
A Short History of Jefferson, Texas



Jefferson, Texas

(The tour starts at the circle in the Port Jefferson History and Nature Preserve in front of the Jefferson Institute)

Early records indicate that Jefferson was founded around 1841 on land ceded from the Caddo Indians. At that time, a log jam more than 100 miles long existed on the Red River north of present Natchitoches, Louisiana. The Indians said that this log jam, known as the Great Red River Raft, had always existed.

The Red River Raft (or Great Raft) acted as a dam on the river and raised the level of Caddo Lake and the Red River several feet. This rise of Caddo Lake and the corresponding rise in the Big Cypress Bayou at Jefferson permitted commercial riverboat travel to Jefferson from ports such as St. Louis and New Orleans via the Mississippi and Red Rivers.

Jefferson was one of the most important ports in Texas between 1845 and 1872. The town reached its peak population just a few years after the Civil War and is reported to have exceeded 30,000. During this time, Jefferson was the sixth largest town in Texas.



The Turn Basin is a wide, deep lagoon in Big Cypress Bayou, it was used for turning around ships in Gulf-Red River trade. The first steamer to reach here was the "Lama" in 1844, by way of Red River and was piloted by William Perry, the first mayor of Jefferson. The Big Cypress Bayou was created by a "raft" of debris that had begun forming about 1529 near Caddo Lake. Cypress Bayou thus was

the best travel route into Oklahoma, western Arkansas and north Texas. Until the Federal government, Yankee Corps of Engineers, in 1873 removed the raft, Jefferson was the southwest's greatest inland port, with this basin as it's business center. The last steamer operated here in 1903.

The most interesting refrigeration history related to Texas dates from 1861 to 1885. When the natural ice supply from the North was cut off by the Civil War, men of ingenuity in Texas and Louisiana came forth with inventiveness in mechanical ice making and food preservation. The birthplace of ammonia-compression refrigeration in the United States is Jefferson, Texas, where David Boyle, in 1873, established his first ammonia-compression plant in a lean-to off a lumber mill where the Jefferson Institute building now resides. Improvements made during the winter of 1873–74 resulted in a high-grade production that attracted national attention. The steamboats and paddle wheels would pull up to the Turn basin and be loaded with ice bound for ports south like New Orleans.

(Tour continues up Dallas St. to the Courthouse)

The Marion County brick courthouse was erected in 1914, architect Elmer George Withers. Outside the building the Dick Taylor Camp of Confederate veterans erected a monument to honor the county's dead in the American Civil War. Marion County was just awarded a grant that will allow the county to restore the building back to its original grandeur.



(Tour continues up Dallas St. to the Old McGarity Saloon)

In 1864, at the close of the Civil War, James H. McGarity, one of the early settlers to Jefferson, purchased the building with Dr. John M. Firth. The business

lasted until 1868 when one of the owners was reportedly indicted for the sale of "vinous liquors," "permitting gaming" and running a "disorderly house."

It's hard to imagine this as a busy street with saloons just lined up and down. The saloon was purchased by several more owners until it was damaged by several street fires that raged in Jefferson between 1868 to 1877. Seeking to restore the building following the fire, Dallas lawyer and former confederate soldier William H. Mason purchased the building in 1872.

Due to an economic downturn in Jefferson, the lower portion of the building was rented out to various local lodges. Though the building was renovated a second time, this time by the Jefferson Masonic Lodge in 1916, by 1950 the building was all but forgotten.

(Tour continues up Dallas St. to Market St. at "The Golden Era" mural)

The yarn of Jefferson's history winds nearly 200 years long from its founding around 1841 to the resurgence of interest in the town's history rebounding today.

The mural is based off of an oil painting made by historian F. Harrisburg. Above it all, the flag of the Union, the original flag of the confederacy and the Texas state flag are aligned around the town's namesake, Thomas Jefferson.



In the center of the mural a steamboat is docked, perpetually loading and unloading its goods. At the bottom left, many faces represent the different ethnicities and heritages that settled in Jefferson, including Jewish, German and Scottish. Above them, an ice truck and gas lights mark Jefferson as the first city in Texas to have both artificial ice and gas lighting.

At the top left, founders Allen Urquhart and Daniel Alley are pictured beside their competing visions for Jefferson, as one wished for the streets to run north to south and the other east to west. Beside them, to their right, they are flanked by a steamboat and another of the founders of Jefferson, Captain William Perry.

On the upper right, the 1873 detonation of the massive stoppage on the Red River is depicted. The loss of the stoppage caused the Big Cypress Bayou to drain, bringing an end to Jefferson's steamboat traffic. Beside it is the House of the Seasons and Railroad baron Jay Gould, who, according to legend, cursed Jefferson for rejecting his offer to turn the steamboat port town into a railroad hub.

In the corner Bessie "Diamond Bessie" Moore is displayed beside her accused killer, Abe Rothchild, still sitting in his cell. Below are the Union and Confederate armies, showcasing the town's close ties to the Civil War, the Queen Mab Ball, a reminder of the town's proximity to New Orleans, and the 1861 ordinance marking Texas' secession from the United States.

(Tour continues across Market St. to the corner of Austin St. at the Historical Museum)

Construction on the Romanesque Revival building with Greek Revival details started in 1888, and was completed by 1890.

It originally served as a courthouse of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Texas,^[2] and as a



U.S. post office. The post office was on the first floor, the court was on the second.

The building was purchased by the Jefferson Historical Society for use as a museum in 1965.

(Tour continues down Austin St. to the Excelsior House Hotel)

Excelsior House is the oldest hotel in East Texas according to the National Register of Historic Places and the only hotel to have been in continuous use since it's opening. Since it opened in the 1850s, it has welcomed some of history's biggest names through its doors: Ulysses S. Grant, Oscar Wilde, Rutherford B. Hayes and Lady Bird Johnson. The hotel is now owned and managed by the Jessie Allen Wise Garden Club along with the Playhouse and Jay Gould's train car The Atalanta.



(Tour continues across Austin St. to the Atalanta Train Car)

One of the legends surrounding Jefferson involved Jay Gould, the railroad magnate. The legend goes that Gould wanted to bring his railroad through



Jefferson but the town leaders refused because they had the river traffic. Gould responded by putting a curse on Jefferson and saying that grass would grow in the streets without the railroad. Gould is even given credit for supporting the removal of the 'Red River

Raft' and the subsequent decline of Jefferson as a river port. The Garden Club obtained Gould's railcar and it is displayed here as a tourist attraction.

(Tour continues down Austin St. as passing Bayou Cafe)

This building was an early "social club" in town, then a Livery, followed by the Jimplicute Newspaper offices, and finally a restaurant.

(Tour continues down Austin St. as passing Kahn and Jefferson Hotels)

The buildings on either side of the street are considered some of the most haunted buildings in Texas if not the United states. There are Ghost Walks that begin and end on this corner, nightly on weekends, that tell some of the history and lore of these 2 buildings.

(Tour wraps up at the Thomas Jefferson bust next to the Jefferson Hotel)



Thomas Jefferson (April 13, 1743 – July 4, 1826) was an American Founding Father who was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and later served as the third President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. As President, Jefferson pursued the nation's shipping and trade interests against Barbary pirates and aggressive British trade policies. It is part of this interest that Jefferson was chosen to name our town. Jefferson, while primarily a planter, lawyer and politician, mastered many disciplines, which ranged from surveying and mathematics to horticulture and mechanics. He was an architect in the classical

tradition. A philologist, Jefferson knew several languages. He was a prolific letter writer and corresponded with many prominent people. His only full-length book is

Notes on the State of Virginia (1785), considered perhaps the most important American book published before 1800. After retiring from public office, Jefferson founded the University of Virginia.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

- Thomas Jefferson, July 4th, 1776