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# THE HISTORY OF HOUSTON COUNTY

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## CHAPTER I

### *Old Spanish Missions in Houston County*

The founding of the first two Spanish Missions in Texas, on the soil of what afterwards became Houston County, can be traced directly to the explorations of Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle, afterwards known simply as La Salle. It was through him, and the expedition headed by him, that the King of France asserted claim to all the territory drained by the Mississippi River, including the territory embraced within the bounds of Texas. The French claim originated in the fact that on April 9, 1682, La Salle reached the mouth of the Mississippi River, on a journey down that stream from Canada, and set up a column, bearing the arms of France, with an inscription: "Louis the Great, King of France and of Navarre, reigns. April 9, 1682." and, with much ceremony shouted to his retinue and to the wandering Indians: "Long live the King" and proclaimed, that in the name of the King, he took possession of all the land drained by the Mississippi River. After this he returned to France and obtained permission to settle a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi, in order that he might hold all of his discoveries for France. Later, on July 24, 1684, La Salle set sail for America with four ships on which he carried about 300 soldiers, priests, mechanics and women and was well supplied with all the equipment necessary to found a city and protect it with arms. However, on this return trip, in search of the mouth of the Mississippi River, he missed his reckoning and finally landed in Matagorda Bay, on the Texas Coast of the Gulf of Mexico, which he mistook for the mouth of the Mississippi River. A few miles from the mouth of the Lavaca River, he erected a settlement, which he named Fort St. Louis. A short time afterwards he left this little fort and started, with seventeen men, to find the Mississippi River. It was on this expedition that he was murdered, by members of his own company,

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at a place which was claimed to be near the present site of the Navasota, and which some writers assert was near the Neches River, in what is now Cherokee County. The writer inclines to the view that Navasota had a better claim to being near the site of this miserable tragedy. This gives us a brief view of the French claim to the territory now known as Texas.

The Spanish claim is based upon the fact that Columbus discovered America and, in addition thereto, the conquest of Mexico by Cortes, and by the explorations of Cabeza de Vaca and Coronado, and other explorers. As a result of these conflicting claims between France and Spain the Viceroy of Mexico, then a part of the Spanish possessions in America, decided to establish a Mission in Texas, and in 1690, at the request of the Indians, did establish a Mission, San Francisco de los Tejas, in the land of the Tejas, at a place known to be within the bounds of Houston County. The Mission received its name from the tribe of Indians then inhabiting that part of Texas, who were known as the Tejas Indians. The word Tejas, which means "friendly," gave its name to all the territory now known as Texas.

The Spanish became alarmed at La Salle's Colony on Matagorda Bay, which caused them to make their first settlement in Texas. This settlement was made in East Texas, near what is now the little town of Weches, in March 1690. Captain Alonzo de Leon marched from Coahuila with 110 soldiers. He was commissioned to destroy La Salle's fort, and to build a Mission in East Texas, with a presidio near the French Boundary. De Leon was accompanied by several priests among them being Father Damiean Manzanet. When this expedition reached Fort St. Louis, Father Manzanet destroyed the wooden buildings setting them afire, being only wooden buildings made from the wreckage of a vessel that had been wrecked on the coast. De Leon came with his soldiers into East Texas with mule trains loaded with wine and wax, powder and shot, and the arrival at the site where the Mission was established is thus recorded by Father Morfi in a *History of Texas*, which Professor Carlos F. Castañeda rescued from oblivion and, of Father Morfi's account of the founding of the first Mission, he gives the following account:

"The feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated May 25th, with the greatest solemnity. After the Mass was concluded, the ceremony of raising our standard was held, a formality which Provosti does not record as having been performed by La Salle, in the course of two years, as he declares was done at the Mis-

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issippi when La Salle temporarily stopped at its mouth before."

These two missions enjoyed but a brief existence, because after being maintained for a period of a little over three years the Spanish no longer feared the French and decided to abandon both missions. The location of these missions, after an elapse of more than 150 years, became lost, as there were no longer markers by which they could be located with certainty.

After the abandonment of the Missions, *San Francisco de los Tejas* and *Santissimo Nombre De Maria*, by the Spanish priests and soldiery, the Mission buildings in the course of time decayed and no trace of them was left. The Indian village in which the Missions were located also disappeared and no outward trace of it could be found. Sometime prior to the year 1934, an old cannon barrel was plowed up in the field of Mr. Moore, a short distance north of Weches. At the time nothing was thought of this relic being in any way connected with the old mission until it was called to the attention of Dr. Albert Woldert of Tyler. He recognized it as the barrel of an old cannon and had the matter investigated by sending information to Spain describing the old cannon barrel. From that source he became satisfied that it was a part of an old Spanish cannon that had been buried by the soldiers on leaving the old Mission. To Dr. Albert Woldert, of Tyler, is due the chief credit for having located the site of these old Spanish Missions. He spent years examining all the available records that bore upon this question and then came in person, more than once, and examined the ground in order to locate the site, according to the old Spanish authorities, and gave an able and scholarly review of his researches in his effort to locate the sister of these Missions.

"Of the co-operation and assistance of Miss Adina de Zavala what all shall I say. The people of Texas know what she did to save the Alamo from desecration. I was aware of that fact, and it was no surprise to me when she brought along her lady friends to go with us to see for herself where my locations of the two above-named missions were situated. The rain that came upon us one day and overtook us did not daunt her courageous spirit. She only laughed, and so did we. It is to her splendid courage and perseverance that you see standing out there the beautiful granite marker for Mission San Francisco, and if you will drive over to the northeast, four and two-tenth miles you will see another granite marker of a similar kind, which was obtained and set up for the location of *Mission Santissimo Nombre de Maria*, on the banks of the river *Arcangel San*

*Miguel*. My sincere thanks are extended to her for her sincere good work in this matter of securing these markers."

After the locations of the two old missions had been made as told in the foregoing pages, the next step was to have them properly marked and designated. Fortunately, Miss Adina de Zavala was President of the Texas Historical & Landmarks Association, and realizing the importance of having some permanent markers made for the missions, at her insistence the Texas Historical & Landmarks Association provided two large granite markers, one for each of the missions, and had suitable bronze markers placed on them. These markers were received in Crockett in the fall of 1934, and on September 21st, 1934, the event was celebrated at the High School Auditorium in Crockett, where Governor Pat M. Neff was the principal speaker and a program of patriotic music was given to a large gathering of people, including the students of the Crockett High School. Following this celebration, Richard W. Knight, Secretary of the Crockett Chamber of Commerce, and the author of this history visited the locations and there conceived the idea that a park should be established at that site that would include the markers, and agreed upon a plan of raising the funds necessary to purchase this park. A price for the land that would constitute this park was obtained from Mrs. T. S. Cook, the owner, and the plan proposed was that one acre of land should be paid for by each subscriber for as much as \$10.00, and in this way the full amount was readily subscribed and paid in. A deed was obtained for the property and it finally was conveyed to the Texas Forestry Commission for park purposes. It happened that a CCC Camp was located near the site of *Mission San Francisco de los Tejas*, and the management of this camp undertook to grade and gravel roads through the park and build a replica of the first old mission. After this had been done, plans were made for a great celebration to be held on July 4, 1935, at which the replica and park should be appropriately dedicated. This celebration was held on July 4, 1935, and was one of the most memorable and outstanding events that ever occurred in Houston County. The following is taken from *The Houston County Times* of July 11th, 1935:—

"A crowd estimated at 5,000, including many distinguished Texans and persons from all parts of the State, attended the Fourth of July Pre-Centennial Celebration held Thursday, at which time the beautiful 117-acre *San Francisco de los Tejas* Mission Park, twenty miles east of Crockett, near the community of Weches, was formally dedicated with impressive rites. The

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dedication services were held at the replica of the *San Francisco Mission*, the first established in Texas, which was founded in 1690 on approximately the same spot where the recently constructed replica was erected. The site of Texas' second mission, *Santissimo Nombre de Maria*, is located only four miles to the northeast of the first mission site.

"The services were opened with high mass ceremonies under direction of Bishop Christopher E. Byrne, Catholic prelate of the Galveston diocese, in which Catholics from Galveston, Houston and Dallas participated. A vested Catholic choir of 50 voices also took part in the high mass, which carried out the dedication of the mission replica with the same ceremonies as were used when the mission was first founded by the Spaniards 245 years ago.

"Catholic rites, which were carried out in the native tongue, were impressive in every detail. Franciscan monks from Waco, who originally came from the same monastery in Spain which furnished many of the early Catholic priests to Texas in the days when the country was a wilderness inhabited only by Indians, participated in the ceremonies . . .

"R. W. Knight, secretary of the Crockett Chamber of Commerce presided at the opening of the services before introducing Representative Albert K. Daniel, who spoke briefly on the history of Texas and Houston County, stating that the mission park celebration will undoubtedly start a movement to revive interest in Texas history and create a greater interest in the Texas Centennial next year. Representative Daniel presented Judge A. A. Aldrich of Crockett, a grandson of Collin Aldrich, the first county judge of Houston County. Judge Aldrich acted as master of ceremonies for the program which followed the Catholic dedication services . . .

"Senator Gordon M. Burns of Huntsville delivered a patriotic address, recalling that 159 years ago America was engaged in a fight to establish independence . . .

"Miss Adina de Zavalla, whose grandfather was the first vice-president of the Republic of Texas, made a short address, recalling that De Soto and Coronado were among those who headed expeditions into Houston County. Miss Zavalla also introduced Father Edward J. Foik of St. Edwards University, Austin, a member of the Texas Centennial Historical Board, who dealt at length with the early history of Houston County.

"Miss Frances Donecker of San Antonio, a director of the Texas Historical and Landmarks Association, was also presented by Miss de Zavalla. Miss Donecker spoke briefly on the part Miss

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De Zavalla has played in the location and marking of Texas' historical spots.

"Senator Gordon Burns presented State Senator Clay Cotton of Palestine, who complimented the citizens of Houston County upon their wonderful co-operation in establishing the mission park and stated that he always felt closely related to the people of Houston County. Dr. A. W. Birdwell, president of Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College at Nacogdoches, brought greetings from another pioneer East Texas county.

"Dr. Albert Woldert, Tyler historian, told how he and J. M. Lovell of Augusta, and G. A. Moore, Houston County farmer, had combined their efforts in establishing the approximate location of the mission sites. R. W. Knight, secretary of the Crockett Chamber of Commerce, sponsor of the July Fourth celebration, was also among the speakers."

Miss Frances Donecker, after returning home from the celebration, sent the author the following poem:—

### "THE REPLICA IN THE PINE GROVE

(Mission San Francisco De Los Tejas—1690)

*A little log chapel alone in the woods,  
Standing there in a forest of pines,  
So modestly peeking through columns of trees  
As if watching for yesterday's signs.*

*Are you looking for brown-robed barefoot men  
Who walked here so long ago.  
Or for Red-men to whom these forests were home,  
With secrets we never shall know.*

*They are gone, both Red-men and white,  
But their spirits still hallow this park,  
And the trees join today in a hymn full of praise  
For the light kindled here by Faith's spark.*

*And the little log chapel alone in the woods  
Stands now, as it stood long before,  
For the ideals and dreams of far-seeing men  
Who hold sacred their native land's lore.*

—FRANCES DONECKER.