

JCHC JOURNAL

J E F F E R S O N C O U N T Y H I S T O R I C A L C O M M I S S I O N

THE YEAR BEHIND, AND THE YEAR TO COME

UPCOMING MEETINGS

- January 18, 2023
10:00 a.m.
- March 15, 2023
10:00 a.m.
- May 17, 2023
10:00 a.m.
- July 19, 2023 10:00
a.m.
- September 20,
2023 10:00 a.m.
- November 15, 2023
10:00 a.m.

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2022 was a great year for the Jefferson County Historical Commission, and members should be very proud of all they accomplished during the year.

As with all industries, the Texas Historical Commission's marker program was slowed down by the Covid-19 pandemic, but 2022 saw a local increase of interest in attaining markers by members of the public. Not only did we receive more inquiries about the marker process, we also celebrated the rededication of the historical marker at Peace Lutheran Church, formerly Trinity Lutheran Church, and enjoyed the dedication of the new marker for William G. "Bill" Hall, the owner of the Gulf Coast Recording Studio. This dedication was well attended by members of the country music industry, local music and history lovers, and most importantly, the family of Bill Hall.

The Cemetery Committee spent 2022 creating and executing two events at the Magnolia Cemetery. A Memorial Day event was held in May to honor all the fallen military members who are interred at Magnolia. The Cemetery Committee also held a two-day historic tour of the Magnolia Cemetery in October as part of the Museum Madness Weekend. Ten speakers from the JCHC and other local historic preservation groups shared the stories of twenty people who are interred at the



William G. "Bill" Hall Marker located at the corner of College and Pearl Streets in Beaumont.

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cemetery. Planning meetings will begin in early 2023 for the Third Annual Historic Tour of the Magnolia Cemetery.



Wiess Plot at Magnolia Cemetery. Photo Credit: RediscoveringSETX.com

In 2020 the JCHC was awarded a grant from the National Park Service, managed by the Texas Historical Commission under the “Hurricane Harvey, Irma, and Maria Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program”. Funds were awarded to perform a Historic Resources Survey of Jefferson County, which will allow the county to create a county-wide preservation plan. A public feedback meeting was held in April of 2022 at the Jefferson County Airport. Valuable input was received from preservation partners at the public meeting and the survey is now approximately 80% complete, with the final completion date being projected for 2023.

One of the tasks of the JCHC is to oversee the mini-museum on the first floor of the historic Jefferson County Courthouse. The mini-museum is in the former cigar and snack stand, and permanently displays a slice of the O’Brien Oak; a historic tree that provided shade for early Jefferson County Court sessions, prior to the county’s first Courthouse being built.

In 2022 the mini-museum housed two exhibits, and we look forward to beginning 2023 with a new display entitled “Floods of Beaumont”. Mini-museum exhibits are not limited to the JCHC, so if your historic preservation group would like to create a display, please reach out to the office coordinator to be placed on the calendar.

Public outreach efforts were resumed in 2022 after two years of Covid-19 restrictions. The JCHC was pleased to participate in the annual “Know Your County Courthouse” event hosted by the non-profit organization, Save Our Children as well as an event hosted by the American Legion Post 33 and Boy Scout Troop 1971 which allowed scouts to earn their American Heritage

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Merit Badges. JCHC members spoke about the 1931 Historic Jefferson County Courthouse, the National Register of Historic Places and Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks. The JCHC Cemetery Chair and an Advisory Member shared a presentation at the McFaddin Ward House about the Magnolia Cemetery and its relation to McFaddin family history. In 2023 the JCHC cemetery chair and office coordinator will be giving presentations to the Captain William Sanders Chapter of the DAR in Port Arthur and a preservation event is being planned with the Port Arthur Library.



Medallion inside the entrance to the 1931 Historic Jefferson County Courthouse. The medallion shows a map of Jefferson County, and is set to be directionally accurate to the county, rather than centered to the building.
Dr. Steven P. Lewis, JCHC

Since 2016 the JCHC has had a standing annual project: the Jefferson County History Calendars. Each year the commission members choose a month to research. The dates and events they compile are included on a wall calendar that is then shared with our preservation partners throughout the county. It is a cumulative project, meaning that dates are added from year to year, but none are removed— so each year contains more dates than the years prior. 2023 Calendars are still available in the JCHC office if your preservation group did not receive enough.

In July of 2022 the JCHC Archeology Committee hosted an Archeology Day at Camp Lookinback, an educational day camp offered by the Beaumont Heritage Society each summer for school aged children. 48 children were in attendance this year.

JCHC members also spent time working with the Texas Historical Commission on ongoing projects. The Texas Historical Commission is working on updating their online atlas <https://atlas.thc.texas.gov> to include more information on Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks and

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cemeteries. JCHC members spent time in August and September photographing the Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks located in Jefferson County. JCHC Members gathered information for the Texas Historical Commission to add to the list of cemeteries in Jefferson County and will be continuing the cemetery inventory list into 2023. The JCHC was also recognized in 2022 by the Texas Historical Commission as a Distinguished Service Award winner for the 37th consecutive year.

The county has graciously provided an upgrade to the computer equipment and software in the JCHC office. The upgraded equipment has allowed the coordinator to participate in online workshops and 'town hall' meetings hosted by the Texas Historical Commission, Friends of the Texas Historical Commission and the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions. It will also allow for research files currently held in the JCHC archives to be scanned using OCR (optical character recognition) software. OCR files are .pdf files in which each word and phrase is searchable. Using this software makes the use of digital information more user friendly, as the researcher can save time by searching for the subject they wish to find, rather than reading through an entire text. OCR files will be shared on the JCHC website starting in 2023



WWI Memorial Monument. Photo Credit: RediscoveringSETX.com

In addition to the wide variety of projects mentioned, JCHC members have been working on many other preservation efforts. A committee was formed in November to work with the City of Beaumont on the relocation of the World War I memorial monument, currently located in "Triangle Park" in front of the former Beaumont Enterprise building. Members have been doing deep research in preparation for the relocation of the monument and have been diligently working to identify all the servicemen from Beaumont who made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation during World War I.

JCHC Members have also spent extensive hours working on long-term projects such as the Caroline Gilbert Hinchey House Preservation Project, the Tyrrell Historical Library Association and the monumental task of photographing and cataloging the changing Beaumont cityscape.

With all of these ongoing projects, we could not be more pleased to welcome six new members to the Jefferson County Historical Commission. 2023 is shaping up to be a fantastic year for historic preservation in Jefferson County!

CLIFTON - CONSTRUCTION, FERRY SERVICE, AND CONVERSION TO NAVAL SERVICE

BY MATT REEVES

Jeremiah Simonson's shipyards laid down the ferryboat Clifton in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in early 1861. With her sister ship, Westfield was launched in June 1861 for the Staten Island, New York Ferry Service. An interesting feature of her construction was the symmetry of her bow and stern – she was a double-ended ferryboat, with both ends of the ship rounded to allow her to run into the New York ferry berths quickly. She also featured rudders on both her bow and stern, obviating the need for the ship to be turned around in the bay while crossing between Manhattan and Staten Island. Pilotheuses above either end of the saloon cabin similarly allowed the vessel to be steered by separate helmsmen. This was achieved by a series of chains connecting the rudders to the pilothouse wheels, a feature later proving to be her Achilles' heel at Sabine Pass.

Clifton's interior accommodations were spacious and considered luxurious for a working vessel. Indeed, her designer, the famous Cornelius Vanderbilt, described her and Westfield as "elegant," and built them both "as a matter of pride" (Justin Parkoff, project head of the USS Westfield Conservation Project, personal communication 2019). While most general-interest sources describe Clifton as 210 feet in length, her actual length, including her overhanging main deck, was at or near 225 feet. The lower number reflects the vessel's waterline and does not account for the superstructure (Justin Parkoff, personal communication 2019). Another prominent feature of Clifton was the slope of her main deck on both ends. Through my studies of Texas steamboats, I became familiar with the effects of hogging, where the boat's hull would become warped over time from heavy cargo loads and the vessel's steam machinery. Systems of iron rods, called chains, extended throughout the boat's structure to mitigate this effect. Later, I was surprised to learn that the hogging feature was intentional on New York ferryboats, allowing the horse teams to travel unobstructed over the paddlewheel shaft, which permitted the easier offloading of horses, wagons, and cargo when these vessels arrived in their berths. Thus, sloped decks were not a result of natural hogging but deliberate construction.

After their completion, Clifton and Westfield operated on the Staten Island for several months in the summer and fall of 1861. Far to the south of the peaceful activities of these vessels and their crews, the first year of the American Civil War had been raging. Though the titanic battles that would see tens of thousands killed and wounded had not yet occurred, the United States had already been torn in half by secession, its property and military installations seized and fired upon by armed rebels, and was confronted by the provisional government and rapidly-forming army of the Confederate States of America. United States forces had been soundly defeated at Manassas and Balls' Bluff, the opposing armies were fighting and maneuvering for control of the states of Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and the vast Army

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of the Potomac was being raised to destroy the seat of the Confederate government in Virginia.

The key to understanding the Civil War events in Texas and Jefferson County is the famous Anaconda Plan. This was the strategy of economically strangling the Confederate government through a naval blockade of Southern ports. With most of the Southern economy based on cotton production, denying their means of export would cripple the Confederate war effort. However, the number of ships in the United States Navy at the beginning of the war was woefully inadequate to implement this strategy; therefore, the United States government began purchasing civilian vessels of a dizzying variety of designs, sizes, purposes, and ages. An example of this variety was the sight of Clifton fighting alongside USS Sachem at Sabine Pass on September 8, 1863 – the large, brand-new, lightly armored ferryboat Clifton, and Sachem, a steam transport vessel, 19 years old at the time, completely unarmored, just over half the size of Clifton and mounting half the number of her guns.

The United States Navy purchased Clifton on December 2, 1861 (Borgens et al. 2010), and the conversion work was done in the same yard where she had originally been built. She and Westfield underwent a dramatic alteration to her appearance and function. The most noticeable changes were the removal of the saloon cabin, the lowering of the main cabin, and the pilothouses being rebuilt further inboard and lowered down into the main cabin. The new locations of the pilothouses provided a means of protection for the crewmen inside them. Removal of the saloon cabin and lowering the main cabin exposed the A-frame supports for the walking beam apparatus, and the two topmost sections of the smokestack were removed. Planking over the main deck sponsors, davits for launches, new masts, anti-boarding nets, and vented paddle boxes were also added. The interior layout of the vessel was extensively reworked, and bulwarks were added to the hull's interior. Clifton's main deck was lined with 5/16-inch-thick boiler plate iron, and these plates protected wooden bulwarks lining the bow and stern. Though the iron was useless in deflecting heavy Confederate ordnance, it protected the crew against soft lead musket rounds and perhaps grapeshot. The plates on the new gun decks were hinged to allow the guns to be run out for firing over a wide diameter. Iron rails were laid down on the bow and stern gun decks to allow for the movement of her pivot guns.

Upon her completion in mid-February 1862, Clifton was ready for naval service, her initial armament consisting of two heavy IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbore guns and four 32-pounder long iron guns of 57-hundredweight. The results of the ferryboat conversions were so suitable to the Navy's purposes that they requested more of them to be purposely constructed as gunboats,

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with custom dimensions specified by the Navy board; however, none were ever actually built (Borgens et al. 2010).

After sailing south to join Admiral David Glasgow Farragut's West Gulf Blockading Squadron, neither Clifton nor Westfield would ever see New York or peacetime service again. Both would participate in extensive combat in the Southern states and end their short careers entombed in the mud of the Texas Gulf Coast.

Sources:

Borgens, Amy, Robert Gearhart, Sara Laurence, and Doug Jones

2010 Investigation and Recovery of USS Westfield (Site 41GV151) Galveston Bay, Texas. Report to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Galveston, from PBS&J, Austin, TX.



An image of Westfield II underway in Staten Island, after the war. Vanderbilt had both Clifton and Westfield reconstructed after their losses. Though Westfield II had some external differences from her original namesake, this photo provides a very good reference for the appearance of Clifton before her conversion to a gunboat (image courtesy of The Mariners' Museum and Park; reference # MS0095/02-#1278).

UPCOMING EVENTS

122nd Anniversary of Spindletop. The Spindletop Gladys City Boomtown Museum will hold their annual celebration of the anniversary of Spindletop on January 14, 2023.

January 19, 2022 Inside the Port of Beaumont: Operations, Military Command, and History. McFaddin-Ward House Visitor Center, 1906 Calder, Beaumont, TX.

The McFaddin-Ward House is excited to host a panel presentation on the Port of Beaumont, which is the #1 strategic military port in the nation and recognized as the busiest military port in the world. Panelists include Chris Fisher, Port Director, Lieutenant Colonel Tyler Olsen, Commander 842nd Transportation Battalion and Judy Linsley, Historian. Lecture begins at 6:30 p.m.

Museum of the Gulf Coast Eighth Annual Art and Photography Contest. Entries accepted from January 9, 2023 to January 20, 2023. Opening reception to be held Friday, February 3, 2023 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.



Jefferson County Courthouse

This beautiful black-and-white image of one of the light fixtures on the first floor of the historic 1931 Jefferson County Courthouse was provided to the JCHC by Judge Branick's office. During the 1981 restoration, the fixtures were replated by the Del-Mar Electric Company of Beaumont and glass sourced from the Merry Go Round Glass Company in Houston.

GET IN TOUCH

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