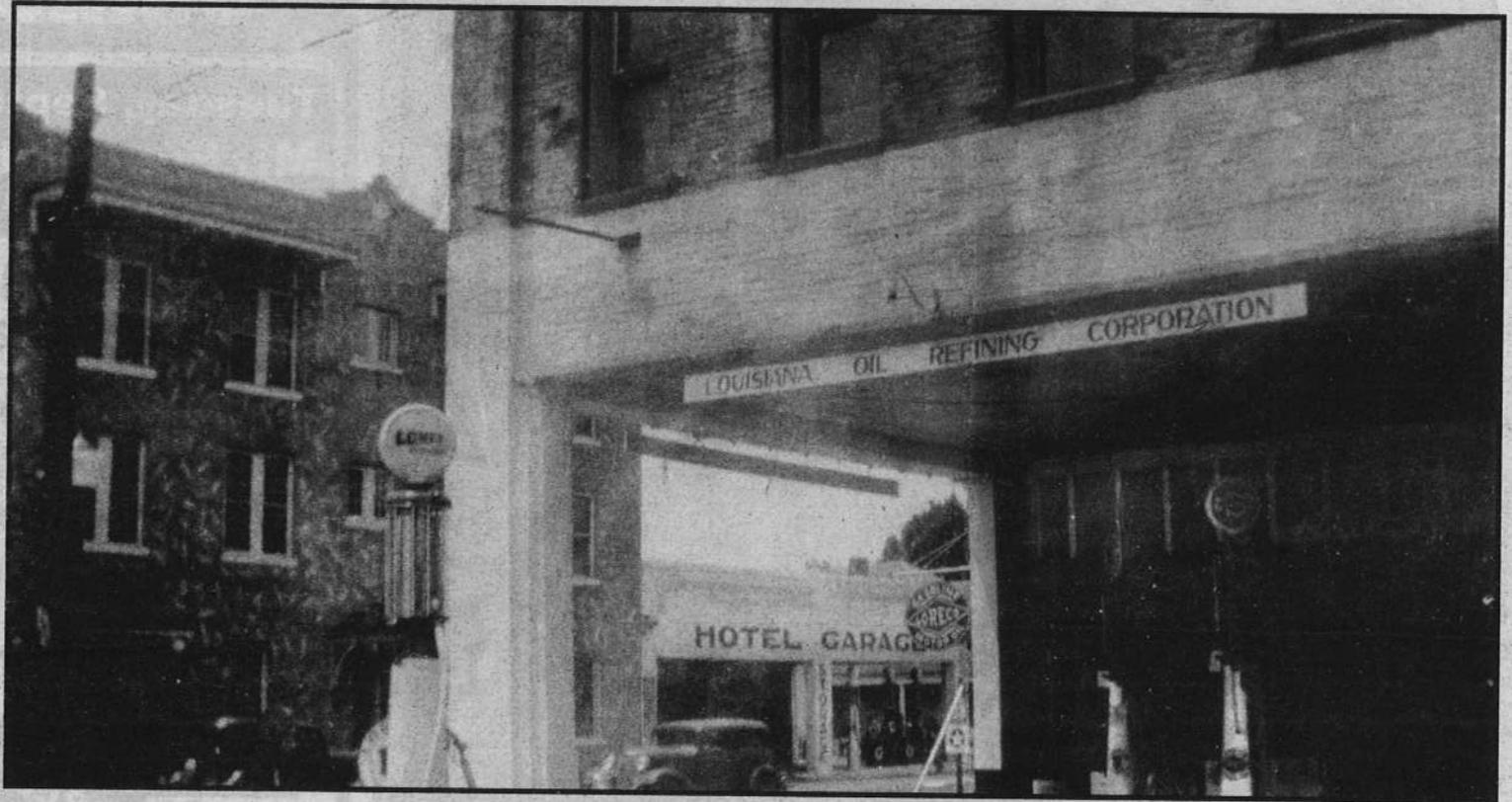


State studies history of transcontinental route linking area town squares to either coast in 1919

MT. VERNON – Trailing along behind local historian B.F. Hicks, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) has re-discovered a transcontinental highway that first connected town squares across Texas to either coast.

Nicknamed “The Broadway of America,” the Bankhead Highway was designated in 1919 and was “the first true interstate highway in the U.S.,” according to Rootsweb.com. Its route meandered from Washington DC to San Diego “by way of Alabama,” said David Moore, who spoke in Mt. Vernon at one of a number of public meetings conducted by the THC along the road’s 850-mile Texas leg from Texarkana to El Paso.

“The route didn’t follow the most direct line,” he said. Its dip through the Old South is directly
(See Bankhead, page 5)



As it approached the Mt. Pleasant square, the Bankhead Highway passed by The McDonald Hotel (later Hotel Stephens) seen through the portico over the gas station across the road. In Mt. Vernon and Sulphur Springs, community leaders are poised to advance the historical tourism agenda being pushed by a THC study of an early highway connecting towns across Texas.



Mrs. Kenneth (Sue) Bolin, shows THC Project Coordinator Leslie Wolfenden a calendar shot featuring Bolin's Station on the Bankhead Highway. Mr. Bolin was the last of three generations of his family to operate the station.

(Bankhead, from page 4) linked to the work of Alabama Senator John Hollis Bankhead, author of the Federal Aid Road Act signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

"The route of the road through East Texas was fluid," said Mr. Hicks, the Mt. Vernon attorney serving as MC for the THC Bankhead meeting in his hometown. Crossing the state line at Texarkana, its route splintered with one leg following what later became U.S. 67 passing through Mt. Pleasant. The other turned south before angling east to Hughes Springs, following present day Texas 11 through Daingerfield and Pittsburg, according to the *American Roads* website. The highway merged again at Sulphur Springs.

Back in 2002, Mr. Hicks leveraged the road's historic significance into a grant application, securing about a quarter million dollars for restoration of the final home of Confederate "Colonel" Henry Clay Thuston and development of the Dupree Nature Trail alongside the route of the old highway. The Thuston home is a 19th-century dogtrot that's now one of the Franklin County Historical Commission's five museum locations.

Not that it matters beyond being an interesting historical note, but in securing the grant, Mr. Hicks usurped the Titus County tale of the Colonel.

Standing over seven feet tall, Colonel Thuston's fame is based on his height more than his war record. In his *History of Titus County*, Traylor Russell made anecdotal note of a day when a "loud-mouthed" youngster seeking attention intended entertaining other loafers gathered at the depot in Mt. Pleasant to see who arrived on the train. The colonel was in the crowd.

"Hey, Thuston, how's the weather up there?" the 4-foot-tall youngster asked.

"Thuston looked down at him and said, 'It's raining,' and spit in his face. The boy's enthusiasm for determining the condition of weather around Thuston's head was considerably dampened," Mr. Russell wrote.

While war records suggest he never rose above the rank of private, Mr. Hicks so skillfully argued on behalf of Franklin County that the colonel's post-war service as a circus flag bearer merited recognition that the Federal Highway Administration agreed and awarded the grant for restoring his final residence, a

home that only fell into Franklin County's hands after Franklin was lopped off the west side of Titus County in 1875.

Back in Mt. Pleasant a century later, former Mayor Jerry Boatner recognized the work of Mr. Hicks at a graveside gathering commemorating the colonel's service to the Confederacy.

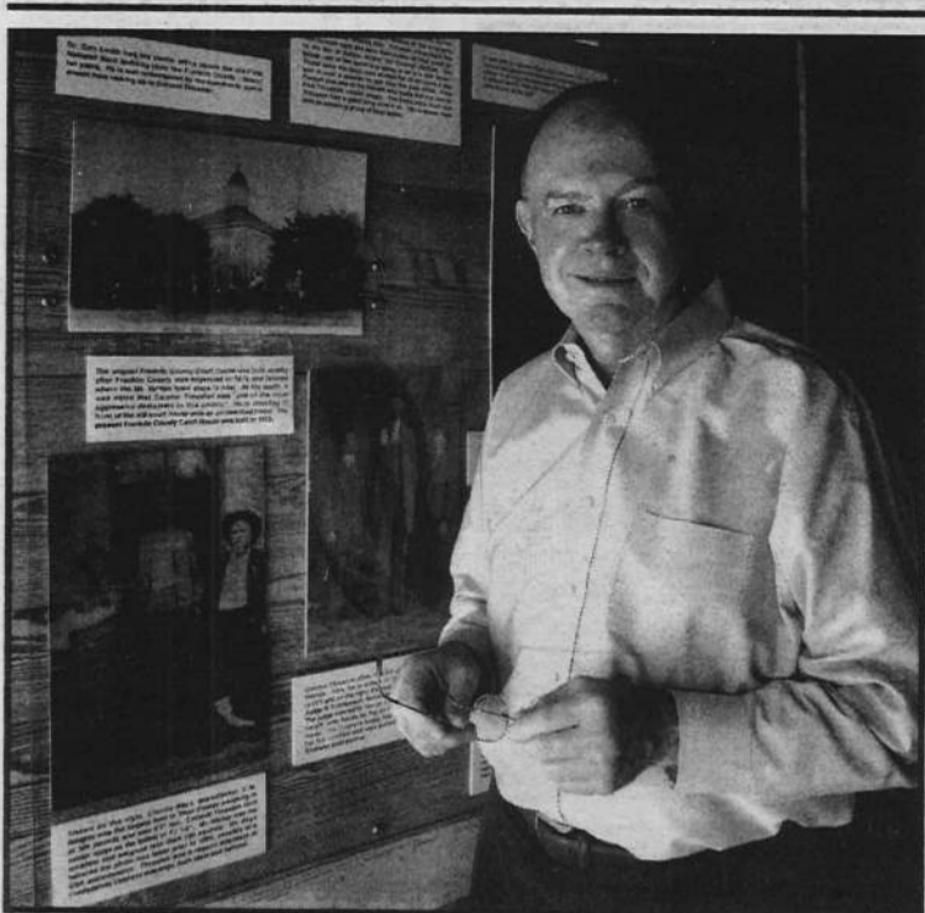
"Mt. Vernon may have the house, but we've got the body," Mayor Boatner said.

As it turns out, the liberties Mr. Hicks took with the matter of the colonel's residence has left Mt. Vernon poised to make the most of the state's intent to help communities across the state make the most of any association with the Bankhead Highway.

Speaking to a packed house for the THC meeting held at the Franklin County Arts Alliance headquarters, Mr. Moore solicited support for creation of a Bankhead Highway Museum.

"It would take a community with a lot of interest in history to do that sort of thing," he said, baiting the locals.

The state's re-vitalized interest in the old road dates back to 2009 when Dallas State Rep. Carol Kent introduced a measure
(See Bankhead, page 7)



Years ahead of the state, Mt. Vernon attorney B.F. Hicks capitalized on the historic transcontinental highway passing through his hometown to reel in grant funds for restoration of the home of the tallest soldier in the Confederacy. Fifty years after Colonel Thuston died, the route of the road passed his last home.

(Bankhead, from page 5) designating the Bankhead as a “Texas Historic Highway” as a part of a new state “Historic Roads and Highways Program.”

“The purpose of this designation is to supplement the THC’s existing ‘historical tourism’ programs,” Representative Kent said. “The Bankhead is a vital part of our state’s history, and it is in danger of being forgotten. With passage of this law, we can celebrate this part of our Texas heritage and promote the Bankhead as a tool for economic development in towns and cities across the state.”

It’s an opportunity likewise recognized by Sulphur Springs Mayor John Sellers, an opportunity dovetailing into his town’s work in economic development on the Hopkins County square. (See story, page 13.)

Working with the Sulphur Springs Downtown Building Alliance, within days of the meeting he attended in Mt. Vernon, Mayor Sellers was on AM radio KSST’s morning talk show soliciting local participation supporting the THC initiative.

Oversight for the THC’s Bankhead project is in the hands of Historic Resources

Coordinator Leslie Wolfenden, who likewise coordinated the THC-backed initiative to put Pittsburg on the map as the first town in Texas to have the whole of its business district included in the National Park system’s National Register of Historic Places. (See story, page 6.)

The two-year Bankhead Highway study is being funded in part through a Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) grant.

“The project will survey the Texas Bankhead route and associated historic resources including auto repair garages, gas stations, tourist camps, auto courts, motels, road markers, paving, traffic signs and bridges,” Ms. Wolfenden said.

The contract for the study that will be completed next summer has been awarded to the Austin-based historic preservation planning and management firm of Hardy-Heck-Moore, Inc. Residents spanning the length of the highway’s route across the state are being asked to submit “historical images, postcards, maps and other Bankhead-related items.”

Ms. Wolfenden is the project contact. She may be reached at 512.463.3386 or at lesliewolfenden@thc.state.tx.us.