

# **Historical Tour**

**of the**

## **HUNTSVILLE HALF MARATHON COURSE**

### **Sam Houston State University**



The Huntsville Half Marathon starts in front of the Health & Kinesiology Center on the campus of Sam Houston State University. The university was founded in 1879 as Sam Houston Normal Institute. It sits on “Capitol Hill,” one of the seven hills in Huntsville. It earned that name because that hill in Huntsville was the first runner-up to Austin as the permanent site for the Texas capitol. In 1923, Sam Houston Normal Institute was renamed Sam Houston State Teachers College. In 1965, it became Sam Houston State College and in 1969, Sam Houston State University. Over 18,500 students are currently enrolled in the university.

### **Peckerwood Hill Cemetery**



Just after you take a right on Bowers Blvd. and behind the convenience store, you will pass the Captain Joe Byrd Cemetery, also known as Peckerwood Hill Cemetery. The land was deeded to the state by a local businessman in 1885 and has been used for the burial of inmates who die in prison and whose bodies are unclaimed by family members. In the early days, burial records were not kept, so no one knows exactly how many are buried in the cemetery. The estimate is over 2,000, including over 200 who were executed

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## Huntsville Unit



You will be circling around the Huntsville Prison Unit, also known as the Walls Unit. The Huntsville Unit was established in 1849 and was the first state prison in Texas. It is the only state prison of over 100 in Texas that actually has a wall around it. The original wall was made of sand brick. The current red brick façade was completed in 1942. The bricks were made at the Jester Unit in Fort Bend County. The unit has 424 employees and 1,705 inmates.

## Texas Prison Rodeo Arena



As you run around the Huntsville Unit past mile marker 4, you will pass the location of the old Texas Prison Rodeo Arena. The arena, as shown above, was demolished in early 2012. Billed as the “Wildest Show Behind Bars,” the Texas Prison Rodeo was held every Sunday in October from 1931 to 1986, except the war year, 1943. It was discontinued primarily due to the deterioration of the arena and the high cost of repair. Thousands of free-world and convict spectators attended the event every year and watched convict cowboys compete in some of the wildest rodeo events you could imagine. The rodeo also featured some of the best entertainers in the country, including John Wayne, Tom Mix, Eddie Arnold, Willie Nelson, George Jones, Reba McEntire and the Judds. Profit from the rodeo went into the inmate education and welfare fund.

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### **Death Chamber**



Death Row is currently at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston. However, all executions in Texas since 1924 have been carried out at the Huntsville Unit. The death chamber is behind the wall in the northeast corner of the unit. You will be passing that corner, which is across the street from the 11-mile marker.

### **Director's Mansion**



Just after you pass in front of the Huntsville Unit and turn left on Avenue I, you will see the Director's Mansion on the right. It is now a Conference Center. This has been the site for the residence of the director of the Texas prison system since 1885. The current building was constructed with inmate labor in 1951. It was the director's residence until 1996.

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## **Bat Warehouse**



After you pass the Director's Mansion, you will begin to notice a strange smell from the red brick warehouse on the right. Until recently, this building was used for cotton storage, but is now home to 40,000 to 60,000 bats. That's the source of the odor. No mosquitoes in this area.