

An Intriguing Glimpse into the Past

Touring Heritage Park



“Stroll into one of the 12 Victorian homes at Heritage Park in Corpus Christi and get a glimpse into the past.”

This wonderful collection of homes sheds light on not only the immediate area, but the culture, hard times and struggle of the Mexican American War and the Civil War on the Texas Coast. The homes take each visitor through the changes of times dating as far back as 1851 at the Merriman –Bobys House, the oldest home in the collection. Visitors take a journey and imagine the lifestyle of each time period throughout the tour.

The committed City of Corpus Christi founded Heritage Park in 1977 to make a past a part of the present and future of the city. Since then the City has collected 12 homes and plans to add more. Heritage Park also reflects the preservation of a cross section of some of the city’s earlier architecture. Individually, each home describes many of the earlier settlers and represents the ethnic and cultural diversity of Corpus Christi today.

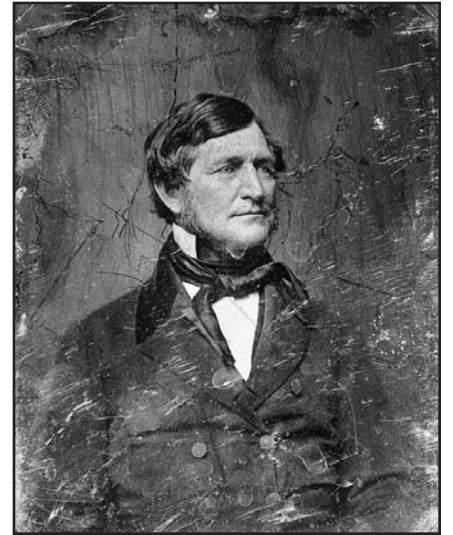
When you look at the beautiful sparkling waters of Corpus Christi Bay, it’s easy to see why the Europeans decided to settle here. At the time, the Karankawa Indians lived on the coastal plain. They were described as giants of six feet and taller, not overly fond of outsiders.

In 1519, the Spanish explorer in search of the fabled Aztec riches, Alonzo de Pineda, sailed into a deep-water pass and a tranquil bay on the Feast of Corpus Christi Day. He declared the area property of Spain.

After three centuries of Spanish rule, in 1821 Mexico declared independence and as Spanish control faded colonists flooded the region.

The Republic of Texas was created in 1836 setting its border at the Rio Grande River. However, Mexico declared the Nueces River as the boundary.

Around this time, Henry Lawrence Kinney, a Pennsylvanian merchant, opened the “Kinney’s Trading Post” on Corpus Christi



Henry Lawrence Kinney opened the first trading post in Corpus Christi that spurred growth on the Texas Coast.

Bay. He supplied ranchers and smuggled arms into Mexico. Kinney is often known today as the ‘founder of Corpus Christi’, who spurred the growth of the city. In 1845, war was declared and Zachary Taylor and 4,000 U.S. troops camped in Corpus Christi in preparation of the Mexican invasion. For the first time the United States flag flew in Texas and the military brought growth to the area. A post office was established the following year and the town’s name was officially Corpus Christi.



Zachary Taylor prepared for the Mexican invasion during the Mexican-American War in Corpus Christi.

During the Civil War, Corpus Christi’s position was perfect for running precious cotton, ammunition and staples for the confederacy. Kinney had marketed

this area as such to help his trade business. This led to a coastal blockade and the bombardment of the city in 1862. The Union and Confederate forces exchanged fire in August 1862. The Battle of Corpus Christi ended with few injuries and one death. Some cannonballs, not exploded, were found along the shoreline many years later. It was said that sailors aboard the ship would steal the captain's whiskey and hide it in the cannonballs. During the fighting the cannonballs were mixed up and those filled with whiskey were fired.

At this time the Merriam-Bobys House was used as a hospital during the Civil War and the yellow fever epidemic of 1867 nearly took the lives of one-third of the population. More importantly, the only three doctors in Corpus Christi at the time also died from the epidemic. The home that currently resides in Heritage Park today is the second oldest structure existing in Corpus Christi and is the most unique structure in the Park, yet the most typical of early Corpus Christi architecture. The Merriman-Bobys House is a clear example of Greek Revival Architecture with three gables.

Soon after the city took a hit of the yellow fever, the Depression set in around 1893. Charlotte Cook Scott Sidbury built a house, known today as The Sidbury House and is one of the first at Heritage Park. Mrs. Sidbury suffered the sad luck of losing three husbands throughout her life of natural causes and in the course of her losses she inherited many businesses. One was a lumber company and when the recession set in lumber was of low demand. Mrs. Sidbury used her innovative business savvy and used the lumber to build rent homes. The Sidbury House that currently stands in Heritage Park today is one of the twin houses she built. The structure is the only remaining example of High Victorian architecture in Corpus Christi today. The house has all of the elements of the Queen Anne style including irregular outlines, verandas, balconies and steep-pitched roofs. The 'gingerbread' appearance is due to delicate and elaborate wood work on the porches.

At the young age of 19 Simon Gugenheim arrived in Corpus Christi in 1882 with \$40 to his name and found a job in a dry goods store. From that experience he built an estate and became a successful businessman, forming Gugenheim-Cohn dry goods, oil properties, farmlands and downtown real estate developments. It is said that he saved the city's economy during the recession and was very active in

civic affairs. Gugenheim and his wife built a house in 1905 that is the only square-turreted structure remaining today in the city. The home displays a tri-faceted porch, spanning gabled wings and bay windows with fourteen-foot ceilings. The Gugenheim House joined the collection at Heritage Park in 1977 and was completely renovated in 1980 by Camp Fire, Inc. Another home that is among the collection of homes at Heritage Park includes The Lawrence House, built in 1893 by Theodore Merchant "Buddy" Lawrence who was the first resident to become involved with the vegetable truck farming industry. Shipping from Corpus Christi opened the market for the local farming community at the turn of the century. Lawrence was appointed as County Judge in the early 1900s and was instrumental in developing 'cow trails' into paved roads. During his term the first road system was established, as well as the construction of the first causeway over Nueces Bay.

The early 1900's showed some prosperity with the first airplane flight and first electric street cars with many homes popping up throughout the area.

The Litchenstein family moved to Corpus Christi in 1873 and became leaders in the business and civic community. Litchenstein's Department Store was a major retail center for South Texans for over 100 years. Julius Litchenstein, son of the store's founder, built The Litchenstein House in 1905 about nine blocks south of its present site at Heritage Park. Julius and his wife lived in the home until 1913 and retained ownership until 1926. The house was moved to what is now known as Heritage Park in 1927. The Colonial Revival house is simple in detail and scale. The turret with clerestory windows is typical of Victorian Period architecture.

Immigrants began flocking to the Corpus Christi area in the late 1800s to pursue the American Dream. The Grande family settled in the area from Russia and the Grande men were entrepreneurs who owned the Ben Grande Saloon, an old-fashion cantina. Benito (Ben) Grande was a community leader and succeeded his father in operating the family business. He built a home in 1904 and Ida Grossman Cohen bought this house in 1925.

The Grossman family donated the home to the city and it was moved to Heritage Park in 1982. Revisions to the home, known today as The Grande-Grossman House changed the style from Victorian to Craftsman with elements of Prairie architecture.

The first known black natives of Corpus Christi

worked for a rancher named John G. Kennedy. When the Littles retired the Kenedys gave them a house that was built in the early 1900s. Mary Belle Littles-Martin inherited the house from her parents and taught piano in the home for many years until her death in 1983. At that point, the house had been in her family for over 60 years. The original fireplace mantle is carved from Tigerwood, commonly known as 'Nigerian Walnut', which is native to West Africa. The beveled wood siding, hip roof with projecting gable and chamfered bay suggest some Queen Anne Victorian Cottage Architecture. The home was moved to Heritage Park in 1986 and restored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to serve as the Corpus Christi headquarters.

In 1919, a hurricane slammed into Corpus Christi with 90 mile per hour winds. The storm killed over 700 people and many more on ships at sea. A 20-foot tidal wave destroyed all in its path. Mary Ward McCampbell and her three sons watched the storm from the second floor of their home that she built in 1908 on Water Street, just a few feet from the Corpus Christi Bay. Mrs. McCampbell was the widow of Nueces County Attorney William Berry McCampbell. Early in 1920 Mrs. McCampbell died of pneumonia that she contracted during the storm. Her son, William Ward sold the house to his cousin in 1921.

The house was donated to the City in 1983 and moved one block from its original site at Heritage Park and is known as The Ward-McCampbell House. This house is a Victorian Age Greek Revival structure with more than 3,400 square feet of living area. The front of the home consists of a gabled frame, a two-tiered, cantilevered wraparound porch and ionic columns. The home was built with cypress wood and included four coal-burning fireplaces. The structure amazingly withstood the hurricane of 1919 and was fully restored.

Corpus Christi took off in the 1920's going from a population of 10,522 to 27,741 in nearly a decade. A deep-water port was opened and a seawall was built in 1940 to protect the city from future storms. The Nueces County was the top cotton-producing county in the United States. The Corpus Christi Naval Air Station opened in 1941 and trained 40,000 naval fliers during World War II. After the war, large industries moved into the area.

In November 1886, the first train arrived in Corpus Christi and opened the door for much opportunity. A.M. French was a surveyor for the construction of the

Tex-Mex Railroad and built a house in 1908 designed by his wife to accommodate both family and friends. French, an attorney and founder of the First State Bank, also founded and directed the first abstract title company in Corpus Christi. He decided to settle in the town after the railroad ran out of money. The Colonial Revival architecture is formal in appearance due to the classic ionic columns on two levels.

The floor plan not only allows for all of the rooms to catch the southwest breeze, it also provides an insight to the type of lifestyle French and his wife Frances Garrett French lived. Mrs. French enjoyed entertaining guests and having parties often. The open floor plan one might see commonly today is laid out in this historical home. The home also has one and a half inch beveled glass in the front doors and sidelights, which is much larger than usual.

In 1942, Rafael Galvan purchased the house and it remained in his family until 1982. Galvan came to Corpus Christi in 1896, worked as a fisherman and then became Corpus Christi's first Mexican American police officer. In 1982 the City of Corpus Christi purchased the house to serve as headquarters for the Parks and Recreation's Multicultural Center and moved it to the present site at Heritage Park.

The grounds surrounding the Multicultural Center, known as The French-Galvan House, includes a carriage house, courtyard with a gazebo and the Lytton Memorial Rose Garden. The facility today is used for year-round for festivals, special events, weddings and receptions.

Heritage Park offers self-guided tours for free to the public. To schedule a guided tour for a nominal fee, contact their office at 361-883-0639. Heritage Park is open every Monday, Thursday and Friday. ■