



© 1998 Heier + History

Rudder Plaza, Texas A&amp;M University, 1973.

*The Landscape of*

# AGGIELAND

NANCY VOLKMAN



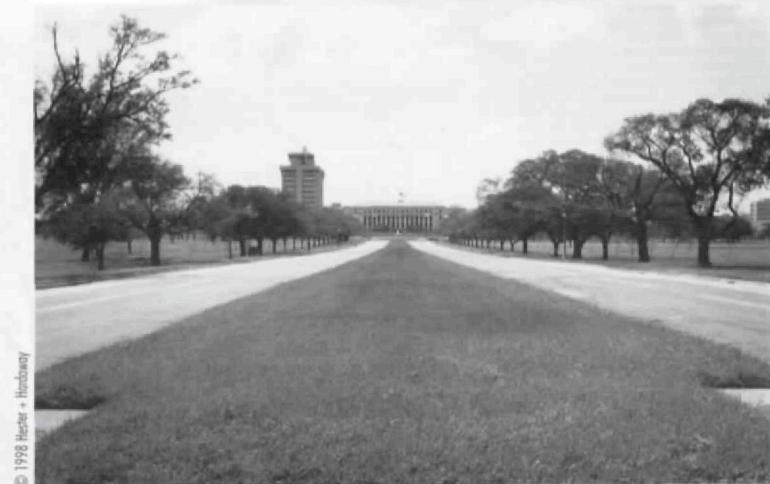
Map of Brazos County, showing the distribution of woodlands (hatched areas) and prairies (white areas) in the 1830s before extensive settlement. Distributions are interpolated from data in original land grant surveys of the Texas General Land Office.

**T**he landscape planning and design of the Texas A&M campus, the communities of College Station and Bryan, and Brazos County are manifestations of both the Aggie concept of tradition and the idea that the environment can be understood as a traditional Central Texas landscape.

This is not the traditional landscape considered from a romantic and nostalgic point of view, nor is it the townscape of neo-traditionalists. Rather, the landscape of Aggieland is a common landscape that reflects attachment to the land as a possession instead of a resource with intrinsic value, a landscape in which encroachment and development instead of stewardship and preservation are the traditional values to be protected and advanced.

When American settlers came to Cen-

tral Texas in the 1820s, they found a natural landscape of two dominant physiographic and vegetative types: the grass-covered plains of the uplands and the forested areas found along the major rivers — the Brazos and the Navasota — and beside numerous creeks that drained the area. The county was literally settled from the bottoms up, with the earliest land claims along the two rivers. Settlement patterns reflected standard land use. In lowlands, rustic plantations, often owned by absentee landlords, had extensive cleared areas where cotton for commercial sale was grown, while in the uplands farms had smaller cleared tracts that served the subsistence needs of farm families. In this early period, several communities developed in Brazos County, including Boonville, the county seat, and



© 1998 Hester + Hardaway  
Oak-lined New Main Drive, Texas A&M campus, College Station.



© 1998 Hester + Hardaway  
New trees growing among prairie grasses, where uncontrolled fires once discouraged such forestation.

Millican, which prior to the Civil War was one of the larger towns in Central Texas. These early townscapes followed simple, traditional grid plans and developed a diffuse pattern of lots that would become common in Central Texas towns.

Extension of the railroad through Brazos County after the Civil War brought the second wave of development to what would soon become Aggieland. In anticipation of the rails, the new town of Bryan was developed beginning in 1859 by the Houston & Texas Central Railroad. In 1866 Bryan became, and has remained, the county seat. When the new land grant college, the Agriculture and Mechanical College of Texas, opened four and one-half miles from downtown Bryan in 1876, the destiny of the county to become increasingly urbanized (or suburbanized, as became the case) was set. In spite of growth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the county remained agricultural, with its prosperity tied to the economic cycles of world trade in cotton until after World War II.

The period from 1920 to 1940 proved to be the most progressive era in landscape planning in Bryan and College Station. It was during this time, as the university began to grow, that a number of subdivisions were constructed adjacent to the campus with plans that reflected, in a prosaic way, planning trends of that era (such as curving streets). The earliest of these subdivisions was College Park, south of the campus. The College Park Development Company commissioned Frederick W. Hensel, the first landscape designer known to have been associated with the university, to design the plat layout and landscaping. Progressive ideas reflected in his plan for College Park included designating a small tract with a pond (now Brison Park) for a community open space. Later such subdivisions as Oakwood and College Hills were added. In all cases their physical plans reflected what might be considered a vernacularization of high-style planning, like that of John Nolen. College Hills, in particular, represented an attempt to make a real town at College Station, which had just been incorporated in 1938. There the developer planned two curving shopping strips, known as East Gate, to flank the subdivision's main entrance opposite the university. By adapting contemporary planning ideas, College

Station developers attempted to create a more cosmopolitan community. This effort, though, was short-lived.

In spite of this modernization of university-related subdivisions during the 1920s and 1930s, little decisive change occurred in Aggieland from the 1860s until the end of World War II. But after World War II, building upon the progressive attitudes of the pre-war period, the school began to see itself as a real state university and College Station as a true city. In terms of landscape these changes significantly altered a rural county dotted with small towns into one dominated by the urban expansion of the university and College Station. The principal effects of this growth on the landscape were suburbanization, development of estates in rural areas, commercial realignment; revegetation of the countryside, and urbanization of the campus.

As late as the 1960s, Bryan retained a somewhat centralized character with an active downtown in its historic core around which new subdivisions, most with small lots, continued to be added. College Station, although already more dispersed in planned form, was still centered on the university. As new housing was added to both communities, subdivisions took on the character of city suburbs, filling in what had been farm land between Bryan and College Station.

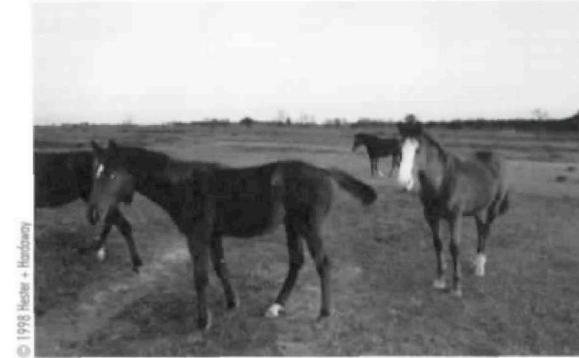
As this trend continued, not only did subdivisions become larger, but lot sizes also increased. While some of these large-lot additions, such as the incongruously named Nantucket, retained a distinctive physical identity, some more dispersed estates were also built. These were small platted areas out in the county or individual plots purchased from farmers. In the 1990s, this practice has become so widespread that most of Brazos County has some form of dispersed housing.

A similar dispersion of commercial activity occurred after the war affecting both old and new shopping areas. In the 1960s, businesses began to leave downtown Bryan for strip developments, principally along Texas Avenue, the central artery which connects Bryan to College Station. For a time much of Bryan's historic area was deserted, except for shabby businesses selling low-priced goods. But eventually, in the 1980s, a new focus in specialty shopping emerged. Small, inde-

pendent restaurants, nightclubs, and antique shops began to occupy empty storefronts. At the same time, in both Bryan and College Station, strip shopping center development accelerated. Texas Avenue became one uninterrupted strip running almost ten miles. While other cities have long strips, like Houston's Westheimer Road, the length of the Texas Avenue shopping district, in comparison to the population, is quite disproportionate.

Town expansion and the development of rural estate housing have not been the only modifications to the countryside. As a result of economic changes in agriculture, land has progressively been taken out of cultivation and replaced by grazing or become unused. As a result, with the exception of Brazos River valley lands still in cotton agriculture, much of the county has become revegetated with trees. New trees have even affected areas once filled with native prairie grasses because the mechanism that preserved the prairies, fire, has been largely suppressed.

Finally, on the campus itself, the rapid growth in student numbers since the 1960s has changed the formerly dispersed, low-density campus into an increasingly urbanized area whose former open spaces are regularly filled with buildings or paving. The change in character has been notable, particularly on the eastern, older half of the campus where extensive green spaces and live-oak-lined streets once predominated. While greater building density would be expected with the growing student body, an unanticipated result has been the way in which remaining open areas (at least those not devoted to parking) have been treated. In contrast to former design approaches that emphasized either a bucolic lawn with trees or a more formal approach in which



© 1998 Hester + Hardaway  
Brazos County pasture land.

geometric garden beds were principal features, recently designed areas have taken on the character of urban plazas with extensive paving and little planting. The Rudder Center Plaza, built in 1973 at the center of campus, was one of the first such urban plazas on campus.

The landscape of Aggieland, at least physically, is not unique. Bryan and College Station together might even be considered a quintessential mid-size city of the late 20th century, with typical urban fringe development out in Brazos County. This region also represents the traditional landscape of Central Texas, one that has rarely been given, but certainly deserves, serious study. This is a landscape that is not necessarily attractive or sustainable in ecological terms, but rather one in which the natural landscape has been inscribed with layers of cultural history representing a preference for satisfying immediate physical needs over beautification or environmental stewardship. In spite of designed landscaping and a lack of topographical drama, Aggieland has acquired special meaning to those who know it. This is a meaning associated with social traditions and a sense of belonging, not place character. If anything can be learned from observing the traditions of landscape design and planning in Brazos County, it is that placeness need not be tied to the character of the natural or constructed landscape. For Aggieland, in spite of its seemingly conventional image, remains identifiable as not just a place, but, for many, the best place. ■

**YOU ARE LEAVING AGGIELAND  
THE BEST PLACE IN THE WORLD**

Sign on exit gates at Easterwood Airport, College Station.