

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form**

10/16/91

**NATIONAL
REGISTER**

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Historic and Architectural Resources of East Columbia, Texas

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Transportation and Settlement Along the Brazos River (East Columbia and Brazoria County):
1820-1918

C. Geographical Data

Brazoria County, Texas

☐ See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Curtis J. Jannell

Signature of certifying official

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Antoinette J. Lee

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

10/28/91

Date

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East Columbia, Brazoria County, Texas

TRANSPORTATION AND SETTLEMENT ALONG THE BRAZOS RIVER (EAST COLUMBIA AND BRAZORIA COUNTY): 1820-1918

INTRODUCTION

This document is one component of a comprehensive survey and nomination of extant historic and architectural properties of East Columbia, Texas. Field investigations were limited to the community of East Columbia; however, the historic context has been defined in much broader terms to allow not only for a better understanding of the role East Columbia played in the county's 19th and early 20th-century development, but also to enable not-yet-identified properties in other parts of the county that, likewise, are representative of the historic context, to be nominated to the National Register.

The project was undertaken under the auspices of the Brazoria County Historical Commission, and partial funding came from a federal grant-in-aid that was awarded by the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Because of their financial contributions, the THC requested that the historic context include all of the county to assist in their on-going efforts to develop statewide and regional contexts. Brazoria County was selected because it includes some of the oldest Anglo-American settlements in all of Texas and because it has been a favorite topic of historians for many years. Staff members of the THC felt that the abundance of published information could easily be used to relate the 19th and early 20th-century history to the built environment; thereby minimizing the need for primary research. This nomination, therefore, is not intended to be the definitive history of the area, but instead, provides the basis for learning more about the extant 19th and early 20th-century structures of Brazoria County and how they are representative of broad trends in local history.

An obvious bias of the project is the lack of consideration given to non-standing, historic, archeological sites. It is strongly recommended that this component not be overlooked or neglected and that the THC provide additional funding in the future to integrate this kind of information into the nomination.

Please note that throughout the history of Brazoria County the town name "Columbia" was alternately used for both East Columbia and West Columbia, usually, but not always, according to the relative fortunes of the communities at a given time. When Josiah Bell first platted the towns in 1824, he mapped out a small town on the west bank of the Brazos River and called it Marion. Bell then carved a two mile road west from the river to a spot on the

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prairie and platted the town he called Columbia. It was this Columbia that served as the first capital of Texas in 1836. Almost immediately after the capital moved to Houston in the following year, Columbia dwindled to a small village but the river landing town of Marion prospered. The river community which was more popularly known as "Bell's Landing" then took on the name "Columbia" which it held for much of the 19th century. The former Columbia became more commonly known as West Columbia, its present name, when referred to at all. Some residents and writers, however, continued to refer to the river town as Marion or Bell's Landing and others refused to relegate the former capital of the Republic to a mere "suburb" by using the designation "West" Columbia. They continued to call it "Columbia." This caused considerable confusion in researching the area. Inconsistency was the general rule throughout the remainder of the 19th and into the 20th century. After oil was discovered near West Columbia in 1918, merchants abandoned the river site and flocked to the boomtown. As West Columbia took on more importance, the riverport town gradually became known as East Columbia to differentiate it from its more prosperous neighbor. In 1924 postal officials formally recognized the town previously known as Marion, Bell's Landing and Columbia, as "East Columbia," by which it is presently known. Because historic documents, letters, maps, newspaper articles, etc. were not consistent in their nomenclature, the words [East] and [West] will be found in brackets within historic quotations to clarify which of the present-day communities was being described. Occasionally, it was not clear which community was intended by the author, and in that case no brackets are used. In such instances, the reference generally describes conditions common to either or both communities. Throughout the remainder of the text, the current town names of East and West Columbia are used even when discussing historic events or conditions.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Brazoria County (see Figure 1), which extends to the east and west of the Brazos River from its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico, was part of Stephen F. Austin's original Texas colony. Austin selected the area for colonization in 1821 because of its access to the Gulf and its rich, river-fed bottom lands. He recognized the potential of the Brazos River as an incoming source of transportation for immigrants and supplies to the new colony and as a means by which its crops could be ferried to market. Soon after Austin's grant was confirmed immigrants began using the water highway to stake their claim to its banks. The plantations developed by the early colonists provided the basis for the regional economy which in turn fostered allied commercial concerns along the river. Within a decade after the establishment of the plantation system, several towns had grown up and flourished along the river which serviced the area plantations. Such riverport towns as Brazoria and Marion (now

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East Columbia) provided superior docking and loading facilities for crop transportation. General mercantile stores were established throughout the many river towns to supply planters with goods and services from the United States. Taverns and boarding houses were among the early enterprises in these towns and provided social outlets for the isolated planters.

From its pioneer beginnings, Brazoria County became the focus of political activity when West Columbia was selected as the first capital of the Republic of Texas in 1836. Although the capital was moved to Houston the following year, West Columbia's selection is an indication of its importance at the center of a prospering agricultural region at that time. Successful cotton production on the Brazos River plantations made its planters wealthy and resulted in the construction of large brick plantation houses which replaced the log predecessors. The riverports transported the crops to markets and spurred activity and growth in the river towns. Cotton remained Brazoria County's major cash crop until the 1850s when sugar cultivation and processing produced equally profitable exports for its planters. The labor-intensive plantations, particularly those involving sugar production, were dependent upon a slave work force and Brazoria County numbered second among Texas' slave-owning counties. Consequently, the emancipation of the slaves following the Civil War dealt a severe economic and philosophical blow to Brazoria County, perhaps more so than in other cotton and sugar-producing counties. The aftermath of the war brought new immigration to the towns along the river. Many whose homes had been destroyed in the war migrated from other Southern states. Northern soldiers and settlers and an influx of German settlers added to the numbers.

Steamboats had been plying the Brazos River since the days of the Republic with varying degrees of success. Although most Texas rivers were shallow and unnavigable, and the Brazos was no exception, it still provided the cheapest and easiest means of transportation in a county of vast distances with few and poor roads. The arrival of the railroads after the Civil War, however, strangled trade on the river and drew Brazoria County's population away from its banks, although the town of East Columbia had both a railroad and a river trade after the war. Most of the steamboat business that occurred in the late 19th century centered not only on the transportation of crops but on carrying people. Riverboats carried passengers from East Columbia to Velasco on land buying ventures. Some cotton was still transported on the river into the 1890s but cotton no longer formed the basis of Brazoria County's economy and steamboats no longer provided the most efficient and reliable method of transportation.

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With agriculture in decline and steamboat traffic gone from the river, Brazoria County lacked a solid economic base. The discovery of oil and mineral wealth after the turn of the century provided a new foundation for the county and boomtowns sprang up just as they had a century before on the river. The great oil strike near West Columbia in 1918 led to the near-abandonment of East Columbia as merchants and residents alike rushed to take advantage of the new source of wealth. Today Brazoria County's economy is closely aligned with its mineral and chemical development and refinery. The river towns and the plantations that supported them no longer factor in the county's wealth but remain as historic remnants of its pioneer beginnings, antebellum grandeur and steamboat-era glory.

EXPLORATION AND SETTLEMENT

Cabeza de Vaca was probably the first European to explore the offshore islands, cane brakes and woods of the Texas coast at the mouth of the Brazos River about 1528. Almost 300 years later the first concentrated settlement attempts in the area were made under the auspices of Stephen F. Austin's colonization agreement with Spanish authorities in Mexico in 1821. Nevertheless, some Americans were recorded as living in Brazoria County prior to the colony's official sanction. George Smeathers, who served as Austin's guide and scout on his first trip to Texas in 1821, had been living in Texas as early as 1809. After leading Austin through the lands fed by the Colorado and Brazos rivers, Smeathers obtained a land grant on Chainey [Chaney] Creek. He later moved to West Columbia where he lived until his death in 1837 at the age of 75 (Creighton, 1975:7). Another settler who arrived before 1822 was James (Brit) Bailey who built a pole cabin for his wife and six children on the prairie near West Columbia. Bailey had been farming for several years before his claim to the plantation was recognized in 1824, making him a member of the "Old 300" after the fact. Bailey's Prairie, as it is now called, was described in 1833 by another pioneer, I.T. Tinsley, as being "covered in season with wild rice and you could see a deer in every direction as far as your rifle could shoot" (Creighton, 1975:8).

Among these earliest settlers to the Brazoria region was Henry Seaborn who came to Quintana on the coast about 1820 and began building sailing vessels that operated in the Gulf. At a time when there were no all-weather roads to transport pioneers to the colony, Austin recognized the importance of establishing a colony with access to the coastal waters and river highways capable of bringing settlers to the interior. When he returned to New Orleans from his survey trip, Austin planned two routes of colonization: one overland and one by sea. He purchased a small schooner, the *Lively* and after advertising for colonists, arranged to meet it at the mouth of the Colorado River in December of 1821. The *Lively* anchored at the mouth

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of the Brazos River by mistake and its passengers waited in vain for Austin. Eventually they built boats suitable for river traffic and began a tortuous trip up the Brazos River where they eventually built a fort on a bluff above present Richmond, Texas, approximately 75 miles inland from the Gulf. This accidental trip was fortuitous for settlement efforts, however, because the Brazos proved to be of sufficient depth to float passengers and cargo to the interior (Puryear, 1976:xvi). During the next 15 years, the majority of seaborne immigration to the colony entered the territory via the Brazos River because of its greater depth (Creighton, 1975:12).

Pioneer farmers fanned out along the river banks and began to cultivate the rich bottom land long before the prairies and timber lands were accessible. Their first homes were log cabins of one or two rooms which were later expanded or replaced with 2-story frame or brick houses (Smith, 1958:8). Early colonists Brit Bailey, Josiah Bell, Martin Varner and Henry Austin lived in tents or log cabins when they first settled in the colony. Rebecca Smith Lee described the scene at Henry Austin's home in 1831 as his cousin Stephen F. Austin arrived for the Christmas season, "Amidst sudden, cheerful confusion ten members of the Austin family were stepping over each other in the log cabin" (Creighton, 1975:402). In addition to their cabins, the planters built log quarters for their slaves, smoke houses, sheds and other outbuildings essential to the operation of their farms. William H. Wharton is reported to have built the first frame house in the colony in 1827 on his "Eagle Island" Plantation in Brazoria County. When Mary Austin Holley visited the Wharton home in the early 1830s, she recorded, "They live more like people elsewhere at Mr. Wharton's, than anywhere else in Texas (Ward, 1962:499).

The colonists who traveled up the Brazos River on the *Lively* in 1822 planted corn during their first spring but Brazoria County's fortune was made in growing cotton. Immigrants were attracted to the coastal counties where the broad plains fed by the Trinity, Brazos, and Colorado rivers were blessed with rich soil, a long growing season, and relatively easy access to markets on the rivers to the Gulf. The first cotton seed was brought to the Brazos River in 1821 by Jared L. Groce who also erected the first cotton gin along its banks (Strobel, 1926:7). By 1825 Texas cotton had already been recognized by New Orleans brokers as "superior to any that comes to this market" (Ward, 1962:174). Cotton was the predominant crop planted along the Brazos River although sugar production gained importance during the 1850s. Farmers in Brazoria, Matagorda, Ft. Bend and Wharton counties developed the largest cotton and sugar plantations in antebellum Texas (Lowe, 1987:12). Although a number of commercial and industrial enterprises prospered in the colony by 1830, these agricultural endeavors formed the basis of its strong economy.

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It was not long before the Brazos River was recognized for its potential beyond bringing new colonists to the region. One of the first to exploit its economic possibilities was Josiah H. Bell with whom Stephen F. Austin had left the care of the colony during his 1822 trip to Mexico City. Bell and Martin Varner moved from their original settlements in Washington County to lands near present East Columbia. In January 1824 Bell camped in a tent on a creek known since as Bell's Creek and immediately began building a landing on the Brazos River below Varner's Creek. He constructed docks and storage sheds in anticipation of the business he would soon be conducting with nearby plantation owners (Griggs, n.d.:1). Later that year Bell built a "good dwelling house" for his wife and family which was probably the first house built in East Columbia (Creighton, 1975:18).

The location of the new river port between the Gulf and the settlement at Richmond was inspired. Known as Bell's Landing by the colonists, it became a major transportation and distribution center for the otherwise isolated plantations along the river. Noah Southwick wrote that "Bell's Landing was the depot for all the supplies for the settlements above" [on the Brazos River] (Creighton, 1975:27). About 1826 Bell laid out a town (see Figure 2) at the landing which he called Marion but colonists generally referred to it as Bell's Landing. About 1826, Bell cut a road two miles long from the landing through heavy timber to the prairie end of his league and laid out a second town he called Columbia [now West Columbia] (Aldridge-Smith, R.T.H.L., 1982). This was the town that became the first capital of the Republic of Texas in 1836.

In his plans for West Columbia (see Figure 3), Bell reserved a plaza for public use and set up twenty square blocks with eight lots to the block for the business section, not including the outlots of one acre each between Marion (East Columbia) and Columbia (West Columbia) set aside for "garden plots" (Creighton, 1975:31). By 1829 Marion had become one of the most important inland ports in Texas with an established clientele of about 130 customers at John R. Harris's store (Creighton, 1975:37). Bell moved from the river and established a plantation near West Columbia about 1826. The plantation buildings included a six room log house with an office in the yard, slave quarters, stables, smoke houses and a blacksmith shop. Only the well remains of the original plantation structures (Creighton, 1975:23; First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:37). In 1829 the *Texas Gazette* newspaper advertised the sale of lots in Bell's town of Marion inviting "all persons who are desirous of uniting in a village situation, which has the advantage of navigation, commerce and agriculture to attend" the sale which was set for the "third Monday in November next" (Creighton, 1975:38).

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The landing became the hub of activity on the river. For all practical purposes, Marion was the head of navigation on the Brazos River and area plantations cut paths to the landing to ship their crops and gather supplies and information. The year 1826 yielded a good cotton crop for Brazoria County with between 2,500 to 3,000 pounds of seed cotton (about two bales) to the acre. Cotton crops in the following two years exceeded expectation after the cotton gin was built in the region. Sugar cultivation was introduced at the Varner Plantation by 1828, and in 1829 the *Gazette* reported that 100 acres planted with sugar cane the previous season yielded a product equal to that of Louisiana (Creighton, 1975:41). Most of these products were sent to market from the docks at Marion.

Plantations became centers of colonial society and planters alternated as hosts of holiday and other social events, but Bell's complex, near the wharves and sources of outside information, became the social and political hub of all the surrounding plantations. It attracted other dwellings, mercantile establishments, taverns and boarding houses to its vicinity, and as the community grew, so too did its importance in colonial affairs. Kate Underwood described East Columbia's preeminence in a 1909 article:

[East] Columbia then was in colonial days a town of importance, the business and social center of a prosperous slave-holding people, living many of them, on large plantations, and leading, though subject to the limitations of a pioneer existence, the aristocratical and patriarchal life of the Old South. Prosperity attended the little town and community hospitality was a religion, and the social side of life was cultivated and enjoyed with grace and stateliness of a bygone age (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:20).

Whether by design or accident, settlers were encouraged to diversify their activities. Farmers received a labor of land (177 acres) and cattlemen received a league of land (4,428), but farmers who also raised cattle received additional acreage (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:6). It is not surprising, then, that although most of the early settlers farmed corn, cotton and sugar, they also raised some cattle. In 1831 the first cattle, six hundred head, arrived on the plantation of Francis Bingham. While most of the colonists set about establishing plantations, entrepreneurs were drawn to the possibilities of the new colony. James E. B. Austin and John Austin followed Bell's example and constructed docking facilities, a cotton gin and store on the river about 15 miles from the mouth of the Brazos in 1828. The town that grew up around their settlement became known as Brazoria and it rivaled Marion for preeminence on the river. Asa Mitchell established a salt manufacturing business at the mouth of the Brazos about 1828 and became an importer of supplies for the farmers and stock raisers along the river. As early as 1822, when the call for colonists had

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barely gone out, Austin was contacted with regard to manufacturing possibilities in the new colony (Creighton, 1975:26).

Between 1826 and 1830 it was estimated that 60 to 100 new colonists were arriving by boat at the mouth of the Brazos every two weeks (Creighton, 1975:43). When Stephen F. Austin made his first trip to Mexico in 1822, he reported that there were already eight large families of 150 people living on the Brazos River. On his return trip in 1833, Austin gave the population as 46,500 [Creighton acknowledges this figure as an exaggeration] (Creighton, 1975:79). The town of Marion at Bell's Landing increased along with the colony. In 1831, Mary Austin Holley described the town as having "two or three cabins, a country store and one frame house painted white" but by 1835 she recorded:

Marion has increased some two or three dwelling houses, and one large warehouse built by Mr. White a large dealer in cotton, many bales of which were lying ready to be shipped in our schooner (Holley, May 7, 1835:19)

Despite the hardships and isolation of pioneer life, the perennial flooding and the tropical storms, the plantations along the Brazos River progressed incrementally and the river towns through which their products flowed prospered accordingly.

The success of the colony was a mixed blessing for the Mexican government under whose auspices it ostensibly flourished. After a trip through the colony, General Manuel de Mier y Teran observed the progress and independence of the colony with a measure of anxiety. He considered the colony's ties to the United States to be detrimental to Mexico's interests and recommended the immediate military occupation of Texas, the prohibition of further colonization from the United States, the encouragement of Swiss and German colonization, and the development of an economic bond between Texas and Mexico through coastal trade. Mier y Teran's proposals were incorporated into the Law of April 6, 1830. The law met with hostility on the part of the colonists who subsequently began fomenting rebellion.

West Columbia became the scene of a disproportionate amount of political activity in the colony prior to the Texas Revolution. The Municipality of Brazoria, which includes present Brazoria County, had been created in 1832, separating the region politically from the larger jurisdiction of San Felipe de Austin. The town of Brazoria, on the river only about fifteen miles from its mouth, was made the seat of the municipality. A cholera epidemic in 1833, coupled with severe flooding, wreaked havoc along the Brazos River and the town of Brazoria was particularly hard hit with scores of people felled by disease (Creighton,

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1975:80). Partly as a result of the flood and cholera, the citizens of the Municipality of Brazoria petitioned the Congress of the State of Coahuila and Texas in 1834 to move the seat of the municipality to West Columbia from Brazoria because of its location,

situated on dry ground, on the edge of a large prairie which spreads itself out for the accommodation of cattle and horses of which a good number is always necessary to transient visitors" (Creighton, 1975:85).

Many of Brazoria's citizens gathered at the plantation home of Josiah Bell to discuss the mounting hostilities between the colony and Mexico. One of them, Ammon Underwood who arrived in Texas in 1834, wrote in his journal on June 9, 1835:

The political state of this country is in such an unsettled condition that I am at an entire loss what to do. . . . commotions in the interior are constantly taking place, and the inability and fickle state of the government becomes more and more apparent daily

On December 25, 1835, at a West Columbia meeting presided by Bell, 35 votes were cast unanimously in favor of a declaration of independence from Mexico (Creighton, 1975:95).

THE REPUBLIC

The year 1836, the year of the revolution and Sam Houston's victory at San Jacinto, was a momentous one in Texas history, and some of the most dramatic events of the year were played out in Brazoria County. Citizens of the county, among them Catherine Carson and her daughter Rachel, evacuated their homes and farms at the news of Houston's retreat from the Mexican army in a panic known since as the Runaway Scrape. After Santa Anna's defeat, the captured general was held on several plantations in Brazoria County including the Patton Plantation and Orozimbo, both near East and West Columbia. That year, too, the newly elected president of the Republic, David Burnet, announced the first congress to be held in West Columbia assuring the town of an enduring place in history. The year of fear and triumph ended in profound sadness when Stephen F. Austin, visionary founder of the colony, died on December 27 at the West Columbia plantation of George McKinstry. Austin's funeral cortege traveled the two-mile road to the landing that Josiah Bell had carved out of the wilderness only a decade earlier. From there Austin's body was placed aboard the *Yellowstone* and taken down the Brazos River to its resting place at Peach Point Plantation (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:36).

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Of the year's events, the one that had the most direct impact on the development of Brazoria County was the meeting of the legislature. On July 23, 1836, President Burnet proclaimed an election to be held on September 5, and named West Columbia as the location of the meeting of Congress because "that town had the most adequate housing accommodations and because it possessed a newspaper, *The Telegraph and Texas Register*" (Creighton, 1975:142). The first Congress of the Republic of Texas convened in West Columbia on October 3, 1836, and adjourned on November 22 of that year. According to Creighton, West Columbia reached the apex of its historical significance in that year as a result of this singular honor. The following year the capital moved to Houston after unwarranted promises of better accommodations, and West Columbia fell into relative obscurity. The intended relationship of Bell's Landing and Marion to the first capital is best described by John Adriance, an early pioneer who took part in the proceedings. Interviewed in 1898, Mr. Adriance recalled:

It was the intention to make [West] Columbia the capital and residential portion of the city, and to use Bell's Landing -- what is now [East] Columbia - - as the commercial portion of the city (Spillane, 1898).

Mary Austin Holley confirms that by 1838,

Marion is now called Columbia, being considered a part thereof and is the landing" and added, "The Landing is the most flourishing [of the two communities]. . . . it is growing fast, and a great deal of business is doing there (Holley, 1838:65)

When the capital moved to Houston, West Columbia's population declined rapidly but the settlement at the landing, which soon adopted the name "Columbia" dropping both "Marion" and "Bell's Landing," grew tremendously during the years of the Republic. Edward Stiff soon described West Columbia as "a small village, 12 miles from Brassoria [sic], remarkable for nothing except the house in which the first Texas Congress assembled" (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:14). The river port town of Marion, however, was thriving. Front Street along the Brazos River became crowded with mercantile houses, saloons, wharves and warehouses in addition to Underwood's home/boarding house. As the town around the landing became more prosperous, its residents began to refer to it simply as "Columbia". It was not until 1924, when much of the town's population shifted once more to West Columbia with the oil boom, that the post office first referred to the town as "East Columbia, late Columbia" (Creighton, 1975:164). A.P. McCormick explained the exchange of names between the two communities as symbolic of their relative importance:

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At that time [c.1836], the prairie end of the Bell tract was the most populous, and held the name of "Columbia", without trimmings, until after the revolution, the removal of the capital to Houston, and the death of Mr. Bell [in 1838]. "Marion" and "The Landing" had yielded to "East Columbia", but with that the river town was content long as Mr. Bell lived (McCormick, n.d., 164).

After hostilities cooled between Mexico and Texas, the plantations along the Brazos River flourished and the settlement at Bell's Landing grew to be one of the Republic's most valuable inland ports (Creighton, 1975:37). Bell's Landing was successful because it was the northernmost, consistently navigable port available to plantations upriver. Beyond Marion the Brazos River was plagued with shoals, snags, and shallow water that rendered ports in that section unreliable to planters sending their crops to market. The landing was also successful because of its proximity to the public highway which passed through West Columbia between Velasco on the coast and Richmond above it on the Brazos (Strobel, 1926:12). Inland plantations in the county were able to convey their crops across a broad prairie to West Columbia by ox cart, load their goods at the landing, and float them down river to Velasco. As a result of the river trade, Marion grew into a thriving commercial center. It was not without its problems as William Fairfax Gray describes in his diary entry of February 28, 1837:

At Marion.--Fine, clear day . . . I could not get [a horse], and walked [to West Columbia], two miles through the bottom, road laid out straight, but not smooth. . . . This place [Marion] consists of about eight or ten houses of all descriptions, mostly shanties. The lots have recently been sold out by J. H. Bell, at \$100 each. They are now asking two, three and four hundred for them, unimproved. The tavern lot has commanded a bid of \$4,000, which was refused. The place will probably improve, and be a good place for neighborhood business, but can never be a great city (Creighton, 1975:401).

Mary Austin Holley also remarked on the success of the town and its drawbacks:

We passed a day with Mrs. Nibbs, at the landing, went down in the skiff - pleasant. The proprietor of the tavern in Marion pays \$1,800 - good money - a year for his house - a very ordinary frame building, and \$450 per year for cook; \$30 per month for a girl. . . . The landing is the most flourishing. It is not very healthy and the last summer, which was a sickly one, more died at Marion, in proportion to the numbers, than elsewhere. Still it is growing fast, and a great deal of business is doing there (Holley, March 13, 1838:65).

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Thomas Nibbs, whose wife was mentioned by Holley, built a log house in Marion on the banks of the Brazos River about 1835. Ammon Underwood, in partnership with his future mother-in-law, Catherine Carson, bought the house in 1838. They enlarged the log house and converted it into a boarding house. Although altered extensively and moved three times in advance of the encroaching Brazos River, the Nibbs portion of the Ammon Underwood house is the oldest building in East Columbia and the only one that dates from the period of the Republic.

As members of the original 300 colonists, William and Catherine Jane Carson settled on the San Bernard River in 1824 but the ailing William died soon after his arrival. His widow and children moved to Bell's Landing where Catherine later went into a partnership with Ammon Underwood and established a boarding house by enlarging the Nibbs cabin. Underwood married Carson's daughter Rachel in 1839 and after the widowed Catherine married Gail Borden Sr. in 1842 all shared the house now known as the Ammon Underwood House (First Capitol Historical Foundation, n.d.). Although Underwood owned several plantations in the county, he maintained his residence in East Columbia where he had established a mercantile business in 1835. The house remained in the Underwood family until 1968 when it was purchased and converted into a museum (Brazoria County deed records).

PLANTATION ERA

Occupational diversity notwithstanding, the towns along the river existed to serve the plantations and all were dependent on the success of the plantation crops as well as the shipping and trading opportunities they afforded. The productivity of the plantations affected everyone in the area and was a constant source of concern and appraisal. Mary Austin Holley mentioned the only extant plantation still standing from that era, now known as the Varner-Hogg Plantation, in her 1838 journal entry:

Mr. Patton, near [West] Columbia has planted 300 acres of cotton and 200 acres of corn. The cotton will yield 3 bales or 1,500 lbs. clear cotton maise. The corn 40 bush. per acre - corn from 2 to \$4 per bush. (Holley, April 29, 1838:70).

Although West Columbia diminished in population and importance once the capital moved to Houston, Brazoria County as a whole prospered after the first tentative years of the Texas Republic when money was tight and the future uncertain. The latter years of the

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Republic and early statehood were ones of increased prosperity and a steady influx of settlers arrived from the states to open new plantations. Many were drawn to Brazoria County by advertisements such as the one printed in an 1852 edition of the *Texas State Gazette*:

TO THE PLANTERS IN THE OLD STATES. This is the year for you to come to Texas and start a new plantation. COME TO BRAZORIA COUNTY (*Texas State Gazette*, "From the Planter", September 11, 1852:30).

Among the many immigrants to Brazoria County in the 1840s were Dr. Mason Locke Weems, II and members of the Dance family who made their homes on South Main Street in East Columbia. Although Dr. Weems arrived with his family in Texas in 1837, they lived for two years on Bay Prairie in Matagorda County before moving to a plantation six miles below Wharton. Weems was a planter as well as a physician and served several terms as probate judge of Wharton County before moving to Brazoria County (Webb 1952, II:876). Dr. Weems probably built his East Columbia home shortly after 1847. The house, which received an official Texas historical marker in 1962, remained in the family until the mid-1980s. In 1848, about the time Dr. Weems brought his family to East Columbia, first cousins James Watkins Dance and James Henry Dance arrived at Bell's Landing where they built sugar mills on the nearby plantations (Creighton, 1975:199). The cousins soon bought land at Cedar Brake Plantation where they operated a sawmill for use in their machine shop on South Main Street. James Henry Dance and his sons, George and David, remodeled the house William Aldridge had built about 1840 across the street from their shop. The machine shop where the Dances manufactured munitions for the Confederate Army during the Civil War was destroyed in the 1900 storm but the house remained in the family until 1908 when it was leased and later purchased by Thomas Masterson Smith. The Aldridge-Smith house today is a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark occupied by members of the Smith family. The arrival of the Dance cousins in Brazoria County coincided with the emergence of sugar production as an important industry in Brazoria County. Most of the earlier farms and plantations concentrated on corn, cotton and livestock, but during the 1850s it was sugar cane cultivation and production that brought wealth to Brazoria County (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:21). Brazoria County's first sugar cane was grown on the 4,605-acre Varner Plantation [Varner-Hogg] as early as 1828, but sugar wasn't processed on a large scale until after 1843 when William Duncan first brought steam power to his Caney Creek mills (Creighton, 1975:197). Even so, sugar production was a labor intensive endeavor in the extreme and could only be made profitable through cheap or slave labor. Although Texans never fully obeyed the Mexican sanctions against slavery, the practice increased after independence thus renewing immigration from the Southern states. The 1840 census reported 1,316 slaves in Brazoria County which was second only to Red River County with its slave

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population numbering 1,872. The Sweeny-Waddy Log Cabin in the rear yard of the Ammon Underwood House dates from this period. It may have been one of the 30 cypress cabins that housed slaves on the Sweeny sugar plantation about nine miles from East Columbia (Strobel, 1926:45).

The bayous of the coastal plain and along the Brazos River were ideal for cane cultivation and Brazoria County's large slave population provided the labor necessary for the manufacture of sugar. Newspapers in 1840 began to discuss sugar as a promising plantation crop, and by 1847 those predictions proved correct when Brazoria County produced 58,205 hogsheads of sugar in addition to a normal cotton yield (Creighton, 1975:171, 194). The adjacent counties of Matagorda, Wharton and Fort Bend became known collectively as the Texas Sugar Bowl. The town of East Columbia and its increasingly busy river landing was surrounded by sugar plantations during the halcyon days before the Civil War. Kate Underwood identified John Adriance's Waldeck Plantation, the Patton Plantation [Varner-Hogg], Willow Glen, Orozimbo, Osceola and the plantations of the Maner, Yeiser, Bell, Banton, Sayre, and Sweeny families as ones served by East Columbia's river port (First Capitol Replica Board, 1986:21).

The cotton and sugar plantations of antebellum Brazoria County were feudal worlds unto themselves. Mary Nixon Rogers described a typical sugar plantation of the 1850s in her *History of Brazoria County*. The planter's residence was a 2-story brick house with 2-story galleries supported by pillars. In the yard was an office where the planter conducted business. Behind the manor house was an immense brick sugar house with a double set of sugar kettles and beyond that were the overseer's residence and the slave cabins, all made of brick. Surrounding the manor house were well-tended lawns and gardens. Fruit orchards formed the boundary between the grounds and the acres of cotton or sugar cane (Smith, 1958:8). Abner Strobel concurred that the homes of most sugar planters were made of brick. He described Morgan L. Smith and John Adriance's Waldeck Plantation as being the best-equipped sugar plantation in the county with a fine brick residence and \$25,000 in statuary in the park surrounding the house. Strobel stated that Waldeck's barns, cribs and slave cabins were also made of brick and that the plantation included a brick church for its slaves (Strobel, 1926:7).

Of the Texas' sugar growing counties, Brazoria was by far the most productive during the 1850s. Only the largest and wealthiest planters in the region could afford the outlay of capital necessary to grow, process and market the crop. In 1852, 29 planters in Brazoria County owned "sugar houses" - brick buildings with boilers, steam kettles - that ranged in price from \$5,000 to \$50,000 with a median value of \$15,000 (Lowe, 1987:20). However,

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Texas' sugar crop was small compared with that of Louisiana. Throughout the 1850s, Brazoria County's most productive sugar years, cotton equaled sugar in export value. Of the 46 plantations that operated in the county at this time, 19 were devoted exclusively to sugar, 16 to cotton, and three to both, with the remainder unspecified (Creighton, 1975:217). Lowe has said that in Texas, only Brazoria, Matagorda, Ft. Bend and Wharton counties approached the planter-dominated economy and lifestyle typically associated with the "Old South".

STEAMBOATS ON THE BRAZOS RIVER

As the sugar plantations and cotton fields of Brazoria County thrived, businessmen along the river redoubled their efforts to establish reliable steamboat transportation for the county's cargo. Schooners from Velasco and Galveston had been plying the river since the early settlement days but after John Bradbury Follett built his first Texas boat about 1840, steamboats assumed primacy as cargo carriers on the Brazos (Creighton, 1975:177). By 1849 regular runs from Velasco to Washington were being made with stops at Brazoria, East Columbia and Richmond. The ships carried much needed supplies to the towns and farms and returned downriver laden with cotton and processed sugar. The advent of the steamship on the Brazos River increased the importance of the river port towns more than ever. Much of the towns' civic projects and political agendas during the 1850s centered on the improvement of the river for steam navigation (Puryear, 1976:27-29). For some 50 years the Brazos River was the most reliable form of transportation for inland planters providing them with access to distant markets and a fragile link to the rest of Texas and the outside world.

River navigation in Texas, however, was always a risky venture and the Brazos proved to be no exception. The *Mustang* was the first steamboat to reach Washington, nearly 200 miles inland from the Gulf, in 1842. Lured by a subsidy and a good cotton crop and favored by unusually high water, the steamer made regular runs between Galveston and Washington in 1843 carrying 700 bales of cotton over a two-month period (Puryear, 1976:55). Later that year, the *Mustang*, overburdened with cotton, sank at its moorings (Creighton, 1975:177). Although most of the Brazos steamboats ended their careers on snags or shoals in the shallow river, the career of the *Mustang* was typical of the boats to follow. Because so many steamboats sank with their cargoes, some planters preferred to hazard the miry roads to Houston rather than risk the "many severe losses from the accidents that have befallen [them]" (Houston *Telegraph and Texas Register*, March 27, 1844). It is a testament to the quality and value of the increased sugar and cotton production throughout the Brazos valley that encouraged investors to defy the odds and continue operating steamboats on the river.

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The most successful use of steamboats on the Brazos was conducted between Galveston or Velasco on the Gulf and Richmond, but in 1849 two light-draught steamers known as the "Brazos Boats" began making regularly runs to Washington. Puryear credits the transition of the middle Brazos valley from subsistence farming to large-scale cotton production on the success of the two boats. A former resident of the lower Brazos in 1849 "praised the steamboats for having imparted new life and vigor to all the movements and operations of the whole Brazos valley" (Puryear, 1976:67). The Brazos Boats proved that steamboat lines could be profitable for the planters and merchants if not for its investors. Only two years after their successful first trip to Washington, the Brazos Steam Association was forced to sell the boats to pay their debts (Puryear, 1976:69). In spite of that failure, the Brazos Boats initiated an era of steamboat service on the river that continued serving the plantations and merchants in the valley until the advent of the Civil War.

END OF THE STEAMBOAT ERA

Pamela Puryear wrote that although it appears that the Civil War brought an end to steam navigation on the Brazos River, other forces laid the groundwork for its demise. Railroad lines were beginning to reach out from Houston in the late 1850s and the Columbia Tap made its first run from Houston to East Columbia by 1859 (Foster, 1990:7). The riverboats could not compete with the more reliable means of transportation provided by the railroads, not to mention the iron railroad bridges built across the rivers that prevented many boats from passing beneath them. By 1860, a trestle of the Austin Tap kept paddlewheelers from operating on the river above East Columbia. Two other trestles were constructed over the river between East Columbia and Richmond, effectively strangling navigation on the middle and upper Brazos. An Army Corps of Engineers survey conducted in 1874 regarded the expense of improving navigation on the Brazos to be totally unwarranted (Puryear, 1976:31). Although a number of attempts were made to reopen the upper reaches of the river, only the lower Brazos between East Columbia to the Gulf continued steam navigation after that time.

In the waning years of the Brazos River steamboat era the Columbia Transportation Company, organized by Travis Logan Smith, Sr., his brother John and brother-in-law, Branch T. Masterson, became the most important commercial transportation service on the river. Their enterprises included cotton, land, cattle and general mercantile stores, and their fleet of steamboats monopolized activity on the lower Brazos in the late 1880s and early 1890s (Puryear, 1976:107). Travis Logan Smith had come to Texas in 1871 after his home in Virginia was destroyed during the Civil War. He and his brother, John, opened a

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mercantile business in East Columbia that expanded to include five branch stores. Smith also began buying land as soon as he arrived in the county and eventually acquired 113,000 acres of timber, grazing and farm land (Creighton, 1975:279; Womack, 1980).

While railroads transported much of the region's freight traffic, the Columbia Transportation Company carried a respectable amount of cotton and cattle on its steamboats despite a focus on carrying passengers to the coast. In the early 1890s Velasco experienced a land boom due to speculation that it might become a major port with the building of jetties through the Brazos bar. The Columbia Transportation Company's small propeller steamers, the *Christie* and *Justine*, brought curious excursionists and potential land investors from East Columbia to the beach to watch the building of the jetties and view the Velasco town lots then being platted. The *Alice Blair* was a handsome passenger steamer purchased by the company in 1891 expressly as an excursion boat to take the multitudes to Velasco, that "infant wonder of the gulf" (Puryear, 1976:109). It was joined by the *Hiawatha*, a lavish pleasure boat with 22 staterooms and 100 foot-long "saloon" (Puryear, 1976:111).

The Velasco real estate endeavors crumbled but not before the untimely death of the *Hiawatha*. Smith, who built his fortune on the river with his boats and mercantile businesses, knew the era was over when the sumptuous boat foundered and sank in the shallow river at its East Columbia moorings in the summer of 1895. The *Alice Blair* ran only occasionally after the *Hiawatha* sank and later that year the Columbia Transportation Company closed its books (Puryear, 1976:114). Travis Smith remained in the East Columbia home he built for his family in 1878. About 1914, Smith helped his daughter Christie and son-in-law, W. L. Crews, buy the former home of riverboat Captain R.T. Aycokk near his own on South Main Street. In 1917, he helped his son, Thomas Masterson Smith, purchase the Dance family home (Aldridge-Smith House) next door. Surrounded by his children, Smith lived to see the oil discoveries of the early 1920s bring fortune to his family once more but he never again saw a return of the steamboats or the revitalization of the river port (Womack, 1990).

By the turn of the century, East Columbia was no longer the hub of mercantile and transportation business that it had once been. Richard Spillane wrote a newspaper article in 1898 on the history of the Texas Republic and recognized the area's significance, but by that time both East and West Columbia were sleepy little towns, already old-fashioned and slipping into oblivion. Spillane described East Columbia:

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The ferry by which you cross the river from the eastern shore is of the style of long ago. You clamber down the steep banks of the stream and board a barge-like flatboat . . . operated as were the ferries of a century ago.

Of the buildings in the town many are so old and weather beaten as to be in striking contrast to what you would expect in a "new" country. Some of these buildings are nearly half a century old. I went into one of them - the business place of Underwood & Diggs and Mr. Underwood informed me his firm had occupied the structure since 1849 [when Ammon Underwood established a mercantile business there organized in 1835 as Milburn & Underwood].

The main street of the town [Front Street] fronts on the river. . . In the clay by the side of the river are the skeletons of what once were famous river craft. There lie the bones of the *Hiawatha*, the *Bucking Billy*, the *Emily P.*, the *White Water* and the *Christie*. Below is an abandoned dredge, some decaying old barges and the well known steamer *Alice Blair*. This may be said to be the graveyard of Columbia's commerce (Spillane, 1898).

FROM AGRICULTURE TO OIL

Misfortune repeatedly befell Brazoria County at the turn of the century. The great flood of 1899 was followed by the Galveston hurricane of 1900, the country's worst natural disaster. In Brazoria County one-third to one-half of all the churches were destroyed in the 1900 storm, including the Methodist church on South Main Street in East Columbia. The boll weevil made its appearance about this time and repeatedly destroyed the county's cotton crops. Brazoria County had recovered from such natural disasters before, but the lingering effects of the Civil War and the increased needs of a rapidly industrializing nation forced its citizens to examine other avenues of economic support.

The social and economic reversals of the Civil War and Reconstruction left a vacuum in Brazoria County's economy in the latter half of the 19th century that was difficult to fill. Although many of the planter families attempted to return to their pre-war lives, of the 46 antebellum plantations only one remained in the hands of its original owners by 1926. Plantation homes fell into disrepair and unused sugar houses became lost in the undergrowth (Strobel, 1926:X). Cotton and sugar, mainstays of the plantation system, were no longer reliable sources of income after the war. The reduced labor force that resulted from the emancipation of the slaves was insufficient to sustain sugar production, although prison farms

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in the early 1900s engaged in some sugar manufacturing. Cotton crops had been periodically successful after the war but around the turn of the century the boll weevil exacted a toll that made cotton, once the staple of the county's economy, an unreliable and unprofitable venture. Travis Logan Smith Jr. recalled the words of a farmer who brought a strange-looking bug into his father's East Columbia store. When the elder Smith asked what it was, the man replied,

Mr. Smith, that is a boll weevil...he will sink your boats, ruin your mercantile business and gins, and you will lose everything, even your land, and there is not a thing you can do to prevent it (Smith, 1958:72).

The plantation system that once held sway and defined a way of life along the Brazos River gave way to a more democratic, if less grand, work and life style.

By the turn of the century Brazos County was, perforce, much less reliant on labor-intensive agriculture than before the Civil War. The conversion of plantations to cattle ranches provided one solution to the labor shortage. As early as 1867, Judge Mordello Munson wrote that "the stock of Brazoria County is equal in value to its agricultural products" (Creighton, 1976:270). By the turn of the century more than 68,000 head of cattle roamed the prairies of Brazoria County with profits of up to 50% apiece in the U.S. market. The development of a meat packing industry in the county also increased the appeal of cattle ranching (Creighton, 1976:270). At the same time, immigrants who came to Brazoria County during the 1880s and 1890s established the practice of crop diversification, and by the early part of the 20th century Brazoria County was becoming known for its truck farming and nurseries. Most farmers grew a variety of garden crops; their orchards produced figs, oranges, grapefruit, and pears.

The success of these farms was insured to a great extent by the growing network of railroads throughout the county and especially the introduction of refrigerated railroad cars capable of carrying their harvests to northern markets. Access to railroad transportation became essential for cattlemen and farmers alike and even enabled new enterprises to flourish. One such endeavor was undertaken by farmer F.W. Meyer who came from Germany to Bonney in Brazoria County in 1893. Meyer acquired a large tract of prairie far from the traditional sources of transportation via the rivers or the Gulf, but accessible to the International and Great Northern Railroad (I&GN). He built up a hay business bailing the prairie grass for shipment all over the South. Eventually Meyer did more business on the

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I&GN than all the towns from Columbia to Houston combined, and earned the title of "Hay King" (Creighton, 1976:277). Meyer's successful use of the railroads reinforced the movement away from the Brazos River as a source of transportation.

New towns gained in prominence toward the end of the 19th century and in the first quarter of the 20th century as older ones, especially those whose livelihoods depended upon the Brazos River, declined. The railroads enabled inland regions of Brazoria County to prosper and drew residents away from the unpredictable and flood-prone river. Even though East Columbia had its own railroad tap, it didn't extend beyond the Brazos River and the town rapidly faded in importance with the end of the riverboat trade. Other communities with larger or more diverse economic bases were able to offer the railroads greater incentives to build through their towns. Some towns were created as a result of railroad enterprises. In 1878, the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway began building east from Galveston and reached Mustang Station which became a regular stop. The town of Alvin evolved around the station about 1881. Pearland was another town created by a Santa Fe railroad switching station, around 1882.

The town of Angleton was probably the most dramatic product of the railroads working to promote a real estate scheme on the coast. About 1890 the coastal town of Velasco, at the mouth of the Brazos River, moved inland about four miles in an attempt to avoid Gulf storms. The move initiated the biggest land boom ever to occur in Brazoria County. Northern promoters acquired property on the new site and successfully pitched the town lots to midwesterners. At first, prospective buyers traveled by train to Houston, then west to East Columbia on the Tap where they boarded river boats and floated down the Brazos River to Velasco. It was a cumbersome way to get to the coast from Houston. Faustino Kiber and Lewis R. Bryan immediately purchased 3000 acres of prairie between Velasco and the Columbia Tap track and donated the right-of-way to the Velasco Terminal Railroad. Passengers could then change trains at "the Junction" and go directly to Velasco, eliminating East Columbia altogether. Kiber and Bryan also laid out a townsite and donated half interest to the railroad company in exchange for building a depot in what was to become Angleton. The new town of Angleton was named for George Angle, general manager of the Velasco Terminal Railroad Company. East Columbia, cut off from the railroad connection to Velasco, continued to run boats downriver until the last of Travis Smith's steamships, the Hiawatha, sank in 1895. It was then forced to relinquish its claim as Brazoria County's transportation headquarters. East Columbia drifted into the 20th century with a number of mercantile stores and a healthy residential population but little of its once-bustling commercial trade.

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The 1896 battle between Brazoria and Angleton for the county seat clearly illustrated the importance of the railroad to future growth and the decline of the Brazos River as an economic force in Brazoria County. The bitterly contested battle between the river town and the prairie town was fought over a five year period from 1891 until the election of 1896. When the dust settled, Angleton was declared the winner. The acquisition of the county seat resulted in an influx of new residents, county officials, courthouse employees, attorneys, hotels and restaurants to Angleton, and by the first decade of the 20th century, it was clear that the focus of the county no longer centered on the river. The plantations that had fanned out along the length of the Brazos River and their "Old 300" families were merely a vestige of its historic past. Brazoria County looked to a new future with new products, new modes of transportation and a new center of social and political life.

Between 1900 and 1920, Brazoria County began feeling the effects of industrial prosperity when sulfur and oil were discovered. These discoveries unleashed Brazoria County from its agriculturally-based economy to one based on mineral and chemical resources. When the first gusher came in January of 1902 at the old Patton Place near West Columbia, it caused excitement throughout the county. Oil wells and derricks were immediately put into operation. About that time Captain F.A. Lucas detected the presence of sulfur in his oil wells at Bryan Mound, and in 1912 he helped organized the Freeport Sulfur Company. The town of Freeport was formally dedicated in November of that year (Creighton, 1976:324). It was the oil discoveries that captured the imaginations of Brazoria Countians, though. By 1917, drilling was going on throughout Brazoria County, and on April 9, 1917, just three after the United States entered World War I, the Bryan No. 3 rig at Damon blew a gusher 1,500 feet into the air. When the Tyndall-Hogg No. 2 shot 2,585 feet on January 15, 1918, it was the official opening of the great West Columbia oil field.

The impact of the oil boom on West Columbia was tremendous, and the tiny village of three stores, a one-room schoolhouse, one small church, and a handful of homes grew into a wide open boomtown. Both oil and sulfur were required by the military, by then engaged in World War I, and the need spurred production efforts. Thousands of oil workers flocked to West Columbia. Almost overnight, frame stores and houses, some no more than shacks, sprang up along the "Avenue" between East and West Columbia to house them. Mercantile stores, boarding houses, restaurants, and other businesses were hurriedly established to serve their needs. According to its owner Jack Renfro, the Palace Cafe kept its doors open continuously, day and night, for three years. One of the most notable features of the boomtown was its mud streets, and Brazos Avenue, the road Josiah Bell carved between East and West Columbia, was the worst. Passengers traveling from Angleton who arrived in East Columbia aboard the Columbia Tap had to take a mule-drawn wagon through the "Mud

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Hole" to West Columbia. The train fare was only 36 cents, but the wagon ride cost \$1.50 and the passengers had to disembark and walk over the worst part of the mud since the mule team couldn't pull their weight through it.

CONCLUSION

The boom continued throughout the war and into the early years of the 1920s before it began to wane. By that time, Brazoria County's economic future was firmly tied to the exploitation of its mineral resources. Accordingly, the communities that came into their ascendance during that time such as West Columbia, Angleton, and Freeport, took precedence over earlier settlements, reflecting the changes made by shifting technological and economic conditions. The oil strike "created" the West Columbia of the 20th century, but resulted in the demise of East Columbia, whose businesses closed their doors one by one. Those merchants who had lingered in East Columbia after the river boat trade slackened, seized upon the opportunity to profit by moving their stores to the boomtown of West Columbia only two miles away. Some merchants who relocated their businesses, like S.S. Weems and T.M. Smith, continued to maintain their homes in East Columbia. Many of East Columbia's former residents cite other factors that contributed to the town's decline, including the perennial flooding of the Brazos River and its encroachment on the commercial district, the muddy roads of the bottom land, and unreliable rail transportation. But all agreed that it was the oil strike that drew the last breath from the once-thriving commercial hub on the Brazos River, leaving only a handful of houses and empty shops (interviews with Marcus Weems, Zuleika Weems Mitchell, Catherine Foster, and Emma Womack, 1990).

Today almost nothing remains of East Columbia's riverfront. The changing course of the Brazos River has removed almost all evidence of the busy commercial district that served the needs of Texas's original colonists, citizens of the Republic, antebellum planters, and steamboat entrepreneurs. All of Front Street, south of the old landing, has fallen into the river and only a historical marker identifies the location of Bell's original landing. Above the landing, a few wood-frame buildings, covered in extensive undergrowth, represent the commercial stock of old East Columbia. Indeed, throughout Brazoria County there is little in the built environment to suggest that the Brazos River was once the lifeline of Austin's First Colony or that the Republic's first capital emerged from its banks. Only the Varner-Hogg Plantation, its manor house and outbuildings, remain of the nearly fifty substantial plantations that fronted on the river and dominated the economic, political, and social life of antebellum Brazoria County.

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Nevertheless, East Columbia boasts a wealth of historic architecture dating from the days of the Republic through those of the steamboat era that has survived despite the vagaries of time, weather, and the Brazos River. It is truly remarkable that the town, which has suffered from repeated flooding and storms, the encroachment of the Brazos River to the complete destruction of its commercial district, and near abandonment by its citizenry, retains such an intact grouping of historic dwellings. The South Main Street town homes of prosperous landowners who subsequently established mercantile and riverboat operations on the Brazos River, are among the oldest extant dwellings in Texas. East Columbia's historic dwellings are all that remain as evidence of its halcyon years as a river port and an era now gone forever from the banks of the Brazos River.

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BRAZORIA CO.

General Land Office, Feb. 1918

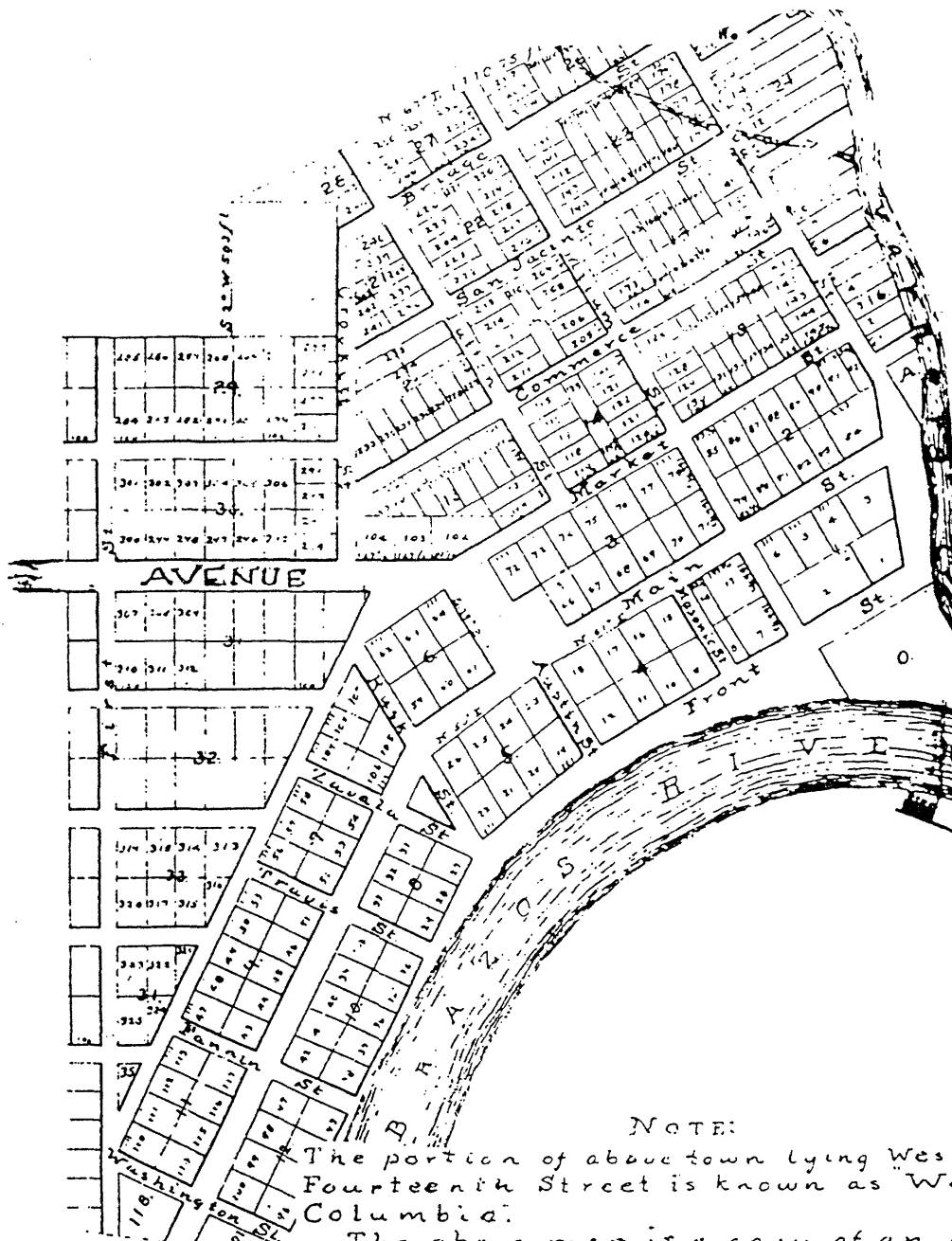


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NOTE:

The portion of above town lying West of Fourteenth Street is known as West Columbia.

The above map is a copy of an old map, in the possession of one of the early settlers of Columbia, and we have every reason to believe that it is correct.

Plat Book 4,
Pages 14-15
Brazoria County Clerk's
Office, Angleton, Texas.

The Brazoria County Abstract Co.

Per F. H. Stearns
MANAGER

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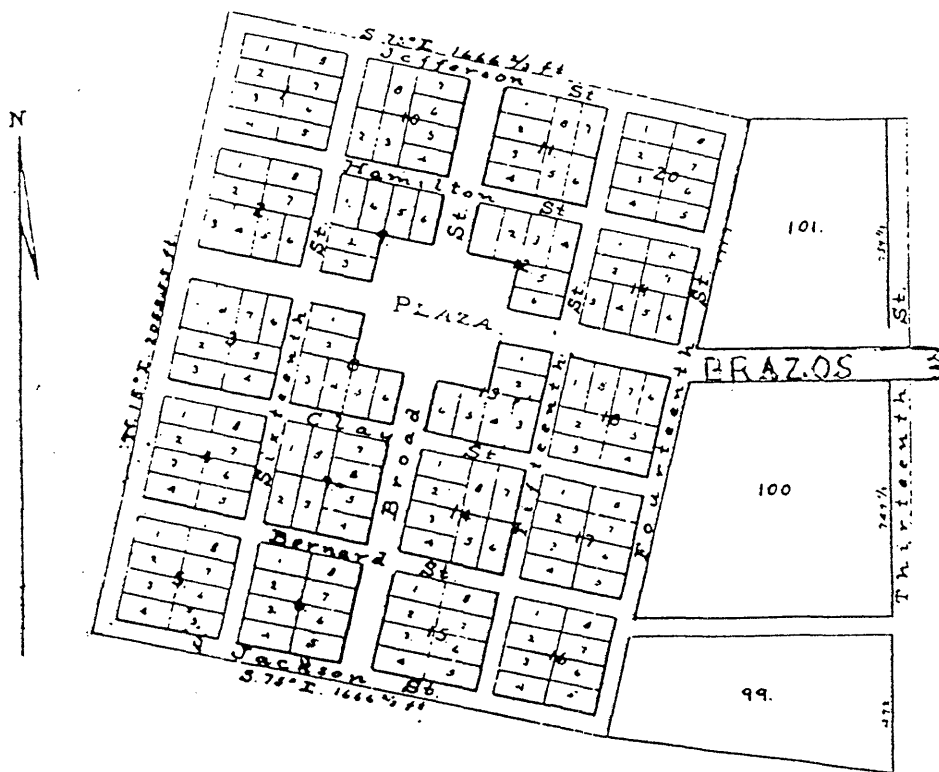
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MAP OF COLUMBIA

COMPILED BY
THE BRAZORIA COUNTY ABSTRACT COMPANY.

Scale - 400 ft to one inch.
Reduced to 600 ft to one inch.



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ASSOCIATED PROPERTY TYPES**INTRODUCTION**

Although the historic context addresses all of Brazoria County, comprehensive survey efforts were limited to the community of East Columbia. A total of 30 historic resources were identified and documented in this community. While this figure may appear to be small, research and survey data suggest that the kinds of historic resources found in East Columbia are representative of broad trends in the region. This conclusion was based upon a careful analysis of extant structures in East Columbia, as well as historic photographs of buildings that are no longer standing. Structures casually observed but in travelling through the region were also considered. Therefore, the identification and classification of distinct Property Types associated with the historic context can be extrapolated from these sources. Additional fieldwork should be conducted elsewhere in the county, and the kinds of properties subsequently recorded could result in the refinement and clarification of Property Types discussed in this submission, as well as the creation of others.

East Columbia is distinctive for its rare, generally intact collection of early (1850-1870) Anglo domestic architecture in a setting that is as pristine as any in the state. Other kinds of historic properties exist and are best categorized by their use, construction and physical qualities. The Property Types established for the historic context include DOMESTIC BUILDINGS, COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS, INSTITUTIONAL BUILDINGS and ENGINEERING STRUCTURES. Subtypes are based principally on plan type and, to a lesser extent, on stylistic detailing in an effort to further refine these property types.

DESCRIPTION: DOMESTIC BUILDINGS

East Columbia's historic domestic buildings can be characterized as vernacular structures whose period of construction is suggested by form, plan, materials and subtle stylistic applications. Major trends and building forms common in much of Coastal Texas are represented. The most common house type of East Columbia is the symmetrical frame house with modest Greek Revival detailing. Dwellings in this grouping feature center passage plans and include 2-story versions of the form known as I houses. Other house types include relatively unadorned Victorian-era dwellings of the late 19th century and "Popular" dwellings of the early 20th century such as bungalows.

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East Columbia dwellings share many physical qualities, including frame construction, wood sheathing and roofing, and pier-and-beam foundations systems incorporating brick piers. A small number of houses, mostly on Main Street, feature brick chimneys at one or both ends of the building. Many historic dwellings in East Columbia have been renovated or remodeled, although the majority retain their integrity of design, workmanship and materials. Renovations that occurred prior to 1940 may be considered historic changes.

The center-passage vernacular form dominates the built environment of East Columbia. Incorporating features common in the gulf coastal region of Texas, these dwellings typically have integral front porches. A smaller number have attached shed-roof porches. Raised foundations are commonly seen on 1-story versions of the form. Gable-end windows and, more rarely, dormer windows increase the utility of upper or attic floors. Rear ells for separate domestic functions such as cooking are often appended to center-passage houses. Specific physical features such as overall proportions, detailing and window types reflect the era of construction, with stouter dimensions indicating mid-19th century construction dates and attenuated proportions suggesting a late-19th century date. Most local examples of the center passage house display fine craftsmanship expressed in simple forms rather than elaborate decorative work. The overriding symmetry of form and classical proportions are suggestive of the enduring legacy of the Greek Revival style in the region.

The I-house version of the center-passage vernacular form is one of the most common subtypes of domestic buildings in East Columbia. Built locally from the middle to the late 19th century, these distinctive 2-story dwellings feature symmetrical or near-symmetrical primary facades. They generally feature axial plans with one or two rooms on either side of central hallways. This floor plan repeats on the second floor. Single-story rear wings or ells housing a kitchen were often part of initial construction. The I-house form is typically capped by a side-gabled roof constructed of wood. Intrinsic elements of the design, galleries or porches usually take the form of 2-story front porches or 1-story rear porches that serve as passages to the kitchen. They typically are detailed with square wood posts and balusters. Porch reconstruction is not uncommon. Window openings are symmetrically arranged, and early examples of the I-house form display wider and shorter rectangular openings with double-hung wood sash of 6/6 light configurations. Later versions feature taller windows of narrower proportions with 2/2 or single-light sashes. Several of East Columbia's earliest examples exhibit detailing drawn from the design idiom of the Greek Revival style, including simple capped columns, pedimented door surrounds and classical moldings. Classical proportions and symmetry of these examples are conspicuously influenced by the high style architectural trends of the period.

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Victorian-era architectural design falls between the classicism of the region's mid-19th century architecture and the ahistoricism that developed in the early 20th century. Although its impact in East Columbia was minimal, regional examples of Victorian-era architecture incorporated asymmetrical massing and elaborate crafted detail to create picturesque compositions. A local example of a this trend is the Aycock-Crews House with detailing evocative of the Queen Anne style. Distinguished by intricate turned- and jigsaw-wood ornamentation applied to a complex form, the dwelling features generous dimensions and a steeply pitched hipped roof that emphasize its verticality. The impact of Victorian-era design in the area was otherwise limited to decorative elements drawn from Gothic Revival, Eastlake, Italianate and Queen Anne styles and applied to simple vernacular forms of architecture.

The handful of houses in East Columbia built after 1900 are either vernacular or popular compositions. The former category includes dwellings that generally defy standard categorization, although they are marked by varying plans, frame construction and minimal stylistic ornament. Modest details drawn from the Bungalow stylistic idiom distinguish local houses grouped within the popular architectural genre. Distinguished by compact forms emphasizing horizontality, local bungalows are 1-story frame constructions typically capped by gable roofs. Tapered columns, eave brackets and other typical bungalow features are absent on most local examples. Most of these houses are clad in wood siding. Windows feature 1/1 double-hung wood sash. Typical modifications include window replacement or installation of synthetic siding. Other 20th-century popular architectural forms, such as those influenced by the Prairie School, are found only in Brazoria County's larger communities.

A number of historic outbuildings also survive in East Columbia. Most often, these ancillary sheds or small barns are of frame construction with board-and-batten siding and wood-shingle roofs. Numerous examples along Main Street continue in their historic functions. A notable exception is the Sweeny-Waddy Log Cabin, currently an ancillary building on the site of the Ammon Underwood House. Originally the homestead of an African American family, the single-pen log building was relocated to its present site for interpretive purposes. Despite the significance of the dwelling, its integrity has been eroded by the loss of setting, association, feeling and historic materials.

DESCRIPTION: COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

East Columbia's extant historic commercial buildings are typical of the type constructed in the community at its peak in the late 1800s. Of frame construction with

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board-and-batten or weatherboard siding, these commercial buildings feature narrow rectangular plans capped by front-facing gabled roofs. The facades feature double-door entries flanked by double-hung wood sash, rather than the more typical large display windows. More characteristic of residential properties, similar windows are found on side elevations. Historic images of East Columbia show several 1- and 2-story frame commercial buildings that varied little from this design. The old post office (razed) was an exception for its brick construction, although it conformed to the vernacular configuration typical of the town.

While East Columbia's surviving commercial buildings attest to the region's early commercial development, they are not representative of the more pervasive commercial forms that developed after 1900 in other parts of the county. Subsequent generations of commercial buildings were more substantial, utilizing masonry construction and decorative elements to achieve their stylistic pretensions.

DESCRIPTION: INSTITUTIONAL BUILDINGS

Closely akin by tradition to the dominant vernacular domestic and commercial forms are the community's institutional buildings. Three examples remain, including two churches and a school. These buildings show a sampling of the forms used for meeting halls in the East Columbia area, but not necessarily the town proper. Speculation is that one or two of the buildings have been moved into the community. Common features of buildings in this typological category include rectangular or square plans, frame construction, wood-sash windows and gable or hipped roofs. Distinguishing features include the use of weatherboard siding in the 19th century, followed by drop (117/121) siding in the early 1900s.

DESCRIPTION: ENGINEERING STRUCTURES

A vital link in the transportation of local commodities, the Brazos River nevertheless hampered travel from east to west across the county. Permanent bridges across the river were not constructed until late in the 19th century, however, due to fears that they would impede shipping and commerce. A metal Pratt through-truss bridge completed in 1913 was the first to cross the Brazos River at East Columbia. Floods destroyed many of the subsequent bridges and deterioration resulted in the dismantling of others. Surviving examples of this property type in the region include metal truss bridges constructed by the

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railroad network in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Brazoria Bridge (NR, 1991) at Brazoria. While no bridge currently crosses the Brazos River at East Columbia, supporting masonry piers mark the location of the area's engineering accomplishments.

Although no other engineering structures were identified in East Columbia, a few of the domestic properties feature cisterns, tanks or windmills. These were inventoried as elements of historic properties.

SIGNIFICANCE

Properties associated with Brazoria County's development during the 19th and early 20th centuries may possess historical and architectural significance that suggest eligibility for listing in the National Register under Criteria A, B, C or D. They can be listed either individually or as part of a historic district. Properties with historical significance are representative of important events or trends of the past (Criterion A) or are associated with an individual(s) that made noteworthy contributions to the county's historical development (Criterion B). A resource considered significant for its architectural merits (Criterion C) should be a good example of a style or type, display unusual or outstanding craftsmanship or construction techniques, or be an important work of an architect or master builder. Cohesive groups of similar resources within a well-defined area may also be eligible for inclusion under Criterion C as a historic district. A historic property that is considered under Criterion D is one that may shed much light on the past. Typically, this is applied to archeological property and would represent the site of a residence or a commercial enterprise.

A building or structure considered eligible under Criterion A should be illustrative of the region's plantation-steamboat economy of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Several resources grouped together in dense concentrations may be nominated as a historic district. In such a case, the historic district is most likely to be nominated under the following Areas of Significance: Agriculture, Commerce, or Community Planning and Development. As the primary shipping and trade center for the county during the early and middle 19th century, East Columbia hosted a bustling economy due to its location on the Brazos River. With the affluence brought about by increased trade and commerce, residents erected grand houses and merchants built new stores that bespoke the community's prosperity.

Historical significance may also involve associations with individuals important in the past (Criterion B). Typically, a building that was the home, office or place of business of a person who achieved significance while occupying or working in that resource will qualify

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under this criteria. To be nominated under Criterion B, a historic resource must be associated with an individual who played a pivotal role in the county's development during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Such a property will likely be nominated under at least one of the following Areas of Significance: Commerce or Politics/Government. An example might be the residence of the founder of a steamship line whose service to East Columbia facilitated the economic development of the community.

A building may also be nominated to the National Register under Criterion C as a noteworthy example of an architectural style, type or form. If nominated under this criterion, a property would be evaluated in the Area of Significance for Architecture. A dwelling with particularly fine Greek Revival detailing or that displayed exceptional craftsmanship that distinguished it from others examples of the style in the region would be eligible under this criterion.

Concentrations of contemporaneous and similarly detailed historic resources within a well-defined area may also be nominated under Criterion C as a historic district. Buildings that are not necessarily significant on an individual basis may be included in such a grouping for their collective evocation of the historic past. When nominated as part of a historic district, groups of buildings can provide a clearer understanding of the full range of local history. Analyzing architectural styles within a district can reveal developmental patterns and demonstrate local variances from prevailing tastes in architecture. If a historic district is nominated under Criterion C (as most are), it will be evaluated in the Area of Significance for Architecture.

A property nominated under Criterion D will likely consist of the archeological remains of a historic building. Since the historic context spans a period including some of the first efforts of permanent Anglo-American settlement in Texas, many resources related to the historical development of the area have deteriorated. Though dwellings may no longer be standing, the archeological artifacts that survive can reveal much about this important part of the local history. While past studies have focused on plantation owners and the more affluent members of 19th century society, other groups including enslaved African American merit indepth investigation. The sole surviving slave quarters in the county, for example, speaks to the Brazoria County's substantial antebellum slave population. Little is known of the everyday lives of the region's enslaved population or of the material culture associated with them. Archival and archeological investigations in the future will, no doubt, focus on sites that are likely to yield vital information about this aspect of the county's historical development. Such sites may be eligible under Criterion D in the Areas of Significance for Agriculture, Commerce and Ethnic Heritage (Black History).

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REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

The accompanying historic context has been developed to allow for the nomination of individual properties and historic districts that are related to Brazoria County's plantation-steamboat economy of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Only a single historic district is being nominated at this time; however, the development of this historic context and associated property types provides an avenue for the nomination of additional sites in the future. To be included, an individual building or a historic district must be evaluated within the framework provided by the historic context. Statements of Significance should focus on the property's relationship to the historic patterns elucidated by the historic context.

Ordinarily, a historic building being considered for listing in the National Register on an individual basis must be at least 50 years old and retain sufficient integrity to be recognizable to its period of significance. Because of the parameters of the historic context effectively end with the discovery of oil in West Columbia at the close of World War I, individual buildings nominated in conjunction with this submission must pre-date 1918. In addition, resources must meet at least one of the four National Register Criteria for Evaluation.

Properties that have been moved are rarely listed in the National Register if they have been relocated from their original site. In East Columbia, however, the changing course of the Brazos River has necessitated relocation of several resources within their lots. As these efforts ensured the survival of the buildings and, for the most part, took place over 50 years ago, such properties may be evaluated under Criterion Consideration B. The Ammon Underwood House (NR, 1976), for example, is listed National Register despite two previous relocations within its lot. As part of the original National Register nomination submitted in 1976, a map (see Figure 3) was prepared to show how the river has changed its course and to justify the building's relocation.

Properties significant for their historical associations (Criteria A and B) do not have to be virtually unaltered or particularly noteworthy examples of an architectural style, type or form. A strong argument must establish the significance of the related event, trend or person within the defined historic context. Merely stating, for example, that a residence was the home of a prominent entrepreneur or plantation owner is not enough to justify listing of associated properties. Significance of the relevant trends or accomplishments must be articulated and compared to similar properties. Properties significant under Criterion B must be closely associated with the significance of the individual. Although resources nominated

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in this way may not be particularly noteworthy examples of an architectural style, they must retain sufficient integrity to be recognizable to the Period of Significance.

Many individual historic buildings or structures are candidates for listing in the National Register under Criterion C as good examples of an architectural style, type or method of construction. Significance must still be evaluated within the framework provided by the historic context and a high degree of historic integrity must be retained. A building's exterior detailing should appear almost exactly as it did when it was originally constructed or when it was sympathetically altered at least 50 years ago. While architectural fabric inevitably deteriorates over time, restoration, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts should be sensitive to historic character. Shapes, forms and materials are compatible with original designs should guide rehabilitation. Installation of historically inappropriate elements can detract from a resource's integrity, rendering it ineligible for listing. Common alterations that can compromise a structure's integrity include replacement of wood-sash windows with modern metal-sash units, installation of wrought-iron porch supports or concrete porch floors, or the application of vinyl, asbestos or aluminum siding over original wood siding. Removal of architectural detailing can also compromise a resource's historic integrity.

To be eligible for listing in the National Register, a historic district must be a well-defined area containing a cohesive concentration of pre-1918 buildings that retain a high degree of historic integrity. At least 50 percent of *all* resources in the district should be classified as Contributing elements. Contributing properties will possess sufficient original fabric to be recognizable to the district's period of significance. The resource does not necessarily have to be unaltered but should retain its most important historic architectural details and materials. A Contributing property may not necessarily relate to the prevailing architectural character of the district if it is eligible for the National Register on an individual basis.

Buildings classified as Contributing typically should still have their original exterior sheathing, trim and materials. The application of asbestos, vinyl, aluminum or any other synthetic siding over the original exterior walls is often regarded as damaging to a resource's historic character and maintenance, thereby disqualifying it for listing. Replacement of wooden porch floors and supports also can compromise historic integrity, as porches usually display the most significant architectural detailing on a residential building. Installation of a concrete porch is one of the most common alterations. Superficial alterations such as the application of nonhistoric colors or paint schemes or the installation of metal roofs are less severe compromises that do not, by themselves, warrant classification as Noncontributing elements. As with individually nominated buildings, the need for high levels of architectural

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integrity is mitigated in historic districts nominated for historical associations rather than architectural significance.

Associated historic outbuildings may be classified as Contributing elements of a historic district if they display architectural detailing that is in keeping with the overall character of the district. They must also be substantial enough in size and scale to be perceived as separate buildings, independent of the main house. Such outbuildings may include a carriage house or barn.

Noncontributing properties are those that detract from a district's historic character. Less than 50 percent of all buildings in a historic district may be so classified. Included in this category are historic properties and their ancillary components that have lost their integrity through severe exterior alterations or have been relocated to a new site within the last 50 years. Buildings constructed since 1941 comprise the other major grouping within the Noncontributing category, as most display share few physical characteristics in common with the prevailing historic character of the area.

Finally, a historic district must have boundaries that are logically determined and can be defended on aesthetic and/or historical grounds. Gerrymandering to bypass Noncontributing structures and to maintain a balance of historic properties of at least 50 percent is not permissible. Instead, boundaries must be regular and, whenever possible, follow historic limits imposed by legal boundaries or natural features.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

See Continuation Sheet G-1.

☒ See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet H-1.

☒ See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- ☒ State historic preservation office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency

- ☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other

Specify repository: Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas

I. Form Prepared By (with assistance from Bruce Jensen, Architectural Historian, THC)

name/title	<u>Daniel Hardy, David Moore, Teresa Myers, Edward A. Galloway</u>		
organization	<u>Hardy-Heck-Moore</u>	date	<u>July 1990; August, 1991</u>
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SURVEY AND EVALUATION METHODS

PREVIOUS SURVEY RESULTS

The initial step of the project involved examination of National Register and State Historical Marker files for East Columbia on file at the Texas Historical Commission in Austin. Pertinent information was integrated into subsequent phases of the project.

FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

The Project Director began field investigations by undertaking a systematic street-by-street examination of the project area (East Columbia), plotting the location of each identified historic resource on a field map. The survey area was roughly bounded by State Highway 35, Duval Street, Front Street and Austin Street, with an extension to include the properties on Main Street. Historic and architecturally significant properties including buildings, structures and objects were inventoried.

As street addresses were unavailable, the project director assigned unique site numbers to all identified historic properties. Recorded information for each property included the Property Type, factual or estimated date of construction, and tentative Preservation Priority Rating. The Property Type category identified original or intended uses. The Project Director estimated construction dates based upon existing architectural fabric and detailing. Preliminary Preservation Priority Ratings reflected an initial assessment of architectural significance and integrity, as well as potential for association with locally significant events, individuals or trends. Properties in the HIGH category were the most obviously significant, while those assigned MEDIUM or LOW ratings were considered to be of lesser importance based upon the limited amount of documentation gathered during the overview phase.

Every building in the survey area was photographed using 35mm black-and-white film, with additional color slide documentation for every HIGH priority site. Roll and frame numbers for each photograph were cross referenced with site numbers and incorporated into the survey database.

Since preparation of a National Register historic district nomination was the ultimate goal of the project, the Project Director established preliminary district boundaries based upon concentrations of historic houses retaining integrity of design, materials and

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workmanship. Final boundaries for the historic district were determined following completion of the research phase of the project.

RESEARCH EFFORTS

Following completion of the overview phase, vital historical information on selected properties was gathered. A plat map of East Columbia facilitated the determination of legal descriptions, current owners and mailing addresses for all properties within the proposed historic district, as well as other HIGH priority properties within the survey area. The Research Assistant then culled the archives of the Brazoria County Historical Museum in Angleton for information on early citizens and associated buildings in East Columbia. Deed records were also examined at the County Clerk's Office at the Brazoria County Courthouse to obtain historical information about owners and builders of the resources.

With additional research at repositories in Austin such as the Texas State Library and Archives and the Barker Texas History Center, the Project Historian compiled information on the general history of Brazoria County with an emphasis on the development of East Columbia. The Project Historian also conducted numerous oral history interviews during this phase to supplement the written records used in developing the historic context and nomination.

NATIONAL REGISTER NOMINATION PREPARATION

The historic context was written to note general trend and settlement patterns in Brazoria County during the 19th and early 20th centuries and to consider the many extant properties -- individual buildings, districts and towns -- near the banks of the Brazos River that were closely related to the transportation and trade network that developed along the waterway. Most of the information used in the historic context was garnered from well-known, published sources.

Since field investigations were confined to extant properties in East Columbia, the focus of the nomination was on the community's role in the transportation network and resultant settlement patterns along the Brazos River early in the county's history. The scope of services was limited to the preparation of a district nomination for East Columbia. District, although other properties (both extant and archeological) in the region are no doubt eligible for listing in the National Register. District boundaries were based upon the physical character and known historical associations of the buildings thus nominated.

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