

Museum News & Views

It is a real honor for me to inaugurate this weekly news item. We at the Museum have a great choice of stories and tales to tell. Since the Texas Centennial celebration in 1936, the Museum has been an inspiration to Texans and non-Texans alike. It has told and continues to tell the extraordinary story of Sam Houston, who came to Texas from Tennessee and the Indian Territory and made a mark on history that will remain for the ages. It is also a major source of heritage tourism and economic development for Huntsville and Walker County. In recognition of the state and national historical significance of the site, the entire Museum complex is on the National Register of Historic Places and Sam Houston's "Woodland Home" is a National Historic Landmark. In 2000 the Museum also received the highest honor awarded to a museum, accreditation by the American Association of Museums.

I am often surprised by the number of folks I meet, many right here in our own hometown of Huntsville, who do not know that the Sam Houston Memorial Museum is an integral part of Sam Houston State University. That bond goes all the way back to 1905. That year, students at the then Sam Houston Normal Institute, with the inspiring leadership of a teacher, Bertha Kirkley, undertook to save a badly damaged old house. That crumbling edifice was General Sam Houston's *Woodland Home*, existing at the time as "Smede's Boarding House," and serving as student housing for college girls. The students repaired the building, removed inappropriate additions, and did their best to put it back to the way it looked when the Houston family lived there.

In 1936 the University and the State of Texas observed the Centennial of the Texas Revolution. The Steamboat House, where Houston died in 1863, was moved across town from its old location next to Oakwood Cemetery and restored on the Museum grounds. They built the Rotunda facing Sam Houston Avenue to display the artifacts and treasures collected by the Houston family. Today the Rotunda is the center portion of the Memorial Museum building. For many museum visitors the most familiar relic of the 1936 Centennial is Lake Oolooteka. Built in the shape of Texas, the lake sees steady traffic as the duck pond loved by many young children who feed the ducks every day.

Today our partnership with the University is visible whenever you drive past the Katy & E. Don Walker, Sr. Education Center on 19th Street. The lower level is closed and under construction as it is rebuilt into the W.S. Gibbs Conference Hall. Funded jointly by the Cultural Arts Foundation and the University, these new rooms will provide Huntsville and Walker County with exciting new meeting facilities for public and private events. Look for a grand reopening in January.

All of the staff here at the museum are deeply proud of their work and treasure the history and heritage entrusted to us. These last few months of unremitting heat and drought have taken their toll on the grounds here just as they have all over town. We are doing all we can to preserve the trees and landscape of the park, which is just as important a historic site as the houses and cabins themselves. There are several large trees which have died and are located in places where they can seriously endanger visitors if they fall. They will have to be cut down soon, so please bear with us while that work goes on.

William Faulkner wrote: “The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.” I’ve been in the museum business a long time and I know how true that is. We live history every day, not just by dressing in historic clothing, firing off muskets, cooking in Eliza’s kitchen fireplace, tending to Houston’s garden, and blacksmithing in Joshua’s forge. We live it every time we talk to a visitor who realizes the issues Sam Houston debated and fought over are still the same issues we discuss today; every time a school child looks amazed and says “I didn’t know they did that back then.” In the weeks ahead, we all look forward to your visit to the Sam Houston Memorial Museum “where a warm welcome awaits.”

Patrick B. Nolan,

Director