

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED CITY OF BRYAN
VISITOR CENTER IN BRAZOS COUNTY, TEXAS

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by

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PROPOSED CITY OF BRYAN
VISITOR CENTER IN BRAZOS COUNTY, TEXAS

BVRA Project Number 01-18

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ABSTRACT

A "desk top" study of existing literature regarding the site of a proposed visitor center at Block 51 in Bryan, Texas was performed by Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) in September 2001 at the request of the City of Bryan. This study confirmed the presence of two extant 19th century structures, a residence (circa 1867-1870) and a carriage house (circa 1888) as well as the footprint of a 1903 residence. Although others may have occupied the original house, it was mainly the residence of John William Coulter, a prominent businessman in the community who moved with his family into the "big house" constructed in 1903 on the same lot. Block 51 was the site of historic occupation from the 19th century through the latter part of the 20th century when the 1903 house was moved to its current location in Fayette County, Texas. The original house occupied by John William Coulter has been determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the Texas Historical Commission. The review was conducted by Chief Historian Jim Steely (see his letter in Appendix I). The records for this project have been placed in permanent curation at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory on the campus of The University of Texas at Austin.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to those who assisted me in this project. At the City of Bryan, Roy Ross (Assistant Director for Administration in the Community Services Department) provided maps, photographs, and reports discussing the history of the project area. Cindy Tennis, archaeologist at the Texas Department of Transportation, was the coordinator for this project. I am especially grateful to my cousin Roger G. Moore for taking time from his busy schedule to discuss this interesting project with me. His comments have been incorporated into this report. Lili Lyddon visited the project area and drafted a project area map utilizing several versions produced by previous researchers.

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INTRODUCTION

The City of Bryan proposes to construct a visitor center on Block 51 that contains two standing structures dating to the 19th century and the footprint of a more recent house that was constructed in 1903 by John William Coulter, a prominent Bryan business man. Funding will be provided by the Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program through the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). It is the intent of the City of Bryan to integrate the standing structures into the visitor center complex. The original house and the carriage house have already been restored by descendants of the Coulter family. The carriage house will be an integral part of the visitor center as it will contain displays that will interpret modes of transportation from 1880 to the present. The purpose of the museum will be to educate visitors as to the part that the carriage house played in the surface transportation system and how that system evolved. Other transportation related displays would also be utilized to enhance this central theme. The footprint of the 1903 house built by Mr. Coulter will be preserved, and a dry rock wall will be placed along the footprint in order to define the limits of this house. The site of the project area and its location within Brazos County is depicted in Figure 1.

It is important to note here that the city block with its two 19th century structures have been deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission (Appendix I). Since state funding is being made available for this project, it must be determined if the proposed construction will adversely affect this National Register property. In order to satisfy this requirement, the City of Bryan contracted with Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) to perform a preliminary assessment of the project area and make recommendations regarding any future work that may be necessary prior to construction of the visitor center.

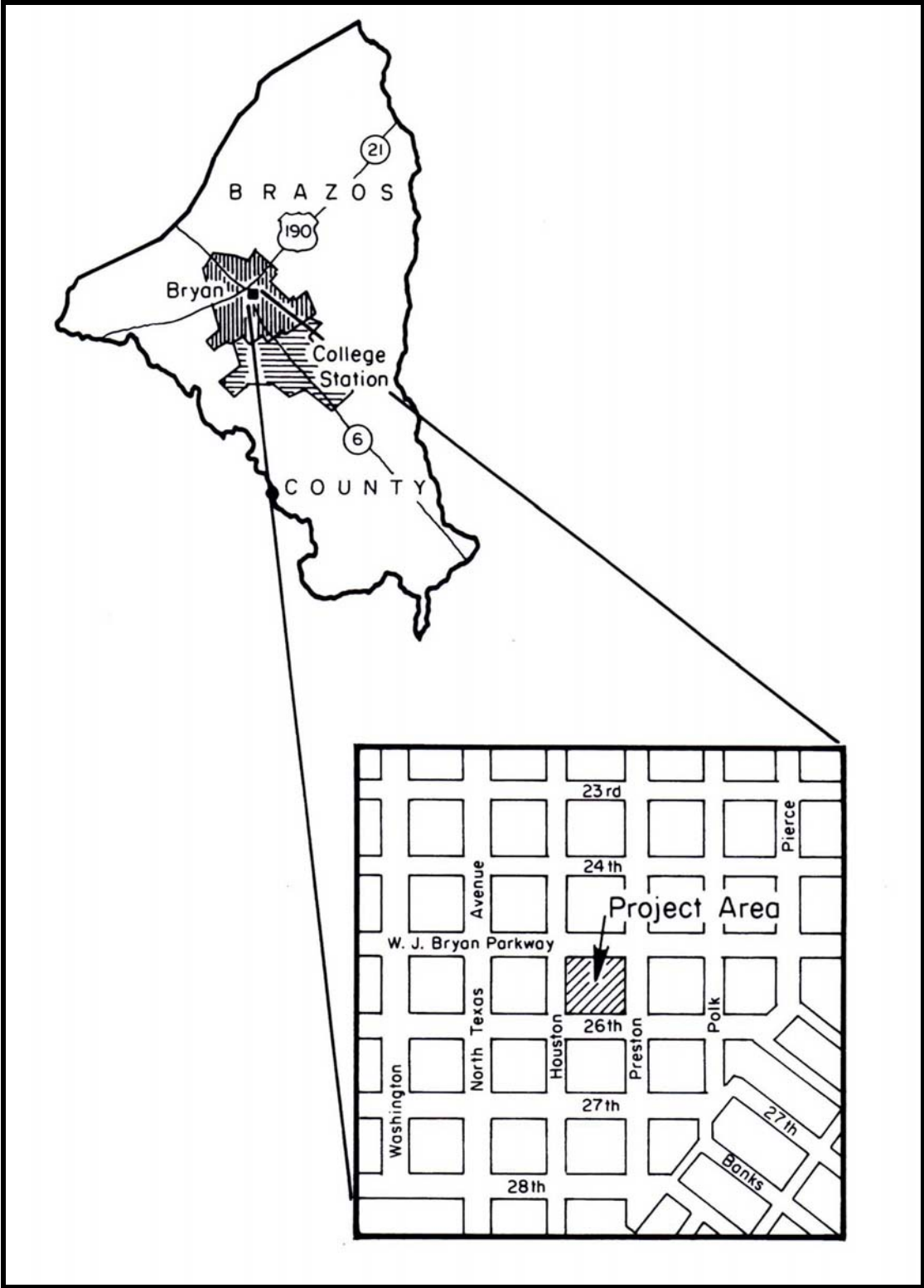


Figure 1. Location of Project Area within Brazos County

METHODS

The methods employed during this assessment are essentially those that are commonly described as a "desk top" survey. Virtually all of the information presented in this report was obtained from reading several reports that have been produced by various researchers interested in the history of the buildings that once occupied Block 51 in the City of Bryan. These reports contain information taken from the County Courthouse (deed records), City of Bryan library archives, Texas A&M University archives, Brazos County Appraisal District, Brazos County Tax Assessor's Office, and interviews with Brazos County Heritage Society members. Soil data on the site were obtained from a geotechnical investigation of the proposed construction area by Buchanan/Soil Mechanics, Inc. of Bryan, Texas. In addition, the project area was examined by the Principal Investigator and draftsperson in order to collect data used (in conjunction with other maps drafted by previous researchers) to provide the project area map depicted in this report (Figure 2).

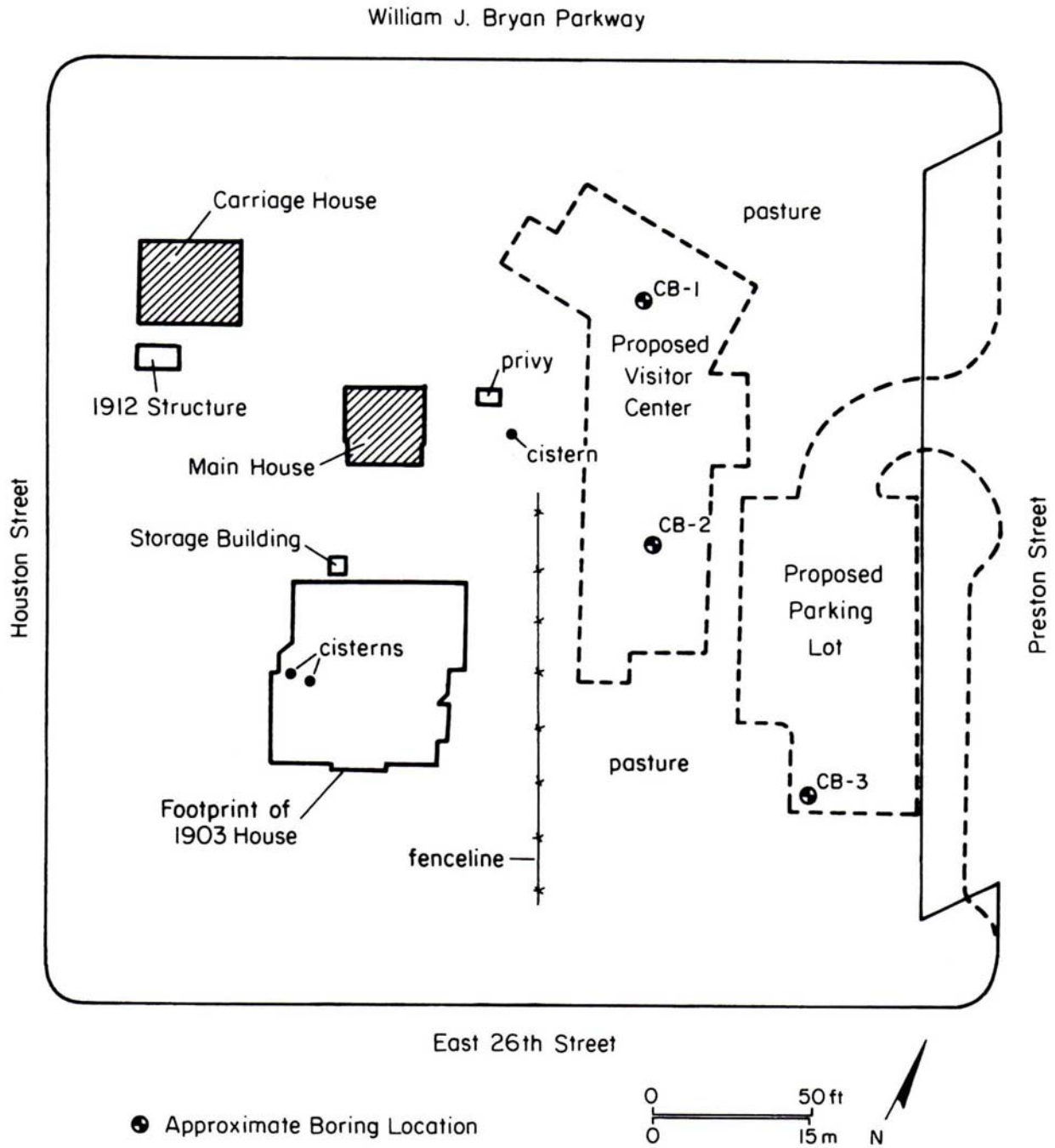


Figure 2. Project Area Map

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The early history of Block 51 is somewhat confusing. According to Hawthorne (1991), the Coulter house began as a seven-room structure built by Thomas D. Harrison who apparently paid taxes on this property in 1869. This description of the house conflicts with that provided by Grots et al. (1991) in that they state the house began as a two-room structure. It is known, however, that John William Coulter was living there by the early 1870s with his family. According to Grots et al. (1991), this structure was expanded, probably in the 1870s, as a room was added to the north creating a three-room building. Sometime in the 1890s, the one room addition and half of the original dog run was demolished leaving the enclosed breezeway and the other half of the dog run (Grots et al. 1991). Thus, the integrity of this significant structure, now referred to as a remnant house, has been compromised. The original house as it appears today following restoration by the descendants of the Coulter family is depicted in Figure 3.

A carriage house was constructed to the northwest of the original house about 1888 on the northwest corner of the property. No information was found regarding the history of this structure. In a detailed study of this building by Hawthorne et al. (1991) the hypothesis was made that some of the wood used in its construction may have come from the original 1860s house, possibly about the time it was moved to make room for the 1903 house discussed below. Figure 4 depicts the carriage house as it appears today following restoration by the descendants of the Coulter family.

The Coulter family outgrew the small residence, and a new house was constructed by the architectural firm Wemyss-Smith in Waco. To make room for the new house, the original structure was moved "back, out of the way of the new house under construction" (Hawthorne 1991:8) where it continued to house servants. It seems likely that the original house was located within the current footprint of the 1903 house. This argument seems to be supported by the presence of a cistern within the footprint of the 1903 structure (Figure 2). Alternately, it is possible that the cistern was built to serve the 1903 house. In this instance the cistern would have underlain the floor of the home and water would have been accessed by a hand pump.

The 1903 house is much better documented than the original dog run building. Several photographs of it are on file at the Bryan Public Library, and the lot is depicted on the 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map. According to a study conducted by the Department of Architecture and the Historic Imaging Laboratory, Texas A&M University (1992:4), the 1903 house had three cisterns. This structure was moved from its original location (Block 51) to the Gay Hill community in Fayette County, Texas in 1975 where it remains today.

Following the restoration of the remnant house by a local firm at the expense of the Coulter family descendants, a cistern was located and capped (Figure 2). Also, the location of a recently demolished privy adjacent to the remnant house (Figure 2) has been identified (Hawthorne et al. 1991:2).



Figure 3. John W. Coulter House



Figure 4. Carriage House

The extensive research conducted for this project has not revealed any evidence of historic utilization of the area that will be affected by construction of the visitor center. A verbal description of the block by an earlier resident of the area states that after the 1903 house was built the smaller house was occupied by a servant with fence lines separating the block into quadrants. The quadrant on the northeast corner was used as pasture for a cow that was milked in the stall on the north side of the carriage house. There was a small pond in the pasture area, but its location has not been identified.

Following the removal of the 1903 house, City Block 51 has remained idle until renovation of the remnant house by the Coulter family.

A geotechnical investigation of the proposed construction area was conducted by Buchanan/Soil Mechanics, Inc. of Bryan, Texas on July 18, 2001. Three cores were bored in the area. The logs of these borings reveal essentially undisturbed natural soil at the surface and offer no evidence of fill deposition at the site. The absence of evidence for extensive near-surface disturbance suggests that there is reasonable potential for intact archaeological deposits. The core boring localities are depicted on Figure 2.

There are two areas of Block 51 to be considered prior to construction of the visitor center. These are the site of the remnant house, existing carriage house, and footprint of the 1903 house (Area A) and the unimproved section outside the fence line of the 1903 house that will house the museum and parking lot (Area B). Area A will be affected by construction of foot paths, historical markers, trees and shrubs, and a dry rock wall outlining the footprint of the 1903 house site.

Area B, however, will be permanently altered through construction of the museum (including restrooms) and parking lot. Based on the archival work that has been conducted to date it is my opinion that Area A is the only portion of Block 51 that contained standing structures. It is likely that all cisterns and privies are located in this area as well. Therefore, it is hypothesized that there is a moderate probability that pre-1870 features exist within Area B. An example of a class of feature that may be found at a greater distance from the residences and within Area B are trash pits. It seems probable that the presence of any previous structures in either Area A or Area B would have been identified through the archival work conducted by the various researchers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there appears to be only a moderate probability of pre-1870 features within the area to be affected by construction of the visitor center as currently planned, this cannot be stated with any degree of certainty without subsurface investigation. Early features that may be present include privies, cisterns, and trash pits. It is, therefore, recommended that the proposed construction area be examined by stripping away the surface layer using a trackhoe or gradall. This procedure will guarantee that all subsurface features (if any exist) will be identified. These features will be mapped and photographed, and their significance will be assessed.

REFERENCES CITED

Buchanan/Soil Mechanics, Inc.

- 2001 Geotechnical Investigation for Proposed City of Bryan Visitor Center, Bryan, Texas.

Department of Architecture and Historic Imaging Laboratory

- 1992 The Coulter Property, Bryan Texas: A Descriptive and Analytical Study and Proposals for the Preservation of the Historic Properties and Use by the City of Bryan. Report prepared for the Landmark Commission of the City of Bryan.

Grots, Martin, David Knapp, and Kirsten Whealy

- 1991 Coulter Residence, Bryan Texas: Building Analysis. Prepared for David Woodcock, Spring 1991.

Hawthorne, David

- 1991 Documentation Report: The Harrison-Coulter-Carnes House. Report prepared for Professor David Woodcock, Architecture 646, Spring 1991.

Hawthorne, David, Tzung-Yu, Hsieh, James B. Oliver, and Ronn Phillips

- 1991 A Preliminary Building Survey of: The Coulter Family Carriage House. Paper presented to Professor David G. Woodcock, Texas A&M University for Architecture Course 646.

APPENDIX I

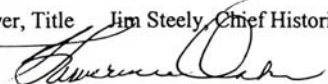
DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FOR THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
for the Purpose of TEA-21 Enhancement Funds Application

The SHPO staff has completed its review of the following historic place:
c. 1880, c. 1900 John William Coulter House Site, 502 E. 26th St., Bryan, Brazos County

- The property is ELIGIBLE for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under the following criterion/criteria:
- A: The property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. See additional comments.
 - B: The property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past. See additional comments below.
 - C: The property embodies distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or appears to be a contributing member of a potential historic district. See additional comments below.
 - D: The property has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history. See additional comments below.
- The following stipulations also apply:
1. Project work will be coordinated with the Texas Historical Commission and follow the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.

The property is NOT ELIGIBLE for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. See additional comments below.

Additional comments:
 This large outlot property once served a substantial late 19th century house occupied by the Coulter family, but the main residence was moved in recent years to the Gay Hill community in Fayette County. Surviving is an extensive Contributing landscape and two Contributing outbuildings, one a mid-19th century frame dwelling, and the other a c. 1900 frame barn, with raised center part and partially enclosed shed bays at each side. The property is eligible for the National Register under criteria A, C and D (for the original house foundation and surrounding cultural deposits) in the areas of architecture, and community planning and development, at the local level of significance.

Reviewer, Title Jim Steely, Chief Historian Date 5 August 1999
 SHPO  (F. Lawrence Oaks) Date 5 August 1999