

Preserving the Past for the Future

by Mac Woodward, Curator of Collections

High atop one of the most prominent hills in Huntsville stands Austin Hall, or Austin College Building as some of the old-timers prefer. This grand structure is located on the site that once might have been the capitol of Texas. In March 1850, Huntsville vied for the prize, but Austin retained its status as the permanent capital and Huntsville finished fourth.

In 1849, the Presbyterian Church selected Huntsville as the site for a new college between the Brazos and Trinity Rivers. A charter was drafted, which the legislature approved, and Governor Wood signed into law the "Act to Incorporate Austin College" on November 22, 1849, named in honor of Stephen F. Austin. The Act named Henderson Yoakum, Reverend Daniel Baker, Sam Houston, Robert Smither, J. Carroll Smith, John Branch, John Hume, Hugh Wilson, James W. Miller, Joseph McCormack, Anson Jones, Abner S. Lipscomb, and J. W. Hampton as the Board of Trustees. On April 5, 1850, the Board of Trustees assembled in Huntsville for the first organizational meeting. The Board passed a motion to appoint a permanent building committee to report the next day. The next day the Board convened to hear the committee reports and decided on an appropriate site. "Capitol Hill," just south of the downtown square, was selected as the location.

On June 24, 1851, the cornerstone for the Austin College Building was laid and construction commenced. Classes began in the Austin College Building in the fall of 1852 although work was not completed until the next year.

The Austin College Building is an excellent example of Greek revival architecture of the antebellum era. The dimensions are eighty-by-fifty feet with the exterior of brick purchased from the newly established Texas State Penitentiary. The original building enclosed eight rooms which measured twenty-two and one-half feet square and two assembly rooms of thirty-five by forty feet. Four large Tuscan columns supported the front balcony. Above the room a grand cupola reached a height of seventy feet. Austin College Building, visible for miles, towered above downtown Huntsville and the surrounding area.

Austin College Building has been the site of many important contributions to early education in Texas. In 1855, the first law school in Texas began, conferring four degrees the following year. The Austin College Building also became one of the six hundred weather reporting stations across the county in response to the Smithsonian Institute's meteorological project which became the National Weather Service.

Austin College struggled through the Civil War and the yellow fever epidemic of 1867, but, suffered financial and enrollment problems during Reconstruction and the early 1870s. In

1876 the College closed and relocated to Sherman, Texas. The Methodist Church purchased the Austin College Building and for a brief period housed Mitchell College.

In 1877, the citizens of Huntsville purchased the Austin College Building and the surrounding land. Two years later they celebrated their effort when the Texas Legislature established Sam Houston Normal Institute as a teacher training institution, now the third oldest college in Texas.

For the last 132 years Austin Hall has been a dominant feature and site on the Sam Houston State University campus. Austin Hall has been a part of every phase of college and university life, serving as classrooms, barracks during World War I, a social center before the construction of a student center, a meeting place, a venue for special events, Alumni Office, and faculty reception center. Austin Hall has endured hurricanes, fires, sometimes neglect, renovations and repairs, and the passing of time. Today Austin Hall is the oldest college building in Texas, and one of the oldest, if not the oldest, college and university building in continuous use west of the Mississippi River. In the bricks that form the exterior of this historic structure are etched the names of thousands of students that have attended Sam Houston Normal Institute, Sam Houston State Teachers College, Sam Houston State College, and Sam Houston State University.

In 2008, Sam Houston State University began planning for a major restoration of Austin Hall. Design development documents have been prepared by Ford, Power & Carson Architects & Planners, Inc. of San Antonio and accepted by the Texas State University System Board of Regents. At this time the architects are working with the Texas Historical Commission on permitting. Also the Texas State University System has approved \$2.2 million in funds for this project. Work should commence this year as preparations are already in progress.

Austin Hall is designated as a Recorded Texas Landmark and a State Archeological Site. The process to list Austin Hall on the National Register of Historic Places has passed its first hurdle. In collaborative effort, the Sam Houston Memorial Museum and SHSU Physical Plant, Space Planning submitted a request for consideration to the Texas Historical Commission. The Texas Historical Commission reviewed the request and approved submitting the formal nomination.

When the restoration is completed, this jewel of the historic quadrangle will continue to serve Sam Houston State University's students, faculty, staff, administration and the community for years to come. Once again we will enjoy, as have Sam Houston and thousands of others that passed through its doors, the warmth and splendor of Austin Hall.

