

Sixth Floor Museum stands as monument to tragedy at a site many wanted destroyed

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In the months and years following the most terrible moments in Dallas' history, the notion of an exhibit focusing on the tragic death of a president seemed almost unfathomable in a city that only wanted to forget.

But almost 50 years after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza stands as something of a monument — taking an event that would haunt Dallas for decades and using it to create something both admirable and unflinching.

Of course, early on, few could have imagined that such an institution would ever exist. For many in Dallas, branded "the city of hate" and widely seen as somehow complicit in the president's assassination, the best thing that could have happened to the old Texas School Book Depository where the shots originated would have been a quick and complete demolition.

It almost happened in the early 1970s when the school book operation moved to another part of town, the Nashville promoter who acquired the warehouse defaulted on a loan, and some of Dallas' most prominent residents donated money to buy the old place and knock it down.

For many in Dallas, the book depository "was an eyesore, and a manifestation of evil," said Stephen Fagin, the museum's associate curator and oral historian and author of the new book *Assassination and Commemoration, JFK, Dallas, and The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza*.

Even Lindalyn Adams, whose leadership helped push the museum idea to completion, remembers bringing visitors downtown to see the sights but scrupulously avoiding the old warehouse.

“We had so many medical conventions here, and the local medical auxiliary would take care of the ladies, so I’d organize these bus tours. I’d point out John Neely Bryan’s cabin, and ‘Old Red,’ and then we’d pass the building, and the bus would list to one side,” Adams recalled. “They’d say, ‘Is that it? Is that it?’

“And there were always visitors in Dealey Plaza looking up at that window.”

It’s that window on the sixth floor where the Warren Commission says Lee Harvey Oswald fired the fatal shots.

In 1972, those who wanted to rid Dallas of this constant reminder of its worst day took the idea to the City Council for a demolition permit. The council rejected the idea on a 7-2 vote.

“They didn’t have the guts to knock it down,” said Conover Hunt, the museum’s project director, “but they sure as heck ignored it. I’ve always called their approach one of passive preservation.”

Eventually, Dallas County stepped in and bought the property for additional office space. Adams remembered her first visit to the place, when she was president of the Dallas County Historical Society.

“I went to that window and looked out — everything looked so close,” she said. “I’ve never handled a gun, but I remember thinking, ‘I could hit something from here.’”

Promise and approval

In 1977, Hunt was newly arrived in Dallas with a growing reputation for her skills in organizing museum exhibits.

One summer day, she took a call from Lon Hunter, an acquaintance and the curator for the Dallas Historical Society, who asked whether she could meet with Adams and Judson Shook, then head of facilities for Dallas County, on the sixth floor of the School Book Depository.

“The county had already bought the building, but they had to address the history,” Hunt said, “so we got a federal grant for \$8,000 or so to do a study and bring in specialists to

detail the history and what might need to be preserved before the county began converting the building for office space.”

They began by recording and preserving all kinds of materials — elements from the second-floor lunch room, the sign from the front of the building, even panels from the Hertz billboard on the roof, perhaps the building’s most conspicuous element and the one thing that might have been able to demolish the building all by itself.

“That sign was like a big sail attached to the building, and it had vibrated out all of the mortar on the top three floors and pretty much destroyed the parapet,” Hunt said. “And there were these giant ceiling beams over toward the front of the building, and they’d been twisted. We got them to agree to leave them, but they had to brace them, and they added a huge structural truss on the third floor.”

Shook, who had a passion for preservation, “was the hero in all of this,” Adams said.

“He had a vision that if the county acquired this building, that it be used in the finest and best way. It couldn’t just be a warehouse. It was his idea that the Commissioners Court should be placed in that building,” she said. “When you think how far-sighted that was, it’s just incredible.”

Adams and Shook were part of a tiny delegation from Dallas that traveled to Washington, D.C., hoping to win a place for the old warehouse on the National Register of Historic Places. They were to meet with Dr. William J. Murtagh, then keeper of the National Register, and happened to see him at an adjacent table when they had lunch.

“He sat down behind us, and I couldn’t help but hear what he said. He told the people he was with, ‘I have an interesting group coming from Dallas, and they want to put the School Book Depository on the National Register,’” Adams said. “And the people laughed and said, ‘Next they’ll want to put Watergate on the National Register.’”

When they met later in a conference room, “everyone’s arms were folded,” Adams said. “But because we had great plans for a potential exhibit, and Judson spoke so well, they started reliving where they were when they heard the news,” she said. “It was kind of an interesting episode, but it was kind of difficult.”

The go-ahead

Things weren't much easier at home. Adams and Hunt met with many of Dallas' most powerful leaders and were never certain of the reception they'd get.

Adams recalled a meeting with the man she remembers as "Mr. Dallas," John Stemmons.

"John was sitting behind that big desk of his — he was 6-4 — and he didn't say a word," she said. Finally, when the visitors finished talking, he spoke.

"It has to be done," Stemmons decided. "You girls go ahead."

But even with Stemmons' blessing, the planned museum remained a sensitive subject, Adams said.

"As far as some of my lifelong friends were concerned, I heard later that they thought I was crazy," she said. "But something had to be done, and it had to be done well in that very building."

The dream realized

Still, the museum project limped along until the mid-1980s, with some in town arguing it was "still too soon" for a project like this.

But in 1987, Lee Jackson became county judge and pledged his support.

"It was like Christmas and New Year's all together," Adams said.

And two years later, the museum opened. It was Feb. 11, 1989, a couple of months after the 25th anniversary of JFK's death. Hunt remembered the trepidation of those most deeply involved in the project.

"People would ask, 'Who's going to cover the opening?' and I said, 'the media.'

"But what if they don't like it?"

"Then we'll never work anywhere again," Hunt said, laughing heartily at the memory.

Adams was confident, but not overly so.

"We thought it was going to last, but we were very careful not to call it 'a museum.' For the first few years, we called it 'an exhibit,'" she said.

It was something new and sharply different as these things go, Hunt said.

“There were a lot of things that were unusual. It had more than 100 pages of text on the walls, a tremendous amount of verbiage. For the time it was done, it had an unusual amount of film. We pushed the envelope on the stand-up experience, so it was very, very long for someone to stand still. And we had very few artifacts, because the major artifact is the sixth floor itself and the view,” she said.

Nicola Langford, now the museum’s executive director, described its beginning as “very unusual ... because there was no real grasp of how people would receive the exhibit and whether it could be a sustainable operation.”

If approval wasn’t unanimous, it was certainly widespread. A headline in *The Dallas Times-Herald* proclaimed, “Today We Stand Whole Again.”

The first visitors to the museum scribbled their thoughts on the memory books.

“A wonderful tribute to a brilliant man,” one wrote. “A painful part of American history that needs to be accurately remembered. Great exhibit,” another added.

Fagin, the Sixth Floor’s associate curator, was among those first visitors. His parents took him the week the museum opened. He was in the fourth grade and was fascinated by the exhibits, the oral histories of those who witnessed this national tragedy, and what this old warehouse, drafty with the winter winds, meant to the people.

Today, he sees The Sixth Floor Museum as a forerunner among the sites that mark America’s tragedies — ground zero for 9/11, the Oklahoma City memorial after the bombing there.

“It took more than 25 years to open The Sixth Floor Museum, but five years for the Oklahoma Memorial and about the same for 9/11,” Fagin said. “We see these places stained by tragedy and violence, and then we see them renewed.

“This raised the questions of how do you preserve what hurts, how do you recognize it, and how do you deal with it properly?” he said. “You can point to a spot where history changed, right here.”

The Sixth Floor Museum drew 350,000 visitors in 2012, Langford said, and remains “very vibrant, with a long future ahead.”

The museum now houses almost 45,000 artifacts and is committed to community engagement, she said, working with students and teachers and making its collections available to researchers.

The youngest of those who remember the assassination are in their 50s now, and many of the witnesses are gone. So the role now is helping new generations understand JFK's death.

"This site will always be here, a perpetual reminder of what happened," Fagin said. "The site is where the story comes home."