

# The Sixth Floor Museum

## Commemorating JFK's assassination and other national traumas

BY RICHARD WEST SELLARS

**F**rom the sixth floor window at the southeast corner of the Texas School Book Depository, traffic on Elm Street below seems surprisingly close. Heading west, the street curves through Dealey Plaza, obliquely away from the viewer, making a slow-moving car seem an easy target. For many Americans, the breaking news announcement came near midday, November 22, 1963: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin from ABC Radio. Here is a special bulletin from Dallas, Texas. Three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade today in downtown Dallas, Texas."

Given its reputation for ultra-right-wing politics, Dallas was quickly blamed for the assassination of the nation's charismatic, liberal standard-bearer. Enduring condemnation, grief, and shame, the city did not leap to commemorate the infamous site where Kennedy was killed. But in 1970 it did erect a memorial three blocks east of the Depository, designed by well-known architect Philip Johnson as an imposing (and rather severe) cenotaph. Essentially out of sight from the assassination scene, it has been largely disregarded by the public. Much later, in 1989, a museum on the assassination was opened on the Depository's sixth floor.

The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza is a compelling exhibition. At times elegiac, it is Dallas's most well-

*View in The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza toward the glassed-in "Sniper's Perch" exhibit, re-creating the area around the window (last window on the right-hand wall) where, according to the official investigation, Lee Harvey Oswald fired upon President John F. Kennedy's motorcade.*



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The building was renamed the Dallas County Administration Building—a name largely ignored by the public: in Dallas and to millions around the world, it is forever the Texas School Book Depository.

But what to do with the sixth floor? From there, according to scientific findings and significant circumstantial evidence—although the subject is one of continuing debate and analysis—Lee Harvey Oswald fired the fatal shot. Particularly, what to do with the area near the window Oswald allegedly used? It seemed out of the question to convert the floor into ordinary offices, including file cabinets, a desk, and a wastebasket in the space near the window—a key



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*Accommodating a historic site to new uses, an elevator shaft rises at the rear of the Texas School Book Depository while below a new visitor center takes shape. Its intrusion on the Depository's historic facade sparked a public debate, but the elevator now whisks museum visitors up past government offices on the building's first five floors. Top photo: On the sixth floor, a repairman works at the "Sniper's Perch" window, which has a view of Houston Street. JFK's limousine traveled toward the Depository up Houston Street, then made its fateful left turn onto Elm Street, directly below.*

considered response to the assassination of President Kennedy. It joins commemorative sites elsewhere marking violent deaths on American soil that shook the nation, from other assassinations to acts of terrorism.

**FOLLOWING THE ASSASSINATION**, the Depository was a troubling presence in a proud city. Fires, twice set by arsonists, caused only minimal damage. Prominent citizens urged demolition, but Dallas officials refused a permit. (This reaction contrasts with the recent, officially authorized demolition of the Newtown, Connecticut, elementary school—an unbearably dark icon after the mass murder of twenty of its first-graders and six adult staff members.)

In the late 1970s, Dallas County purchased the Depository, then renovated the first five floors for official use.

evidentiary area for the most infamous murder of our time.

Ultimately, many individuals contributed to the solution for the sixth floor, but the person most responsible for the outcome was a Dallas native, Lindalyn B. Adams. Recognized and honored for accomplishments in public affairs, including her leadership in historic preservation in Dallas and elsewhere in Texas, Adams began an effort in 1977 to convert the Depository's vacant sixth floor into a museum on the assassination. To that end she helped establish the Dallas County Historical Foundation. But given the controversial nature of the proposal, Adams faced local reluctance and outright opposition. When I first met her in late 1986, she still had not gained the funding and support needed to get the project fully under way.

Our meeting was fortuitous. As a historian with the National Park Service (NPS), America's premier historic preservation institution, I had drafted a short commentary on the fate of the Texas School Book Depository, which interested me; and I needed my facts checked for accuracy. A friend suggested contacting Lindalyn Adams in Dallas. At the time I knew nothing about her background. When I called her, she confirmed my wording, then invited me to visit the Depository and the sixth floor sometime. Although I was based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, this fit my

plans well: my wife, Judy, and I had tickets for an upcoming Cotton Bowl game in Dallas (Ohio State beat Texas A&M).

On December 30, Adams showed us the sixth floor, a large, open space little changed since November 1963, except that it had long ago been cleared of stacked boxes of school books. The empty floor was closed to the public. It was when we looked through the window and down on Elm Street where it curves alongside the Grassy Knoll that I was struck by how close and easy it all seemed.

Adams and the Foundation were also seeking to preserve the entire assassination scene, and with good reason. Indeed, President Kennedy's assassination took place in a well-manicured Dallas city park: Dealey Plaza. Somewhat in the shape of a huge amphitheater, sloping and open to the west, and bordered on other sides by low-profile buildings, including the Depository, Dealey Plaza was the setting for "Camelot's" final, tragic act.

After the tour, we talked for nearly an hour about the museum proposal. I told Adams that from the very day of the assassination I had wondered how Dallas would treat the Depository, and I stated emphatically that her proposal was appropriate for the building and for the city of Dallas. It was also in line with NPS treatment of historic properties.

Concluding our visit to the Depository, Adams took my wife and me to lunch at the Dallas Country Club. When we parted, I had no idea that I would have any more to do with her sixth-floor plans.

**ALTHOUGH MY MEETING** with Adams was in no way official, I believe that beyond communicating my own background and experience in the field of historic preservation, what mattered most was that, in effect, I brought the NPS imprimatur to the project. Adams had already obtained considerable advice and support from highly regarded professionals in museum development



*John Wilkes Booth's pistol, with which he shot President Abraham Lincoln, is part of a museum display at Ford's Theatre, where the assassination took place. The museum, which sets the event in historical context, provided a precedent for creating The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.*



and related fields. Once the project got under way, they would continue providing vital support and leadership. But I learned later that my show of interest, along with the possibility that the NPS might be brought into the project, gave Adams new resolve and proved a turning point in her efforts.

Coincidentally, Lee F. Jackson, an incoming judge for the Dallas County Commissioners Court, was set to be inaugurated on January 2, only three days after my visit. His office would be in the Depository building, and he already had given his support for a museum on the sixth floor. In his inaugural address, Judge Jackson reemphasized his goal to see the museum project to conclusion. Increased support from Dallas city leaders followed both the judge's endorsement and Adams's revitalized efforts, which also bolstered fund raising. In mid-January, Adams called to bring me up to date, and asked if I could give support to the project—which led to my being a liaison to the Foundation.

At our initial meeting in the Depository, Adams had indicated an interest in the NPS having some kind of of-



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*More than 300,000 visitors pass through The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza each year. They learn about Kennedy's election, his administration, the events in Dallas, the worldwide shock and mourning, and even the major conspiracy theories that arose.*

ficial affiliation with the site. This never reached fruition, although the service contributed my time and skills and helped in other ways. Most notably, the NPS Washington office helped the Foundation secure designation of virtually the entire assassination area as an official National Historic Landmark.

As I watched the museum planning evolve, I became even more convinced that Dallas should have full “ownership” of the finished product. Given what Dallas had gone through following the assassination, it would serve the city well to show grace under pressure through this highly visible project led by its own citizens. Adams, herself a Republican, was able to gather support for the project from prominent and influential members of both political parties.

Conover Hunt, Adams’s choice for project director, was one of the professionals who had already worked with the Foundation for a number of years. And she made one goal very clear for this museum in the Republican-dominated city of Dallas: to present, as much as possible, a nonpartisan account of the Democratic president. The exhibition came to include Kennedy’s background, election, the positive and negative aspects of his brief admin-

istration, and then his trip to Texas, and to Dallas. The exhibition continues with the aftermath: the suspect’s escape, capture, and death, plus shock, mourning, and ceremony around the world. It concludes with the official investigations and major conspiracy theories that arose.

**AS A HISTORIAN AND CONSULTANT,** I mainly assisted on two key fronts: planning the museum, and justifying the project to Dallas civic leaders. The planning involved matters such as reviewing proposed exhibition texts, photographs, and film storylines along with discussions of overall museum layout and even the type and color of carpet to be used. It also involved whether to include the autopsy images or the Zapruder film “head shot” (fortunately ruled out following an extended debate). But likely I helped the most through my direct contacts with civic leaders, primarily through testimony at official city meetings, where I sought to reinforce the view that the museum would enable Dallas to confront this tragic event publicly in a dignified and enduring way.

For instance, when the Dallas Area Rapid Transit planned a subway facility that would negatively impact the assassination area, I cautioned the “DART Board” and the Dallas City Council that unless they prepared a full and open analysis of the facility’s possible impacts on the historic assassination site, they would very likely face litigation for failing to comply with national historic preser-

vation law. I also sought to emphasize to civic leaders the significance of Dealey Plaza and the Depository by placing them in the company of other historic sites such as Gettysburg Battlefield National Military Park, the USS *Arizona* Memorial, and of course Ford's Theatre, where President Lincoln was assassinated. (All of those sites are under NPS management.) With aggressive pressure coming from a number of directions, the DART Board ultimately proved willing to preserve the integrity of the assassination site.

Also addressed was the apprehension among Dallas citizens that a museum on the sixth floor would memorialize the sniper and his roost. The museum planners were determined that the exhibition be a recognition, not a celebration, of history, and we argued that preserving and interpreting Ford's Theatre had in no way served to idolize Lincoln's assassin. I noted that this was true even though the stage actor John Wilkes Booth, who was roughly the equivalent of a leading movie star today, was the polar opposite of the obscure Oswald.

A comparison that seemed to have special resonance for Dallas civic leaders I spoke to was another NPS site, Custer Battlefield (now Little Bighorn Battlefield) National Monument. In the early summer of 1876, sudden news of the defeat and death of the charismatic, nationally known Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer and more than 250 troops under his command stunned the nation. Details of this historic event have ever since been entangled in controversy, sparking heated debate among scholars and buffs, and thus helping perpetuate public memory of the battle—a clear parallel to the Kennedy assassination and its conspiracy controversies. More than a hundred years after the battle on the high plains of present-day Montana, and far from today's large population centers, the Little Bighorn site draws several hundred thousand visitors each year. Given that the Kennedy assassination occurred in heavily populated metropolitan Dallas, the site and its surrounding controversy may also continue for generations to attract public interest.

**MANY PUBLIC MEMORIALS EXIST** in the U.S., ranging from the spontaneous and temporary deposits of toys, candles, and handmade cards at the site of a hit-and-run

death of a child to the formal and permanent Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery. A smaller number can be said, like The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, to mark violent death on U.S. soil, specifically death that sent shock waves through the national community at the time it occurred.

The assassination of Lincoln probably has the closest parallel with that of John F. Kennedy. Had Lincoln not been martyred, however, and instead faced the bitterly fractious post-Civil War situation, it is questionable whether public remembrance of him—as symbolized by the Lincoln Memorial dedicated in 1922—would have been so worshipful. As for the Civil War itself, counting casualties on both sides, it logged more military deaths than any foreign war in American history. Every battle was deadly, but only certain ones impressed themselves on national consciousness at the time. Foremost among these was the Battle of Gettysburg.

In contrast to the enduring public remembrance of the

Kennedy and Lincoln assassinations, the two other presidential killings in American history are but a dim memory in the public mind. Even though streets and schools across the country are named in honor of James A. Garfield and William McKinley, if a national poll were taken a huge majority of responders would be unable to identify these other two assassinated presidents—much less where the shootings took place.

On July 2, 1881, in the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, D.C., a deranged fanatic shot President Garfield. The president lingered until infection spreading from the wound ended his life on September 19. The station was demolished in the early twentieth century, and the National Gallery of Art (its “West Building” today) has occupied this site since the late 1930s. Neither the Gallery nor the city provides any public notice to tell passersby that an incumbent president was mortally wounded in close proximity to the Gallery's Constitution Avenue entrance. Disagreement exists over the exact spot.

Several blocks away, at the base of Capitol Hill, is a monument erected in honor of Garfield. But it attracts little public interest, in part because it stands in the cen-



Visitors view highlights of complex assassination investigations—which themselves became focal points of controversy, ongoing today.

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ter of a busy traffic circle. What is more important, although widely mourned at the time of his death, Garfield has steadily declined in the national memory.

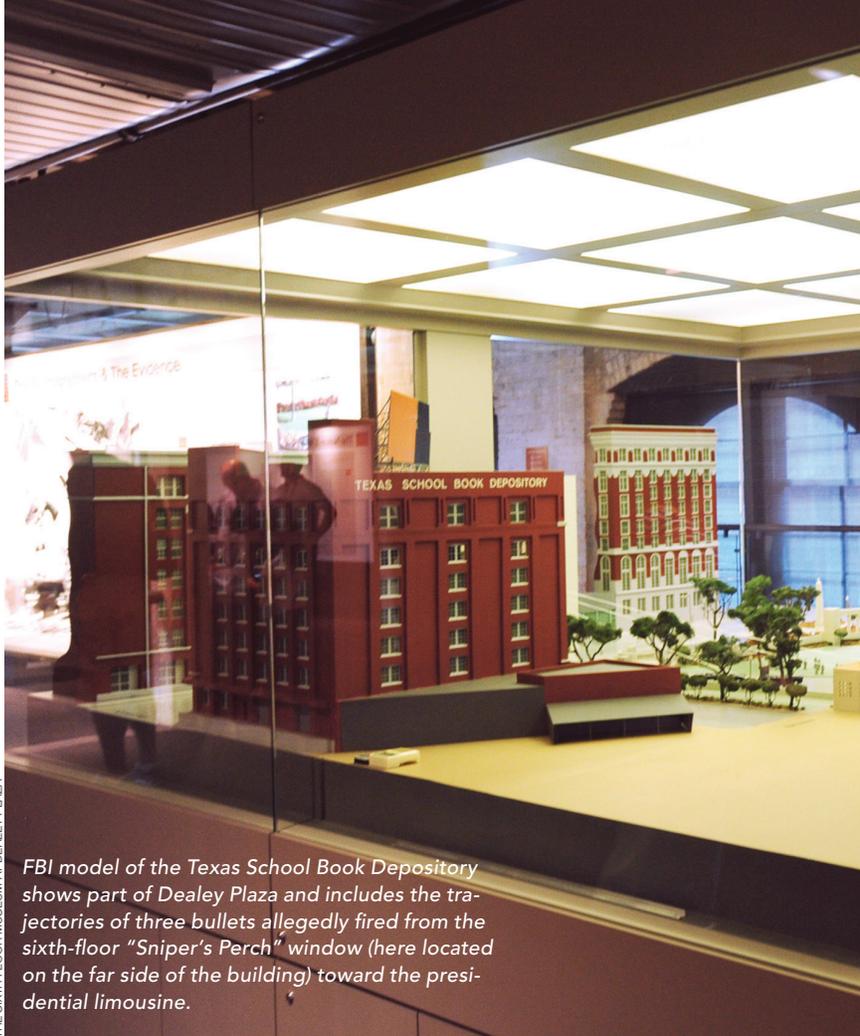
An anarchist shot McKinley in Buffalo, New York, on September 6, 1901, during the Pan-American Exposition. The president died eight days later. The attack occurred as McKinley greeted visitors in the Temple of Music, a large performance hall, one of a number of temporary structures built partly of plaster of Paris for the exposition, then torn down afterward. Today a bronze plaque attached to a modest granite stone marks the approximate location of this assassination. It sits in the grassy median of a residential street in what came to be a neighborhood of handsome two-story bungalows. The city erected a tall obelisk in downtown Buffalo to honor McKinley's memory. Yet it may well be that lingering national memory of the McKinley assassination primarily focuses on the rise to power of his successor, Theodore Roosevelt.

**IN RETROSPECT, THE 1960S** were the decade of major political assassinations, beginning with President Kennedy in Dallas, and continuing with the killings of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis in early April 1968, and two months later, of Senator Robert F. Kennedy, in Los Angeles. It seems certain that there was no broad conspiracy to eliminate these leaders, but surely the end result was to silence the three most prominent and persuasive spokesmen for American political liberalism.

The Dallas project sparked my interest in commemoration of assassinations, especially when the memorial efforts were on-site. While the Kennedy project was underway, I became involved briefly with plans for the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Apparently aware of the sixth-floor project in Dallas, officials with the state of Tennessee and city of Memphis asked me to review and comment on the incorporation of the motel into the proposed National Civil Rights Museum, and on treatment of the motel itself. In this case, as in that of Dallas and the Depository, the decision was to save the Lorraine Motel.

In June 1987 I met with city and state representatives and we toured the motel area, including the rooming house across the street where, allegedly, James Earl Ray had fired the fatal shot from the bathroom window. After the tour we had an extended discussion about their proposals, which by and large I thought were fully appropriate. The new museum was dedicated in September 1991.

The Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles where Robert Kennedy was shot was torn down in 2006. Long before



FBI model of the Texas School Book Depository shows part of Dealey Plaza and includes the trajectories of three bullets allegedly fired from the sixth-floor "Sniper's Perch" window (here located on the far side of the building) toward the presidential limousine.

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that, the hotel's public affairs manager gave me a tour of the kitchen area where the shooting occurred. She told me that the assassination contributed to the decline of the hotel's business. Indeed, the Ambassador, huge but almost vacant, had aged, like some once-beautiful movie goddess. The lobby had a lonesome, empty, even seedy feel about it.

The hotel had plenty of history before 1968. Its fabulous nightclub, the Coconut Grove, was perhaps the most glamorous watering hole in the Hollywood area where movie stars could gather to see and be seen. During the 1930s and early 1940s, several Academy Award ceremonies were held in the Coconut Grove, including the one celebrating the 1939 film *Gone With the Wind*, which honored Hattie McDaniel, the first African American to win an Oscar. With the Ambassador's decline, a protracted but ultimately unsuccessful preservation battle arose to save what was a true Los Angeles landmark. After the demolition, markers were placed nearby to remember RFK and the assassination.

The 1960s also witnessed other key assassinations, such as those of Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers (1963); three civil rights activists—James Earl Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, near Philadelphia, Mississippi (1964); and Malcolm X, the radical Muslim and civil rights spokesman (1965).

Sadly, national traumas did not end in the 1960s, and communities have continued to grapple with the deli-



cate matter of creating new memorials. Among those that draw visitors are Strawberry Fields in New York City's Central Park, honoring John Lennon; the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum, marking the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building; and the three 9-11 memorials: the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City, the Pentagon Memorial in the capital, and the Flight 93 National Memorial in southwestern Pennsylvania.

**ON NOVEMBER 22, 1988**, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the JFK assassination, I joined others from the sixth-floor museum project to give brief comments to an invitation-only national press conference held on a lower floor of the Depository. And three months later, on the eve of President's Day, in February 1989, my wife and I attended a formal dinner to mark—with a sense of great relief for everyone—completion of an intense, demanding project. (The making of this museum is well-chronicled in Stephen Fagin's new book, *Assassination and Commemoration: JFK, Dallas, and The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza*.) The day after the formal dinner, Judy and I attended the official ceremonies opening the exhibits on the sixth floor, then said good-bye to Lindalyn Adams, Conover Hunt, and other friends, and flew back to our home in Santa Fe.

I last visited the museum this past summer, and came

away thinking it is still a powerful, affecting exhibition. I noticed the solemn expressions of many in the museum, particularly, it seemed, among older people. It was mid-week, and the place was packed. More than 300,000 visitors go there each year, and many thousands more visit only Dealey Plaza, making this easily the most visited historic site in Dallas, and one of the leading places to see in that part of the country.

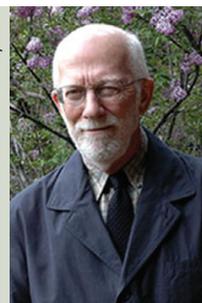
For some, still, to go there is to wish there were no reason to go there—to wish it all away. For those of us who were alive and aware at the time (“Where were you when you heard the news?”), the memory is still fresh: the ordinary urban landscape, the enthusiastic crowd near the last stretch of the welcoming motorcade, the president's limousine only a few feet from the safety of the Triple Underpass . . . and then, the man who had everything—wealth, glamor, charm, intellect, power—shot dead. The museum cannot instill such emotions in the generations that follow, but may yet help them to understand the personal depth of history.

National traumas comprise countless personal traumas. And of the many people I met in Dallas, the person whose life seemed most deeply affected by the assassination was Bill T—an African American construction worker from the city of Philadelphia, who was not involved in the museum project. On the twenty-fifth anniversary, he had, as he put it, “inadvertently managed” to get into the invitation-only press conference, and later he introduced himself to me out on Dealey Plaza, where the crowd was gathering as the fateful noon hour approached.

Bill told me that he was six when President Kennedy was killed, and he had never seen his mother and father cry so hard. Their reaction to the president's death affected him profoundly, and he became intensely focused on the assassination and its many aspects. He had taken a bus all the way to Dallas just to be at the site for the anniversary observances.

On top of this, Bill was wearing a Dallas Cowboys jacket, and I asked him why. Although a Philadelphia native, he had become a Cowboys fan because of his interest in the assassination. Yet he had never before even been to Dallas. And he said he did not expect to come again. But then Bill remarked, “Well, maybe to see the sixth-floor exhibit once it opens.”

**Richard West Sellars** is a retired U.S. National Park Service (NPS) historian and author of *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (Yale University Press, 1997, 2009), plus numerous articles. During his thirty-five-year career, he taught many courses in historic preservation and visited nearly all of the approximately 400 parks under NPS care. He is currently writing a memoir, focused mainly on his experiences with and observations of NPS treatment of the parks.



ANDREA SHARON