



RESTORING THE BEST VIEW OF HOUSTON

by Larry Spasic

The view from the summit.

One of the most impressive and historically significant monuments in Texas can once again be fully enjoyed by visitors. The elevator at the San Jacinto Monument had been closed for renovations for two years. It opened just after Labor Day 2006 to take visitors up 489 feet to the monument's observation floor where they are able to view the rich tapestry of the Texas coastal area, including the historic San Jacinto Battleground, the Houston Ship Channel and, in the far distance, the city of Houston's wonderful skyline.

When it opened in 1939, the San Jacinto Monument used a cage-like elevator to access the observation floor. In 1953, Houston philanthropist Jesse H. Jones, concerned about safely transporting the growing number of visitors to the summit, donated \$50,000 for the purchase of the building's current Otis elevator.

The new elevator served the monument and its traffic well for fifty

years. In 2004, however, the San Jacinto Museum of History Association (SJMHA) undertook a feasibility study to develop a plan for the future of the museum and its programs. During this process, several concerns were identified, prompting the SJMHA to ask a noted engineering firm to review all related fire and safety issues. From the firm's report, it was determined that the elevator, as well as a majority of the building's support systems, had outlived their operational life expectancies.

While a functional alarm system was in use, there was no coordinated fire protection system in the building and no means to be assured of the safe exit of guests from the observation floor in the event of an emergency or elevator power outage. Following the identification of other potential safety hazards in the building, a life safety specialty contractor conducted a follow-up evaluation, including specific recommendations for the installation of a fire protection system, a sprinkler system, a new fire alarm system, the upgrade of elevator safety equipment, the creation of an "area of rescue" in case of fire on the observation floor, safety improvements on the main stairway, installation of fire-rated construction materials on the administrative floors and restoration of the plaster ceilings in the museum and lobby areas.

Armed with this knowledge, the association's board and leaders of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) took a proactive stand in September 2004. Although there had been no serious public safety incidents involving the elevator or a fire in the monument, they determined that it was necessary to close the observation floor until the deficiencies could be thoroughly addressed. While most, if not all, historic structures require periodic safety upgrades, the height and design of the San Jacinto Monument presented several challenges.

TPWD's Infrastructure Division estimated repair costs at \$2.14 million. This would pay for fire safety repairs and improvements to the monument, including the installation of a new sprinkler system, elevator and fire alarm upgrades, safety improvements in the main stairway, and fire hardening of the basement through the fourth floor. Funding for the project was included in House Bill 10, approved by the Senate and signed by the Governor in June 2005. Sarita Hixon, chair of the San Jacinto Museum of History Association, is deeply grateful to Rep. Wayne Smith (R-Baytown) and others who worked to ensure the San Jacinto Monument would receive the funding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: LARRY SPASIC, PRESIDENT OF THE SAN JACINTO MUSEUM OF HISTORY SINCE AUGUST 2006, JOINED THE STAFF IN 1989 AFTER TEACHING TEXAS HISTORY IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR TEN YEARS. HE SERVED ON THE TEAM THAT RESEARCHED AND EDITED THE SCRIPT OF *Texas Forever!! The Battle of San Jacinto*.

TPWD, which maintains the San Jacinto Monument, awarded the renovation contract to Kellogg, Brown & Root, and work began. To make all the necessary renovations, the entrance to the museum was closed from late December 2005 through spring 2006, and the elevator was closed from September 2004 through the summer 2006.

So, it was with great pleasure that Mrs. Hixon and Larry Spasic, president of the San Jacinto Museum of History Association, joined Robert Cook, executive director of TPWD, Rep. Smith and Sen. Mario Gallegos in cutting the ceremonial ribbons to reopen the elevator to the public on September 7, 2006. Visitors are once again able to enjoy the spectacular view from the top of the monument. While standing on the observation floor under the Texas star, one can see the Houston skyline and the Houston Ship Channel, including a view of the Fred Hartman Bridge leading east to Baytown, and look down on the sacred battlefield where soldiers fought for Texas' independence from Mexico. With the completion of the renovation, the full scope of experiences offered by the SJMHA are available to the public, including the permanent exhibit in the museum gallery, the gift shop, the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Library and the award-winning interpretative movie *Texas Forever!! The Battle of San Jacinto*.

The private, non-profit SJMHA has operated the San Jacinto Museum at the

base of the monument since 1939. Each year, forty-to-fifty thousand school children visit the museum and monument to learn about Texas history in a hands-on environment. The museum offers a teacher's curriculum guide to help make their visits meaningful and educational. Our staff has taken advantage of the renovation period to complete several important projects at the museum. We have refreshed our interpretive cases by rotating newly acquired artifacts and other items from our collections into our permanent gallery.

The Jesse H. Jones Theater for Texas Studies, funded by the Houston Endowment, Inc. in 1990, has undergone a complete renovation, with new carpet, seating, lighting system, and screen, thanks to a generous grant from The Dow Chemical Company. A prior grant in 2003 from the Houston Endowment, provided us with the funds to convert our international award-winning show *Texas Forever!! The Battle of San Jacinto* from conservation-challenged slides to a digital presentation. The presentation tells the Texas story from the Spanish colonial period through the Battle of San Jacinto to the westward expansion of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. A grant from the Albert & Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation made it possible for us to upgrade our forty-year-old telephone network.



Senator Mario Gallegos, Jr., Representative Wayne Smith, Museum Board of Trustees Chair Sarita Hixon and Museum President Larry Spasic reopen the elevator at the San Jacinto Monument on Sept. 7, 2006. Courtesy San Jacinto Museum of History

We have and will continue to be diligent in publicizing the reopening of the San Jacinto Monument and Museum. It is appropriate and fitting that this wonderful and unique memorial tower honoring all those who fought for Texas independence is now available to once again educate and honor the heritage left to Texans today. And, on a more practical level, visitors to the San Jacinto State Historic Site can once again experience the best view of Houston – the view from the observation deck of the San Jacinto Monument. ✨

MOORE ARCHEOLOGICAL CONSULTING, INC., IS HONORED BY THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK AT THE SAN JACINTO BATTLEFIELD, A SITE HALLOWED IN TEXAS HISTORY.

ROGER G. MOORE, PH.D.
3511 HOUSTON AVENUE, SUITE B HOUSTON, TX 77009
713 861-8663 (R MOORE) 713 861-2323 (LAB)
713 861-8627 (FAX) CAVERARCH@AOL.COM

