NOMINATION FOR WILLIAM HARLEY GANDY DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AWARD

As chairman of the Montgomery County Historical Commission, I am pleased to nominate the **History Taskforce**, a Texas 5013c nonprofit corporation, for the 2025 *William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award.* I am submitting the following list of activities for the 2023 and 2024-2025 years that I believe justify this award.

The *William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award is* presented at the discretion of the Montgomery County Historical Commission to those special individuals, corporations or organizations who have exhibited distinguished leadership, initiative, and dedication to the preservation of the history of Montgomery County, Texas. The winner of the award must have shown significant accomplishments in the field of historical preservation and research. Such achievements must be notable and have made an important contribution to the preservation and/or advancement of the history of Montgomery County.

1. Preservation planning

The History Taskforce undertook the planning and the restoration of the Recorded State Landmark Thomas Chapel United Methodist Church in Willis, Texas, in early 2023. Over 2023-24 the group raised about $90,000 in private funding (with about 24% reimbursement from the Montgomery County Historical Commission and about 1% crowd funding) to rebuild the 1899 African American church, including foundation, plumbing, heating and air conditioning units and duct work, gas line replacement, reconstructing the bell tower and replace the front façade of the building. The project was completed in August, 2024. (*See attached detailed report of the church's restoration submitted to the Montgomery County Historical Commission*)

2. Historic site identification

A. The Campbell Cemetery in Montgomery County, a black cemetery where slaves from Danville, Texas, plantations and their descendants were buried in the 1890s to the early 1960s, was rediscovered by the Taskforce. After searching for the known black cemeteries in the area to find the burial places of the six builders named on the cornerstone at Willis historic black Thomas Chapel, they interviewed numerous elderly black residents of the area looking for a forgotten cemetery. During this process, they discovered that one interviewee as a child had attended a black Baptist church that had been destroyed during the construction of Interstate 45 in about 1952. This 90-year-old senior said that burials from this church were in a cemetery about a ½ mile west of where the church had been located. Taskforce investigators suspected that this might be the cemetery known to the state of Texas as Campbell, but the state did not know the exact location and the elderly Willis resident was only able to describe a general area.

The events that led to it being forgotten began in 1960 when the white landowners fenced off the area and forbade anyone to enter the property. Over the next 60 years, the site was overgrown by trees and underbrush. In about 2022, a large national real estate development company purchased approximately 1200 acres which included the cemetery and began development of a gated luxury community for 50+ seniors. They were aware of the cemetery because it was on the plat maps as the J &M cemetery. Taskforce inquiries to the company about the existence of a cemetery on the property went unanswered. The Taskforce was able to discover that it was the "lost" Campbell cemetery by requesting from the fire department a copy of the plans that the company had filed as public information to get the permits to build the gated community. Taskforce members went to the site and insisted on being able to visit the site per state law. When they finally gained access to the site, they immediately discovered numerous tombstones, including four of the men listed on the Thomas Chapel cornerstone that they had been trying to locate. The management of the company had not destroyed any of the cemetery but were not open to preserving and marking it because they believed it might draw people to visit it inside their gated development.

B. The technique of interviewing elderly black seniors has proven to be a good technique for finding forgotten burial places in Walker County. In talking to seniors in New Waverly, Taskforce members found a man who recalled a cemetery next to a current Macedonia Baptist church, but today there is no sign of a cemetery there. People affiliated with the church said they had no memory of this, but several seniors in town told stories of having played among the tombstones on their way home from a black school that had been nearby. Taskforce investigators began a search through county records and death certificates and were able to verify by name two people buried there in the 1940s. A record book from the now closed Huntsville Funeral home was found in the New Waverly public library and two more burials from the same time period were discovered to be in that cemetery, even though the death certificates said only New Waverly as the burial place. Since death certificates can only be searched by individual names, not cemeteries, the Taskforce is now building out family trees for names to search, since the cultural tradition is to bury people near their relatives.

C. The Taskforce has identified one individual John Alexander, a black WWI veteran who served in Europe, recorded on a death certificate as being buried in the "Fisher Cemetery". This cemetery is known to the landowner as a "slave" cemetery on the former Fisher plantation that was located along Hwy 75 just north of New Waverly. The landowner said that there were no markers there but refused to allow Taskforce investigators to go to the site. At the beginning of June 2025, a timber clear-cutting operation began to clear all the land where this cemetery was thought to be, apparently for some kind of development project. Since John Alexander was survived by many years by his parents who were buried many years later in the Macedonia cemetery in New Waverly, it is believed that he was buried there because his grandparents or other relatives may have been enslaved and buried there. Research on this is on-going.

D. In February 2025, a Conroe resident told Taskforce members that he grew up across the road from a "slave" cemetery off Mount Zion Road in Walker County, giving the exact location. The landowner was contacted. She knew about it and invited investigators out to her rural property. She said her parents had purchased the property in 1924 from two families who were large slaveholders

prior to the Civil War, and she believed that all the burials there were before 1924. After an examination of the site, evidence was found of numerous burials with broken concrete curbing, but only two intact stones. One had a legible name and date; the other was unreadable. Cattle were being run in that location and the destruction of markers in the location may have occurred by repeated "bush hogging" of the location. A family tree has been done on the one marker that was readable and the search of death certificates of that person's relatives is underway. This research is difficult as most death certificates in that area state only "Mt. Zion community." There is also a large black cemetery a few miles away in Montgomery County at the site of the old Mt. Zion Baptist Church. People buried there also have "Mt. Zion community" on their death certificates. Search is underway for funeral home records that might be more specific about which cemetery people were buried in.

3. Preservation of significant archival or artifact collections

In partnership with Familysearch.org, the History Taskforce has been given the use of five specialized digitization cameras and computers with the necessary specialized software for recording large volumes of historic documents, pictures, and other material found in personal or institutional archives. Three of these units have been for several months at the Alabama-Coushatta Reservation east of Livingston for their use for digitizing their tribal archives. This is not a direct project of the History Taskforce.

Digitization projects in 2023-25

1. **Archives and personal papers of Bessie Price Owen**
   A longtime educator in the Montgomery area, Bessie Price Owen died in August 2009, at age 90 leaving her extensive archive of materials to her niece Catherine Price. For several years Ms. Owen also served as the chair of the Montgomery County Historical Commission and was considered an expert county historian.
   Ms. Owen helped organize the Montgomery Historical Society in the city of Montgomery. She was also recognized for her research and worked frequently with the Texas Historical Commission to gain recognition for the numerous historic homes and buildings in Montgomery that today bear Texas state historical markers and plaques. She was also instrumental in the development of Cedar Brake Park in the city.
   Over her lifetime of local historical research, Bessie Price Owen amassed an extensive collection of history with documents, photos, pieces of historic currency and more. Of interest among the collection is also documentation of her Price family cattle brand.
   Items in her personal collection filled 12 large boxes including family histories, wills, copies of documents from the Republic of Texas and early statehood, histories of local churches and schools, and personal letters that talked about life in early Montgomery. Ms. Owen interviewed many people who have since died who were able to give detailed information about the area. Audio tapes of interviews she conducted from the 1970s and 80s were also digitized by converting them to MP3 files. (about 9000 images)

https://www.yourconroenews.com/neighborhood/moco/news/article/Collection-of-Montgomery-area-history-is-digitized-17218122.php

2. **Archives of the James Price family in Montgomery**
   Dr. James H. Price came to Montgomery County from Tennessee in about 1838 and quickly became a successful farmer/rancher, hotel owner, and businessman. His descendant Catherine Price had an extensive collection of documents, letters and personal papers from Price and his various relatives that shed light on the development and on prominent people in the early city of Mongomery and the economic development of the area. (about 1500 images)

3. **Archives of Nat Hart Davis Museum, Montgomery, TX**
   Nat Hart Davis arrived in Montgomery, Texas in 1840. He was a prominent attorney, community leader and judge. The Davis collection contains the organizational documents and history of the city's Montgomery Historical Society, in addition to files about prominent citizens in the early Montgomery area. It contains documents about the numerous historic homes in the town and about the design of the first Texas state flag. (about 2,000 images)

https://www.historytaskforce.org/post-office-ledger.html#/

4. **House documents of Magnolia House**
   This collection contains the documents about the construction of the "Magnolia" home completed in 1854 for Peter Willis, who arrived in Montgomery from New York followed by his brother Richard. There are also family letters and other business documents. The two brothers became extremely wealthy beginning with land development with their Texas Land Company. The city of Willis was named for the brothers whose company had contracts with the Galveston railroad development interests to lay out towns along the railroad's route. They were into farming, ranching, investments, banking, and many types of mercantile businesses. Members of the family moved into wealthy business circles in New York and Washington. (500 images)

5. **Archives of William Harley and Martha Gandy**
   William Harley Gandy, a Navy veteran in WWII, came home to earn his Master's degree from the University of Houston, where he wrote the first comprehensive history of Montgomery County as his thesis in 1952. He became an outstanding public school educator and eventually became Chairman of the Montgomery County Historical Commission. His wife Martha supported him in his historical research and projects. Included in their archives were thousands of documents, pictures, books and maps. After Martha's death, the Taskforce digitized 22,000 images and placed them on Familysearch.org so that they would continue to be available for free to anyone with a computer anywhere in the world.

6. **Archives of the Spring Historical Museum in Spring, Harris County**
   The collection of the Spring Museum has documents reflecting the town's beginning as a German farming community that bought land along Spring Creek during the Texas Republic period in answer to advertising in Europe for cheap land. The communities of Klein and Tomball were later expansions of this German community. The collection contains early documents in German, concerning weddings, baptisms, and other church related activities. Numerous German family

histories, pictures and documents show the police/fire departments origins and documents about the early railroads that were important in the area's development. (about 5,000 images)

https://www.yourconroenews.com/news/houston-texas/trending/article/spring-history-database-documents-museum

4. Research that leads to a greater understanding of state or local history

The Greenwood plantation database project

This project from the History Taskforce that was begun in 2023 is now helping Black families link to their ancestors who were enslaved in Montgomery County.

The project started during the pandemic when a Taskforce member was working from home researching online records to see if there was a database for slaves at any plantation in Montgomery County. Knowing that any information that survived from before the Civil War on slaves very rarely had any personal information, such as name, age, or family relationships. However, deep in the archives of the UT Brisco Center in Austin, online searching revealed 18 surviving record books from the Greenwood Plantation in Danville.

The existence of these books was known but the fact that one of these was a volume labeled "Negro Records" got the attention of the Taskforce researcher. Since this researcher was a retired professor at SHSU, she was able to get the archivists in Austin to scan and email the volume to her since the Austin facility was shut down because of Covid.

The book proved to be a gold mine of information about the slaves held by Green M. Wood, the man in charge of running that plantation. He was managing this farm for the owner, his father, who lived in Alabama. The book included names, ages, names of the children's parents, births and deaths, and sales and purchases of slaves at this location - material for Wood's reports to his father.

With this kind of information, the Taskforce researchers knew that family trees could be built for each of the 123 enslaved individuals in the book. If this was done, many black families could trace their ancestry back past the roadblock that slavery often presented to black researchers. The goal for the researchers was to work through building family trees for these 123 people from prior to Emancipation to the 1950 Census. They knew it would be an enormous effort, and they organized a network of LDS volunteers to help.

A Taskforce member with ties to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was able to arrange for help from volunteers across the United States. This now completed research paints a picture of the Black community during this time frame and explains how the group of slaves from Greenwood are now linked to Thomas Chapel United Methodist Church and Rest Haven Cemetery in Willis. Many black people living in northern Montgomery County and southern Walker County are direct descendants of slaves.

Taskforce researchers believe that there were about 75 plantations in Montgomery County prior to Emancipation. They believe that the three largest plantations — which included Greenwood — were in northern Montgomery County centered around the now vanished Danville community. Nothing remains of Greenwood today.

A course named "Linking African American Families in Montgomery County, Texas" was presented for the first time on March 4, 2023, at the TexasConnect@rootstech genealogical conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. The database is now the model used nationwide by LDS and its genealogy website, FamilySearch.org, to help other Black families connect to their ancestors.

The History Taskforce was informed on July 1, 2025 that the Family Search organization is forming groups based on the Taskforce model by working in the African American community to guide their research of underserved ethic and cultural groups in the Pacific, including New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Devea in the Philippines.

https://www.historytaskforce.org/slave-database.html#/

Conclusion

As additional supporting documentation concerning this marvelous organization, I am including below (1) a summary of the members and activities of the History Taskforce and (2) a detailed report on the History Taskforce's painstaking restoration of the Thomas Chapel Church, the historic RTHL-designated 1899 African American church that is referenced above.

As can be seen from the above impressive body of work accomplished in a relatively short period of time by these passionate volunteers, their collaborative efforts are contributing significantly to the genealogical methodology and research of enslaved people in East Texas. Furthermore, the History Taskforce has become a major resource for our Montgomery County Historical Commission and for many other area historical organizations as we endeavor to better understand and preserve Texas history, not only in Montgomery County but far beyond our county's borders. Therefore, I cannot imagine a more deserving organization to receive Montgomery County's *William Harley Gandy Distinguished Service Award* than the **History Taskforce.**

Submitted by Larry L. Foerster, Chair
Montgomery County Historical Commission
Email: foerster@dfcllp.com
Phone: 936-537-9070

The History Taskforce

History is a perishable commodity; when it's gone, it's gone forever.

Who we are:

- A small group of volunteer members, selected and invited to join because they have expert skill sets and experience in a particular field

- Several members in the organization have multiple credentials. Included in the current skill sets are a university professor, four members of county Historical Commissions, one local historical society president, a LIDAR expert, three genealogists with over 50 years of experience each, public record experts, and a public relations/media expert

- Members serve as "history consultants" to history organizations or educational groups

- Members of the Taskforce pay all their own expenses and receive no compensation from groups they assist. For most members this is their full-time job.

- The History Taskforce is a 501c3 Texas nonprofit corporation

What we do:

- Consult with groups about strategic planning for their organization's continued growth and the growth of their programs

- Advise about historical event planning and marketing

- Advise about finding funds for programs

- Search out original documents in danger of being lost/destroyed and historical sites that may be in danger of destruction by unregulated commercial land development

- Digitize records and papers for preservation and make them available for researchers and the public by placing them on Familysearch.org or Ancestry.com and on library and museum websites

- Conduct information gathering through oral/video interviews with "national treasure" individuals in communities, and build relationships and interest in history among groups not usually involved in these activities

- Work with academics who are researching particular areas of history, people, or events. Often assisting in book publishing with research and graphic layouts

- Work with local school districts to develop programs that promote an interest in history.

List of the members of the History Taskforce:

Ann Meador

Cindy Cheney

Cynthia Stubblefield Walker

Jack Carrel

Annette Kerr

Melissa Oman

Darrell Hebert

Kirsten Beard

Rod Hansen

Edited: June, 2025

Thomas Chapel United Methodist Church

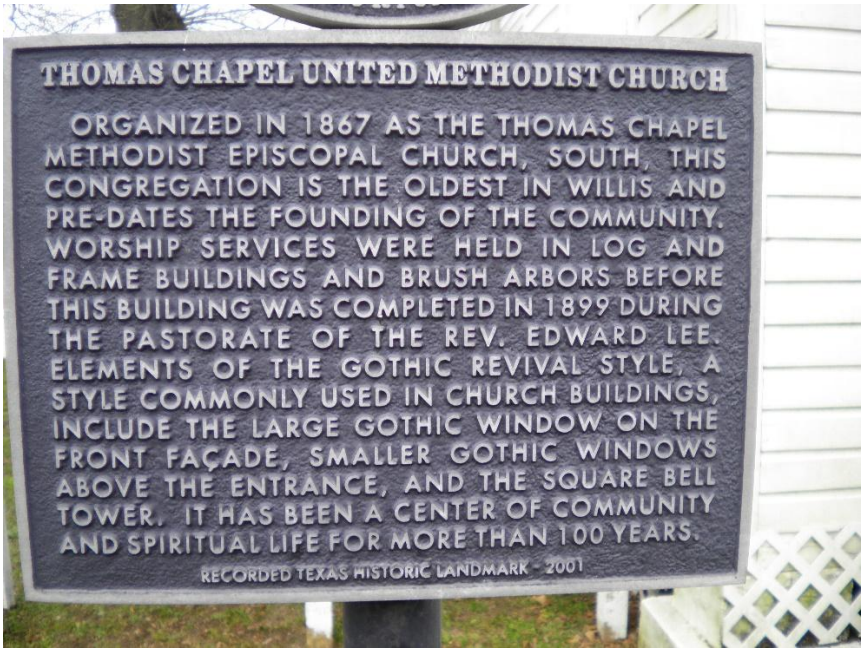
512 W. Martin Luther King Blvd

Willis, Texas 77378

2021-2023

Thomas Chapel UMC is believed to be the oldest church building in continuous use in Montgomery County, Texas, and has been designated a Texas Landmark building. On this site, slaves from the large plantations at Danville were given permission to hold church services in a brush arbor beginning in the 1830s. After Emancipation, these former slaves constructed a log church structure for worship services on this site before the current city of Willis, Texas existed.

When the International and Great Northern Railroad bought a right-of-way through the county in 1870s, they hired the Texas Land Company to plat the town, officially giving the log-cabin worship site to the congregation for a church. In 1899, the sons and grandsons of these formerly enslaved people of the Greenwood Plantation and other plantation near Danville replaced the log-cabin church with the current Recorded Texas Landmark church built with their own labor. Their names are inscribed on the cornerstone of the building.



The history of recent restoration efforts for Thomas Chapel

This church has always held a place of great importance in the city of Willis and the surrounding area. It had a large congregation where all types of community events took place. It served as a school in early days where adult community members were taught to read and write because it was against the law for enslaved people to be taught. There were numerous children's programs. It was the center of activities to empower people to register to vote during the Civil Right era. The majority of members of the church are traditionally buried in the large Willis Rest Haven Cemetery a few blocks from the church, so there is a strong community connection to that cemetery with church members serving on its board.

In 2004, the church applied to the Texas Historical Commission for a grant to do some restoration to the building. The Austin staff evaluated the building, determined things that needed to be done, and awarded a matching grant of about $57,000. The church was unable to raise the required matching funds so it did not receive the money. Records show that they received no assistance from any outside groups in raising the funds in 2004.

As development in the city of Willis has rapidly increased in the past 20 years, the building continued to age and lose members to newer churches that have opened nearby. The city of Willis' contribution to this project was the waiver of permit fees for construction. The church sits in the center of the African American neighborhood and its congregation now consists of older African Americans. Since the spring of 2020, they have been holding services remotely because of the Covid epidemic.

In the fall of 2021, two members of the Montgomery County Historical Commission who were aware of the threat to this landmark building began to plan for Phase I of its restoration, the repair and leveling of the building's foundation.

Leveling the building before and after

With a contribution from a private donor who was a member of the 501c3 nonprofit History Taskforce, the Heritage Museum of Montgomery County sponsored the leveling of the building and was reimbursed with funding from the Montgomery County Historical Commission. Following this work, the Heritage Museum board decided that they did not want to continue supporting this project.

The History Taskforce organization knew that Phase I was the just the first necessary step, but much more restoration work needed to be done. Using private funds, they began Phase II of the chapel's restoration. They applied for and were awarded some reimbursement funds from the Montgomery County Historical Commission.

This work could not have been accomplished without the master carpentry work of Reverend Orbra Toliver, pastor of Toliver Memorial Church of God in Willis. The church, named after his father Reverend Chester A. Toliver, is near the Willis Rest Haven Cemetery and was built by his father and him. Rev. Toliver spent over three years working on this building, working at a fraction of the rate that he normally receives for his work. Like the men who built the original building 123 years earlier, he said he works to help the community.

The Phase II work fell into several distinct projects:

1. The rear entry handicap ramp

Although the oldest part of the church had little damage to its foundation after 123 years, the 1952 addition of a community room at the rear of the building was not as soundly built. Considerable damage to foundation beams was found, and this section needed to be raised by about 8 inches on the northwest corner. All this was repaired in Phase I. Because the back of the building was raised, it was necessary to rebuild the handicap ramp that led to the back entry. The original ramp did not meet code and was not in useable condition, so it was replaced. Below is the original ramp and the new replacement ramp.

The original handicap ramp

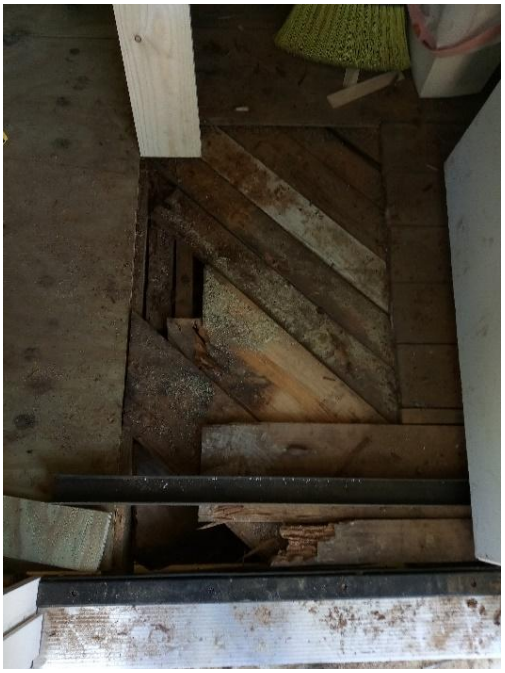
The new handicap ramp

2. The men's bathroom steps and door

When the 1952 addition was built, the ladies' bathroom had an entry from inside the building, but the men's room was entered from an exterior door. The floor to the men's room was rotted from water coming into the building under the door. The toilets in both restrooms were cracked and leaking and were replaced with donated fixtures from Full Force Plumbing.

The original men's room door. The steps to it had collapsed.

New door and steps. A second handrail was installed after this photo.



Original rotted floor in men's room

New sheet vinyl floor in men's room donated by members of the History Taskforce

3. Extending the sewer pipes and replacing all the water pipes and restroom fixtures

Raising the building required extending the sewer pipes to the toilets. All the plumbing pipes going to sinks and toilets, hot water heater, and kitchen sink were old and leaking and were replaced. A new insulated cut-off box was installed where water comes into the building from the street.

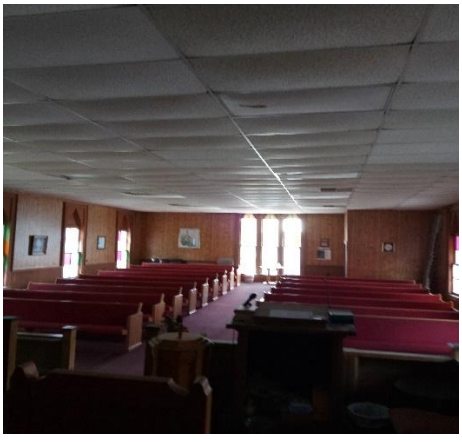
4. Air conditioning ducts

The building was originally built with a tongue and groove bead board vaulted ceiling which remains intact. Some years ago when the building was air conditioned, a tile dropped-ceiling in a frame was installed. This became a problem when raccoons were able to get into the ceiling and nest in the insulation around the A/C ducts.

The photo shows the vaulted ceiling with old light fixtures and in the upper right the duct work damaged by raccoons. It was necessary to replace all the duct work.

This photo shows the main air ducts about to be installed. This size of duct needed is no longer commonly used and had to be located online and shipped in. It also shows another view of the original vaulted ceiling of the building.

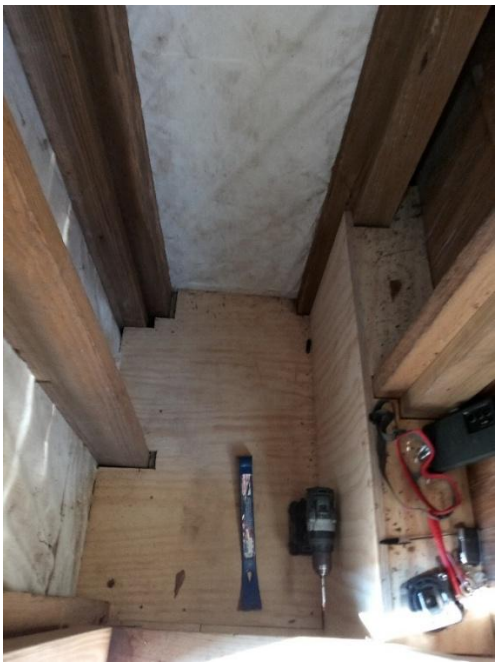
When this was completed, the new ceiling tiles had to be installed.



5. Repairing raccoon damage to building

In order to prevent additional raccoon damage to the building, their entry way into the building had to be discovered. After searching all through the building to find a spot where they could enter, a wall in the foyer that held the bell tower ladder was taken down. A very large hole was found in the floor where raccoons had gnawed through the floor and were climbing the bell tower ladder to get into the space where the air ducts were located. Live traps were set out to capture any raccoons that remained in the building.

Repairing the raccoon entry hole was difficult because the work space was so small.



6. Replacing the lattice work around the foundation of the building

As a safe guard against animals getting under the building, a wooden frame work was built between all the piers holding up the building. It was anchored with bolts to each pier. Wire was secured on each section and then white lattice was secured to the outside.

Lattice Framework

Finished trim

7. Replacing the back entry door

The door on the rear entry to the original 1952 addition to the building had been improperly installed. It could not be properly locked. The original door was taken down, the door frame rebuilt with a new threshold, and a new knob and lock were installed.

Rev. Toliver replaces the original threshold of the door which had been constructed from a sawmill slab.

Rev. Toliver rebuilding the door frame.

8. Replacing the gas piping to the heating system

All the original galvanized gas piping beneath the building and connections to the gas heating units in the building were inspected and repaired as needed by Latino Plumbing. New vents to those units were installed on the roof.

9. Restoration of four windows in fellowship hall built 1952

The frames of the four windows in the fellowship hall addition built onto the rear (north side) of the building in 1952 had completely rotted. The glass panes had fallen out of some of them and had been replaced with plywood or cardboard. The unusual age of the windows, which were salvaged from the demolition of other local buildings when the original construction of the addition began, required that they be reproduced by a skilled carpenter by hand.

Old damaged windows in fellowship hall

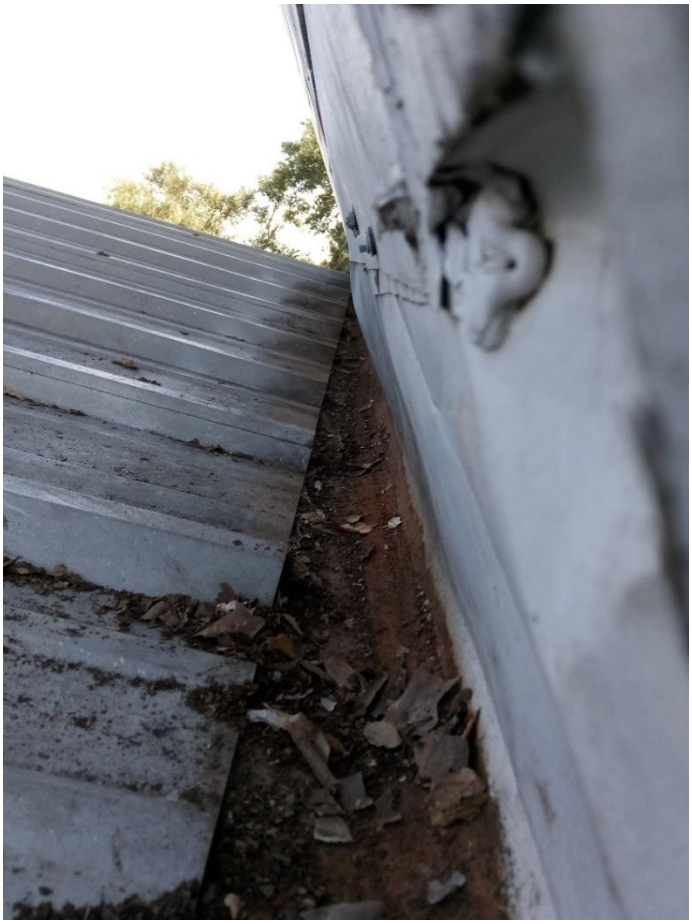
Installing new hand- crafted windows

New windows installed in fellowship hall

Phase III of the Thomas Chapel project:

1. Repairs to the standing metal seam roof – approximate cost $17,000

Several roofing companies examined the roof and found that the metal sheets on the 25+-year-old roof are in relatively good condition. The 20,000 fasteners that secure the sheets, however, have rusted away and had to be replaced and sealed. The flashing around the bell tower had leaks, allowing water to leak into the sanctuary and run down the façade of the building. This problem was identified by THC in 2004 when the church asked for and received a matching grant. The church could not raise the $28,000 matching money and so the grant was not funded. The problem still existed 20 years later and had caused the siding on the front exterior of the building to rot. These repairs were made in early January, 2024.



Flashing around the bell tower created leaks inside the sanctuary and water damage to the exterior of the front of the building. The flashing has been repaired

In mid-January 2024, Gulf Storms Roofing and Construction repaired the roof by replacing 20,000 metal fasteners and the new flashing around the bell tower. Due to the steepness of the roof, special safety harnesses had to be used by the workers.

Repairs to the church roof

A bullet hole in the roof was also discovered and repaired.

2. Repairs to the water damaged front façade of the building – approximate cost is $19,000

Although the Texas Historical Commission in 2004 granted a matching grant to the project, the church could not raise the $28,000 to take advantage of that opportunity. The History Taskforce in 2023 applied again for a grant to correct the 20-year-old issue in this Landmark building but this effort produced no funding for the roof repairs or to repair damage to the façade of the building.

Water damage to façade right of front door

This damage occurred for the most part on the front wall of the building because of a 25+-year-old roof leak. The rotted wood needed to be replaced and the wall caulked and painted.

Condition of the façade became critical

On January 29, 2024, the History Taskforce felt that work needed on the façade had become urgent. Due to lack of grant money for this project, the repairs to the façade of the RTHL church building were begun with personal funding from members of the History Taskforce and with ongoing

continuous fundraising efforts. Action on this issue needed to begin as soon as possible. Rotting boards were falling off the building and keeping water out of the sanctuary had become a real issue.

Gulf Storms and Construction begins removing the rotten façade of the RTHL building on Jan.29, 2024

Work in progress by January 30, 2024.

Southeast façade where some repairs have been completed, primed and painted. February 3, 2024.

New challenges to façade repair are discovered – Cost to repair $14,000

As with most buildings that are 125 years old, more problems are usually found when work begins. Because of the time that had passed since the church could not match a state grant offer in 2004, the water damage to the building continued for 20 additional years. During that time the vertical timbers supporting the bell tower rotted and had to be repaired. The History Taskforce had to seek funds to make those repairs. Support timbers at the base of the bell towers are original to the building and were placed there 125 years ago by the Greenwood plantation Freedman builders of this church. After all the years of water damage, they have well served their purpose. They were replaced to ensure the stability of the bell tower. Ron Saikowski of Quest Engineering was the pro bono consultant on this repair. Work on this repair began Feb 12, 2024.

Southwest corner support column of bell tower is water damaged and must be replaced.

The bell project at Thomas Chapel

The 30-inch bell in the bell tower rang for the last time in 1951 when the wooden supports holding the 500-pound bell in place rotted and the bell turned on its side in its metal cradle. Repairing this was a complex problem. The space in the top of the tower around the bell is about five feet square, not big enough for two men to lift the heavy bell. Rev. Toliver and Jason Brambaugh came up with a plan to build a heavy frame and use a "come along" winching device to raise it so that the supports could be repaired. The plan was successful.

A GoFundMe account paid for the restoration of the bell. A woman in Utah saw the project online and contributed $1,000 to repair the bell. She said that, as a preacher's small daughter in Utah, she remembered when someone stole the bell from her father's church, and she wanted to help replace this one.

Before repairs

The 500-pound bell that sits atop the church's bell tower was purchased by the new church for $60 in 1906 from the C. S. Bell Foundry in Hillsboro, Ohio. It was the best bell that foundry made at that time. The bell was cast and then delivered by rail freight to the Willis depot in 1906.

After repairs

After the front wall of the church was repaired, the medal cradle of the 1906 bell in the tower was braced with sturdy timbers so that it was once again functional to announce church services as it has done for over a century.

Press the link below to hear it ring in 2024 for the first time since 1951.

video of bell ringing.3gp

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The History Taskforce, a local 501c3 history working group, has undertaken to restore this historic Landmark building as funds become available or can be raised through grants and donations. Anyone who wants to help with this project can contact the History Taskforce at Historytaskforce9@gmail.com for further information or call Ann Meador at 281-731-8626. More information can be found on the Friends of Thomas Chapel Facebook page and at www.historytaskforce.org