

SAM HOUSTON PARK, DAVIS PLANTATION
(Sam Houston Park, Old Place)
(Sam Houston Park, John R. Williams House)
1100 Bagby Street
Houston
Harris County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3542-A

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Intermountain Regional Office
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, CO 80225-0287

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SAM HOUSTON PARK, DAVIS PLANTATION
(SAM HOUSTON PARK, OLD PLACE)
(SAM HOUSTON PARK, JOHN R. WILLIAMS HOUSE)

HABS NO. TX-3452-A

Location: Sam Houston Park
1100 Bagby Street
Houston, TX

Old Place is located in the central section of the park, which is bound by Allen Parkway outbound to the north, Bagby Street to the east, Allen Parkway inbound to the south, and Interstate 45 to the west. Sam Houston Park is immediately west of downtown Houston.

Present Owner: The City of Houston

Present Occupant: The Heritage Society

Present Use: Old Place was moved to Sam Houston Park and restored by The Heritage Society in 1970. The house now operates as one of The Heritage Society's nine historic structures in Houston's only outdoor museum. The house is open for tours Tuesday-Sunday.

Significance: Old Place was moved from the west bank of Clear Creek in 1970 and is thought to be the oldest remaining structure in Harris County. It was probably built by John R. Williams, an Austin colonist, about 1824. Mr. Williams was issued the title to the labor of land on which Old Place originally stood on July 27, 1824. Because each colonist was required to erect a dwelling and improve the land they purchased within two years in order to "prove" or take full legal possession of the land, and because Williams was able to sell his labor one year after he was issued the title, it is assumed that he built some sort of structure on the labor. That structure is believed to be Old Place.¹

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The house is believed to have been constructed c.1824 by John R. Williams, one of Stephen F. Austin's Old Three Hundred original settlers.

¹ Abstract of Land Titles of Texas, Vol. I, Galveston.

2. Architect: John R. Williams

3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: The original owner was John R. Williams, who owned the property from 1824-1825. In 1825, Williams sold the land and house to William and Allen Vince, who occupied the property until 1843. Family tradition indicates that the Vinces never lived on the Old Place property. Rather, the land was used for rounding up cattle and the house was primarily a resting place or shelter for this activity. In 1843, Allen Vince rented the house to Christian Duer, who lived there with his family from December 1843 until December 1844. In December 1844, the Duers left Old Place to relocate in north Harris County. In March of 1844, Ann Vince, who had been deeded the Old Place labor by her husband Allen, sold the property to Robert G. Waters. Waters sold the property to Jane Choate Owens in May of 1852. In March of 1871, Owens sold the property to Joseph Davis. It was the Davises who named the structure "Old Place." Old Place was owned by members of the Davis family until it was given to the Heritage Society in 1970 by Mabel Estes Waters Perkins, the granddaughter of Joseph Davis.²

A. One labor of land (approx. 177 acres) on North Bank of Clear Creek

1824 Deed July 26, 1824, recorded in Harris County Deed Records, Vol. B, p. 71
Mexican Government
To
John R. Williams

B. Labor of land situated on the septentrional margin of arroyo Clear Creek for a

1825 consideration of 100 pesos
Deed October 19, 1825, recorded in the Harris County Deed Records, Vol. 16, p. 380
John R. Williams
To
William Vince and his successors

C. One labor of land granted by Mexican Government to John R. Williams, a

1844 colonist in Austin's Colony by deed of 7-27-24
Deed March 19, 1844, recorded in the Harris County Deed Records, Vol. I, p.342.
Ann Vince, wife of Allen Vince
To
Robert G. Waters

² Unknown Author, "Title to Property," Old Place File, File "OP: Title & Deed Information," The Heritage Society Master Files, Houston, TX.

D. Estate of Robert G. Waters, including 177 acres in Harris County

1851 Recorded February 24, 1851 in the Fort Bend County Probate Records,
Vol. B (1) p. 705

J.D. Waters states that R. G. Waters' estate is indebted to him by a note for \$8,000 and asks court approval to sell the assets of the estate. Property ordered sold at Court House in Richmond.

E. Estate of Robert G. Waters, including 177 acres in Harris County

1851 Recorded September 29, 1851 in the Fort Bend County Probate Records,
Vol. B (1) p. 705

All assets of the estate

To

F. J. Calvit

F. 177 acres in Harris County

1852 Deed April 19, 1852 in the Harris County Deed Records, Vol. Q, page 87

F.J. Calvit

To

J.D. Waters

G. 177 acres in Harris County

1852 Deed May 26, 1852 in Harris County Deed Records, Vol. Q, page 88

J.D. Waters

To

Jane Owens, wife of John Owens

H. 177 acres in Harris County and 8 adjoining acres on the west boundary

1871 Deed March 6, 1871 in Harris County Deed Records, Vol. 9A, page 411

Jane Owens

To

Joseph Davis

4. Original plans and construction: Old Place is a single room, single story dwelling, with a front porch and entry on the west façade and a back door on the east façade. Roughly hewn cedar logs form the frame, which is covered in unpainted cedar clapboard siding. A reproduction mudcat chimney and fireplace is located on the north façade of the house.

5. Alterations and additions: Additions were first made to the house by Jane and John Owens in the 1850s, although it is unclear how extensive these additions were. Under the ownership of the Davis family, Old Place was expanded into a nine room house and much of the original structure was covered. When The Heritage Society first examined the house in the late 1960s, it was in the form of a dilapidated Victorian cottage. Upon further examination, the original building was rediscovered and ultimately moved to Sam Houston Park.

B. Historical Context:

1. The house and its occupants:

A. John R. Williams, 1824-1825

Documents signed at the time his title was issued indicate that John R. Williams came to Texas "to settle in Austin's Colony with his family and cultivate land." The document also says he is a citizen of the United States. Beyond that, little is known of him, as he sold the property a year later and left the area.³

B. William and Allen Vince, 1825-1843

William Vince was the brother of two of the men who had witnessed John R. Williams' original purchase of the land. William was one of six siblings who had come to Texas in 1822. All of the Vinces: William, Allen, John, Richard, Robert, and Susan, were of The Old Three Hundred. The Vince family holdings were extensive. William Vince owned both a league and a labor on the south and north banks of the San Jacinto River. His property would become the city of Pasadena, Texas. Robert and Richard bought their league together just west of the town of Lynchburg, Texas. Allen Vince bought his league with his friend, Moses A. Callahan. Allen's land was located southeast of Harrisburg, Texas. Family tradition attests that the Vinces never lived on the Old Place property. Rather, the land was used for rounding up cattle and the house was primarily a resting place or shelter for this activity. William Vince died in 1836 and Allen Vince became the Administrator of his estate. Allen claimed that he and William had been in business together and took title to the Old Place property as his share of the business. Allen Vince owned land in several Texas counties and was a prominent rancher. He continued to use the labor primarily to run cattle, but in December 1843, he rented the house to Christian Duer. Duer lived in Old Place one year and kept a journal during his time there.⁴ This journal is in possession of The Heritage Society.

C. Christian Duer, December 1843-December 1844

It is unclear how long Duer had been in Texas before he and his family moved into Old Place. He was well acquainted with his neighbors and with many businessmen in Houston. Duer ultimately owned several houses in Houston and land in north Harris County. He appears to have been involved in numerous businesses including real estate, ranching, merchandising, and money lending. The Duers led an active and robust life, as evidenced by entries in Mr. Duer's journal. The journal records an almost endless series of visits to and from neighbors and friends, excursions into town, hunting trips, business transactions, and efforts to help those in need. Despite being 20 miles away from downtown Houston, the Duers were anything but isolated. In addition to his extensive social card, Mr. Duer subscribed to the newspapers and news journals of the day. In

³ Linda S. Weiland, "Old Place," 30 March 1989, Old Place File, File "OP: Building History," The Heritage Society Master Files, Houston, TX.

⁴ Ibid.

December of 1844 the Duer family left Old Place and relocated to north Harris County.⁵

D. Robert Waters, 1844-1852

In March of 1844, Ann Vince, who had been deeded the Old Place labor by her husband, Allen, sold the property to Robert G. Waters. Waters was involved in Christian Duer and Allen Vince's cattle driving activities at Old Place and appeared in Duer's journal entries from 1844. Waters was born in South Carolina and began buying land along the Brazos River in 1840. He took part in the Mier Expedition and returned to Texas after his release. In 1846 he gave 20 slaves to Elizabeth Waters and sold his Brazos River land to her husband, J.D. Waters. Robert Waters died in Matamoros while serving in the US Army during the Mexican War. In 1851 J.D. Waters petitioned the Fort Bend County Court to sell the land owned by Robert. The court documents suggest that Robert Waters died with considerable debt. With permission granted by the court, J.D. Waters sold the property to Jane Choate Owens for \$1000 in May of 1852.⁶

E. Jane Choate Owens, 1852-1871

Jane Choate Owens is a descendant of one of the earliest known families in Harris County. Her father, Thomas Choate, came to Texas from Landry Parish, Louisiana in 1830. He and his wife Jane Dalton received title to a league of land in Austin's third colony in January of 1832.

Jane was first married at the age of 16 by provisional bond to James Earle. They were divorced three years later and had no children. In April of 1840, Jane married John Owens. The couple moved from Fort Bend County to Harris County sometime before 1850 and settled in the Clear Creek area. They moved into Old Place after purchasing the property from J.D. Waters. The Owens family enlarged the house and purchased land from the Thomas Choate acreage nearby. They used their land for running cattle, as had the Vinces and the Duers before them. The couple had eight children, six of whom survived infancy. John Owens died in 1864 and Jane moved to Harrisburg, Texas. In March of 1871, Jane sold the property to Joseph Davis.⁷

F. The Davis Family, 1871-1970

The Davis family named the structure "Old Place." The first owner was Joseph Davis, who bought the house in 1871. In 1885, following his wife's desire to move to Galveston, he deeded the property to his daughter Mary. Mary was married to E. T. Waters and the couple had two children. Mr. Waters was a sickly man and died in 1895, leaving Mary to care for the children herself. Mary adjusted to her new situation with determination and strength. She raised cattle on the property and according to family tradition owned the first herd of

⁵ Weiland

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

registered Brahma cattle in the area. After discovering that many of her cattle were being killed or injured by negligent ranch hands, she began supervising their activities herself. She was also known to take part in roping and branding the cattle. When hoof and mouth disease wiped out her entire herd, she simply started over, increasing the herd over time.

Mary took the care of her children as seriously as she took ranching. She had a schoolhouse built on her land and hired a teacher so that her children could attend school. It was also Mary who oversaw the cemetery where her father was buried in 1888.

In 1905, Mary married Thomas Linder and moved to League City, where she owned additional property. The Linders were devout Methodists, so Mary allowed Old Place to be used for revival meetings. The house became known as "the Preacher's house."

Mary died in 1928 and her daughter, Mabel Estes Waters Perkins, took over ownership of Old Place. Mabel gave Old Place to The Heritage Society in 1970.⁸

2. The Old Three Hundred

The Old Three Hundred were the original settlers who received land grants in Stephen F. Austin's first colony in Texas, which extended along the rich bottomlands of the Brazos, Colorado, and San Bernard rivers. The area reached from the vicinity of present-day Brenham, Navasota, and La Grange, Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. In 1821, Moses Austin, Stephen's father, received a permit from the Spanish to settle 300 families in Texas. His death a short time later prevented him from realizing his plans. Taking his father's place, Stephen traveled to San Antonio and met with Antonio Maria Martinez, the Spanish governor. Governor Martinez recognized Stephen as his father's successor and Stephen began making plans to find willing colonists. By the summer of 1824 most of the Old Three Hundred had made their way to Texas. Between the years of 1823 and 1824, Austin and land commissioner Baron de Bastrop issued 272 land titles. Bastrop was called away in 1824 and was not replaced until 1827. At that time, Gaspar Flores de Abrego, the new commissioner, issued the remaining titles. The colonization decree required that all the lands granted to settlers should be occupied and improved within two years. Most of the colonizers complied with the terms, as only seven of the grants were forfeited.

These families are to Texas what the Mayflower settlers are to Massachusetts or the Jamestown survivors are to Virginia. Among The Old Three Hundred is the man credited with building Old Place, John R. Williams.

3. The Heritage Society

⁸ Weiland

The Heritage Society formed in 1954 as a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of Houston's built heritage. The organization formed to save Kellum-Noble House, which was constructed in 1847. Kellum-Noble House is in its original location and is part of what is now known as Sam Houston Park. Over the years, The Heritage Society has moved eight structures to the park: Nichols-Rice-Cherry House, constructed in 1850 and moved to the park in 1959; San Felipe Cottage, constructed in 1868 and moved to the park in 1962; Pillot House, constructed in 1868 and moved to the park in 1965; St. John Church, constructed in 1891 and moved to the park in 1968; Old Place, constructed in 1823 and moved to the park in 1970; Staiti House, constructed in 1915 and moved to the park in 1986; Yates House, constructed in 1870 and moved to the park in 1994; and 4th Ward Cottage, constructed as early as 1866 and moved to the park in 2002. The Heritage Society manages these nine historic structures, which are open to the public for tours Tuesday through Sunday.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General statement:

1. Architectural character: Old Place is a one story, one room dwelling which rests on a pier and beam foundation. The structure reflects early 19th century dwellings of the Texas frontier, with its unpainted cedar clapboard siding, tree stump foundation piers, and simple design. Old Place underwent several additions which covered the original one room structure with new walls, additional rooms, and new finishes. During restoration by The Heritage Society in the early 1970s, the original lintel, the basic frame construction, the original window sills, and wooden pegs on the walls were uncovered.

2. Condition of fabric: The current condition of Old Place is good to excellent. The house underwent major restoration in the early 1970s when it was moved to Sam Houston Park, and again when it was moved to its current location in the park after severe flooding in 2001. It has been properly maintained since.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Old Place is a one story, one room structure measuring approximately 36 feet by 26 feet, including the front porch.

2. Foundations: Old Place rests on a pier and beam foundation of tree stumps.

3. Walls: The walls are of unpainted cedar clapboard, laid in horizontal planks with 4"-6" exposure.

4. Structural system, framing: Old Place was constructed using the braced-frame technique with mortise and tenon jointure. The studs and beams are hand hewn cedar. The 4 x 4 corner studs, placed in upright position from floor to ceiling, are braced in a lock-joint by two short 4 x 4 timbers on either side about three feet from the floor and locked again to the 8 x 8 floor sill.

5. Porches, stoops: A replica porch was constructed during the 1970 restoration using evidence from logs in the attic of the house that had been cut to receive a truss. The porch is supported by rough hewn cedar supports and runs the entire length of the front (west) façade of the structure.

6. Chimneys: A replica mudcat chimney is centered on the north façade of the structure.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The doorways are framed simply, with no decorative trim. The doors are not original to the house, but were made from reclaimed wood. The doors are made of four vertical slats which are braced on the interior. The knobs of the doors are made of wood and operate with wooden latches.

b. Windows and shutters: Old Place has three windows along its front (west) façade and three windows directly across these on the east façade. Each window has a single shutter that is held open or closed by wooden latches.

8. Roof:

a. Shape, covering: Old Place has a side gabled roof that is covered in cedar shakes. The west eave of the roof extends over the front porch.

b. Cornice, eaves: The roof does not have a cornice. The front (west) eave extends to cover the front porch. The east eave extends only slightly.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. First Floor: Old Place is a single room dwelling with a cooking area to the north and a sleeping area to the south. A door and three windows line the east and west walls and a fireplace is located on the north wall. The south wall has no openings.

2. Flooring: The flooring is variable width pine that runs from north to south.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceiling are unfinished, exposing the back side of the clapboard siding and the rafters of the roof.

4. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: No interior doors exist in the structure.

b. Windows: The sills of the windows are cut into the framing members of the structure. Lexan has been installed in each window by The Heritage Society. Originally, the windows had no glazing.

5. Decorative features and trim: The structure is extremely utilitarian and has no decorative features or trim.
6. Hardware: Aside from the hinges of the doors and the shutters, all hardware is made of wood.
7. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: The structure has no heating or air conditioning system. All ventilation is accomplished through opening the doors and windows.
 - b. Lighting: Electricity was added to the structure during the 1970 restoration. Modern lighting, including canister lights in the corners and spotlights in the rafters, is not original to the house but is used for security and tour purposes by The Heritage Society.
 - c. Plumbing: None
8. Site:
 - a. Historic landscape design: The land on which Old Place sat was used primarily for running cattle. It is unlikely that landscaping was designed.
 - b. Outbuildings: In January of 2010, The Heritage Society added an outhouse behind Old Place. The outhouse is new construction and was constructed utilizing reclaimed wood.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural drawings:

*Drawings from the 1970 restoration of Old Place by Denny & Ray, AIA
Architects and Planners

B. Early views: From The Heritage Society Photograph Collection

*Photographs of the structure in its original location before it was moved to Sam Houston Park and restored by The Heritage Society, c.1968

*Photographs of Old Place post restoration, c. 1971

C. Interviews

Harvin C. Moore, September 24, 1992, Stagecoach Inn in Chappel Hill, TX,
conducted by June A. Begeman, from the Collection of The Heritage Society.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary Sources:

Abstract of Land Titles of Texas, Vol. I, Galveston.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. B, p. 71. Recorded October 19, 1825.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. I, p. 342. Recorded March 19, 1844.

Fort Bend County Probate Records, Vol. B (1), p. 705. Recorded February 24, 1851.

Fort Bend County Probate Records, Vol. B (1), p. 705. Recorded September 29, 1851.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. Q, p. 87. Recorded April 19, 1852.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. Q, p. 88. Recorded May 26, 1852.

Harris County Deed Records, Vol. 9A, p. 411. Recorded March 6, 1871.

Denny & Ray, AIA Architects and Planners. *Restoration Drawings of "The Old Place" for the Harris County Heritage Society*. 23 November 1970. The Heritage Society Master Files, Houston, TX.

2. Secondary Sources

Unknown Author. "Title to Property." Old Place File, File "OP: Title & Deed Information," The Heritage Society Master Files, Houston, TX.

Weiland, Linda S. "Old Place," 30 March 1989. Old Place File, File "OP: Building History," The Heritage Society Master Files, Houston, TX.

The Heritage Society Docent Training Materials

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was funded by a grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation. The project was initiated by Kimberly Wolfe, Buildings Curator for The Heritage Society. Courtney Miller, preservation consultant, provided the field measurements, and Paul Homeyer of Gensler provided the final measured drawings. Photography was done by Michael Fry, photographer. The project historian and coordinator was Kimberly Wolfe, who conducted research necessary for completing the historical narrative portion of the project and oversaw the entirety of the project. The project began in October of 2009 and was completed in the fall of 2010.