



# MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## MONTGOMERY COUNTY, TEXAS

January 2017

### **2016 ANNUAL REPORT TO** **MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COURT**

#### **WHAT IS THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION?**

*The official state agency for historical preservation, the Texas Historical Commission (THC), was created originally in 1953 as the Texas State Historical Survey Committee by the Texas Legislature. It retained that title until the 63<sup>rd</sup> Legislature changed it to the Texas Historical Commission.*

*The Montgomery County Historical Commission (CHC) is a duly constituted organization of Montgomery County government composed of citizen members who are appointed by the Commissioners Court and serve for two-year terms. The Commission reports to the County Judge and the Commissioners Court, and also to the Texas Historical Commission.*

*The County Historical Commission has followed the Texas Historical Commission's on-going purpose of surveying, recording and promoting the appreciation of local history as well as marking those historic sites and structures deemed worthy of preservation for either historical or architectural reasons.*

*The Commission works in various fields, including archeology, architecture, history, economic development and heritage tourism for the benefit of present and future generations. The agency helps identify and preserve historic sites and helps to preserve the heritage of Montgomery County. Historic preservation is a vital part of a promising future within our community.*

#### **MISSION**

- *To discover, and as appropriate, circulate information pertinent to the historical identity of Montgomery County, Texas, such as the placement of historical markers.*
- *To cooperate with other persons, groups, organizations and agencies in preserving the history and heritage of Texas.*

## RECAP OF COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION (CHC) ACTIVITIES IN 2016

1. MEMBERSHIP: The Commissioners Court in December 2016 reappointed 27 members to the County Historical Commission (CHC), composed of a variety of individuals who bring special expertise, skills and background to the County Historical Commission.
2. MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS: The Historical Commission met six (6) times in 2016. (The Texas Historical Commission asks that each county historical commission meet at least four times each year.) The Commission schedules regular meetings every other month during the year beginning in January. Meetings have been held for several years at the Greater Conroe-Lake Conroe Chamber, but in November the Heritage Museum of Montgomery County began hosting our meetings.
3. COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION WEBSITE: The Commission website is a “work in progress.” It is designed to serve as an internet archive for historical articles and photos of Montgomery County and provide an interactive map of historical sites around the County with individual “pins” where a link to a historic narrative will provide the reader with detailed information about each historical site, building and cemetery. The CHC website serves as a clearinghouse for many other county and state historical societies and museums. It also offers a calendar of events for local historical organizations, county residents and tourists. Plans call for improving our Commission website and other social media so that we can more effectively reach a larger audience.
4. HISTORICAL RESOURCE SURVEY: The CHC has plans to continue updating the CHC’s *Historical Resource Survey* to identify all historic sites and buildings in our county. This information can be used for our website’s map of historical sites, buildings and cemeteries throughout the County. This project will also help the Commission identify and protect old historical structures that may be planned for demolition or otherwise damaged. Ron Saikowski chairs our *Endangered Building Committee* which will continue to identify threatened old historic buildings that may be subject to demolition or need repair, or be qualified for designation with a historical marker. The Texas Historical Commission has urged county historical commissions to make this a higher priority as more and more historic buildings across the State are being lost to new development. As these are identified, your CHC is constantly looking at ways to restore and reuse these structures for new purposes consistent with our mission statement.

Of particular importance at this time is the preservation of the old truss bridge spanning the San Jacinto River at FM 2854. Records show that this bridge was constructed by El Paso Iron Company for the County in 1910 and served for many years as the old state

highway 105 bridge from Conroe to Montgomery. The Texas Highway Department and the Texas Historical Commission are urging local authorities to save and repurpose these historic structures.

Also, the CHC is exploring ways to save the old Stewart and Stewart law office in Conroe, originally the home of former Conroe mayor and downtown Conroe drug store owner, Robin Carter and his family. Constructed in 1935, it will need to be moved or it will be demolished to make room for a proposed county tax office.

5. YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD. This is the fourth year for our *CHC Youth Advisory Board*. It is composed of high school students selected by their teachers and administrators from high schools throughout Montgomery County. This *Youth Advisory Board*, or “YAB” as we affectionately call it, provides suggestions to the Historical Commission for the promotion of historical activities that would engage students’ interest in our local and state history and recruit student volunteers to assist the CHC and other historical organizations in the preservation and promotion of historic buildings, sites and cemeteries throughout Montgomery County. This student organization—the first of its kind in the State of Texas—meets monthly during the school year. Members of the “YAB” have served as hosts for the “Christmas in Historic Montgomery” event in December and actively engaged in helping plan and conduct the annual History Road Rally in Willis in January 2016. They also took a guided bus tour of historic old Willis and Danville historic sites sponsored by the Heritage Museum. Using money from book sales and donations to the CHC, four \$1000 scholarships were awarded to YAB graduating students in Montgomery County.



2015-2016 Youth Advisory Board

6. **HISTORIC PRESERVATION GRANTS:** With the generous financial support of the Commissioners Court, CHC continues to offer grants to 501c(3) non-profit historical organizations around the County as reimbursement for rehabilitation of old historic structures. Working closely with County Auditor Phyllis Martin and County Judge Doyal's staff, the CHC Finance Committee (composed of Gertie Spencer and Anna Sheppard) have developed guidelines and procedures for the CHC and Commissioners Court approval of such grants. The largest grants in 2016 were for roof repairs for historic buildings owned by Montgomery Historical Society, repairs to the Heritage Museum and restoration of paths leading to historic log cabins at Fernland Historical Park in Montgomery.
  
7. **COUNTY HISTORICAL MARKERS:** The second Montgomery County Historical Marker was dedicated at the Longstreet Cemetery near Bays Chapel on August 12, 2016 at the gravesite of Algernon "Texas" Alexander. Texas Alexander is considered by many in the international blues community as the father of Texas blues. Blues fans from throughout Texas contributed to the purchase of the marker. County Judge Craig Doyal and Texas Alexander's biographer, Coy Prather participated in the ceremony.



*Coy Prather, Larry Foerster & Judge Doyal*

On September 10, 2016, a third county historical marker was dedicated by many members in the Conroe community in celebration of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Baptist Church of Conroe.



*First Baptist Church marker*

A fourth county historical marker application was dedicated on January 10, 2017 for the 1911 J. L. Hicks Building in downtown Conroe. Another marker application has been submitted by the Heritage Museum of Montgomery County to recognize the 1924 Grogan-Cochran house which has served as the museum's first building since May 1986. Other county historical markers are being planned for other historic sites and structures around Montgomery County.

8. **STATE HISTORICAL MARKERS:** The Texas Historical Commission approved a new state historical marker dedicated to the ***“Lake Creek Settlement,”*** the first Anglo-American settlement in Montgomery County located west of the San Jacinto River. The research was provided by Kameron Searle, a noted Montgomery historian. The marker will be installed in the City of Montgomery in the spring of 2017. There are plans to pursue designation of state historical markers for the Houston burial site of Isaac Conroe, the African-American campus of Conroe Industrial and Normal College, the Crighton Theatre, the abandoned towns of Danville and Fostoria and to sponsor state historical cemetery markers for certain post-Civil War Afro-American cemeteries in our county.
9. **TEXIAN HERITAGE FESTIVAL:** The County Historical Commission was a co-sponsor of the annual October 8 ***Texian Heritage Festival*** at the Fernland Historical Park in Montgomery. The event offers families an opportunity to step back in time to experience

life during the period of colonial Texas and the Texas Republic. Members of the CHC and its Youth Advisory Board members participated in the event.



*Sons of the Texas Republic at Texian Heritage Festival*

10. COUNTY HISTORICAL TIMELINE: With the support of former County Judge Sadler and the County Commissioners, CHC Chairman Larry Foerster completed his extensive *Montgomery County, Texas Historical Timeline* which was published in January 2014. This 239-page bound book—complete with historic photos, old drawings and maps—offers a detailed chronology of notable historic events in Montgomery County from the time of the Native Americans to the present. The book was provided for free to all county libraries and has been made available for sale to the public as a fundraising project for the CHC. Over \$20,000 has been raised from 2014 through 2016 from the sales of the book to support future preservation projects of the Historical Commission. With additional information and photographs provided by county families over the past years, Larry Foerster is currently working on a revised and even more detailed second edition of the book.

11. WORLD WAR I VETERANS BOOK: Under the leadership of Commission member Dr. Jeremiah Dancy, professor of military history at Sam Houston State University, the CHC is excited about its new project to recognize World War I veterans from Montgomery County. The book will feature several Montgomery County citizens who served in the military during World War I, with their lives chronicled before, during and after the war. Written along the style of Tom Brokaw's *Greatest Generation*, our plans are to publish the book by the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World War I armistice—November 18, 2018. The book will include an appendix listing all the County's WWI veterans. As we partner

with graduate history students at SHSU, the book should provide a unique historical perspective of Montgomery County from 1900 to 1940.

12. **HISTORY ROAD RALLY:** The Commission sponsored its third annual *History Road Rally*. Each year the event features the local history of a different area of Montgomery County. The 2016 *History Road Rally* was held in the city of Willis on January 23. A record 35 participating teams representing Texas communities as far north as Ft Worth and McKinney, Texas enjoyed following clues and finding their answers to county and state historical events and persons, as they drove their vehicles around the Willis and old Danville communities for two hours. Each participant received a souvenir “History Road Warrior” button. The teams returned for free pizza and drinks while their answer sheets were judged. The three winning teams received trophies and \$25 gift cards courtesy of our sponsor Gullo Ford, Gullo Toyota and Gullo Mazda automobile dealerships of Conroe.



*Children at former Willis Male and Female College site*



*Participants at historic Thomas Chapel in Willis*

13. MONTGOMERY HISTORIC CEMETERY TOMBSTONE CLEANING VIDEO: On April 23, 2016, Youth Advisory Board members: Ross Ohendalski and John Taylor participated in an instructional video on how to properly clean historic tombstones. The instructional video was produced at the Montgomery old church cemetery by Commission member Victoria Endsley with plans to make the training video available to the public on the Commission's website. The County Historical Commission sponsored the project.



John Taylor and Ross Ohendalski



Rev. Thomas Chilton tombstone after cleaning

14. TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION CONFERENCE IN AUSTIN. In June, County Historical Commission members JoDell Whitehead and Maria Banos Jordan attended the county historical commission training conference in Austin sponsored by the Texas Historical Commission. The two-day seminars offer opportunities for our members to network with other county historical commissions and with the staff of the Texas Historical Commission.
15. WILLIAM HARLEY GANDY DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD. This past fall, the CHC developed a new award to be presented at the discretion of the County Historical Commission to individuals, corporations or organizations who exhibit distinguished leadership, initiative and dedication to the preservation of the history of Montgomery County. The winner of the award must have shown significant accomplishment in the field of historical preservation and research. Such achievements must be notable and have made an important contribution to the preservation and/or advancement of the history of Montgomery County. The award is named in honor of William Harley Gandy, the first chairman of the Montgomery County Historical



Commission, a distinguished history teacher, and the author of the definitive 1952 treatise on the history of Montgomery County. Recipients of this award will be publicly recognized at a County Commissioners Court meeting.

16. PROMOTING MONTGOMERY COUNTY HISTORY: Over the past five years, Commission members have collaborated with the Conroe *Courier* “Trends” editor Sondra Hernandez in producing a monthly Sunday article in the *Courier* featuring a historic Montgomery County building, person or residence. Commission member Sharon Russell has been contributing history articles for the monthly issues of *The Woodlands Lifestyles and Homes* magazine. With our help, historical features have also been produced in the *Community Impact* newspaper. These articles are designed to generate interest and renew community pride in the history of Montgomery County.
17. INFORMATION CLEARINGHOUSE: The Historical Commission serves as a clearinghouse for the distribution of information and announcements among historical organizations and interested citizens in our County concerning upcoming events and projects of significant historical interest throughout Montgomery County and the State.
18. WALKING TOUR OF CONROE: Commission members are also involved in plans to develop a self-guided walking tour of historic Downtown Conroe in collaboration with the Conroe Convention and Visitors Bureau and Conroe Live, Inc., a non-profit organization.
19. HISTORICAL PRESERVATION DISTRICTS: Members of the County Historical Commission are engaged with other organizations in generating community interest in the development of a historical business district and residential historical preservation districts in and around downtown Conroe and other older communities in Montgomery County. Discussions with members of the City of Conroe council have been initiated with the hope that portions of the business district along Main and Simonton Streets in downtown Conroe can be designated for a “National Register of Historic Places.”
20. SHARING COUNTY HISTORY WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS: Several times during the year CHC Chairman Larry Foerster and other CHC members are invited to give presentations on Montgomery County history to numerous civic and church organizations throughout the county with the goal of increasing local interest in our history. PowerPoint slide shows of historic photographs and maps are frequently used for these presentations.

21. CRADLE OF TEXAS TOUR. In collaboration with historians and civic leaders from the State of Tennessee, and with the support of members of the Montgomery County Historical Commission, CHC member Dr. Robin Montgomery has organized a unique tour of historical sites in the Walker, Washington and Montgomery County areas focused on the life the of General Sam Houston. The “Cradle of Texas” tour is scheduled for this spring, and will bring numerous tourists from Tennessee to share the rich historical connection between our two states, as many early settlers to Texas came from Tennessee.
  
22. TEXAS 2015 DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD: Finally, we are honored that your Montgomery County Historical Commission was recognized for the fourth consecutive year by the Texas Historical Commission with its 2015 “*Distinguished Service Award*,” a coveted award from the Texas Historical Commission to a select few county historical commissions that “...demonstrate exceptional service and dedication to preserve the heritage of Texas.”

Respectfully submitted,

Larry L. Foerster, Chairman  
Montgomery County Historical Commission