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The University of Texas at Austin

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Introduction

The University of Texas at Austin stands as one of America's great public universities—a beacon of knowledge and innovation at the very heart of Texas. With its stately Tower rising above the city skyline, the university represents not only the aspirations of generations of Texans, but also the ongoing pursuit of excellence and leadership in higher education. From its origins as an idea in the early 19th century to its current stature as a world-class research university, UT Austin's journey mirrors the story of Texas itself: bold, dynamic, and forever changing.

This book is a history of The University of Texas at Austin. Within these pages, you will discover the key moments and pivotal decisions that shaped the institution, from its conceptual foundation in the 1827 constitution of Coahuila y Texas, through its formal establishment by the Texas Legislature, to the laying of the cornerstone atop College Hill. You will meet the visionary figures and bold leaders—presidents, faculty, regents, and students—who collectively propelled UT Austin forward, even in times of uncertainty or adversity. Their legacy can be traced not only through the university's buildings and academic programs, but also through an enduring spirit of resilience and ambition.

As the university expanded in size and scope throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, it tackled many of higher education's most pressing challenges, from advancing academic excellence and research to navigating issues of integration, diversity, and state support. The iconic UT Tower, athletic traditions, and vibrant campus life became hallmarks, fostering a sense of pride and identity that extends well beyond the Forty Acres. The student body itself grew increasingly diverse, mirroring broader social changes and ensuring that UT Austin would remain a crucible for innovation and progress.

UT Austin's story, however, is not solely one of individuals or brick-and-mortar. It is also a testament to the transformative power of ideas, to the enduring draw of discovery and service, and to the vital role that higher education plays in building a thriving society. The university's research endeavors have produced breakthroughs in science, engineering, and the humanities, while its alumni have shaped culture, policy, and business on a global scale. Endowments and public trust provided the resources necessary for evolution and sustained excellence, positioning the university as one of the world's leading public institutions.

Today, The University of Texas at Austin continues to evolve. With the support of the community, the energy of its students, and a commitment to its founding mission, UT Austin is poised to address the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first

century. In tracing this remarkable journey, this book aims not only to honor the past but to inspire future generations to continue the university's proud tradition as a force for knowledge, progress, and leadership in American life.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of a Dream: Early Concepts of Higher Education in Texas

The story of the University of Texas at Austin begins not with the laying of a cornerstone or the enrollment of its first students, but rather with an idea—a persistent, compelling vision for public education in a land that was still very much a frontier. This vision took root long before Texas became an independent republic, finding its initial expression in the constitutional documents of a nascent society. The earliest formal mention of a public university in Texas dates back to the 1827 constitution of the Mexican state of Coahuila y Texas. This foundational document, though ultimately not leading to immediate action, laid the philosophical groundwork by promising public education in the arts and sciences. It was a bold aspiration for a region still finding its identity, signaling an early recognition of education's importance.

After gaining independence from Mexico in 1836, the Republic of Texas continued to champion the cause of public education. The Constitution of the Republic underscored Congress's responsibility to establish a comprehensive system of education once circumstances permitted. This was more than mere rhetoric; it reflected a growing understanding among the new republic's leaders that a well-educated populace was essential for a thriving democracy. President Mirabeau B. Lamar, often referred to as the "Father of Texas Education," was a particularly vocal advocate, emphasizing the critical role of education in his early speeches to the Texas Congress. His conviction that "a cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy" would later become the university's motto.

In a tangible step towards this educational dream, the Texas Congress in 1839 designated fifty leagues of land—a vast expanse totaling approximately 288,000 acres—for the establishment of a publicly funded university. This substantial land grant was a testament to the grand scale of their ambitions, even if the immediate practicalities of building a university remained years away. Furthermore, as part of the planning for the new capital city of Austin, forty acres were specifically reserved. This particular plot, later affectionately known as "College Hill" and now colloquially referred to as the "Forty Acres," was intended to be the site of the university's original campus. It was a clear marker, a physical placeholder for a future institution that existed, for the time being, only on paper and in the hearts of its proponents.

However, the path from idea to reality was anything but smooth. The early efforts to establish the university were frequently derailed by political turmoil and the pressing concerns of a young republic. For instance, an act to establish the University of Texas

was referred to a special committee in the Texas Congress in April 1838 but failed to advance. The Civil War, in particular, brought a significant halt to progress, and a substantial portion of the university fund, derived from the sale of the 1839 land grants, was even diverted to meet the state's general needs, not to be fully repaid until 1883. By 1865, the university's endowment stood at a meager \$16,000 in warrants, and no substantive organizational steps had been taken.

Despite these setbacks, the commitment to a state university persisted. The Texas Constitution of 1876, a document that still largely governs the state today, further solidified this resolve. Article 7, Section 10, of this constitution explicitly mandated the establishment, organization, and maintenance of a "university of the first class," to be located by popular vote and named "The University of Texas." This constitution also provided a significant endowment, setting aside one million acres of unappropriated public domain in West Texas for the university and its branches. An additional two million acres were granted in 1883, with the proceeds from these lands, primarily from oil and natural gas royalties, eventually forming the Permanent University Fund (PUF)—a financial bedrock for the university system.

The stage was now set for a crucial decision: where would this promised institution of higher learning actually be built? On March 30, 1881, the Texas Legislature formally structured the university and called for a popular vote to determine its location. This democratic process underscored the widespread public interest in the university's establishment. The ballot presented a choice between Austin and several other communities, with a separate vote for the medical department.

The election was held on September 6, 1881, and the results were clear. Austin was chosen as the site for the "Main University," receiving 30,913 votes. Galveston, coming in second with 20,741 votes, was designated as the location for the medical department, a separate branch of the university. The decision was, at times, contentious, with some communities, like Tyler, initially garnering significant support for the main branch. However, Austin's persistent advocacy and its existing designation as the capital ultimately prevailed.

With the location settled, the practical work of building the university could begin in earnest. On November 17, 1882, a significant milestone was reached with the laying of the cornerstone of the Old Main building on the original "College Hill" site. The day, a cold and rainy Friday, was hardly ideal, but a crowd of several thousand braved the elements to witness the historic event. The parade, led by the George Herzog Marching Band, assembled near the Capitol grounds, which themselves were still under construction after a fire.

During the ceremony, Ashbel Smith, a prominent figure in Texas history often called "the father of the University of Texas" and the president of the Board of Regents, delivered a stirring address. He expressed profound optimism about Texas's vast,

untapped resources, prophetically declaring, "Smite the rocks with the rod of knowledge, and fountains of unstinted wealth will gush forth." Smith's words encapsulated the hope that the university would unlock the state's potential, both intellectually and economically. His vision extended to the practical, as he played a key role in recruiting faculty and shaping the curriculum for a "first-rate institution."

Finally, on September 15, 1883, The University of Texas officially opened its doors. At its inception, the university was a humble affair, consisting of just one building, a faculty of eight professors, and a student body of 221. While the Old Main building on College Hill was still under construction, initial classes were held in the temporary Capitol building located on Congress Avenue. This temporary home, a three-story brick structure, also housed the state government while the current Capitol was being built. It was a unique, if somewhat unconventional, start for an institution destined for greatness, with students eventually moving into the Old Main building in January of the following year.

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