

Brief description and history of Walker County:

The Cenís (Assinay and Hasinai Tribes) Indians were among the earliest known residents of the area that is now Walker County. This tribe, part of the Caddo Confederacy, was first mentioned in 1687 by Henri Joutel, who served under the French explorer Rene Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle. The Cenís Indians lived between the Trinity and the San Jacinto rivers, where they raised corn crops which they traded with western Indians for horses, hides, and Spanish goods. The Cenís were wiped out in 1780 by invading tribes that had been driven from their own ancestral homes along the Mississippi River by American expansion. Another band of Indians, the Bidais, inhabited the northern area of present Walker County and eked out a marginal existence as hunter-gatherers. Although spelled differently, their name is perpetuated in the name of a small creek, Bedias, flowing into the Trinity River from the west and in a town, known as Bedias, located in Grimes County just west of the current Walker County line.

The Walker County area, situated at the edge of the southern forest, became an important site for intertribal trade. Here the Alabama-Coushatta, the Neches, and the Nacogdoches tribes from the forests to the east arrived to swap goods with the Comanche, Lipans, and Tonkawas of the plains.

The first Europeans to explore the area may have been Spaniards under the leadership of Luis de Moscoso Alvarado, who arrived in the region in 1542. Then in 1687, La Salle crossed the area that is now Walker County. To counter the French threat presented by the La Salle expedition, a military company captained by Alonso De León was dispatched to East Texas in 1689 by the Viceroy of New Spain. De León's men cleared a lane that became La Bahía Road. A portion of this thoroughfare passed over the area of present-day Walker County.

In the early 1830s, colonists from the United States arrived in the area. Pleasant Gray and his brother Ephraim established a trading post on the site that eventually became Huntsville, named after Huntsville, Alabama, Pleasant's former home. In the mid-1830s the brothers conducted a lucrative trade with the neighboring Indians.

In the years prior to Texas independence, the area was governed by the municipality of Washington, which became Washington County during the Texas Revolution. In 1837 the First Congress of the Republic of Texas included the area of present Walker County in Montgomery County when that county was carved from Washington County.

Steamboat navigation of the Trinity River spurred the earliest burst of

commerce in the county and in 1838 James DeWitt established the port town of Cincinnati, which soon became the leading regional commercial center, partly because it was on the stage road connecting the towns of Washington-on-the-Brazos and Nacogdoches. Cotton and other agricultural products were taken down this highway to Cincinnati, and then transported down the Trinity River to the Port of Galveston.

In April 1846 the First Legislature of the new State of Texas established Walker County and designated the city of Huntsville the county seat of government.

James Mitchell (1795–1870) came to the future Walker County under a Mexican land grant in 1833, and helped to found Walker County. Mitchell, who became one of the first county commissioners, established the Mitchell House and Inn on the Old San Antonio Road, also known as El Camino Real de los Tejas, which started in Natchitoches, Louisiana and ran through the Piney Woods of East Texas going to San Antonio and eventually ending in Old Mexico. During the 1840s, the Mitchell house was a stop for weary stagecoach travelers.

By 1847 there were 2,695 people living in the area. In 1848 the county became the designated site for what became the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville, which began operating in 1849. By 1850 the population of Walker County had increased to 3,964.

Walker County was the home of Samuel Houston (March 2, 1793 – July 26, 1863), known as The Raven (his Cherokee Indian name), and as General Sam Houston. Sam Houston, governor of two states, president of the Republic of Texas, U.S. senator, and military hero, was one of the most colorful figures of 19th-century America. Born near Lexington, Virginia, he was reared in Tennessee by his widowed mother. As a youth he spent much time with the Cherokee Indians and developed close ties with them. Joining the United States Army, he served under Andrew Jackson in the Creek wars (1813-14). In 1818, Houston resigned his commission and, after studying law for a few months, was elected attorney general for Nashville and appointed adjutant general of Tennessee. He served two terms in Congress (1823-27) and in 1827 was elected governor of Tennessee.

While governor of Tennessee, Houston married Eliza Allen on January 1, 1829. For unexplained reasons, however, the marriage was dissolved almost immediately. Houston, under pressure from the influential Allen family, resigned his office. For the next six (6) years he lived with the Cherokee Indians in the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), taking a Cherokee wife, Tiana Rogers and adopting Cherokee citizenship. He was a trader, advisor, and special envoy for the tribe on several occasions. It was in this last capacity that, in 1832, he first went to Texas, then under Mexican rule, in a futile attempt to secure a land

grant for the tribe. By 1835, Houston had moved to Texas. With the outbreak of the Texas Revolution, which started in that year, he was named commanding general of the Revolutionary Army of Texas. In March 1836, Houston was a delegate to the convention that declared Texas an independent republic. His command was reconfirmed, and on April 21, 1836 he led the Texas army to a brilliant victory over Santa Anna in the Battle of San Jacinto.

Houston served as the first president of the new republic from 1836 to 1838 and was later elected to a second term (1841-44). In 1845, after the annexation of Texas by the United States, he was elected to the U.S. Senate, serving from 1846 to 1859. In the Senate, Houston was known for his staunch Unionism and friendship for the Indians. Unhappy that Texas seemed to be moving toward secession, he successfully ran for governor as an independent Unionist in 1859. Despite his efforts, however, the people of Texas voted to secede, and he was forced out of office in March 1861.

In 1840, Houston had married Margaret Lea in Alabama. She had persuaded him to stop drinking, for which he had a sizeable reputation, and to join the Baptist church. They had eight children. General Sam Houston died at his home in Huntsville, Walker County, Texas on July 26, 1863. He was seventy years old at the time of his death. His grave site is in the Oakwood Cemetery, in Huntsville, which can be reached by traveling two blocks north on Spur 94, the shortest highway in Texas, which intersects Texas 190 (11th Street). Houston personally chose this location for his gravesite because it was across the street from where his beloved Steamboat House once stood.

Walker County was initially named for Robert J. Walker, a legislator from Mississippi who introduced into the United States Congress the resolution to annex Texas. However, Walker later supported the Union during the Civil War, thus in order to keep the county's name from being changed, it was renamed for Samuel H. Walker, a Texas Ranger and soldier in the American Army.

Walker County continued to grow and develop during the 1850s and by 1860, it had attracted several churches, two small colleges (Austin College and Andrew Female College), numerous businesses, and a newspaper, the Huntsville Item. The Huntsville Item was founded in 1850 and is noted as the second oldest continuous running newspaper in Texas.

During these years, the state penitentiary had expanded and become a significant producer of cotton goods. In 1859 the institution was capable of producing 12,000 yards of cotton goods each day. By 1860 county residents also supported ten public schools attended by more than 400 students.

In 1867, the county once again saw yellow fever raise its ugly head. This

epidemic far overshadowed the first yellow fever plague that hit the county in 1853. Walker County was so ravaged by this fever that it touched virtually every family. In visiting the old Oakwood cemetery, many tombstones carry the death dates of 1853 or 1867.

Railroads tied Walker County to national markets and helped to encourage immigration into the county. But during this expansion of the railroads in the late nineteenth century, being bypassed by a railroad meant almost certain death to a community. Huntsville was threatened with extinction in the early 1870s after the city failed to pay the railroad a requested bonus. In 1872, after the tracks had bypassed their town, Huntsville residents hurriedly raised \$90,000 to build a spur line from their town to the road that had passed them by. Walker County contributed an additional \$35,000. The spur, known as the Huntsville Tap, reached the main line near the new town of Phelps. The river port towns died as the railroads replaced steamboats for hauling freight. When the railroad community of Riverside was established, it became the new center for both rail and water freight, and this new center of commerce eventually killed off its upstream competitors. Meanwhile, new communities like New Waverly, Elmira, Phelps, and Dodge sprang up adjacent to the tracks. The arrival of the railroad also helped to stimulate the area's agricultural economy, which began to revive during the 1870s.

Logging and cotton farming continued to be the mainstays of Walker County between 1900 and 1930, but partly because of the boll weevil, cotton farming in the area became less productive after 1900. The character of the local economy was fundamentally altered during the Great Depression, as cotton farming collapsed. As tens of thousands of acres were taken out of crop production during the depression, the number of cattle doubled. These trends continued into the 1940s, so that by 1950, only 7,000 acres were planted in cotton.

After the Great Depression, the timber industry flourished. Although hardwood continues to be harvested, the main crop has been the southern yellow pine. The Sam Houston National Forest, which includes a large area of the southern half of the county, sustains much of this large lumber industry. The population of Walker County increased during this period, rising to 19,868 by 1940 and to 20,163 by 1950.

The economy of Walker County benefits from the presence of Sam Houston State University, also known as Sam, which was founded in 1879 and is the third oldest public institution of higher learning in the State of Texas. The main campus is located in downtown Huntsville and is one of the oldest purpose-built institutions for the instruction of teachers west of the Mississippi River. The university was the first such institution of its type in the State of Texas. Needless to say, the university is named for one of our great founding fathers, General Sam Houston. SHSU is part of the Texas State University System and

has, as of the fall semester of 2011, an enrollment of more than 17,200 students. The institution was the first institution classified as a Doctoral Research University by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education within the Texas State University System. The university has more than 102,000 living, addressable alumni and an active Alumni Association. On October 10, 1889, the first class of 110 students and four faculty members commenced instruction on the site of what had once been the campus of Austin College. The original building, Austin Hall, was constructed in 1851 and is the oldest university building west of the Mississippi still in operation. Peabody Memorial Library was the first free-standing library and was constructed in 1901 with funds provided by the George Peabody Foundation, and it is still in use as a venue for special university events.

When the university first opened, students received a certification to teach in the State's elementary and secondary schools, but after 1919, the university began to award bachelor's degrees and in 1936, the school awarded its first post-baccalaureate degree. In 1923, Sam Houston Normal Institute changed its name to Sam Houston State Teachers College. Then in 1965, it became Sam Houston State College until in 1969 it became what is now known as Sam Houston State University. The university celebrated its 130th year of operation in 2009.

Another increasingly important factor in the growth of Walker County is the tremendous expansion of Houston. As Houston continues to sprawl northward, more Walker County residents benefit from employment opportunities available in its metropolitan areas. County residents often work in Houston offices, commuting from their Walker County homes. As a side note, Sam Houston State University is currently in the construction mode of property in Harris County which will be known as the Northwest Houston Campus.

Walker County, including 801 square miles, is located near Lake Livingston and Lake Conroe and is surrounded by the Sam Houston National Forest. According to the 2010 census, Walker County has a population of 67,861. The County is home to Sam Houston State University, Texas Department of Criminal Justice (the only State agency with headquarters outside of Austin), and the Huntsville State Park.

Residents of Walker County enjoy winters where temperatures fall below freezing on only one several days a year. Cloudiness and fog are more prevalent in winter than in other seasons, yet the county continues to receive about 50% of the total sunshine possible. Summers are hot and humid with little variation in day-to-day conditions except for occasional thunderstorms that help to dissipate the afternoon heat. Spring and fall weather is delightful – moderate days – cool nights.