

ON



TRACK

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GARLAND LANDMARK SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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Fire Brings a Square to Downtown

Part 1: A history and redesign primer



The Garland Square, December 24th, 1932. The huge crowds are due to a car raffle, which ultimately was won by Laverne Knight.
Garland Landmark Museum Collection

The Garland Square is set for a new design. Redesigning an American city square once is quite an odd phenomenon, but this will be the third incarnation of this area of Garland.

Redesigning city squares is extremely unusual in the US because nearly every single square is based around a courthouse. No courthouse, no square. Garland was never a county seat, so it never had a courthouse, yet has a lovely square. Why?

"The Square" didn't start off as such. What is now an open area was jam-packed with businesses and storage structures made of wood. Things were rather higgledy-piggledy in this section of the city. Businesses went up quickly as Garland grew. At the turn of the last century, Garland was second in population only to Dallas. On a typical trade day, over 35 businesses were in operation in this small quadrant with horse/buggy parking being at a premium.

Only three stately brick and iron buildings stood on the square by the very end of the 1800s. Those were all built by lodges, namely the Knights of Pythias, the Oddfellows and the Masons. Fraternity upstairs, businesses downstairs. The Oddfellows building stands empty but adjacent to the Masons which now houses Lifewell

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Church on 6th Street. These two buildings look remarkably similar as they were constructed at the same time. The Knights of Pythias makes up one half of the Guaranty Bank, on the corner of Main and 6th. All three were constructed between 1897 and 1899.



West side of the square, c. 1915. Knights of Pythias is on the far left with Oddfellows and Masons at the far right. Garland Landmark Museum Collection

Thanksgiving of 1899 fell on November 30th for people celebrating in the DFW area. If that date strikes you as late, it is because most cities celebrated Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November at the time. President Roosevelt wanted it to be the second-to-last Thursday of the month, but many cities traditionally stuck with the last Thursday, regardless. On December 26th, 1941, Congress stepped in and made it the fourth Thursday.

Late on that November 30th, fat and happy, people were tucked in their beds. A fire broke out on the square. Apocryphal tales attribute it to a cigar being thrown down in the printing office of the Garland News, but no one really knows what started the fire. What we do know is that it raged, consuming everything made of wood all the way around the square, fed by high winds that night. Nearly every business was wiped out. Passengers on the Katy Line watched in horror as they went through town, close enough to feel the heat of the fire. A bucket brigade was started, pumping two wells dry, but it did nothing to stop the blaze. In desperation, men from the city rushed in to burning buildings, chucking merchandise, materials and machinery in to the street in an effort to save it. These men stayed all night on the square, protecting what was left of people's investments.

Very nearly the only things left standing were the three brick lodge buildings. The 'square' was flattened and a smoldering ruin. 30 of 38 businesses were lost entirely. Very few Garland businesses had any type of insurance to help them recover. The estimates are thus: \$80,000 in losses (2.3 million in today's money); \$20,000 of it was insured (\$600,000 today). A

quote in the Dallas Morning News mentioned that the insurance agents were 'exceedingly courteous and fair'.

The Garland News building was owned by John H Cullom at the time. Their losses were \$2,000 (\$58,000 today) with no insurance to cushion the blow. The post office was a total loss as was all of the mail and other documents stored within. The bank burned, the drug stores burned, the restaurants burned – it was all gone.

The fire was not all bad. Several good things came of it. The city decided in concert that they would redesign the area to have an open square. John T. Jones, later the president of National Bank, is credited with organizing the deeding of the square to the city. The two chief investors were, interestingly, a woman by the name of S.J. Murphree who deeded her portion of the square for \$1500 (\$46,000 today) and M.D. Williams , proprietor of the M.D. Williams store, who sold his portion for a single dollar (\$30 today).

These investments allowed for a chance to broaden the square so there was horse/carriage parking and clean up the streets. Main became Bankhead, 4th became 6th, Harbison became State, North became Main, and 5th emptied. Mondays became trade days with wooden, elevated sidewalks

installed so the women would show up – no dirty skirt hems here. Everything was more organized and more appealing for women to attend and shop throughout the day.

By early September, 1900, the mayor was saying that Garland was back on its feet. The farmers were having a great year with a bumper crop of cotton that was selling for high prices. Thirteen (13!) new brick businesses and several frame houses and stores were already built in those 8 months and the brand-new brick high school was opening the second week of September. It was a hotly contested election year and the mayor said he wished everyone would forget about politics and keep building.

A few of those very first brick buildings were Intrinsic Brewery's main building which originally housed BG Clothing. (The beer garden side would not be built until 1918 as a harness and tin shop.) Also completed in 1900 was the space now occupied by Rowlett Florist and Gifts next door to Intrinsic. The florist shop originally housed a grocery. It became a 'cash grocery' to great fanfare in the 1930s. "Cash groceries" allowed you to shop and pick what you wanted from shelves rather than waiting for the shopkeeper to choose items behind the counter for you.



North side of the square, c. 1913. From left to right is Joe J. Mickle & Son, H.W. Jones, Flook Grocery, a variety of smaller shops and the Garland Hotel at the end of the block. Garland Landmark Museum Collection



Southeast corner of the Square with the WWI memorial fountain in the foreground and two-story

Nicholson Hall in the background, c. 1933. Garland Landmark Museum Collection

The buildings around the square continued to be constructed, mostly in fireproof brick, through roughly 1920. In 1914, a huge cistern had been installed under the square, replacing the small well/trough that had been in use for watering horses. All parking and streets had been paved by 1933. Also in 1933, a huge memorial fountain dedicated to the Garland residents lost in WWI was installed.

The 1950s brought many changes. The first was the removal of the fountain as too many people complained about water spots on their shiny cars. Next, businesses started putting sleek facades on the front of their buildings, obscuring the brick work, clerestory windows and crenellation of the uppermost brick. A few of these facades are still left around the square although many have been removed in the intervening years.

Which brings us to the 1970s complete overhaul of the center of the square. The idea of redesigning the square was originally proposed in 1968. By the late 1960s, the square was mainly just for parking. There were many abandoned businesses and the square was no longer used for gatherings. In decades past, it had been used for rallies, dances and other festivities. Now it was mostly abandoned and the city was desperate to bring business back, away from the popular malls.

That 1968 proposed redesign was presented to the community on February 13th. It was shocking in its scope. It called for the demolition of a majority of the buildings in a twelve block area around the square. Avenues B and D, Walnut, Austin Street,

South Garland and North Star would provide access to the newly rebuilt area. All other streets would be obliterated or replaced with pedestrian walkways. The trajectory would be to have something more spectacular than NorthPark Shopping Center which was new at the time.

As anyone from the Garland area can guess, that did not happen. And lucky for us as we maintain the original buildings from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But, you may not know that the reason this design didn't take place was actually because of deed restrictions on that original donation of land right after the fire of 1899. In no uncertain terms, it called for this area to remain permanently open.

The square, as it stands today, was designed by the firm of Oblinger & Smith from Wichita, Kansas. It was designed as a plaza, built up along the sidewalk, with parking along the perimeter. There were steps down to a fountain on the eastern side and trees along the edges. In the



LANDSCAPED COURT—This architect's drawing of a landscaped court is one of several shown to property owners and other interested persons Tuesday night when a proposed plan

for downtown Garland's redevelopment was presented by Lane Gantler and Partners, architects and engineers of Dallas.



The square ca. 1985 featuring terraced steps and a water feature. Stores along Sixth Street included Accent Lighting, Cole & Davis, and McKnight Drugs, all with the ubiquitous “cohesive” metal awning.
Garland Landmark Museum Collection

1970s, the buildings that surrounded the plaza all had the same metal awning to create a cohesive feel. Rosalynn Carter dedicated the square in 1976 although it was not entirely completed until 1979.

The basics of that 1970s design stand unchanged until today, minus the fountain which was removed under the auspices of drought restrictions in the 2010s. The new redesign of the plaza for the 21st century looks to make it more pedestrian-friendly. The entire plaza will be brought to street level and will be able to host a much wider spectrum of events, from small to large. It calls for a performance area, much more shade, a play area and a second performance area for smaller special programs. All of this will be well-illuminated and easier to navigate.

The design has not been finalized, but the design concept seen below has been published. The City is looking to open bidding for construction later this year (2021), with a completion set for late 2023.



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Downtown Scavenger Hunt

Visit the museum during open hours to get your scavenger hunt clues, lanyard and starting pin. Head to the business you think is the correct answer and see if you are right. If so, they will give you another souvenir pin. Once you have all 10 pins, return to the museum for your goodie bag full of prizes. This is a great way to learn about historic downtown Garland while visiting businesses at the same time!

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