

Summary of Fort Bend County Historical Commission Activities in 2019

The Fort Bend County Historical Commission is an advisory group to the Fort Bend County Commissioners Court, appointed by the Court every 2 years. We report our activities to the Texas Historical Commission and are supported by it however the county historical commission is a department of county government. Drilling down, the Fort Bend County Historical Commission includes 7 committees: Archives, Cemeteries, Cultural Resources, Historic Preservation, Public Affairs, Oral History and Research and Markers. The Commission volunteered more than 5000 hours in 2019.

The Archives Committee is responsible for managing the records generated by the work of the Commission and its Committees. Members of this committee work in the Commission's office to enter records into the Commission's database and scan documents and photos in order to make them available to the public via the Commission's web pages on the County website. Archives' large achievement in 2019 was working with Kofile, a document management firm, to have 10 cartons of cemetery and historical markers files scanned. This will greatly aid the process of loading them online and increase the transparency of the Commission. Thanks goes to the Friends of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission who paid the cost of the scanning. Archives Committee members worked almost 80 hours last year.

The Cemetery Committee researches deed and other records to locate cemeteries, monitors already known cemeteries for damage or potential endangerment, works in the field to find and document the bounds of newly discovered cemeteries and other tasks. In 2019, the committee presented programs to 2 organizations concerning historic cemetery laws and preservation in Texas, found deeds to 2 historic cemeteries in the county, filed one "Notice of Existence of Abandoned Cemetery", assisted 2 successful applications for Historic Texas Cemetery designation and monitored the condition of 14 threatened historic cemeteries in Fort Bend County. The Cemetery Committee contributed 1366 volunteer hours in 2019.

Of special note is the Commission's work regarding the Sugar Land 95 found in the Bullhead Camp Cemetery. In 2019, the Fort Bend County Historical Commission met in special session to consider a motion to intervene in FBISD's action before the district court to remove the dedication from the cemetery so that it could move the bodies to a nearby cemetery owned by the city of Sugar Land. The Commission, in a unanimous vote, requested permission from the Fort Bend County Commissioners Court to intervene in the proceedings. Due in large part to this action of the FBCHC, Fort Bend County entered into negotiations with FBISD to acquire the portion of the site where the remains were found so that the bodies could be reinterred there. It was determined that the law at the time did not allow the county to manage a cemetery. Local state representatives became involved and passed laws in 2019 allowing Fort Bend County to manage the cemetery which would pave the way for its acquisition by the county. Unfortunately, negotiations completely bogged down and FBISD chose to reinter the remains

on the school site on its own. Future plans for memorialization are unknown at this time. DNA testing is proceeding.

One of the laws passed in 2019 (HB 2430) changed the way abandoned cemeteries are protected. The law removed the authorization for county historical commissions and the Texas Historical Commission to intervene and become parties in a suit involving the removal of remains from an abandoned, unknown or unverified cemetery or the removal of a cemetery dedication. Instead, the court may consult with the historical commissions if it so chooses but there is no requirement for this. However, the portion of the code requiring that county historical commissions be notified of a petition to remove remains from such cemeteries remains in force. The bill also authorized a court “to order the removal of human remains from an abandoned, unknown or unverified cemetery where the owner has petitioned for removal of a cemetery designation to any other place on the owner’s property that the district court finds is in the public interest” as an alternative to ordering such a removal to a perpetual care, municipal, or county cemetery. This law only serves to diminish the protection of the next Sugar Land 95 wherever they might be and make it possible for back door, under the table negotiations to destroy important historic cemeteries.

The Cultural Resources Committee protects, researches and inspects potential historic sites and resources throughout the county. Most frequently, the committee responds to requests for comment from construction or technology companies planning to build on sites in the county. Five requests for comment were received and considered. Other cultural resource activities of note include support of the preservation of the section house in Fulshear and archeological work to excavate the Lamar cistern, which has been completed, and to discover the exact location of Mirabeau Lamar’s house. This work is ongoing.

Most important of the FBCHC’s work to protect the cultural resources and historic sites in Fort Bend County is its efforts to document and preserve the site of an antebellum sugar purgery from what was the Arcola Plantation, now the Sienna development in east Fort Bend County. It may be the only one still standing in the United States. Members of the Commission have been dedicated to saving the site for years. In 2019, attempts were made to document the site as there is concern over its survival. Little progress was made though efforts are still underway. The Commission’s work did result in newspaper articles being published about the site in the Houston Chronicle that were forwarded to Preservation Texas, the Smithsonian Institution and to other researchers throughout the country. In addition, members of the Commission and the Fort Bend Archeological Society, Jay Roussel and Bruce Grethen prepared a poster presentation about the purgery site for the Texas Archeological Society annual meeting in Amarillo in the fall of 2019. The Commission worked with Joanne Ryan, an expert on the antebellum sugar making process in the South to prepare the poster and in larger efforts to preserve the site. Ryan spoke at the Commission’s 4th quarter meeting which was attended by people from throughout the Houston area resulting in a partnership with Preservation Houston to attempt to have

researchers from Texas A&M document the site. The poster presentation was well received at the Texas Archeological Society meeting and was an important part of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission's work to outreach to people outside of the county and educate them about the great stories from the County's past.

Historic Preservation is one of the core functions of the county historical commission. The Historic Preservation Committee resumed its activities this past year after a brief hiatus. Committee members signed up to complete historic resources surveys of various areas of the county and were provided with training and documentation to assist them in this important task. Information collected includes name, location, date of construction, function, historic use, image, architectural description and historical information. This work is ongoing. Over 900 volunteer hours were accrued by this committee.

The Public Affairs Committee is responsible for all the publicity efforts by the Commission. They write press releases and articles for local newspapers about upcoming events and Commission achievements. Committee members outreach to the public. They created the Commission's brochure and tour guide for the County Courthouse. In addition, they represent the Commission at events throughout the year such as Texian Market Days at the George Ranch Historical Park. This Committee also manages the Bert E. Bleil Heritage Award process and reception. It also oversaw the selection of the 2019 Commissioner of the Year, Linda Wooten.

One of the activities of the Commission that we are most proud of is that of the Oral History Committee. Interviews are taken with members of the public, transcribed, edited, indexed, approved and made available to the public on the Commission's web pages. Efforts were made this year to keep interviews to a manageable level so that the entire process could be completed in a reasonable amount of time. Several interviews were published last year and efforts to complete more are always underway. One project of note in 2019 was a partnership with the city of Sugar Land to allow use of some of our oral history interviews for a public art project in celebration of the city's 60th anniversary. We will also receive 15 additional interviews to add to our collection.

Another core responsibility of our county historical commission is to assist those interested in applying for historical markers. The Research and Markers committee helps those who are writing papers and applying for markers. 4 papers are in progress and 1 is ready for submission. It edits paper drafts and works with the Texas Historical Commission to write final marker text after a marker topic has been approved. 4 marker texts were finalized in 2019. Unfortunately, the THC lost the foundry it worked with to create historical markers so the process was delayed for most of the year. The THC has announced this year that it has secured another foundry and that markers already approved will be completed within 8 months. This committee also oversees marker dedication ceremonies in conjunction with marker sponsors. Due to the delay

in marker production, no dedications were conducted in 2019. An additional paper was submitted in 2019 for the undertold marker program which provides funding to produce markers that address historical gaps, document significant underrepresented subjects or stories or promote diversity of topics. This paper was not approved for a marker. We are always looking for untold stories that would be great for a historic marker. The Research and Markers Committee is also tasked with monitoring existing markers to ensure that they remain standing and in good condition. One marker was found to be broken in 2019 and efforts are ongoing to see to its replacement. More than 40 hours were contributed by the Research & Markers Committee.

I thank all of the members of the Fort Bend County Historical Commission for their hard work in 2019 and look forward to more great achievements in 2020. You are invited to join us at quarterly meetings, volunteer for one of our committees and support the preservation and promotion of the deep and diverse history of Fort Bend County.

Submitted this the 5th day of March, 2020 by Chris Godbold, Chair, Fort Bend County Historical Commission