight homestead was located in the Hill & Simpson addition to the City of Hallettsville and fronted on Kroschel Ave.

After acquiring his brother's interest, M. A. sold the McKnight building to Maria T. Kainer on December 29, 1897. Mrs. Kainer purchased the property using the proceeds from her late husband's life insurance policies.

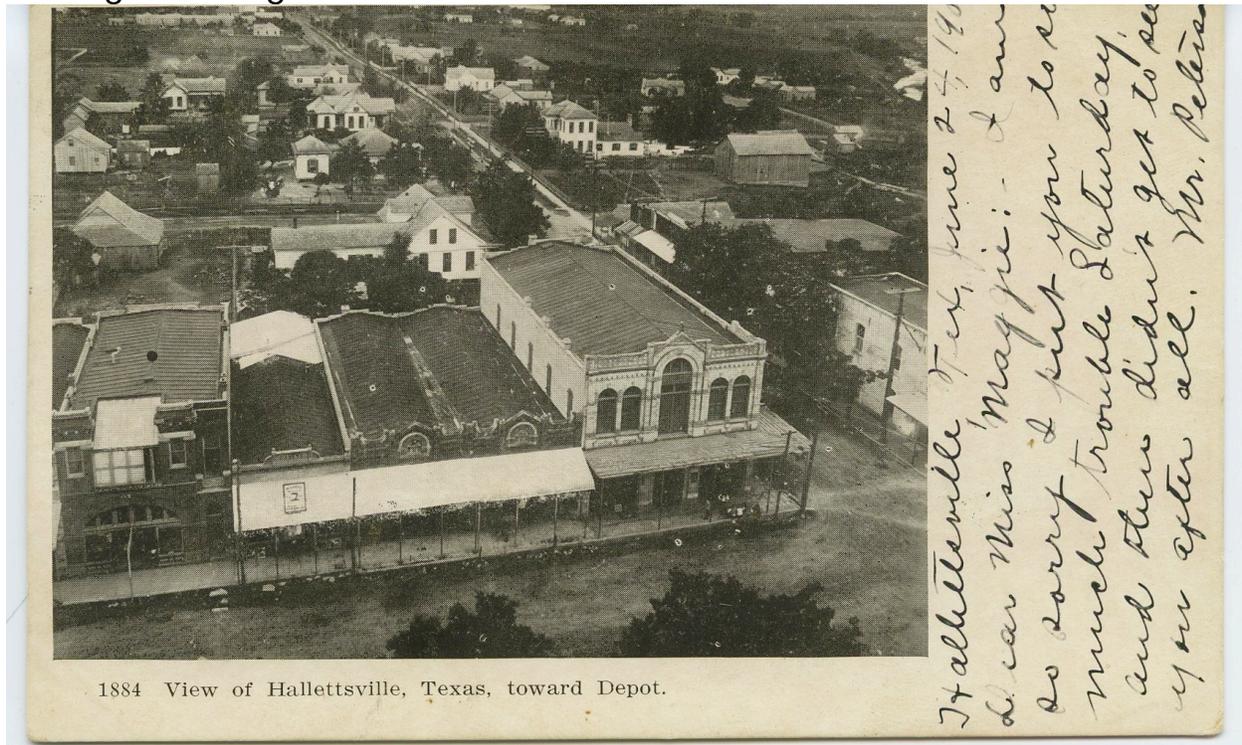


In the January 6, 1898 Hallettsville Herald it was announced that the McKnight Building occupied by Ledbetter & Knox, druggist, had been sold to Mrs. J. N. Kainer for \$4,500.00. S. O. Patton Esq. for Mrs. Kainer closed the deal the past Thursday. Mrs. Kainer retained ownership of the building until it was sold to Paul Renger and Michael Saccar in 1912.

The McKnight building served as a drug store for many years, including Ledbetter & Knox, Kainer Drug Store and City Drug Store. Dr. Paul Renger also

had an office in the rear of the building until 1921. It later housed Rubin's Men's Shop, Wall's Dress Shop and the Ben Franklin Store.

In 1970, the Ben Franklin store moved from the McKnight building into the Heye building next door. After Ben Franklin vacated the building, the street level floor of Gindler's, in the old Von Rosenberg building, expanded to take in the empty McKnight building to the east.



1884 View of Hallettsville, Texas, toward Depot.

In September 1983, Eli and Ruth Rubin sold the McKnight building to the Gindler Bros. In May 1999, the now joined buildings were purchased by James and Zoy Kocian, remodeled in 2001, and currently operates as the Kocian Building.

*Great minds are related to the brief span of time during which they live as great buildings are to a little square in which they stand*

SIDEBAR: McKnight Bros.

M. A. McKnight and J. F. McKnight were two of seven children of Thomas William McKnight and his wife Elizabeth MacNamara. The two boys apprenticed under their father, a well-known builder and contractor, who emigrated to the United States from Ireland in 1849 and settle in Calhoun County, Texas in 1855

Matthew Alvin McKnight (M.A.) was born on August 25, 1856 in Virginia. He married Lelia Barclay in Tyler County Texas on May 25, 1892. His son, Matthew

Alvin, was born on April 2, 1893 in Hallettsville during the time M.A. was working on the McKnight Building.

M.A. was killed in a street duel on April 5, 1912 in Beaumont, Texas. McKnight and W. C. Whitney, two of the most prominent contractors of Beaumont, supposedly shot and killed each other over a disputed contract for a school house in Jefferson County, Texas.

James Fulton (J.F) was born on April 27, 1865 in Port Lavaca, Texas. He married Henrietta Augusta Little on February 24, 1897 in Victoria, Texas. J. F. and his family made their home in Hallettsville where he died on October 18, 1941.

J.F. was a prominent building contractor for approximately 40 years in Texas and West Louisiana.