

Hamilton County New Deal-Era Architecture Driving Tour

Transcript

Track 1: Introduction

[Acoustic guitar music]

Narrator: By 1933, financial conditions for most Americans were looking pretty dire. Prices for crops like cotton were low, and farmers had a lot of livestock they just couldn't sell. Like millions of other rural Americans, Hamilton County residents were feeling the impact.

To boost the economy, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced his New Deal in March 1933.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt: [crackling radio static] I pledge myself to a New Deal for the American people.

Narrator: This series of programs aimed to turn the economic tide by creating public works projects that would expand and modernize the nation's infrastructure. Hoping to boost the local economy and put its citizens back to work, organizations in Hamilton County applied for several of these relief projects. By the end of the 1930s, Hamilton County and the surrounding area saw several public work projects completed, and locals even began to discuss how to "Build a Greater Hamilton."

Hoping to provide opportunity to as many unemployed people as possible, each New Deal agency targeted a different demographic. The National Youth Administration employed young men ages sixteen through twenty-five, while the Civil Works Administration was a short-term project providing construction jobs during the winter of 1933. One of the most popular agencies, the Works Progress Administration, or W-P-A, employed over eight-and-a-half million Americans - mostly men without formal educations - to build everything from public parks to schools. The W-P-A designed and constructed so many buildings it developed its own architectural style. Called W-P-A Moderne, it is known for its modern and futuristic appearance, but lacks the ornate details of earlier architectural styles like Art Deco.

Along with W-P-A Moderne, you can expect to see a few other New Deal-era architectural styles in Hamilton County. The National Park Service, or N-P-S, Rustic

style is common among New Deal-era architecture. First introduced in the national parks, the style uses local materials to blend with the environment, trying not to detract from the natural beauty of its surroundings.

Finally, the Colonial Revival style appeared in the late 19th century, around the time of the first United States centennial in 1876, when many Americans expressed a renewed interest in the architecture of our founding fathers. This style uses elements commonly found in Colonial Era houses, like symmetry and double-hung windows, but adds more decorative elements to the structures. This style most commonly appeared on federal buildings during the Great Depression.

[Acoustic guitar music fades out]

Track 2: Stop 1 - Hamilton Roadside Park

[Sound of tires on gravel and a diesel car engine coming to a stop. A car door opens and shuts, followed by the sounds of feet walking across gravel and children's voices.]

Narrator: Preparing for a statewide party, the Texas Highway Department built many roadside parks like this one located along Highway 281 north of Hamilton. As travelers were journeying to Centennial Park in Dallas for the Texas Centennial celebration, spots like this allowed travelers to take a break from the road and stretch their legs as they crossed the state to celebrate one-hundred years of Texas.

This particular park is a typical example of Depression-era roadside parks. Stone and cement picnic tables dot the space, with grills and fire pits just waiting for a family to cook up some hamburgers and hot dogs. The designers also planned the park with the glaring Texas sun in mind: groves of trees offer shade, a necessary amenity for travelers in this state.

While the Texas Highway Department designed these roadside parks, it enlisted the National Youth Administration, or N-Y-A, to execute the plans. Parks like this one were typically made of local materials and concrete, keeping each project as simple as possible. The young men working in the N-Y-A didn't have heavy machinery to help with the most labor-intensive aspects of their work. Instead, they cleared the site using hand tools and cut each stone with a hammer and chisel.

Before you get back on the road, take a moment to visit the pink granite Centennial marker just to the north. It's made from the same material as a Texas icon located just a couple hours down the road in Austin: the Texas State Capitol.

[Sound of a car engine turning over, an engine idling, and then tires on gravel as the car accelerates away.]

Track 3: Stop 2 – Hamilton School District Gymnasium and Sporting Courts

[Sound of children's voices while playing.]

Narrator: It's not hard to see why locals call this white limestone building the "rock gym." Built by the Works Progress Administration in the W-P-A Moderne style, the Hamilton school gymnasium's simple design made it easier for unskilled workers to contribute to its construction. But, if you look carefully, you'll see subtle modern details from the period, like the curved roof and the stone pilasters.

During the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt hoped to expand Americans' access to sports and other recreational activities. The gym and adjacent sporting courts - just to the north and down the hill - gave students of all ages safe and modern facilities where they could be active and play. The courts' amphitheater-style seating hints at the facilities' role in the community: a place where Hamilton residents of all ages could recreate and socialize together. [Sound of sneakers squeaking on a basketball court and male voices shouting.] It doesn't take much to imagine the crowds gathered to cheer on Hamilton's student athletes. [Crowd cheering, referee's whistle blows. Cheering crowd and sounds of a basketball game continue in the background.]

The gym has also hosted generations of students. The girls' high school basketball team won the state championships right here in 1952, beating Morton High School twenty-seven to nineteen. Students from every grade level, from kindergarten through high school, still use the gym today.

[Sound of footsteps on playground and distant child's voice.]

Track 4: Stop 3 – Hamilton Post Office

[Sound of hammer and chisel on stone.]

Narrator: A majestic eagle perches above the doorway of the Hamilton Post Office, greeting visitors and reminding them of the building's federal origins.

Built in 1940, the Hamilton Post Office was designed by Louis A. Simon, the supervising architect of the Public Buildings Administration. Earlier relief programs created work for unemployed local architects by commissioning them to design new buildings. But, by the late 1930s, the United States government wanted to ensure continuity across the

design of all federal buildings, and so it stopped contracting with local architects and began designing buildings in-house.

Louis Simon designed this post office in the Colonial Revival style. He used large, double-hung windows and symmetry to emulate the facades of the colonial buildings that influenced this style. You can see these same features on federal buildings across the nation.

The mural decorating the inside of the building follows the New Deal's tradition of working with independent artists. During the Depression, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, commonly known as the Section, commissioned artists to paint murals in public buildings across the nation. Some people questioned including the arts in New Deal legislation, to which administrator Harry Hopkins replied, "Hell, artists need to eat, too."

The federal government commissioned artist Ward Lockwood to create several murals across the United States, including *Texas Rangers in Camp* at the Hamilton Post Office. Administrators asked artists to design post office murals to reflect local history and culture. Lockwood's mural depicts four Texas Rangers gathered around a campfire, playing instruments, and singing songs under the stars.

Lockwood's work on *Texas Rangers in Camp* is unusual because he used the fresco secco technique, which requires the artist to apply pigments directly to dry plaster with the use of a binding agent. This meant Lockwood had to travel to Hamilton to create the mural - he couldn't paint it in his studio and ship it to the post office when it was complete.

If the building is open, head inside to view Lockwood's work, as well as the original architectural details in the lobby.

[Sound of hammer and chisel on stone.]

Track 5: Stop 4 – Pecan Creek Park Swimming Pool

[Sound of splashing and voices, continuing in background as narrator begins speaking.]

Narrator: The Pecan Creek Park Swimming Pool was built between 1938 and 1939 by the Civil Works Administration, or C-W-A. Architects designed the pool and bathhouse in the N-P-S Rustic Style, which used local materials to blend the buildings with the environment. The C-W-A chose white limestone for the bathhouse's exterior because of its abundance across the state, and the low, white walls make the building feel like a seamless part of the Central Texas landscape.

The pool was part of a nationwide effort to create more public recreational spaces. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used New Deal projects to increase local communities' access to recreational facilities, including pools like this one. This was part of his emphasis on improving Americans' everyday lives through physical activity. Families could splash around at the pool to cool off [sound of large splash in pool], or take swimming lessons to help prevent drowning accidents [sound of lifeguard's whistle]. Local residents were on board with the President's efforts, too: in 1938, Cecil and Malcom James donated the land for the pool and park in memory of their parents, John and Mary T. James.

While there have been many additions to the pool over the years, including modern bathrooms and shaded picnic facilities, its appeal to locals remains the same: it provides the opportunity to play, exercise, and get out of the blazing Texas sun on a hot summer day.

[Sound of one large splash in pool.]

Track 6: Stop 5 – The East Henry Street and North Bell Street Bridges

[Sound of cars driving past and indistinct voices in the background.]

Narrator: In 1939, the *Hamilton County News* published a vision for the town: local residents should “Build a Greater Hamilton.” This hopeful plan outlined twenty different ways, big and small, that life in Hamilton could be improved. These included paving Highways 36 and 281, building a fireproof hotel, installing outgoing mailboxes downtown, and, last but not least, constructing three concrete bridges across Pecan Creek. In 1940, just one year after publishing their ideas, two of these bridges were finished: one on East Henry Street and another on North Bell Street.

The bridges are simple in design, similar to the utilitarian, man-made structures commonly built by New Deal relief agencies like the Works Progress Administration and Civil Works Administration. Concrete was a popular construction material during the Great Depression because it was cheap, strong, durable, and it was easy for unskilled workers to learn to work with it. Each bridge accommodated both pedestrian and auto traffic, with sidewalks on both sides and a paved, two-lane road down the middle. At the East Henry Street bridge, if you walk along the trail under the bridge, you can see the stone abutments that support the bridge.

[Sound of cars driving past.]

Track 7: Stop 6 – Cranfills Gap High School

[Sound of school bell ringing and voices of students milling about in hallway.]

Narrator: After several schools in the Cranfills Gap area consolidated into one, it quickly became clear that not everyone could fit under one roof. Officials relied upon the Works Progress Administration, or W-P-A, to help them build a new high school that would give them the space they needed to house their growing student body. Originally designed to hold five classrooms alongside a combined gym and auditorium space, the white limestone building was a picture-perfect modern high school when it was completed in 1939. Today, the building is used as an auditorium and the classrooms are located elsewhere.

[Faint sound of clapping.]

Despite its renovations, you can still see traces of the building's original W-P-A Moderne architectural style. The front entrance is defined by a portico made of two pilasters and a slight gable pediment. Perched above the entrance near the original roofline, a small plaque acknowledges the building's construction by the W-P-A between 1938 and 1939. The original windows would have been double hung and wood sashed and the roof would have been flat, as indicated by the stone cornice just below the modern roofline.

[Sound of school bell ringing and voices of students milling about in hallway.]

Track 8: Stop 7 – Evant High School Gymnasium and Auditorium

[Sound of sneakers on basketball court, referee's whistle, and cheering crowd.]

Narrator: The oldest of the high school buildings on this tour, the Evant High School Gymnasium and Auditorium also stands out for the materials the Works Progress Administration, or W-P-A, used to build it. Constructed between 1935 and 1937, the building heavily features the W-P-A Moderne style with a gabled roof and pediments. While many W-P-A buildings use local materials like white limestone, the Evant High School Gymnasium and Auditorium also includes contrasting brick accents on the corners, creating stark lines you won't find on other local, New Deal era buildings. The bricks also outline the shapes of the original doors and windows, giving you a peek into the original layout of the building. Like many other stops on our tour, the building was designed to serve the larger community as well as the student body, which it continues to do today.

[Sound of sneakers on basketball court, referee's whistle, and cheering crowd.]

Track 9: Stop 8 – Hico School Auditorium and Gymnasium

[Sound of basketball bouncing on court and faint crowd in the background.]

Narrator: Don't mistake the Hico School Auditorium and Gymnasium for your run-of-the-mill W-P-A Moderne building. Like other buildings from the New Deal era, this one is built from locally quarried limestone. Usually, stone was cut by less skilled workers, so it had a rougher appearance. The stones for this building, though, came from the local Barbee Mill, which was no longer in use and was being torn down. That's why the stones on this gymnasium look more regular, fit together tightly, and have less mortar between them.

Wanting the best for its students, the gym had the support of the Hico community. In addition to receiving W-P-A funding, the city sold bonds to help fund the construction. Kal Segrist, a baseball player, state representative for Dallas, and Hico native, even pitched in to help fund the construction.

Once it was built, the gym hosted a wide variety of events. Some of these were typical for a school gym, like basketball and volleyball games, and some were a little bit - different. The Future Farmers of America put on a boxing tournament as a fundraiser. [Sound of crowd cheering and a trip gong ringing three times.] Perhaps the most unusual, though, was a donkey basketball game. [Sound of sneakers squeaking on basketball court and donkey braying.] This strange game of hoops raised money for the athletic department and had teachers, coaches, and even school board members facing off against the Chamber of Commerce while riding donkeys wearing specially made tennis shoes.

You can't see it from the street, but the W-P-A built another building here as well. A home economics lab is located around back. Generations of students spent time in "the cottage," as it was called, practicing cooking, sewing, and other skills they would need to maintain a household.

[Low murmur of students milling around in hallway.]