

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--SAN AUGUSTINE--MALLORY

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OLD SAN AUGUSTINE

CRADLE OF THE TEXAS REPUBLIC

Strolling the sleepy streets of San Augustine, you can lose 160 years in a quiet afternoon.

Slip back to the 1830s under an almost continuous canopy of towering pecans, oaks, and magnolias--back to the American pioneers who settled here, back to the patriots who planned battles of the Texas Revolution, back to the missionaries who forged the first footholds for Protestantism west of the Sabine River.

In a town still dripping with history, go back to the very roots of Texas politics, education, and religion.

With major lakes and national forests next door, San Augustine relishes its reputation as a jumping-off spot for outdoor recreation. But venerable homes and churches dating from the Texas Republic (1836-1845) remind you why this slow-moving East Texas hamlet of 2,300 calls itself the "Cradle of Texas."

Fifty-seven structures bear Texas historical medallions, six of which carry National Register of Historic Places designation. San Augustine boasts a number of firsts for Texas: first Anglo-Saxon settlement; first town laid out on the American plan (blocks arranged in a grid); first university; first Methodist and Presbyterian churches, first African-American church of record, and oldest continuous Episcopal church; first

Masonic Lodge (though initially operated under a Louisiana charter); and first Boy Scout troop.

In the years leading to the Texas Revolution, San Augustine strategically straddled the legendary El Camino Real (King's Highway), the chief inland route from the southern United States into Texas. American settlers funneled westward through San Augustine's customs house in search of cheap land and new lives.

Some settlers skirted around the gateway settlement for less than honorable reasons. San Augustine's densely forested redland hills lay just west of a lawless "no man's land," a buffer zone set up first to separate Spanish and French territories and, later, Mexico and the U.S. According to local historian and teacher Willie Earl Tindall, "many settled here along Ayish Bayou trying to get away from the law back in the United States."

Adventurer Philip Nolan ran a wild horse trading operation with partner Antonio Leal at the site of the first European presence in the area, Mission Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de los Aies. Leal had taken over the mission site in 1794, twenty-one years after the Spanish abandoned it.

Nervous about armed Anglo-Americans in eastern Texas, Spanish authorities killed Nolan and captured Leal. Title to the site passed in 1801 to Edmund Quirk, the first of a flood of Anglos gone to Texas.

With population rising, in 1832 a committee of 15 settlers established a town at the old mission site as "a permanent place for holding court, and for trade and commerce..." They named it San Augustine in honor of the Mexican viceroy of Texas, Augustin de Ahumada.

A number of new American arrivals eventually became heroes of the Texian revolt against Mexico.

Davy Crockett came here and was even elected to represent San Augustine in the historic Consultation of 1835, held at Washington-on-the-Brazos to weigh the

prospects for war. He never performed his duty, marching instead to the Alamo, Willie Earl explains.

Sam Houston entered Texas for the first time at San Augustine. Twice, the people of San Augustine voted him into the Congress of the Texas Republic. San Augustine Historical Foundation president Kenneth Skillern says the leader of the Texian army built a house in town, but never lived in it. Rather, he stayed with Philip Sublett, a close friend, business partner, and colonel in the Texas Revolution. During times of political or personal crisis, Houston could always find refuge in San Augustine, adds Skillern.

At the corner of Congress and Market Streets, begin your trek back in time at the sparkling white Ezekiel Cullen House, a community house and museum operated by the local Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

In 1839 master builder Augustus Phelps, an architect-carpenter from New England, constructed the home to well-proportioned dimensions, featuring a broad front gable supported by four Doric columns. That same year Phelps also built the nearby Matthew Cartwright House and the Colonel Stephen W. Blount House. All three remain fine examples of the classic Greek Revival style which flourished during the Texas Republic. Each carry the added Phelps' trademark--at least one five-pointed Texas Star subtly detailing a wall, downspout, or doorway.

Carolyn Allen writes in *Historic Homes of San Augustine* that Phelps' influence made San Augustine architecturally superior to any Texas town except Galveston before the Civil War.

As judge of the First Judicial District of the Republic of Texas, Ezekiel Cullen frequently entertained prominent Texas leaders in his home's upstairs ballroom, explains local DRT president Verline Stewart. Fan-shaped windows at each end of the ballroom still slide into the walls to let in cool breezes on warm summer nights.

Downstairs, the Cullen House features a gallery of works by San Augustine native Seymour Thomas, a noted painter whose portrait of Woodrow Wilson hangs in the White House.

In 1952 Hugh Roy Cullen of Houston, Judge Cullen's grandson, commissioned respected San Augustine restorationist, the late Raiford Stripling, to refurbish the home. Stripling restored other local structures--including the 1826 Milton Garrett House, one of the oldest log homes in Texas, in which he lived several years--as well as historical treasures in other parts of Texas.

Down Market Street from the Cullen House, a historical marker pinpoints the site of the first college in Texas, the University of San Augustine.

"Early San Augustine leaders were highly educated," explains Willie Earl. "The town became the education mecca of the Republic with three universities, unusual for the times."

That first university received its charter from the Republic the same year the city incorporated, 1837.

Also that year--with Texas free of Mexican religious controls--San Augustine became the birthplace of Texas Protestantism with the arrival of Littleton Fowler. Within months the determined Methodist missionary had established two churches, the First Methodist Church of San Augustine and McMahan's Chapel, located a few miles east, at the Sabine County line.

Today, the First Methodist Church fills a whole block. In 1897 prominent citizen Matthew Cartwright donated the block, which was then across the street from the original church. Miffed by a previous incident in which his horse got loose while he was at church, Cartwright stipulated that the new church maintain a "place for hitching horses, and standing room for buggies..."

"A few years ago we discovered there no longer was a place to hitch horses outside the church," says member and local history buff John Oglesbee, "so we had to erect one to meet deed requirements."

The current church, completed in 1909, boasts massive stained glass windows...as well as a wooden hitching post.

Across Ayish Street from the Methodist Church, a pristine building houses the longest-standing Episcopal church in Texas. Organized in 1848 at the insistence of Frances Henderson (wife of J. Pinckney Henderson, a San Augustine native and the State of Texas' first governor), Christ Church began on a sorrowful note. In his first duty, the new church vicar performed a burial service for his oldest child, who died of scarlet fever the day after the family arrived in town.

The simple Carpenter Gothic style of the current church, built in 1870, represents "one of the most important and authentic ecclesiastical buildings in Texas," according to White House restorationist Dr. William Seale, an East Texas native .

Heart-of-pine pews and hand rails remain from the original 1848 sanctuary, points out Fr. Jim C. Wooldridge, Christ Church vicar. San Augustinian Colonel Stephen W. Blount, a signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, donated the building's lumber and shingles. To the chagrin of some citizens, explains church historian Sam Malone, part of the cost reportedly came from \$500 which Blount won on a bet that his friend Sam Houston would win a second term as president of the Republic.

New 1840s-style reproduction gaslights add an electrified brightness to the sanctuary. Each light bears an intricate design repeated in the carved wooden altar. At the ceiling, the crooked tail of a squirrel holding an acorn whimsically supports the unique green and brass-colored fixtures.

The church proudly displays hand-written notes from George L. Crocket, Christ Church vicar for 42 years, about Texas' first Boy Scout group which he organized in

1911. Crocket also authored the detailed 1932 history of the region, *Two Centuries in East Texas*, copies of which are for sale at the church.

Near San Augustine's historic city cemetery, Presbyterianism got its Lone Star start. Organized in 1838 in a rural school house, a fledgling church soon moved into town as San Augustine Presbyterian Church. During the Civil War, membership dwindled to one person, Polly Nicholson, who refused to let the church die. In 1887, when members constructed the current building, they renamed it Memorial Presbyterian in memory of the early pioneers.

Another historic church, Jerusalem C.M.E. Church, claims title to the oldest black church of record in Texas, first known as the Church on the Branch when founded in 1845.

A few blocks away, mouth-watering aromas--golden-brown biscuits, fried eggs, crisp bacon, creamy grits, and even creamier gravy--waft from the Capt. E.D. Downs House, recalling San Augustine's more recent heritage of the Old South.

To build the 1902 Victorian, now a bed and breakfast, Capt. Downs cut trees from his land, floated them down the Sabine River to a mill in Orange, then transported the lumber back to San Augustine by barge and ox teams. The prominent plantation owner, merchant, and banker also constructed three homes nearby for his children.

Edward A. Clark, Downs' grandson and former U.S. ambassador to Australia, still maintains a home a few miles south of town at Straddlefork Farm, a restored 1873 house built by early Texas patriot Jacob Herring with lumber reused from his original 1836 home.

San Augustine sports two other bed and breakfasts.

The Wade House, a 1940 Mt. Vernon style home, features more than 100 vintage hats displayed throughout, plus furnishings and art from the families of owners Nelsyn and Julia Wade.

Curt Goetz decorated his B&B, the Greer Goetz Elangeni House, with hunting trophies, tapestries, and paintings from around the world. Built circa 1840, the cozy cottage sits alongside the original El Camino Real, as evidenced by wagon tracks worn in rocks behind a pond.

Some B&B guests come not only for history, but for camping, hiking, and water sports near San Augustine, which lays sandwiched between more than 600,000 acres of public lakes and forests. Short scenic drives east and south of town take you to the Sabine National Forest on the shores of Toledo Bend Reservoir and the Angelina National Forest on the shores of Sam Rayburn Reservoir. The reservoirs are Texas' largest two lakes (in surface area) and feature some of the state's finest fishing.

Outdoor recreation may be close at hand, but history remains San Augustine's forte.

Five interconnected organizations--Daughters of the Republic of Texas, Sons of the Republic of Texas, Daughters of the American Revolution, San Augustine Historical Foundation, and San Augustine County Historical Commission--maintain local commitment to heritage. An associated group, the Junior Historians of San Augustine, passes the torch of tradition to the next generation.

With such reverence to historical preservation, San Augustine promises to remain a city with a future in the past.