

A Brief Overview of the History of Richardson, TX

Presented by Dr. Steven R. Butler

Richardson's Sesquicentennial

On June 26, 2023, Richardson's official birthday, the city will be 150 years old. A 150th anniversary is called a "sesquicentennial."

In anticipation of this occasion, a look back at Richardson's history seems appropriate.

Introduction

Richardson is a truly remarkable place. In the span of 150 years—just two human lifetimes (more or less)--Richardson has grown from a literal dot on a map to one of the biggest small cities in Texas. Today, with a population of more than 120,000, it is now No. 31 out of more than 1,200 incorporated municipalities.

Richardson has also grown in land size. When founded, it measured 121 acres. Today (2022), Richardson encompasses 28.6 square miles. That's 18,304 acres.

Introduction

Richardson has also changed demographically. In its early days, it was almost entirely white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. Today, only slightly more than half of Richardson residents are non-Hispanic white. About 17 percent are Hispanic, about 17 percent are Asian, and nearly 11 percent black. Many other faiths, not just Protestant Christian, are now practiced. The number of non-religious residents has grown too. In short, Richardson is a reflection of modern-day America.

Introduction

Looking back, it's easy to see that several factors have led to change and helped Richardson grow and prosper. What are they?

- New forms of transportation
- New types of businesses
- A business-friendly municipal government
- A progressive outlook on the part of both citizens and government, i.e. a willingness to embrace new technology and accept social and demographic change

The Six Eras of Richardson's History

- Pre-History (up to 1841)
- The Pioneer Era (1841-1872)
- The Town Period (1873-1924)
- The Early City Period (1925-1953)
- The Growth/Transformational Era (1954-1979)
- The Modern Era (1980-present)

Pre-History (up to 1841)



Courtesy National Park Service.

During the Ice Age of 10 to 20 thousand years ago, Woolly Mammoths roamed North Central Texas, including present-day Richardson.

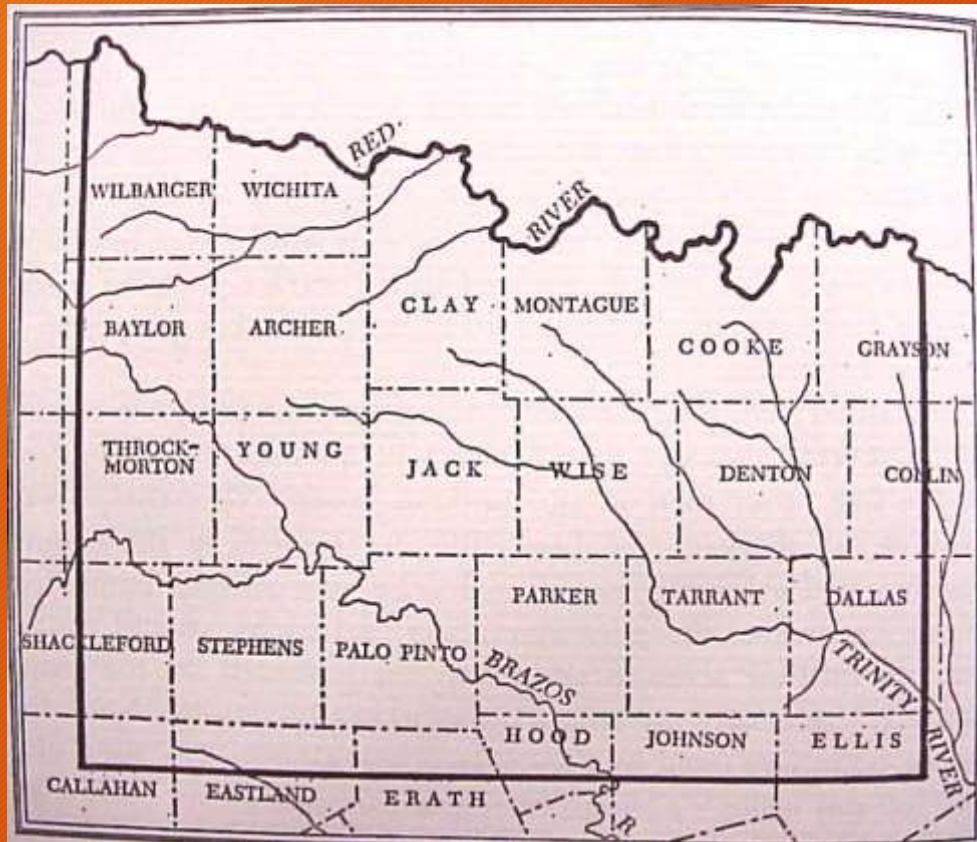
In 1971, the skeleton of a mammoth was found in the city landfill (now Breckinridge Park). Today, the “Richardson Mammoth” is on display in the Heard Natural Science Museum in McKinney, Texas.

Pre-History (up to 1841)



Prior to the arrival of Anglo-Americans and their African-American slaves in North Central Texas, the site of the present-day city of Richardson was part of a vast, trackless prairie inhabited by semi-nomadic tribes of Native American Indians and huge herds of bison (buffalo) as well as other wild animals that provided the native people with food and other necessities of life.

Pioneer Era (1841-1872)



The Pioneer Era began with the founding of the Peters Colony, a private enterprise charged with bringing people from the United States to settle in what was then the north central part of the Republic of Texas, including the present-day site of Richardson and its immediate environs.

Pioneer Era (1841-1872)



During this era, many of the families that would become prominent in the early history of Richardson received land grants in the area or bought land cheaply. They came largely from slaveholding states, like Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee, but some came from Illinois and Ohio as well. Most of these people lived on scattered farms that lay within the city limits of present-day Richardson, or immediately outside it.

Pioneer Era (1841-1872)



In 1858, on land owned by John B. Floyd, a small settlement called Breckinridge, named in honor of Kentucky politician and then-U.S. Vice-President John C. Breckinridge, was established on a now-vacant site that lay between present-day Richland College and present-day Restland Memorial Park. This settlement, which consisted of a hotel, a post-office, a general store, and a blacksmith shop, was the forerunner of the present-day city of Richardson. It was also a regular stage-coach stop on the Sawyer, Risher & Hall line.

The Town Period (1873-1924)



The town period began with the construction of a train depot by the Houston & Texas Central Railroad on a line now used by DART light rail. In 1873, the settlement at Breckinridge was abandoned after three men, George Blewett, William J. Wheeler, and Bernard Reilly sold a right-of-way to the railroad and two of them (Reilly and Wheeler) sold a total of 101 acres overlapping the train tracks to the H.&T.C. for the establishment of a town called Richardson, in honor of H.&T.C. Secretary, Alfred Stephen Richardson. A mistake by a deed writer and mapmaker inadvertently increased the size of the town to 121 acres.

The Town Period (1873-1924)



Courtesy Richardson Public Library.

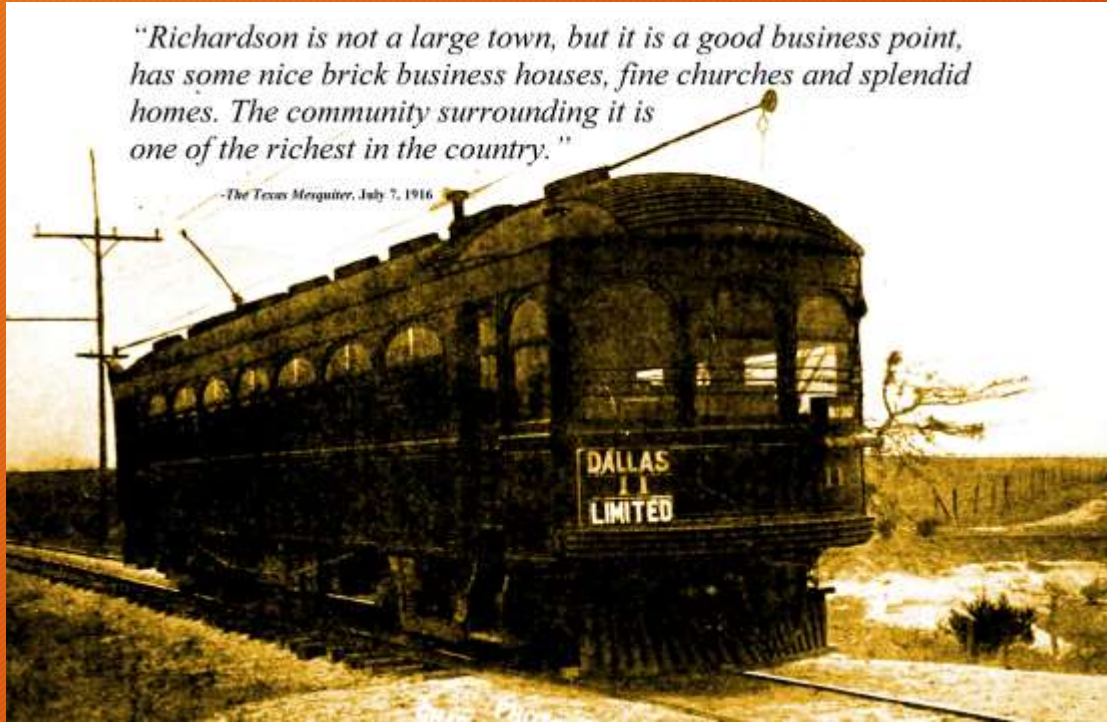
During this period, the town, which had more businesses than its forerunner, grew slowly but steadily during the late nineteenth century.

Throughout the Town Period, Richardson served primarily as a place for nearby farm families to go for groceries, dry goods, and to have their cotton crop ginned and baled, or their automobiles serviced.

The Town Period (1873-1924)

"Richardson is not a large town, but it is a good business point, has some nice brick business houses, fine churches and splendid homes. The community surrounding it is one of the richest in the country."

-The Texas Mesquiter, July 7, 1916



Following the turn of the twentieth century, the arrival of a telephone exchange, electric lights and power, and two new forms of transportation, the automobile and the Interurban, led to a slight increase in population.

The Interurban was faster, cheaper and more frequent than the H&TC, connecting Richardson with Dallas to the south and Denison to the north.

The Early City Period (1925-1953)



In 1925, the City of Richardson was born when voters approved incorporation and elected their first mayor, Tom McKamy. They likewise approved the drilling of an artesian well, the construction of a water tower and the installation of a sewerage system. Some of the streets and roads were either paved or graveled. A police and volunteer fire department were also created.

Courtesy Richardson Public Library.

The Early City Period (1925-1953)



During the early city period, Richardson's population grew, but mostly through natural increase. The city's principal employers were the cotton gins and the variety of businesses that lined Main Street. The interurban and the railroad (now the Southern Pacific) continued to provide links to the rest of Texas and the United States. By and large, a small town atmosphere prevailed.

The Great Depression had only a minimal effect on Richardson. Apart from rationing and the fact that many Richardson and area residents served in the armed forces, the city was relatively untouched by World War II.

Courtesy Richardson Public Library.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



Following the end of the Second World War, Richardson began to change dramatically as new businesses began to arrive in the area, most notably Texas Instruments (1956) and Collins Radio (1957). The extension of Central Expressway (US-75) to Richardson in 1954 also stimulated growth. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, suburban housing developments began to spring up on former cotton farms on both sides of the freeway, and in effect, Richardson became a "bedroom community" of nearby Dallas, which was also undergoing rapid growth at this time.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



In 1956, Richardson voters approved a home rule charter. At about this same time, shopping centers began to spring up throughout the city. The first was Heights Shopping Center, just west of old downtown Richardson, on the opposite side of 75-Central. In 1977, Richardson Square Mall, a sprawling indoor shopping center featuring some of retail's biggest names (Sears, Montgomery Wards, Dillards, etc.) opened in East Richardson.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



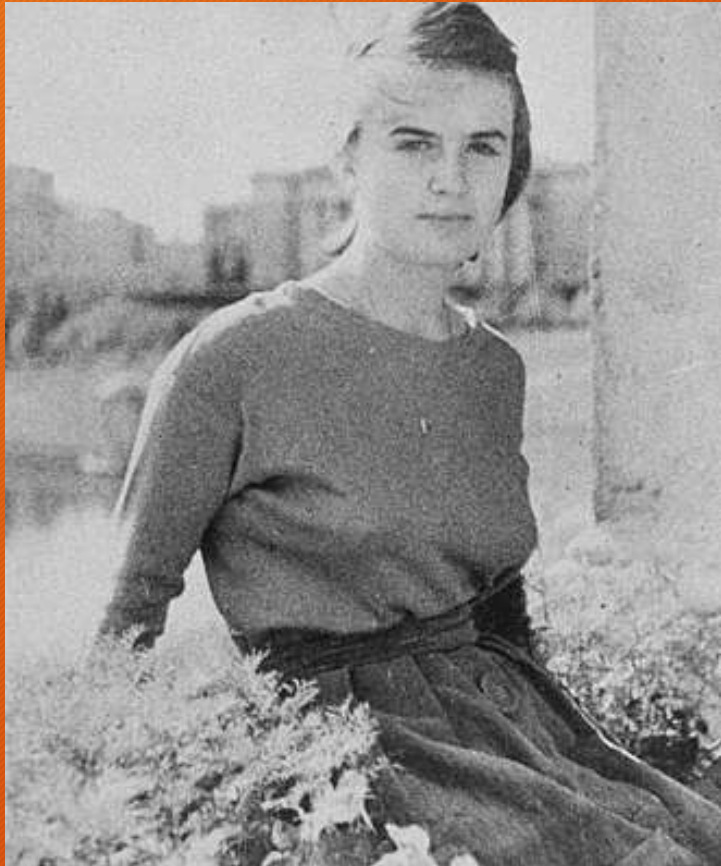
In 1953, as the postwar "baby boom" and new development led to a rapid rise in school enrollment, elementary age students were separated from older students when the city's first high school (now the Math-Science Technology Magnet School) was built to educate grades seven through twelve. In 1959, contracts were awarded for the construction of a new, much larger (and costlier) high school on Belt Line Road. It was completed and opened in 1961. By that time there were also two junior highs, nine elementary schools and one combined elementary-high school for African-American students.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



In 1968, the city's second large high school, J. J. Pearce, named for a longtime local administrator and located on the city's far west side, was ready for occupancy. This was followed in 1969 by the construction of a third large high school, named for scientist Lloyd V. Berkner, on the east side.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



One of the most noteworthy events in Richardson's history, the desegregation of its public schools, occurred in 1964. That same year, the city was briefly in the national spotlight when Marina Oswald, widow of alleged JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, came to live in Richardson and in 1965, bought a house there. (She and her second husband have long since moved to another locality.)

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



The so-called “Space Race” of the 1960s also put Richardson in the national spotlight when Richardson-based Collins Radio played an important role in communications with satellites and also astronauts, including those that landed on the Moon for the first time in 1969.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



Texas Instruments likewise played a role in the “Space Race.” In 1958, TI engineer Jack Kilby invented the integrated circuit, or microchip, that made it possible for Apollo spacecraft to have an onboard computer.

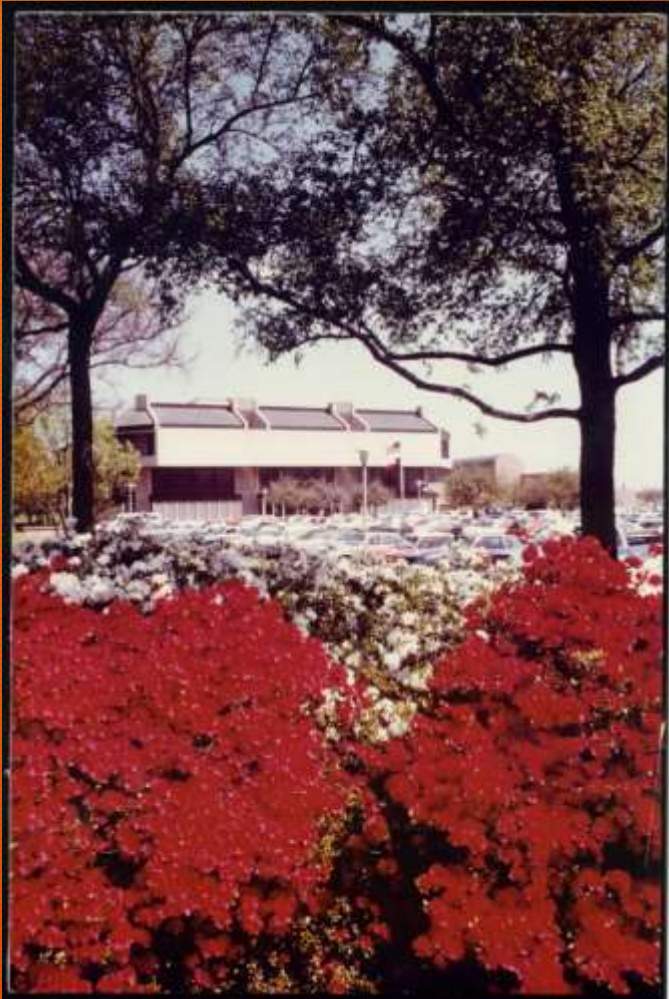
The microchip that Kilby invented on Richardson’s doorstep also made the modern age of communications possible. Today, it is used in personal computers, cell phones, laptops, tablets, and other electronic devices.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



Institutions of higher learning were also established during this era. In 1969, the Southwest Center for Advanced Studies, located on the city's northwest side, became the University of Texas at Dallas (even though technically located in Richardson). Three years later, in 1972, Richland College of the Dallas County Community College District, located in Dallas just outside the Richardson city limits, opened its doors to students for the first time.

The Growth or Transformational Era (1953-1979)



Parks, playgrounds, and public swimming pools likewise proliferated during this era, and in 1970, a new public library was built, followed by the construction of a new city hall in 1980.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



TELECOM
C O R R I D O R
RICHARDSON, TEXAS

During this era, Richardson became known as the "Telecom Corridor," when major telecommunications firms began to locate in the city. Among these were MCI (the forerunner of present-day Verizon) in 1982, followed by Nokia, Nortel, Ericsson, U.S.Data, and Amphenol Fiber Systems International, to name but a few. Some of these companies have since relocated or been replaced by others.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



Richardson also expanded not only its population but also its area when land in neighboring Collin County was annexed to the city. A new park, Breckinridge (named for the little community that was the forerunner of Richardson), was established there, where the city's annual Independence Day fireworks show is now held. In 1995, the City of Richardson also purchased land known locally as "Routh Woods," and turned it into a nature preserve complete with paved paths.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



The modern era also saw the beginning of new community events. In 1989, the City of Richardson began holding its annual "Santa's Village" in the plaza adjacent to City Hall and in 1993, the annual Wildflower Festival, an event which remains popular to this day, was first held. A city-owned entertainment venue, the Eisemann Center, opened in 2002.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



Transportation was improved too, with the widening of 75-Central Expressway in the late twentieth century, and arrival of DART (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) buses in the 1980s and trains in the early twenty-first century. At the beginning of the present century, four DART light rail stations were opened in Richardson, at Spring Valley Road, at Arapaho Road, Galatyn Park, and City Line/Bush Turnpike.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



The arrival of DART light rail also stimulated the city's growth, with the building of new apartment houses and businesses in the vicinity of the four stations. The most recent example is the new high-rise State Farm Insurance campus which sprung up on long-vacant land between Renner Road and the President George H. W. Bush Toll Road.

City facilities expanded too. The new public safety campus at Greenville Avenue and E. Main is one of the most outstanding.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)



As the city prepares to celebrate its Sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) in 2023, the future of Richardson looks bright.

BUT....

Preserving Richardson's History



One area in which Richardson has fallen short is historic preservation. Far too many old buildings and landmarks, dating from the city's early days, have been demolished with hardly a thought. And when people see the few that remain, they know nothing about them, about why they might be important and worthy of saving.

Preserving Richardson's History



One good example is the old Odd Fellows building at 111 E. Main.

Although the date at the top says "1924," it was actually constructed in 1898, which makes it one of the oldest structures in downtown Richardson. (1924 is the year the Richardson Masonic Lodge, which bought the building in 1933, was first organized.)

Preserving Richardson's History



The ground floor was originally a grocery store. Later it became the Citizens State Bank, a Richardson institution for decades. The top floor started as the Odd Fellows hall, but everything important happened there. That's where the community band practiced, where women's clubs met, and where people voted. It also served as Richardson's first city hall, from 1931 to 1933.

Preserving Richardson's History



The building next door, at 115 E. Main, built in 1911, is another Richardson landmark. For most of the first half of the 20th century, this was Harben's Drugstore, owned and operated by one of the town's most influential families and a regular gathering place for everyone in town at one time or another.

Preserving Richardson's History



Next door, at 117 E. Main, built in 1924, was the Harben-Spotts Printing Company—home of the *Richardson Echo*, the town's only newspaper for the first half of the 20th century.

Preserving Richardson's History



Up the street, there is another old block that dates from the late 19th and early twentieth century. The brick on the west end, built about 1898, originally served as a dry goods store. Another housed the town's first movie theater, while a third was an auto repair shop before it was divided into a popular café and a grocery store.

Preserving Richardson's History



This distinctive little building across the street was Richardson's post office from 1939, when it was built, until 1955.

Preserving Richardson's History



Even this little non-descript building at 110 E. Main has a long history. Built in the 1890s, it served as a popular soft-drink stand until its original owner, Brack Lothridge died. In 1938, Mayor Tom Jackson bought it, bricked in the original frame building (still there underneath the brick) and used it as a business office.

What can the RHGS do?



We are going to start by publishing a Sesquicentennial Souvenir picture book, highlighting historic buildings, landmarks, and sites in Richardson.

Our next step should be to work with the city to see that no more historic buildings and landmarks are demolished. We also need to work with business and homeowners on a plan to erect or place markers or plaques at various sites, to call attention to the historical significance of a building or landmark.

What can the RHGS do?



There are lots of other things we can do. In the smaller city of Allen, they built a replica of their original train depot and placed a vintage locomotive on tracks next to it. Why can't we do something like that?

In other towns and cities they have turned old buildings or replicas into local history museums. Why can't we do something like that?

What can the RHGS do?



In other towns and cities they have erected statues and monuments to historical figures or groups of people (such as early pioneers). Why can't we do something like that?

In other places they have paid for Texas Historical Commission markers to commemorate historical sites. Why can't we do something like that?

What can the RHGS do?



The fact of the matter is that we can do all those things, and more, if we want to!

All it takes is the will and the drive, and money too of course, which we can raise if we have the will and the drive.

What can the RHGS do?



The Sesquicentennial of our city is a good time to get started.

So, what are we waiting for?