

DALLAS COUNTY
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Footprint **Wins First “Best Historic Film” Award**

DCHC Sponsors Dallas International Film Festival

Footprint, a short documentary film that follows and records the reactions of visitors to the World Trade Center Monument in New York City, has won the first “Best Historic Film” award at the 2018 Dallas International Film Festival. This award was sponsored by the Dallas County Historical Commission to help raise awareness for the preservation and appreciation of history.



Footprint was produced by Sara Newens (who also directed) and Laura Heberton. It was selected from among four other finalists.

In *Footprint*, cameras roam around the memorial site and capture the honest and spontaneous reactions of the site’s many visitors—both American and foreign--during a single day. Commission member Christopher Smith, who participated in the judging for the award, said the film is an important example of how history can serve as a tool for encouraging people to peacefully discuss and think about truly emotional events.

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See **Best Historic Film** on page 4

The Story of Little Egypt

DCHC to Provide Marker Funding

As part of its effort to recognize previously untold aspects of Dallas County history, the County's Historical Commission has agreed to provide one-half of the funding for the Little Egypt historical marker that was recently approved by the Texas Historical Commission.

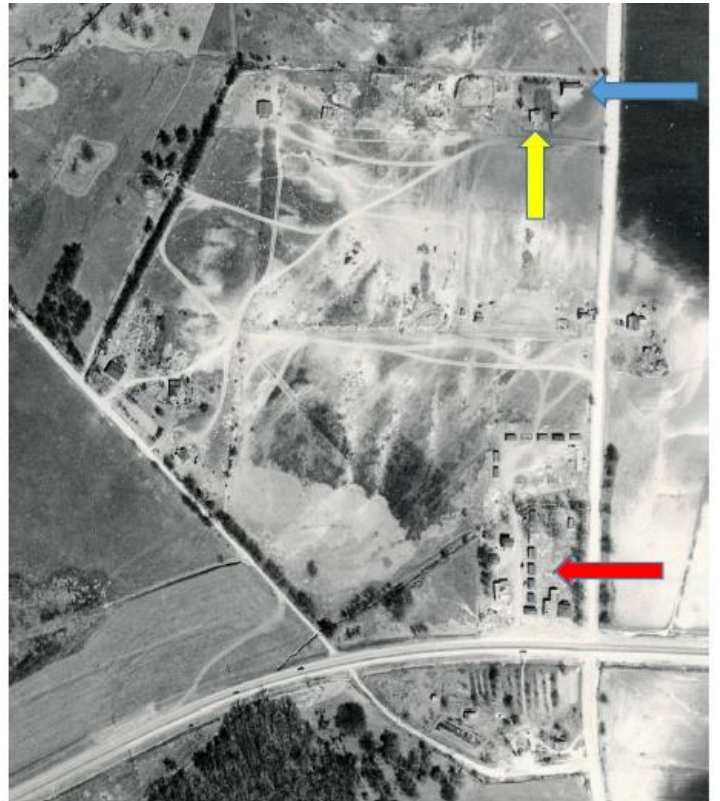
Little Egypt was a small black community that existed for about eighty years in what is now considered to be Lake Highlands. There is literally no physical evidence remaining to indicate that the community once existed in the area bounded today by Northwest Highway, Ferndale Road, Lanshire Drive, and Thurgood Lane, and it represents another of those fascinating stories that helped create Dallas County, but which are known by only very few.

Established when Jeff Hill, a freedman, paid \$300 for a 30-acre tract of land in 1883 that was surrounded by other mostly white farmsteads and a scattering of black landowners and sharecroppers, Little Egypt became the home for Hill and his family. By 1900, the settlement had grown to include Hill's adult children and a number of renters and was included on Sam Street's 1900 comprehensive map of the County. By 1920, it had also become the home to the Egypt Chapel Baptist Church—from which it is thought the community acquired its name—and a one-room school that served as the only black school in the area.

Other family members and friends began moving into Little Egypt, which helped make the community even more close-knit, and by the 1950s, it had over a dozen homes, a small store, a motel, and possibly a dance hall. Nonetheless, the area was still heavily rural in nature as the streets were unpaved; there was no city water, sewer, or garbage service; and most homes did not have telephones (with some homes not even having electricity).

These characteristics were in marked contrast to the suburban-type development that had completely engulfed the area by 1960. Where once had stood acres of prairie now stood rows and rows of newly-constructed brick homes and a new shopping center was being built directly across the street on the community's east side. With the 30-acre community being one of the few largely undeveloped areas remaining in the area, real estate developers began eagerly eyeing it, and in 1961, a group of investors offered to buy-out the entire community with the condition that *everyone* in the community (which now had a population of about 200) had to agree to sell and to move. While in many instances it would not have been possible to reach such unanimity, in Little Egypt, perhaps because of the many family relationships that existed, it was.

On May 15, 1962, a fleet of thirty-seven moving vans rolled into the community, and by the end of the day, everyone was gone. Since then, the area has been the collective home to, among other things, a grocery store, a swimming club, a roller skating rink, a What-A-Burger, a veterinary clinic, doctor offices, and miscellaneous shops.



A view of Little Egypt in 1951. The red arrow marks the location of a hotel, the yellow arrow marks the location of a new home, and the blue arrow marks the location of the Little Egypt Church. Note how the surrounding area is still undeveloped.



Little Egypt eight years later. The area is now heavily surrounded by development. The blue arrow denotes a newly-built Army Reserve facility, and the red arrow marks the site of what will soon become the Northlake Shopping Center.

See **Little Egypt** on page 3

Colonel John C. McCoy

Pioneer Surveyor, Attorney, and Santa

By Brenna Elliott

Like many people on the frontier during the 1800s, John C. McCoy did many things in his life. Some may know him as being the first practicing attorney in Dallas, the builder of the first frame structure in the city (at the corner of Commerce and Lamar), or Dallas County's first district clerk. But he did much more than that.

Born on a farm in Indiana in 1819, McCoy, at the age of fifteen, began studying at several seminaries. After a few years, he became deputy circuit clerk of Clark County (in Indiana) and began pursuing the study of law part-time. He was next employed as a surveyor and then as an agent that drafted an Indian treaty, and in 1841, he became licensed to practice law.

McCoy began his relationship with Dallas in 1844 when he accepted a position as an agent/surveyor for the Peters Colony. Given the nature of transportation 170 years ago, he arrived in 1845 after following a rather "normal" route involving steamers to New Orleans, Galveston, and Houston; a raft up part of the way of the Trinity River; two teams of oxen; the Caddo Trail; and two

ponies. Upon his arrival in Dallas, he discovered a man clad in a red and black plaid blanket coat in buckskin leggings and wearing moccasins; this man was named John Neely Bryan.

McCoy quickly became an active citizen, soon left the employment of the Peters Colony, and helped Bryan organize the newly-created county. He surrounded the courthouse with magnificent trees. As his law practice thrived, he fell in love and married Cora M. McDermott. It was said she created an atmosphere of paradise and a home of gaiety. Tragically, after two years of marriage, Cora, along with the child she was carrying, died while in childbirth. McCoy never remarried.

Following his wife's death, McCoy continued his life of civic engagement. He became district attorney and was elected twice to the legislature. He helped found the first Masonic lodge in Dallas, a public reading room (which became the origin of the Dallas public library), and the Dallas County Pioneers Association, and he became president of the Dallas Bar Association and the Dallas Public Library Association.

While many adults knew McCoy for these activities, just as many children knew him for something much more important—Christmas. Every year, the McCoy household would seek to invite all local children to his decorated home for a Christmas party. With McCoy's beard having grown long and white, he not only celebrated Christmas and children much as Santa would do, he also began to resemble St. Nick as well.

McCoy died in 1887. His work and generosity were so well-known and appreciated that it was reported that "hundreds and hundreds of his old neighbors, of his newer friends, the rich and the poor, the black and the white" visited his home to pay their respects and that a crowd estimated to be in the thousands attended his burial service. He was, said the *Dallas Morning News*, "not only respected and honored by all who knew him, but he was loved by all, deeply loved by the very many."



McCoy Street in East Dallas is named after John McCoy for his many contributions to the city.



Santa Claus or John McCoy?

Little Egypt *(continued from page 2)*

Because of a concern that the cost of a historical marker was discouraging and preventing many important events and subjects from being acknowledged, Dallas County began providing funding for untold history markers in 2016. The Little Egypt marker is the second marker funded under this program and was selected because it not only recalls Dallas' rapid transition from rural to urban, but it also chronicles black life in Dallas from the end of Reconstruction, through the days of Jim Crow, to the dawn of the Civil Rights movement.

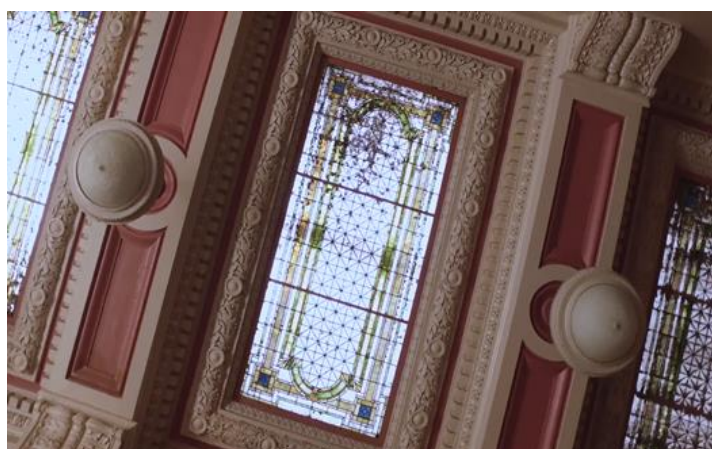
Film Completed on County Records Building

A film that chronicles the history of the Dallas County Records Building complex has been completed by Mark Birnbaum Productions. The 32-minute film, “Nobody Knows Where You’re Going If You Don’t Know Where You Came From,” weaves modern footage and historic photos with stories about the complex from people who worked there and from County officials.

The film shows the elaborate staircase and stained glass skylight that greet visitors to the Criminal Courts Building, and it discusses a shoot-out that took the life of a County jailer, the federal court order that led to a new County jail, and the complex’s segregated past.



The Records Building complex actually consists of three distinctly different buildings that were constructed over a forty-year period. The Criminal Courts Building was the first building constructed; it was built in 1914. The Records Building was the second building; it was constructed in 1928. The Records Building Annex was the last of the three buildings to be constructed; it was completed in 1955. While the buildings are physically connected, the floors of one building are not readily level with those of another and so one has to encounter various sets of transition steps in order to travel between the buildings to access the “same” floor.



The film was produced as part of the Dallas County project that is presently underway to substantially renovate and update the complex while simultaneously preserving its historic integrity. It is anticipated that this renovation and preservation project, which will be one of the largest ever conducted in the Dallas area, will be completed in 2020.

The film, which took about four months to produce, can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/209533676>.

Best Historic Film *(continued from page 1)*

Boston film critic Jake Mulligan has also praised the verité-style documentary, writing that it “says much while showing little” and that the film’s score, which is combined with natural sound, produces “a subtle sense of uneasiness, as if a warning were being echoed through history.”

The 2018 Dallas International Film Festival began on May 3 and runs through May 10. The Festival, which originally started as the Deep Ellum Film Festival in 1999, has since become one of the largest film festivals in North Texas with over 110 entrants from 25 countries and 27,000 attendees.



Dallas County's Role in Historic Preservation

Dallas County is probably not the first—or second—organization that comes to mind when you begin thinking of who is involved in Dallas-area historic preservation. That distinction probably lies with a local historical society or a city's landmark commission so when one discovers just how often the County is involved with local history, one is likely going to be pleasantly surprised.

The County's involvement in historic preservation is quite varied and takes forms that aren't always readily recognizable. It is, for instance, the owner of several significantly historic buildings like the Old Red Courthouse and the former Texas School Book Depository (its acquisition of the School Book Depository, in fact, probably helped prevent this structure from being demolished).



As the owner of historic buildings, it has not only consciously made the decision to utilize and invest in these structures, but it has also taken steps to call attention to their historic features, such as the remnants of segregation-era signage, so that the public will not forget parts of its past, no matter how unpleasant they may be, and to incorporate historical elements, such as the importance of the Trinity River, into building updates. Such actions not only help ensure that these important buildings will continue to exist, but that they and their history “remain alive” and relevant.



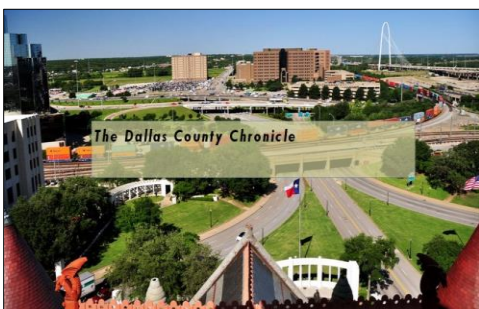
As the local arm of the State, Dallas County is responsible for holding millions of documents—property records, marriage licenses, birth certificates—which are so critical to the tracing of family genealogies and the telling of local histories.

As the first level of review for proposed State historical markers, the County is directly involved in the preservation and acknowledgment of many of the stories that comprise Dallas-area history, and as a member of the community, Dallas County helped lead the effort to create both the Sixth Floor Museum and the Old Red Museum.

As numerous as these roles have been, they still do not include all of the County's historic preservation activities. The County's Historical Commission has written historical marker applications and sponsored history conferences, and the County's provision of tax incentives so that empty and long-neglected historic buildings can be renovated and converted into housing, offices, and hotels has saved twenty properties from demolition and increased their value from \$35 million to almost \$500 million.



Although Dallas County's involvement in historic preservation is not necessarily apparent, it is quite real, and because of it, there should continue to be a future for the area's past.



The *Dallas County Chronicle* is the official newsletter of the Dallas County Historical Commission.

The Historical Commission serves as the primary advisory body on historic preservation matters for the County.

Its meetings are open to the public and are typically held on the second Thursday of every month at 11:30 a.m. For more information about the Commission and its meetings, please call 214.653.7601.