

Austin Hall

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"Austin Hall: SHSU landmark." This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University.

This university is uniquely favored to have on its campus one of the architectural treasures of Texas. It is difficult in this era of skyscrapers, grandiose malls, and massive public buildings to understand the impact that this small Greek revival classroom building made on Texans in the 1850s.

Apart from the larger Spanish missions, which were in a fairly ruinous state by that period in Texas history, only the so-called "Colonial Capitol—completed in 1853, not the present capitol—exceeded Austin Hall in impressiveness within the boundaries of this state, or nearly any place in the United States west of the Mississippi. Admittedly, the prominent site atop one of Huntsville's highest hills contributed greatly to the visual impact as it does today. In the words of Austin College historian P. E. Wallace, "It was the pride of Huntsville, the light of the Presbytery, and the wonder of visitors of that locality."

There are some who bridle at the official use of a name other than Austin College Building for the classical structure that overlooks Huntsville and much of the campus, as it was erected for the Presbyterian college established in Huntsville in 1849 and named in honor of Texas' founding father. The succeeding institution in the same building was named for a Texas military hero and first general elected President. This succession of names is doubly appropriate since Houston was a charter trustee of Austin College, before it moved to Sherman, and had told its founder, Daniel Baker, with characteristic hyperbole, quote, "that it would be a greater advantage to have a Presbyterian college located here than to have the place made the capitol of the state."

Houston's statement rings a bit hollowly in view of the fact that Huntsville was no doubt still rankling over having failed to oust Austin as the capitol in an election that took place in the spring of 1850, as called for in the Constitution of 1845 when Texas became a state. A number of citizens had been optimistic enough to set aside five acres and to designate the knoll on which Austin College would be placed as "Capitol Hill," and the name persisted even after Austin handily surpassed Palestine to make its temporary status permanent. Huntsville trailed Tehuacana and Washington-on-the-Brazos in garnering the fifth-highest total.

Disappointed Huntsville might be, but the splendid site was then available for Austin College. Only a bit more than a year later, work was begun on the building for which Daniel Baker and many others had worked so diligently. For an amusing account of the laying of the corner stone, one should read the diaries of Adolphus Stearn, the Samuel Peeps of frontier Texas, published as *Hoorah for Texas!* in 1969. That event took place midday of June 24, 1851, and Stearn notes that "a hotter day we certainly did not have this summer." He does not report that Sam Houston held his umbrella over President McKinley to shield him from the sun during his long oration, but that story has become a fixed piece of Houston lore.

The 80- by 50-foot structure was built of soft, sand-molded bricks which had been made at the state penitentiary. Their softness is attested to by generations of initials scratched deeply into the muted red walls. The plastered columns can be described as Tuscan or Roman Doric. It has been traditionally maintained that Austin College was designed by Abner Cook, the master builder who created the finest residences in Texas before the Civil War, notably the Governor's mansion and a number of other beautiful houses still standing in Austin. But the evidence for this is largely circumstantial. He came to Huntsville in 1848 to build the penitentiary, which had been awarded to that city the previous year, and he was also a trustee of Austin College. However, he returned to Austin in 1850, before the building

was begun, and he is not mentioned except possibly by inference in the contract for construction, which is preserved in the Walker County deed records. It is certainly not a wild conjecture, however, to assume that Cook would leave plans with his friend, Robert Smither, for a project in which he was so involved.

Despite the auspicious beginning and a successful early history—a bronze plaque on the building notes that it housed the first law school in Texas—Austin College was in very difficult circumstances by the 1870s. The Civil War caused the loss of most of its students for the duration, and the Reconstruction period and long after was characterized by a weak economy in East Texas. The yellow fever epidemic of 1867 certainly did not help, giving Huntsville a reputation for unhealthiness that took years to live down. Even well into the 20th century, the bulletin of Sam Houston State emphasized the pure water and healthful climate to prospective students. In short, it is not surprising that Austin College moved to Sherman, then the most flourishing region in the state, in 1876. After a few sporadic sessions as a local academy, the Austin College building once again was the seat of an institution of higher learning, when Texas, with urgent pressure and financial assistance from the Peabody Educational Fund, finally acted to establish a teacher training institution.

Thanks to the efforts of citizens of Huntsville who purchased the building and all its surrounding land for \$1,000—it cost over \$10,000 28 years earlier—and the introduction by Colonel Ellie Abercrombie, Huntsville's state senator, of a bill which set up the institution and named it after the hero of San Jacinto, Sam Houston Normal Institute began its history, long by Texas standards, in October, 1879. Indeed, only Texas A&M and its associated institution at Prairie View had been established earlier, in 1876, among state-supported institutions of higher learning. That precedence is somewhat diminished by the fact that Sam Houston produced the first graduating class in 1880, an outstanding group of educators whose sense of specialness remained with them throughout life, so much so that its last reunion was in 1940, when all the survivors were in their 80s. One of those distinguished members of that class, incidentally, was T.U. Taylor, longtime Dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Texas; Taylor Hall is the central building of that college. That the nomenclature "Austin Hall" is not of recent coinage is made apparent by Taylor's reference to his classes under Professor O.H. Cooper 60 years earlier, quote, "in Austin Hall in Huntsville," in a nostalgic essay which he wrote in 1940.

Owing to the immediate success of the Normal—which received top students recommended on a quota basis from each Texas senatorial district, in addition to a certain number of places available for sufficiently academic local scholars—Austin Hall was almost instantly too small. As a temporary measure, a third floor was added in the 1882-1883 academic year, which solved the even more immediate problem of a leaking roof. As the drawing reveals, the style was changed to the then-fashionable French Empire: the graceful cupola gave way to a mansard roof, and would not reappear for more than a century later. The bell, whose tolling from the cupola had summoned students to class, was sent to Austin College. It is known as the Sam Houston bell, for it was he who obtained it, and it is still a venerated component of the Sherman campus.

The disproportionate roof of the new building was not long to tower over the self-proclaimed "Athens of Texas," however, as the enormous structure of the new Main Building began going up in 1889. "Old Main," the fond name it acquired over the years, would completely obscure Austin Hall from the town's sight until that sad night in February, 1982, when one of Texas' finest Victorian public buildings went up in flames. The way in which the new Main Building had been sited almost on top of Austin Hall would indicate that it was thought that the smaller, older building would be demolished in the not too distant future; a 1913 master plan did not include it. As fashions and attitudes tend to come full circle, however; by the 1920s, Greek Revival was one of the most admired styles for academic buildings once again. Sam Houston State Teachers College, as it had been renamed in 1923, decided to renovate Austin Hall by removing the third floor—yes, the roof was leaking again—that third floor which had ruined the classical proportions. Since the campus had developed greatly along the quadrangle, it was thought desirable to have Austin face away from Old Main with an additional column of portico on the south side, even though the cupola was not replaced until the reopening in 1927.

Throughout these years of physical changes, the manner of service to the parent institution also changed. Before the Main Building's completion in 1890, of course it had to serve all purposes; it was the only building. Afterwards, until what would become known as the Agriculture Building was built in 1910—that was demolished in 1982—it housed the science departments. The last of the science classrooms housed on the third floor that no longer exists left in 1916 for

the new science building, now the Administration Building, or the Bobby K. Marks Administration Building. In 1917, it had a short service as a World War I barracks. Its primary role in subsequent years was as a social center. In fact, Social Center was the official and formal name until the construction of the first student center in 1950, recently renovated as an academic building and alumni center. At the time of the great fire that destroyed Old Main and gutted Austin Hall, the latter was housing military science in the upper floor and alumni offices as well as the faculty reception center. Austin Hall in its renovated state is a beautiful facility of which any institution would be proud.

Regarding the pleasing exterior, one concedes that it cannot recreate the overpowering dominance of Old Main on the crest of the hill, but replacing the cupola after an absence of more than a century has added the height which makes the building imposing enough to match the recently emphasized designation of "Hall." Despite intermittent efforts over many years to achieve that usage, understandably since few administrators wished to memorialize another institution, even one so different as Austin College. These efforts had never before really taken hold of the consciousness of the academic community. It would seem however that at last SHSU has taken complete possession of its only building which was familiar to its honoree, and for that reason Sam Houston's bronze statue was placed in front of the 1927 façade of Austin Hall. Some have suggested that it should be moved to the original front, overlooking the city, now that Old Main is no longer obscuring it, as Austin Hall should become the symbol that Old Main once was.