

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

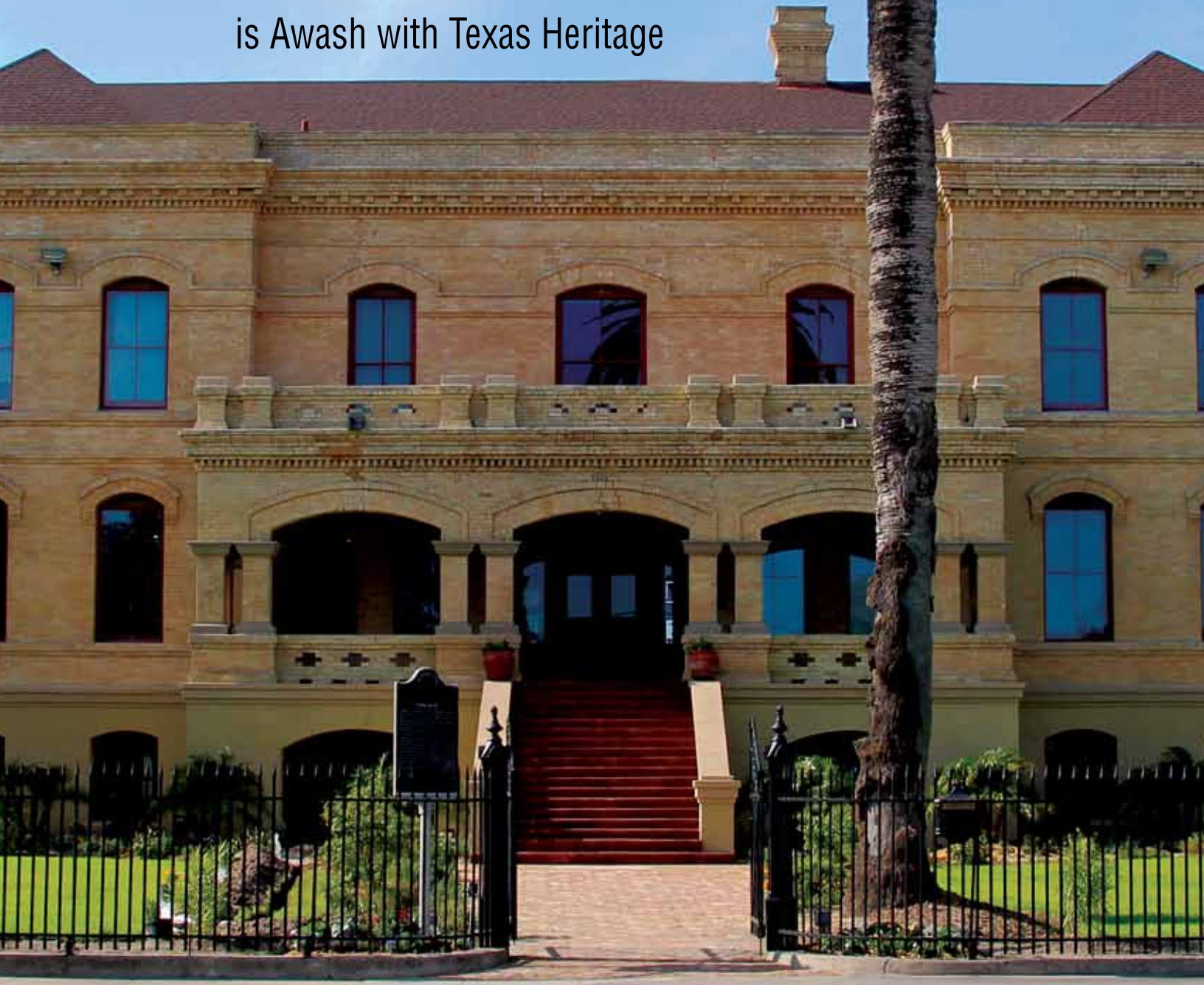
THE MEDALLION



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*Galveston's  
Grand History*

Vibrant Gulf Coast Island  
is Awash with Texas Heritage



# Galveston's Grand History

## Gulf Coast Island is Awash with Texas Heritage



Text and photos by Andy Rhodes, *The Medallion* Managing Editor

When J.P. Bryan first saw the former Galveston Orphans Home in 2013, two words immediately came to mind: “pretty scary.” After serving as a safe haven for thousands of children for nearly a century, the 1902 brick structure had become abandoned and debris-filled. Bryan, a former commissioner with the Texas Historical Commission, soon realized the building had the potential to provide protection of a different kind. “Once we started envisioning it as a restored building with all the possibilities it held as a museum, I said, ‘Oh my gosh, this could be an incredible opportunity,’” he says.

Bryan, a proud descendant of Moses Austin, recently dedicated the building as **The Bryan Museum** ([www.thebryanmuseum.org](http://www.thebryanmuseum.org), 409.632.7685), which showcases his remarkable collection of more than 70,000 items spanning 2,500 years of Texas and Southwestern history. A portion of Bryan’s collection was previously displayed at the headquarters of his company, Torch Energy Advisors, in downtown Houston. He eventually searched for a larger

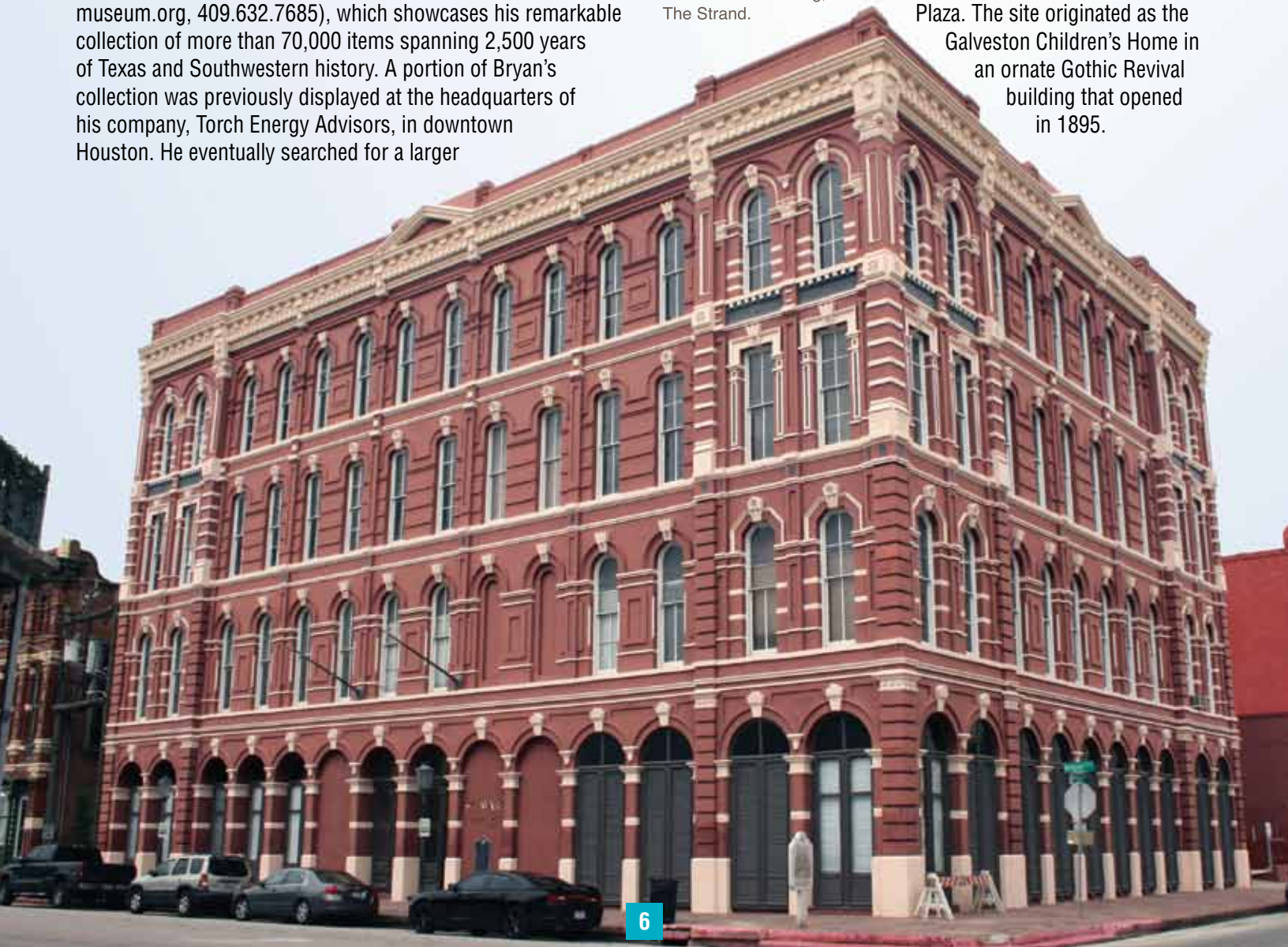
site in nearby Galveston, where much of the region’s history began with the arrival of tens of thousands of immigrants.

“This is where so many people came in to the South and began expanding and settling,” Bryan explains. “The settlement of the Southwest is one of the greatest in the world, and people can see that history revived and shared right here in this museum.”

Appropriately, the building has a storied past. According to Bryan Museum Curator Andrew Gustafson, the orphanage was founded in 1878 by George Dealey, a father of nine who went on to become a highly respected civic leader in Dallas

Stewart Title Building,  
The Strand.

and namesake of the city’s Dealey Plaza. The site originated as the Galveston Children’s Home in an ornate Gothic Revival building that opened in 1895.





The Bryan Museum's eye-catching exhibits include this display dedicated to the region's Spanish Colonial period.

The building was severely damaged in Galveston's 1900 hurricane, but restoration funds were quickly raised by publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, who hosted a charity bazaar in New York City. The structure was remodeled in a Renaissance Revival style and opened two years later as the Galveston Orphans Home.

Bryan has long dreamed of sharing his passion for Texas and Southwestern history. Since the 1960s, he and his wife Mary Jon have amassed one of the largest collections of its kind in the world. The Bryan Museum features three floors of rare and stunning artifacts, maps, and documents. Highlights include the Joel Robison sword used to aid in Mexican Gen. Santa Anna's capture after the Battle of San

Jacinto; authentic correspondence from infamous Gulf Coast pirate Jean Lafitte; a striking collection of



J.P. Bryan and his dog Chalk pose at the Bryan Museum's entrance.

decorative saddles; and historic firearms used in pivotal Texas battles.

Museum visitors can view these and other notable artifacts in eye-catching and dramatically lit exhibit cases. Many are placed over windows with diffused natural light, providing a pleasant backlit appearance with accompanying artwork to highlight the artifacts. The exhibits begin with Native American history—stone tools, artwork, and pottery—and progress chronologically to eras including the Spanish Colonial period, French occupation, and the Texas Revolution.

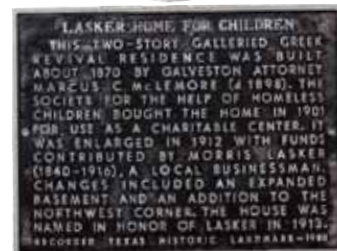
“The collection isn't solely dedicated to Texas, but a lot of what happened in Texas impacted the entire West,” Bryan explains. “Texas was at the core of so many things. We were our own nation, and there were a lot of significant people and events here.”

Bryan also takes pride in the building's environmental sustainability, with a geothermal system consisting of 40 wells drilled deep into the ground to harness energy to heat and cool the structure. The museum was also developed with local resources and incorporates reclaimed wood from its basement level.

In addition, the Bryan Museum offers a research library with an impressive document collection. Bryan is especially proud of the letters from William B. Travis at the Alamo and Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto, and rare maps, including one of the first to be made of Texas by noted cartographer Karl Pressler.

According to Bryan, the biggest challenge in developing the museum was addressing its ground floor, which was dilapidated and cluttered with debris. Since it had served as a play area in the Orphans Home, Bryan and his team developed a vision to repurpose the entire floor as a children's gallery with a Gulf Coast theme featuring aquatic creatures and underwater scenes. In addition, an area under the stairs offers a small exhibit dedicated to the building's former residents.

“One of our museum volunteers was an orphan here, and she remembers when she and the other children would play and hide under these stairs,” says Jamie Christy, the museum's director. “They created a little doorbell system, and wrote notes on the walls about the teachers. This is just a small way to acknowledge the significance of their lives here and the history of this wonderful building.”



A THC medallion tells the story of the Bryan Museum's original inhabitants.

“We're a very distinct part of the world with a very distinct history. ... We love it, and we think everyone else should, too.”

—J.P. Bryan, former THC Commissioner

Bryan expects the museum will serve an important role for current and future generations to learn about the significance of Texas and regional history. He's excited about sharing the stories of heroes and everyday people who contributed to the compelling story of the Southwest.

"We're a very distinct part of the world with a very distinct history," Bryan says. "Sometimes you'll hear people say history is dull or boring. Not us. We think history is most definitely not boring. We think history is high adventure. We love it, and we think everyone else should, too."

## Gallivanting in Galveston

While in Galveston, heritage travelers should also prioritize a visit to the **Lone Star Flight Museum** ([www.lsfm.org](http://www.lsfm.org), 409.740.7722). The museum offers an impressive collection of vintage warbirds, including a B-17 Flying Fortress, World War II-era F4U Corsair fighter, and a T-6/SNJ Texan trainer.

According to museum director Larry Gregory, most of the planes are still in flying condition, and he's especially grateful

for the World War II veterans who visit the museum and even accompany him on flights. One of his most memorable experiences was flying in a B-25 bomber with a veteran who piloted a similar model nearly 70 years ago.

"He had a big smile on his face the whole time, and after we landed I asked him what it was like compared to the times he flew in combat," Gregory recalls. "He said it was just like when he was in the war—it felt the same, looked the same, even had some of the same smells. The only thing that he missed was the scent of gunpowder, but he definitely didn't miss being shot at."

Gregory adds that the museum's B-25 is the only flying version of the aircraft painted in the colors of the Doolittle Raiders, who executed a daring mission on Japan in April 1942. Led by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, the surprise raid was co-piloted by Lt. Col. Richard Cole, who is now 98 years old and living in Texas.

"One thing we try to get our visitors to understand is the tremendous solidarity of Americans supporting World War II—from civic programs to local gardening efforts to industrial companies," Gregory says. "The whole country was pitching in and making sacrifices for our soldiers."



The Tremont House transports hotel guests to Galveston's late-1800s heyday.

Galveston Island's local history is ably administered by the **Galveston Historical Foundation** (GHF, [www.galvestonhistory.org](http://www.galvestonhistory.org), 409.765.7834), which oversees several properties showcasing different aspects of the city's heritage.

One of the GHF's most visible landmarks is the 1892 **Bishop's Palace** (409.762.2475). The most-visited historic attraction in Galveston, Bishop's Palace is a National Historic Landmark and considered one of the country's most significant examples of a Victorian-era residence. Boasting a dramatic turret on the southeast corner, the mansion also features 14-foot ceilings, stately marble columns, an octagonal mahogany stairwell, and spectacular stained glass windows.

It is open daily for self-guided audio tours and monthly for "basement to attic" tours offering access to off-limits areas.

Just down the road, the GHF recently opened an **Architectural Salvage Warehouse** (409.750.9108) in a stylish 1940 former Sears building. Although its primary purpose is to provide historic building materials for local preservation projects, the warehouse is also a fascinating place for heritage tourists to scour the shelves for intricate and unique furniture, hardware, and woodwork.

Nearby is another impressive GHF site, **Ashton Villa**. The 1859 Italianate mansion is primarily used for private events, but its carriage house serves as a public visitors center. The site also features a commemorative statue honoring Juneteenth, when Union Gen. Gordon Granger read the Emancipation Proclamation nearby on June 19, 1865. This year marked the 150th anniversary of the historic event, which included a celebration around the statue.

The GHF also administers the popular **Texas Seaport Museum** and historic ship **Elissa** (409.763.1877). The 1877 British cargo ship twice loaded cotton at Galveston, prompting the GHF to purchase the ship and undertake a dramatic restoration in 1982. *Elissa* remains a fully functional vessel that continues to sail occasionally, and thousands of visitors annually board the decks of this floating National Historic Landmark. The adjacent Texas Seaport Museum tells the story of *Elissa's* rescue from the scrap yard, along with Galveston's legacy of maritime commerce and immigration.



The 1892 Bishop's Palace is Galveston's most-visited historic attraction.



The Grand 1894 Opera House.



The carved “Birds of Galveston” is a highlight of the popular Galveston Tree Sculptures Tour.

The museum is adjacent to **The Strand** ([www.thestrand.com](http://www.thestrand.com)), Galveston’s downtown business hub in the prosperous late-1800s and early 1900s. The 36-block historic district captures the essence of the city’s “Wall Street of the South” era with popular shops, restaurants, and galleries.

One of the area’s heritage highlights is the **Grand 1894 Opera House** ([www.thegrand.com](http://www.thegrand.com), 409.763.7173). Listed in the National Register, the Grand was also proclaimed the Official Opera House of Texas by the Texas Legislature in 1993. The building’s rich history is apparent in the ornate Victorian-era furnishings and red velvet-lined curtains and chairs in the elegantly protruding box seats.

The Strand is also home to the stately **Tremont House** ([www.thetremont.com](http://www.thetremont.com), 409.763.0300). The hotel transports guests to Galveston’s heyday with lofty ceilings and windows, wrought-iron beds, and antique furnishings. The Tremont also recently resurrected a popular tradition of hosting a seasonal afternoon tea, next scheduled for September 14 (reservations available via the website).

“This is a revival of a classic Sunday afternoon tradition that was an important cultural activity in historic Galveston,” says the Tremont’s Christine Hopkins. “We recreate it by offering more than a dozen varieties of tea along with finger foods and treats—cucumber sandwiches, macaroons, and exquisite pastries—accompanied by a harpist, which is simply beautiful.”

Similarly historic is the Tremont’s sister property, the **Hotel Galvez** ([www.hotelgalvez.com](http://www.hotelgalvez.com), 409.765.7721). Known as the “Queen of the Gulf” when it opened in 1911, the

Galvez is stunning in its Victorian elegance. The hotel includes a modest yet fascinating exhibit area, featuring informative panels, historic artifacts, and photos highlighting the island’s colorful Gulf Coast heritage, from maritime adventures to bathing beauty contests.

Heritage travelers seeking lodging in one of Galveston’s celebrated historic residential districts should consider the 1870 **Lasker Inn** ([www.laskerinn.com](http://www.laskerinn.com), 409.497.4318). After the 1900 storm, the Greek Revival home served as a refuge for homeless children for nearly a century, and it is now considered Galveston’s most popular bed and breakfast.

Another residential-district highlight is the **Galveston Tree Sculptures Tour** (information and maps available at [www.galveston.com](http://www.galveston.com), 409.797.5144). In 2008, Hurricane Ike devastated the island with a tidal surge that ultimately led to the demise of thousands of oak trees. Local artists

paid tribute to the majestic oaks by creating carvings from the tree remnants. Highlights include “Birds of Galveston,” a large live oak containing 17 carved birds, and “Tin Man and Toto” at the home where “Wizard of Oz” co-director King Vidor was born.

“Galveston truly embraces the history of our late-1800s golden era as the Playground of the South,” says Mary Beth Bassett of the Galveston Island Convention and Visitors Bureau. “Now we have amazing new places like the Bryan Museum that are bringing history lovers here to help us celebrate a new golden era for Galveston.”



For information about other heritage tourism destinations in the Galveston area, order a free copy of the THC’s *Texas Independence Trail Region* travel guide at 866.276.6219 or [www.texasimtravel.com](http://www.texasimtravel.com).



Top right: An exhibit at the Hotel Galvez. Right: A T-6 Trainer airplane at the Lone Star Flight Museum.

View more Galveston photos at [www.thc.tx.us/blog](http://www.thc.tx.us/blog).