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RESTORATION GLORY: Detail of the original prototype for the City of Houston flag, freshly conserved in 2015 for its centennial. COURTESY PRESERVATION HOUSTON

ORIGINAL PROTOTYPE OF HOUSTON CITY FLAG RESTORED AND UNVEILED TO HONOR FLAG'S CENTENNIAL

In 1915, Houston was on its way to becoming the preeminent city in Texas. That year, it celebrated the Fourth of July by unveiling a municipal flag. Designed by retired railroad employee W.A. Wheeldon, the banner featured "one lone white star, floating in a sea of azure blue and bearing on its surface the original seal of the city of Houston," which features a plow and a locomotive.

Charles A. Spain told the *Houston Chronicle* that the plow and locomotive hinted at Houston's aspirational nature. "Houston had bigger ideas than what reality was even back then," Judge Spain said. "They wanted a railroad, so they put a railroad on the seal and the railroad came."

The Houston flag is back in the public consciousness thanks to Preservation Houston's successful restoration of the original prototype of the 1915 flag. Donated by the descendant of a local collector, the flag sat in a garage for many years before its rediscovery. Preservation Houston raised the \$3,500 needed to have the flag restored, with the final grant monies provided through the Grace Rogers Cooper Grant program of the North American Vexillological Association-Association nord-américaine de vexillologie.

Having recently edged out hurricane-battered Galveston as the most populous city in Texas, Houston remained a small, sleepy Southern town, with post-World War I growth tied to shipping and oil still in the future.

The 1915 flag is "a reminder of how completely different this place was then," said Jim Parsons of Preservation Houston, which underwrote the

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TOP: Judge Spain presents Preservation Houston with the Cooper Grant at the Houston City Hall on Sept. 8, 2015. David Bush, Preservation Houston acting director, and Houston Mayor Annise Parker look on.

COURTESY PRESERVATION HOUSTON

MIDDLE: Wm. Jefferson Spain, left, with donor Frank Descant at the March 7, 2016 unveiling of the restored prototype flag. COURTESY CHAS. A. SPAIN

BOTTOM: The unveiling of the restored flag was marked by a presentation, a revival of the Houston city song, and, of course, cake. COURTESY CHAS. A. SPAIN

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VEXILLOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE STATE OF TEXAS

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BANNER EVENT: RESTORED CITY OF HOUSTON FLAG UNVEILED



TOP: Preservation Houston Director Emeritus Bart Truxillo, left, with textile conservator Jessica Hack.
MIDDLE: Frank Descant, left, who donated the flag to Preservation Houston; Houston Metropolitan Research Center Director Laney McAdow; Preservation Houston Acting Executive Director David Bush.
BOTTOM: Members of the Daidone family, which owned the flag prototype for many years.
DAVID ORTIZ/
PRESERVATION HOUSTON

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2015 conservation of the prototype flag. “It was a small town trying to be a big city.”

The genesis of the flag was a contest organized by Mayor Ben Campbell. Such was the hubris surrounding the contest that the *Chronicle’s* story on New York City’s adoption of a flag to mark its 250th anniversary was headlined “New York Copies Houston Idea on City Flag.” Several entries focused on Houston’s coming status as a major city. One design included an illustration of Houston as a meteor, the *Houston Post* reported at the time, “the head of the star of which was plowing its way through a sky of equal proportions of red and blue.”

Mr. Wheeldon was an English immigrant, and his original design reflected that country’s heraldic tradition: it originally depicted the coat of arms of Sam Houston’s family. The contest judges, however, substituted the city seal for the coat of arms, saying it was more forward-looking.

The 3-by-5 foot prototype for the Houston flag was created by seamstresses at Levy Bros. Department Store as a model for a 10-by-12-foot silk flag made in New York that was carried in the 1915 Independence Day parade ahead of the city’s leading figures. The *Chronicle* reported that “all along the line patriotic cheers greeted the blue bunting.” After the parade, several thousand Houstonians gathered at the city auditorium to sing that new city song.

After serving its purpose, the prototype ended up in private hands; it was given to Preservation Houston by Frank Descant, who inherited it from his uncle, collector Sam Diadone. The flag was found by Mr. Descant in a garage. When he first came across the flag, “we looked at it and said maybe it’s from the ‘50s,” Mr. Descant told the *Houston Chronicle*. “I thought it was a nice thing to give to the city.” He gave the “moth-eaten” relic to Preservation Houston in the mid-2000s.

Preservation Houston donated the restored prototype of the 1915 flag this March to the City of Houston for permanent display in the historic Julia Ideson Library. The March 7, 2016 program included a presentation by New Orleans textile conservator Jessica Hack, who restored the flag. The long-forgotten Houston Municipal Song (which was adopted along with the flag and sung to the tune of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”) was performed by the Houston Saengerbund, the city’s oldest musical association. A formal presentation of the flag was followed by a reception.

The rediscovery of the prototype spurred discussion of the city and its traditions. Houston’s flag has not become an iconic symbol of the city, unlike the flags of Washington, D.C., or Chicago. “You use these kinds of things to inspire people,” Judge Spain told the *Chronicle*. “My question is, why do people in Chicago care so much and maybe why are people in Houston not as connected?”

“Think about it,” Mr. Parsons told the *Chronicle*. “Things were really different. In 1915, Houston had 100,000 people. Now we have 2 million. That’s an insane rate for a city to grow. That kind of growth doesn’t let you retain much in the way of tradition and symbols.

“The city became all about change. We don’t even recognize that old Houston anymore. And that’s because the city blew up.”