

Dealing with Dealey Plaza

*America's Emotional Grand Canyon Draws
Millions of Visitors to Dallas Each Year*

Editor's Note: for Texas historian A.C. Greene's critique of this story, click [here](#).

By Max Holland

I stopped for gas about 10 miles short of Dallas, not so much because I was running out of fuel but to pause and take a deep breath. Soon I would be arriving in Dealey Plaza, a place I had never been to and a place I had never left.

In November 1963 I was about to celebrate my 13th birthday, so I am old enough to remember the weekend when such names as Love Field and Parkland Hospital were branded onto a nation's memory. For me, and I suspect for most Americans sentient in 1963, the assassination became like oxygen: unseen, ubiquitous, yet highly combustible.

For the past two years, however, I have been immersed in the events of that day, working on a history of the Warren Commission's investigation. Not another book about the assassination, as I tell everyone, but the largely unknown story of the government's response. Arriving as a writer, I wonder what I can possibly see or say that hasn't already been seen and said about this outdoor Ford's Theatre.

While several American cities have been assassination sites – Washington (twice), Buffalo, Memphis, and Los Angeles – none has ever been defined so by a political murder. For months, if not years, afterward, to be from Dallas was to invite scorn and abuse nationwide. A Texas drawl was far from welcome in post-November 22 America. And nowhere were the recriminations more wrenching than in Dallas itself.

There was an almost unbearable symbolism to President Kennedy having been cut down in Dealey Plaza. With its colonnades and gently sloping lawns, the small park celebrated George Dealey, a civic leader and a founding father of *The Dallas Morning News*. By the 1960s, George's son Ted had turned the *News* into one of the most virulent, anti-Kennedy sheets in the nation, contributing mightily to Dallas's reputation as the city not too busy to hate. Having stoked a climate of intolerance, it seemed cruelly fitting that the name Dealey was then stained by association.

All this came back to me as I spent my first afternoon walking around haphazardly, somewhat dazed to find that Dealey Plaza exists in real life, not just on television and in old newsreels. I yearned to spend as much time as possible there, to steep myself in the plaza so that it became an ordinary place as much as an extraordinary one. For the next

11 days I walked around it daily, sometimes when it was jammed with tourists and buses but often when there were no other souls. And I came to understand two unspoken aspects of the dread-inducing site, or as a local columnist once labeled it, America's emotional Grand Canyon.

Unlike any other city that has suffered such a calamity, it was difficult for Dallasites to avoid the scene of the crime. A Washingtonian could have easily avoided Ford's Theatre if the memory were too raw. Not so in Dallas. No less than Los Angeles, the city adored the automobile and geared its development to it. The fan-shaped plaza marked a major motor gateway, a triple-road underpass leading from downtown Dallas to all points west. And for every motorist traveling east into the city, Dealey Plaza presented the city's first face, the tangible welcome to "Big D."

Dealey Plaza also represented to Dallasites the core of their city's identity. The intersection of Elm and Houston Streets, which border the plaza, was proximate to the very spot where Dallas was founded more than 100 years earlier and where traces of those settlers could still be found. The fact that the president was murdered a matter of yards from where the city was born was especially poignant, a seeming rebuke to Dallas, everything it stood for, and everything it could every hope to achieve. It was as if the city were forever branded with the mark of Cain.

How, I wondered, does a city cope with a birthplace and a gateway smeared by a horrible crime and with a history much larger than any one city normally is expected to address? Dallas took nearly 30 years to answer that question. But the story of how it did so is something of a road map through a national trauma and persistent obsession – that is, if the one and a half million people, young and old, who visit Dealey Plaza annually are any guide.

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993, the plaza, underpass, surrounding buildings, and rail yards draw pilgrims for much the same reason Gettysburg does. Something vast and profound happened here, consecrating the ground in the process. The difference, of course, is that for many this event happened within their lifetimes. The mood is invariably somber, broken only by chatty teenagers or the "guides" who loiter around the plaza pushing their interpretation of the assassination for a price. Some two blocks away is a private museum devoted entirely to conspiracies, and for \$20, the most dedicated can board a chauffeured van for a complete package tour. It begins at Love Field and follows the motorcade route through downtown Dallas, continuing on to Parkland Hospital and the rundown movie theater where police apprehended Lee Oswald, revolver in hand.

Long before the tourists arrived, of course, Dallasites themselves thronged the compact plaza. Within minutes of the official announcement that the president was dead, the curious began flocking to Dealey Plaza. People brought or sent flowers, ranging from hand-picked bouquets to massive arrangements, until by Saturday afternoon it was difficult to see the ground. Of no less interest was a squat, seven-story brick building set apart from the others nearby. If undistinguished before Friday, now it loomed as large as

a peak in the Grand Tetons. For it was from a sixth-floor corner window that one Lee Harvey Oswald, ex-Marine and self-styled Marxist, fired three shots at the presidential motorcade passing below at the crowd-pleasing speed of 11 m.p.h. Twenty years of ensuing civic debate would pivot on what to do with this building.

Discussion began even as the Warren Commission started its investigation. The building at 411 Elm had become so instantly known as the Texas School Book Depository that few people realized it was only leased by its namesake, the Texas School Book Company. The building's owner, local real state magnate Colonel D. Harold Byrd, was besieged with offers as high as \$1.5 million for what was suddenly the world's most infamous building, but he refused to sell, fearful that 411 Elm would become a tawdry, profit-making sideshow. His stance mirrored the prevailing attitude of Dallas's tightly knit business and civic elite. 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. Tearing down this affront to Dallas might not expunge the black mark, but it would be a good start. It was only too bad that significant alteration of Dealey Plaza was out of the question, but who was to say what might be achieved over time?

Benign neglect became the rule as Dallas tried to forget. The sixth floor was sealed off, and tour bus guides neglected to mention the book depository in their commentaries. But knots of people could be seen in Dealey Plaza every day, and they exerted a pressure on the city akin to Chinese water torture. Eventually the city council memorialized the president's fate in a one-square-block area two blocks east of Dealey Plaza, and when the Kennedy Memorial Plaza opened in June 1970, civic leaders believed that no one had the right to ask more of Dallas. But the plaza proved to be a failure. Architect Philip Johnson's stark cenotaph, resembling large Legos, left many visitors cold. It told them nothing about that day, which is why they had to come to Dallas in the first place, and many were confused when they realized the memorial was not actually at the assassination site.

When an exhibitor of Kennedy kitsch bought 411 Elm from Byrd in 1971, the city finally decided to take action: If the awful reminder was not going to go away, at the very least it had to be handled in good taste. Slowly Dallasites came to realize that the city would be cursed again if it allowed demolition, or exploitation, of the albatross on Elm Street. In 1977, voters approved the purchase and renovation of the building, reserving the sniper's perch for what is now the Sixth Floor Museum. It has been an unqualified success since opening in February 1989. About 175,000 annual visitors were predicted, but in 1995 the Sixth Floor drew 421,000.

Almost half of the exhibit is devoted to Kennedy's "life and times," and I could not help but note one irony. The city that gave Richard Nixon his biggest margin of municipal victory in 1960 now houses an exhibit that rivals the display at the Kennedy Library. Unlike the library, however, the events of November 22 are center stage. To avoid inadvertently glorifying Oswald's violent act, the museum chose the assassination artifacts with care and the story is carefully redacted. The famous Zapruder film is edited so that the president's head is not seen exploding. Nonetheless, the stomach still knots at

the crackling AM radio broadcast, “We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin ... from Dallas, Texas... Three shots were fired at President Kennedy’s motorcade.”

Naturally I was curious to see how the museum handled the *Warren Report* controversy. The museum only presents at length findings from two federal investigations, giving equal weight to the 1964 *Warren Report* and the 1979 report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations. This is a real disservice: While the *Warren Report* has been roundly criticized for more than 30 years, it still holds up, whereas the thin reed upon which the House report claimed a conspiracy was discredited within months. Putting the two on the same footing has also alienated the dwindling band of Dallas lawmen who investigated the assassination that weekend. Long before the *Warren Report* confirmed it, they knew they apprehended the right bastard.

Distrust of the city’s own once-exalted lawmen is a sobering reminder of Dallas’s residual trauma. Somehow it remains emotionally more satisfying to believe that the police got the wrong man— that such a momentous crime had to be plotted by men breathing together, rather than by one individual acting in an unpredictable world. I like to think that someday the exhibit will change, explaining the controversy and disbelief but not lending undeserved credence to it.

Otherwise Dallas has acquitted itself well. The Hertz sign is gone from the roof of 411 Elm, and a few flagpoles grace the plaza, but Dealey Plaza is frozen in time, more or less as it was on that bright November afternoon. Aside from visiting the museum, visitors current and future will walk the hairpin turn that slowed the president’s motorcade and gaze down Elm Street as it descends toward the triple underpass, where Jacqueline Kennedy anticipated a few moments of cool air and relief from the beating sun. They will experience the plaza’s bowl-like depression, which gives a sense of tragic envelopment much like the effect Maya Lin deliberately sought in her design of the Vietnam Memorial.

Above all, they will catch themselves, as I did whenever I stood in the plaza, stealing furtive glances at a sixth-floor window sealed ajar in perpetuity at the same height it was raised 33 years ago. An open window that might easily be taken for an open wound.

