

## HOUSTON HERITAGE

# Plow and locomotive on city seal illustrate origins of Houston

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In 1840, Houston's city fathers adopted a seal. Realizing that other cities had an official symbol to define their character, the Houston City Council selected a design presented by Dr. Francis Moore Jr.

It has always been assumed that the seal adopted on Feb. 24, 1840, was the one pictured at the right. But recent research has suggested that Moore's design portrayed a pastoral scene, one which featured an ox grazing in a field of grass and bluebonnets. This fact cannot be confirmed, since few records containing a seal have survived from the early years of our city's existence.

However, the current seal — whether it was the first or second — did appear as early as 1869. It clearly speaks to the roots of Houston's economy and to the visionary leadership of its citizens.

Francis Moore was one of those leaders. As editor and part-owner of the *Telegraph and Texas Register*, the leading newspaper in the Republic of Texas, Moore promoted the commercial development of the fledgling community of Houston. As Houston's second mayor in 1838, he also led the government in refining the city's position as a growing trade center.

It was characteristic of Moore's intense interest in the welfare of Houston that, on a trip to his native New York, he had a die-cutter produce a seal for his city. In return for his ingenuity, Mayor Charles Bigelow and members of City Council paid Moore

\$50. And Houston had an official symbol.

In 1940 — exactly 100 years later — *Houston Magazine* described the city seal as "beautifully simple and beautifully plain in meaning." It further explained the design as portraying, at its conception, "the Lone Star, symbol of the newborn nation of the West; the noble locomotive, heralding Houston's spirit of

progress; and the humble plow, symbol of the agricultural empire of Texas from which Houston would draw her wealth — by the iron rails."

If the current design was indeed an 1840 creation, it reveals a large dose of "looking to the future." While a charter had been granted in 1839 to a group of Houstonians who were interested in de-

veloping an area railroad, a rail line did not actually pass through Houston until 1856. However, the promotion of rail transportation was always foremost in the minds of city leaders. By 1882, 10 railroad lines converged on Houston.

Agriculture provided the core of Houston's economy in these early years. Cotton and sugar cane — and later rice and timber — were the major products exported from Houston. Numerous cotton brokerage firms opened. Sugar mills were established nearby. Related industries sprang up to service the commercial activity fueled by the transporting of goods by rail.

This flurry of commercial activity created a demand for more business services. As a result, banks and law firms were formed. Interestingly, most of the bankers had begun their careers in the cotton business.

By 1900, Houston had a population of 44,000. Its cotton firms were handling millions of cotton bales and the city had become the major railroad center in the Southwest.

Through the years there have been occasional attempts to "update" the city seal by depicting skyscrapers, airplanes, oil wells and even rockets. However, that simple 19th century seal accurately and vividly reflects the vision, persistence and dedication of those who laid the foundation for today's city. It really did begin with a plow and a steam locomotive. ■

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