

Frontier Texas Sculptor Remembered Through His Houston Monuments

By Susan Teich

Houston proudly showcases many works of art by Frank Teich (1856-1939), an early Texas sculptor originally from Germany. Teich began painting at age eight and upon graduation from the University of Nuremberg, he served as apprentice to the German sculptor Johannes Schilling; it is speculated that Teich worked on the German national monument, *The Watch on the Rhine*.¹ His artistic skill combined with business savvy enabled him to succeed in America, settling near Llano, Texas, where he bought a granite quarry that supplied rock for his statues and monuments now seen throughout Texas.

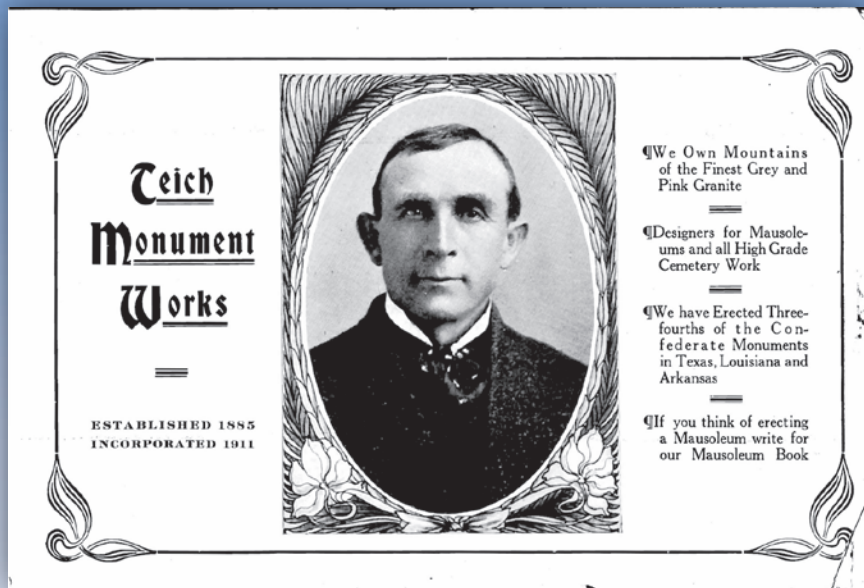


Image courtesy of Susan Teich.

In 1878, Teich emigrated from his hometown of Lobenstein (now Bad Lobenstein), Germany to the United States. He came with no knowledge of English, lived initially with grandparents in Wisconsin, and traveled broadly about the country. In Chicago, where the Cook County Courthouse was under construction, he showed the superintendent his drawings and was hired to supervise a crew of stonecutters. Upon the building's completion, Frank Teich moved to St. Louis, where he worked until he had saved \$600 to go to California. While working in a land office and traveling about the state, he heard about the discovery of gold in South Dakota. Putting together a crew of Chinese workers in San Francisco, Frank took them to the mining district of the Black Hills. From there, he returned to St. Louis, where he worked until 1883, accumulating enough money to travel to Texas, where he remained.²

The year he arrived in Texas, Frank was hired to supervise the building of the San Antonio National Bank and the San Antonio City Hall. When a frost caused cracks in the limestone gathered for construction of the bank, an affordable substitute was needed. Frank located granite at Bear Mountain, just north of Fredericksburg. The stone had to be cut and then carried over eighty miles of trail by ox-drawn sleds, resulting in the first use of Texas granite for building construction. Until that time, builders were unaware that Texas had granite of commercial quality in sufficient quantities to make its use practical. His efforts later earned him the title "Father of the Texas Granite Industry," an odd designation for an artist.³

That same year, the foundation of the new Capitol in Austin was completed, using imported granite. Gustav Wilke, contractor for construction of the Capitol, hired Teich as superintendent of the cutting and placement of stone for the remainder of the building. The Building Committee approved plans that called for the use of Texas limestone, asking Teich to look for a source. After inspecting every known quarry in the state, Teich reported that it

was not possible to obtain enough Texas limestone of sufficient quality and thickness to support the immense weight of the Capitol. He urged the use of granite instead. The Capitol has the appearance we now take for granted due largely to Frank's efforts.⁴

By 1935, the Teich Monument Works operated out of ten quarries and kept five finishing plants busy. Then, on September 17, 1936, at about 1:00 a.m., a devastating fire began in one of the shops and spread to other buildings. The *Llano News* reported that about \$4,000 of finished new work was lost in the fire. In addition, the fire destroyed raw stock valued at \$1,000. The total damage was estimated at \$50,000, and Teich had no insurance. The fire marshall ruled it as arson. The family believed that the husband of a recently fired Teich household maid started the fire by removing a gas cap from a car inside the shop and draining gas out and around the shop. The Llano Fire Department saved only Teich's studio, office, and home. Teich watched as the fire destroyed so much of what he had worked to build, and his health declined rapidly afterward. Frank Teich died in 1938.⁵

The Teich Monument Works resumed operations seven months after the fire at a reduced capacity under the management of his son-in-law Linden Foster. Now, the property is a privately owned ranch. The sign on the fence at the entrance still proclaims "Teichville, Texas."

Teich's commissions in Houston became so numerous that he eventually listed his business, Teich Monument Works, in the Houston City Directory. These listings appear yearly from 1936 to 1941. They ended three years after his death, at a time when Foster managed the business. The address given in the listings was that of his agent in Houston, M. J. Adlof, operating from a house at 836 West Cottage Avenue, now in the Norhill Historic District. Beautifully restored, the house was the subject of a feature article in *Houston House and Home Magazine*.⁶

HERMANN PARK

Driving the circular entrance to Hermann Park, the Sam Houston Monument comes into alignment with the Obelisk, a view that appears in so many photographs as to make it a Houston signature. Teich created both the fifty-foot obelisk and the massive

base for Sam Houston, each from his Llano granite.

Sam Houston came first, unveiled before an estimated 3,000 people on August 16, 1925, secure on Frank's thirty-five-foot arch. The four-year-old great granddaughter of

Sam Houston, Margaret Bringhurst, unveiled the statue while held in the arms of John H. Kirby. Also present were Sam Houston's daughter and granddaughter, Nettie Houston Bringhurst and Nettie Bringhurst Busch (the child's grandmother and mother). The headline in the *Houston Post-Dispatch* declared, "Baby Hands Tear Veil From Equestrian Statue of General Sam Houston – Thousands Cheer as Tribute Is Paid to Illustrous [sic.] Texan."⁷

The occasion was the culmination of an idea long percolating in Houston, and taken up in earnest by the Woman's City Club of Houston at a meeting on March 5, 1923, in the home of its president, Mrs. John Miles Stewart.⁸

Frank's commission came from the statue's sculptor, Enricio Filberto Cerracchio, whom the Sam Houston Monument Association selected to construct the monument and to hire a stonecutter. To fund Cerracchio's fee of \$75,000, the Women's Club secured commitments from the State of Texas for \$25,000 and from the City of Houston for \$10,000. The rest came from public donations. The Women's Club organized basement rummage sales, musical

reviews, and sold reproductions of the Texas Declaration of Independence. Despite their heroic efforts, the last \$10,000 was not forthcoming. In 1944, City Council appointed a committee to solicit private donations to that end, but there is no record that it could ever raise the money.⁹

Cerracchio presumably paid Teich out of his \$75,000 fee,

but the amount is unknown. On the day of the unveiling, Mrs. Stewart publicly stated, "I want to give due credit to Frank Teich of Llano, who has worked so faithful [sic.] with the stone work. Mr. Teich has put his very heart into the work of erecting the base. On account of delays and other things the job has cost him several thousand dollars but he has erected something which is in keeping with the monument for which it was planned."¹⁰

To prepare for the 1996 restoration of the monument, the City hired architectural archaeologists to conduct research. They interviewed Adolph Conrad, a former employee of Frank Teich, still residing in Llano. He was nineteen-years-old when he helped



Sam Houston Monument (1925).

All photos by Susan Teich.



Pioneer Memorial Shaft or The Obelisk (1936).

construct the arch, and ninety at the time of the interview. Conrad confirmed that Teich used steel pins to secure the stones, drilling into the granite to place them. Columns of stone holding up the statue weighed eight and a half tons each.¹¹

In 1936, the City of Houston threw itself a huge 100th birthday party. The four-day celebration began with a fireworks display for 45,000 people in Hermann Park. Describing the festivities, the *Houston Post* gushed, “Houston, getting along in years, forgot that she was very old Saturday night as she hoisted her skirts and kicked and frolicked on the eve of her one hundredth birthday.”¹²

On Sunday, August 30th, a Founders’ Day luncheon, sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the San Jacinto Centennial Association at the Rice Hotel, included a 100-pound birthday cake with 100 candles for the 600 guests. The first slice was given to John T. Browne, Houston’s oldest former mayor. Radio broadcasts and tributes all that day culminated in the dedication of Frank Teich’s fifty foot memorial shaft in Hermann Park, seen today at one end of the reflection pool.¹³

Erected to the memory of the City Founders, the *Post* called it “the tallest monolith ever quarried in this state.”

The San Jacinto Memorial Association commissioned the Pioneer Memorial Shaft. Mary Austin Beard, ten-year-old daughter of Colonel and Mrs. Norman H. Beard, did the unveiling and Mayor Oscar F. Holcombe received the monument.¹⁴

Elsewhere in Hermann Park, drivers dart past Houston’s first public work of art, a vigilant statue of Dick Dowling, “The Hero of Sabine Pass.”¹⁵

Having emigrated from County Galway, Ireland, to New Orleans in 1837, and then to Houston in 1857, Dowling was already a successful businessman by the outbreak of the Civil War. He was a charter member of Houston’s first fire department (Houston Hook and Ladder Company No. 1), on the board of Houston’s first public utility company (the Houston Gas Company), and the first person in Houston to install gas lighting in his home and business (a saloon known as “The Bank”). As a first lieutenant in the Davis Guards, an Irish unit from the Houston area, he distinguished himself on September 8, 1863, by leading a force of only forty-seven men in blocking Sabine Pass to prevent an invasion of Texas by 5,000 Union troops on twenty-two ships. He died at age thirty from yellow fever contracted while tending the sick during the epidemic of 1867. Mayor Alexander McGowan and the entire Houston Fire Department served as pallbearers.¹⁶



Dick Dowling Statue (1905).



One of Teich’s Glenwood commissions was the Henderson obelisk, the tallest monument in the cemetery. It was erected in 1931, two years after the death of Frank W. Henderson, whose will provided that the monument be built for the grave of his father, James Wilson Henderson, the fourth governor of Texas. At forty-four feet, it was said to be the largest one-piece stone monument erected in the United States at the time.¹⁷

His statue is located on a grassy median at the intersection of Cambridge Street and MacGregor Drive. Frank Teich was a fitting choice to make the statue. It is estimated that he made a third of all Confederate soldier statues in the state of Texas. The Daughters of the Confederacy recognized his service when, incongruously, a Dallas chapter made him an honorary “Daughter.” Representatives of the Confederate Veterans (Dick Dowling Camp, No. 197, of Houston), The Ancient order of Hibernians, and the Emmet Council (a Catholic organization) commissioned the statue to honor Dowling. Joined by many prominent citizens, the groups raised Frank Teich’s fee of \$1,900.¹⁸

The statue was dedicated on St. Patrick’s Day in 1905 at its original location in front of City Hall on Market Square. The parade through downtown was illuminated with green lights, and the carriages of dignitaries included three of the five surviving soldiers of the Battle of Sabine Pass. At City Hall, John H. Kirby, who had contributed \$250 toward the cost of the statue, served

as master of ceremonies. Annie Dowling Robertson, the daughter of Dick Dowling, unveiled the statue and presented it to Mayor Andrew Jackson, who accepted it for the citizens of Houston. Since then, the statue has been on the move. In 1939, it followed City Hall across town to stand in Sam Houston Park. The statue moved again, in 1958, to Hermann Park.¹⁹



World War I Memorial (1920).

SAM HOUSTON PARK

The Dowling statue was not the only one of Teich’s works at Old Market Square. April 25, 1920, marked the dedication of a memorial erected by the Houston War Mothers to honor servicemen from Harris County who died in World War I. The ceremonies began with a shower of flowers from the sky, dropped by a formation of four airplanes

from Ellington Field. The commander of the Thomas Dismuke Post of the American Legion conducted the program. The Reverend Harris Masterson, Jr., delivered an address describing his service in a base hospital in France. At the conclusion, someone played taps and the audience joined in singing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”²⁰

Originally named the *Cenotaph to the Unknown Soldier*, it was more accurately renamed the *World War I Memorial*. In fact, all 199 of the known war dead from Harris County are specifically named on a plaque attached to the large boulder of Frank’s Llano granite. This cenotaph, like Dowling, moved to Sam Houston Park in 1939 when City Hall made its move. It remains there today, displayed in the courtyard at The Heritage Society Museum.²¹

GLENWOOD CEMETERY

As with many sculptors of the time, the “bread and butter” commissions came from those wanting memorial art to grace the graves of their loved ones. Glenwood Cemetery, where the elite of Houston were buried from its opening in 1872, is a natural setting for Teich’s work. With its entrance at 2525 Washington Avenue, it is more than a cemetery. It is a garden park that embraces ravines left by Buffalo Bayou, a place for the living to walk as well as a place for the dead to rest.

Frank sometimes worked in marble, but primarily in granite, a substance so hard that it proved more difficult to carve than other rock, so hard that it endured time and weather better than other rock. Granite became the preferred stone for memorial art when improved rail transportation in the 1880s made it easier to transport.²²



Another angel, bearing a spray of marble lilies, leans against the Dunn family monument. Frank Dunn, Jr., who died in 1903, worked for \$40 a month at the store then known as Sweeney and Coombs. He later opened a highly successful pawnshop at Smith Street and Rosalie Avenue and left an estate of \$250,000.²⁴



Michael the Archangel himself, ready with sword, guards the grave of Captain William Dunovant. The monument honors a planter and manufacturer of sugar, cotton, and rice. A former business partner killed Dunovant in 1902 during a confrontation on a moving train when Dunovant drew a gun. The partner was acquitted on grounds of self-defense.²³



An angel balanced on stacked granite bases marks one of the best known family plots, that of James A. Baker, Sr. He was a banker, founding partner of the Baker Botts law firm, personal attorney to William Marsh Rice, and the grandfather of James A. Baker III, who served in the administrations of three U.S. presidents.²⁵

Angels watch over most cemeteries, and Frank Teich provided a flock of them. Examples known to be his work, or attributable to him, include the graves noted here.

Finding Glenwood monuments by Teich Monument Works is not easy, however. Only a few recent monuments in Glenwood bear the names of the artist stonecutters. However, there is help from newspaper descriptions of major works and from the illustrated sample books that Frank Teich carried on his many trips to Houston to secure orders.

The one word that summarizes Frank Teich is “granite.” Granite, his chosen medium, links his work on the Austin State Capitol with his works in Houston, where Teich granite stretches from Hermann Park to Sam Houston Park to Glenwood Cemetery and reminds us of our past.

Names fade into history. Stone endures. Frank Teich’s Houston monuments, whether or not they bear his name, remain lasting reminders in granite of his pioneer presence.

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An angel prostrate with grief drapes over the Hill family monument. ►

The plot was opened in 1903 for the burial of Abbie Hill, eldest daughter of Judge E. P. Hill, a president of the Houston Daily Post and founder of the Houston Land and Trust Company.²⁶



Gustav Adolph Sternenberg’s angel holds a marble trumpet at her side. Sternenberg, who owned a lumber company and numerous downtown buildings in Houston and San Antonio, died in the 1908 typhoid epidemic.²⁷



◄ A pensive angel, finger pressed to cheek, watches over the 1903 grave of Gus Fredericks. Houston’s second oldest commercial building, the Sweeney, Coombs and Fredericks Building (301 Main Street), is named for the Houston jewelry firm of which Frederick was an owner.²⁸

► Among other Glenwood monuments carved by Teich, one adorns the particularly notable grave of Frederick A. Rice, younger brother of William Marsh Rice. Frederick Rice joined Captain James A. Baker in rescuing the Rice fortune following the murder of William Marsh Rice and the filing of a forged will. Their actions kept the fortune intact for the purpose stated in the actual will—to establish a university, which became Rice Institute, now Rice University. Frederick Rice was a founding director of Glenwood Cemetery and served as its treasurer for many years. He died in 1901.²⁹

