The Ruins of Dallas

Today: Martyr's Park (The Triple Underpass at Dealey Plaza)
July 24, 1860: Hangman's Gallows

(Excerpt from *The X on Elm Street: JFK Assassination-Related Sites in DFW*)

As the three condemned men emerged from the smoke-blackened courthouse, the din of the crowd erupted into a jeering roar. Faces squinted against the angry oven heat of the sun, to which they were accustomed, but which now seemed to rage back at them with a mirrored vengeance, as if to reignite the great heaps of ash and cinder along the dirt streets in all directions. The last embers of the fire had been extinguished two weeks earlier, but a creosote pungence still hung heavily in the air. The courthouse, one of few brick structures in town, had withstood the inferno even though the heat had been intense enough to penetrate its windowpanes and ignite the drapes inside. Most other structures had been reduced to rubble. The fire had taken only a few hours to destroy what had taken so long to build. Now the three prisoners, African-American slaves – Patrick Jennings, Samuel Smith, and Cato Miller – were about to pay for it. To the crowd assembled on this afternoon of July 24, 1860, these were the ruins of their city – to the three men being led to the gallows at the river's edge, these were the gates of hell.

After The Alamo, Dealey Plaza is the most visited historic site in Texas. As many as a million people come each year to visit the site where the 35th President of The United States was assassinated. Yet none of them are aware that there is a "hidden" side to Dealey Plaza – one which secretly commemorates not only the death of President Kennedy in 1963, but also the executions of three other men a century earlier. The earlier event has been all but forgotten, tucked away in a dark recess of the city's elusive, shadowy history. Today visitors walk from the former Texas School Book Depository building, down the sidewalk along the right side of Elm Street, to the base of the infamous Grassy Knoll, but seldom farther. On what turned out to be a stiflingly hot November afternoon in 1963, just before the first rifle shot rang out, Jackie Kennedy thought the shade of the Triple Underpass looked welcoming. Today it seems foreboding, and most pedestrians stop short of it. But just on the other side of the underpass to the right lies an unmarked .6-acre parcel of land. It is called Martyr's Park, and it is nestled between Elm Street's convergence with Stemmons Freeway and what was once the eastern embankment of the Trinity River. It was known as Dealey Annex until 1991, when the city reluctantly and unceremoniously agreed to rename it at the behest of a petitioning historic committee. Martyr's Park goes virtually unvisited by day except for motorists who might give it the occasional unregistered glance as they accelerate along its edge – but, as evidenced by the aroma of urine, the discarded beer cans, and other detritus, the place finds frequent use as a homeless camp by night.

When Texas gained its independence from Mexico in the 1836 Battle of San Jacinto, most of its established settlements were concentrated in the southern and deep eastern regions of the new Republic. The uninhabited bulk of the country offered a kaleidoscopic variety of geologies and terrains, each stretching for vast distances before giving way, gradually or abruptly, to the next. Texas extended to the north and west into portions of what are now New Mexico, Oklahoma, Colorado, Kansas, and Wyoming. This was big and enticing country for the hardy, adventurous frontiersman, and it offered countless grants

of fertile land to the enterprising empresario. Such was the allure that brought one Tennessee lawyer from his home in Van Buren, Arkansas, a town he had helped establish, to the wilderness of north Texas.

John Neely Bryan, aided by a Cherokee Indian guide, arrived on an eastern bank of the Trinity River and pitched camp in the autumn of 1840. He found the area suitable for establishing a trading post to do business with Indians and the white settlers who would traverse a projected military highway between Austin and the Red River. An act of the Congress of The Republic of Texas had designated the highway, which would run "at or near the three forks" of the river. Upon completing an initial survey, Bryan went back to Arkansas to dispose of his holdings there. He returned to his former camp on the Trinity in November 1841, only to find that Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar had sent rangers into the area to drive out the Indians. They had effectively completed the task – Bryan's customers were gone. He decided to remain and establish a permanent settlement, which he named Dallas (the origin of the name remains in dispute), and he invited the settlers at Bird's Fort, 22 miles to the northwest, to join him on the lower river.

Dallas was established at a place where there was said to be no reason for a city to exist. Other settlements along the Trinity had more to offer, the settlement of Farmers Branch to the north was larger, and the early years of Dallas would be years of misery for its inhabitants. The only real promise of the area lay in its rich, black, waxy soil – and so Bryan and his newly recruited settlers put themselves to the task of making something of their scrawny settlement. Predictably, they met with adversity at every turn – the threat of Indian raids, sweltering summers accompanied by drought, and bitterly harsh, wet winters. But slowly, inexorably, the tide began to turn as signs of civilization appeared on the horizon. Settlers began crossing the Red River in larger numbers. The Republic of Texas established a post office in Bryan's cabin and he was appointed postmaster. Churches, schools, and places of business followed. In 1846, the year following Texas' annexation into the United States, Dallas County was organized with the town of Dallas as its temporary county seat (the county was named, without dispute, in honor of George Mifflin Dallas, the nation's Vice-President under James K. Polk).

By the end of the 1840s, Dallas had become a thriving refutation of the idea that the nation's westward expansion attracted only those who wished to escape the trappings of society for clean air and wide open spaces – these people were eager to entice others into their community. They wanted the wilderness tamed so the comforts and amenities they craved might settle over them. In the election of 1850, Dallas was narrowly voted in as the permanent county seat of Dallas County, ensuring that no matter what else it might become, it would at least be the dominant town in the region. In its early years, the area's principal crops had been those necessary to provide a food supply. But it was wheat that would become the prominent crop, spurring city and county growth through the 1850s. This growth brought with it a resultant growth in African-American slave population.

As 1860 opened, abolitionist voices from the North echoed throughout the nation – signs of the times were multiplying. In Washington, D.C., a crucial three-cornered campaign, with Abraham Lincoln arrayed against Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckinridge, was in full swing. In Dallas, a meeting was called "for a free interchange of opinion on the great questions which now agitate the country." Dallas County had already raised a company of volunteers, and was now urging others to join – secession was imminent, and war was inevitable. Many Texans were convinced that abolitionists were responsible for a growing unrest among slaves and for encouraging insurrections. The June 20, 1860 issue of the *Dallas Herald* carried the story of the death of a boy in nearby Bonham at the hands of a black woman: "This child is the 4th or 5th person murdered by negroes recently in that county. It is all attributed to the pernicious effects of the abolitionist commissaries." Dallas had endured two decades of hardships to develop from a primitive settlement into a major trade center of the South. But even before the Civil War broke out, the flourishing city would lie in ruins.

The fire started on the Sunday afternoon of July 8, 1860 in a box of wood shavings in front of the new W. W. Peak & Brothers Drug Store. Temperatures reached 106º F in the shade that day. The flames engulfed the wood frame building and its stores within minutes and, whipped by a strong southwesterly

wind, grew into a raging inferno that quickly enveloped every building in sight. Residents were awakened from afternoon naps, some narrowly escaping the conflagration and the collapse of structures around them. They watched helplessly as every store, both hotels, the *Dallas Herald*, the post office, and virtually the entire business district went up in flames. In the aftermath, a deathly silence fell over the city. It was later learned that similar fires had erupted simultaneously in Denton and several other nearby cities. “We barely escaped with our lives,” wrote Charles Pryor, editor of the *Dallas Herald*, “some like myself, without clothes, boots, shoes, or anything else.” Pryor, the de facto voice of the city, was far from discouraged – he predicted that he would be publishing again within two or three months.

Initially, no one suspected the fires had been touched off by “incendiaries”, not even Pryor, who had often used the *Herald* to minister his own fiery anti-abolitionist stance to his readership. But within a couple of days, he began a vigorous letter-writing campaign to newspapers across Texas, connecting the fires to what he now believed to be an organized slave insurrection attempt overseen and guided by white abolitionists from the North. The ensuing pandemonium came to be called the “Texas Troubles”, during which there would be instances of newspapers reporting fires that had not occurred at all. Pryor's allegations were soon accepted by a grim and determined Dallas whose citizens were none too eager to accept their city's destruction, now heralded in headlines across the state, as an act of God.

The plot was said to have been fomented by two white abolitionist preachers from Iowa who had been expelled from Dallas the previous year. Citizen leaders formed a 52-member Committee of Vigilance. Their purpose was to mete out justice to the county's 1,074 slaves, most of whom were suspected of having knowledge of, or involvement in, the planned revolt. Like all vigilante groups, the committee's proceedings operated outside the law in ascertaining guilt and prescribing punishment. Confessions were extracted from slaves throughout the county by means of whipping and torture. The anti-abolitionist faction became convinced that the slaves' plans included the poisoning of water wells, the burning of other towns throughout the South, and the widespread murders of slaveowners… with particularly sinister acts reserved for “certain females”. Some committee members called for the execution of every slave in the county, but a more moderate faction argued that this would come at a cost of over $800,000 to slaveholders – the focus of the investigation was then narrowed to three selected slaves. Deliberations continued all day and into the evening on July 23 as an anxious crowd waited outside the courthouse. Judge Nat Burford visited the courtroom to encourage hanging of the three, then quickly recused himself from the proceedings, realizing neither he nor the committee could legally impose death, which was not a lawful penalty for arson. After Burford left the courthouse, a decision was announced: the accused ringleaders – Patrick Jennings, Sam Smith, and Cato Miller – would be executed by hanging the following afternoon. After witnessing the execution, all other slaves in the county would be rounded up, bound to trees or posts, and severely and mercilessly whipped (some would be beaten almost to death).

Of the three men condemned to die, Patrick Jennings was the most resolute. He had been brought to Texas from Virginia and sold to George W. Guess, a young and prominent Dallas attorney. The son of a previous owner would later say, “old Pat continued to be an agitator in Texas as he had been in Virginia.” According to Charles Pryor, it was Patrick who had set fire to Peak's drugstore and, after Dallas had burned, bragged about the deed, calling it “only the commence of the good work.” Samuel Smith was a slave preacher and, as such, was considered to have played a highly visible and threatening role in the planned revolt – Pryor called him “a hardened old scoundrel.” Cato Miller was owned by Rachel Overton, the widow of Aaron Overton, and was highly regarded by the family – he had been entrusted to run the Overton gristmill, the first in the county.

On the afternoon of July 24, a gallows, in close view of “an immense concourse of citizens and negroes”, awaited the accused rebels. Led under heavily armed guard from the courthouse, the condemned men showed remarkable composure as they walked to their deaths through the scorched ruins of the town they were accused of destroying. Jennings was reported to have shown particularly unparalleled nonchalance in the face of doom, refusing even to spit out his chew of tobacco as the noose

was placed around his neck. For his nonchalance, however, he would suffer.

Were the fires actually the start of an organized slave uprising? The vigilante committee heard ample testimony to the affirmative (much of which, today, appears to have originated with Charles Pryor and his letters), but if it kept written records of evidence and proceedings, they have been lost to history. Record temperatures were recorded on July 7, 8, and 9, with thermometers peaking as high as 112º F, and it was not uncommon for wooden structures to combust spontaneously at such extremes, especially those in which the new, highly unstable phosphorous matches, then known as "Lucifers", were stored. At least one member of the vigilance committee, Judge James Bentley, would later declare that, in his opinion, the accused were innocent. He believed the fire had resulted from someone throwing a smoldering cigar stump or match off the second story of the drugstore into the rubbish heap below. He added, though, that because of the inflamed state of the public mind, "someone had to be hanged." In one of the first histories of Dallas, published in 1892, 71-year-old William Perry Overton (whose mother had owned Cato Miller) would recall, "A lot of men had been smoking that Sunday around the drugstore, and I think the fire started from that." Nonetheless, slaves were whipped and tortured into confessions, and three were chosen, innocent or guilty, to set a horrific example for the rest. Although the Dallas fire and the subsequent executions would be largely ignored by future Texas and Civil War historians, the "Texas Troubles" had a significant impact on the southern secessionist movement. Today there are compelling arguments on both sides of the case, but on that grim summer afternoon in 1860, the argument would be settled at the riverbank. If the committee's decision was meant to terrify the slaves in attendance that day, it was surely about to accomplish its mission. Above the muddy, murky waters of the Trinity, an unseen specter brooded over the gallows.

At 4:00 PM the hangman pulled the lever. The drop was effective and merciful for Smith and Miller, whose necks cracked at the ends of their ropes – no struggle was made by either man. But death came hard for Patrick Jennings – his drop had been miscalculated. He writhed and twisted on air in a desperate dance to free tightly bound hands from behind his back, to step on some unseen footing in the void below on which to lift himself for a gulp of air, to release his neck from the fearsome grasp of the rope, only to feel it tighten and cut deeper with every movement. Witnesses said his struggle lasted for twenty minutes or so, after which the three bodies were cut down and dropped into their graves near the gallows. As the black, waxy soil was shoveled over them, the specter of death lingered, then quietly moved on.

A century later, no trace of these scenes would remain – not the ruins, not the courthouse, not even the river. Dallas would rise again, above and beyond these unmarked graves – not as a primitive village in the wilderness, but as a great sprawling city. But the restless specter would make its way back to this old brooding ground, now unrecognizable… yet familiar.

Dallas was quickly rebuilt after the fire of 1860 and the subsequent hangings. If the events of that summer were discussed at all, they were talked about in whispers. By September, citizens seemed to have comfortably dismissed the notion that there had been a slave uprising in the making. Even as civil war loomed, Dallas's bigger concern became that of bringing the railroad through town. But war and reconstruction would delay the arrival of the iron monster for another 12 years. When the Houston & Texas Central and the Texas & Pacific railroads finally arrived in 1872, they brought a staggering, explosive boom in population which continues today.

Dallas has been called a city with no history. When the occasional "history" book beckons from a dusty used bookstore shelf, it is often found to consist of a few opening pages glossing over the city's past, followed by an encyclopedic who's who of contemporaneous corporations and business leaders – Dallas is not in the business of history. Her cityscapes are hardly recognizable from year to year, much less over courses of generations. Wrecking balls, bulldozers, and construction cranes are constantly at

work, obliterating yesterday's quaint architectural scenes to make way for today's vertical rise of concrete, steel, and glass. Indeed, there is history here, but much of it lies hidden. Archaeological scrapes have revealed that John Neely Bryan's cornfield still lies beneath the lawn of the original town square on which a towering new courthouse was constructed in 1892 (now known as "Old Red"), by which time few citizens of the ever-changing city knew who Bryan was. Scattered around the area are lots, structures, and landscapes that have been made over and repurposed time and again under the incessant march of commerce and enterprise, history be damned. The bodies of Patrick Jennings, Samuel Smith, and "Old Cato" were unearthed in 1872 during excavations for the Texas & Pacific railway bridge over the Trinity, but were summarily reburied nearby, out of the way. Today those forgotten bones lie somewhere beneath rumbling railroad tracks or bustling parking lots near the Triple Underpass. The late SMU professor, Dr. William Farmer, who wrote the only comprehensive history of the fire and the hangings, once said, "Dallas is unlike Chicago – it doesn't know about its fire."

The place now known as Dealey Plaza is the original townsite of Dallas. It is the place where John Neely Bryan claimed his headright and built his cabin in 1841 – it would serve as the hub of all future expansion of the city. Here the Trinity River flowed, until the early 1930s, along the western edge of downtown – through what is now Martyr's Park. Bryan's vision of Dallas as a major port city on a navigable Trinity would never come to pass. The unscenic river would prove to be a thorn in the city's side rather than a commercial asset and, in the interest of flood control and land reclamation, would be moved a half-mile to the west and straightened by the series of levees through which it flows today.

Despite his outward amiability and remarkable achievements, the founder of Dallas was a troubled soul. Little is known about John Neely Bryan's day-to-day life, as he was not given to writing down his experiences and reminiscences. It is clear that he cared deeply for Dallas and its citizens, relishing the role of City Father – yet he remained restless and unfulfilled. He gave away many of the townsite's lots, as gifts to newly married couples, and as incentives to lure businesses and county government. The lots he sold brought little return. He set out to find wealth in the California Gold Rush of 1849, but returned to Dallas empty-handed in 1850. Over the next few years he became increasingly morbid and depressed until, in 1855, he shot a man for insulting his wife. Believing he had committed murder (he had not – the man survived and declined to press charges), Bryan fled to the Creek Nation in Oklahoma Territory where he took up residence with a trader named Jesse Chisholm (namesake of the historic cattle trail). After several years of wanderings through the West, he returned home with his fortunes and outlook somewhat improved. His reasons for staying away from Dallas are just as unclear as his reasons for returning, unannounced, to rejoin his family one spring night in 1861 (he had been absent during the Dallas fire and the hangings of 1860). At the outbreak of the Civil War, Bryan enlisted in the 18th Texas Cavalry regiment but was discharged a year later as unfit for active service. After the war, he tried to resume farming but his mental state continued to deteriorate. He was committed to the State Lunatic Asylum in Austin in February of 1877. He died there that September and was buried on the asylum grounds in an unmarked grave—no one knows exactly where.

Bryan's remote settlement would grow from an agrarian village to a teeming world-class metropolis, reaching ever upward, toward the clouds, where a great winged horse would crown its beaconing skyline. It would reach twice again as high, and higher still. Yet the city would always embody the restless, unfulfilled spirit of its founder. Despite its outward amiability and remarkable achievements, Dallas would be a troubled city.