

# THE USS TEXAS: THE RESTORATION OF HOUSTON'S GREATEST WAR HERO

By Abbie Salyers

The city of Houston is home to numerous museums, historic buildings, and memorials that encompass topics ranging from natural history to African American history. Each site represents a unique time period or subject matter, yet each also has its own institutional history. The decisions behind the creation and interpretation of these sites reveal much about the interest, values, and public memory of both local communities and the nation as a whole. An analysis of a museum's developmental history can provide insight into changing public opinion, professional developments, and societal values.

The Battleship *Texas*, located in the Houston Ship Channel, is a museum that not only has a unique military service history, but also has an institutional history that provides a parallel to the development of the museum field as a whole. It represents both local and national memory. With service in both world wars and numerous military firsts, the *Texas* has a battle record that

speaks for itself in its importance as a memorial to the veterans that served on board and as a museum of changing military technology of the early twentieth century. After the state of Texas obtained the ship, she was initially neglected and allowed to fall into a state of disrepair, but as the field of preservation and museum studies emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, professional and public opinion forced the caretakers of the ship to conform to emerging professional standards.

The story of the Battleship *Texas* and her preservation is significant for students of military, local, and museum history alike.<sup>1</sup>

On March 12, 1914, the United States Navy commissioned into service the USS *Texas*, a battleship similar in design to the British dreadnoughts. The *Texas* and her sister ship, *New York*, were the first ships in the U.S. fleet to boast ten 14-inch guns, in addition to twenty-one 5-inch guns, and four torpedo tubes.

The \$5.83 million

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Abbie Salyers received her B.A. in History with a concentration in Public History from James Madison University. She is currently working towards a Ph.D. in History at Rice University. She also volunteers at the Battleship *Texas*.



ship was over 570 feet long and 95 feet wide with a displacement of 27,000 tons. Fourteen coal-burning boilers provided power to the ship's two reciprocating steam engines, which could reach speeds of up to twenty-one knots.<sup>2</sup>

After her initial trials, the *Texas* participated in President Woodrow Wilson's intervention in Vera Cruz, Mexico, before joining normal fleet operations in 1915. In the early years of World War I, the *Texas* was involved in routine training and practice maneuvers as part of the Atlantic Fleet. After the U.S. entered the war, the *Texas* became part of the 6th Battle Squadron of the British Grand Fleet and served in the North Sea operations for the duration of the war.<sup>3</sup>

Between 1918 and the outbreak of World War II, the *Texas* was modernized and outfitted with many experimental new technologies. As the military recognized the expanding potential of aviation, the Navy built launching platforms, and later catapults on the gun turrets of the *Texas*, which was then able to carry seaplanes for use in reconnaissance and fire control. The Washington Naval Treaty of 1921 prevented the building of any new battle-ships, so the *Texas* received extensive refurbishing to keep her up to date. The fourteen coal-burning boilers were replaced with six oil-burning boilers; the original

cage masts were replaced with more solid tripod masts; the torpedo tubes were removed; torpedo blisters were added for increased protection; and her fire control capabilities were improved. In 1928 the *Texas* emerged from her extensive overhauls as the flagship of the U.S. Navy.<sup>4</sup>

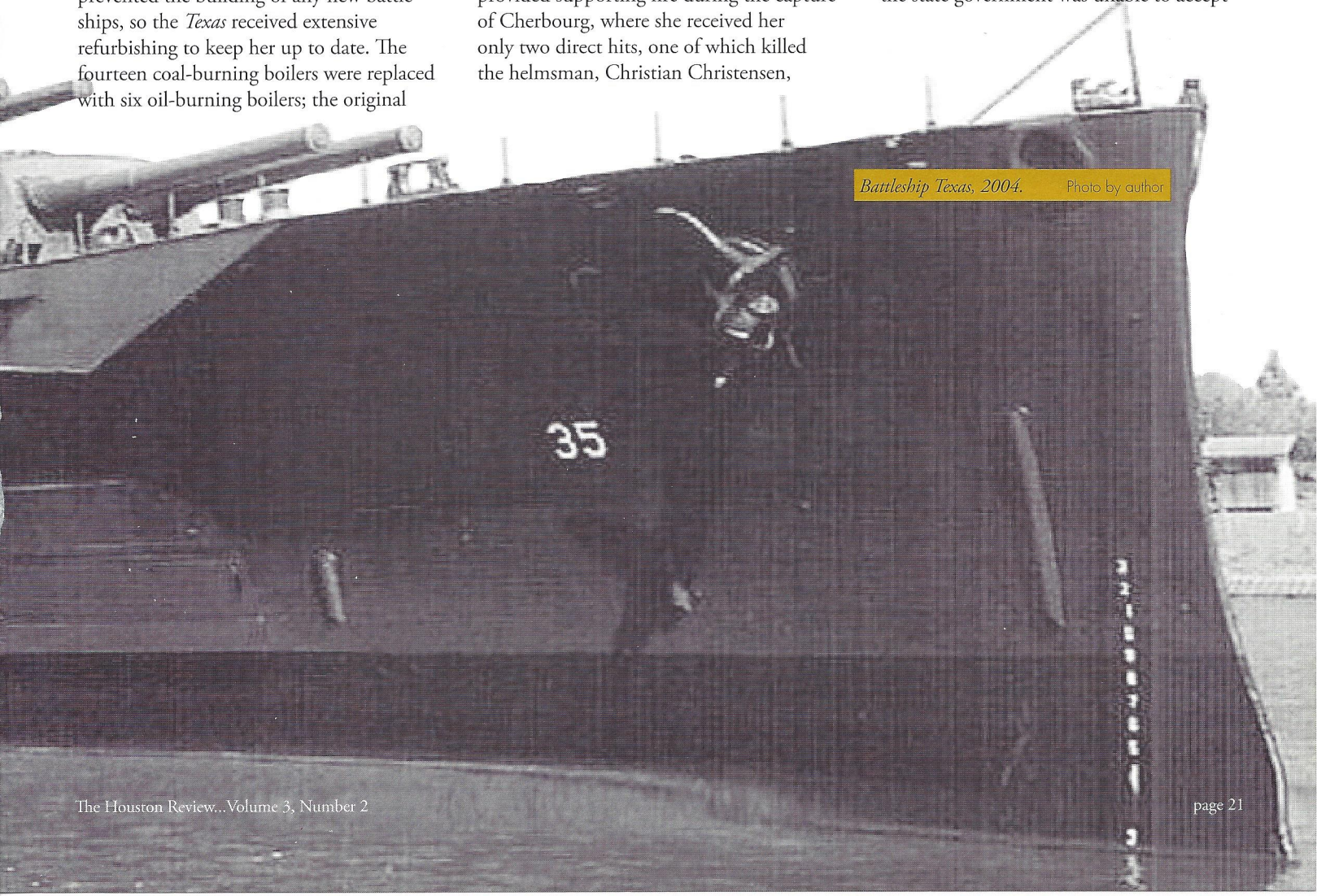
Prior to American involvement in World War II, the *Texas* conducted patrols in the Atlantic Ocean protecting neutral shipping interests and later joined in convoys shipping lend-lease materials to Britain. She also underwent more changes, as her deck was outfitted with 40mm and 20mm antiaircraft guns. In 1940 she was also equipped with a CXZ, a radio wave detection system that became one of the earliest models of radar.

After the United States declared war, the *Texas* participated in troop transport for Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa, before returning to convoy escort duty across the Atlantic. On June 6, 1944, the *Texas* was at Normandy where she supported the invading troops with off-shore bombardment and served as a hospital ship for wounded soldiers.

Two weeks later, the *Texas* again provided supporting fire during the capture of Cherbourg, where she received her only two direct hits, one of which killed the helmsman, Christian Christensen,

the one combat fatality suffered during all her thirty-four years of active service. In February and March of 1945, the *Texas* participated in the grueling invasions of the Japanese islands of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, where her crew remained at battle stations for almost two straight months. Having played a part in bringing about victory in both the European and the Pacific theaters, the *Texas* celebrated the end of war by participating in the "Magic Carpet" rides, transporting over 4,000 troops home to the United States.<sup>5</sup>

In September 1945 the *Texas* appeared on a House Naval Affairs Committee list of outdated ships slated for decommissioning, target practice, or the scrap yards. Two Texas congressmen with strong ties to Houston, Lyndon B. Johnson and Albert Thomas, began a campaign to save the dreadnought as a memorial to those who had served aboard. By October their efforts had convinced Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal to offer the *Texas* to its namesake state on the condition that the state agree to continue maintenance according to Navy standards. Governor Coke Stevenson confessed that the state government was unable to accept



Battleship Texas, 2004.

Photo by author

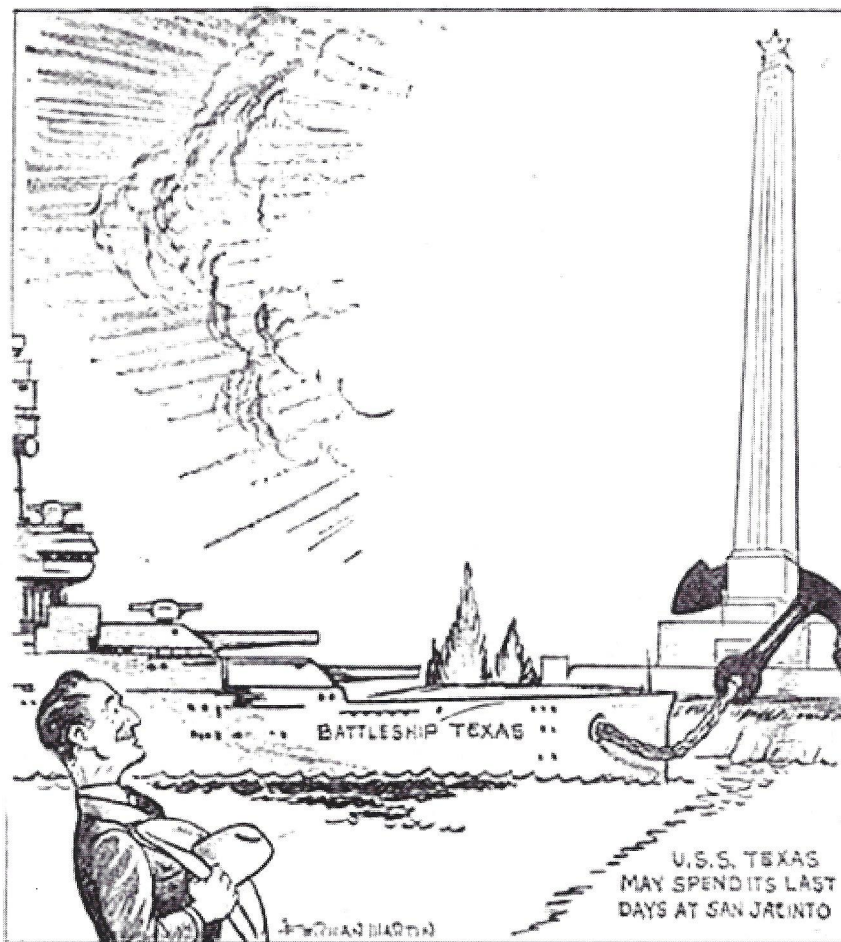


the financial burden due to its postwar economy and internal infrastructure needs, so he sent the offer to the City of Houston with the understanding that if enough private funds could be raised he would accept the donation on behalf of the state. By the end of 1946, civic groups, individuals, and the Harris County Navigation District had contributed funds, but the total still fell far short of the \$225,000 necessary to create a berth for the ship and provide for the first years' worth of maintenance.<sup>6</sup>

The fundraising process proceeded so slowly that in March 1947 the Navy issued an ultimatum declaring that either Texas find the funds or the battleship would be scrapped. According to *The Dallas News* on March 9, "for many months the Navy has been ready to turn the mighty battle-wagon of the seas over to the state of Texas. But an uninterested or neglectful citizenry has made no move toward accepting the gallant vessel."<sup>7</sup> As the state faced the somewhat awkward situation of having requested the ship and yet not having provided the means to care for it, Governor Beauford Jester created the Battleship *Texas* Commission to lead the effort to raise the money necessary for acquisition.<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Gregory, Vice President and General Manager of the *Houston Post* and an outspoken advocate for the battleship, was appointed chairman of the new nine-member commission.<sup>9</sup>

A major fundraising campaign was launched on September 15 and included efforts from citizens of all ages across the state and even from other states nationwide. The campaign began with a radio broadcast featuring Governor Jester, Admiral Chester Nimitz, Secretary Forrestal, and actress Linda Darnell, all of whom collaborated to tell the story of the *Texas*' service, explain her possible fate, and solicit donations. Local Jaycee clubs visited area schools to encourage small donations, hoping for

## A Fitting Place to Anchor Houston Chronicle 24 Sep 1945



100% participation from school children. On the suggestion of Senator Fred Harris, an honorary Texas Navy was established and each donor received a certificate declaring them an honorary Admiral in the new Texas Navy. The Governor also declared December 7, 1947, as Battleship *Texas* Day to raise awareness of the ship's plight. Popular film stars Linda Darnell and Dana Andrews produced a short movie on the *Texas* that was shown before feature films in theaters across the state to solicit donations.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these efforts, in March 1948 the donations still did not meet the \$225,000 needed. The Navy became tired of the delays and the unwanted cost of upkeep for the *Texas*, so they informed Gregory that the battleship was departing Norfolk for the Houston Ship Channel. When she arrived, Texas should either have a slip ready or prepare to scrap her. With a month left to raise the remaining \$25,000 before the anticipated grand opening on San Jacinto Day, April 21, 1948, Gregory told his readers, "If Texans want their ship they must

put up or shut up."<sup>11</sup> In the final weeks of the fund-raising drive, the *Post* thanked every donor by name, from children who gave one dollar to corporate donations of hundreds of dollars, all in an effort to increase awareness of and interest in the project. The Battleship *Texas* arrived at the ordinance depot of the Houston Ship Channel at the end of March, where it received its final preparations from the Navy before its permanent placement at San Jacinto. The presence of the ship inspired increased donations, and the Commission met its goal.<sup>12</sup>

The battleship arrived under the care of Chief Machinist's Mate Johnny McKeown, who had enlisted in the Navy at the age of sixteen and served for thirty-one years, the last thirteen of which had been on board

the *Texas*. The Commission appointed Joseph M. Strickling as the official caretaker of the memorial ship, with McKeown as his assistant and live-in keeper of the ship. Under their care, the *Texas* was pulled into the newly dredged slip and flooded below decks with three million gallons of water, which settled the hull into the mud to anchor the ship.

On April 21, 1948, the 112th anniversary of the Battle of San Jacinto, the festivities at San Jacinto State Park centered on the arrival of the battleship. Former Captain of the *Texas* Charles A. Baker decommissioned the ship and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Mark Andrews presented her to the state of Texas, to be under the control of the newly designated commander in chief of the Texas Navy, Governor Jester.<sup>13</sup> The ship's logbook closed with the entry, "Presented to the state of Texas as a Permanent Shrine," and Admiral Nimitz, retired from the U.S. Navy and newly commissioned as an admiral in the Texas Navy, declared:



By demonstrating the fighting spirit of Texas to our enemies in two world wars, this gallant ship has proved worthy of her name... Texans are proud of the privilege of providing a snug harbor for the old "T," and preserving her as another symbol of Texas greatness. It is particularly fitting that her final resting place be adjacent to these historic battlegrounds where so much of the Lone Star State tradition was born.<sup>14</sup>

The *Houston Chronicle* reported that the ship "rivals the San Jacinto Monument in popularity with visitors," but controversy concerning the care of the battleship arose almost immediately. Strickling, the head caretaker, was fired in October 1948 after complaining that the ship was not being properly cared for, and even after McKeown took over the supervision of the *Texas*, more complaints followed in March 1949 from the Judicial Council of the Harris County Veterans of Foreign Wars. The VFW Post primarily opposed the gaudy concessions hawking their wares along the walkway to the ship, but they also cited neglect of the ship's proper maintenance. Complaints were made again in June regarding the condition of the battleship and the placement of hot dog and peanut stands on the deck of the ship.

In 1950 even more serious problems arose concerning the erosion of the banks of the slip, which would eventually cause the ship to tilt since it was anchored in mud deposits. The Commission declared the erosion a "crisis," and received over \$5,000 in donated materials and equipment to construct temporary concrete supports until the state legislature could vote on appropriating more funds. Eventually the San Jacinto Park Board, which had jurisdiction over the shore facilities, took bids in late 1951 to construct one combined store and concession stand that would be less conspicuous, and the anchoring system was improved in the slip.<sup>15</sup>

## PRESERVATION BEGINS

During the first twenty years of state possession of the *Texas*, the Commission did little preventative maintenance beyond painting and scraping and the placement of bulkheads to prevent further soil erosion. Ironically, Lloyd Gregory provided advice to visitors from North Carolina and Alaska concerning his process of saving the *Texas* so that they could do the same for their state's namesakes; however, his own ship

**Tugs to Bring U.S.S. Texas Up Channel Today**

**Arrival of Ship Speeds Campaign**

The gallant old Battleship Texas, nudged along by four tugs, will come up the Ship Channel Wednesday to the San Jacinto Ordnance Depot.

Comdr. A. Seward and pilots of the Coastwise Pilots Association set 6 a. m. as the hour of departure.

**THE SHIP** was expected to arrive at the depot around 2:30 p. m.

The commanding officer of the depot issued positive orders that no visitors would be allowed on the Ordnance grounds or on the ship during the nearly three weeks the *Texas* will be there getting her final spit and polish before being moved to her final berth at the San Jacinto battleground.

The famed battlewagon will be saluted at Baytown by school children, veterans' organizations and employees of the Humble refinery.

It will pass between Morgan's Point and the Baytown docks before being moved to the ship channel.

*Houston Post*, March 31, 1948, Front page coverage

suffered while he handed out recommendations. An editorial published in the *Houston Post* in 1966 criticized the condition of the ship and included pictures of rusted steel and trash littering multiple portions of the battleship. Gregory responded with the hopes that the article might raise awareness of the need for the ship to receive more funding and acknowledged that he was "partly to blame" because he "had become too complacent."<sup>16</sup>

The article brought about some changes, but unfortunately they proved detrimental to the preservation of the *Texas*. In 1968-69, the original teakwood deck was rotten and leaking and Gregory reported that replacing it with a concrete deck over the steel support beams would help decrease leaks and rusting. Although the records are not clear about who exactly made the decision to use concrete, an interesting factor to consider is that the staff of the *Texas* at that time consisted of only four men under the guidance of Captain McKeown, while the Commission itself included only four members of veterans groups, two members of the public, two representatives of the Sons and Daughters of the Republic of Texas, and one member of the Texas State Historical Association. Few veterans and

representatives of the mentioned groups had much experience in either battleship maintenance or preservation techniques, especially considering the relative newness of the preservation movement. After installation, the concrete deck only increased the problems by soaking up water and expanding and shrinking during weather changes, causing cracking. The water absorbed through the concrete was simply channeled through these cracks into more concentrated leaks in the lower decks.<sup>17</sup>

During the early 1970s, some slight improvements were made to the ship, including sandblasting the hull, removing paint and rust, repainting the *Texas* battleship grey, and coating the steel with resin to prevent corrosion and strengthen rusted areas. But the *Houston Chronicle* still reported in March 1972 that the *Texas* was "under attack" from neglect due to a lack of funding that had allowed rust and decay to take their toll on the ship. The gunnery observation room and conning tower were closed as safety hazards from the amount of corrosion, and a Navy inspection estimated yearly costs would be nearly \$300,000 to repair the damage and remain open to the public. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) reported improvements to the ship in 1976. At the same time, efforts were made to advance interpretation by placing audio stations in twelve different areas of the ship to tell the history of the *Texas* and describe daily life aboard the battleship. The Commission also installed a new theater on the second deck to show a fifteen-minute documentary with footage of the dreadnought's wartime service. In addition, a newly renovated stateroom was opened to the public in 1979 in honor of Gregory, who had passed away earlier that year, after retiring as Chairman of the Commission in 1975.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the minor improvements, the *Texas* Commission was the subject of a Sunset Commission inspection and audit in 1977. The function of the Sunset Commission was to eliminate unnecessary state agencies, and this particular study was to determine the future of the Battleship *Texas* Commission. Rather than suggest the complete dismissal of the *Texas* Commission, the Sunset Commission instead recommended that the *Texas* Commission be placed under the authority of another governing body, such as TPWD. Some members of the state





*Battleship Texas in dry-dock, 1988.*

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are courtesy Battleship Texas Archives

legislature disagreed with the recommendation and pushed for the continuation of the Commission's control, causing a debate that stalled in the legislature and forced the Commission to disband and TPWD to assume control.

Within a year, the state legislature had reformed the Commission and placed the ship under the care of Captain Andrew Garcia and his maintenance staff. Unfortunately the Commission faced more complaints within only a few years of reassuming control, when eighteen staff members joined forces with the Texas State Employees Union to protest unsafe working conditions and poor use of funding. The seriousness of the health charges and the estimated cost of repairs encouraged the state legislature to again take part in the debate, this time reversing their previous decision by permanently removing the *Texas* from Commission control and turning over the battleship to TPWD authority.<sup>19</sup>

### **A NEW ERA**

On September 1, 1983, the Commission officially disbanded and TPWD took

over the administration, preservation, and maintenance of the battleship, which was now under the command of Captain Dan Harrison. Under the TPWD, the *Texas* received a steady budget from the state for the first time, although the funding was still supplemented with private donations. All decisions regarding the care of and expenditures for the ship had to be approved by both the local and state TPWD office, and a newly created Battleship *Texas* Advisory Board made suggestions regarding the care of the ship as well. In 1985 the "First *Texas* Volunteers" came together to offer time and service to the upkeep and interpretation of the ship, and the Battleship *Texas* Foundation was formed as a separate fundraising committee.<sup>20</sup>

Initial structural investigations by the TPWD revealed fairly extensive rust damage to the hull and lower compartments that would likely require dry-docking to repair. In order to pay for the preservation and interpretation goals, the state launched a new fundraising drive, like those of the late 1940s, led by Governor Mark White to be completed before the

sesquicentennial anniversary of Texas in 1986. The strategy was similar to the one presented forty years earlier as the newly created Battleship *Texas* Advisory Board urged local corporations, schools, and stores to donate proceeds or materials. Local radio stations launched the campaign "Save the Battleship *Texas*—She fought for you, now let's fight for her," while children participated in art contests, and corporations like McDonald's and JCPenney even joined the effort. Governor Mark White declared 1986 to be "Battleship *Texas* Year," and the *Post* published an article drawing attention to the deterioration of the ship and informed the public that only \$200,000 of the desired \$6 million had been raised by June of 1986. Orion Knox, director of the TPWD's Historic Site Restoration Branch, placed the blame for the condition of the ship on the financial constraints of the original Battleship *Texas* Commission and encouraged citizens to help avoid similar problems.<sup>21</sup> Former crewman Jeff Lacy remarked, "It breaks my heart to see the condition of the *Texas* today... We had pride in that ship — the beauty, the cleanli-



ness. I thought Texans were people of great pride. If they knew what this ship had done, maybe they'd try to save it."<sup>22</sup>

Just as it had years earlier, the attack on Texas pride stimulated citizens into action, and large fundraisers spread across the region. Channel 11 produced a short documentary, "The Pride of Texas," to give a history of the battleship's service record and explain the dangers facing continued neglect of the ship. The San Jacinto Mall launched chili cook-offs, swimsuit competitions, and eating contests to raise proceeds, and they also sold Battleship *Texas* merchandise. Whataburger, Pizza Hut, Fantastic Sams, Randalls grocery store, Greyhound, and the Houston Ballet all initiated programs to donate portions of their proceeds toward efforts to restore the ship. By October 1986 the Battleship *Texas* Foundation had received \$2 million in private donations, \$580,000 from a U.S. Navy Appropriations Bill, and \$5 million from military appropriations legislation.<sup>23</sup>

Regardless of the widespread support for the improved preservation, some citizens objected to the work going into the restoration. Curt B. Thompson, who had served in the Navy, wrote an editorial to the *Post* declaring that, "the (Help the *Texas*) campaign [is] a foolish ideal. Let's scrap the pile of metal, sell it and put our money where it's most needed, into building a new modern fighting ship...." Although the editor responded that there already was a new USS *Texas* in the U.S. Navy, it seemed that others shared similar opinions. A later editorial in the *Post* entitled, "Let 'er die," offered a striking comparison: "the ship is rusting, peeling, leaking and settling in the mud. Millions to save it is compared to keeping alive a 100-year-old unconscious person by respirators, feeding tubes and I.V. medications."<sup>24</sup> The editorial continued that the state should, "allow the ship a timely and decent demise" and advised spending the money on people who were still alive by donating food and money to charities. An angry response asked, "Why not topple the San Jacinto monument? And raze the Alamo? It's roughly the same."<sup>25</sup>

Despite some opposition, TPWD made preparations for the *Texas* to be towed to dry-dock at Todd Shipyard in Galveston. Naval architect Ed Philips inspected the

ship to ensure it would stand up to the pressures of towing and being lifted from the water, while engineers dredged the channel around the slip to allow enough space for the ship to move. After minimal repairs and the emptying of 600,000 gallons of water and fuel from her lower decks, the *Texas* rose out of the mud and proved herself seaworthy. In December 1988 the battleship moved at four miles per hour through the channel to the shipyards where she would receive extensive physical repairs while engineers improved her slip as well. Although the process took much longer than the intended six months, in

**"I thought Texans were people of great pride. If they knew what this ship had done, maybe they'd try to save it."**

**—Former Crewman Jeff Lacy**

late 1989 the ship finally left Galveston for Green's Bayou, where it received a new wooden deck and mooring collars to anchor it to pilings that had been planted seventy feet deep in the reconstructed slip. Almost two years after leaving, the *Texas* returned to her slip in September 1990.

The project had taken longer than expected and gone over budget, but since the TPWD had remained insistent on meeting historical accuracy standards, the newly renovated ship reflected the difference from earlier days. Now painted dark blue in accordance with Navy camouflage Measure 21, the battleship had over 350,000 pounds of new steel on the main deck and hull plus a new wooden deck. Former crewmen accompanied the *Texas* on her trip back to San Jacinto, and on September 8, 1990, the site officially reopened with a large ceremony featuring Governor William Clements and a 21-gun salute honoring the veterans of the *Texas*. With the worst of the structural damage repaired, TPWD turned its attention to modernizing the interpretation of the battleship.<sup>26</sup>

## **INTERPRETATION ON THE BATTLESHIP TEXAS**

The interpretive changes that the *Texas* underwent throughout the years reflect the changing trends in the field of public history and museum studies. In the past, many people looked to history, not for what it could teach, but for how it could make people feel. European shrines and castles created a sense of nostalgia and commemorated heroes. Americans looked to museums and historic sites like Colonial Williamsburg and Mount Vernon in much the same way: as a source to *feel* what life was like in the past. As emphasis on scientific methods increased in the late nineteenth century, the field of history became more confined to the university, more narrow in focus, and less appealing to the public. The idea of history as "a place to go" increased in popularity and many people looked beyond the academy to local museums, films, novels, and fairs for more enjoyable history. The field of museum studies grew at a time when historians faced decreasing academic opportunities, which encouraged many to move into the public arena.<sup>27</sup>

As the museum field became more professionalized and increased in popularity, the federal government instituted a series of laws providing funding and protection for historic sites. The number of museums in the United States continued to increase and many universities created museum studies curriculums to accommodate the growing interest. In addition, scholarly associations such as the National Council on Public History emerged and began publishing journals and holding conferences to discuss aspects of the museum field.<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of the public history field coincided with changing trends in the academic realm such as the development of social history and what would be labeled "revisionist" history. The study of history began to feature the average lives of commoners instead of focusing primarily on prominent men and women, while newly raised issues of race, gender, class, and imperialism complicated history and often ignited debates within the academy. The shift was slowly reflected in museums as well, as many attempted to move away from serving purely as shrines to people,

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# USS TEXAS

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objects, or earlier times, and began to question previously held conceptions and to incorporate new perspectives. This revisionism was reflected in the museum field by a movement towards historic accuracy and improved preservation techniques.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps one of the best examples of the development of the preservation field as it relates specifically to the Battleship *Texas* was the creation of the Historic Naval Ships Association (HNSA). In 1966 representatives from the battleships USS *Texas*, USS *Massachusetts*, USS *North Carolina*, and USS *Alabama* and from the cruiser *Olympia* met for the first time as members of the newly formed Historic Naval Ships

concerned with standards of preservation, it serves as an example of the changing trends that affected the care of the *Texas* since its decommissioning.<sup>30</sup>

The original bill that created the Battleship *Texas* memorial provided for its "exhibition as a permanent memorial for the purpose of commemorating the heroic participation of the State of Texas in the prosecution and victory of the Second World War II." While plaques and ceremonies on board did honor the veterans of the ship, the Commission paid little or no attention to aspects of historic interpretation or authenticity. The absence of leadership with historic experience and subsequent lack of planning and restoration efforts contributed to the decline of the *Texas*, not only structurally, but also histori-

the changing academic and public opinion towards proper restoration helped bring about the move from the Commission to TPWD control in 1983, and with the change in command came a change in interpretation as well. Within the first year of TPWD control, James Bell, TPWD Director of Parks, published an article in *Sea History*, the journal of the National Maritime Historical Society, which detailed the plans for the restoration of the *Texas*. The first and most important stage was an investigation of the condition of the hull and lower tanks of the battleship to determine the extent of damage. Preservationists would then consider different options of structural restoration and discuss the addition of shore facilities and the further interpretation of the ship's compartments. This approach marked a decisive shift in tactics from the Commission's tendency to make only surface repairs and minimal aesthetic improvements to an in-depth study of necessary structural repairs and potential interpretation questions.<sup>32</sup>

One of the first projects was the identification and cataloguing of all the spaces and artifacts onboard the ship. After the original docking of the battleship, the Commission had not only flooded some lower tanks, but also sealed off approximately eighty percent of the ship from the public. According to Board Chairman Denny Hair, many of the sealed compartments had become at least partially flooded due to leaks; however, their contents remained untouched since 1946 and items such as pin-ups, cigarettes, and personal belongings were found in many of the areas. TPWD found over 60,000 items in their initial investigations just within their first year of control. Unfortunately, in addition to the historic artifacts, reports also mentioned the large amounts of litter left over from the Commission days when visitors brought food onboard and often left trash and vandalized the ship to document their visit.<sup>33</sup>

Under the new leadership, research was conducted to determine the best and most successful ways to present the ship. Dr. Wilson E. Dolman of TPWD set the interpretive goals of the *Texas* as the representation of five aspects of the ship's history: the operational history, the role of the ship as the last remaining dreadnought, the function of battleships in naval operations, the daily life for sailors aboard the battle-



Staff members Ken Grubb and Gaspar Camarillo and volunteer Blaine Corman (center) work together on the main deck of the ship.

fleet and elected Lloyd Gregory of the *Texas* as the first president. By 1980 the original fleet of five had increased by only thirteen new ships, but as interest in preservation increased during the 1980s and 1990s the number grew to fifty-seven in 1992 and currently includes over 150 ships from around the world. In addition to hosting an annual conference for members, the HNSA provides educational information, preservation resources, and funding for research to both members and the public through publications and their website. While the HNSA is just one of many organizations

cally, as significant artifacts and educational opportunities were neglected and lost. The Commission had hired F. A. Pellerin as the first curator; however, his efforts consisted only of commemorating the veterans with displays of flags, uniforms, and pictures in "T" shaped frames throughout the ship. Historical accuracy was all but nonexistent as vendors sold peanuts on the deck of the ship, and the original teak deck was replaced with concrete in an unresearched and inefficient attempt to eliminate leaking in the least expensive manner.<sup>31</sup>

The ongoing damage to the ship and



ship, and the unique aspects of her engines and riveted construction. In addition, the ship itself would reflect the condition it was in during its service in the Pacific in late 1944 and early 1945 based on the most recent changes that had been made to the ship prior to its decommissioning. Dr. Dolman explained that in the view of the TPWD, the ship "should be respected as a unique artifact of great historical significance (in the museum sense) and should not have to experience intrusions on it any more than is necessary."<sup>34</sup>

The new plans called for the creation of self-guided tours through newly restored and reopened portions of the ship, with the primary goal being to, "preserve, restore and reclaim the historic fabric of the ship." The overhauls in 1925 changed the ship so drastically, it would have been nearly impossible to return to her WWI appearance; and the repairs done in the fall of 1944 had changed the mainmast to an extent that it also would have been difficult to return to the appearance of the ship during the D-Day invasion without "destruction of ... historical fabric," so TPWD decided that the restoration would reflect the *Texas*' service in the Pacific. As research continued into the history of the ship, curator Jerry Moore also made an effort to correct inaccurate restorations from the Commission era, such as a series of incorrect stenciled labels on different compartments.<sup>35</sup>

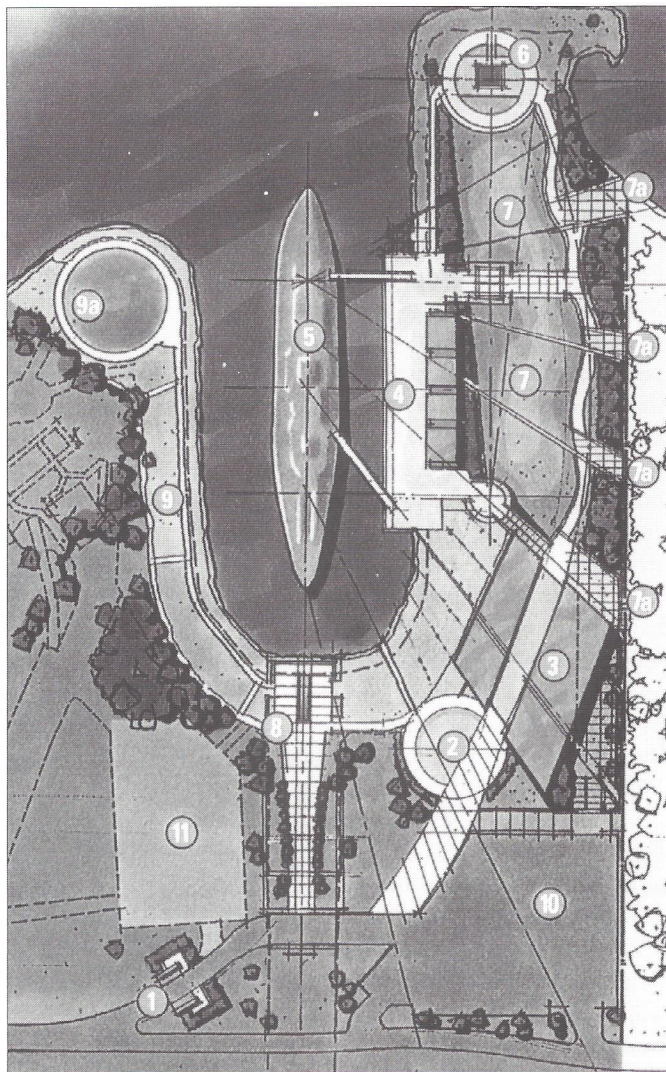
In addition to having specific interpretive goals, the introduction of experienced historians and museum specialists to the staff was a contrast to past Commission members who had limited or no historical experience and applicable knowledge on interpretation, research, and preservation. Under the direction of the TPWD,

decisions followed extensive research and documentation, which although limited by time and money, still conformed to a higher standard of historical study.<sup>36</sup>

The TPWD managed to achieve their primary structural restoration goal through the dry-docking in 1988-1990, but they still faced interpretation decisions for the deck spaces that were to be opened to the public. The 1999 Master Plan reflected the increasingly specific goals for maintaining historic integrity aboard the battleship and preserving not only the structure, but also the historic narrative of the *Texas* for future visitors. According to the plans, "Unlike other historic naval ship museums that restore compartments to general Navy specifications, TPWD's restoration efforts are intended to recreate conditions as they existed specifically on the Battleship *Texas* in 1945. This includes many 'unofficial' modifications that were added by the sailors to make life aboard ship more comfortable." These specific

## MASTER PLAN, 1999

1. Entry Markers
2. Memorial Plaza
  - Outdoor Lecture Space
  - Plaza Map
3. Interpretive Center
  - Main Exhibit Hall & Display
  - Interactive Exhibit Space
  - Classrooms
  - Offices
  - 100 Seat Theater
  - Gift Shop
  - Café
4. 1945 Wharf Area
  - Restoration Workshop
  - Public Restrooms
  - Storage
  - Portside Public Access
  - Gangway
5. Battleship *TEXAS*
6. Battleship *TEXAS* Commemorative Park
7. Macro-Artifact Park
  - Landscaped mall commons with natural circulation path
  - Picnic tables and benches
- 7a. Artifact Node
8. Promontory Point
9. 100 foot Reflective Zone Around Perimeter of Battleship
- 9a. Houston Ship Channel Park Point
10. Parking Area
11. Overflow Parking Area



interpretive goals called for extensive research and veteran interviews, both of which show a marked change away from the less exacting standards of the Commission days.<sup>37</sup>

The staff of the battleship also recognized that, "modern museum visitors desire—and expect—a more sophisticated experience than that offered by the traditional museum exhibit. This shift in visitor expectations has prompted most modern museums to adopt new interpretive strategies in an effort to create a blend of education and entertainment." Because of these changing desires for modern museums, TPWD instituted a series of new interpretive techniques including audio features throughout the ship, living history special events, and educational outreach programs.<sup>38</sup>

The 1999 Master Plan also first introduced an extensive modernization plan that was expanded upon in 2004 to include new onshore support facilities, increased



interpretive space, a 1945-era wharf, and a memorial park. The existing structures on the south side of the ship would be removed to allow the parkland to revert back to its conditions in 1836 at the time of the Battle of San Jacinto. Visitors would gain access to the ship via a reconstructed World War II-era dock, complete with period vehicles and supplies, and ship restoration facilities along the wharf would also be available for public viewing. A memorial plaza area would honor the veterans who served on board the ship, while an outdoor artifact park would also allow visitors to view some of the larger artifacts that cannot be displayed on board. Perhaps the most important addition to the site would be a new interpretive center, which would include additional historic information, artifacts, and theaters, as well as a gift shop and restaurant.

The location of these extensive new facilities, as well as the location of the ship itself raises questions of interpretation. When the ship was brought to San Jacinto in 1948, the property was already owned by the state, so it seemed a convenient and inexpensive location for the ship. However, as one might imagine, just as efforts to improve the accuracy of the battleship's interpretation have increased, so have efforts to improve the presentation of the San Jacinto battlefield. The setting of the *Texas*, and particularly its onshore facilities, currently rest on part of the site that is believed to be the original Texan camp during the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. According to the 1998 Master Plan of the San Jacinto Battleground:

The specific location of the ship, its support facilities and parking, which are adjacent to and on the Texian Camp portion of the Battleground, conflict with the optimal context, ambience and interpretation of the 1836 Battle and the Battleground. Accordingly, the Master Planning Committee recommends that consideration be given, when feasible, to the possible long-term relocation of the ship to another site within the park, where it can be a focal point with enhanced interpretive opportunities.<sup>39</sup>

The plan recommends the relocation of the surrounding buildings to the north side of the ship until the time that the complete removal of the ship is a possibility.

In a 1999 article, Caroline Gregory, a trustee of the Foundation, stated that

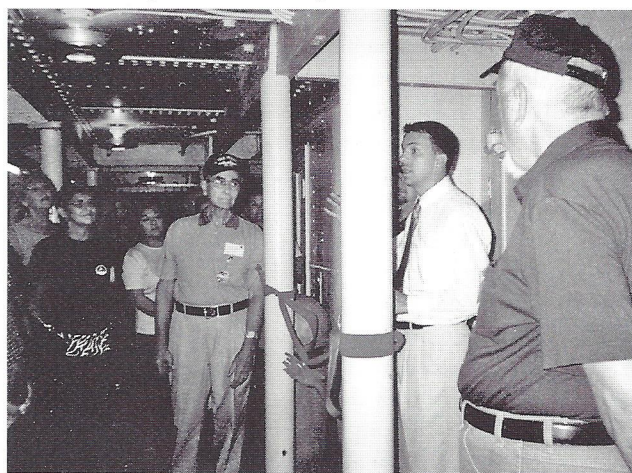
there are "absolutely no future plans to move the ship from its present berth."<sup>40</sup> Instead she cited the previously mentioned plans for relocation to the north side and the creation of additional interpretive buildings. Although it is obvious to staff that the close proximity of the ship and battlegrounds offer interpretive problems for both sites, San Jacinto Advisory Board Member Jan DeVault explained that it is often less obvious to visitors, particularly young children who may not understand that the guns of the *Texas* did not provide artillery support to Sam Houston's men. Even after acknowledging the problems, there is no easy solution. As the ship continues to age, the likelihood of its ability to survive another move decreases. In addition, private donors have offered money to provide improvements to the existing slip and new requests for more money to move it would not be taken well by those who already paid to have it stay in its current location.

While some may argue for its removal, the TPWD is currently attempting to ensure its long-term residence at San Jacinto by installing a dry-dock or cradle in the slip at the battleground, which would allow the ship to be permanently displayed out of the water. There is concern that the ship will not survive further towing to distant dry-docking facilities, and the removal from the water will not only prevent further rust and hull deterioration, but also allow visitors to view the entire ship, including the rudder and propellers that are normally underwater.

The continued blending of time periods within one site may cause some confusion, but improved interpretation at both the battleship and the battlegrounds can in fact provide a broader understanding of American history. According to the 2004 interpretation plan, "while the San Jacinto Battleground speaks to Texans' attainment of liberty, the USS *Texas* speaks to Texans and all citizens concerning the maintenance of that freedom." Improved interpretation of the battleship through the planned interpretive center and onshore facilities combined with the restoration of the Texan camp on the south side of the ship will provide visitors with a more accurate understanding of each site individually, while providing parents and

teachers with an opportunity to teach about different eras and changing technologies throughout history. Research by TPWD has also shown that the close proximity of the sites increases the attendance at both the battleship and the battlefield, so financial consequences must also be taken into consideration when discussing the removal of the ship.<sup>41</sup>

Today, the staff continues to fund-raise for the permanent dry-dock, onshore interpretive center, and 1945-era wharf, and the staff is hopeful that a proposal to use \$16 million in federal highway funds will be approved by Congress and allow them to begin work. While preservationists must



*During the crew reunion in October 2005, Director Barry Ward (center) addresses veterans and visitors prior to the revealing of a newly restored stateroom.*

hope that these improvements will be made in the near future before the structure of the ship incurs any more damage, one cannot help but recognize the immense improvements that have already taken place aboard the ship.

The *Texas* welcomes over 150,000 visitors annually, and in 2004 she hosted over 2,700 students and adults as part of an overnight educational program. Over thirty-five percent of the ship is open to the public at all times, while additional restored spaces are available through special guided tours. Volunteers are currently working on projects to restore officer staterooms and the combat information center, and efforts are ongoing by the staff and volunteers to improve interpretation through explanatory signs, rotating exhibits, and guided tours. In addition to the maintenance crew, the staff itself now includes historians, archivists, a collections manager, trained interpreters, and a curator, all of whom have experience

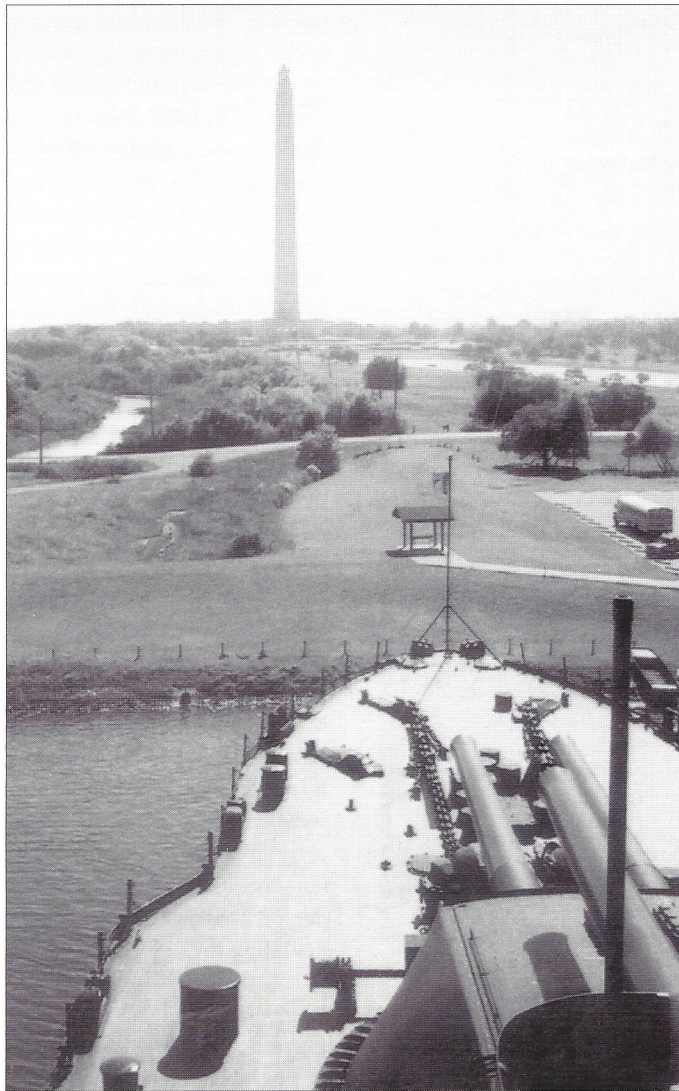


in preservation and interpretation techniques and serve as living proof of the increased dedication to accuracy and conservation.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Battleship *Texas* is its ability to shed light on a number of different historical currents of the twentieth century. The ship sits at the intersection of the regional, national, and institutional history of the last hundred years. The list of names associated with the preservation of the *Texas* reads as a roll call of prominent Texans, including Admiral Chester Nimitz, Lyndon B. Johnson, Albert Thomas, Mark Andrews, and Lloyd Gregory. The campaign to raise money to save the ship involved numerous local organizations and individuals, and there is no way to know how many Houston school children of the 1940s are honorary admirals in the Texas Navy through their contribution to the fundraising drives.

Whether it is an ideal location or not, the placement of the ship at San Jacinto has also associated the *Texas* with Texan independence in the state's public memory. Admiral Nimitz described the location as "fitting" in 1948, and Assistant Secretary of Labor John J. Gilhooley declared on San Jacinto Day in 1958, "Texas, has, I think, few more gallant symbols of its own bravery and tenacious purpose than this ship, moored now in its home earth. Texans, then, may see in this ship the Lone Star State in miniature—its past, and by the bright lights of its past, its future." It was largely the citizens of Texas who fought to save the ship from destruction in the 1940s and the 1980s, and the story of the preservation of the *Texas* is impossible without an understanding of the role of state involvement.<sup>43</sup>

The national significance of the ship is an important part of the story as well, in both a military and a cultural sense. The military career of the battleship lasted thirty-four years, spanned two world wars, and boasted a number of groundbreaking innovations including radar and naval aviation. At her commissioning and again after



View of the San Jacinto Monument from the bow of the ship, 2004.

Photo by author

modernization in the 1920s, she was the flagship of the U.S. fleet and represented the height of modern military capabilities. She participated in some of the most famous engagements of World War II, yet through it all, she sustained only two direct hits and suffered only one combat fatality. In addition to her military exploits, as a museum ship she serves as a constant memorial to the thousands of Navy and Marine veterans from around the country who served on board during her active career.

Culturally, the *Texas* is also important as a medium through which to examine society during the first half of the twentieth century. As anthropologist and ship's interpreter Kenneth Grubb has explained, "the social construction aboard *Texas* throughout her years of service is a reasonable approximation of the social construction of American society...during

the time of *Texas*, the definition and understanding of class and racial divisions were altered in both civilian and military culture, and...these shifts can be examined through *Texas*." During the same celebratory speech, Gilhooley recognized the ship's military and cultural significance claiming, "For Americans, this monument is a miniature of the United States Navy and of the men of her service in war and in peace; those ships and men...whose firm blue line has never failed the United States and never will. For Americans, it is a symbol, then, of bravery, and duty, and history."<sup>44</sup>

The ship's importance and significance in national memory is also related to its institutional role and development as a museum. In a nation where heritage tourism is of growing interest to the population, the accurate preservation and maintenance of historic sites is important, and the story of the *Texas* is indicative of the national trend. As the first memorial ship of its kind, the *Texas* was a pioneer not only in the military but also in the museum field. While her first thirty years left much to be desired, the improvements of the last twenty years parallel the developments across the country in preservation and interpreta-

tion, and according to the TPWD, "the Battleship is viewed now by other historical naval vessels as the standard for historical preservation." Between current exhibits and interpretation, living history events, and archival opportunities, "the potential utility of *Texas* as an educational, interpretive, and research vehicle is virtually unlimited."<sup>45</sup>

Although funding and staff shortages often prohibit ideal restoration and interpretation on board the battleship, the current state of the ship provides a safe and accurate venue for a trip back in time. The regional, national, and institutional significance of the *Texas* provides visitors with a multi-faceted museum experience that offers something to guests of all ages and interests, and represents a remarkable combination of military power and civic cooperation. ■◆