

SOUTH CONGRESS
Self-Guided Tour

Preservation Austin exists to empower Austinites to shape a more inclusive, resilient, and meaningful community culture through preservation.

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Preservation Austin

PRESERVATION MONTH 2022

South Congress Self-Guided Tour

South Congress has an energy all its own. Like so much of our city, the district has grown and transformed a number of times since 1852 when James Gibson Swisher donated land to be used as a postal route and the main highway to San Antonio. Just like the 1910 concrete bridge over the river that finally connected South Austin to the city, Preservation Austin is building a bridge between our ever-changing city and its vibrant history.

Your support ensures that we can fulfill our mission to empower Austinites to shape a more inclusive, resilient, and meaningful community culture through preservation. Our city will change, just like South Congress. **You can help us protect the best of Austin by donating or becoming a member today at [preservationaustin.org](https://www.preservationaustin.org).**

ABOUT THE ROUTE

The ensuing content corresponds to a 2-mile walking route. While many are open to the public, some locations on this tour are private property and meant to be experienced from the public right-of-way. Please be mindful of owners' property and privacy.

Historic Context

The history of S. Congress is as varied and vast as the history of Austin. The land south of the capitol remained largely undeveloped during Austin's formative years as the capitol city. Swisher's donation of land in 1852 connected Austin to San Antonio. In 1877, the construction of a wooden bridge at S. Congress Ave prompted real estate speculation south of the river; however, significant development in South Austin did not occur until 1910 when a streetcar route was established over the new bridge. Prior to this development boom, S. Congress was an unpaved rural road. In 1909, business enterprises on S. Congress were predominately grocery stores, bakeries and horse sales, blacksmiths, and liveries. By 1930, transportation connectivity and automobile travel dramatically increased the residential and tourist trade on South Congress.

The Congress Ave bridge was expanded to four lanes in 1956. This development invigorated South Austin and established S. Congress as a destination for tourism and entertainment. Later, the speed and convenience of I-35 drew much of the tourist trade off S. Congress. Decreased commercial rents attracted smaller retailers and artists, and S. Congress' modern reputation as an eclectic destination for shopping and entertainment was born. From a humble rural road to a world-renowned cultural district, the evolution of S. Congress demonstrates the incredible adaptability of Austin's historic neighborhoods.

RESIDENTIAL – TRAVIS HEIGHTS-FAIRVIEW PARK & BOULDIN CREEK

Two of South Austin's earliest neighborhoods flank the S. Congress corridor: Travis Heights-Fairview Park and Bouldin Creek. These neighborhoods developed primarily in the early decades of the twentieth century following the arrival of the streetcar in South Austin, but their origins date to earlier subdivisions of the 1870s and 1880s.

The land comprising Travis Heights and Fairview Park, located east of S. Congress, were once part of Swisher's original land donation and platted in the late nineteenth century. Marketed as an upscale suburb, they feature winding streets and large lots reminiscent of

the picturesque "parklike" suburbs of the northeastern United States. Their architecture is characterized by an eclectic mix of styles, including Queen Anne, Tudor, Spanish Colonial Revival, and Classical and Colonial Revival styles. In 2021, Travis Heights-Fairview Park became South Austin's first National Register Historic District.

The west side of S. Congress, today's Bouldin Creek neighborhood, also experienced significant growth in the early twentieth century. Platted in 1894, it wasn't until the 1920s that the neighborhood quickly began to fill in with modest cottages and bungalows. Before its suburbanization, Bouldin was also home to a freedman community that developed shortly after the Civil War. An African American school opened in a home donated by John Thomas Brackenridge in 1905, and the area took on the name of Brackenridge. Several African American churches developed in the community, including St. Annie AME and Friendly Will Baptist, among others.

MOTOR TRAVEL – MERIDIAN HIGHWAY

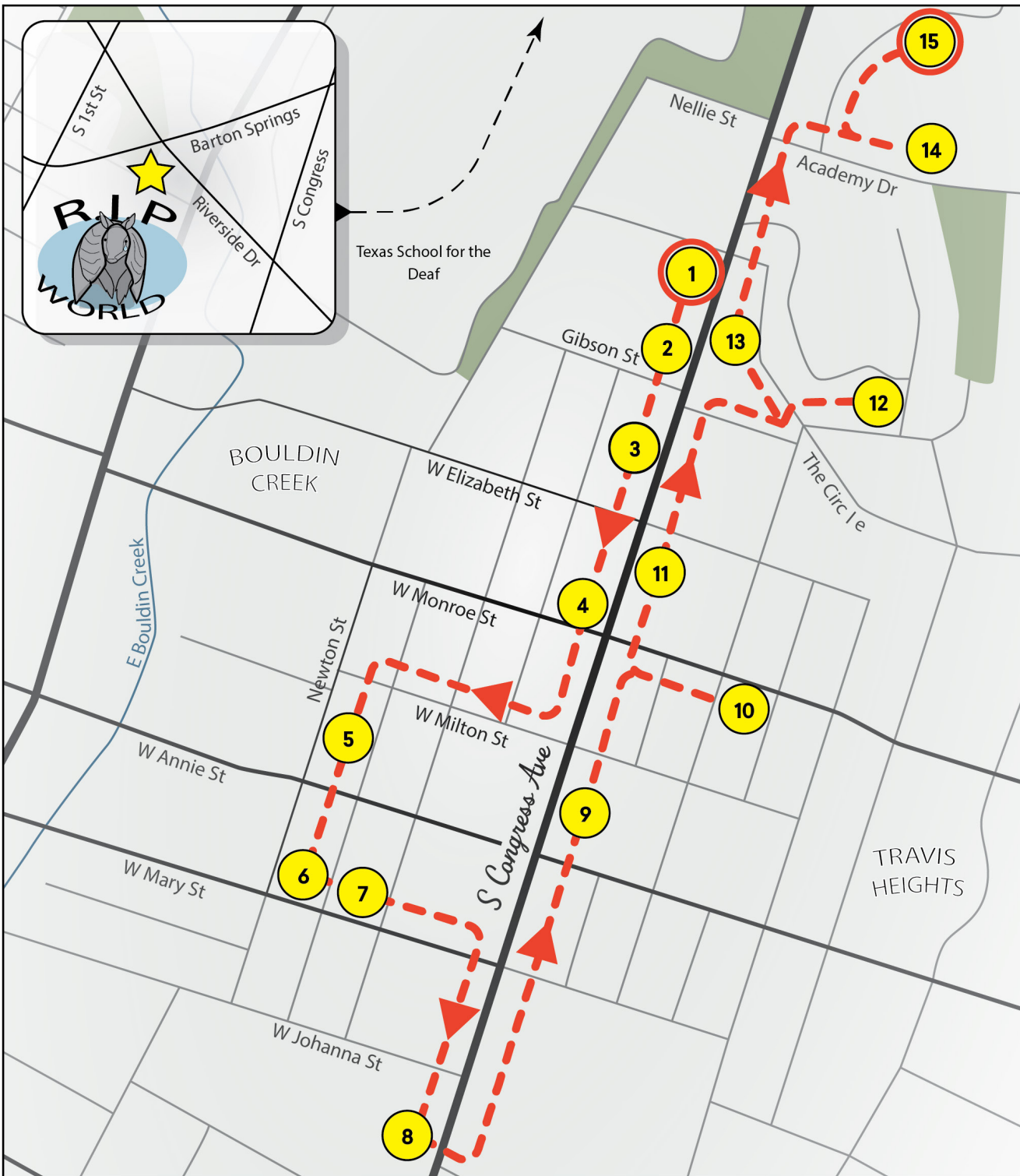
Once touted as the "Main Street of North America," the Meridian Highway was an early twentieth-century auto highway traversing Texas and the United States. Established in 1911, it became the nation's first international highway system, eventually extending from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Laredo, Texas. The extensive north-south corridor stimulated national and international trade and promoted regional and statewide tourism. Within Texas, the route of the Meridian Highway followed historic paths once used by Native Americans, early Spanish explorers, military survey parties during the Republic of Texas period, and cattle drives and railroad lines of the late nineteenth century.

S. Congress encompassed a large portion of the Meridian Highway route in Austin. Development along the highway catered to traveling motorists and included hotels, motels, gas stations, and other amenities. Vestiges of this historic auto route along S. Congress Avenue include two former tourist courts, today the Austin Motel and Hotel San Jose.

LIVE MUSIC

Austin's live music tradition is long and varied. In the mid-twentieth century, a well-established music scene was appearing at venues throughout town—Threadgills on N. Lamar was home to folk music, and places like the Broken Spoke and Dessau Hall played traditional country music. In East Austin, Chitlin' Circuit stops like the Victory Grill saw some of the biggest names in blues and jazz pass through. E. Sixth had a vibrant conjunto scene, and rock music was coalescing around UT Austin.

It was the opening of Armadillo World Headquarters in 1970, however, that would come to define Austin's reputation as a music city. The venue opened in an old armory building on Barton Springs Rd. off S. Congress. The unique mix of country and rock performed by acts like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings defined the new "Austin Sound" that put Austin and Armadillo World Headquarters on the map. S. Congress blossomed into a locus of live music during this 1970s heyday—the iconic Continental Club transitioned from a supper club into a live music venue, and Willie Nelson opened the Austin Opry at the old Terrace Motor Hotel. After ten years in operation, Armadillo World Headquarters closed in 1980 and was demolished in 1981, but its impact on Austin's music scene is still felt today. Though S. Congress has evolved greatly in the past 50 years, live music continues to be a vital fixture of the district.



South Congress SELF-GUIDED TOUR



POINTS OF INTEREST

1. Eck Dry Goods, 1202 S Congress Ave
2. Austin Motel, 1220 S Congress Ave
3. San Jose Court, 1316 S Congress Ave
4. J.M. Crawford Building, 1412 S Congress Ave
5. Willie Wells House, 1705 Newton St
6. Stanley Homestead, 1811 Newton St
7. The Herb Bar, 200 W Mary St.
8. C-Boys Heart & Soul, 2008 S Congress Ave
9. Fire Station No. 6, 1705 S Congress Ave
10. Fred Allen Memorial Church, 205 E Monroe St
11. Bergen-Todd House, 1403 S Congress Ave
12. Brunson House, 200 The Circle
13. Continental Club, 1315 S Congress Ave
14. Miller-Crockett House, 112 Academy Dr
15. Terrace Motor Inn, Austin Opry, 200 Academy Dr



IN MEMORIAM

Former Armadillo World HQ, 301 W Riverside Dr



PRESERVATION
— AUSTIN —

Featured Sites

1. ECK DRY GOODS BUILDING - 1202 S. CONGRESS AVE (1888)



Reportedly one of South Austin's oldest stores, the Eck Dry Goods Building served as a store and residence for Leonard T. Eck (1844-1925) in the nineteenth century. Eck, originally from Germany, settled in Austin with his family in the late 1870s. An 1897 city directory locates Leonard Eck at this address, noting his business included "watches, clocks, jewelry, dry goods, notions...groceries...feed..." and more. Eck Dry Goods even boasted a telephone at that

time (No. 33), reportedly the earliest business line in South Austin. The modest, two-story stone building includes round-arched openings above the storefront, segmental-arched window openings on the second floor, and the inscription, "L. Eck. 1888" on the parapet. In addition to his many business interests, in the early twentieth century, Leonard T. Eck served as postmaster for the small community of Teck (named in his honor) in western Travis County. He is buried in Austin's Oakwood Cemetery.

2. AUSTIN MOTEL - 1220 S. CONGRESS AVE (1938)



"So Close Yet So Far Out," reads the iconic marquee of the Austin Motel, easily one of the most photographed landmarks in Austin. In 1925, after the death of Leonard Eck, his daughter Jennie Eck Stewart inherited the eastern half of the 1200 S. Congress block. Following in the entrepreneurial footsteps of her father, Stewart launched a new concept in lodging designed in response to the 1930s automobile boom to accommodate road

travelers along the Meridian Highway. Opened in 1938, the Pueblo Revival style "tourist camp" included twenty-four units and nineteen garages, along with its iconic (and notorious) neon sign. In continuous business for over 65 years, the hotel was purchased by Bunkhouse Group in 2017 and today features 41 guest rooms that open to patios situated around a central courtyard and pool, with eccentric and bold vintage interior design.

3. SAN JOSE COURT - 1316 S. CONGRESS AVE (1936)



The "ultra-modern" San Jose Court was established in 1936 by lawyer George F. Zimmerman. Designed by Edwin C. Kreisle and R. Max Brooks, FAIA, the Spanish Eclectic motor hotel included two-story offices flanked by one-story rooms and garages to the north and south. The finely-appointed complex included colorful furnishings and landscaping, and was billed as "the last word in architectural beauty and efficient arrangement." Zimmerman was later

sentenced, at age 69, to two years in federal prison for defrauding investors. Decades later his dream motel had fallen on extremely hard times, known more for seediness than refinement. Liz Lambert purchased the property in 1995 and transformed it into the Hotel San Jose. This was the hotelier's first project, home to the free South By San Jose festival during SXSW since 1998.

4. J.M. CRAWFORD BUILDING - 1412 S. CONGRESS AVE (1887)



The one-story commercial building at S. Congress and Elizabeth St. served as a feed and seed store throughout much of its history. The original building on the site operated as a grocery store and corn and feed mill prior to its acquisition by J.M. Crawford in the early twentieth century. Crawford initially ran a grocery store here, which later operated as a feed store by the 1920s. In 1922, a fire destroyed Crawford's original store building,

but it was soon rebuilt and continued to operate into the early 1940s. The building then became the Central Feed and Seed Company, which remained in operation until 1993. Since 1995 the building has been home to Güero's Taco Bar.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark

5. WILLIE WELLS HOUSE – 1705 NEWTON ST (1912)



This modest dwelling was the childhood home of baseball legend Willie “El Diablo” Wells. His mother Cisco Wells purchased the house in 1912 in the segregated Brackenridge community. The side-gabled frame house with board and batten siding did not originally include a kitchen or indoor plumbing. The house’s famed resident, Willie Wells, is known as one of the greatest shortstops of all time. His career in the Negro Leagues and in Latin

America spanned from 1924 to 1948. While playing in Mexico, he was given his nickname “El Diablo” for his passionate playing style and talents on the field. His accomplished career includes winning three pennants, managing Negro League teams, mentoring Jackie Robinson before he became the first Black player in Major League Baseball, and developing the concept of the batting helmet (after suffering a concussion in 1942, Wells wore a construction hard hat for protection). Later in life, Wells returned to his Bouldin Creek home and lived here until his death in 1989. He was posthumously inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame in 1997 and is buried in the Texas State Cemetery. The house was restored in 2016 and is protected by a historic preservation covenant held by Preservation Austin.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark, National Register Listed

6. STANLEY HOMESTEAD – 1811 NEWTON ST (1895)



“The Stonehouse” was built by Robert S. Stanley for his family in 1895 in the Brackenridge community. Stanley was born in Austin in 1863, two years before Emancipation in Texas. Considered one of the first African-American businessmen in South Austin, he was a stonemason and merchant. His craftsmanship is displayed in the design of his front-gabled vernacular house with a 2-foot thick limestone basement. Stanley also produced and sold

headstones, one of which is placed at the entrance gate with an inscription for “Emma Bruce.” Stanley was one of the first trustees of St. Annie AME Church, located a block down from his home at the corner of Newton and W. Annie. Stanley died in 1941 and the home remained with his family until 1998. Like the Willie Wells House, the Stanley House is protected by a historic preservation covenant held by Preservation Austin.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark, Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, National Register Listed

7. THE HERB BAR - 200 W. MARY ST (1925)



Around the corner from the Stanley House, the building now housing the Herb Bar was built by Mr. Stanley in 1925. It served as a general store until the 1930s and Stanley’s second wife, Jennie, ran the shop. The Stanleys are believed to be one of the first African American families to have their own small business in South Austin. Various businesses occupied the building until 1986 when the Herb Bar opened here, today a legacy Austin business. Stanley’s signature

stonework is visible throughout the building, and vines cloak the storefront’s stepped parapet roofline.

8. C-BOYS HEART & SOUL – 2008 S. CONGRESS AVE (1937)



Calling itself the “swankiest club on South Congress,” C-Boy’s Heart & Soul is a music venue and nightlife hub known for featuring classic soul and R&B music. The 1937 limestone and wood-frame building was formerly an auto parts store and later became a fixture of the S. Congress entertainment scene. Before the club was “C-Boys Heart & Soul,” it served the community as “The It’ll Do Club” in the 60s and “Donna’s Club” in the 70s and early 80s. It had

a brief stint as one of Austin’s first Cajun restaurants, “Big Mamou,” and then as the “Blue Bayou” restaurant in the late 80s. It opened as C-Boys in 2013 after Continental Club owner Steve Wertheimer purchased and restored the club. He named it in honor of his mentor, Louis Charles “C-Boy” Parks, the manager of the legendary Rome Inn Club. Today, C-Boy’s features an intimate indoor bar area and stage, an outdoor patio, and the “Jade Room” lounge, which is an upstairs space styled after 50s-era Japanese GI bars.

9. FIRE STATION NO. 6 – 1705 S. CONGRESS AVE (1932)



Following S. Austin's residential boom in the early twentieth century, Fire Station No. 6 was built on S. Congress in 1932 as the new South Austin central fire station. It replaced an earlier nineteenth-century frame fire station on the site. Designed by Austin architect Edwin C. Kriesle and described in local newspapers as a "brick cottage type" building, the fire station reflects elements of the Tudor Revival style through its stone arched entrance porch, arched front door,

and prominent front gable with a sweeping eave. The fire station was enlarged with the incorporation of additional garage bays by the early 1960s. Although primarily known for his residential projects, Kriesle designed numerous public buildings in Austin including the Lions Municipal Golf Course Clubhouse (1930) and the downtown Austin Central Fire Station (1938) at 401 E. 5th St.

10. FRED ALLEN MEMORIAL M.E. CHURCH – 205 E. MONROE ST (1914)



Fred Allen Memorial M.E. (Methodist Episcopal) Church replaced an earlier South Austin Methodist Church formerly at W. Johanna St. The imposing Neoclassical-style building, designed by Austin architect George A. Endress, features square corner towers with weighty pediments, a heavy cornice, a smaller pediment and columns at the side entrance fronting Nickerson St, multi-light stained-glass windows, and decorative brick stringcourses wrapping

the lower half of the façade. The building's auditorium seated a congregation of 500, and the basement provided space for a large Sunday School facility. In 1922, the brick Tudor Revival-style dwelling next door was completed as the parsonage. A two-story education annex was incorporated in the 1950s. Grace United Methodist Church occupied the building in 1968. Today, the building is home to Life in the City Church, part of the United Methodist Church.

Designations: Contributor to the Travis Heights-Fairview Park National Register District

11. BERGEN-TODD HOUSE – 1403 S. CONGRESS AVE (1877)



This Victorian mansion dates to the year that Fairview Park was platted in 1877, before South Austin was incorporated into the city limits. The two-and-a-half-story home was built for James V. Bergen of Flushing, NY and his wife, Almira, of St. Catherine's, Ontario. The couple married in 1868 and moved to Austin in 1874. During his time in Austin, Bergen worked in the real estate and abstract business. The Bergens moved to El Paso around 1900 and Mr.

Bergen served as the real estate and tax commissioner for the Southwestern railway system until his death in 1915. Following the Bergen's, the residence was purchased by Mrs. Tennessee Ann Todd, a widow, who used the home as a boarding house, according to city directories. After her passing in 1930, her daughter, Ruth Todd, lived there until 1965. It has remained in the Todd family since, and today is one of the last remaining single-family residences on the bustling S. Congress strip.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark

12. BRUNSON HOUSE – 200 THE CIRCLE (1917)



Built in 1917 for Newton Brunson Jr. and Alma Meyer Brunson, this beautiful bungalow is part of the Fairview Park neighborhood. Designed to blend with its natural surroundings, it is situated on a hill and shaded by mature live oak trees. The Brunson House represents the Arts and Crafts bungalow style and includes its original woodwork, long-leaf pine floors, doors, wood-frame windows, ornamental brickwork in the chimney, and stone driveway. German craftsmen

and personal friends of Newton Brunson built the house using lumber supplied by the Calcasieu Lumber Company of Austin. Newton Brunson was the exclusive dealer of Majestic Radios and Electric Refrigerators and with his wife, Alma, he raised peacocks, guinea hens, deer, chickens, ducks, and geese in outbuildings on the property.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark

13. CONTINENTAL CLUB – 1315 S. CONGRESS AVE (1947)



One of Austin's most legendary music venues, the Continental Club has served up unforgettable experiences for more than 65 years. The one-story, flat-roofed masonry building is marked by an iconic neon sign that is believed to have been constructed in 1947, and first housed a Laundromat called the Half-Hour Laundry. The building also housed the Paul Wright Electrical Company from 1951 to 1955, when the Continental Club opened as a supper

club for members and their guests. Intricate murals depicting scenes of Europe have been restored from the Club's days as a supper club, and can be seen on the interior. Some sources say that the Continental Club was the first bar in Travis County to sell liquor by the drink, and, in the 1960s, they promoted "Band and Go-Go-Girls nightly." Musicians including Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble, Lou Ann Barton, Joe Ely, Charlie and Will Sexton, and others have filled the historic space with their tunes. The Continental Club and owner Steve Wertheimer received a Preservation Merit Award in 2008 for the ongoing stewardship of one of Austin's most iconic music venues.

14. MILLER-CROCKETT HOUSE – 112 ACADEMY DR (1888)



The Miller-Crockett House is named for its original owners Leslie Crockett, descendent of Alamo legend Davy Crockett, and his wife Mary Ann Miller. The home was occupied by the couple for over sixty years and was later converted into the Miller-Crocket Bed & Breakfast in the mid-1990s. The grand Victorian home is one of the oldest in Travis Heights, dating back to the early development of the neighborhood in the late nineteenth century. It

features a generous wrap-around porch with square columns and a hipped roof with fish scale shingles. In 2008, the house was rehabilitated as the centerpiece of Bunkhouse Group's Hotel Saint Cecilia. The historic home boasts five of the hotel's fourteen suites and features jewel-toned, vintage-inspired interiors.

Designations: City of Austin Landmark

15. TERRACE MOTOR HOTEL/AUSTIN OPRY – 200 ACADEMY DR (1953)



The site of 200 Academy Dr holds a rich history in leisure and entertainment. As the Terrace Motor Hotel, it was advertised as the "Wonder to See." Opened in 1953, the \$2 million modern resort was designed by Austin architects Emil Niggli and W.O. Gustafson on seven acres of wooded hills. The resort rivaled motor hotels in Miami and Las Vegas, boasting luxury with two swimming pools, two restaurants, a clubroom, and 211 versatile units built on

211 elevations. The hotel included suites, bedrooms, studios, rooms with kitchenettes, and six honeymoon cottages that overlooked the creek. By the late 1960s, the once glamorous hotel fell into disrepair. In 1977, Willie Nelson bought the clubroom/convention center and converted it into the Austin Opry House, a live music venue that hosted performances by legends such as Nelson himself, Ike & Tina Turner, Merle Haggard, and Waylon Jennings until it closed in 1992. The site is now the 82-room Hotel Magdalena. While much of the historic hotel amenities have been demolished, potential plans to revive what remains of the Austin Opry (now used as offices) are currently under discussion.

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