



This House is Your House



Introduction:

Since the building was completed in June of 1856, the Governor’s Mansion in Austin has served as the home for Texas governors and their families. What many children may not realize, however, is that the Mansion is public property and owned by the citizens of Texas. Governor Preston Smith summed it up when he welcomed visitors to the dedication of the Mansion’s Texas Historical Marker on December 9, 1969 (*The Austin American Statesman*):

“This Governor’s Mansion actually belongs to you and all other Texans, and not to the present tenants.”

The June 8th fire brought the Governor’s Mansion much media attention – the story even ran on the *BBC News* in the United Kingdom. (“Fire Hits Historic Texas Mansion”, 2008/06/09) Historical renovation experts were brought in to assess the damage and estimate the cost of rebuilding the structure. State-owned buildings don’t carry private insurance because the cost would be greater than simply covering any losses. The Texas Legislature will be asked to appropriate taxpayer money for rebuilding the Mansion, but public awareness and involvement are also important. The tragedy of the Mansion fire provides a unique opportunity for all Texans to connect with the past and actively participate in the present.

The public has been welcomed into the Governor’s Mansion since Governor Elisha M. Pease’s time. On August 23, 1856, the *Austin State Gazette* ran the following announcement:

“Governor’s Levee: The executive invites all citizens to the Mansion on Saturday night at 8 o’clock.”

Pease wrote his wife (who was visiting family in Connecticut at the time) that he estimated at least 500 people attended the reception and over 300 stayed to eat supper. The bill for feeding all those people totaled \$121.80. Much of what we know about the early years of the Governor’s Mansion comes from letters, receipts, and other artifacts saved by the Pease family.

The Mansion continued to be the site of social and political functions throughout the years and to welcome citizens and tourists for guided tours. Even now, students can take a virtual tour of the Mansion’s interior before the fire by double clicking on room photographs on the Friends of the Governor’s Mansion site <http://www.txfgm.org/>. Interested teachers can also find suggested classroom activities on this site. Additional restoration information can be found at <http://www.texasgovernorsmansion.org>.

Unit Overview:

There is a wealth of information and countless teaching opportunities related to the Governor's Mansion. One obvious area of interest is Architecture. There are several resources included on that subject for teachers to explore if they wish. This unit, however, is focused on helping students discover the true value of the Texas Governor's Mansion as a symbol of Texas and to understand the loss felt by so many Texans. Though designed for fourth graders, the lessons can easily be adapted for slightly younger students or those as old as 7th grade Texas History students. Teachers of older students would want to bring in the state and national social and political conflicts of the 1850's and 1860's as well as the criminal aspect of the mansion fire.

The unit incorporates a wide variety of primary source materials including quotes, photographs, census records, letters, and excerpts from newspapers. The lessons are divided into three sections which can each last one or two class periods or be expanded based on class interest and time available:

- What Do We Value? – Understanding the historic and symbolic value of the Mansion.
- Who Do We Know? – Illustrating the Mansion's tangible connection to people of the past
- Who Can We Become? – Developing *hero characteristics* list from Mansion residents
- What Can We Do? – Challenging students to contribute to restoration and preservation

Standards:

In addition to objectives given for each lesson, the unit will cover the following student expectations from Fourth Grade's Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies:

(17) Citizenship. The student understands important customs, symbols, and celebrations of Texas. The student is expected to: (A) explain the meaning of selected patriotic symbols and landmarks of Texas, including the six flags over Texas, San José Mission, and the San Jacinto Monument;

(18) Citizenship. The student understands the importance of voluntary individual participation in the democratic process. The student is expected to: (A) explain how individuals can participate voluntarily in civic affairs at state and local levels; (C) identify the importance of historical figures such as Sam Houston, Barbara Jordan, and Lorenzo de Zavala who modeled active participation in the democratic process; and (D) explain how to contact elected and appointed leaders in state and local governments.

(22) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of sources including electronic technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software; interviews; biographies; oral, print, and visual material; and artifacts to acquire information about the United States and Texas; (B) analyze information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing, contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, and drawing inferences and conclusions;

(23) Social studies skills. The student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms. The student is expected to: (A) use social studies terminology correctly; (B) incorporate main and supporting ideas in verbal and written communication; (C) express ideas orally based on research and experiences; (D) create written and visual material such as journal entries, reports, graphic organizers, outlines, and bibliographies; and (E) use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation.

(24) Social studies skills. The student uses problem-solving and decision-making skills, working independently and with others, in a variety of settings. The student is expected to: (A) use a problem-solving process to identify a problem, gather information, list and consider options, consider advantages and disadvantages, choose and implement a solution, and evaluate the effectiveness of the solution; and (B) use a decision-making process to identify a situation that requires a decision, gather information, identify options, predict consequences, and take action to implement a decision.

Related Resources:

Alarion Press. *Greek Art and Architecture*. www.alarionpress.com

The Center for American History www.cah.utexas.edu
Census records, Online exhibits, Links to related sites.

Daniel, Jean Houston and Price and Dorothy Blodgett. The Texas Governor's Mansion. Austin: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 1984.

Flanagan, Sue. Sam Houston's Texas. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.

Friends of the Governor's Mansion www.txfgm.org
Historical information and updates on restoration efforts.

Friends of the Governor's Mansion. The Governor's Mansion of Texas - A Historic Tour. ISBN 0-9615894-1-8.

Fritz, Jean. Make Way for Sam Houston. ISBN 0698116461.

Hafertepe, Kenneth. Abner Cook – Master Builder of the Texas Frontier. ISBN 0-87611-101-0.

The Handbook of Texas Online www.tshaonline.org

Hart, Katherine. Waterloo Scrapbooks 1968-1970, 1975. Austin: Friends of the Austin Public Library.

Library of Congress – American Memory www/memory.loc.gov
Historical collections for the National Digital Library.

Lone Star Junction www.lsjunction.com

Sam Houston Memorial Museum www.shsu.edu/~smm [www](#)

Taylor, Anne. Architecture and Children. Teachers Guide with Interdisciplinary learning activities. School Zone Institute. ISBN 0-913947-06-7.

Texas Historical Commission www.thc.state.tx.us
Heritage Travel Guides, Fort St. Louis, Texas Trivia, Great Links to related sites

Texas History, University of North Texas
<http://www.texashistory.unt.edu/young/educators/lessonplana.shtml>
Primary Source Adventures and other teaching materials

Texas History Web Guide www.kclibrary.nhmccd.edu.texashistory.html
Links to sources for Texas history and culture

Texas State Library and Archives Commission www.tsl.state.tx.us/treasures/index.html
Online exhibit of historical artifacts and documents.

U. S. Census Bureau <http://www.census.gov/index.html>
State and County Quick Facts, Maps, “Especially for Kids.”

Van Buren, Maurie. House Styles at a Glance. Illustrated Guide. ISBN 0-929264-85-1.

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