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FRENCH LEGATION STATE HISTORIC SITE

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TEXAS
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REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES



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TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
REAL PLACES TELLING REAL STORIES

Welcome to the French Legation State Historic Site. The French Legation was built in 1841 as a diplomatic outpost to the Republic of Texas and was sustained over the next 180 years by notable Texans who contributed to the growth of the state, community, and shared heritage. Today, the French Legation continues its long history as a place where stories are shared and community grows.

FIRST GATHERINGS

The hill on which the French Legation sits was first used by Native Americans for thousands of years. Archeological excavations revealed artifacts establishing human presence as early as the Paleo-Indian period 8,000 to 9,000 years ago. Evidence shows the site was intensively used during the Archaic period about 5,000 years ago.

THE FRENCH LEGATION

In 1839, France became the first country to recognize the Republic of Texas as an independent nation. The French king sent diplomatic representative Jean Pierre Isidore Alphonse Dubois de Saligny to Texas as his chargé d'affaires.

When Dubois first arrived in Austin in 1839, he rented lodgings in the frontier town. Not satisfied with the quality of these lodgings, he purchased 21.5 acres of land from ambassador to the United States and future president of the Republic Anson Jones so he could build a home and place to carry out his diplomatic duties. Construction began on September 15, 1840. The site operated as a diplomatic post from 1839 to 1841 by different groups, primarily the French Government and the Catholic Church.

Dubois sold the property to Father Jean-Marie Odin in December 1840 to support the Catholic Church's

efforts to establish a diocese in the Republic of Texas. After the United States' annexation of Texas in 1845, the property stood empty until it was sold to Texas Revolution war hero and Congressional representative Moseley Baker in 1847. Baker quickly sold the land to Dr. Joseph W. Robertson.

The Robertson family was the last and longest private owners of the property. Their tenancy lasted through two centuries of U.S. history from the Civil War and Reconstruction through both World Wars of the 20th century. The property remained in the Robertson family until it was sold to the State of Texas in 1949.

ALPHONSE DUBOIS, 1839-1840

Jean Pierre Alphonse Isidore Dubois de Saligny was born in France in 1809. He served in the French embassy in the United States as secretary and was sent to Texas in 1839 to see if the new republic should be recognized by France as a sovereign nation. His favorable reports led to official recognition by France for young nation and a promotion for himself as the King's charge d'affaires to the Republic of Texas. Dubois held this post for seven years (1839-1842, 1844-1846).



Old Austin 1873
French Legation highlighted
Augustus Koch, Courtesy of UT Libraries

FATHER JEAN-MARIE ODIN, 1840-1847

In 1838, the Catholic Church created an Apostolic Prefecture in the Republic of Texas. The Prefecture established a separate missionary jurisdiction from Mexico that would lead to the creation of a Diocese. Father Jean Marie Odin of France was named Vice Prefect to Texas. He had experience working with scattered populations and was known for his skill in gaining followers to the Catholic faith.



Jean-Marie Odin. Courtesy of the Catholic Archives of Texas. Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops.

In 1839, Father Odin arrived in Texas with two mandates. The first was to secure title to all the church property that had been built under the Spanish government. The second was to revive the prominence of the Catholic Church of Texas. Father Odin successfully accomplished both missions.



THE ROBERTSON FAMILY, 1848-1949

Dr. Joseph W. Robertson was born in South Carolina in 1809. He trained as a physician and spent a year in Alabama practicing medicine, before moving with his wife Ann and their two children to the Republic of Texas.



One of the earliest images of the property painted by Julia Robertson, c.1858.

Dr. Robertson settled in Bastrop County in 1837, where he served as a Texas Ranger and in the House of Representatives. In 1839, the family relocated to Austin, where he operated a successful pharmacy and medical practice on Congress Avenue. Dr. Robertson would later serve a term as Mayor of Austin in 1843.

In 1841, his wife and daughter died, leaving him a widower with a young son. The following year, he married Lydia Lee. The couple had 10 children together. Lydia came to Austin with her siblings from Ohio, and each became prominent in the city's social and political circles.

The Robertsons purchased the French Legation in 1848 with the intention of creating a girls' school. When that effort didn't succeed, the family moved into the home the following year. The family played an important role in the growth of the Robertson Hill neighborhood of East Austin through sale of land to formerly enslaved African Americans and to recent immigrants.

A HOME FOR HISTORY

The Robertsons' daughter Lillie was a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT) and shared the history of the Republic Era by giving tours of the "Old French Embassy." After her death, the State of Texas purchased the property and named the DRT as custodians. The organization opened the French Legation Museum in 1956.



Lillie Robertson

In 2017, operation of the site was transferred to the Texas Historical Commission. After extensive historic restoration and addition of visitor amenities, the French Legation reopened to the public in 2021 as a place to gather, share stories, and envision the future.

Discover more of the story by visiting the outdoor exhibit panels on the grounds and along the street, and by logging on to our website where we invite you to contribute your own stories and pictures of the French Legation and its neighborhood.

Join the story by exploring opportunities for classes, programs, volunteering, and rentals at the French Legation!

WALKING TOUR 1 FRENCH LEGATION

The Legation house was built around 1841. It had multiple owners including Dubois de Saligny, diplomatic representative of France, Bishop Jean Marie Odin, the first Bishop of Galveston, and the Joseph W. Robertson family, who owned the site for approximately 100 years.



2 DETACHED KITCHEN

In the property deed between Father Odin and Dubois de Saligny, Father Odin asked that a kitchen and carriage house be added to the property. Based upon archeological evidence, the kitchen building has been constructed on the same spot facing the same direction.



3 VISITORS CENTER

This building was originally constructed to interpret the carriage house requested by Bishop Odin. It is now the visitors center, where visitors can purchase admission for tours, as well as light grab-and-go foods and drinks.

