

The Square From Every Corner

By Margaret Logue Sudderth

In telling the history of Waco, the Square is an appropriate place to start—the public Square—the place where people gathered to trade, barter, celebrate; a place for face-to-face interaction. The Square offered a common experience to the entire community. In the process it served as the political, social, and market center for the city. It was a public place, a dynamic place which reflected the soul of the city.

The history of the Waco Square began when surveyor George B. Erath laid out the town. As was common in those days, Texas cities were being laid out and established by land agents and investors seeking to make a profit.

Galveston land speculators Jonas Butler and N.A. Ware hired the land agent Jacob DeCordova to sell a tract of land they had acquired west of the Brazos. DeCordova employed surveyor George B. Erath to lay out the town.

Erath, who had been in the area in 1837, felt it would be a good site for a town because of its central location.

On March 1, 1849 Erath laid off only the main street and lots which could be immediately sold. The proceeds went to the owners of the land not one of whom had ever seen it. Erath sold lots on both sides of Bridge Street. The lots that would be on the Square brought \$10 each, none higher.

A county is born

On Jan. 22 1850 McLennan County. was created. Jacob DeCordova realized the importance of county seat designation. That June he conveyed to the county certain property, including the public square in exchange for declaring Waco the county seat. The wording of the deed would become a source of controversy throughout the Square's history.

In September, 1850, county commissioners chose a lot on the Square's south side for the first courthouse. In April of 1851, the commissioners accepted John Blair's bid of \$500.

An 1882 newspaper article described the first courthouse as a structure 20 feet by 40 feet with a hole cut for a window in the south end, and two places partitioned off at the back for the offices of the county and district clerks, the latter of whom kept the record of the court in an old candle box.

What did the Square look like during the 1850's? Recollections from early settlers describe the center of the Square as an undeveloped plot of land with trees growing in its middle. In 1857 the city council voted in favor of a draft for cutting weeds and bushes growing over the Public Square. Richard Coke's law office stood with the courthouse on the south side, a hotel, livery stable, blacksmith shop and some residences were on the north side and the east side had a grocery house. Waco was not yet a business center, but it provided food and lodging for travelers.

The ferry crossing owned by S.P. Ross was the only one along the Middle Brazos, so wagons and surreys came here to cross the river.

In February of 1856, the county commissioners formed a committee to develop a plan for a new courthouse to be built of brick or stone in the Square's center

A typical courthouse design of this period, the plan called for a two-story structure, with four rooms of the first floor, and a courtroom and two jury room on the second floor. It was completed in 1858.

By the end of the 1850s the Square was established as a center of county government. Several lawyers owned property around the Square, with its beginnings a mercantile center.

In 1855, the first brick building was built on the south side; In 1857 W.W. Downs built the Downs building, the tallest in Waco, on the corner of Austin and the Square. The Masons and Odd Fellows began meeting on the Square.

In the 1860s the Square began to function as a gathering place to hear speeches, barter, sell, trade and have public celebrations. It was there that Sam Houston gave an anti-secession speech to a crowd in front of the courthouse.

Slowly the number of mercantile establishments grew. Merchants continued moving off Main Street onto the Square. Lawyers had worked on the Square for years, they were joined during this time by druggists, doctors, and more lawyers. Waco's first bank, Flint and Chamberlain's opened on the Square's west side.

Cattle, cotton, goods and services

Waco was on the Chisholm Trail, meaning that cattle herding became big business after the Civil War. A. Poage, an old-time cattle driver, remembered in the late 1860s seeing thousands of cattle driven in big herds down Washington Street and across the river where the Washington Avenue Bridge is now. He remembered that Waco enjoyed the trade of those passing herds, for provisions had to be bought to feed the men.

As Waco was the biggest town for some ways north of the route, many herds were outfitted here for wagons, harnesses, saddles and six shooters. Every cowboy had to have a six-shooter. Many a cowboy left a part of his hard earnings in the old Ranch saloon on the East side of the Square.

These drives of cattle to Kansas brought back the Waco its first ready money after the Civil War. After the railroad came in 1872, Waco became a trading point for West Texas ranchers. Transportation played a major role in the development of Waco and the Square in the 1870s. The Suspension Bridge built in 1870 was the only bridge across the Brazos.

The Tap Railroad, completed in 1872, accelerated the expansion of commerce in Waco, linking Waco's growing cotton market to larger markets in Texas and the world.

No place in the city characterized this growth and the development of Waco as a cotton market like the Square. By the 1870s cotton had become a cash crop, and farmers from McLennan and surrounding counties were growing cotton.

Cotton came to the Square from Erath, Hill, Hamilton, Bosque, Comanche and Coryell Counties. The authors of Waco's 1876 City Directory described the relationship between cotton farmers and city merchants:

“Nearly the whole of this cotton is bought in Waco by the merchants or special cotton buyers, and hence a large amount of money passes into the hands of the producers, and much of it in turn, is expended for goods and groceries.”

Many of Waco's leading merchants: Carter, Killough, Majors and Smith, set up shop on the Square, as did Waco's first three banks. The Square in the 1870s and 1880s was host to a wide variety of businesses and people:

In January of 1874 the local press commented that “the Square's odd jumble of wood, cotton, men, women, boys, auctioneers, cattle, horses, dogs, and lawyers is seen in no other place in or out of Waco.”

On the south side W. P. Martin and Bros. sold furniture, rugs, and coffins, and served as undertakers. J. L. Cornish advertised prescriptions, paints, tin, wood, willow, queensware, tobacco, and cigars and offered the highest market price for whatever the farmer brought to the Square, including cotton, hides, wool, wheat, oats, flour, butter, eggs, and country produce — generally on a cash basis. Sanger Bros. And I. W. Lewine and Bros., sold dry goods and clothing.

In addition to these businesses, there were saloons, harness and saddle shops, candy makers, a meat market, watchmakers, jewelers, doctors, druggists, bakers, confectioners, and dressmakers.

In 1876, over 20 lawyers maintained offices on the Square. Bawdy houses on Second Street were granted licenses in the 1870s and 1880s. All these businesses were used by cattlemen, rural farmers, and city dwellers alike

Besides conducting business, the public Square hosted local celebrations. Many parades and speeches took place on the Square. A parade in 1870 celebrated the opening of the Suspension Bridge. Nineteen years later a parade celebrated the bridge as a free bridge. Each parade began on the Square.

In America's Centennial year, 1876 on the Fourth of July, the ceremonial cannon was fired in conjunction with a parade that jammed 14,000 people into the Square and nearby streets.

In May 1876, when Texas Gov. Richard Coke was elected to the U. S. Senate, newspaper accounts described the Square as “thronged with people,” and with brass bands, gun shots, fireworks.

Who owns the Square?

The Square had been the center of county government since 1850. In 1874 a controversy arose over the location of the third county courthouse. It was eventually constructed on the east side of the Square, but the Square almost lost the courthouse altogether.

By 1874, the second courthouse was about 16 years old, had a leaky roof and poor ventilation, so in April of 1874 the commissioners ordered the sale of the courthouse and began to consider where to build the new courthouse.

A local legend has it that one night, Waco businessman Tolephus Johnson had all the oak trees on the courthouse lawn cut down one night, rendering the site less desirable, swinging the vote in favor of property adjacent to the Square which he supposedly owned.

Another reason comes from a quote in William Curry's *A History of Early Waco with Allusions to Six Shooter Junction*, which says that the city practically ran the county off the Square.

In a 1874 newspaper account a Waco citizen asserted that, "Recently the city has assumed that the Square belongs to the city and not to the county, although the county had been in possession of it for years using it for courthouse purposes, yet the city authorities have, with more or less violence, seized upon it and forbid its longer use for this purpose."

The county sold the courthouse in May 1874 to a Mr. Johnson for \$575. A day after the sale, 27 citizens (including Johnson, all West Waco businessmen and many on the Square) purchased the southwest corner of South Second and Franklin and offered it to the county as a free donation on which to build the courthouse.

On May 27, 1874, the five county commissioners rejected the offer and voted to rebuild in the Square. For the time being the courthouse would remain on the Square.

On Aug. 8 1874, (about 3 months later) the city council resolved to take charge of the Square. It also ordered Johnson to immediately close the fence on the Square

In November of 1874, a single line in the *Waco Daily Examiner* reported: "There were many quizzical looking faces on the Square yesterday, because the trees and fences that should be, were not.

Shortly after this, on Dec. 1, a commissioner reversed his position and voted to reconsider the decision to place the courthouse in the Square.

In August 1875 three commissioners voted to build the courthouse in East Waco. twice. Then they agreed that if the citizens of Waco would donate either of two West Waco locations, or the vacant lot near the county jail, the county would reconsider.

That month, the county reversed its choice of East Waco and purchased, for \$3,500, the northeast corner of Second and Franklin near the jail.

A grand jury considered the right of the county to build a courthouse in the Square. Could the county use the city Square for county purposes?

The grand jury supported the county in its use of the Square. So, the county's third courthouse, completed in 1877, stood on the Square's east side, and the Square remained the county's governmental center until the turn of the century.

Attempt to regulate the market

In November of 1874, the City Council declared the public Square to be a free mart for the sale of country produce. However, in 1877 the city built a market house at Fourth and Franklin hoping for revenue for the city. In 1878, farmers who used the facility petitioned the council to prohibit trade on the Square and streets before 9 a.m. The council took no action.

The market house was not a success. In 1882 a newspaper complained that "the City Market is not being used and not making money for the city. More than half the stalls are empty; fruit, fish and vegetable vendors sell on the streets and do not pay for a stall.

The City Council passed an ordinance requiring all farmers to use the market house during designated hours. Two months later, over 260 citizens called for the repeal, and the market house was no more.

This was the first, but certainly not the last time the city tried to regulate the use of the Square.

By the end of the 1870s, the Square was unchallenged as the political, social, and business center of Waco, but this would not last because Waco was growing, and so was the business district.

As Waco's economy and population continued to grow, so did the city's business district, and certain businesses began to move off the Square and up Austin Avenue.

For instance, in 1880, over 20 law offices were on the Square. By 1894 only two lawyers maintained offices on the Square. During this time, Waco National Bank and Waco State Bank moved to Austin Avenue joining the city's 4 other banks.

Between 1880—1894 the number of doctors on the Square dropped from eight to four. And shops such as dressmakers and milliners selling fancy goods followed the movement up Austin. By 1894 none were left on the Square.

Numerous dry goods and grocery houses continued to operate on the Square, particularly those that catered to the farmer. The Square's north side was dominated by firms who bought goods from farmers: cotton, grains, hides, and wool.

As businesses moved off the Square, others took their place. The number of restaurants on the Square doubled. Saloons became more numerous too.

Newspaperman William C. Brann expressed his view of the subtle differences in clientele between Austin and the Square by the 1890s.

“The Square was host to Mexicans, Indians, Negroes and Whites. Entertainment on the Square included dancing and gambling and occasional knifing or shooting.

“Austin Avenue exuded a more urbane atmosphere, and the people who frequented Austin were a strange mix of city and country. Their boots and cowboy hats were seldom dusty, their clothes were pressed and of better quality.”

Racial, ethnic mix changes

The racial and ethnic makeup of merchants and shop owners on the Square had been changing since 1870s. In the 1860s the majority of merchants were white Southerners. By the 1870s immigrants, many of them Jewish, appeared on the Square.

Sam Sanger from Bavaria and Issac and Jacob Levine from Poland all ran dry goods stores on the Square.

By 1886, seven of the 15 businesses on the south side had Jewish proprietors. These men, all immigrants from Eastern Europe, ran dry goods and clothing stores, saloons, sold jewelry and watches, fruits and confections.

Black citizens began operating businesses on the Square to reflect the growing black population. In 1860 blacks made up almost 40 percent of the county's population, and in 1880, black Wacoans made up 35 percent of the city's population.

There were five black-run businesses in 1886, and 10 by 1898.

These businesses included a meat market, a doctor's office, restaurants and barber shops, and a saloon. Most of these businesses stood on South Second (east side) or the south side.

By the 1880s the south side of the Square was becoming informal meeting place for blacks.

King Cotton and so much more

One aspect of the city that did not change was the continued role Waco had as a growing cotton market.

By this time Waco's economy was tremendously dependent upon the cotton industry. The Square reflected the importance of cotton with its cotton buyers, commission merchants, and cotton storage facilities.

The writer of an 1882 newspaper article described the Square as filled nearly all day with bales of cotton, and estimated over 300 bales came through the Square that day.

Although cotton was the most prominent, it wasn't the only item for sale on the Square.

Farmers sold corn, wood, hides, and produce; horse traders sold horses and mules. Peddlers sold their wares and hay farmers sold hay on the Square and surrounding streets.

If it sounds crowded, it was. Near the end of the 1890, certain interest groups, namely cotton buyers and Square merchants, attempted to regulate the Square or eliminate groups they perceived as a threat to their business in any way.

Various attempts were made to regulate or eliminate the auctioneer, horse traders, hay dealers and peddlers. Most attempts were unsuccessful, except in the case of the peddlers.

Auctioneers sold everything from hotel furniture to cotton bales. In 1893, several merchants petitioned the city council to prohibit auctioneers from selling any articles sold in stores on the Square. The council took no action.

Peddlers and horse traders

Peddlers had a long history of selling their wares on the Square, from notions to medicinal items. A Mr. Stewart sold a tooth wash and also offered to pull teeth.

In 1896, some Waco businessmen sought to prohibit peddlers from selling on the Square and certain streets. They succeeded with the passage of the 1896 Peddler Ordinance, which prevented the use of Square and certain streets to sell or barter personal property.

Mondays became the popular day on the Square to sell and trade horses and mules, especially on the Square's north side.

In 1895, the city council began investigating the possibility of regulating the Square's horse traders.

A city council member proposed an ordinance prohibiting Horse Trading on the Square. Investigation by the Street Committee labeled the horse traders an obstruction nuisance because they hitched their horses to the chains and posts surrounding the City Hall, making it useless for others. (As far as I know, no action was taken.)

An overcrowded Square

In August of 1898, several cotton buyers, after hearing cotton farmers complain about the inconvenience of marketing cotton on Waco's crowded Square, urge the city council to investigate the hay hucksters using the Square.

The city council did not remove the hay dealers from the Square, but used the city policemen to line up all the wagons on the Square to make as much room as possible.

By 1910, 200,000 acres in McLennan County was devoted to the cultivation of cotton. Half of Waco's 22 cotton offices were on the Square almost exclusively on the north and northwest sides.

Cotton buyers often dressed in vests and no coats, sometimes in derby hats, stood on the Square to strike deals with the cotton farmers. These cotton buyers would nut samples from the bales of grade the cotton as to quality.

Waco resident Roger Conger recalled the upstairs cotton offices, where on humid October afternoons a lone fan might stir the air, filled with the smell of cotton pulled out of a bale, a not unpleasant, but unforgettable odor.

H. F. (Bro.) Barnes came to Waco with his father and recalled what a tremendous sight the Square was for a country boy. Barnes, who sold corn, cotton, pears, peaches, hogs, and sweet potatoes, remembered the camaraderie among produce sellers on the Square.

People gathered, enjoyed fellowship, traded, and just had a good time.

Division of country and city

Generally speaking, city people had begun to move to the suburbs, (Provident Heights) which offered, by 1898, daily market and newspaper delivery. Generally Waco's city dwellers shopped on Austin Avenue, where Sanger Bros., Goldsteins and later Cox's were key department stores.

For but the country customer, however, the Square was the place to shop and socialize.

Maurene Conkle, who would come to town with her family from Bruceville-Eddy remembered, "It was a big treat to come to Waco and to the Square, even just to visit and not shop."

In contrast, Harry Provence, who grow up on Speight Street near Baylor University, recalled that the Square "really was not a part of our life, and there wasn't anything down there we needed or wanted."

Despite these distinctions, parades continued to appear on the Square, circling the City Hall and proceeding up Austin Avenue. in the early 20th century. The Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and Sells-Floto circuses appeared there. Music could be heard from small bands of black musicians who played their fiddles, washboards, and horns.

Preachers preached on the Square. Many were Baylor students. Some came from the Salvation Army, the local headquarters of which was on the Square. A Brother Barnes, who preached on the Square at times, recalled 60-70 people gathering to hear sermons in front of the Salvation Army.

Many children who came to the Square were fascinated by a pool in the southwest corner of the City Hall grounds filled with many kinds of colored fish.

Q. Z. Valentine remembered wanting to see the fish fountain when he came to town with his dad. The Kate Friend fountain provided water for the work horses, the mules and the horses that came into town from the country, the townspeople's horses and the town dogs; and there were myriad on every street.

“Hamburger Pete”

Of many restaurants, one of the most memorable was Pete's Hamburgers.

Pete Klaras and his brother, natives of Greece, built one of the many successful businesses operated by immigrants on the Square. Known on the Square as Hamburger Pete, Klaras began with a hamburger stand which expanded and grew into what became a landmark.

Both city and country people frequented Pete's, which sold 10-cent hamburgers and 15-cent fish sandwiches.

Maureen Conkle said that before heading back to Bruceville after a trip to town for buy supplies, her family always ate at Pete's Hamburgers.

The smells of the Square, not surprisingly, were memorable: fried onions from Pete's; leather from the harness shops; chili powder from Willie's Cafe; pickle brine, coffee in bins in the grocery stores; and the not-so -pleasant odor of animals.

For the many cultures that thrived on the Square, it also reflected the segregation of of its age, such as when it was for public celebrations,

It also was the place for mob violence.

In 1916, a mob seized black teen Jesse Washington from the courthouse following a sensational murder trial, brutally beat him on the way to the Square and burned his body there.

In 1922, a mob took Jesse Thomas' body from the undertaker and burned it on the Square's east side.

A new look for the Square

Modernity called in the Twenties. Waco population grew 32 percent from 1920 -1930, so the city council decided to build a new city hall. It didn't want the proposed art-deco design envisioned to be surrounded by rundown buildings, so an effort was made to force shops around the Square to spruce up their facades.

The Chamber of Commerce civic improvement committee felt the Square should present a new and tidy appearance, and worked to convince store owners to meet their obligations and spruce up the facades, or face the city attorney.

The city's efforts to modernize the Square climaxed when the city passed an ordinance barring farmers from using the Square as a public market.

The city cited traffic problems and unsanitary conditions (the Young Men's Business League had tried this in 1921, but only lasted 6 months).

In July of 1930, a group of farmers filed suit seeking an injunction to prohibit the city from enforcing the ordinance. Farmers cited the deed which they claimed expressly conveyed the land to be used as a public Square. They also cited the 1874 ordinance declaring the Square a free mart for country produce. The city won. In November of 1930, police began removing vehicles from the Square and sending them to the new market on First Street, near the Suspension Bridge.

In 1932, the ordinance was repealed at the request of businessmen on the Square, but the Square never regained its stature as a farmer's market.

Decline of the Square

Without the farmers, the Square lost its primary function as a marketplace. However, the farmers' departure marked the culmination of a steady decline in the Square's importance as an agricultural center. With the advent of tractors, the mule and horse trade gradually disappeared from the Square.

Automobiles and suburban shopping centers hastened the decline of the Square as a business center, and undermined the downtown in general.

Suburban shopping centers like Brookview Hills offered plenty of parking and served the suburban population. Downtowns couldn't compete with the automobile.

On May 11, 1953 a tornado touched down in downtown Waco and destroyed a substantial amount of property around the Square, killing 114 people.

In subsequent years, many of the buildings on the Square were left damaged because people were unable or unwilling to invest in property on the Square when people were moving westward.

Sixteen years after the tornado, in 1969, the Brazos Project, a federal Urban Renewal initiative, funded the demolition of 199 buildings, including all buildings around the Square.

As the Salvation Army's Bro. Barnes observed, "I hated to see it go, but progress — you must give way to it." Waco City Hall is all that's left of the Square.

In 2001 Keep Waco Beautiful completed Heritage Square, a commemorative gathering place with fountains and greenery, to fill the void that for a generation was nothing more than a huge parking lot where the Square once stood. The Hilton Hotel stands on the path of Waco's first Main Street. By 1969, the Square of old, with its crowds and cotton, was already no more than a memory.

And so, you see what's taken place. You pass that place down there now, unless you know, you would never know.