

A.C. Greene on the Texas School Book Depository

Editor' Note: Noted Texas historian A.C. Greene took issue with the article "[Dealing with Dealey Plaza](#)" that appeared in the November/December 1996 issue of *Preservation* magazine. Here is Greene's January/February 1997 critique, followed by a response.

Max Holland's highly romantic and personal article, "Dealing with Dealey Plaza," contains a number of factual errors and pays too much attention to the legends and rumors that have accumulated around the former, and infamous (as he puts it), Texas School Book Depository.

There never was a time, following the Kennedy assassination, when the building was in any real danger of being razed. There were undoubtedly private citizens who, for whatever reason, wished the structure could be torn down, but no Dallas official ever made any kind of formal proposal that this be done. I was editorial-page editor of the late *Dallas Times Herald* at the time of the assassination. Had there been any significant move to raze the school book depository, I would have been informed quickly, and I had access to the Dallas leaders who would have joined the *Times Herald* in dismissing anything in that direction.

Holland writes that "20 years of ensuing civic debate would pivot on what to do with this building." This glides over a lot of Dallas social and political change and is perhaps based on a 1984 national television interview broadcast during the Republican convention in Dallas, when a Dallas businesswoman stated she wished the building could be razed and the whole event forgotten. Her remark was received with a great deal of popular resentment in Dallas, where a \$3.5-million fund-raising effort was underway to create the highly successful "Sixth Floor" exhibition.

The depository building (which was never called "411 Elm") was not sold to "an exhibitor of Kennedy kitsch," as Holland states. That was a building across the street from the depository. The Texas School Book Company remained a tenant of the depository building for a number of years after the assassination and thus was not open to the public. The contention that "tour bus guides neglected to mention the book depository" shows a distinct unfamiliarity with the tour-guide business. And it should be pointed out that the building was purchased in 1977 by Dallas County, not "voter approved" by the city of Dallas, and was made into an office adjunct to the nearby Dallas County Courthouse complex.

Perhaps the most unfair paragraph is the lengthy one in which Holland states that the late D. Harold Byrd's refusal to sell the depository building after the assassination "mirrored the prevailing attitude of Dallas's tightly knit business and civic elite [that] if nothing were done for a few years, passions would simmer down, visitors would stop

coming, and 411 Elm could be handled discreetly; that is, razed.” Byrd knew his way around the world of public opinion well enough to realize that the depository building would forever be part of the historical inventory, not just of Dallas, but of the nation. He, along with the mayor and most city council members, understood the assassination was never going to “simmer down” and that people would never stop coming to Dealey Plaza. There may have been people in Dallas, in the first year after the tragedy, who thought that eventually the assassination “would go away,” but they had little or nothing to do with operating the city.

I recognize that Holland’s article is a personal, emotional view that, were it merely a literary essay, might be acceptable as such. But to have this article appear in *Preservation* as factual recounting is not fair to history.

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Max Holland responds:

As a noted historian of Texas, A.C. Greene is more than entitled to criticize my perspective and opinions. But before he casts aspersions on my ability to gather and report facts accurately, perhaps he had better go back and read the more than 30 years of newspaper clippings about 411 Elm that are on file at the Dallas Public Library. It is Greene who has the important facts wrong.

“The depository building . . . was not sold to ‘an exhibitor of Kennedy kitsch’”? The building was sold in 1970 to Aubrey Mayhew, a Nashville entrepreneur and trashy purveyor of Kennedy memorabilia. On April 17, 1970, Greene’s own former newspaper, *The Dallas Times Herald*, described Mayhew as having the “largest collection of Kennedy items in the world.” *The New York Times* of the same day noted that Mayhew was the author of a book, *The World’s Tribute to John F. Kennedy in Medallion Art*, and that his recent purchase of some personal letters written by Jacqueline Kennedy had caused a furor.

Mayhew’s ownership was the gaudy threat that galvanized Dallas into action, according to local newspaper accounts. As *The Dallas Morning News* of November 1, 1971, reported, “there has been a change in attitude by the city’s business leadership on disposition of the Depository. Previously, city leaders tried to ignore the assassination . . . and have not wanted any tangible reminders. They would have been happy if . . . the highest bidder [when Byrd sold it] had been a real estate developer who wanted to tear the building down Fearing it would become a ‘tourist trap’ over which they had no control, the city’s business and civic leadership finally sat up and took notice.”

“No Dallas official ever made any kind of formal proposal” to tear down the former depository? In 1972 two Dallas city councilmen, Fred Zeder and Russell Smith, publicly advocated razing 411 Elm and sought to prevent any federal, state, or local tax monies from being spent to preserve the building. Quoting again from Greene’s former employer

(September 9, 1972): “Zeder . . . said he was against ‘any memorializing of that day of infamy with that structure’ [and] said he would rather see the building razed and turned into a park.” The next day the *Times Herald* published an op-ed piece by Zeder making his argument at length. And although Zeder and Smith were in a decided minority on the city council, their sentiments were echoed by organized private citizens. The *Morning News* of August 2, 1972, reported that Tom B. Rhodes, a businessman representing “Dallas Onward,” told the city council that “we feel strongly it is a mistake to preserve the [building] as it continues to give Dallas a black eye.”

I did not write, nor did I mean to imply, that a majority of Dallasites ever wanted to tear the building down. And several local political leaders – including former mayor Wes Wise, state senator Mike McKool, and councilman Garry Weber – fought tirelessly over many years to preserve the site with dignity, recognizing explicitly that the former depository was an inseparable element of Dallas’s outdoor Ford’s Theater.

There is one embarrassing error in the article’s final paragraph. The assassination obviously occurred 33 years ago in November, not 43 as printed. But otherwise I stand by my “emotional” account: The path to the present, almost superb situation was long and tortuous.