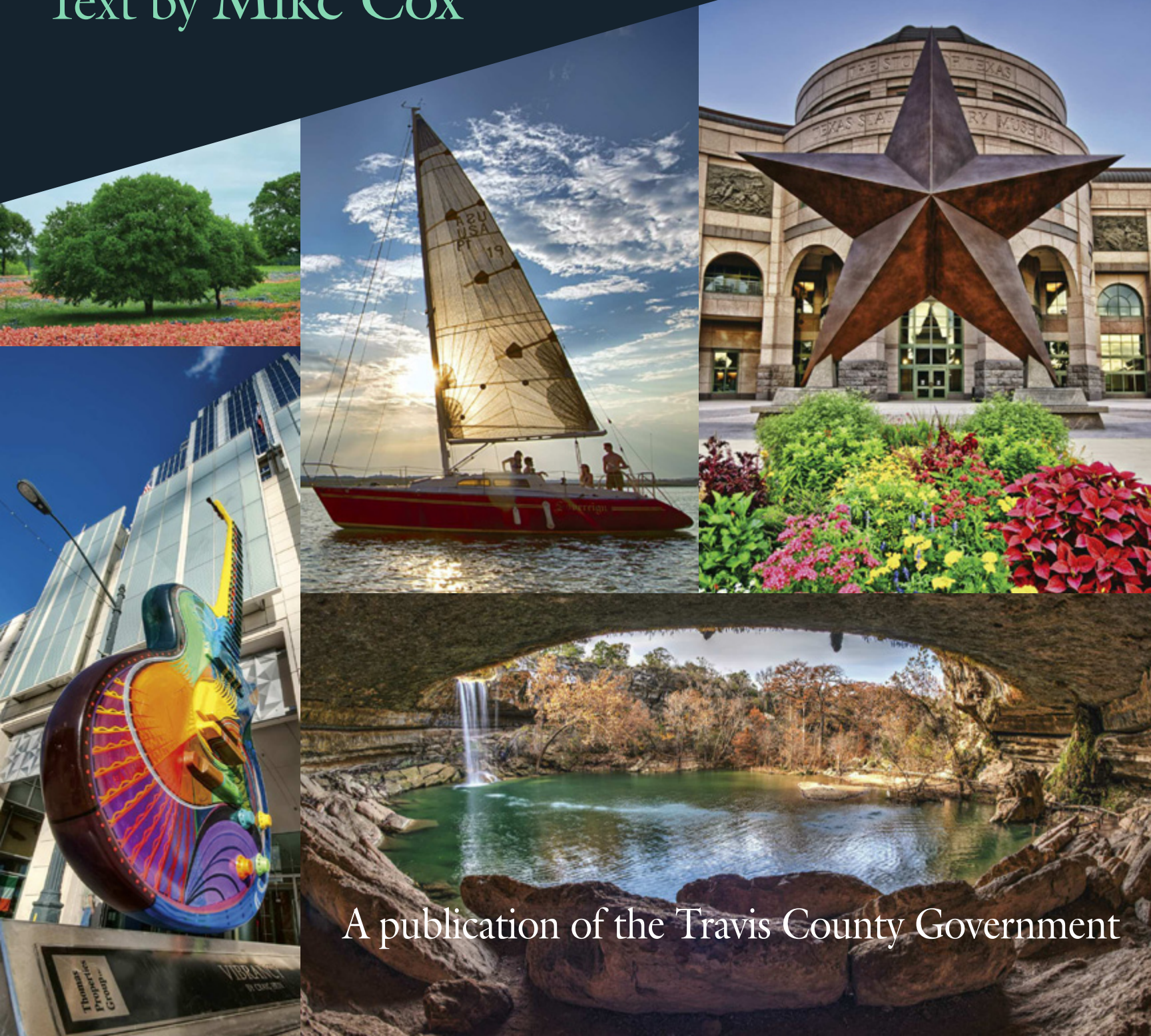


TRAVIS COUNTY Icons & Ideas

Photography by John R. Rogers

Text by Mike Cox



A publication of the Travis County Government

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Travis County and the City of Austin will soon be celebrating their 175th anniversaries. The twin anniversaries are December, 2014 (Austin) and January, 2015 (Travis County).

First Edition

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Chapter 1

Building Blocks of the Past

Historians can look at the events leading to the organization of Texas' 254 counties and see that most of them came into being when a particular community finally gained enough residents to have a need for local government. Other counties existed as nothing but empty boxes on a map until people finally arrived to settle them.



Left: Austin got its name from Texas colonizer Stephen F. Austin, later buried in the State Cemetery. Travis County got its name from Alamo legend William Travis, whose body was burned at the Alamo.

Below: The Republic of Texas made Austin its capital in 1839, creating Travis County shortly thereafter in 1840.





Top: The cattle industry played an important role in the development of Texas, with the historic Chisholm Trail crossing Travis County.

Above: Oldest structure in Travis County, the French Legation dates to Texas' time as an independent republic.

Left: Built in 1857, the Governor's Mansion still serves as the home for the Texas chief executive.

But Travis County—celebrating its 175th birthday—has a unique creation story, its origin tracing to something that continues to define it: Its principle city was chosen as a national, and later, a state capital. The way that came to be involved one man's political aspirations. And a dead buffalo.

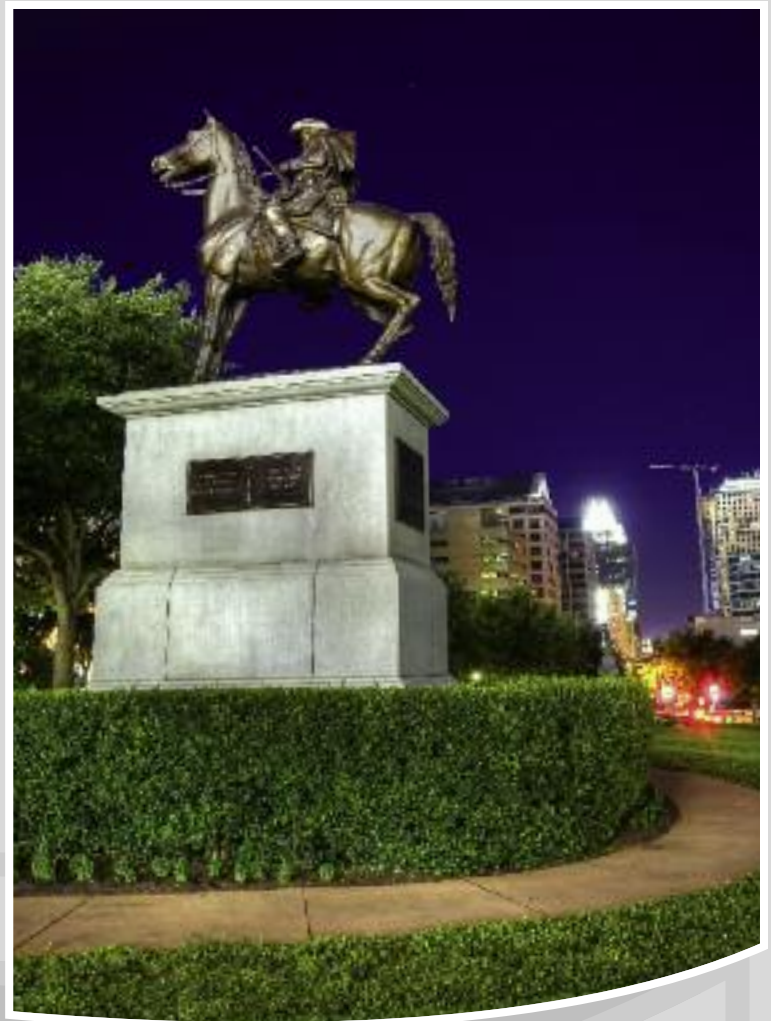
Of course, with a major river coursing through it, the area had a human population long before Europeans first trod the soil of future Texas. Archeologists believe pre-historic people lived near Barton Springs and other good water sources in the area as early as 8,000 B.C.

In the eighteenth century, Spanish explorers travelling through Central Texas also spent some time in the future county. They even established a mission near Barton Springs in 1730, but did not maintain it for long. If they had stayed around, the area likely would have had a very different history, perhaps developing more like San Antonio.



Right: Men on horseback played a pivotal role in shaping Travis County's history.

Below: Spaniards briefly established a mission at Barton Springs in the early 1730s. This Capitol monument recognizes the state's rich Hispanic heritage.





Spain lost Texas to the new Republic of Mexico in 1821, and soon colonists from the adjacent United States started arriving. Reuben Hornsby, the first Anglo settler of future Travis County, built a cabin at a bend of the Colorado River in 1832. Three years later, Joseph Harrell and his family joined the Hornsbys, but Harrell soon took a notion to move farther north, settling on the east side of Shoal Creek near where the stream empties into the Colorado.

At the time, Harrell's cabin stood as the most remote outpost of settlement in the Mexican province of Coahuila y Texas. Following the 1835-1836 revolution that led to an independent Texas republic, Texas Rangers constructed a wooden stockade called Fort Coleman, the first government facility in the future county. By 1838, a few other settlers had begun improving land along the river above Bastrop, and that summer, Edward Burleson had a town site surveyed on the river between Shoal and Waller Creeks. He called it Waterloo and Harrell became the village's first postmaster.

Pre-Travis County was too attractive an area not to have started growing sooner or later, but what happened that fall changed everything.



Top: The Bob Bullock Texas History Museum chronicles Texas' colorful history.

Left and below: The Driskill Hotel took in its first guests in 1886.





Above: The Paramount Theater on Congress Avenue, opened in 1913, continues to entertain residents and visitors.



Left: From Vaudeville to Greater Tuna, the Paramount has seen it all.

Below: Located on historic East Sixth Street, the Driskill remains one of Travis County's most elegant hostelrys.





A Georgian with an imposing name and even bigger dreams, Mirabeau Bonaparte Lamar, came to Texas in 1835 and fought in the Battle of San Jacinto, the short but bloody fight on April 21, 1836, that assured Texas' independence from Mexico. The man who led Texas forces in that battle, Sam Houston, soon gained election as the first president of the Republic of Texas. Lamar was his vice president. But by the nascent nation's constitution, a president could not succeed himself in office.

What happened next has often been told, with one notable omission.



Left: Being the seat of Texas' government has been one of Travis County's major economic drivers.

Below: Texans dedicated the present capitol in 1888.





The relatively well-known part of the story is that in the fall of 1838, escorted by a detail of Texas Rangers, Lamar and his private secretary traveled to the frontier and stayed at Harrell's cabin. When Harrell's son burst in at breakfast one morning to announce that buffalo covered the prairie north of the river, Lamar, Harrell and the rangers saddled up for a buffalo hunt.

They charged into the herd, which milled in the area that later became Congress Avenue. With a pistol, Lamar took down a big bull at what is now Eighth and Congress. The riders had separated during the excitement of the hunt, but afterward regrouped on a hill affording a good view of the river valley below. There, admiring the view, Lamar famously said,

“Gentlemen, this should be the seat of future empire.”



Above: The Capitol at night seen from the underground extension.

Right: As Texas grew, the Capitol complex continued to expand, including construction of an underground addition. Travis County's history includes much of the state's history, with numerous historical milestones commemorated by statuary on the Capitol grounds.





Above: The current Travis County Courthouse, in use since 1931, is the third structure built to house the county's courts and government offices.

Below: A classic example of Art Deco design, the Fifty-Third District Court has had many trials over the years.

The lesser-known kicker to this tale is that Lamar's visit to Waterloo had absolutely nothing to do with simply having a hardy outdoor adventure. In modern parlance, it was nothing but a campaign stop. In a day when news spread no quicker than the fastest horse, Lamar had been out pressing the flesh, hoping to drum up votes. And Lamar's bringing down a big buffalo with a pistol was the Texas beginning of a continuing political ritual—the candidate goes hunting to prove he's got the right stuff.

Lamar got elected, but for future Travis County the importance of the vice president's visit went far beyond his political victory.

Geography affects history just as the events that eventually become history impact geography. The area where Harrell had chosen to live, remote and dangerous as it was, was well suited for settlement. That's why Burleson had founded Waterloo. The river and the two large creeks that flowed into it (later named Shoal Creek and Waller Creek) provided water for man and animal, not to mention fish to eat. The "mountains" (as most early visitors called them) west of Shoal Creek stood covered with juniper and oak trees while the prairie spreading eastward from what is now known as the Balcones Escarpment covered rich, black soil that early visitors must have felt practically begged for a plow. Too, the area had no shortage of limestone from which homes and businesses could be built, and beyond the mountains, legend had it that gold and silver waited to be mined.

Clearly suitable for settlement, the area either side of the mid-Colorado, a hilly expanse of nature's artistry at its best, called to a man at a deeper level.



“I must consider this the most beautiful country I ever saw,” a visitor named Thomas Bell wrote his brother a year after Lamar’s visit. “There is some of the most beautiful lands [sic] I ever beheld or ever expect to.”

Soon after being sworn in, Lamar appointed a commission to come up with a location for the new country’s seat of government. Lamar said Waterloo was one of the places they needed to check. The fix may have been in from the start, but however it happened, the commission selected the place that had captivated Lamar.

A new city named for colonist Stephen F. Austin was laid out between Shoal and Waller Creeks, workers threw up a wooden capitol and a house for the president and on December 27, 1839, the city was incorporated.

On January 25, 1840, Congress created Travis County—named for Alamo legend William B. Travis—by legislatively slicing off the western half of Bastrop County. Over time, Travis County would be whittled down to its present size, in the process creating a dozen additional counties.



Above: All faiths are represented in Travis County. This is All Saint's Episcopal Church.

Left: Replica of Lyndon Baines Johnson Oval Office at the LBJ Presidential Library.

Below: Library housing President Lyndon B. Johnson's papers was dedicated in 1972. Though born in the Hill Country, LBJ was a driving political force in Travis County, Texas, the nation and the world.





Austin and Travis County endured an attempt by Sam Houston during his second term in office to remove the capital to Houston, a city he felt had been particularly well named. It also survived an 1850 election that could have made another Texas town the capital, and yet another capital-selection vote in 1872. The town's first railroad had arrived in 1871, and once the votes were counted in the following year's polling, Austin and its host county slowly began to grow.

By the late 1880s, Austin had its two prime icons—a red granite state house dedicated in 1888 that is taller than the national capitol, and the University of Texas, opened in 1883.



Top, left: This old cotton field eventually gave way to bluebonnets.

Top, right: Opened in 1883, the University of Texas has remained a hugely powerful force in Travis County's development.

Above: Sam Houston tried to move the capital to the city named in his honor, but Travis County residents resorted to force and stopped it.

Right: Mount Bonnell is one of the highest points in Travis County, as well as one of the most historic and legend-steeped.

Creating the Atmosphere for Growth

Chapter 2

Travis County and Austin are ranked at or near the top of so many best-this and best-that lists that it is challenging to keep score. But the take home is easy to summarize: The county, along with its principal city, is a hot place to do business and a cool place to visit.

Already with a population of 885,400 (2013 estimate), Austin is the fastest growing city in the nation. In 2014, it was adding an average of 110 residents every twenty-four hours. Travis County, with an additional quarter million-plus residents living outside Austin, is one of the faster growing American counties as well. The county enjoys one of the nation's more robust economies, and is considered a great place to locate a new company or expand an existing one, not to mention being a fine place to live.

It has not always been that way.



Left: As Travis County has grown, so has the county's need for office space. This high-rise at Seventh and Lavaca is home to the Travis County Commissioner's Court and other county offices.

Below: Thanks to the many factors contributing to Travis County's atmosphere for growth, it is one of the nation's fastest growing areas.





Above: In addition to state government, Travis County hosts a federal district court and numerous other federal offices.

Below: Travis County Commissioners meet every Tuesday morning.

Opposite, top: Travis County's seal is a central feature inside the seven-story structure.

Opposite, bottom: County Judge Sam Biscoe presiding over a commissioner's court meeting.





In 1940, a century after its founding, only 89,000 people lived in Travis County, most of them in Austin.

A large county in area, back then Travis County was decidedly more rural than urban. Forty-Fifth Street marked the northern edge of Austin and not much of the city at all extended south of the Colorado. On the eve of World War Two, the county had 3,187 farms, including 150 dairies (contented cows gave down their milk in pastures that eventually became north Central Austin) and mostly cattle ranches in the western half of the county. In fact, excluding state government and the university, agriculture and mining (mostly limestone and clay) drove the county's economy. Cotton was the biggest crop, but the rich black soil east of the Balcones Escarpment produced everything from corn to hay to fruit.

Travis County has always been a place where an energetic person could make a living, but it sure helped if you worked for the state or the University of Texas.

For years, the Austin Chamber of Commerce longed for industrialization, but it just did not happen. Well into the 1960s, the county supported only a modest level of light industry: A brick business, a chili cannery, a vanilla extract producer and that was about it.



Growth came slowly at first, and even after the county started gaining businesses and people, well-intentioned if not particularly capitalistic activists fought hard to slow the pace. In the hippy-dippy days of the late 1960s and early 1970s, protestors climbed a giant oak tree trying to keep it from being bulldozed in the name of progress. Others fought to save Victorian-era houses earmarked for demolition to make room for parking lots or new office buildings. In the 1990s, environmentally concerned Austinites rallied to protect Barton Springs from pollution born of upstream development. Because of the political pressure these and other movements generated, when economic development did begin to gain momentum, Travis County did more than many areas across the country to grow responsibly.

What eventually transformed Travis County can be summed up in one word: Education. Thanks to the discovery in the 1920s of prodigious amounts of oil beneath a million-plus acres of UT-owned land in West Texas, the university finally achieved its constitutional mandate of being a “university of the first class.” The school became a fusion reactor for ideas, a factory of innovation. In addition to UT, St. Edward’s University, Concordia College and Huston-Tillotson University added to the pool of bright minds. Later, Austin Community College, a two-year school with numerous satellite campuses, would have nearly as many students as UT.



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