

BELLVILLE

DOWNTOWN SQUARE



*Walking around the Square,
imagining the majestic old courthouse
that once graced town center,
you can walk through the years
that Bellville grew from
frontier town to the busy
little market & antique center
it is today.*



A Brief History of Bellville

Brothers Thomas & James Bell, who came from Florida in 1822, settled in the area as some of Stephen F. Austin's earliest Texas colonists. Thomas Bell offered the voters of Austin County free land to build a new town for the county seat. In an 1846 election, the voters accepted the offer and Thomas deeded 108 acres and James deeded 37.5 acres to the county. The town was platted by district surveyor D. Charles Amthor to center around the courthouse & town square. Pioneers from such faraway places as Germany & England were drawn to the new town, which in 1848 was named Bellville by popular vote.

Churches, a log cabin, a wooden courthouse and a jail were the first public structures. Bellville's first hotel opened in 1849. Most of the early residents were farmers, and the town grew slowly. Within ten years, the town boasted about fifteen businesses.

The arrival of the railroad in 1880 created a market outlet for cotton & other agricultural products, as well as providing transportation to Galveston & other major destinations. This brought a rapid increase in population and business development. Within three years, the population of Bellville rose from approximately 300 to an astounding 1,000 residents!

The *Bellville Standard* newspaper was established in 1882. A telephone company began operations, and a library was established by 1886. Cotton production rose in the late 1890's & more than 10,000 bales were shipped each growing season. By the turn of the century Bellville was thriving both culturally and economically.

In 1915 when "black gold" was discovered around Bellville, oil was added to cotton as the area's major industries. Development of local oil fields further spurred the town's growth and continued to help support Bellville throughout the 20th century.

The city of Bellville celebrated its sesquicentennial, 150 years, in 1998 and continues looking forward.



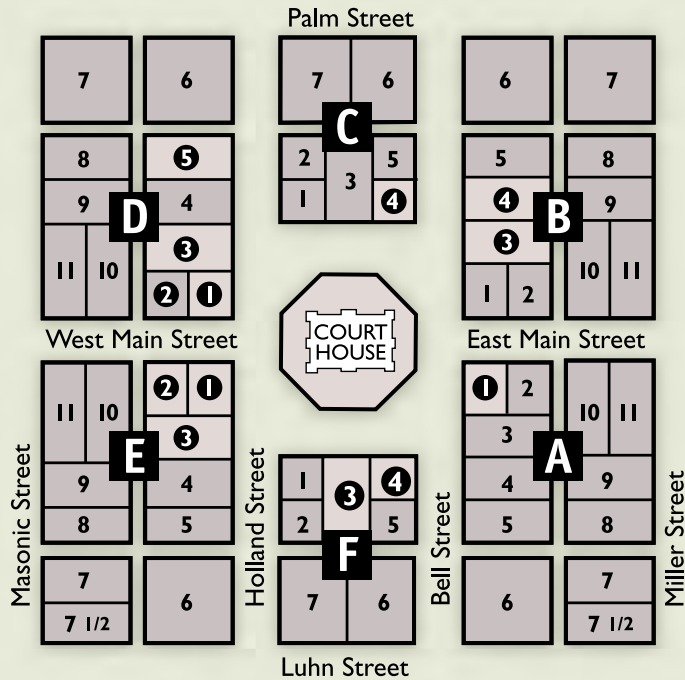
TOUR OF THE SQUARE

Self-Guided

The Courthouse Square remains as it was laid out in 1848. Some of the buildings are original from the late 1800's, while others have appeared in later years.



Photo from the collection of Darcy D. Dehnel



Block **A** Lot **1** 103 East Main

The Gustav Koch homestead on the Bellville Courthouse Square at East Main would become a prosperous general merchandise store. In 1875, Charles F. Hellmuth married Mary Koch Demant, the widowed daughter of Gustav Koch, and joined his father-in-law & Arthur Kopisch in an already established merchandise store. Charles then started his own business in 1882 in a small frame building on the Koch homestead, and offered for sale "staple and fancy dry goods, groceries, boots, shoes, and hats".

The prospering business allowed for the construction of a two-story brick building by John Colleton in 1885. So C.F. Hellmuth General Merchandise was now located in a fine new building described as mammoth and well-appointed, chock full of general merchandise & farm implements. He was also a cotton buyer, and in 1895 purchased 5,000 bales of local cotton.

By 1896 Hellmuth's new brick building housed a jewelry store, a confectionery and a warehouse. The business was successful well into the next century. Basking in success, C.F. Hellmuth purchased more property & extended his business in 1890 by building an adjacent one-story brick building on lot 3, and entering into other enterprises on the square. These locations would continue in later years to house merchandise stores, a meat market, a seamstress & millinery shop...now various businesses. From 1950 to 1979 the Mewis Restaurant occupied the main building, and has recently been extensively remodeled, revealing much of it's early charm, and again houses a fine restaurant today.

Block **B** Lot **3** 11 North Bell

Peter Paul Wolnitzek, a Pole from Germany, purchased this lot & built a building for furniture repair & cabinet making as well as a residence. A generous supporter of the Catholic Church, he donated the land for the St. Peter & Paul Catholic Church of Bellville, named for his patron saints.

August Haak, a 25-year-old from Prussia, bought the building for a shoe business & home. The first shoemaker in Bellville, in 1870 he bought the corner (lot 1) to the south and in 1878 built the second privately-owned brick building in town. A fine building, it was used as a benchmark for the other brick buildings that soon followed. After moving his original store, Haak continued to live next door until the late

The different buildings of the Austin County Courthouse have been in the center of the square since 1850.

Commissioners Court contracted in 1855 for a large brick building which became the first brick building in Austin County. In the following years improvements were made to the building and it was adequate until about 1877.

R.W. Rutherford, an Austin County contractor made necessary additions. There were serious foundation problems in the original sections by 1884, but the commissioners didn't take action until 1886-87. Arrangements were made with local businessmen to remove the old structure. Records were stored & affairs of the court were conducted in rented offices while the new edifice was constructed. Business resumed in the marvelous new Victorian-style courthouse in March 1887 which served the needs of the county for 73 years, until a fire destroyed the landmark in 1960.

The bell was salvaged from the bell tower and is displayed at the front of the east side of the present courthouse, built in 1961.

1890's. Maps indicate this property was vacant after 1901.

In 1949 construction of a new post office was announced, moving here from South Holland. Metal shortages due to World War II delayed the opening until 1950. It remained here until 1966.

Block **B** Lot **4** 19 North Bell

John Manning came to Texas from North Carolina in 1840. By 1850 he & his wife, the foster daughter of John Nichols, built the Manning House hotel on this site. Much of the land in the area was in the John Nichols League. Manning owned the property until 1897, although always a hotel, after 1882 there were several different proprietors. It is interesting to note that in addition to being a favorite place for travelers, they were contracted to keep prisoners, guards, & their horses in the mid 1850's.

One of the innkeepers, Robert Minton, later became innkeeper across the square where Hermann Miller had his Iron Front store on South Holland. In 1895 T.H. Burns became proprietor and named it The Farmers Hotel. It was demolished in 1900. Maps indicate in 1901 until sometime after 1906 there was a livery & feed store at this location.



Photo from the collection of Darcy D. Debnel

In 1917, the present structure above was built by J.T. Colleton for Adolph Louwein and designed by the renowned architect A.C. Finn. Mr. Louwein operated a garage & car sales company here. M.C. Albert operated here as Bellville Motor Company until 1939, when he moved to East Main. Part of the building was leased to Dealright Dairy and Zapalac's Meat Market, the latter being operated by M. Zapalac for 30 years. The back of the building helps one picture somewhat the original materials & design of the structure.

Block **C** Lot **4** 20 East Main

The site of one of the early, and most celebrated hotels in Bellville, The Germania. It began as a cabinetmaker's shop in 1859, owned and operated by Mr. August Nitschke from Germany. He paid for a good part of the property by making furniture for newlywed John Osterhout, the original owner. The hotel changed ownership & expanded to the lot next

door, flourishing until burning to the ground in 1926 from a bizarre skyrocket accident.

The present building was built in 1930 by Dr. J.A. Neely and touted as one of the first steel-reinforced structures in Bellville.

Agee Drug Store shared the first floor with Levine's 5 & 10 Cent Store. The back section was occupied by the Southern Union Gas Company. The second floor was Bellville's first hospital. Practicing there in addition to Dr. Neely were Dr. Herbert Roensch and dentist Dr. L.J. Clark.

This is Bellville's only four story building, though it doesn't look like it from the front. If you go to the Bell Street entrance, you'll find a first floor office space, a mezzanine, a full second floor, and on top, a structure that was used as an operating room. The latter is easily visible from the City Park. There's even an elevator.

In 1935, R.T. Hurta bought the Agee Drug Store and continued in business there until the late 1970's. Interestingly, the first floor used to be divided in half. The drug store permanently on the corner, and the other half occupied by Western Auto, Cameron's 5&10, and the Federal Land Bank, in that order. During the 1960's, the Hurtas expanded the pharmacy by knocking down the wall which once stood between the pillars, still visible in the downstairs antique store today.

Block **D** Lot **5** 22 North Holland

In 1850, the original building on this site was the National Hotel, third hostelry in Bellville. In 1856, Andreas & Anna Rothermel purchased the hotel, operating it together until Andreas died in the 1860's. Even with eight children, Anna took over management of the hotel, kept it open through the Civil War, and lived there as proprietress until the 1870's.

Bakery, grocery & meat market stores appeared in the 1880's. In 1891, Joseph Rothermel opened a hardware-tinware store & grocery emporium in a new two-story frame building on the lot where his parents had operated the National Hotel. Next door to his hardware store, he operated a saloon & lunch counter. His buildings, among others, were destroyed by fire in 1900, and along with the 1900 storm, forced the sale of the property.

In the 1920's, the present building was constructed for a cleaning & pressing establishment operated by J.J.Pavelka for a number of years. Eventually it became vacant until being purchased & renovated in 1993, housing antique shops to this day.





Photo from the collection of Gillis Bader

The next three buildings listed were a real hub of activity during the years of 1879 to 1928. The buildings apparently were constructed so one could pass from one to another, but eventually were separated to go their individual ways.

Block **D** Lot **3** 8 North Holland

In 1879, Charles F. Langhammer built a two-story brick building just north of the corner on North Holland. He had a general merchandise business with Christie T. Sanders. They also operated a saloon in connection with their merchandising business to the south; Mr. Langhammer held the office of Tax Collector in Austin County and also represented his district in the Texas Legislature from 1894-1895. He was one of the organizers of the First National Bank in 1890.

Fritz Roensch & Carl Schauerhammer worked as clerks for Langhammer. By 1887 they formed a partnership and took over the saloon on the corner, renaming it the True Blue Saloon. The Langhammer building was now empty, so the billiard & pool tables from the Saloon were moved there, since the law now prohibited such items to be in saloons. Roensch & Schauerhammer decided to also use the Langhammer building for some merchandise since it was already outfitted with shelves. This business continued to grow, adding crockery, groceries, glassware, household items, & holiday goods. They extended the building and added toys & gifts to the section behind the saloon. In 1891 they even offered free delivery to all parts of the city.

In 1892, Schauerhammer & Roensch purchased the two-story brick building from Langhammer and in 1910 purchased the Saloon property on the corner. In 1928, the partnership dissolved, after 40 years of success.

Other stores occupied this property, including the New York Store with men's clothing that operated from 1950 'til 1960. A Montgomery Ward catalogue store among others were also tenants.

Block **D** Lot **1** 4 West Main

One of Bellville's first general merchandise stores was opened by James Strawther in 1849. It's location on the corner where West Main enters the Courthouse square has a long, active history. The town's earliest lawyers, Benjamin T. Harris & Nehemiah Holland had offices in the building at one time.

Charles Langhammer purchased the corner in 1882 and erected a one-story brick building where Charles & Henry B. Menke ran the Pearl Saloon.

By 1887 the saloon changed hands and became known as the True Blue Saloon. Fritz Roensch & Carl Schauerhammer formed a partnership that was to be one of the town's best known & most successful business enterprises. The popular saloon served W.J. Lemp Beer and lake ice from St. Louis to grateful billiard players. The elaborate lunch counter had the best of food & drink. They were also known for the monkey brought from Galveston in 1897 to entertain patrons, which was so popular that two spider monkeys were added in 1901. The partnership managed the saloon & cafe until the business dissolved in 1928. In 1931, the saloon section was torn down to make way for a Gulf gas station to serve the growing number of automobiles, serving the town for many years.



Block **D** Lot **2** 10 West Main

This building was constructed by J.T. Colleton in 1892 for Charles Langhammer for use as a saloon. The back area became a part of Schauerhammer & Roensch where toys & dry goods were sold. At one time, it was also a millinery shop.

In 1929, Reichardt & Abbott purchased the building and Old Homestead Coffee from Brenham had a business here for a few years.

The Zieske family operated the local newspaper, *The Bellville Times*, here from 1935-1979. In more recent years the property had been completely renovated to accommodate a jazz club/coffee shop and residence.



Photo from the collection of Darcy D. Debnel

Block **E** Lot **1** & **2** 4 South Holland

James Hillyard, County Clerk for Austin County when the seat was moved to Bellville, bought all five of these lots in 1850. He held them until selling them in 1855 to Nehemiah Holland, Bellville's first lawyer. The next year, partner Zimri Hunt, bought half interest in the property. For the first few years, Holland & Hunt had their office in a small frame building in the middle of the two lots. Hunt left in 1877, but Holland continued to office here until his death in 1881.

The corner lot began its separate life with its purchase by August Ringener, who built the one-story building you see today in 1883. The back half of the building, fronting on West Main Street, was a grocery, while the front half, facing the square, was a general merchandise store.

In 1890 this became Bellville Bakery & Restaurant, where one could get hot or cold lunches for 10 cents. In 1894, it reverted back to a general merchandise store. For the most part, it spent over half of the century as a dry goods establishment. It was first known as Henrichsen's Dry Goods and then Weige's, particularly popular for its beautiful fabrics, and continued under management of his two daughters after Mr. Weige's death.

The south part of the store was also built by Ringener in 1894. It was home to Hermann Miller General Merchandise in the early part of the century and the H.F. Granau Mercantile in the 1920's. Joe Peschke's Men's Furnishings operated here for some time & also had a small dry cleaning business in the back. Since 1983 there have been variety of shops.



Block **E** Lot **3** 8, 10, & 12 South Holland

In 1857, John Kray bought Lot 3 from Nehemiah Holland & erected a wooden two-story building for a storehouse, hotel, & general merchandise business. The ownership of this building changed several times, but the same type of business continued under John Kray as merchant.

Arthur Kopisch bought the property in 1865 and formed a partnership with his stepfather Gustav Kopisch, in general merchandise, which prospered until the late 1870's. Arthur & his family resided above the store. After Arthur's death, his wife Emilie continued living there, renting the first floor to others until the purchase of the building by H.J. Miller.

In 1894, Miller razed the old wood building & erected an Iron Front two-story brick building. The builder was J.T. Colleton. Most of the first floor was used as a post office. The second floor became the Minton Hotel (later remodeled into office facilities). It was destroyed by fire in March 1923.

By October of 1923, L.A. Machemehl built the white-glazed brick building which stands today. The building was made to be as fireproof as possible. Its first occupants were the post office, the Paul Steck Confectionery, and the Bellville Grocery Company. Several businesses grace the structure today, several of which being here since the 1970's.

Block **F** Lot **3** 9 East Main

When W.L. Springfield bought lot 3 in 1866, there was a small frame structure in the center of the lot. At only 22 years old, he established a drugstore there. In 1877, on the west side, he built this two-story brick building. The first privately-owned commercial brick building in town, it is now the oldest on the square. R.W. Rutherford was the builder & J.T. Colleton was the brick mason.

Springfield maintained his business for approximately 30 years. He was postmaster for 17 years, and a leader in Civil & Social affairs.

In 1896, he rented the drugstore space to Fred & Charles Tesch who continued the business until 1902. After a brief return to business, Springfield sold the store & all fixtures

in 1911. It then became a billiard hall and from 1951 to 1963, Whimphey's Cafe. Typical of overhangs from the era, the canopy existing today is original.

Photo from the collection of Darcy D. Dehnel



Block **F** Lot **3** 11 East Main Street

In 1850, one of Bellville's earliest structures was on this site. A small frame house owned by Georgia farmer James N. Cloud, was purchased in 1853 by Benjamin Granville, Bellville's first postmaster. Thus, the site of the first public building used as a post office. For a time in the early 1860's, it was a watch & clock repair shop. William Springfield purchased the site & started his first drug store. Old maps indicate there was a well here. Buildings were erected on both sides of this property. The two-story brick to the west you just visited & one known as the Chesley building just to the east. The humble wood structure continued as a general store, confectionery, fruit stand, & grocery.

Since walls existed on both sides, it was a relatively easy job to create the buildings that stand here today. The upper floors show how the windows of the adjoining buildings were bricked in. Several additions have been made to the original. Most local citizens remember this as the Brouillette Furniture Store from 1936 to 1961. Looking just above the front entrance, one can still see the remains of the Brouillette sign. Antique stores have occupied this store for many years.

Block **F** Lot **4** 13 & 15 East Main

The First National Bank, organized in 1890, spent the next 14 years in Springfield's second 2-story building. In 1904 the Bank moved to Menke/Langhammer Building to the east, which was built in 1879.

In 1914 the Bank purchased the building & remodeled both floors, adding the 1st National Bank sign. In 1927 the inside staircase was completely remodeled. The Bank remained until 1952 when they moved to a one-story building on the northeast side of the square. The Bank then leased the first floor of the former building to C.A. Mewis. In 1969 the C.A. & Anita Mewis Trust purchased it and maintains their office in the building to this day.

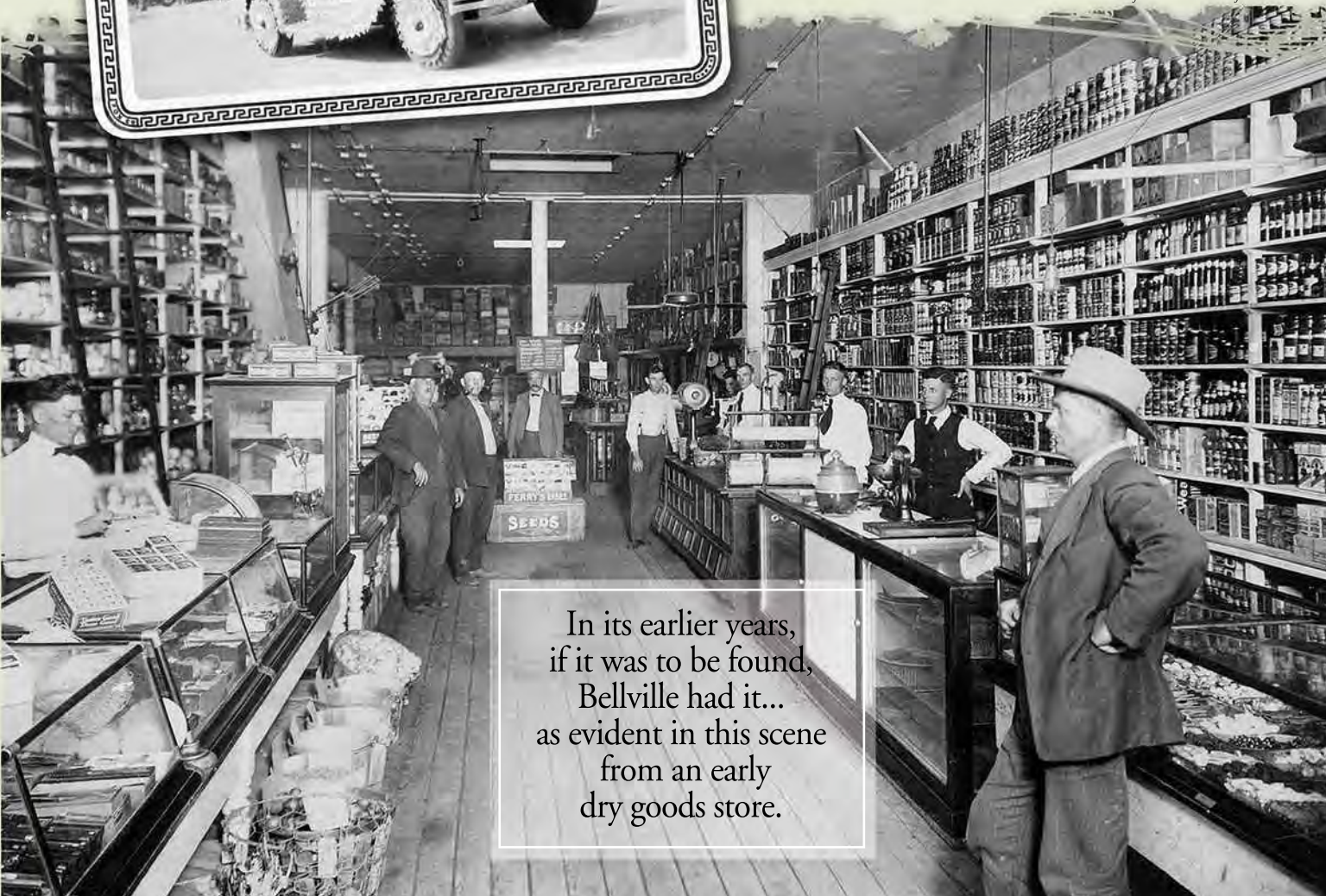


Bellville has always been an important hub for trade and entertainment for people living in the surrounding areas, and beyond.



Photos from the collection of Darcy D. Debnel

Photo from the collection of Gillis Bader



In its earlier years, if it was to be found, Bellville had it... as evident in this scene from an early dry goods store.

We hope we have whetted your appetite along the way to further indulge in the history of the merchants of the past and the wares of those in the present. Please come back for a visit soon. There's always something new to learn, see, and do right here in Bellville.



Photo from the collection of Darcy D. Dehmel

- Visit the 15 State Historical Markers in our city.
- Tour the old Austin County Jail Museum.
- Take a driving tour of the town's many Victorian-inspired 19th century homes.
- Visit Bellville on Market Days, the 1st Saturday of each month, with booths of crafts, flowers, & novelties.



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BellvilleHistoricalSociety.org

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