

The Fielder Flash

Arlington Historical Society

February 2025 Newsletter



Our Venues

Fielder Museum | 1616 W. Abram Street

Knapp Heritage Park | 201 W. Front Street

Arlington Heritage Memorial Grounds | 600 W. Arkansas Lane

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A note from the editor



This month, we have a guest piece from Geraldine Mills—a letter she wrote in 2003 about what she envisioned for Arlington's future. We also have a tribute to Martha Willbanks and a look back at the history of Theater Arlington and how it became Arlington Music Hall.

FYI, Fielder Museum has new hours: Tuesday through Saturday from noon to 3:30 PM. And we have a new exhibit coming soon: "Planes, Trains, and Automobiles." Come out and see us!

Jason S. Sullivan, 02-28-25

Newsletter Editor

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Upcoming Events

- **March 15**—'Open House' at Arlington Heritage Memorial Grounds; guided and self-guided tours of the cemetery—11:00 AM to 2:00 PM (weather permitting)
- **March 20**—Texas Author Book Club continues with "Tears of the Truffle Pig" by Fernando A. Flores—Fielder Museum, 6:30 PM
- **April 17**—Texas Author Book Club continues with "Sugar on the Bones" by Joe Landsdale—Fielder Museum, 6:30 PM

Newsletter Exclusive

In 2003, Executive Director Geraldine Mills wrote about what she envisioned for Arlington in 2025. It includes dreams of historic preservation and heritage tourism with trolley tours and arts and culture experiences that give Arlington vitality. Some of these things have come true, while others are still great ideas. For some, though, fate had other plans.

When she wrote this, Knapp Heritage Park hadn't even opened yet—we celebrated its 20th anniversary last September. She mentions the trolley tour stopping by the Eastern Star Home, which was demolished over a decade ago. These are just two examples of how historical preservation has its rewards, disappointments, challenges, and mysteries. Nonetheless, we march on through the ebbs and flows.

Future Directions: Shaping the Future from the Past

by Geraldine Nash Mills, Director (2003)

The year is 2025.

An 84-year-old woman leaves her 108-year-old home in the South Center Historic District located in the heart of a vibrant and eclectic Arlington Central. She boards inner-city transportation with her five great-grandchildren to give them a tour of her birthplace.

The tour will begin at the rebuilt T&P Depot at Front and Center Street. There they will see exhibits about Arlington's history and how the railroad was the starting point for this town. The linear park between East and West Streets will contain a walk of fame, a replica of the mineral well, and other artifacts from our past.

They will then cross Front Street to the Knapp Heritage Park to view the earliest structures in our city.

- Watson and Jopling-Melear log cabins 1850
- Northside Schoolhouse 1910 built by Joe Crawley
- Bardin Barn, donated by the legendary Bill Bardin

Knapp Heritage Park is known for its interactive techniques for teaching local, state, and national history.

We return to the depot to get tickets for a Fun Central Historic Trolley tour. The tour begins in the Olde Town Historic District and includes "The Hill," our early African American neighborhood.

Historic Meadowbrook Park, on lovely West Abram, and the remains of Carlisle Military Academy in the heart of UTA are of special interest. Old homes, churches, parks, cemeteries, and

archaeological and cultural sites are included in this unique Fun Central Trolley tour. The nationally recognized Arlington Museum of Art is included in the tour and public art is on every corner and in all parks. Some pieces depict people and events in our history. Others are just for FUN!

Some industry representative pieces are:

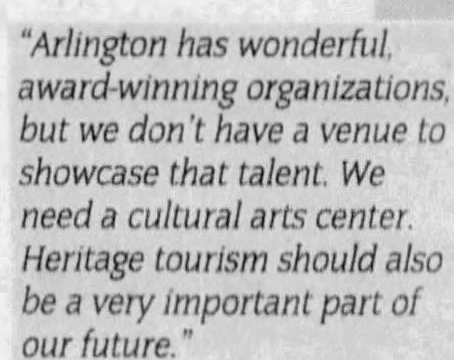
- Bale of Cotton - early industry
- O.S. Gray - pecan industry
- Horse and jockey - Arlington Downs
- 1954 Pontiac Chieftain - General Motors
- Lillard's Hog Farm - farming and ranching
- Top O' Hill Terrace - entertainment
- Wheelbarrow versus Ambulance race - Arlington Memorial Hospital

Arts and Culture and other people of interest:

- Howard and Arista Joyner
- Ms. Persis - dance instructor
- Henry Gonzales - horse trainer
- Claude Horan - horse trainer and luthier
- Boyd Lawson, Ms. Brittain, Dickey - Scouting

Other people and places

- Richard Greene - Mayor
- C.D. Richards - ASC
- Joe Givens - BBQ
- James Knapp - lawyer
- Happy King - realtor
- Tom Ditto - merchant
- Lou Henry Taylor - entrepreneur
- Carrie Rogers - female constable
- Allen Pointer - Domino Parlor
- Albert's Pool Hall - entertainment



"Arlington has wonderful, award-winning organizations, but we don't have a venue to showcase that talent. We need a cultural arts center. Heritage tourism should also be a very important part of our future."

— Geraldine Mills
Director, Arlington
Historical Society

Fort Worth Star-Telegram (April 2003)

All of these pieces are great FUN and serve to give Arlington its own unique identity.

There are eight National Historic Districts, one hundred State Historical markers, and some thirty Arlington Preservation markers in this tour, including the lovely Eastern Star Home on the Historic Bankhead Highway.

We purchased tickets at the depot for Cher's Farewell Forever concert at the Arlington Cultural Center. The Center is a state-of-the-art performance hall used by CATS, Theatre Arlington, Ballet Arlington, Symphony Arlington, Steppers, Choral Society, and the Arts Departments of AISD, UTA, and TCC. The Council for the Arts, formed in 2004, was instrumental in planning multicultural events that celebrate the exciting diversity of our city. Historic and heritage

preservation and a thriving arts community have contributed to the economic and civic vitality of Arlington.

The grand opening of Knapp Heritage Park in September is the first step on this journey, then, it will be “all aboard” as we campaign to rebuild our train depot! What a great way to keep alive the people and events that make this city ours!

The Arlington Historical Society is Preserving the Past as a Present to the Future. Come on, everyone, “all aboard!”

Geraldine

Martha Willbanks: Trailblazer and Role Model

Martha Willbanks (1949-2001) was Arlington's first female police officer, sergeant, and lieutenant. Her 28-year career with the Arlington Police Department was impactful and meaningful.

Willbanks was a UTA graduate. She joined the Arlington Police Department in 1972, initially facing challenges common to women in the profession: her first uniform was a repurposed parking enforcer's outfit, and early assignments included being relegated to desk jobs and juvenile investigations.

Despite these obstacles, she persevered. Willbanks was promoted to sergeant in 1975, working in the detective's division, and became lieutenant in 1984. By then, only about 5% of the country's police officers and detectives were women, and only a small fraction were in supervisory or leadership roles.

In 1997, when the city shifted to geographic policing, Lieutenant Willbanks was assigned to north Arlington, where she lived, allowing her to make an even more significant impact close to home. It was also about this time that doctors discovered her illness.

Though other officers knew of her illness, her death of breast cancer at age 51 was unexpected. Remembered as a trailblazer and role model, Martha Willbanks helped pave the way for women in law enforcement.



Arlington Theater opened 75 years ago this month; Arlington Music Hall still going strong

Arlington Theater opened on February 10, 1950, with a double screening of “The Story of Seabiscuit,” starring Shirley Temple. Arlington Mayor B.C. Barnes cut a ceremonial ribbon before the opening, and much of the town came out for the Friday night fun. There were also spotlights outside, fireworks, and live entertainment.

The new, luxurious theater had plush seating for 1,200 people, a balcony, a ‘cry room’ for upset children, air conditioning, and a 20-foot snack bar with a soda fountain. It became a popular place to see movies—from double features to Saturday matinees to midnight screenings and everything in between. Many people have fond memories of attending Arlington Theater.



After the movie theater closed in 1974, the building was converted into a church and used as such for over a decade. The building sat empty for a few years until Johnnie High purchased it. After extensive renovations, it reopened in 1995 with a new name—the Arlington Music Hall—and became home to the Johnnie High Music Revue.



The weekly show featured various country, bluegrass, and gospel acts, with many up-and-coming guest performers. Although Johnnie High died in 2010, the show briefly continued in his honor. Later that year, the venue became home to Symphony Arlington and was recognized as a City of Arlington Local Landmark.

Today, the Arlington Music Hall is an intimate venue for live music, comedy, and other performances, with over a dozen monthly shows. Its marquee is a charming, nostalgic reminder of the good ol’ days and is an iconic sight in Downtown Arlington.



Photos:

- 1) Arlington Theater on opening night (1950)
- 2) Arlington Theater (1955)
- 3) Marque for Johnnie High Music Revue (1990s)
- 4) Arlington Music Hall (2020)

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