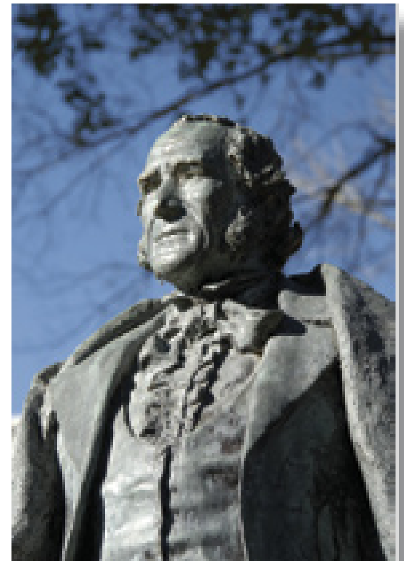
Becoming Normal

The north balcony of Austin Hall provided an idyllic vantage for re-treating in thought. By the time former Austin College student Harry F. Estill returned in 1879 as a member of the first class at the new Sam Houston Normal Institute, the structure on which he stood had en-joyed a commanding view atop College Hill for almost three decades. From that eminence the entire village of Huntsville lay in plain sight, spreading from the business district into the contours of a rolling val-ley interrupted by clearings where houses and small farms began fill-ing a grid of roads cut out of dirt and clay. At its center, the wagon and buggy traffic creaking along the Walker County Square, the State Penitentiary, and the railroad depot suggested ties to a world outside the narrow confines of the otherwise secluded community. Beyond the village the view offered little but an immense stand of pines that capped a succession of hills along this hither edge of the great East Texas forest—that and an expansive sky, bro-ken by occasional curls of smoke from unseen chimneys and cooking fires.

The picturesque scene belied the turmoil that folks at this place had known since before Estill's father, Charles, had brought his family to Texas from Virginia in 1869. What was left of life's social and economic fabric following the South's defeat in the Civil War found the policies of Re-construction pulling at the remaining seams. Until recently, bad luck and limited options had conspired with the larger events to arrest the momentum of this once-promising lo-cation.



Statue of General Sam Houston

Certainly, young Estill had grown up hearing about the smallpox outbreak of 1865, followed two years later by a yellow fever epidemic that literally decimated the town of about two thousand souls. For a community already dispirited by the loss of sons and fathers who never returned from the late war, the sud-den outbreak and panic must have seemed like one of Job's calami-ties. A victim who was the very picture of health one day could slip suddenly into a state of debility the next, graduating from fever and pain in the extremities and loins to heaving clots of blood and then to jaundice and death all in the space of three days. Those with means

and acquaintances fled into the countryside. People who remained in town ceased even to walk the streets, save for those attending the sick and dying. From early August until mid-October, businesses shuttered their doors, schools and churches grew silent, and the delivery of mail was all but suspended. Ever afterward, men, women, and children who had lived through the epidemic would dread the onset of a fever, fearing a return of the "black vomit" and the yellow pallor of death, while outsiders grew wary of a place that appeared so unhealthy.

Nevertheless, visitors who did have business in the town could arrive by train beginning in 1872. No doubt Estill welcomed the whistle of the steam locomotive with cautious optimism, yet it was unlikely that he spent much time listening to adults speculate about the expectations of prosperity it might bring. Even before the economic Panic of 1873 buried the material fortunes of countless Americans, money in East Texas was already scarcer than opportunity. After Huntsville in 1871 was unable to raise the bonus the International and Great Northern Railroad had tried to extort from the town, a citizens' committee scrambled for funds that at least secured a tap route seven miles from the main line. The great iron road that connected Galveston and Houston to the Red River and points north would not count Huntsville among its stops.

The Normal School. *The term "normal school" came into English usage from the French école normale by way of the Latin schola norma. Translated from that ancient language, schola, simply enough, means "school." Norma was first used to describe a carpenter's square for measuring right angles, which then came to signify any rule or standard. In France during the 1790s the first école normale trained teachers as a model institution whose place in the educational system was after high school, but before the university level. By the mid-nineteenth century a normal school movement had emerged in the United States whose chief aim was to prepare prospective teachers for elementary classrooms in the public schools.*

It was the checkered fortunes of the five-acre campus on which Austin Hall stood, however, that probably concerned Estill the most. Surely, his student experience at a place that had recently changed hands for the third time since he had first enrolled there left him anxious to put his education behind him. Even with the might and resources of the state behind the newly organized Sam Houston Normal Institute, the school's success must have seemed short of certain, given the history of education at this location and the normal's first shaky steps.

It all began with such promise. In 1849 Austin College received a state charter to open an institution of higher learning in Huntsville. The Presbyterian boys school, its supporters hoped, would pay cultural dividends to an aspirant town that had already distinguished itself as the home of the state's leading citizen, Sam Houston. Two years later, with the superstructure of Austin Hall building beginning to cut the skyline, an assembly of trustees, visiting dignitaries, and local people gathered on a torrid June day to lay the cornerstone. Big Sam himself helped pack the block's hollow center with such items as Republic-era currency, the Holy Bible, contemporary newspapers, and other mementos. Admirers of the old general also noted his tender gesture of stepping forward with an umbrella to shade college president Samuel McKinney as he labored under the oppressive sun to deliver the keynote address.

The Austin College Building today

When completed, the two-story hall of rose-colored brick presented a majestic contrast to the dog-run cabins, false-fronted shops, and Greek revival homes and buildings that typically characterized the architectural fare of this frontier state. Emerging between its Tuscan columns, which held up porticos front and back, a white cupola rose—appropriately—like an ivory tower. On nights when the building was illuminated, travelers approaching Huntsville at a clip of nine-miles-an-hour could catch glimpses of the building a full two hours before reaching the county square. "Like a Lone Star, emerging from the clouds of an unsettled firmament," the Presbyterians swelled, "Austin College is slung forth in the openings of a hopeful sky."

Briefly the four-year institute enjoyed halcyon days of expanding enrollment, a stable faculty, and social traditions that students who later attended Sam Houston Normal would find familiar. On Sundays the town's leading citizens received students in their homes, sponsoring teas and receptions aimed at cultivating the boys' manners and social sensibilities. More leisurely, students engaged in such activities as croquet atop the hill, hay rides to the shade-lined creeks near Possum Walk, and even simple strolls into town, where they could escape the watchful eyes of their appointed guardians.

All too soon, however, the business of teaching submitted to the politics of survival as the catastrophic events of the 1860s unfolded. The Civil War consumed the confident vision of the school's trustees as well as the lives of many of its most promising students. Whatever optimism that attended the return of peace quickly slumped beneath a burden of debt, declining enrollment, and the ill fortunes visited upon Huntsville during the years of Reconstruction. Rumors of an impending move persisted until the Presbyterian Synod officially announced early in 1876 that the North Texas town of Sherman had made a successful bid to become the new home of Austin College.

It was during those latter days, 1872 to be exact, that Charles P. Estill joined the faculty of Austin College and enrolled his twelve-year-old son Harry in the institution's preparatory school. Like most Southern men returning from the war, few opportunities lay before the former Confederate captain and graduate of Virginia's

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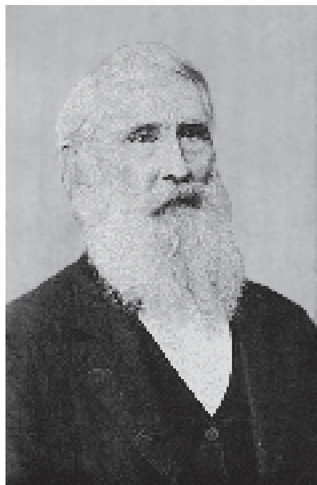
Washington College. A teaching position at the troubled college, while uncertain at best, nevertheless allowed Estill to put his considerable talents to use. Unwilling to follow Austin College to Sherman, he at least agreed to help coordinate the move and complete the semester for a student body by then composed entirely of boys from Huntsville and the surrounding countryside.

Charles Estill did not record his thoughts regarding the prospects for his own son as they packed the last boxes and checked off the final tasks marking the end of the Austin College era. Perhaps both of them knew already that the Methodists had planned to revive a school for boys atop the recently abandoned hill. In any event, it was a venture of which the elder Estill wanted no part, and he quickly left to take a professorship at the state's new Agricultural and Mechanical College located on the prairie below Bryan.

At Huntsville, then, Mitchell College opened in 1877 as an associate institution of the town's Andrew Female Academy, established by the same congregation in 1853. Despite assurances that the new institution "is on the upward grade and is entitled to the confidence and patronage of all whom it may concern," trustees found few backers willing to put their money where their faith was. The short-lived school—a college by name only and moribund upon its birth—at least limped along until community leaders recognized a greater opportunity at hand.



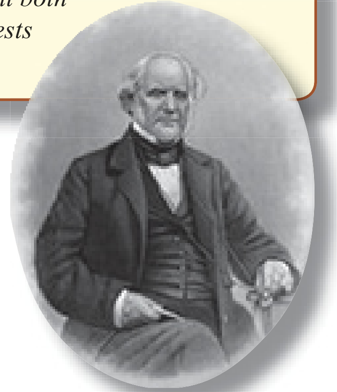
Governor Oran Roberts, 1815-1898

On the agenda of the state's Sixteenth Legislature, set to convene in January 1879, was a proposal to establish a teachers' training school. The idea had long sputtered at the periphery of the volatile political matters attending Reconstruction. To the extent that education ranked high among Republican priorities, popular opposition to almost any measure championed by the loathsome Carpetbaggers assured that little would be accomplished. The return of Democratic rule, however, led to a renewed interest in improving the quality of education at public schools throughout Texas, and, consequently, the training of its teachers.

Governor Oran Roberts counted himself among the converted who believed that the creation of a normal school represented a cause both worthy and overdue. Addressing the legislature on February 10, he revealed a proposition that won over many lawmakers who had earlier questioned the very need for such an institution. Barnas Sears, representing the foundation of Boston philanthropist George Peabody, had promised the governor he would match a $6,000 appropriation for each of the first two years if the legislature would pass a bill to establish and support a "first-class" normal school. Financial arrangements afterward, he added, would be renewable on a year-to-year basis.

It took the House and Senate scarcely two weeks to introduce the necessary bills. In even less time some of Huntsville's leading

The Peabody Education Fund. *The Peabody Education Fund—through both material grants and wise counsel—provided immeasurable support for the Sam Houston Normal Institute during its formative years. Benefactor George Peabody, born in Danvers, Massachusetts in 1795, turned a small fortune accumulated in a northeastern wholesale business into staggering wealth after moving to London, where he became an investment banker. Despite Peabody's success, his one great regret in life was that he could point to only four years of formal education. Commenting on his deficiency, he once wrote: "I am well qualified to estimate its value by the disadvantages I labour under in the society in which my business and situation in life frequently throws me." Already engaged in other philanthropies, he was moved by the condition of Southern children following the Civil War and resolved to add The Peabody Education Fund to his roll of causes. The foundation's money was used exclusively to promote education in the South. Much of it went to train teachers, who, in turn, would elevate the quality of education in their public schools. When Peabody died in 1869, Barnas Sears stepped down from his presidency at Brown University in Rhode Island to become the foundation's general agent. He took a particular interest in the Sam Houston Normal Institute, going so far as to supplement both the operating budget and the salaries of its faculty. The Peabody Library, which rests just east of Austin Hall, honors the memory of the school's first benefactor.*



George Peabody 1795-1869

citizens sent a letter telling the legislature that a campus and building were readily available. A group of local businessmen, directed by Sanford St. John Gibbs, had earlier purchased the Austin College property and pledged now to donate the land and improvements to the state if the deal went through. In the meantime, Colonel George Grant led a delegation to Austin to press the town's case in person. There, fellow townsman and senator James Russell Burnett had already laid his own groundwork by securing the able support of House Speaker John Cochran.

Two days after general bills were introduced in the House and Senate to create the school, Burnett made a more specific proposal: "*An Act to Establish a State Normal School to be Known as the Sam Houston Institute and Located at Huntsville, Texas.*"

If battle-hardened legislators who wanted the plum for their own communities dismissed the attachment of Sam Houston's name as sentimental opportunism, the offer of a ready-made campus was an advantage not easily deflected. Before would-be competitors were able to mobilize any serious opposition, Burnett and Cochran pushed the bill on a steady course, brushing aside committee concerns and motions for delays. When the final count was read, the bill passed by just three votes. But pass, it did. On April 21, 1879—San Jacinto Day—Governor Oran Roberts signed the measure that formally established the Sam Houston Normal Institute. Shortly afterward, a hopeful Harry F. Estill enrolled in the inaugural class. The familiar campus he called home once more would never again be far from the center of his life.

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