

## Old Main

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Written and read by Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian, except where noted. Excerpts from *Texas Highways* are read, with permission, from: Humphries, Jack. (May 1977). Dear Old Main. *Texas Highways*.

This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian here at SHSU. Today's podcast deals primarily with the first building constructed on this campus after its creation, along with other elements of early SHSU history. I shall begin with a few comments that accompanied the dedication of the Old Main Memorial in 1987; that sad reminder of the building that was the glory of Huntsville is just in front of Austin Hall, as was the building itself for 92 years.

On September 23, 1889, the cornerstone for the Main Building at Sam Houston Normal Institute was set in place. This event was the culmination of the persistent efforts of the citizens of Huntsville and the staff and faculty of SHNI, under the leadership of State Senator L. A. Abercrombie and President Joseph Baldwin. Their efforts resulted in obtaining an appropriation of \$40,000 for the construction of the Main Building from the Twenty-first Legislature.

The Main Building, a towering Gothic structure, later to be known as Old Main, was 157 feet long and 92 feet wide with five classrooms, a large reception room, and wide corridors in the shape of a cross on the first floor. On the second floor there were four large classrooms and what has been termed the grandest part of the building, the Sam Houston Memorial Hall. It was an auditorium 71 by 96 feet with a slanted floor and a broken design ceiling of beaded wood with excellent acoustical qualities. The hall could seat 1,500 people with each one having an excellent view of the large stage.

The aesthetic quality of Sam Houston Memorial Hall was further enhanced with twenty-three cathedral-like stained glass windows. These were glass memorials which had been installed periodically up to those commissioned for the Diamond Jubilee Celebration in 1954.

As the enrollment increased and the curriculum broadened, the role and scope of the institution changed, bringing about the need for name changes. The name was changed in 1923 to Sam Houston State Teachers College. In 1964 the name was changed to Sam Houston State College and again in 1969 to Sam Houston State University.

On February 12, 1982, a devastating predawn fire destroyed Old Main, the most beautiful building owned by the State of Texas. The cause of the fire was never determined.

The architects' estimate to rebuild Old Main was over \$16,000,000. The Texas Legislature, after due consideration, decided that the citizens of Texas could be better served if the same amount of space was funded in another building. This was done. However, the President of Sam Houston State University, Dr. Elliott T. Bowers, with the help and guidance of Gib Lewis, Speaker of the House, Representative Allen Hightower and Senator Kent Caperton, was able to persuade the Texas Legislature to appropriate funds to memorialize the site of Old Main and restore Austin Hall.

Here now stands the footprint of the famous old building.

Continuing with another view of today's subject, I would like to read an article entitled "Dear Old Main," by Dr. Jack Humphries. Despite that title, the article deals to a great degree with the earlier building built for Austin College here in Huntsville. Dr. Humphries was longtime Vice-President of Academic Affairs here at SHSU and later President of our sister

institution Sul Ross State University. He approached this subject a number of times: this article was written for a general audience in *Texas Highways* magazine in 1977—before the fire that destroyed it in 1982; he also wrote a booklet that emphasized the celebrated stained-glass windows, as well as an article for a scholarly journal.

A familiar sight to the visitor traveling along Interstate 45 through Huntsville is the 19<sup>th</sup> Century structure of Old Main. Towering over the Sam Houston State University campus, the imposing structure marks Capitol Hill, a name reflecting a community wish that died aborning. The old building is visible to the passerby in summer and winter, and looks more like a castle than a college.

Capitol Hill is also crested with another building no less imposing for its 1853 vintage—the Austin College building. Giant oaks and other university buildings obscure it now from freeway view, but it remains virtually unchanged, a silent, dignified testimony of time past, of the educational history of a state profoundly influenced by its presence. Old Main and the Austin College building reflect the architectural tastes of early-day Texas and the faith of a frontier state in education for its citizens.

Austin College was established in 1850 through the efforts of Rev. Daniel Baker, a prominent early Texas Presbyterian educator, and several Huntsville citizens including Colonel Henderson Yoakum, author of the first history of Texas. The first permanent building for the new Presbyterian school was begun in 1851. Since Huntsville citizens thought their town would be chosen as the site for the state capitol, they dubbed the building site “Capitol Hill.” (When Austin won the election in 1850, loyal Huntsville citizens attributed the development to an illegal Mexican vote in the Rio Grande area.)

Austin College’s first board, which included such distinguished Texans as Sam Houston, Anson Jones, Dr. A. J. Branch, Yoakum and others, approved a building contract in 1851, and soon the cornerstone was set with “due and ancient form” amid “a large and respectable number of visiting ladies and gentlemen.”

Completed in 1853, the building was a spectacular sight. Its dimensions were 80 by 50 feet with 10 rooms, two of which were large enough for assemblies. The balcony on the north front was supported by four large Tuscan columns, and the flat roof supported a cupola that topped out at 70 feet.

The quotation following is from J. M. Fullenwider at the time of the dedication: “It overlooked the town in the valley north about a half-mile distant and the country beyond for miles. During commencement exercises when the building was brilliantly illuminated, the illumination could be seen 18 miles away.” Another contemporary of the era wrote: “It was the most handsome college edifice in the State of Texas until after the close of the war”—[meaning the Civil War, of course]—“and possibly had no peer in the Southwest. It was the pride of Huntsville, the delight of the Presbytery, and the wonder of visitors of that locality.”

The old college got off to a good start. Enrollment peaked at 84 in 1855, one year after the first degree was awarded. A law department, the first in Texas, was established in 1855. It awarded four diplomas in its two-year history. The school progressed until the Civil War, although its enrollment was never stable and its finances were precarious. Rev. Baker spent most of his time on the road raising funds for the school, while President McKinney administered and taught.

In 1855 the senior class stirred up some excitement when they organized the student body commencement party and announced there would be *dancing*. The shocked faculty threatened to withhold the degrees if the dance was held. So the enterprising seniors changed the date of the dance to after commencement. But it did not work. They held the dance—and no degrees were given. It was a year and a half before the board grudgingly awarded them.

Austin College never recovered from the Civil War. In the post-war years enrollment dwindled to a handful, and it became increasingly difficult to raise funds. In 1867 a yellow fever epidemic in Huntsville added to the school’s problems. By 1874 there was talk of moving the college, and in 1876 it was on its way to Sherman, where it remains.

The old Austin College building was used briefly as a private school. In 1879 Huntsville residents courted Governor Roberts and the Legislature for the state's first teacher training, or "normal" school. The town bought the building and gave it to the state. Later that year when Sam Houston Normal Institute was established, the Austin College building was the center of operation.

Enrollment in the new school, nourished by state-sponsored scholarships, increased steadily and soon taxed the available space. In 1882, the cupola was removed from the old building and another floor and a mansard roof were added. In the late 1920s, the original flat roof was restored but the cupola was left off. A column-flanked south entrance matching the one on the north side was also added. Through the years the building has served a variety of uses, but the exterior—of red brick with stately white columns—remains essentially unchanged.

In 1889 the Legislature appropriated \$40,000 for another building for the Normal Institute, and one year later Old Main was dedicated. Of course, it was not called "Old Main" at the beginning; it was only the Administration Building.

It is only a few feet north of the Austin College building, almost obscuring the panoramic view in which Austin College founders had taken so much pride. The two-story Gothic edifice was 157 feet long and 92 feet wide. The first floor consisted of "recitation rooms" and offices, and the second floor was the Sam Houston Memorial Hall, which seated 1,500. The *Huntsville Item* described it as "without doubt the handsomeist (sic) and best fitted up hall in the state. . . ."

Twenty-three lavish stained-glass windows flank the hall commemorating educational leaders and events in Texas history. The large center window on the north side honors Sam Houston, while others honor benefactors to Southern education, the early Normal school program, presidents and faculty.

The south windows commemorate the Battle of San Jacinto with hallowed references to the Alamo and Goliad, former presidents and state Senator L. A. Abercrombie—"Senator, Jurist, Knightly Gentleman, Without Fear, and Without Reproach"—whose skillful efforts helped secure the Normal School for Huntsville.

Today, the Austin College building and Old Main anchor the north end of a rather traditional academic quadrangle. A small, secluded tea garden flanks the buildings on the west side.

Memorial Hall remains impressively intact with its wood inlay floor even though the old pipe organ and "church pews" have been removed and a stage cuts into the seating capacity.

The old buildings remain historical showpieces, distinguished because they have persevered on the Texas educational scene for 126 and 89 years respectively—[remember to add 30 years to that; this article was written in 1977]. Their walls have recorded successes and failures, joys and sorrows, the voices of Texas statesmen such as Houston, and the voices of Texas citizens who helped these buildings serve their purposes. If only those walls could talk.

With those final words from Dr. Humphries, I conclude this remembrance of Old Main. Thank you for listening.