taking the sites to the next level

HISTORIC HEIGHTS
An Update On the Texas Historical Commission's 20 Historic Sites
Historic Sites Receive Much-Needed Improvements

From the authentic adobe home of one of San Antonio’s most prominent leaders to the sacred grounds that memorialize soldiers who fought at the Battle of Coleto Creek, many of the real places that tell the real stories of early Texas are being restored and rehabilitated through the Texas Historical Commission’s (THC) Historic Sites Program.

Notable improvements and extensive renovations have taken place at many of the state’s key historic sites over the past two years, and the THC is proud to showcase these new and improved sites to the public.

“"Our agency’s historic sites bring to life and explain the mystique of Texas history.""
—MARK WOLFE, THC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Here is an overview of recently completed and reopened projects:

Sam Bell Maxey House State Historic Site
Built in the Victorian Italianate style in 1868, the Sam Bell Maxey House State Historic Site in Paris was considered a proper and elegant home for the family of Sam Bell Maxey, a West Point-educated Mexican War veteran. Maxey, a Confederate general and two-term U.S. senator, and his wife Marilda raised their family and hosted many distinguished guests in this home, which was commonly regarded as a town social center. Family members lived continuously in the house for 99 years until 1967.

A major restoration project, completed in December 2011, preserved the building and enhanced the environment for the extensive collection of Maxey family artifacts. During construction, collections were moved from the house and placed in climate-controlled temporary storage on site. Historic paint analysis was conducted to identify original exterior paint colors, and the existing paint, which was plagued by mold and mildew, was completely removed and the house was repainted. Wood siding, caves, and trim were repaired. All windows and exterior doors were removed, restored, and reinstalled. The worn cedar roof shingles were replaced and stained to match the historic finish. The HVAC system was replaced with an upgraded version that provides better filtration and humidity control, and a “dry pipe” fire suppression system was carefully integrated into the historic interior. Accessible public restrooms were added in the historic stable for visitor comfort.

Cover: Sam Bell Maxey House State Historic Site

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Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site

The Levi Jordan Plantation State Historic Site was acquired by the State of Texas in 2002, primarily for the significant and unique archeological resources identified there that relate to the African American experience in 19th-century Texas. Site namesake Levi Jordan purchased more than 2,200 acres in Brazoria County in 1848 and built the family home and ancillary buildings utilizing an enslaved workforce. The house served as the focal point of the large plantation operation, which produced sugar and cotton. The most significant piece of extant architecture remaining today is the two-story Greek Revival style plantation house constructed during the mid-1850s. The house is among the oldest structures remaining in Brazoria County.

Preservation and stabilization efforts on the plantation house, which was in very bad condition when transferred to the THC in 2008, were completed in February 2012. After detailed archeological investigations had been completed, the house was structurally stabilized from floor to roof, then lifted off its piers so a new foundation could be constructed. The completion of this project marks the first significant step toward creating a compelling public history experience at the site. Future plans include site interpretation and a visitors center, which will be developed over the next several years.
Magoffin Home State Historic Site
Located in downtown El Paso, the Magoffin Home State Historic Site is a unique adobe homestead that tells the stories of a multicultural family that influenced the development of the Southwest borderlands. Joseph Magoffin was born in Mexico, educated in Kentucky and Missouri, and went to El Paso in 1856. After serving in the Civil War, he became an advocate for the development of El Paso and the region, and he served as county judge, mayor, and in numerous other public offices. In 1877, he and his wife Octavia moved into their new adobe home. It is one of the oldest surviving adobe residences in the region.

Major preservation work completed in March 2012 included the installation of a new roof, adobe and plaster repairs, reconstruction of the shutters, and the application of a lime wash to the exterior walls. In addition, paint analysis documented a distinctive variety of decorative finishes that were original to the home in the late 1800s, and these were recreated. Portions of the site were regraded to eliminate drainage problems and to protect the adobe walls, and new mechanical and electrical systems were installed to provide the optimum environment for the site’s collections. While the site was closed, interior restoration work including painting, chimney repair, and floor refinishing was completed with support from the site’s friends group, Casa Magoffin Campañeros.

Below: Magoffin Home after restoration; Inset: Artisan José Limon, fourth-generation plasterer, utilized traditional techniques on the project.

Above: Hall chimney before and after restoration
Fannin Battleground State Historic Site

Fannin Battleground State Historic Site near Goliad, immortalizes the Texas soldiers who fought in the Battle of Coleto Creek there in 1836 during the Texas War for Independence. Outrage at the subsequent execution of the captured Texas troops under orders from Mexican General Santa Anna became a rallying cry at the Battle of San Jacinto, where Texas won its independence.

Building restoration and notable site improvements were completed in June 2012. Improvements at the site include a greatly expanded interpretation of the events that took place 175 years ago, a new entryway with gates and signage, and a new flag area incorporating the historic entrance gates and memorial stones. The bandstand preservation project included restoring original window and door openings, painting the exterior structure, and restoring the original roof. Other improvements include a new restroom building, outdoor interpretation panels throughout the site, and a new exhibit on the first floor of the historic bandstand, which includes an overview of the Battle of Coleto Creek's importance and an interactive map detailing troop movements during the engagement.

“I was very pleased when I heard they were going to restore the park...It’s important to keep up the park because men fought and died here for this country and they made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.” — GEORGIA SWICKHEIMER, FANNIN BATTLEGROUND REOPENING EVENT

Sam Rayburn House Museum

The Sam Rayburn House Museum was the home of Sam Rayburn, one of the most powerful and influential politicians of the 20th century. Rayburn built the two-story home in 1916 on a 121-acre farm just west of Bonham. Rayburn served in the Texas House of Representatives and the U.S. Congress, eventually becoming speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He served as speaker for 17 non-consecutive terms between 1940 and his death in 1961. The home exists today as a 20th-century time capsule that preserves the Rayburn family home of the 1960s. The home contains all original Rayburn family furnishings.

An extensive preservation project was completed in February 2012. The foundation was stabilized, the rear kitchen wing was stabilized and re-leveled, deteriorated wood siding and trim was repaired or replaced, the original windows were rehabilitated to be fully functional, and site drainage problems were corrected. The nearby tractor shed, used by Rayburn to house farm equipment and vehicles, was repaired and structurally reinforced.

While repairing deterioration was a priority, recapturing lost historic authenticity was integral as well. The project included changes to the home’s front façade and back porch to present them as they were during Sam Rayburn’s lifetime.

In addition to work on the historic home, the project included updates and repairs to the visitors center. The restrooms were renovated, the exterior space enlarged, accessible parking space and ramps were modernized, and new exhibit lighting was installed in the gallery.
Starr Family Home State Historic Site

The Starr Family Home State Historic Site in Marshall, which underwent restoration for more than a year, reopened to the public in November 2011. This impressive site showcases three generations of Starr family history through the preservation of seven historic buildings and an extensive collection of family artifacts including books, clothing, and furniture. By virtue of their successful land business formed following the end of the Civil War, the Starr family was a major contributor to the growth of the railroad and cotton industries and the settling of the frontier of Texas in the late 1800s. The centerpiece of the site is the 1871 family home of Frank Starr, known as Maplecroft.

The significant restoration project at the site, which preserved the buildings and the collections while improving site operations and enhancing the visitor experience, was completed in November 2011. The main house, Maplecroft, was given priority attention. The entire building exterior was addressed. This included repairs to the roof, chimneys, wood siding, windows, shutters, railings, stairs, and foundation walls, retaining as much historic material as possible at every step. The historic paint colors were analyzed and accurately reproduced. Window air conditioning units were replaced with a contemporary HVAC system that provides a much better environment for the historic artifacts in the house. At the rear of the site, the Blake House garage was expanded to provide a new maintenance shop space, a restroom for maintenance staff, and an accessible public restroom for visitors. Both Maplecroft and the Blake House were fitted with wheelchair lifts to enhance visitor access.
Casa Navarro State Historic Site

Casa Navarro State Historic Site is the 1832–1850 adobe caliche block homestead, store, and office of Texas hero and leader José Antonio Navarro. This site celebrates the life of a true Texas patriot in the heart of downtown San Antonio. A rancher, merchant, and one of only two native-born Texans to sign the Texas Declaration of Independence, Navarro was a leading advocate for Tejano rights.

This past year, restoration work on the historic house, kitchen, and mercantile structures was completed. It included accessibility upgrades, repair of historic woodwork, plaster and painting, new HVAC systems, and new LED exhibit lighting. A new restroom and workshop area was constructed to replace inadequate facilities, and the visitor orientation area, museum store, and staff offices were created in the previously unutilized Mercantile Building. The courtyards between the buildings were reworked to improve circulation and drainage. New gallery-style exhibits focus on Navarro’s role in early Texas politics, his relationship to prominent Texans of the time, and his family legacy. First person multimedia presentations help to bring Navarro’s own thoughts to life, and interactive and multi-sensory elements engage visitors of all ages. The historic cistern and well were also reopened for interpretation. The Friends of Casa Navarro made a substantial financial contribution to the new interpretation project.

A colorful 50-by-8-foot hand-glazed tile mural was added along the outside wall of the site by renowned San Antonio artists Jesse Trevino and Elizabeth Rodriguez. The public mural, located on the exterior wall along Nueva Street, honors Navarro’s life and legacy along with the thriving community of Laredito (little Laredo), which once surrounded the site.

Fulton Mansion State Historic Site

The Fulton Mansion State Historic Site, located in Rockport, interprets the lives of the Fulton family, who made their fortune shipping cattle tallow and hides between Rockport and New Orleans in the 1870s. With its distinctive mansard roof and ornate trim, Fulton Mansion has represented the aristocratic Victorian world of a prominent South Texas family since its completion in 1877.

The site’s new Education and History Center, which opened in August 2012, showcases stories about the Fultons, their stately home, and their life in Aransas County, while providing visitors with improved amenities and services. The new facility contains an interactive exhibit for visitors of all ages and interests, and offers a comfortable place to wait for tours of the mansion. In addition, visitors will now have easy access to public restrooms.

A multi-purpose room accommodates education groups and is available to the public as a community event space. The Friends of the Fulton Mansion, which has served as the site’s support group for nearly two decades, has been an important partner in the development of the center. Significant financial support for the project was also provided through Transportation Enhancement funds from the Texas Department of Transportation.
"I thought the celebration was a great success...We have been so pleased to see the progress made since the THC has taken over the site."

—GINNY RASKA, LEVI JORDAN DESCENDENT

Fast Facts:

6% Increase in THC’s historic sites visitation from Fiscal Year 2011 to 2012

287,974 Number of people who visited the THC’s historic sites or participated in educational programs in Fiscal Year 2012

48,800 Number of volunteer hours contributed at the THC’s historic sites in Fiscal Year 2012

1,565 Number of artifacts from the THC’s historic sites conserved in Fiscal Years 2009 to 2012

1,163 Number of cubic feet of archeological collections maintained by Historic Sites Division

209 Number of preservation maintenance projects completed in Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012

THC Chairman Matt Kreisle, Executive Director Mark Wolfe, and Friends of Fulton Mansion celebrate the opening of the new Fulton Mansion Education and History Center