

# Marshall: All Aboard!

## Railroad, African American Legacies Are Hubs of Northeast Texas City's Heritage

The railroad brought prosperity and growth to many Texas towns, but it delivered a different brand of cargo to Marshall. Beyond the usual goods and services that nurtured a developing community, the railroad's presence in Marshall played a role in a distinctively educated population and a lasting cultural legacy.

Marshall's geographic location in far northeast Texas provided a strategic connection to the region's active steamboat traffic and emerging railroad lines from points east. As early as 1858, steamboat passengers arriving at Swanson's Landing on the southern shores of nearby Caddo Lake could catch a passenger train on the

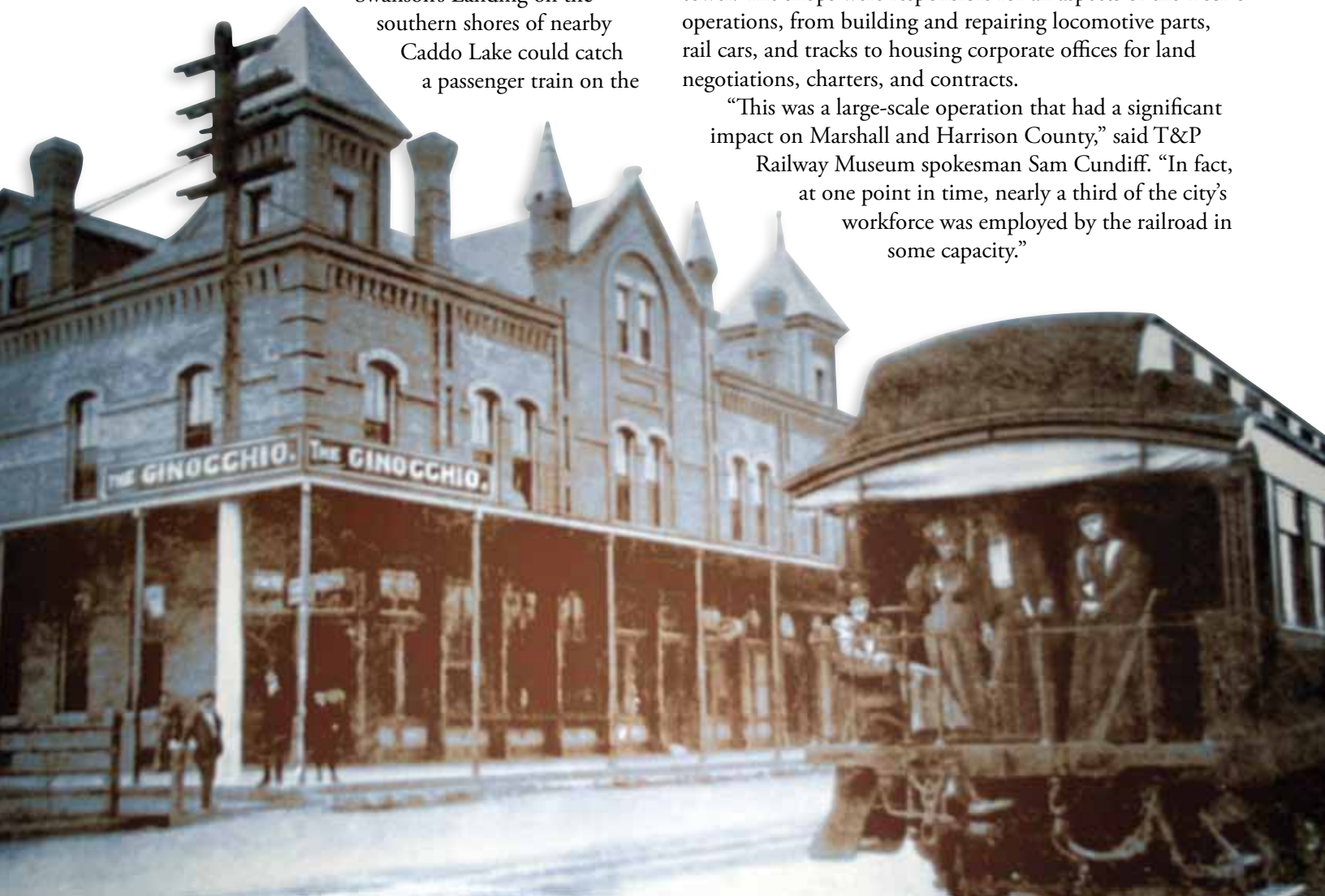
Southern Pacific Railroad and ride to Marshall.

The railroad brought money, settlers, and supplies to Marshall, making it one of the largest and wealthiest towns in East Texas, according to the *Handbook of Texas Online*. By the 1870s, the community boasted an impressive group of lawyers, political leaders, and educators, earning it the nickname "The Athens of Texas."

This growth and prosperity prompted Harrison County officials to boldly bolster the city's profile by offering the Texas and Pacific Railway (T&P) a \$300,000 bond subsidy in 1871 to locate its manufacturing shops and administrative offices in Marshall. T&P President Jay Gould accepted the offer, and the town received an immediate population and financial boost from the influx of railroad workers.

The T&P's extensive operations became known as the Marshall shops, a 66-acre complex comprised of 57 buildings including a roundhouse, car shops, warehouse, and water tower. The shops were responsible for all aspects of the T&P's operations, from building and repairing locomotive parts, rail cars, and tracks to housing corporate offices for land negotiations, charters, and contracts.

"This was a large-scale operation that had a significant impact on Marshall and Harrison County," said T&P Railway Museum spokesman Sam Cundiff. "In fact, at one point in time, nearly a third of the city's workforce was employed by the railroad in some capacity."





Among these employees were African American freedmen, many of whom congregated in the railroad's barrelhouses (warehouse facilities traditionally associated with logging camps). Other African Americans in Marshall were drawn to educational opportunities, particularly at Wiley College and, later, Bishop College. Founded in 1873, Wiley College became the first African American college west of the Mississippi River certified by the Freedman's Aid Society. It began offering college-level classes in 1885, and has remained a community cornerstone ever since.

Wiley College flourished as a result of the large number of freedmen in Harrison County after Emancipation. Prior to the Civil War, the county had the most slaves in the state. According to the *Handbook of Texas Online*, "The census of 1860 enumerated 8,784 slaves (59 percent of the total population), 145 planters who owned at least 20 bondsmen, and a cotton crop of 21,440 bales." Coupled with the burgeoning railroad industry and its need for cheap, manual labor, booming Marshall was a hub for African Americans seeking employment and improved lives.

Many freed slaves and their families created opportunities for themselves through education. An early advocate for learning was Meshack Roberts, a freed slave who served in the state legislature from 1873–78, until he was forced from office by the rise of the white Citizens Party of Harrison County. Though illiterate, one of Roberts' main goals was to educate African Americans throughout Texas, and he helped in the founding of Wiley College.

Another prominent champion of education in Marshall was Matthew Winfred Dogan, president of Wiley College from 1896–1942. During his tenure, the school expanded and rose to national prominence. He was responsible for obtaining the Carnegie Foundation grant to build the public Carnegie Library in 1907.

It was also during this time that one of the great accomplishments in African American history occurred.

*Opposite page: The Texas and Pacific Railway transformed Marshall in the 1870s (photo: Marshall Depot, Inc.). Clockwise, from above: This significant heritage is documented at the city's railroad museum; A former Carnegie Library is now an administration building at Wiley College; The restored courtroom of the 1901 Harrison County Courthouse.*

In 1935, the Wiley College debate team defeated all-white reigning national champions, the University of Southern California. This unprecedented feat was the basis for the fictionalized account in the 2007 film "The Great Debaters." The team was led by Melvin Tolson, a well-known civil rights activist, poet, dramatist, and English professor at Wiley College from 1924–47.

One debate team member who was mentored by Tolson rose to national prominence during the civil rights movement: James Farmer, Jr. co-founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942. As the national organization's chairman, he was a leader in the nonviolent civil disobedience movement of the 1960s and organizer of the Freedom Rides in the South. In 1998, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Honor by President Bill Clinton. One of Farmer's early motivations for founding CORE was Marshall's segregated Paramount Theater, with its offending side entrance for African Americans leading to the balcony.

While the civil rights movement shook the entire country, Marshall was an epicenter in Texas. In 1960, lunch counter sit-ins at the segregated Woolworth's and Fry Hodge Drug Store were some of the largest in the state. The nonviolent protests were led by students from local African American colleges (Wiley and Bishop)—the latter founded in 1881 by the Baptist Home Mission Society. The sit-ins were only partially successful following arrests and court cases. Rather than integrate, the downtown lunch counters closed and remained so until the 1990s.

That limited victory is representative of the challenging African American history in Marshall, where slavery, Jim



Crow laws, and the fight for civil rights are recent enough that many in the city still deal with their difficult memories. This struggle is an important consideration for Janet Cook, executive director of the Harrison County Historical Museum, who is setting up the permanent exhibits to be housed in the newly restored Harrison County Courthouse.

When the museum reopens later this year, the exhibits will follow a timeline of events, with African American history dates intertwined rather than set apart. Cook says there was discussion about a separate African American exhibit, but she acknowledges, "It's a part of everyone's history in Harrison County."

"Slavery is a difficult and sensitive subject to deal with," Cook adds. "It's a very dark period in our history, but it's something we can't just ignore. It's especially important in Harrison County because after slavery, things like Wiley College and music helped bring us to the place we are today."

Music, in particular, has become a focal point for Marshall's current cultural heritage, especially its role in the development of the boogie woogie genre (see sidebar on page 13). This barrelhouse-style piano music is honored in the city's official campaign titled Marshall, Texas: The Birthplace of Boogie Woogie. A palpable energy surrounds this recent heritage discovery, and its resultant concerts bring together people of all ethnicities and ages.

"I grew up in Marshall, and I'd always heard about the thriving African American music scene that was here until Prohibition," recalls Jack Canson, co-director of Marshall, Texas: The Birthplace of Boogie Woogie. "There hasn't been much news about it since then, but we're hoping to bring it back."

Canson is grateful of the surviving legacy, saying, "If there wasn't so much rich African American heritage around here, I'm not sure we'd even be able to pull off this boogie woogie thing."

## Marshall Matters

For heritage travelers, the best way to get immersed in Marshall's rich African American legacy is through an educational driving tour, guided by the informative *Buard History Trail* brochure. The brochure offers a comprehensive timeline, detailed maps, historic photos, and insightful background about more than 30 sites related to the history of African Americans in Marshall. Corresponding markers are installed at most of these locations, which include Wiley College, the site of Bishop College, the Paramount Theater, and the Old Powder Mill Cemetery. Free copies of the *Buard History Trail* with an accompanying audio CD are available from the Marshall Convention and



Visitors Bureau (213 W. Austin St. or call 903.935.7868).

Regardless of your area of historical interest, the best place to start a heritage-themed journey in Marshall is the stately **Harrison County Courthouse** (Houston Street and North Washington Avenue, 903.935.8417). Serving as the town's visual and visceral centerpiece, the courthouse was restored in 2009 through the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Texas Historic Courthouse Preservation Program.

The Neo-Classical Beaux Arts style building was constructed in 1901 of corn yellow brick and carved Lueders limestone, with remarkable architectural elements such as colossal pink granite columns adorned with terra cotta capitals, eagles along the edge of the roof line, Lady Justice atop a beautifully restored cupola, and recreated and restored ornamental finishes throughout the building.

Although the Harrison County Historical Museum is currently being installed in several wings of the courthouse, visitors are still encouraged to explore the building to experience its rich history and hand-crafted detailing. As museum director Cook notes, "The structure itself is our county's greatest artifact."

Similarly significant is the **Texas and Pacific Railway Museum and Depot** (800 N. Washington Ave., 903.938.8248, [www.marshalldepot.org](http://www.marshalldepot.org)). All that remains of the once-vast T&P Railway yards is the historic 1912





depot; however, this prominent red-brick building aptly represents the extensive operations that had a significant cultural and developmental impact on Marshall. To get to the museum, visitors must pass through a tunnel below the still-active Amtrak line and enter the depot, where an impressive collection of railroad artifacts awaits. Items include memorabilia from early passenger trains, exhibits detailing the large-scale manufacturing functions at the shops, and hands-on displays including a model train and pull whistle.

Just south of the depot is Marshall's downtown commercial district, containing a diverse mix of shops, restaurants, and businesses in restored historic buildings that have benefitted from participation in the THC's Texas Main Street Program. Among the most-visited sites is the **1898 Weisman Building** (211 North Washington Ave., 903.934.8836), which operated for more than a century as a department store until closing in 1989. After an extensive rehabilitation, the Weisman Center now houses a café and a collection of merchants offering antiques, pottery, art, and furniture.



While downtown, consider visiting another popular cultural attraction—the **Michelson Museum of Art** (216 North Bolivar St., 903.935.9480, [www.michelsonmuseum.org](http://www.michelsonmuseum.org)), featuring a colorful collection of paintings and drawings by Russian-American artist Leo Michelson (1887–1978). Since opening in 1985, the museum has expanded its collection to include early 20th-century American art and international objects such as African masks and Chinese opera puppets.

A few miles from downtown is the historic campus of **Wiley**

*Clockwise, from top: The 1918 Thirkield Hall sits prominently on Wiley College campus; Powder Mill Cemetery is on the Buard History Trail; The Harrison County Historical Museum will feature cultural exhibits inside the courthouse. On the cover: The 1901 Harrison County Courthouse.*

**College** (711 Wiley Ave., 903.923.2400, [www.wileyc.edu](http://www.wileyc.edu)). Founded in 1873, the oldest African American college in the western United States remains an important educational institution and boasts several historically significant structures. Among them are the distinguished former Carnegie Library now housing the Willis J. King Administration Building, the 1905 President's Home, and the 1918 Thirkield Hall. An Official Texas Historical Marker near the President's Home chronicles the real stories of Wiley College's notable history.

For additional information about heritage tourism destinations in Marshall and East Texas, order a free copy of the THC's *Texas Forest Trail Region* travel guide by calling 866.276.6219 or visiting [www.thc.state.tx.us/travel](http://www.thc.state.tx.us/travel). Regional attractions are also featured in the THC's free travel booklet *African Americans in Texas: A Lasting Legacy*, available via the same phone number or [www.africanamericansintexas.com](http://www.africanamericansintexas.com). ★

## Making the Starr Family Home Shine

The Starr Family Home, one of the THC's 20 historic sites, is among Marshall's most-visited heritage tourism attractions. However, the stately 1871 Victorian home, Maplecroft, is currently closed for much-needed preservation work, including minor structural repair, addition of central air conditioning, carpentry repairs, and exterior repainting. The site will reopen by December 1, 2011.

While work is proceeding at Maplecroft, site staff is repairing and repainting the remaining structures on the 3.2-acre site that have hosted four generations of Starr family history.

"It's a lot of work to paint all these buildings and carefully handle all the artifacts—especially the Maplecroft mansion," says MaryLin Hocutt, the site's office manager. "People in Marshall keep calling to see if we're open because we host so many events throughout the year. I tell them it'll be awhile, but it will definitely be worth it when everything's completed."

In the meantime, Hocutt notes that site staff is available to provide off-site programs to school groups and community organizations. For more information, contact the site at 903.935.3044 or email [starr-family-home@thc.state.tx.us](mailto:starr-family-home@thc.state.tx.us).

*The Starr Family Home's Blake House is receiving a fresh coat of paint.*

