

Thomas Flintoff Visits Houston

Archives and special libraries which concentrate upon the history of a city or region often labor long and hard to document the physical characteristics of buildings, streetscapes and cityscapes, bridges, and other features of the early built environment. The physical arrangement of these structures and other elements, their scale, and especially their relationships to each other sometimes remain elusive, even enigmatic. Unfortunately, prose accounts from letters and diaries, while rich and precise in illuminating the social and political aspects of life, often only frustrate the reader who seeks to document the built environment with their use. We can read and comprehend that a building sported a clock tower, but if it is uncertain where on the structure this tower was located, our mental image of the building is far from complete, and may be seriously flawed. In describing buildings, pictures are certainly worth far more than words. The development of photography and its universal employment boosted understanding of the changing world. Comparison and study of historic photographic images is today crucial to the study of the history of American communities.

Prior to the general use of photography, the itinerant artist played a major role in recording the appearance of towns, cities, and natural landscapes. As printing developed in fifteenth-century Europe, woodcut views of cities began to be widely used for book illustrations. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pioneer artists, many of them Europeans, traveled throughout America.¹ Many of these artists took time to study local townscapes, and to record them in paint. The townspeople were usually unable to take time to see their surroundings, since they were preoccupied with survival and with improving the environment in which they lived and worked. Often these painters took their work away with them; relatively few were published, and today their works may be completely unknown in the American communities where they visited.

In 1984 the existence of a series of five watercolors of Houston painted in March 1852 came to light via a letter from East Brighton, Victoria, Australia.

¹John W. Reps, *Cities on Stone: Nineteenth Century Lithograph Images of the Urban West* (Fort Worth, 1976), 2-3.

This letter, from Jean Salvado, was addressed to "The Mayor & Councillors, City of Houston." In it, Mrs. Salvado offered two of the paintings as gifts to the city. While on a tour of the United States, she presented the paintings in person on September 24, 1884, and received the Seal of the City of Houston from Mayor Whitmire. The two paintings were forwarded to the Houston Public Library to become part of the holdings of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. Along with the three additional scenes of Houston painted by the artist on the same 1852 visit and still held by Mrs. Salvado, these paintings are a remarkable find for two reasons: they are the only known visual images of certain early Houston buildings, and the earliest known images of the city done by a professional artist on the spot.²

The artist, Thomas Flintoff, was born about 1809 at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. Although it is unclear just where else in the United States Flintoff visited, an 1850 painting in the possession of Mrs. Salvado suggests he was then in California painting scenes in gold mining camps. He definitely visited Galveston, Austin, Houston, Corpus Christi, Indianola, and Matagorda between May 1851 and May 1852, and he was widely acclaimed in Texas.³ Most of his works were oil portraits, with which he earned his livelihood, and apparently he painted the landscape scenes for his own enjoyment. Flintoff's style, especially that of his portraits, is related to the English romantic school of painting. His work also takes careful note of the physical surroundings and professions of the people he painted. It is clear that he perceived acutely the natural and built environments to which he introduced himself. Today his work is represented by portraits in the Texas State Capitol, Texas State Archives, San Jacinto Museum of History, Barker Texas History Center, and other distinguished regional institutions. His landscape paintings, however, do not seem to enjoy such representation.

It seems that Flintoff's sojourn in Texas lasted from at least May 1851 to

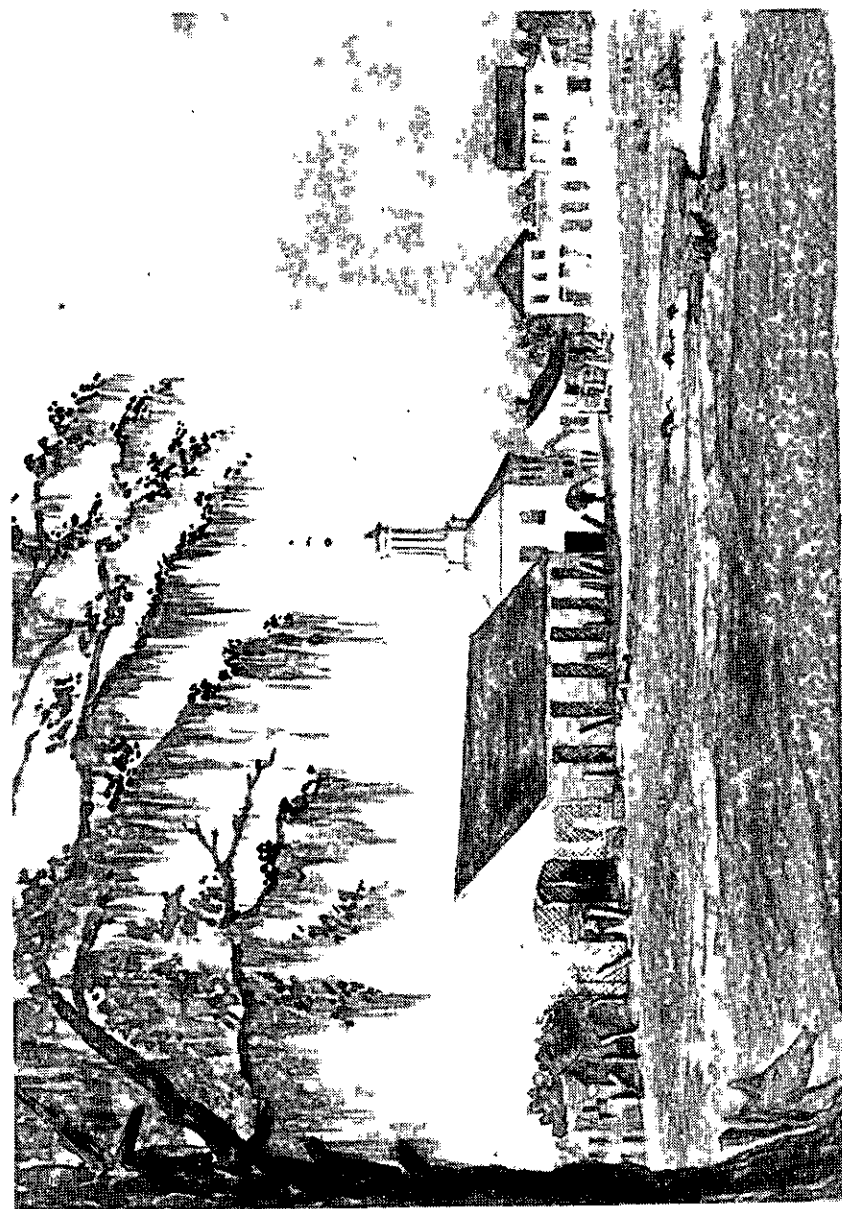
²The earliest drawings were made by Mary Austin Holley, a cousin of Stephen F. Austin, during a Christmas 1837 visit to Houston. These are rough sketches of some of the city's earliest buildings and temporary structures, showing little detail or expertise. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, professionally drawn views of the city as a whole appeared in East Coast and European publications. Showing the city nestled among wooded mountain ridges, these views clearly derived their form from the artists' imaginations rather than reality. Some of these images are reproduced in Ann Quin Wilson, *Native Houstonian: A Collective Portrait* (Houston, 1982), 29-31.

³Particulars about the life and Texas career of Flintoff appear in Pauline A. Pinckney's book *Painting in Texas: The Nineteenth Century* (Austin, 1967), 57-68. Dates for his visits to Corpus Christi, Indianola, and Matagorda come from other watercolors in Jean Salvado's possession. I am indebted to Nancy Hadley for conducting the biographical research on Flintoff.

May 1852. By 1859 he was in Australia, where he died in 1891 in Melbourne. According to Mrs. Salvado, the paintings of Houston were purchased by her grandfather during a trip to England in 1910 or 1911, along with a number of other English paintings.

Of course, many questions about the work of Flintoff remain. We are not sure whether these five watercolors are all that he painted in Houston, and we do not know all of the other Texas locations he visited. We wonder why his landscape paintings have not received earlier attention, especially in this region. Further research is in order, beginning with the remaining paintings in the possession of Jean Salvado. But we now know more than ever before about the physical characteristics of the city in the 1850s, a knowledge essential to a real understanding of life in early Houston.

Michael E. Wilson
Assistant Editor



Market Place and Gaol, Houston, Texas, March 20th, 1852. HMRC.

Houston Market and City Hall

The first painting in the sequence is dated March 20, 1852. In many ways it is the most important, since it is the only firsthand image of the city's first municipal quarters. Located on Market Square, bounded by Preston and Congress Avenues and Travis and Milam Streets, this pair of structures was until now usually avoided by historians because its form was unknown. At least two drawings were made by recent researchers, using only prose accounts as guidelines, and the results bear little resemblance to the reality we see here. In 1840 Thomas Stansbury & Sons were awarded a city contract to construct a long one-story frame building facing Travis Street to house market stalls. As this building progressed, city council voted to construct a City Hall adjacent to it. Many questions are answered for the first time by this picture. We see where the entrance is located, and the lattice side openings for ventilation. We note that the City Hall was square, not rectangular as previously believed, and that it faced the short end of the market building. Finally, a surprisingly ambitious cupola sets the building apart, indicating the special place the structure held in the community. The City Hall was completed in November 1841. In 1860, eight years after Flintoff painted this picture, a clock tower was added to the building. These buildings were removed before construction began on the second City Hall in 1871. In the background, past the surrounding houses, we see some of the thicket of trees in the area. A tree in the foreground hangs thick with moss. A hog runs freely in the lower left. It seeks the shade of the tree, hinting that this early spring day was warm in Houston.

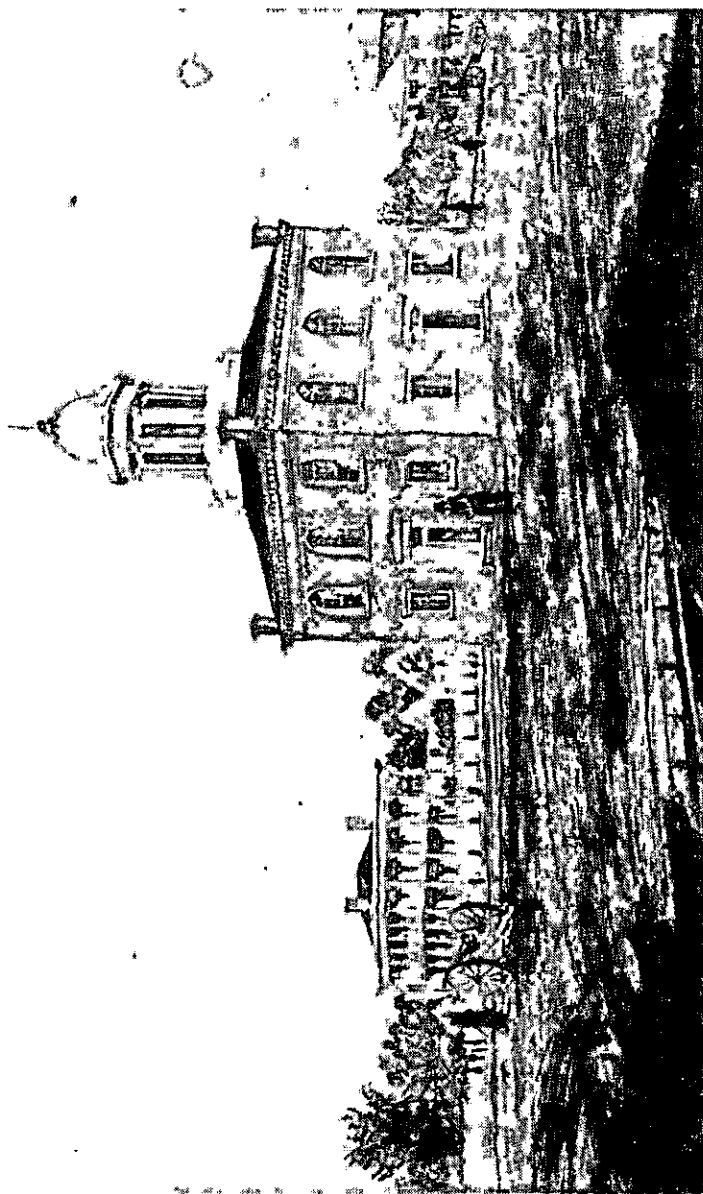


Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist Churches, Houston, Texas, March 20th, 1852. Courtesy Mrs. Jean D. B. Salvado.

Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist Churches

Painted the same day as the civic complex, this watercolor depicts the meeting places of three pioneer Protestant congregations in Houston. We are looking at the trio from the southeast, probably from Capitol Street just west of Main. In the background to the left is the *Methodist Church*, a small brick building which fronted Texas Avenue between Milam and Travis. This church was opened May 11, 1844. Previously known drawings of it show a shed or gable roof, but it clearly boasted a Gothic-like tower when Flintoff visited. The building stood until it collapsed after a storm in 1860 or 1861.⁴ In the center of the scene is the *Baptist Church*, erected at Texas Avenue and Travis Street in 1847. What appears to be a domed cupola on the roof may in fact be that of the *City Hall* about one and one-half blocks away. This building served the congregation until 1877. In the foreground is the *Presbyterian Church* on the northwest corner of Main Street and Capitol Avenue. The congregation built this small white frame building in 1842 and worshiped there until it burned in 1862. A flock of birds is landing on the roof of the church, but the sturdy picket fence that surrounds the building keeps cows and other animals in the street.

⁴Southwest Center for Urban Research, *Houston Architectural Survey* (Houston, 1980), 1:175.

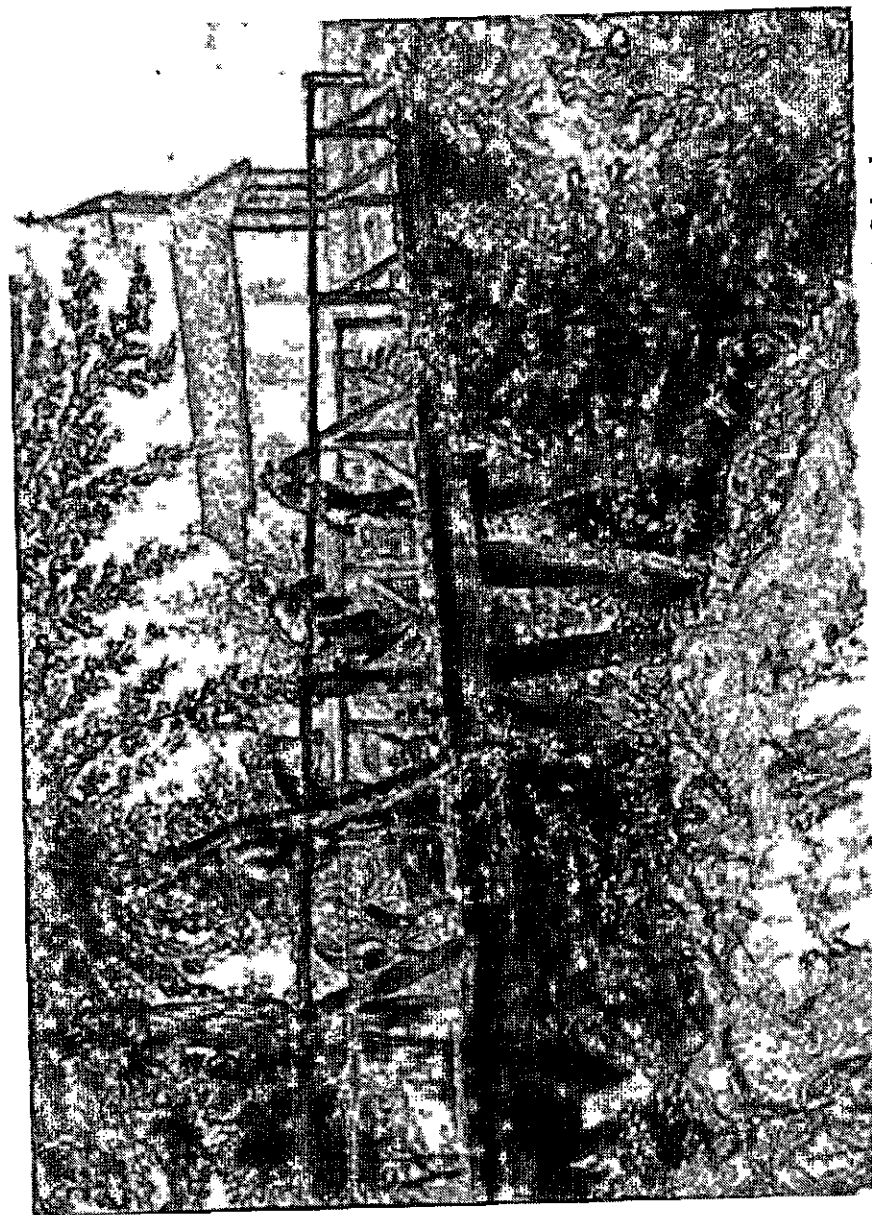


Court House, Houston, Texas, March 24th, 1852. HMRC.

Harris County Courthouse

For his second scene involving a public building, Flintoff chose Courthouse Square, painted March 24, 1852. This was Houston's other principal public space. The building in the scene is the new brick courthouse which was dedicated the previous fall, on October 15, 1851. It was designed by F. J. Rothaas, cost fifteen thousand dollars to build, and had a cross-axial floor plan with an entrance on each side.⁵ The structure had round-arched windows on the second floor, brick dentils at the cornice, a fairly massive dome for the size of the building, and, apparently, corner chimneys. The square is devoid of almost all vegetation except for some scrub grass. There are mud tracks where wagons have passed in the left foreground. As in all Flintoff's pictures, the colors are natural tones: warm earth or brick brown, subtle grey-green, grey-brown, and white. It is an appropriate palette to convey the warm sunshine, primitive structures, and dusty or muddy earth of an early Texas town.

⁵*Houston Architectural Survey*, 1:36.



Catholic Church, Houston, Texas, March 25th, 1852. Courtesy Mrs. Jean D. B. Salvado.

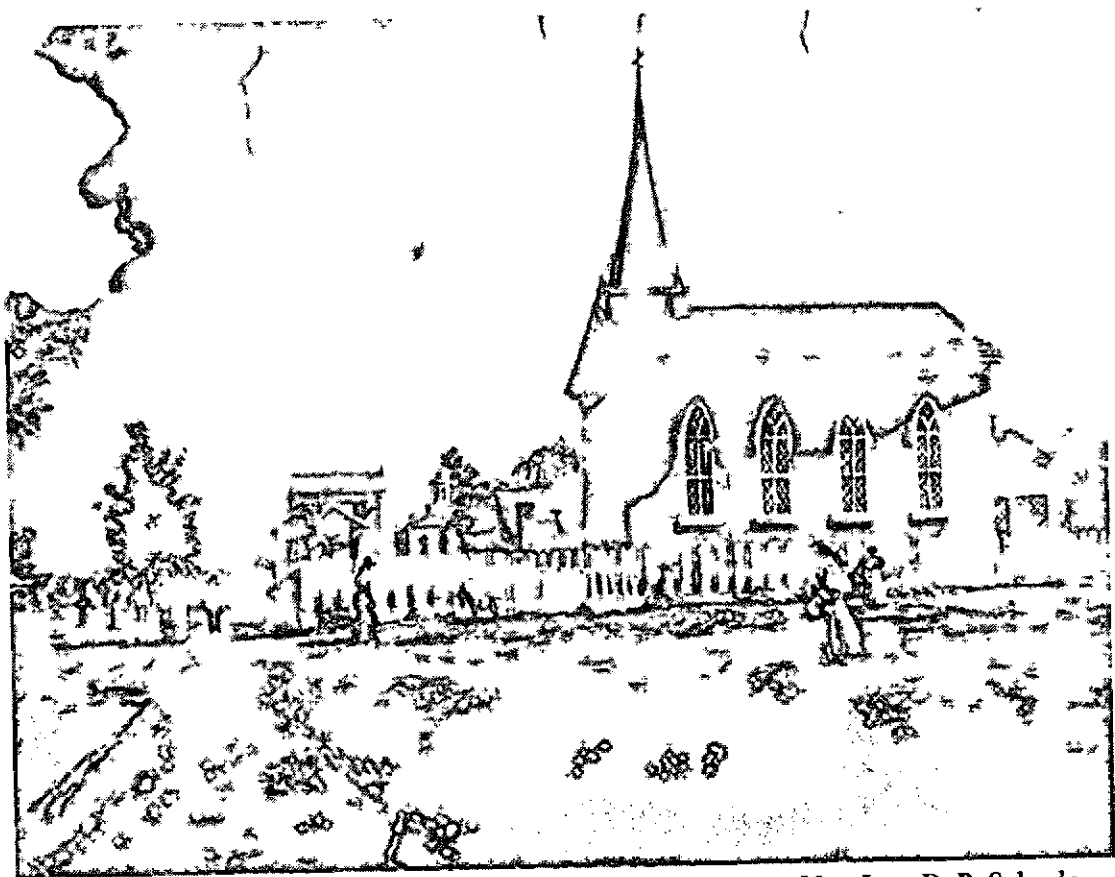
Catholic Church

This painting is the most remarkable in the set from the standpoint of urban geography. Foremost in the scene is a ravine (probably a tributary of Buffalo Bayou that once ran down Franklin Avenue). Its craggy banks and the abundance of its scruffy vegetation are richly evocative of early Houston's natural environment. A rider on horseback and two loiterers occupy the small footbridge. Such bridges were necessities in the early years of the Bayou City. The church building depicted in the background is the first Catholic church in Houston, erected during 1841-1842 at the corner of Franklin Avenue and Caroline Street. This wooden church with twenty pews served until 1871 when Annunciation Church was dedicated. A German Catholic parish was then housed in the building until 1878.⁶

Episcopal Church

The final painting in our series, dated March 26, 1852, depicts Christ Episcopal Church. This small brick building was completed in 1847 on the east side of Fannin Street just north of Texas Avenue. Our perspective is across Texas Avenue. Beyond the church, in the middle of the picture, is the County Courthouse two blocks away. Judging from the shadows on the building, it is late morning, and several people make their way around town. As with the other churches, a white picket fence keeps animals, in this case a goat and a dog, outside the churchyard. Wildflowers grow here and there over the vacant land in the foreground of the scene. The church shown here, demolished by 1859 in order to build a larger brick structure on the site, had a simple gable roof, a modest steeple topped by a cross, and four lancet windows on each side of the nave.

⁶Sister Mary Brendan O'Connell, "A Brief History of Annunciation Church," *Centennial: Annunciation Church, 1869-1969* (Houston, n.d.).



Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas, March 26th, 1852. Courtesy Mrs. Jean D. B. Salvado.