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*Training the Next Generation of Public Historians in East Texas:
A Report from Stephen F. Austin State University's
Public History Program*

BY PERKY BEISEL

Since moving to Nacogdoches in 2005, I have come to learn that many things about Texas that I had thought were merely exaggerations are in fact quite true. Friday night high school football is very popular. Grilling is a year-round practice, not just a summer picnic feature. And Texans are passionate about their history. There is a strong sense of place in East Texan local history. While elsewhere public historians may have to explain how local resources are significant in their own right, I have not found this to be a problem in East Texas. In fact just the opposite seems to be the case. There is so much importance placed on the locale, specific events and persons, or narrow time periods, that the larger stories recorded in the landscape and the built environment, those related to broader, national narratives, are sometimes overpowered by the multitude of fragmented or even segregated local histories. This article describes some of the survey projects undertaken by students in the Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA) public history program to identify historic resources in the East Texas landscape that not only represent these segmented histories but also bridge the gaps between them.

Hands-on learning is a proven method to engage students' intellectual curiosity, to help them master larger concepts, and especially important in public history, to experience collaboration with individuals, agencies, and organizations. Since 2005, when I arrived in East Texas to establish a master's-level public history program at SFA, we have developed several public-university partnerships to teach the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of public history students in addition to their traditional research, writing, and editing training. The projects have run the gamut from digitizing and re-housing archival

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materials to developing disaster management plans and accessioning items using PastPerfect to transcribing oral histories and developing teacher lesson plans based on those interviews to creating poster exhibits for heritage tourism fundraising. Each of these projects were successful because we partnered with local public historians—curators, archivists, museum directors, historical association boards—to fulfill a need identified by them that could be integrated into a larger curriculum of theoretical readings and state-of-the-field assessments. Nacogdoches and SFA, like many other towns and colleges in Texas, already had a long, if informal, history of public history collaboration. This was a boon to me and to the program when the History Department decided to fully commit to public history. The framework was already in place due to the work of historians such as Dr. Jere Jackson and the Center for East Texas Studies that spearheaded the erection of historic markers throughout the town, Dr. Bobby H. Johnson who has conducted oral history interviews with local World War One veterans and sawmill industry employees, and Dr. Archie McDonald and the East Texas Historical Association that has supported research and presentations into a variety of topics and time periods.

Building upon this tradition of collaboration and my own interest in the landscape and the built environment (buildings, structures, and objects), we have conducted several historic resource surveys. There are several different types or levels of surveys depending upon the needs of the project designers.¹ It could be as simple as an afternoon drive through a historic neighborhood to get a “feel” of an area. Other surveys might cover miles of country roads or urban streets in order to document resources of a particular type, era, architect, or theme. Historic surveys are often conducted to satisfy the legislative requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and other laws, to identify resources threatened by development or loss of context, or to develop preservation and heritage tourism programs.² They can be documented using index cards and quick snapshots or recorded using GPS units, complex data programs, and high quality cameras. A survey project could be based solely on the results of the fieldwork or it could incorporate extensive archival research. All of these variables are determined by the project designers. Here at SFA most of our surveys have been developed in conjunction with city planners or county historical commissions to address their specific needs. As public history

educators we want the students to learn the skills necessary for conducting a historic survey while becoming aware of the historic resources that surround them in their daily lives. In other words, to paraphrase a once popular tombstone epitaph, "Remember man as you walk by, as you are now so once was I," we strive for our students to remember the past when they drive on the highway, walk down a city street, or bike through a park.³

The East Texas landscape is much more than its usual descriptor of the piney woods. It has been altered by many generations from the Caddo Indians to today's oil and gas explorers. Transformations of landscape have included clear-cut forests during the late nineteenth century timber boom to cotton fields in the early twentieth century, then a shift to dairy farms followed by the rise of the poultry industry and the beef cattle industry after World War II. There is one two-mile section of road less than a mile outside the Nacogdoches city limits where it is possible to drive through what is today an alternating pasture and timber area and not know that it was once cotton fields and six independent dairies. There are almost no traces of the former tenant houses, cotton fields, or dairy barns. Our small towns have experienced similar changes. San Augustine, today a small county seat in a county of less than nine thousand people, was once one of the largest cities in Texas whose domestic architecture rivaled that of any other town in the rural south of the early nineteenth century.⁴

Heading east along the El Camino Real (Highway 21) towards Nacogdoches, one passes through Chireno and Melrose, both towns that were once also well-known throughout Texas and the South and had boasted vibrant economies, and today have just a few buildings and structures to symbolize their past. West of Nacogdoches in neighboring Cherokee and Houston counties the story is much the same. Their respective county seats of Rusk and Crockett have intact courthouse squares lined with late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century business buildings and nearby residential areas filled with a similar range of homes. It is doubtful, however, that these towns and many others in deep East Texas will ever be as populated as they were a century ago. Moreover, the historic buildings, structures, and objects that represent these earlier eras in the region's cities and countryside are often just as vulnerable to abandonment, disuse, or old age as the more common pressures of development and expansion.

Our first project with the City of Nacogdoches was prompted by the typical threats of demographic changes and increased traffic. The Pecan Orchard neighborhood is located just north of the SFA campus and extends to Austin Avenue, the northernmost citywide cross street, which narrows to two lanes in the historic neighborhood. To the west the area is bounded by North Street and to the east by LaNana Creek. There had been several attempts by area residents to encourage zoning changes and obtain National Register designation in the 1990s. In the spring of 2006 staff members of the zoning department contacted me about conducting a survey of the neighborhood in response to renewed efforts to zone the area historic. That fall students in the graduate-level Introduction to Public History course conducted a walking survey of the neighborhood.⁵ Using plat mats provided by the city, I divided the neighborhood into three sections. Each team of students then recorded features such as structure style, original function, roof materials, and number of chimneys using the Texas Historic Commission's two-page survey form. When the team finished its work, the students submitted a final report that included photographs and the survey forms as well as listings of well-preserved and endangered structures, and an evaluation of their section placed within the national context as described by David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland in *Historic Residential Suburbs*.⁶ All of this material was then given to the city. What we discovered was a mix of primarily early—to mid—twentieth century one—story bungalows, Tudor Revivals, and minimal traditional homes with some larger ranch—style homes along the perimeter. The neighborhood's elementary school, Raguet Elementary, as well as the area's overall development was a classic example of growth in the report. Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, new construction from businesses along the main thoroughfare and the transformation of properties into student rental houses had begun to erode the neighborhood's historic fabric.

In spring 2008, as part of the Introduction to Public History course, we conducted a similar project at the request of property owners on Walker Avenue, a block—long street that runs north and south between Main Street and Hospital Street near the historic Oak Grove Cemetery in downtown Nacogdoches. There are thirteen homes on this street, all of which were built in the 1920s in the Craftsman bungalow style. Although neighboring properties in all directions are included in historic zoning and National Register districts, there has been no such designa-

tion for these properties. As before, the students were separated into groups, this time one for each side of the street, and they added in—depth property ownership research to their agenda of photographing and surveying the buildings' and structures' condition. Although many of the homes had recently acquired new owners, the students met with several long-time residents who spoke about the street's history. The students learned that there have been few exterior changes to the homes and the only major change, the addition of a second story, is itself historic. The final reports giving detailed property descriptions and tracing Walker Avenue's transformation from a private speculative to a close-knit community with popular block parties were given to each owner.⁷

Our third survey within the City of Nacogdoches, and our current project, is being conducted for the City of Nacogdoches as part of a Certified Local Government (CLG) survey grant awarded by the Texas Historical Commission (THC) in late 2010. In 1986 the city hired a historic preservation consulting firm to survey its historic resources and recommend future National Register and/or zoning districts. The three-volume report included almost 1,300 addresses for each of which was a brief stylistic, materials, and condition report occasionally accompanied by individual histories or additional resources such as Sanborn map references. Although the 1986 survey proved very useful in the formation of various districts and the city's Main Street and Preserve America designations, it is now twenty-five years old. Some notable buildings and structures have remained virtually unchanged. Others, such as local master architect Dietrich Rulf's office, have been rehabilitated and now contribute to their neighborhoods. But still more have sustained damage or alterations and their integrity, historic feel, is no longer intact. In the summer of 2010, Dr. Paul J. P. Sandul and I met with the city's historic sites director, Brian Bray, to discuss what could be done to address the situation. The result was the submission of the CLG grant to update the 1986 survey while making the information more accessible to the public as well as city staff. In fall 2010, undergraduate students in my American Architectural History course had the opportunity to begin the project by conducting a survey of the downtown zoning district. The five groups of students surveyed their respective areas by filling out a paper survey form and taking photographs of each structure. In addition they recorded all plaques, markers, and statues in the area.⁸ At the end of the class, each student had conducted indi-

vidual research on a single structure and submitted an in—depth report. The class’s work accomplished its two goals. The first was to conduct a trial of the survey form developed using FileMaker Pro. We made changes to its layout based on the students’ feedback and the data—entry process. The second goal of the course was much broader: to make students aware of their surroundings, especially the built environment. Many of the students had never spent much time in the downtown area and they were surprised to discover its variety and complexity. The numerous text messages I received from the students about the landscape and buildings they encountered on their independent travels during the semester confirmed the success of the second goal.

In the spring and summer semesters of 2011, we continued to build and refine the city of Nacogdoches Historic Sites Survey. Two graduate-level courses, Introduction to Public History and Internship in Public History, incorporated the survey project and these students integrated GPS units into their work. The first class surveyed the Zion Hill zoning district using the revised FileMaker Pro data sheets and cameras to document the structures and Trimble Juno units GPS to note their locations. By the summer, the city had purchased its two Trimble Yuma units (extremely rugged GPS units with a built-in full Microsoft 7 Windows computer and dual GPS—enabled cameras) and we used them to digitally record the condition, style, and materials data about each built environment resource and take a GPS—enabled photograph. During the summer the students completed the Washington Square zoning district, the Sterne-Hoya zoning district, and non-district, but independently zoned, historic buildings and structures.⁹ In the late spring I had begun working with the Center for Regional Heritage Research to construct a website for public access to our survey work. By midsummer this website (<http://www.sfasu.edu/heritagecenter/622.asp>) was ready for the graduate students to login from their homes or offices and add their forms, photographs, and additional research, such as historic photographs and Sanborn maps, to each address’s webpage. As we continue with this project over the next year, I fully anticipate additional students having the opportunity to learn about Nacogdoches’s historic resources while gaining a better understanding of architectural styles, survey techniques, computer and website programming, and GPS units. Once we have completed the requirements of the grant we will be free to expand the survey to include resources such as the Pecan Orchard

and Walker Avenue neighborhoods. For the public, city staff, and public history students this project is an excellent opportunity to reconnect to our sense of place while going beyond our traditional definition of what is historic in Nacogdoches.

Although city surveys focused on downtown business districts or neighborhoods united by architectural style, builders, or owners are very common, historic preservationists also conduct fieldwork in the countryside. We have had two such projects here at SFA. The first was in the summer of 2007 when students in the Internship in Public History Course drove in teams along each road in their respective quadrants recording every barn, house, church, cemetery, and any other notable built environment resource, such as water towers, wooden bridges, or markers. The students used a newly developed FileMaker Pro survey form based on the students' experiences with the Pecan Orchard survey's THC form.¹⁰ In addition, the students used handheld GPS units to record their locations. At the end of the course, the students' photographs and resource summaries were combined with footage filmed by a Fine Arts student employed by the East Texas Research Center and made into a ten-minute short film about the survey process and the landscape of the Nacogdoches countryside. What we learned is that there is a strong mix of vernacular massed gable-front one-story wooden homes usually dating from the 1940s to the 1960s and small, two to four bay, brick ranches houses, oftentimes nearby an older frame structure. The fence lines are usually wire strung on wooden or metal posts filled in by trees and brush. The only signs of older communities are the historic dual entrance churches or the cemeteries with homecoming pavilions.

The experiences gained in this limited scope survey were utilized in the development of a county-wide survey of cemeteries, churches, and markers for the Houston County Historical Commission (HCHC) in July and August 2009. This project is an excellent example of university and community collaboration. The HCHC identified local residents willing to house the three graduate students for two nights each week and provide dinners for a period of four weeks. I co-wrote a grant with the Center for Regional Heritage Research to cover the use of a SFA vehicle used by the graduate students. Each week the graduate student team met with a commission member and a local representative of a different part of the county and surveyed as many historic resources as they could visit each day. I conducted similar surveys two

days each week with a team of three undergraduate students, although we left Nacogdoches each day at noon after morning classes and returned late at night. We used the THC's individual burial forms for each marked burial in cemeteries with less than twenty known internments. We also used GPS units to map the perimeters of each cemetery and notable structures. All cemeteries were documented using the THC's Historic Texas Designation form. These forms were later given to the HCHC along with the photographs so that community members could submit them to the THC for approval. In addition, each team used the FileMakerPro survey forms, photographs, and GPS units to document churches, schools, and other notable architecture along with markers encountered during their travels.¹¹ Since then, this work has been the basis for a new, county-wide heritage tourism map, a cemetery marker guide, and other collaboration with the commission.

As a new public historian arriving in East Texas to develop a master's level graduate program in public history, the opportunities and challenges were simultaneously exciting and daunting. At the beginning of each course there is the daunting specter of students' failing to connect to the past. What happens if they do not recognize the value in the everyday, the familiar rather than the exceptional? Fortunately this has not been a realized fear. I am beginning to accept that even if we had unlimited resources and time, and my colleague Dr. Paul J. P. Sandul and I were able to devote ourselves full-time to the training of public history students through collaborative projects (no personal research, no U.S. history survey courses or upper-level topics courses, and no life beyond the program) there is such a need for and recognition of the value of public history that we would still not be able to meet the demand. This is a good problem. Our students will have ample opportunities to learn about the various public history fields not only through critical analyses of the literature but also through hands-on, service learning that grounds each of us in the surrounding landscape of our daily lives, in the structures and resources that too many of us no longer see as we pass by.

(Endnotes)

¹¹ Patricia L. Parker, "Guidelines for Local Historic Surveys: A Basis for Preservation Planning," *National Register Bulletin* 24, revised

(Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1985), has extensive information about the different types and uses of surveys and how to plan them.

² Thomas F. King, *Cultural Resource Laws and Practice*, third edition (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2008). There are many situations that can trigger the need for a historic resources survey (and quite often an archaeological survey as well).

³ A “call to arms” that many of my students have connected with, especially after their fieldwork, is John Stilgoe, *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (New York: Walker and Company).

⁴ There are several San Augustine properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places such as the Mathew Cartwright House (1839) and the Ezekiel Cullen House (1839) that are outstanding examples of the popular Greek Revival architectural style. See George L. Crockett, *Two Centuries in East Texas* (San Augustine, TX: Christ Episcopal Church, 1932; facsimile reproduction, Austin TX: Hart Graphics, Inc., 1982).

⁵ The survey did not include the buildings and structures along North Street (Business 59) and College Street, almost all of which are infill construction. The M.A. students in the course were Jennifer Brancato, Tiffany Eurich, William Foley, Joshua Johnson, Janice Watkins, Paul Maleski, and John Garbutt. There was another similar survey in Fall 2008 by undergraduate students in Introduction to Public History of the Starr Avenue area on SFA’s south side.

⁶ David L. Ames and Linda Flint McClelland, “Historic Residential Suburbs: Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places,” *National Register Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2002).

⁷ The graduate students in this course were Angela Henderson, Chris Elzen, Mike Godfrey, Melanie Hanson, Amick Warden, James Vest, and Angie Love.

⁸ The plaques and markers included the 1936 Centennial, THC, and Heritage Club of Nacogdoches programs.

⁹ During the summer an independent study undergraduate student surveyed the Virginia Avenue zoning district and with the help of Center for Regional Heritage Research graduate assistant Ricardo Romero, we began to edit, resurvey, and re-photograph the downtown district first surveyed in the fall. By the end of summer 2011 approximately 75% of the structures zoned historic have survey forms, photographs, and additional information available on the website.

¹⁰ We began using the FilmMaker Pro software because it is easy to customize, student-proof during input, and flexible when exporting.

¹¹ The project resulted in the documentation of 115 cemeteries, 27 of which had all individual burials surveyed, 119 THC markers, 7 other markers, 45 churches, 17 named structures, and 16 unnamed structures. The graduate students were Chris Elzen, Lisa Bentley, and Pamela Ringle. The undergraduate students were Cassie Bennett, Joyce Preston, and Brenna Kelly.