

Master Planning the San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site

by Michael Strutt

Every Texas schoolchild in fourth and seventh grade Texas history classes knows what happened at San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site. But for anyone—even these students—visiting the site today, understanding what happened here, and how, is difficult because over the 171 years since the battle much has happened to the land on which Texas won its independence. Roads have been constructed, and taken out. During the 1936 centennial celebrations, construction began on the monument and reflecting pool near where the Mexican Army camped one hundred years before. Residences north of the reflection pool and a wastewater treatment plant east of the monument have come and gone. In 1948, the Battleship *Texas* was parked where the Texas Army once camped, and a picnic ground lies where the Mexican Army fled during the fighting. All of these intrusions make it difficult for the modern observer to get a sense of the momentous events of that day and how the landscape affected the outcome. To help visitors better understand San Jacinto, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) began the process of creating a master plan for the battleground. This document details what changes need to be made to the site to enhance interpretation and enable modern visitors to understand how the terrain affected the result of the battle.

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The problems with the site are easy to understand, but less easy to fix. The monument and the battleship draw visitors to the site, but neither is where the fighting took place. Some of the planning questions focus on the landscape. What did it look like in 1836? How can we change it today? How should people move about the site—walking, riding, or driving? How do we orient the visitor to explain the battle's events?

To master plan a site such as San Jacinto requires bringing many experts together. The process includes research, brainstorming what to do, public input, and determining how to get things done. The planners began with this question: What do we need to do to improve the site and the way TPWD interprets the battle? The answers to that question are many, including building a visitors center. While there is a museum in the monument, it does not serve as a first stop, or an orientation center, for the visitor. The museum is operated by the non-profit San Jacinto Museum of History Association, but the responsibility to interpret the battle rests with Texas Parks and Wildlife.

The process for re-envisioning the battleground began in 1995-1996 when four workshops and a public hearing were held to receive comments on what was needed at the battleground. The professional team assembled included staff from TPWD and consultants specializing in writing historic sites master plans. This team set out to chart a new course for San Jacinto. After several drafts and public comments, TPWD released the master plan in 1998. The main goals are as follows:

- preserve the park's significant cultural, historical, and natural resources;
- enhance interpretation;
- achieve for the San Jacinto Battleground a level of public awareness comparable to that of the Alamo as a premier historic site;

- maximize the park's and the museum's financial stability;
- provide recreational opportunities compatible with the park's commemorative purpose; and
- provide a healthy and safe environment for visitors and staff.

Because of the single, eighteen-minute, event that took place here, San Jacinto is a site of major state, national and international importance. How we achieve our stated goals must be considered carefully. Any changes to the site must take into account the potential to adversely modify the historic scene. Research to support proposed changes must demonstrate that no intact archeological evidence of the battle will be damaged. Previous well-meaning changes to the landscape have obscured terrain elements that allowed the Texas Army to advance upon the Mexican front almost unseen. The reflecting pool and entrance road across from the battleship covered over a topographically low area that the Texans used to approach the Mexicans. Helping the modern visitor understand how the terrain played a role in the battle folds into a vision of returning the landscape to its 1836 appearance. In relation to this ideal the Master Plan states:

- the pre-eminent focus of the Park and its future development should be a delineation and interpretation of the 1836 battle; and
- the battleground should, to the extent feasible, be returned to its 1836 condition of prairie, marshes and trees.

The Master Plan acknowledges: "While it is, of course, impossible to turn back the clock and return the Battleground to its exact 1836 condition, it is possible to specify a number of achievable steps that will, over time, bring the site much closer to its original condition than it is today."¹

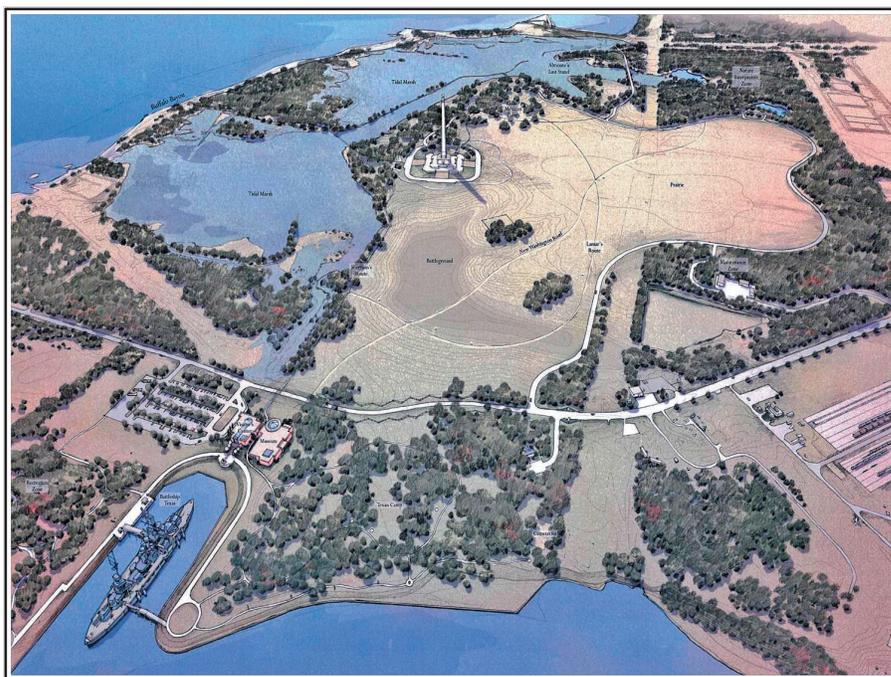
One change that the plan recommends is to remove the reflecting pool. This feature now covers the site of that low

lying swale which allowed the Texans to pass un-noticed up to the Mexican front, hiding their advance until they were nearly on the rise where the monument now sits. An early twentieth century Army Corps of Engineers map clearly shows the swale. In creating the reflecting pool and road, a large area around the swale was smoothed out, erasing a vital piece of the landscape that the modern visitor needs to understand how topography played a role in the outcome of the battle. The Texas landscape gave birth to Texas independence, but this will be difficult to understand until the historic scene has been restored.

Roads that wind through the site today are slated to be removed, giving visitors a different way to visit the battlefield. Pathways through the site will allow for greater interpretive opportunities on the field. The markers currently on the battleground simply state that one group or another passed nearby. The master plan layout gives greater access to the land, thereby opening opportunities for interpreting various aspects of the battle and participants.

One goal of the master plan is to create eleven development zones within the battleground. These zones will help redefine areas of the site that are related to the events of the battle and will restore parts of the historic landscape. Other zones will serve as recreation or operations areas within the site. The prairie, forests, and wetlands that existed in 1836 will be restored because students cannot otherwise envision “grass as tall as a horse’s belly” as reported by soldiers in Sam Houston’s Texas Army on the field in 1836. A commemorative zone is planned for the area near the battleship. This zone will contain all the commemorative memorials that have been placed at the battleground over the years. A new visitors’ center is recommended as the orientation locus for the battleground and battleship. Other zones include an area that buffers the site from modern development, an entryway to the site, and the operations/maintenance area.

In August 2004, TPWD commissioned a cultural landscape



San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site, January 2005. Courtesy TBG Partners, Schematic Design Package

report focusing on the landscape as it existed at the time of the battle.² The report is intended to support the development goals of the master plan. Research for the report focused on documents and site features that help in understanding the “character of the early nineteenth century landscape.”³ This report is critical to being able to undertake the recommended changes outlined in the master plan. The cultural landscape report’s maps illustrate the look and feel of the scene at the time of the battle, while also detailing changes in the landscape through time.

To support changes to the site suggested in the master plan, research is underway by historians and archeologists on various parts of the site. While many books exist about the battle and there are markers positioned on the field by veterans of that eventful day, questions remain. The markers were placed there many years ago, but many years after the events of April 21, 1836. Things changed between 1836 and 1901 when aged veterans visited the site and showed the Daughters of the Republic of Texas where to put markers. Archeological studies currently underway are focusing on locating the center of the most intense fighting, and following the route of Mexican retreat.

This work will take time to locate all the pieces of the historic puzzle.

In the meantime, TPWD and our partners are moving forward with strategies to implement pieces of the master plan that can be accomplished as soon as funding becomes available. Many of the planned projects at the site hinge on obtaining funding from the State Legislature, but private funds raised by the Friends of the San Jacinto Battleground are paying for some of the archeological and historical studies as well as restoration projects. The information gathered now will pave the way for enhanced interpretation of the site, and in making sound management decisions about placing new facilities and re-establishing the historic landscape. The final implementation of the master plan is still a long way off. In the end, the battleground may look slightly different than envisioned by the master planners—much will depend on funding levels and the archeological research currently underway. However, the intention is to create a more comprehensible landscape, one that is user-friendly and understandable in broad terms for the modern visitor trying to glimpse the battle in their mind’s eye through the smoke of the musket fire. ✧