

DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS

by James E. Fisher

It stands above the flat Texas soil east of Houston and it is one of the most recognizable symbols of the history of Texas, but few people who see it today realize that this now iconic structure had a mixture of appearances before it rose above the surrounding landscape for its dedication on April 21, 1939. By date, the oldest conceptual drawing developed by architect Albert Finn's firm was produced on August 25, 1934.¹ This monument drawing displays an exterior layout similar to the final version, with the building's finial shown as a simple flat five-pointed star. In a note to Albert Finn, Jesse Jones comments, "The star in the last design seems too large, and I am inclined to the opinion that figures of some sort would be better than the star."² Over the next year, staff architect Victor E. Johnson³ sketched many of the ideas generated under Albert Finn and Jesse Jones' leadership. The concepts they explored range from a basic pillar

and pedestal style, to an elaborate building which featured a circular, column lined Court of Honor with no central pillar or shaft.⁴ Between July and September of 1935, at least a half dozen building drawings were developed for consideration.

In October 1935, Hiram O. Clarke, Jr.,⁵ Chairman of the Special Houston San Jacinto Memorial Committee, sent a recommendation to Lieutenant Governor Walter F. Woodul, Chairman of the Commission of Control - Texas Centennial in Austin, recommending the design of the building we know today. This letter of recommendation includes a paragraph which notes that the building "of classic lines with the court of honor . . . involved expenditures greater than the appropriations available and were not quite in harmony with all of the views necessary to be given consideration in the erection of such an outstanding and lasting memorial."⁶

For the 100th anniversary of the Battle of San Jacinto, April 21, 1936, a model of the recommended memorial was produced to accompany the formal announcement of the design. Since 1936 the Marini family, and now Melba Marini Champion, has maintained the "mother mold" of that model.



Her father, Charles Marini, founded Houston Art Stone & Ornamental Plaster Company in 1918. C. L. Moore, his model maker, crafted the architect's model of the San Jacinto Monument. The mother mold is the original model, and from it other models are created. Mrs. Champion recalls that three replicas were produced from the Marini-Moore master, and that those replicas



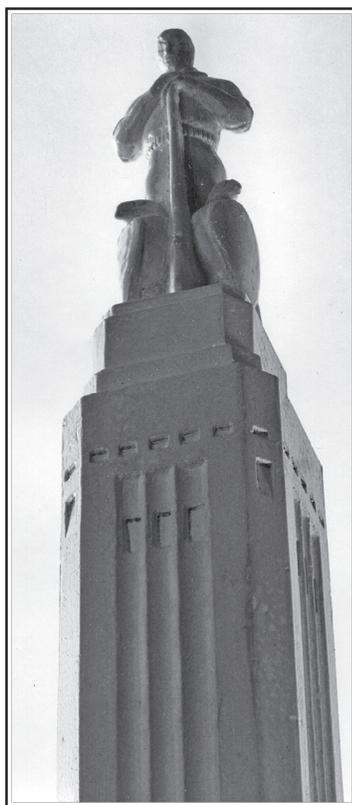
Melba Champion and Marini-Moore Model.
Photo: James Fisher

ALBERT FINN DESIGNS. COURTESY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER, HPL.

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were given to U. S. President Franklin Roosevelt, Texas Governor James Allred, and Houston Mayor Oscar Holcombe.⁷

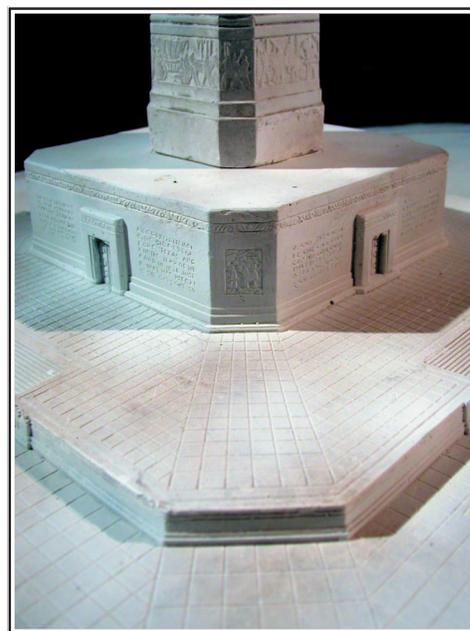
The publicity photographs of the model taken by James Merchant's Company in 1936 reveal that some details of the overall design were still being deliberated.⁸ Two of the monument's final designs shown in Victor Johnson's sketches had been eliminated; those being the original five-pointed star, and the standing masculine, business figure. The primary Merchant photos of the model present the nine-pointed star which now tops the monument; however, an additional photograph brings to light a pioneer figure clutching a rifle standing atop the monument. At this figure's feet are two eagles positioned on either side of the rifle's stock. In 1965 the San Jacinto Monument and Museum acquired the shaft of that version of the model which bears the pioneer figure shown in the photo.⁹ Charles Kubin of Bellows Construction, the grandson of the carpenter who built the monument star, noted in a talk on October 17, 1991, to the Houston Chapter, Associated General Contractors, "I was 5 at the time that the Monument was built and I have no recall of that time and the job. However, dad told me an interesting story about the star. He said that the plans called for a star but everyone was unhappy with the appearance of the star. Consideration was given, at an early stage, to a two dimensional star and even replacing the star with a statue of Gen. Sam Houston, but these ideas did not solve the 360 degree view problem, so a dimensional star with 9 points was conceived."¹⁰ From



James Merchant photo. Courtesy Story Sloane Gallery.

that statement one might surmise that Merchant's photographic pioneer figure represents General Houston watching over his battleground. Also presented in the publicity photographs are artistic features which did not become part of the monument. The model exhibits four stylized groups of pioneers positioned on the roof above each entrance.¹¹

The Marini-Moore model includes an amphitheater on the east side of the monument base. The Merchant photos confirm that portion of the model showing it covered, as if landscaped, with the curved outline of the amphitheater still visible. The original \$840,000 estimate of cost for the project did not include this element, but it was a desired addition as evidenced in Consulting Engineer Robert Cummins' letter to A. C. Finn in February of 1936, specifying that adding the terrace and amphitheater, "as shown on the latest plan", would add an estimated

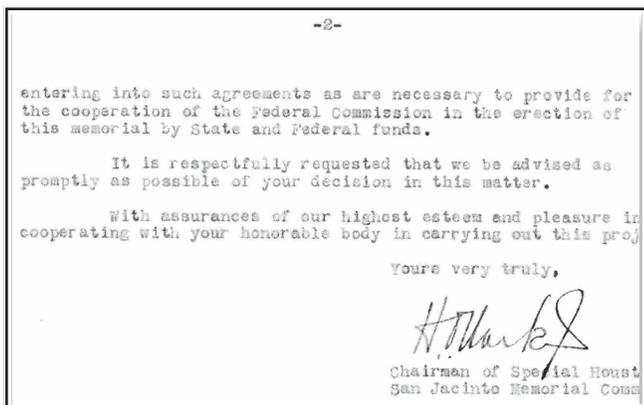


Marini-Moore Model. Photo: James Fisher

\$150,000 to the project.¹² Ultimately a 5,000 seat Amphitheater became part of the completed structure.¹³

Cummins' February letter also reflects a \$6,000 allowance for an unspecified "Top Ornament"¹⁴. As the 9-pointed star became the choice for that top ornament, the covering of the star became the next assessment. Correspondence from the Aluminum Company of America in May, 1936, to A. C. Finn's office requests that only aluminum alloy #214 be used to cover the finial, otherwise the alloy "will probably turn black."¹⁵ In a response it was asked "Would it be possible to get a mat finished surface – say like a sandblast – something without any sheen in a color that would match the Cordova Shell Texas Limestone?"¹⁶ The exterior of the 200 ton "Lone Star" that is the San Jacinto monument's finial is covered in same Cordova stone used in the building of the monument.

In summary, General Houston does not forever gaze out upon the landscape, and the building includes no colonnades or groups of pioneers, but it boasts an exterior that is simple, meaningful and timeless. So in this writer's opinion, Albert Finn and Jesse Jones fought their own battle, and like the Army of San Jacinto persevered in a distinctive and spectacular manner. ✪



Hiram Clarke, Jr. Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, HPL.