

# Building the San Jacinto Museum and its Collection

by Lisa A. Struthers and Elizabeth Appleby

On February 15, 1938, the San Jacinto State Park Commission requested that George A. Hill, Jr., serve as chairman of a museum board to plan and organize a museum of history to be housed in the San Jacinto Monument.<sup>1</sup> He was eminently qualified. Hill, the grandson of San Jacinto Veteran James Monroe Hill, was a member of the Texas State Historical Association, the Texas Folklore Society, and The Texas Philosophical Society. He also had served for four years as president of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>2</sup>

In early April, Hill corresponded with respected scholars of Texas history and museum directors, asking their opinion of his plan. Hill's report on the plan was then submitted to the State Board of Control and the San Jacinto State Park Commission, which unanimously approved it.<sup>3</sup> The State Board of Control approved a resolution creating the San Jacinto Museum of History on September 22, 1938. The legislature appointed five trustees: George A. Hill, Jr., Louis W. Kemp, W. B. Bates, Alfred C. Finn (architect of the San Jacinto Monument) and Madge Hearne (granddaughter of Sam Houston and President of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas).<sup>4</sup> The trustees, all from the Houston area, were appointed to serve for five years.

The trustees were given the authority :

- a) to formulate a plan for a museum of history to be located, exhibited and administered in the San Jacinto Memorial Monument Building; such authority to include proper management or supervision of the room, or rooms, so occupied within the building;
- b) to select materials, equipment and furnishings for the operation of the Museum and the Memorial Monument Building;
- c) to prescribe standards and rules and regulations for the conduct and administration;
- d) to make provision for the accession of historical materials for preservation and exhibition therein, and to do and perform such other acts as shall be necessary, convenient or desirable in the furtherance of the foregoing objectives; all, however, being subject to the approval and control of the San Jacinto State Park Commission, and of the State Board of Control of the State of Texas to the extent that such supervision and control may be vested in either or both of such State agencies under the provisions of existing, or future laws.<sup>5</sup>

The San Jacinto Museum of History Association, with the same officers, was chartered to raise funds for the San Jacinto Museum of History and to solicit donations of historic material.<sup>6</sup> The charter of the association proclaimed the mandate "to revisualize



*George A. Hill, Jr., from the San Jacinto Museum & Monument: The First Ten Years of the San Jacinto Museum of History Association under its late president of the board George A. Hill, Jr., 1950.*

the history of Texas and the region; instill and encourage historical inquiry; collect and preserve the materials of history and spread historical information; illustrate the chronological story of the region as determined from authoritative history by means of exhibits worthy of a museum of first rank; extend and diffuse knowledge of our history, and promote and perpetuate peace, friendship, and sympathetic understanding between the people of Texas and the people of Mexico, Spain, France, and the Latin-American Republics."<sup>7</sup>

A result of the broad mission statement was the invitation of the heads of state of Mexico, Spain, the Latin American Republics, Great Britain, and France to the opening of the museum "representing as it does our common history, in separate periods." Directors of history museums and

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historical associations throughout the world were also invited.<sup>8</sup> This broad vision influenced the collecting focus of the museum, the publications of the association, and the exhibits presented.

Hill conferred with Ike Moore, then State Supervisor of the Historical Records Survey of the WPA, on how the historical material acquired by the museum should be arranged, inventoried, and stored.<sup>9</sup> Ike Moore was later hired to be the first Director of the museum, beginning in January 16, 1939, and Malcolm McLean was hired as assistant archivist.<sup>10</sup> The initial focus of the museum association was to prepare for the opening of the museum on April 20, 1939.

Museum cases were purchased from the Remington Rand Company, in a style approved by Alfred C. Finn, the architect. "The Bronze Wall Cases will be equipped with a composition surbase specified by the architect. Both the finish of the wood and bronze, together with the style of wood cutting for the base, will also be supplied in line with the architect's requirement."<sup>11</sup> The legs of the flat cases, and the bases of the wall cases were designed to compliment the fluting on the exterior of the monument shaft, and the interior bronze doors. The cases were required to be received by April 1, to allow time for the installation of the exhibits.<sup>12</sup> An initial fund of \$30,000 for exhibit installation was put together by business firms and individuals, with an appeal going out to the citizens of Houston in February, 1939.<sup>13</sup> These funds were also needed to pay for staff and for the expenses related to the opening ceremony for the museum.<sup>14</sup> A total of fifty-one cases were purchased before the 1939 opening, with additional cases purchased over the next several years.<sup>15</sup> Some of these cases are still in use today, as are the benches and monolithic chairs that were designed to match the cases. The standard brass lamps have been replaced by a more unobtrusive lighting system.

The original plans for the monument included murals on the gallery walls.

By the time the building was ready to be opened, murals had not yet been designed.<sup>16</sup> In the early 1950s there was some discussion with muralist Warren Hunter about adding the paintings, but the decision was made to delay the murals until a later time.<sup>17</sup>

The first items to become part of the collections of the San Jacinto Museum were collected by the San Jacinto Centennial Association at the time of the Centennial and displayed in the west wing of the Houston Public Library in 1936. One of the goals of this Museum of Houston and Texas History was "providing a nucleus for the permanent San Jacinto Museum of History."<sup>18</sup> George D. Sears was the chair of the accessions committee for the Centennial Association; he later gave much of his collection of early Texas imprints to the museum.<sup>19</sup> Another exhibit of historical materials was presented at the Houston Public Library in early 1939, with the purpose of showing the public the kinds of things that were to be collected for the San Jacinto Museum of History.

In creating the museum, the association believed that it would benefit hundreds of people in south and southeast Texas by providing an institution that would care for and display their relics nearby, and that

many people would take advantage of the new museum by donating their historical materials.<sup>20</sup> One of the major donors was George A. Hill, Jr. who had been collecting historical materials for several years, with the growing intention of forming a museum. The opening exhibit, however, contained a significant number of items loaned from other institutions and from individuals. "We are hopeful that Mr. Thomas Streeter of New York will lend to us, for exhibition, the material loaned by him to the New York Public Library for their Centennial exhibit in 1936."<sup>21</sup> Other lenders for the initial exhibit were Everette Lee DeGolyer, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and the University of Texas Library.

The original plan for the museum exhibits was to portray seven chronological periods: the Spanish and French discovery (1492-1683), Spanish and French colonization (1683-1810), Mexico's struggle for independence (1810-1821), the period of Texas' colonization following Mexican independence (1821-1834), Texas' struggle for independence (1834-1836), the Republic of Texas (1836-1845), and Texas from statehood until the Civil War (1845-1861).<sup>22</sup> The Spanish Room to the south was planned to cover the first four periods, with the last three



*Crowds visit San Jacinto Monument. Originally published by the Houston Post.*



displayed in the American Room to the north. The room at the back or east side was planned to be used to display books and manuscripts; the first exhibit placed there was Thomas Streeter's collection.<sup>23</sup>

Materials were initially received on behalf of the museum in the third floor of the Houston Public Library.<sup>24</sup> Some loan items were not received until the third week of April. Ike Moore and Malcolm McLean spent the night before the opening completing the installation of the cases, leaving the monument just before 8 a.m. Margaret McLean, hired as the receptionist, and the elevator operator were the only employees present when the doors opened.<sup>25</sup>

Pictures of the opening day, April 20, show that the galleries were full of visitors. Volunteers from the Fire Department acted as guards during the opening, directing traffic through the galleries.<sup>26</sup> During the summer of 1939, an average of five hundred people visited the museum a day, with up to four thousand visitors on some days.<sup>27</sup>

In the initial year, 395,062 people visited the San Jacinto Museum. Admission to the museum was free, and an elevator ticket cost 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. Visitation remained high until wartime rationing of tires and gasoline dropped the attendance to 173,368 in fiscal year 1943-44. Uniformed servicemen,

however, were given rides out to the monument. Patriotic fervor in the 1940s led to high attendance figures after gas rationing ended. After ten years, almost three million people had visited the San Jacinto Museum.<sup>28</sup>

The war years were difficult for the museum in more than attendance. Staffing was an increasing problem due to the distance workers had to travel to the museum at a time when fuel was limited, the higher wages available for defense work, and the calling up of staff to join the Armed Forces. Malcolm McLean, archivist of the museum, resigned December 15, 1941, to do translation work for the War Department. Ike Moore left in 1943, despite an appeal by George A. Hill, Jr., to the Selective Service. "Though the chances of military attack on the Houston area is probably remote in the foreseeable future, Mr. Moore's presence would be indispensable for the safe removal of the Museum's treasures to a protected place. In the



*Four Fingered Aztec flute used in religious dances. ca. 15th century.*



*From left to right: Leather moccasin given to Sam Houston by the Cherokee, a purse given to Sam Houston by Native American girl, and the glasses he wore while serving as a U.S. Senator.*

event of bombing attack the Museum will move its materials on exhibit from the vulnerable museum halls to the interior basement of the Monument proper. Such removal would be done in haste and would require a detailed knowledge of the collections. (The Houston Public Library and the Museum of Fine Arts also plan to move their rare materials to this same place in the event of an attack.)<sup>29</sup> While Moore was in the Navy, the museum stored his household goods "under the stairway on the basement floor."<sup>30</sup> Moore lost his life aboard the U.S.S. *Sangaman* in May of 1944. In February of 1942, Joe B. Frantz was hired as Archivist; he became Temporary Acting Director as of May 31, 1943, until he too went into the Navy three weeks later. Andrew Forest Muir started work as Acting Director on August 8, 1943, and Dorothy W. Estes (later Knepper) took over the job in June of 1944. Elevator operators, secretaries, custodians, and building engineers were also lost to the war effort.

Outreach was an important goal of the museum. From its inception, the museum put together small traveling exhibits for display in schools, stores, banks, and theaters.



*Uniform worn in Texas Campaign by Juan Morales, commander of the Mexican Fourth Column at the Alamo.*



Some of the many Pre-Columbian artifacts in the museum collection.

Gerry Doyle, part-time publication director, prepared a slide show that he presented at schools and civic groups in the Houston-Beaumont area.<sup>31</sup>

An early goal was to encourage school group visitation.<sup>32</sup> As an aid to students studying Spanish, the museum published *Documentos Tejanos*, a book providing copies and transcriptions of Spanish-language documents dating from 1829 to 1841, along with Spanish language vocabulary and historical background for each document. The initial print run was given free to Houston schools.<sup>33</sup> A curriculum guide was developed in 1992 to aid teachers in planning field trips to the museum.

As part of its efforts to encourage historical inquiry, the San Jacinto Museum of History Association joined with R. H. Barlow of Mexico City in publishing volume three of the journal *Tlalocan: A Journal of Source Materials on the Native Cultures of Mexico*, which was “dedicated to throwing light on the Indians of former New Spain.”<sup>34</sup> Documents in Nahuatl from the museum’s collection were reproduced in this periodical. Based on the work of Ike Moore and the Historical Records Survey Program, the museum published *Texas Newspapers: A Union List of Newspaper Files Available in Offices of Publishers, Libraries, and a Number of Private Collections* in 1941. Other interesting publications included *Construction of the San Jacinto Memorial* (1938); *The Battle of San Jacinto, and the San Jacinto Campaign* (1947); *The Ships of the Texas Navy: a List* (1948); *A Check List of Manuscripts* (1949), listing the collection donated by Mr.

and Mrs. Jesse H. Jones; *Camels in Texas* (1956); a reprint of Robert Penn Warren’s *How Texas Won Her Freedom: the Story of Sam Houston & the Battle of San Jacinto* (1959). *The Honor Roll of the Battle* was published in 1965, listing the names of the veterans listed on the bronze plaques in the museum. One of the initial members of the Board of Trustees, Louis W. Kemp, conducted the research for the plaques. More recent publications include *Joy Unconfined* (1986), a work showing the portraits of Robert Joy, and *Sam Chamberlain’s Mexican War*, published for the museum by the Texas State Historical Association.

Initial plans for the museum included lectures on historical and patriotic subjects for schools and adult groups, and organizing essay contests to stimulate original research, and aid for researchers.<sup>35</sup> A large portion of the distinctive character of the San Jacinto Museum of History is derived from the unusual range of its collections. Many history museums are committed to presenting either an event or a period in history or a local, national or international view. The museum mission manages to combine aspects of all these types, which has the potential to cause confusion in our guests, but it is the expansive nature of our collection that has the ability to inspire and teach. It is rare to find a fifteenth century Mayan artifact and a fine silver tea service used by a Texas patriot, military uniforms, archaeological specimens, religious icons, farm tools, pharmacological artifacts, ornate jewelry, Christmas

ornaments and toys all under the roof of a small, state history museum.

A museum is conventionally regarded as an assembly of objects recording the achievements of the past, but as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, it also exists as “the present moment of the past”, throwing a light both backwards and forwards from history into history from our own time.<sup>36</sup> Thus, performing a qualitative exam of the collections in 2007, we will undoubtedly pose many of the same questions that historians and guests have asked for decades, but the answers to these questions may prove to be vastly different due to the changing times and audience. If asked to select a handful of artifacts for display or discussion from such diverse resources as ours, one faces a daunting challenge. What criteria should be used to make the selection? What weight should each criterion carry? What impression should be conveyed? Such basic questions trigger more practical concerns. Should the choices be based principally on historic importance or uniqueness—both ambiguous criteria that reflect personal perceptions of quality? Or should the importance of the object to its original owner or subsequent owners be a factor? Should the objects collectively present the entire chronological and historical sweep of the collection?

The artifact collection at the San Jacinto Museum of History—with over 18,000 items in storage and a mere two percent on display to the public at any given time—has significant artifacts representing the many cultures that have occupied the region for nearly seven centuries. Thus, a simple chronological sequence can provide a framework which can be followed backwards or forwards in time from early Native American empires in Central America and the Southwest to the early decades of the twentieth century in Texas, tracing the history of the region from early European settlement, through revolution and nationhood and then the conflict and capitalism of the later half of the nineteenth century.





The Battle of San Jacinto in *History of South America and Mexico* by John M. Niles. Hartford: H. Huntington, June 1837.

The earliest artifacts include ceremonial, practical and ornamental pre-Columbian pottery. The collection includes over 200 items representing (among others) the Mayan, Aztec, Olmec, and Zapotec civilizations. The collection includes a wide variety of vessels that were made to honor and commemorate once-living rulers and to venerate their culture's gods and ancestors; these objects, laden with power and symbolism, were frequently buried in tombs. A careful examination of our ceramics gives an excellent idea of the elegance and extraordinary delicacy that must have characterized these ancient civilizations and the variety and depth of the museum collection. The collection also includes many iconic items from the middle to late nineteenth century that are illustrative of the rich heritage of Texas, including Colt pistols, spurs, bits, boots, saddles, chaps, rifles, and over eighty examples of barbed wire. Analysis of these artifacts can reveal how various elements of equipment changed over time and how different regional styles of equipment evolved in Texas.

The San Jacinto Museum of History has special areas of richness in the collection reflecting the interests of the museum founders and key events in Texas history. The holdings on the exploration and colonization of the

New World in the southwest, the Texas Revolution, the Republic of Texas, and the Civil War, to name a few, are areas of depth and breadth in the artifact collections. These treasures, which include many of the artifacts commonly associated with the collections of the museum, include items such as the military uniform of Juan Morales, the commander of Mexican forces in the battles of the Alamo and Coleto during the Texas Revolution. When he led the Mexican Fourth Column at the Alamo, he wore this uniform consisting of a coat, facing, belt, and shoulder strap. The coat is in excellent condition despite its age. This artifact is one of the most popular with museum visitors, and it is important for the history that it evokes and the artistry that it illustrates.

Another item that is closely associated with both the history of Texas and the history of the museum is the collection of 140 watercolors executed by soldier and artist Samuel Emery Chamberlain depicting his adventures during the Mexican War. These watercolors illustrate Chamberlain's memoir titled *My Confession: the Recollections*

*of a Rogue*. One of the most notable of the illustrations was the one used at the close of the manuscript. A rainbow is depicted extending across the Rio Grande River from a recognizable Washington, D.C., to Mexico City with the word "Peace" written in bold block letters at the apex of the arc. The image exemplifies one of the fundamental goals of the museum: to create a greater understanding between the two cultures.

Within the artifact collection are pockets of unexpected treasures that are illustrative of the diverse history of the region and the expansive nature of our mission. Nineteenth century furniture-making tools, Christmas ornaments and decorations, cooking implements, children's toys, printing blocks, pharmaceutical tools and chemicals, are just some of the items that may remind visitors of visits to their grandmother's attic when they were young and serve to tell a more comprehensive story of the history of the people who made Texas what it is today.

The collections housed in the Albert Ethel Herzstein Library were acquired over a period of time, from a number of donors, and cover a wide variety



Novena a la Esclarecida Virgen, Madre de Religiosas Santa Clara. Mexico: Herederos de la Viuda de Francisco Rodríguez Lupercio, 1703.





Peace by Samuel Emery Chamberlain (1829-1908), soldier, adventurer, and artist who fought in the U.S.-Mexican War with the first U.S. Dragoons.

of formats. The Albert and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation supports a cataloging project that shares information about the collections through OCLC's WorldCat and through the museum's website.

The Herzstein Library houses over 20,000 volumes of books and periodicals. Some, like the latest Texas history works, are available currently in bookstores, while others are rare works not readily available. *Novena a la Esclarecida Virgen, Madre de Religiosas Santa Clara* was printed in Mexico in 1703 and is one of a large collection of early religious works printed there. This small book came to the museum from George A. Hill, Jr., as a part of his Spanish language collections. Other books, like a copy of Henderson K. Yoakum's 1855 *History of Texas, From Its First Settlement in 1685 to its Annexation to the United States in 1846*, are rare due to their association with a previous owner. A copy in the Herzstein Library was owned by Moses Austin Bryan, nephew

of Stephen F. Austin and a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto. Bryan annotated his copy to correct and add to the section on the battle. *Niles Weekly Register*, first published in 1811, informed the citizens of Baltimore and other areas of the results of the battle in May of 1836.

Certainly the most unique items at the museum are part of the archives. Some of the large collections, such as the Adele Briscoe Looscan Collection, are the papers of one family, in this case including members of the Briscoe and Harris families. An 1838 letter from Mary Jane Harris Briscoe tells of the growth of the city of Houston and a storm off of Galveston Island that destroyed several ships of the Texas Navy. Other manuscript collections were brought together later by a collector. One such collection is the Houston Endowment Texana Collection, donated by Mr. and Mrs. Jesse H. Jones in 1948. An interesting letter from this collection is one from Major General Edmund P.

Gaines to the U.S. Secretary of War, dated April 28, 1836, advising of the Texan victory at San Jacinto, the capitulation of Santa Anna, and the disposition of the Cherokees and other Indians in Texas from the United States side of the national boundary to return to their villages.

The library houses approximately 350 maps, and 250 prints and lithographs. The photograph collections range from individual family daguerreotypes to the Cecil Thompson collection of over 1,200 photographs of the Houston and Galveston area. Whether writing a book, working on a thesis, or investigating your genealogy, the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Library at the San Jacinto Museum of History is a good starting point for your Texas research. The library's collections are non-circulating, but may be used in the library. It is open for research by appointment on Fridays and two Saturdays a month. To schedule an appointment, contact the librarian, Lisa Struthers, at 281-479-2421 or [library@sanjacinto-museum.org](mailto:library@sanjacinto-museum.org).

The founding trustees set four goals in 1938 when they drafted the charter of the museum: to plan, equip, organize, and acquire artifacts that could then be used to exhibit and interpret the broad nature of their mission. The success of this endeavor can be measured in the quarter of a million visitors to the site, the interest of local, national, and international scholars in our collections, and the continuation of presenting to the public "to revisualize the history of Texas and the region." ✧



Americae Sive Novi Orbis, Nova Descriptio by Abraham Ortelius. Antwerp, 1570.