



TRAVEL TEXASSM

—————[Wharton Community Tourism Assessment February 25-26, 2020]—————



COMMUNITY TOURISM ASSESSMENT

Overview

A Community Tourism Assessment:

- ✓ Organizes local attractions into an easily referenced report.
- ✓ Provides recommendations for improving community resources based on observations from tourism staff conducting the assessment.
- ✓ Uncovers untapped or underutilized attractions in a community.
- ✓ Encourages regional collaboration and the creation of tourism partnerships.
- ✓ Educates communities on how to develop and promote local tourism attractions.
- ✓ Establishes a foundation for future tourism planning or development efforts.

Overview (continued)

- Representatives from multiple state agencies visited Wharton, TX over February 25-26, 2020 and completed an itinerary featuring local tourism attractions and meetings with involved community members. Participating agencies include:
 - Nate Gieryn and Spencer Streetman - Office of the Governor, Economic Development and Tourism (EDT)
 - Teresa Caldwell - Texas Historical Commission (THC)
 - Kristin Lambrecht - Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA)
 - Lois Rodriguez - Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT)
 - Anina Moore - Texas Commission on the Arts (TCA)

Overview (continued)

- This report includes many of the ideas generated throughout the assessment and is primarily meant to be an inventory of attractions experienced during the assessment and other aspects of the travel product. **Please note that the assessment report may not include all attractions or potential attractions in the region.**

Overview (continued)

- While visiting Wharton, assessment team members were impressed by many of the strengths and opportunities available for developing tourism in the community. Weaknesses and threats to tourism development that were observed are common to many smaller communities: lack of resources, time constraints of a visitor center with available staff/volunteers and disjointed promotional efforts.
- Despite some unavoidable challenges, an overall takeaway from the visit is that there is a lot to be excited about in Wharton and surrounding areas. Combining the area's attractions with an engaged and welcoming community effort should drive tourism.

Overview (continued)

- The inventory of attractions and Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis is organized based on general activity categories that are popular with leisure travelers to and within Texas:
 - Culinary, Shopping and Entertainment
 - Historical and Cultural Tourism
 - Nature Tourism
- The report will also include:
 - The economic impact of tourism in Wharton County
 - General comments on tourism development and promotion
 - Detailed notes from the state agency representatives

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ECONOMIC IMPACT OF TOURISM

Economic Impact of Tourism

- An estimated \$38.8 million was spent by visitors to Wharton County in 2019. This spending directly supported 460 jobs with \$10.2 million in earnings and \$3.7 million in state and local taxes.
- Looking at the Independence Trail region, nearly \$28.9 billion in travel spending was recorded in 2019. There's potential for Wharton and Wharton County to increase their share of this spend and grow tourism in the area.
- For more economic impact information and other travel research, please visit www.travel.texas.gov.

A photograph of three women sitting at a wooden picnic table in a vineyard. They are smiling and talking, with one holding a wine glass. The background shows rows of grapevines under a bright sky. A large tree is on the left side of the frame.

CULINARY, SHOPPING AND ENTERTAINMENT

Attractions Visited

- **Hinze's BBQ**
- **Provisions Bistro and Market**
- **Milam Street Coffee**
- **Plaza Theatre**
- **Highway 59**
- **Downtown Wharton**

Hinze's BBQ



Hinze's

- **Strengths:** The assessment team had the pleasure of having lunch at Hinze's BBQ. The restaurant was very busy and it is clear that Hinze's is a loved establishment and a community staple. The food was very delicious! Great online presence with company information and history.
- **Weaknesses:** The original building was located on Highway 59 and very visible to people traveling. The new location is located in town and was busy, however it may result in less organic tourism foot-traffic.
- **Opportunities:** The original sign is still standing on 59. It would be beneficial perhaps to add a sign adjoined, with the new location address.
- **Threats:** None.

Provisions Bistro & Market



Provisions Bistro & Market

- **Strengths:** Known as the main local fine dining establishment. Provisions has a great lunch and dinner menu and beautiful décor and architecture. Great preservation and restoration, originally a bank.
- **Weaknesses:** The operation times are limited. This can be beneficial however in cutting down on operational costs.
- **Opportunities:** Expanding operation times. Expand on the “Market” side of the restaurant that is already there, have a farmers market on the sidewalk out front one Saturday of the month with an array of vendors.
- **Threats:** None.

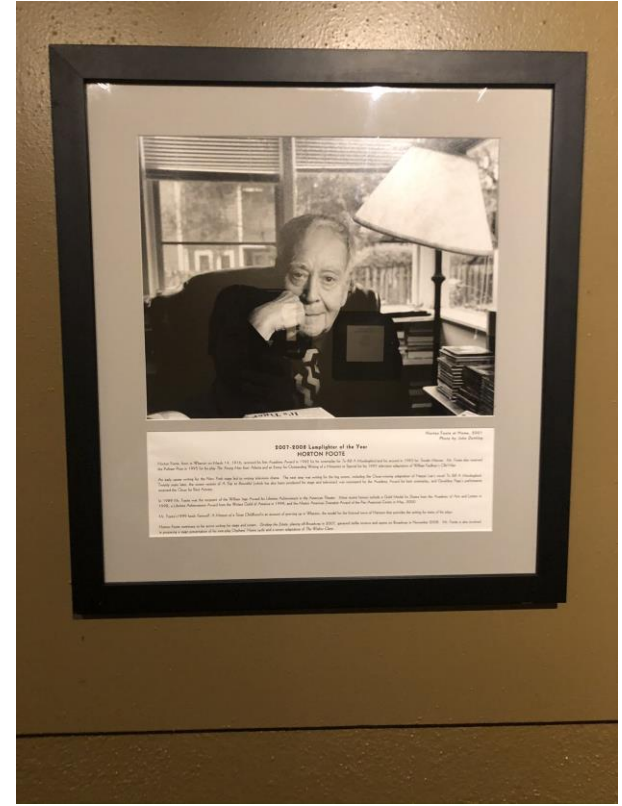
Milam Street Coffee



Milam Street Coffee

- **Strengths:** Milam Street Coffee is very popular amongst the locals and visitors. It has a very active calendar of events to keep the community engaged.
- **Weaknesses:** Interior décor is charming but could use a small update.
- **Opportunities:** Continue engaging with the community. Local support will make the establishment more attractive to visitors
- **Threats:** Milam Street Coffee is the only coffee shop in Wharton, therefore it does not have any real competition.

Plaza Theatre



Plaza Theatre

- **Strengths:** The Plaza Theatre is a 200-seat historical building preserved and still in operation. The iconic theatre marquee and period architecture that is still intact is remarkable. Wharton is the hometown and birthplace of playwright Horton Foote. This should be capitalized on as a potential draw for literary tourism.
- **Weaknesses:** None.
- **Opportunities:** A Horton Foote Festival/Showing would appeal to people to visit. Hosting a traveling theatre company. Screening classic movies, themed weekends.
- **Threats:** None.

Downtown Wharton



Downtown Wharton

- **Strengths:** Downtown Wharton provides the small-town ambiance that attracts visitors. Many of the businesses are locally owned. It has had quite the historical journey of restoration over the years. There's a good mix of shopping, including antiques, and restaurants/café's that appeal to visitors. Many of the shopping establishments are tourist and local friendly. Milam Street coffee and Provisions coffee draws traffic as a locally owned business and not a chain.
- **Weaknesses:** Some of the store fronts are boarded up or vacant, discouraging visitation to the area.



Downtown Wharton(continued)

- **Opportunities:** The downtown area is a real asset for Wharton. A peaceful collaboration of communication amongst the Downtown Business Association, The Wharton Chamber, and the City working together could facilitate improvements to the district. Easily maintained beautification efforts, like murals, can help to revitalize. The Levee project completion will help battle devastating floods. The Chamber has a brochure rack with ample information(slide 53), installing a second rack downtown would help with visitors shopping/walking downtown to obtain trip planning inspiration.
- **Threats:** It's possible that the levee project slated to start in November can deter people from visiting during construction.

Highway 59

- **Strengths:** Heavily trafficked, Highway 59 receives many travelers. Buc-ee's Gas Station has helped detour many commuters to stop.
- **Weaknesses:** Lack of, or outdated signage along the corridor to encourage visitation to the city.
- **Opportunities:** Installation of signage highlighting downtown and the planned Spanish Camp Trail.
- **Threats:** Not many visitor friendly establishments other than Buc-ee's.

A family of four—a man, a woman, and two children—are walking together on a paved path in front of a large, historic white mission building. The building features several arched doorways and a prominent bell tower with a cross on top. The scene is set during the day with soft lighting. The family is dressed in casual attire; the man is in a blue shirt and tan pants, the woman is in a blue dress, and the children are in a plaid shirt and a brown shirt. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and suggests a family outing to a cultural or historical site.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL TOURISM

Attractions Visited

- Wharton County Courthouse
- Southern Pacific Railroad Depot
- Wharton County Historical Museum/Dan Rather House
- Teepee Motel
- Horton Foote House
- Morris Carriage House

Wharton County Courthouse



Wharton County Courthouse

- **Strengths** : The Wharton County Courthouse is a beautiful building and an anchor attraction like other historic courthouses around the state.
- **Weaknesses** : Tours are offered right now appointment only, through the chamber.
- **Opportunity** : Regularly scheduled tours posted online could help draw tourists. The courthouse would benefit from displaying an assortment of timeline photographs on the ground floor. Showing the progress the courthouse has had over the years in a mini art gallery would help people to understand and appreciate the landmark even more.
- **Threat** : None.

Wharton County Courthouse



Displaying historic photos like these in the first floor gallery can visually show visitors how far the courthouse has come.

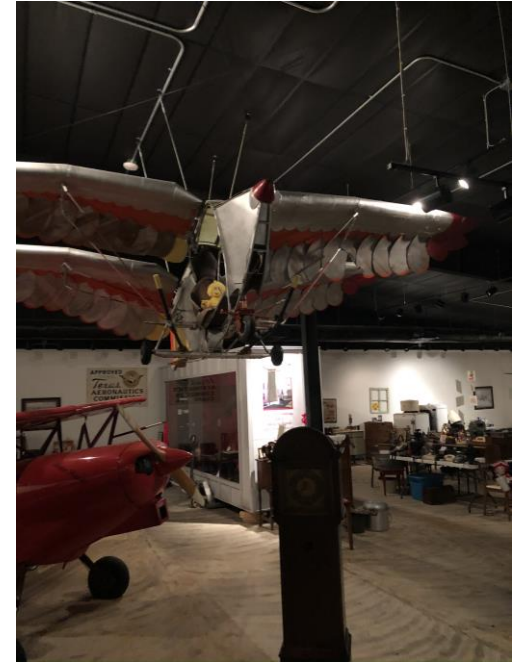
Southern Pacific Railroad Depot



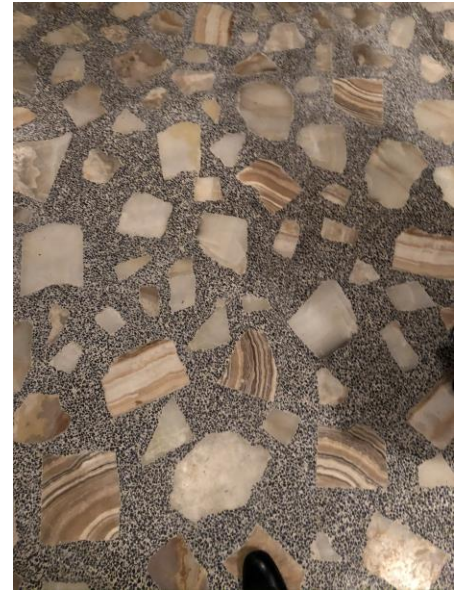
Southern Pacific Railroad Depot

- **Strengths:** The assessment team had the pleasure of visiting the historic Southern Pacific Railroad Depot. The restoration and attention to detail is incredible. Friendly and knowledgeable volunteer, open by appointment during the week.
- **Weaknesses:** The Depot has a very informative webpage on the City website, although there is no information on the times it is open. The Chamber website mentions operations on Saturday only.
- **Opportunities:** Hosting community events at the Depot would draw people to visit, not just private events.
- **Threats:** Only open on Saturday and appointment only.

Wharton County Historical Museum/Dan Rather House



Wharton County Historical Museum/Dan Rather House



Wharton County Historical Museum/Dan Rather House



Wharton County Historical Museum/Dan Rather House

- **Strengths:** Great interpretation of the chronological evolution and settlement of Wharton. The extensive wild game trophy room is also an architectural gem. The technological room and collection is very impressive.
- **Weaknesses:** Closed due to Hurricane Harvey.
- **Opportunities:** Opening the museum would be beneficial to cultural tourism. The Texas Gulf Sulphur Company-Newgulf room would be beneficial for meetings as a source of revenue for the museum.
- **Threats:** The museum is closed.

Teepee Motel



Teepee Motel

- **Strengths** : Currently well known in the region. The vanishing Teepee motels are still an attractive part of road trips and Americana.
- **Weaknesses** : The motel has been closed since 2017 due to flooding from Hurricane Harvey.
- **Opportunities** : Opening would benefit Wharton's tourist visitation.
- **Threats** : The majority of travel reviews online mention negative experiences with management and upkeep. Revitalization of the motel would be an asset for Wharton and bring back travelers interested in visiting roadside attractions.

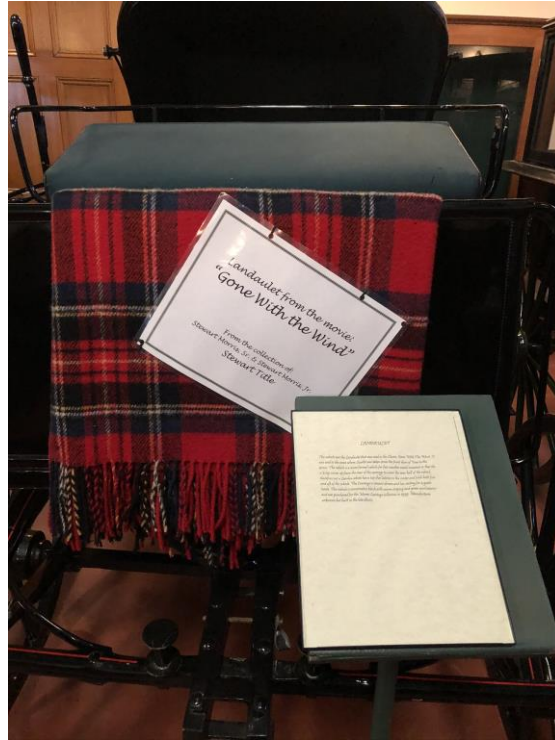
Horton Foote House



Horton Foote House

- **Strengths:** Literary Historical landmark
- **Weaknesses:** Not open to the public, no signage in front of the house.
- **Opportunities:** A potential location for a historical marker, outdoor “drive-in” movie screening show outside. A historical homes tour was mentioned that would encourage “foote” or drive by traffic. Producing small leaflet pamphlets or a website with addresses and descriptions would be a great activity for visitors to enjoy.
- **Threats:** At this time there are no public tours or a historical placard at the house.

Morris Carriage House



Morris Carriage House

- **Strengths:** Amazing collection of carriages, accompanied by thorough descriptions. Friendly, knowledgeable volunteer support, open to give guided tours by appointment.
- **Weaknesses:** By appointment only and no longer participating in city parades.
- **Opportunities:** Opening up the Carriage House for visitors.
- **Threats:** The limited visitation times to the house and the distance out to the property.



NATURE TOURISM

Attractions Visited

- **Riverfront Park/Santa Fe Trail**
- **Pierce Ranch**
- **Dinosaur Park**
- **Brahman Cattle**

Riverfront Park



Riverfront Park

- **Strengths:** Beautiful picturesque scenery, the Port of Wharton Dock is a great spot to visit.
- **Weaknesses:** One of the docks is falling apart, roped off and a safety hazard.
- **Opportunities:** Constructing a new dock, and a walking/bike trail would encourage recreational activities. Businesses offering water activities such as tubing or canoeing.
- **Threats:** Continued erosion and vegetation overgrowth of the area will make it unusable to enjoy for recreational opportunities.

Riverfront Park



The Riverfront Park is an outdoor recreation outlet that should be capitalized on. Not many communities have water attractions in the middle of their town, so this would be a great way to set Wharton apart from the herd.

Updating signage (like the one to the left) would be a great way to encourage picnics, walkers/runners, and outdoor recreational activity seekers.

Pierce Ranch



Pierce Ranch

- **Strengths:** Historical home, completely preserved, active event venue, weekend getaway for small groups, and hunting ranch
- **Weaknesses:** Not as accessible to the public, only private events or rental.
- **Opportunities:** Polo Matches were discussed as spectator events. School field trips for bird spectating.
- **Threats:** None.

Dinosaur Park



Dinosaur Park

- **Strengths:** Very charming dinosaur near the entrance of Wharton. It is a popular photo attraction from researching social media outlets.
- **Weaknesses:** Confusion on the origination of the dinosaur.
- **Opportunities:** A plaque would be a nice addition to where the dinosaur installation came from. More playground equipment or tables for picnics to encourage visitation.
- **Threats:** The levee will force to park to move and or relocate

Brahman Cattle



Brahman Cattle

The assessment team learned an interesting fact, that the Brahman cattle is a unique cattle breed that originated to the US by way of Wharton from India back in 1906. It would be beneficial if there was a tour with the cattle being highlighted.

Coordination with local ranchers would help bring their unique history to the public.

Brahman Cattle

Public art related to the Brahman's like what Hutto and Dallas have done may be a fruitful endeavor. Concrete statue Brahmans would be very eye-catching and spark curiosity on visitors passing through.

Hutto has a local fundraiser where they have local businesses sponsor a large concrete Hutto Hippo sculpture to paint and display in the front of their establishment.



Brahman Cattle

Dallas has a great art installation of the early trail of Longhorns. A trail of Brahmans at the entrance of the city would be an intriguing welcome and photo-op for visitors.





TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION

Lodging

- Wharton would benefit from additional lodging options to provide more choice for visitors and increase hotel occupancy tax revenue.
- Currently there are about 94 sleeping rooms in town which can fill up for events. The Holiday Inn Express accounts for about one-third of the cities room inventory. The assessment team had a pleasant stay at this hotel and there is certainly potential to package the property with other attractions or experiences when promoting the area.
- The TeePee Motel has a large tourism following and awareness. Revitalizing and opening would be beneficial to visitation.

Items Included

- Chamber/Visitors Center
- Signage around Wharton
- Tourism promotion
- Event promotion

Chamber / Visitors Center



**Electronic marquees are a great way to inform the town of current events.

Signage around Wharton

- Visitor centers provide a starting point for travelers unfamiliar with an area, and similar to signage can attract those just passing through. Current signage in town is outdated and could use a refresh/ update or removal. Updating the visitors center so that is consistently staffed would be beneficial.



Chamber / Visitors Center



Many Brochures are very outdated or over displayed and cluttered, making it hard to know where to start.



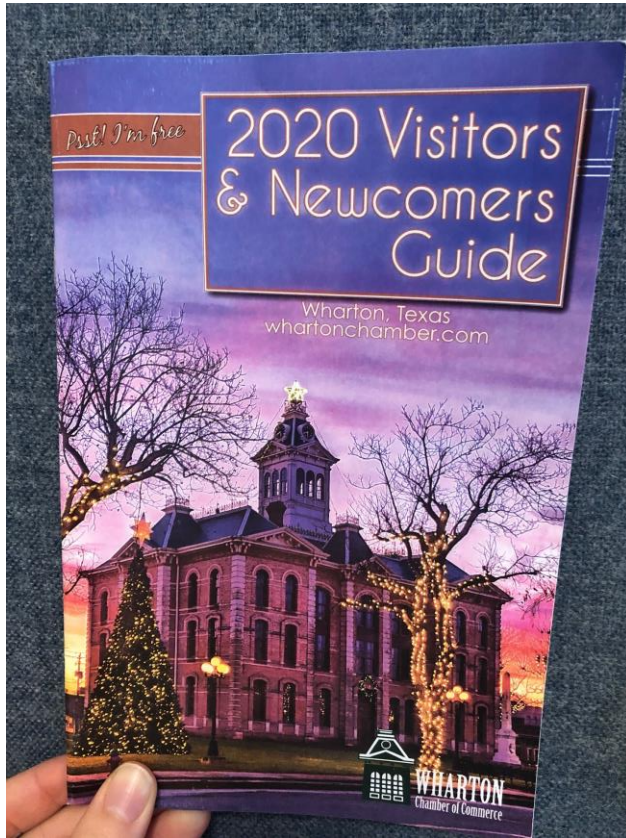
Visitor Center outside brochure rack is a great way to help provide afterhours information.



Tourism Promotion

- There are many different organizations involved in tourism in Wharton, which is not uncommon. For the area to reach its potential it may be necessary to assign one organization as being responsible for tourism promotion efforts or create a **tourism committee** that meets regularly to help with coordination.
- There are many attractions in Wharton which together create a significant amount of tourism product, but without promotion it will be hard to generate awareness of what there is to do in the area and inspire potential visitors to make the visit.
- Efforts to promote Wharton online could use a refresh. Creating a single voice for the community that targets those outside the area with engaging photos, videos and other content is an important step for developing tourism. More information on social media promotion is included in the agency notes.

Promotional Literature



The 2020 Visitors & Newcomers Guide is very informative and a great representation of Wharton. Continued publication of this is highly recommended and encouraged.

helpdesk@whartonchamber.com

Visit Historic Wharton

Morris Ranch & Carriage House
The Morris Ranch & Carriage House is a big attraction to our visitors, with a large collection including the carriage that carried Vivian Leigh in the film *Gone with the Wind*. Address: 2110 County Road 117. Phone: 979-532-1862. Hours: By appointment only.

Teague Motel
The Teague Motel was originally built in 1942 to serve travelers heading across Texas on State Highway 69. This was an era of grand road trips, family adventures, and American innocence. The Teague operated for 60 years, until the interstate highway system and a new era of travel routed customers away. But driving past the abandoned motel one afternoon, Barbara Whelan, is native to Wharton County, recalled to her husband, Byron, that she has always wanted to stay in one of the teapots but never had the chance. Recent lottery winners, Barbara and Byron Whelan decided to invest in the property and bring it back to life. They purchased the motel in 2004 and it reopened October 2006. Address: 4016 E. Business St. Phone: 979-282-9474.

Piazza Theatre
The renowned Piazza Theatre gives our downtown square with live entertainment throughout the year. Address: 129 S. Houston St. Phone: 979-532-1084.

Cattle Country
The Wharton area is known for the Brahman breed of cattle, originally imported from India and readily identifiable by humps on their backs. You can see them on Texas 69, north of Hangerford, and on the 150, west of Hangerford. Hangerford is located six miles north of Wharton on Business 59. The Hanger Ranch of Hangerford is among the most well known.

The Outdoors
The town of Wharton, with a population of about 10,000, is literally at the doorstep of some of the best hunting and bird watching found anywhere, truly an outdoorsman's paradise. He also can get an hour away from the beaches and excellent fishing along the Gulf of Mexico. Wharton also has many parks, including Riverfront Park, as well as the Santa Fe trail adjacent to Santa Fe Street. The Riverfront Park runs along the Lobo creek, a block south of Monterey Square and has a fishing pier, the "Port of Wharton" overlook, picnic areas, playground equipment, and canoe launch.

Southern Pacific Railroad Depot
Located at 100 S. Sunset St., the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot has been fully restored to how it appeared a century ago, when it served as a hub for transportation, news and social life at Wharton. Address: 100 S. Sunset. Hours: Sat. 9 am-1 pm.

Wharton TEXAS.COM

979-532-1862

Great handout we received that would be beneficial to keep in distribution.

Event Promotion

2020 Wharton Chamber of Commerce Events

Friday, Feb. 28 – Winter Lunch & Learn

Thursday, March 19 – 101st Annual Chamber Banquet

Friday, May 15 – Spring Lunch & Learn

Friday & Saturday, June 5-6 – 12th Annual Citywide Garage Sale

Saturday, June 27 – Fireworks Show

Friday, July 17 – Summer Lunch and Learn

Saturday, Sept. 12 – 13th Annual Golf Tournament

Thursday, Oct. 15 – 3rd Annual Party Under the Bridge

Friday, Nov. 6 – Fall Lunch & Learn

Tuesday, Nov. 24 – 40th Annual Christmas Holiday Parade

Friday, Dec. 18 – 3rd Annual Snow on the Square



Event Promotion

Creating a healthy list of events should be promoted on paper, on the front marquee outside the Chamber building, and Facebook.

The Chamber Facebook account is active and we were impressed with how information is being rapidly updated during the Coronavirus pandemic to keep the community informed

There is a function on Facebook where The Chamber can co-host events with businesses, reducing the stress on one individual person having to keep up with updating events, delegating the manpower. The businesses can create the event, request co-hosting with the Chamber, maximizing exposure all across the city.



WRAP UP AND RESOURCES

Closing Thoughts

- The assessment team would like to pass along our many thanks to everyone that contributed to the warm welcome and hospitality experienced during our time in Wharton. The potential for tourism development in the area is exciting and hopefully the ideas generated during the assessment visit and captured in this report will be helpful when developing a plan for attracting more visitors to your community.
- The following pages include links to homepages for the State of Texas agencies with tourism related resources to accompany the agency notes. Staff at each agency are available to assist with questions on programs as needed.

State of Texas Resources

- Office of the Governor, Economic Development & Tourism - <https://gov.texas.gov/business>
 - Travel Texas - <https://gov.texas.gov/travel-texas>
 - Texas Film Commission - <https://gov.texas.gov/film>
 - Texas Music Office - <https://gov.texas.gov/music>
 - Texas Economic Development Corporation - <https://businessintexas.com/>

State of Texas Resources

- Texas Commission on the Arts - <https://www.arts.texas.gov/>
- Texas Parks and Wildlife - <https://tpwd.texas.gov/>
- Texas Historical Commission - <https://www.thc.texas.gov/>
- Texas Department of Transportation - <https://www.txdot.gov/>
- Texas Department of Agriculture - <https://www.texasagriculture.gov/>



TRAVEL TEXAS

WHARTON HERITAGE TOURISM ASSESSMENT

Teresa Caldwell - Texas Historical Commission

What is Heritage Tourism?

Cultural heritage tourism as defined by the National Trust for Historic Preservation is “traveling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present. It includes historic, cultural and natural resources.”

Understanding America’s heritage and exploring distinct communities continues to grow in importance in attracting the traveler. More people are seeking travel experiences that connect them to local culture and unique stories. This is good news for Wharton. Travelers want to visit places that showcase their past and dynamically weave their traditions and historic built and environmental fabric into contemporary life. Places that value preservation as a core community development tool often become ideal destinations for travelers seeking heritage tourism experiences.

What Benefits Does Heritage Tourism Offer?

Studies on the characteristics of heritage tourists reveal them to be an attractive audience. These high value visitors spend more on accommodations, shopping, entertainment and dining than any other type of tourist. If this group has a quality experience, they tend to come back more often than other tourist segments and tell their friends about the place.

How Does Heritage Tourism Fit with Current Community Planning Activities?

By working in communities across the country, the National Trust has developed five guiding principles to create a sustainable heritage tourism program:

1. preservation and protection of resources
2. focus on quality and authenticity of place
3. collaboration
4. balancing the needs of residents with those of visitors
5. investing in your stories and finding creative ways to interpret them

Think of heritage tourism as an opportunity to show off all the things that make Wharton special through its great historic places, stories, traditions and people. These qualities contribute to a community’s “sense of place.” Defining sense of place is challenging because it is not attributable to one thing. It is the charm, authenticity and evolving cultural activities, it is the well cared for historic downtown or neighborhood, it is the parts of the community you can see, touch and use, but it is more than the built and natural environment. It is the heritage of the people(s) who settled an area combined with contemporary community life. It is what makes Wharton a great place to live, work and visit.

Issues related to parking, walkability, wayfinding signage, streetscapes, greenspaces, the night skies, hike and bike trails, walking paths, and paddling trails allow avenues for providing broader interpretation of the city’s historic and contemporary stories. Community histories are not static, and modern activities related to community development, cultural traditions, arts and entertainment, and outdoor recreation are part of a continuum that contributes to the continued vitality and growth of the city that is attractive to residents and visitors alike.

There are many opportunities to weave the stories of Wharton into the daily lives of residents and visitors, extending the reach of your museums, and giving people new ways to connect with the built

environment. Some of those recommendations are included below, but instead of undertaking interpretive endeavors on a case-by-case basis, it would be useful to develop a master interpretive plan that works in partnership with other planning schemes including the 2018 Texas Downtown Association's assessment of downtown, the Lower Colorado River Authority's plan, the American Planning Association plan for the Central Business District, the Urban Land Institute Study created for Wharton's West End Corridor, the Wharton Downtown Business Association 2019-2020 Strategic Plan, and the city's Comprehensive Master Plan. This will allow for consideration of interpretive strategies in the early stages of new development.

If stories are your product, an interpretive plan serves as a roadmap for telling them in a meaningful way. If done correctly, interpretive planning does the following:

- defines themes and stories of community for visitors and residents,
- facilitates the utilization of natural, physical, historical and cultural resources and stories which might otherwise be ignored or overlooked,
- coordinates the interpretive development efforts of stakeholders eliminating duplication, and
- enhances optimal use of available physical and financial resources within an area or region.

Thoughtful interpretive planning efforts can have an important impact on larger community goals of maintaining the historic downtown as the heart of Wharton, attracting new residents to your community and county, developing new visitor audiences, and engaging them as investors in the stewardship of your city and county.

Capitalize on your heritage tourism assets

For a community of its size, Wharton is fortunate to have an impressive collection of heritage and cultural assets, along with natural resources. Wharton has more than 30 listings on the National Register of Historic Places, including the Wharton County Courthouse Historic Commercial District, the West Milam Mercantile Historic District, and the Historic Lynn Street District.

Nestled on the banks of the Colorado River, Wharton is located 60 miles southwest of Houston, the fourth most populated city in the state, on U.S. 59. In order to attract visitors from Houston and elsewhere, you must know what your assets are, produce enticing products based on those assets, and then effectively promote Wharton to your target markets. One of the biggest challenges for Wharton is that the majority of your visitor-centric heritage tourism assets are either temporarily closed, open by appointment only, or never open to the public at all. An assessment of the heritage tourism resources that were visited during the Office of the Governor site assessment trip, along with asset strengths, concerns and opportunities follows:

1. Downtown Wharton Area located in the Wharton County Courthouse Historic Commercial District (Historic Monterey Square)

STRENGTHS: *The downtown courthouse district, also known as Historic Monterey Square, became a National Register listed Historic District in 1991 and is roughly bounded by the alley north of Milam Street, Rusk Street, Elm Street, and Richmond Street. The West Milam Mercantile Historic District is an important corridor into the downtown district which contains an attractive collection of historically significant buildings, the majority of which are still being used in some capacity. (SEE CONCERNS and OPPORTUNITIES) *The wonderfully restored 1889 Second Empire and Italianate-style **Wharton County Courthouse** was the work of Eugene T. Heiner, one of the state's foremost architects of the nineteenth century and is still utilized for county business. It is the heart of the downtown square and serves as the centerpiece of Wharton's downtown area. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The **Historic Plaza Theatre** graces the downtown square as a live entertainment space for plays, concerts, special events, as well as a

performing arts gathering place. The theatre started out as the Plaza Hotel, a two-story brick structure built circa 1904. The hotel was gutted and a movie theater built within the brick shell in 1941. The Plaza Theatre has been entertaining Wharton area residents since its grand opening gala in March 1942.

*Downtown Wharton is comprised of a decent retail mix of businesses for visitors and residents, although there are still empty buildings that need renovation and occupation by retail, restaurants, and lodging for the benefit of locals and visitors alike. *For a small community, Wharton has a good number of antique stores and other unique shopping opportunities which are essential for attracting heritage tourists, although having more quality shopping opportunities downtown would be preferable. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The downtown area is fairly well-maintained and attractive, but downtown beautification efforts that include the entire Main Street district would ensure the whole area is enticing for visitors, as well as residents. (SEE CONCERNS and OPPORTUNITIES)

CONCERNS: *Ensure that the historic integrity of the downtown area is at the forefront of any downtown revitalization efforts by preserving and/or restoring historical structures and improving exterior facades when necessary to help define and maintain an authentic sense of place for visitors, as well as residents. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Ensure that the empty buildings downtown are filled with tenants who contribute to the economic vibrancy of Wharton and appeal to visitors and residents alike, such as retail establishments, art galleries, restaurants, living space and lodging. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *There are several buildings downtown that are in need of serious restoration. *Unified beautification efforts (such as landscaping/planters and nice trash cans) would make the downtown area more attractive to visitors. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Lack of a variety of places to eat and drink downtown. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Lack of varied entertainment downtown. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Lack of wayfinding signage guiding potential visitors to heritage sites. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *There are safety concerns regarding the walkability of some sections of downtown sidewalks, as well as crossing highways to patronize businesses and heritage sites in all parts of downtown. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The reluctance of some in leadership positions to fully embrace Wharton's heritage and its story-telling potential for residents and visitors. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES)

OPPORTUNITIES: *Ensure that a vibrant mix of retail, restaurant, residential, and professional services occupy historically significant structures and draw residents and visitors downtown by recruiting different business types there. *Develop varied downtown promotions to add an extra incentive for visitors to stop downtown and shop in Wharton. *Develop cooperative print ads for downtown merchants to advertise the entire downtown area to visitors. *Implement the **Texas Downtown Association** (www.texasdowntown.org) assessment recommendations for downtown Wharton for additional suggestions on how to ensure that the downtown area flourishes. *Ensure that the downtown area is well-maintained and attractive and features unified beautification efforts (such as landscaping/planters and nice trash cans). Since Wharton is a Keep Texas Beautiful affiliate city, consider partnering with them on some projects. KTB also provides several grants found here: <https://www.ktb.org.grants> that might be helpful. *Consider applying to become part of the Texas Historical Commission's **Texas Main Street Program (TMSP)** (<http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/texas-main-street>), a downtown revitalization program. Wharton was part of the TMSP in the late 1980's but dropped out of the program several years later. Designated cities are eligible for a number of services, including site visits, technical advice, and design assistance. Many Main Streets that are part of the TMSP have become destinations themselves because visitors flock to communities that value their historic downtowns and are willing to invest in them. *Portions of the downtown square are not walkable and crosswalks on high pedestrian corners in downtown are sorely needed to make visitors feel more comfortable crossing the road (and it would be safer!), which would be beneficial to all parties-visitors, the County, the City, and

the businesses. *Produce a brochure or rack card on the stories and architecture of the Courthouse for self-guided tours and offer guided tours on a regular basis, preferably on Saturdays (at least once a month) when the majority of visitors find themselves in downtown Wharton. And consider opening the Courthouse during special events.

*Further **embrace** your **unique heritage**! Horton Foote, Dan Rather, Brahman cattle, Kolache Trail – there are aspects of these people and assets that no other place on earth can claim. Ensure that you capitalize on these stories by further highlighting them in existing museums and/or dedicating interpretive panels and displays to the subject/s when and where appropriate. Other assessment team members will elaborate on specific ways to celebrate playwright Horton Foote, so I would just encourage you to include these stories with physical sites, when available, in guided and self-guided interpretive tours (walking, driving and/or bus) that are developed.

*All tourists love to **eat** and **drink**, especially the heritage tourist. Family-owned, local ethnic restaurants, coffee shops and tea rooms are especially popular with heritage tourists and are preferable to chain restaurants. This makes sense since heritage tourists want to experience the “local flavor” of your community. Wharton has a good selection of locally owned restaurants for a community of its size although only a few are located in the downtown area, including Milam Street Coffee and Provisions Bistro and Market, which provides a fabulous gastronomical experience and should be promoted widely, especially by the Chamber of Commerce regardless of membership status. The addition of a tea room and/or a bistro and more restaurants featuring local fare could further entice heritage travelers to stop or stay longer in downtown Wharton. And an upscale restaurant downtown would especially appeal to heritage tourists.

*No one likes to **shop** more than the heritage tourist, especially in specialty and antique stores and shops featuring local crafts. The downtown district contains at least four antique stores and several more shopping opportunities, where visitors love to spend their money. The antique stores are also promoted via the Texas Gulf Coast Antique & Junkin’ Trail. *Recruit additional high quality boutique, antique and/or specialty stores to downtown Wharton to keep heritage tourists in town even longer. *Develop varied downtown promotions to add an extra incentive for visitors to stop downtown and shop. This is something that a Main Street manager could do if you decide to apply to become a designated Texas Main Street community through the THC’s Texas Main Street Program. *Farmer’s Markets are a great way for visitors to support local growers and producers, and get fresh produce, honey, eggs and other wares in the process. Wharton should advertise its Farmers Market better so visitors have a chance to take advantage of it if they so desire (even though it is not located downtown).

*What are the **entertainment** options in your downtown district and elsewhere? There are currently few entertainment activities or other forms of amusement that visitors can take advantage of downtown on a regular basis with the exception of shows at the Historic Plaza Theatre, Java Jam nights at Milam Street Coffee, and special events. Additional adult oriented and family friendly entertainment options downtown would be optimal.

*Are the shops in Wharton **open regular hours**? Nothing is more frustrating to a heritage tourist than to travel to a site or store during regular business hours and find out that it is not open. Establishing and then following posted hours of operation is essential for maintaining visitor satisfaction. When the assessment team was evaluating downtown, there were at least two shops that were closed (when they should have been open) and one opened late while we were there, which was extremely disappointing. *And there should be shopping, eating and entertainment establishments open after 5 pm each day to

keep tourists from leaving your community at night. Remember, if downtown Wharton rolls up its streets in the evening, then neither your visitors nor residents will have no choice but go elsewhere for goods, food and amusement!

*Businesses in Wharton that meet the criteria should consider applying for a **Texas Treasure Business award**, a THC program which recognizes Texas businesses that have been in operation 50+ years. For additional information and the application, go here: <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/texas-treasure-business-award> . Once businesses have taken advantage of this program, they can leverage the award in promotions and other ways.

***Develop self-guided walking and driving tours** to include information about community, county and statewide history and the architectural styles of significant buildings and cultural assets, including, but not limited to historic homes, historic churches and cemeteries. I did find a Historic Home Tour on the Chamber's website and in the 2020 Visitors & Newcomers Guide, but it is not very user friendly and there is no accompanying map! Development of additional thematic tours could help visitors learn more about Wharton's history, as well as appeal to specific visitor segments, and hopefully entice them to stay longer. Alpine has developed an historic walking & windshield tour that can be used as a model and information about their tour can be found here: http://www.historicalpine.org/historic_walking_tour.htm.

***Cemetery tours** (both led by guides dressed in period attire and self-guided) are becoming increasingly popular and are an excellent way to learn about the community's history, as well as architectural styles of its headstones. Cemetery tours could be planned in the Wharton City Cemetery and the African American Cemetery. Wharton County has several more historic cemeteries where tours might be appropriate as well. New Braunfels is one community that offers cemetery tours. For information about their tours, see <http://spasswalkingtours.com/historic-cemetery-tour/>. And Save Austin's Cemeteries holds an annual Murder, Mayhem and Misadventure Walking Tour at Historic Oakwood Cemetery. Details on this event can be found here: <https://www.sachome.org/events/mmmtour.html> . Also ensure that the cemeteries that are more than 50 years old are recognized with a historical marker and/or historic cemetery designation as appropriate. Information on historical markers can be found here: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/state-historical-markers> and how to apply for a Historic Texas Cemetery Designation can be found here: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/cemetery-preservation/historic-texas-cemetery-designation> .

***Embrace new technology** when developing **walking and driving tours**. Printed materials will always be needed by some visitors so their availability should not be eliminated, but options should continue to be developed to serve those who use smart technologies regularly, especially younger travelers, including Wharton County Junior College students. Smart phone applications provide opportunities to enhance these stories through the use of photographs and voice narration, including historic neighborhoods and significant architecture, and also give broader access to cemeteries for users.

***Develop a mobile app tour** featuring Wharton County's many historic districts and National Register properties (according to the Wharton County Historical Commission's website - <https://whartonchc.com/> - there are 31 National Register listings and seven Architectural State Antiquities landmarks). Mobile apps can be available to users as native apps – direct downloads to a mobile device from a site like the App Store or GooglePlay, or through a mobile responsive website.

Native apps stand alone, mobile responsive sites require an internet connection via wifi or cell data during use.

There are numerous mobile app providers and it can be challenging to select the right one. Here are some of those providers, along with Texas projects that utilize them: <https://guidebycell.com> (Texas Memorial Museum); <https://voicemap.me/> (Lampasas Walks: Historic Downtown Lampasas); <http://www.acoustiguide.com> (Galveston Historical Foundation); <http://www.otocast.com/> (Historic Austin Tours developed by Preservation Austin); <https://www.oncell.com/> (OnCell is the THC's platform for [Texas Time Travel Tours](#)); and <https://bar-z.com/> (Explore Glen Rose Texas).

Most points of interest in an audio tour contain a photo or two, and some written information, in addition to the spoken narrative. But remember that an app is only as good as its content so think about your stories. National Register nominations are useful for many things, i.e. they are factual in nature and most often relay information about the physical building elements in order to support the designation. However, we learn little about the people who lived or worked there so you need to ensure that *stories* are crafted about the occupants *based* on NR nominations.

***Print guides** can serve a similar purpose as a mobile tour, however the scope of content is much more limiting. Carefully consider amount of content, font size, overall design and space for images. Most visitors using paper appreciate larger type and many of these people are heritage tourists. In order to include all the information desired while still keeping an attractive layout, consider providing links to online website/s or app/s for additional information. If done well, print guides can be great products, but they must be relevant and up-to-date. Once print pieces become dated, they should be discarded for newer information or you risk alienating your visitors.

***Costs** for mobile and print products will vary within and between media types and sometimes that becomes the deciding factor, but you must also consider the long-term maintenance costs. And keep in mind that it doesn't have to be an either/or decision. Some people prefer a print product to supplement/support a digital experience, and there is also some technology, like the use of QR codes (elaborated on below) to access content that also works well with print products.

***You can also enhance access to city and county stories by developing QR Walking Tours** in Wharton. QR (*Quick Response*) codes are bar codes that allow you to link to events, text and website URLs. QR codes are fast becoming more common and can be used as a (free) storytelling mechanism to engage tourism audiences. Bibisi (<http://www.bibisicorp.com/>) has created heritage tourism based QR tours in Texas. San Antonio has a QR Historical Landmarks Tour consisting of 12 landmarks, and New Braunfels also has a QR History Tour including their cemetery. Using historic photos and a compelling storyline, include a QR tag that connects through a mobile device to the rest of the story, plus a link to the modern use website of the building or event. BeQRious.com is one site that generates QR codes and provides tracking analytics. Learn about this new way of exploring our world at <http://www.beqrious.com/>.

***Add a guided ghost tour** to keep visitors downtown at night in Wharton. It does not have to be entirely historically accurate as long as that is stated up-front. It is a *ghost* tour after all! There is a Legends at Monterey Square flier produced by the Wharton Chamber of Commerce that includes a Confederate Army veterans ghost story that can be used as a starting point. It could become a Ghosts and Legends Tour at Monterey Square to capture those additional stories, including Bonnie & Clyde, the Dickson Monument, the Sniper's Nest, Lucky Shot, Pecans vs. Sycamores, along with the Confederate Army veterans ghost story. Granbury does a nice job with its Granbury Ghosts and Legends tour that features

a walking tour of Granbury's historic downtown square led by a guide dressed in Civil War attire. Additional information is also available on their audio tour. Visit <http://www.granburytours.com/Pages/default.aspx> to learn more.

*Offer **hospitality training** that includes a heritage education component. Hospitality training is often used to prepare front line employees to successfully interact with the public. Expand the traditional thinking about hospitality training as Wharton develops tourism products and invite a wide range of citizens to learn about those experiences first hand. Continue working with partners to host opportunities for everyone from front line employees, business owners, museum staff and volunteers and city and county employees to participate in mini-familiarization (FAM) tours to learn about existing and new heritage tourism places and activities. The city of Beaumont's Destination Training is designed to educate and inspire a renewed sense of pride in that community. Learn more about this award-winning program at <http://www.beaumo-ntcvb.com/about-beaumont/about-the-cvb/hospitality-training/>. And Seneca McAdams, executive director of the Texas Independence Trail Region, is a certified hospitality instructor. (SEE Regional and Statewide Heritage Tourism Resources at the end of the report.) Other certified trainers can be found here: https://agriflife.org/texasfriendly/home/customer_service/.

***Signage, Entryways, Restrooms, Sidewalks and Crossings!** Signs direct visitors to your community and the sites within it, and they advertise it to others. Therefore, both directional and on-site signage are crucial for ensuring good visitor experiences. Wharton could benefit greatly from a **wayfinding system** to help guide visitors from attraction to attraction. This signage will decrease trip stress for your visitors because they will be able to find your sites more easily, and it will also increase the amount of time that many visitors spend in Wharton because the signage will lead them to sites and attractions they did not previously know about. (Figure 1) It may also help residents find your community's attractions! Wharton understands the necessity of providing wayfinding and has recently hired a company to provide this vital service! Ensure that the public is engaged in the entirety of this project to ensure public buy-in and transparency.



Figure 1. Wayfinding signage in downtown Atlanta, GA

Signage for historic assets also provides good support for print products or mobile apps. Creating simple, unobtrusive signs for historic homes and buildings offer recognition to the place itself, regardless of the availability of supportive materials. Also be sure to include signage for your National Register Districts in your wayfinding signage plan.

Wharton's **entrance corridors** and **gateways** are also in need of a cleanup and facelift. Visitors make impressions (both good and bad!) about you based on the attractiveness of your entryways and **signage** since they are the first things that they see upon entering your community, therefore a beatification plan to address these issues should be developed.

Downtowns that value their visitors also provide accessible **public restrooms** for their comfort. If you can't afford to build stand-alone facilities, consider opening the Courthouse on weekends. Visitors can use those restrooms, as well as learning about the history and architecture of that building.

You must also ensure that your **sidewalks** are truly walkable and **crosswalks** are added to help get visitors to the shops and sites on all sides of downtown, as well as in other parts of Wharton where you

wish to encourage foot traffic. If you expect visitors to walk, then you must provide a safe way to do so or they may only make one stop or simply not stop at all on their way out of town!

*Develop dynamic programming for children at the *Wharton County Historical Museum, Hessed House of Wharton* and elsewhere. You have built-in audiences of children and their parents and the opportunity to start building the next generation of preservationists who understand and value their community. Take advantage of it by providing age appropriate events and activities downtown! *Ensure that whatever products are developed from these various experiences are featured prominently in all promotional materials, on the website and in advertising campaigns.

2. Wharton County Historical Museum and 20th Century Technology Museum

STRENGTHS: *The **Wharton County Historical Museum**, currently closed due to damage sustained from Hurricane Harvey, was constructed in 1990. The museum is comprised of a 1,800 square foot museum wing that features five galleries devoted to Wharton County history, as well as the preserved 1960s Appelt Johnson home which consists of family memorabilia and an impressive array of big game trophies. Museum exhibit themes include prehistoric life, pioneer settlement, local industry (Texas Gulf Sulfur), transportation, ranching and agriculture, medicine, the “Shanghai” Peirce Ranch story, religion, war and peace, and sports and broadcasting. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The **20th Century Technology Museum** is housed at the back of the Wharton County Historical Museum and documents the innovations of the last century. The museum collects, preserves, and displays everyday objects of historical technology and serves as an educational and cultural center. One of the most impressive items on display is an experimental aircraft designed by Burt Rutan. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The childhood home of long-time legendary CBS television anchorman Dan Rather, relocated to the museum grounds from the Old Gulf community in 1992, reflects domestic life from the 1930s. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES)

*Good directional signage leading to the remote museum location from downtown Wharton. *Free admission. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Adequate size for population served. *Good parking. *Interesting collection of historically significant artifacts and displays. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Friendly, knowledgeable staff. *Self-guided and guided tours. (SEE CONCERNS and OPPORTUNITIES) Guided tours are available for large groups and schools by advance appointment. *A limited gift shop with items for all ages that relate to the museum’s mission and enables visitors to contribute financially to the museum. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Rotating exhibit space that gives visitors and locals who have been to the museum a reason to come back several times a year. *Provides public outreach and programming for children and adults including educational school programs/tours. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *There is a meeting room inside the museum that can be rented out for functions, with many organizations able to use it free of charge.

CONCERNS: *Additional interpretation of the exhibits, artifacts and memorabilia for those who don’t want a guided tour would increase the visitor experience. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *The animal trophy collection is out of context with the historical themes of the museum. Memorabilia and collections in “Miss Lillie’s Room” (Appelt Johnson Home) fail to reflect the life and times (1885-1987) of its owner. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Museum exhibit labels should be revised to museum standards to include more concise narrative and larger and more readable type. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) *Coherence and flow of the museum’s historical theme is not easily followed through the various time periods represented. Cultural histories should be integrated into the displays, including Hispanic contributions. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) With the addition of the 20th Century Technology Museum, there is some confusion on what this has to do with the Wharton County Museum and how the two are related (or if they are at all). (SEE OPPORTUNITIES) There is little emphasis on the Dan Rather house in the museum and tours of the

house aren't widely promoted partly due to the fact that the house needs renovations. (SEE OPPORTUNITIES)

OPPORTUNITIES: *Since the museum is currently closed and is in the process of being renovated due to Hurricane Harvey damage, take this opportunity to think about how to best present and interpret your artifacts and memorabilia. *Interpret the trophy animal collection based on ecological, environmental and conservation issues. *Include the history of the family in the attached 1960s Appelt Johnson home including its community contributions and their life and times. *Arrange exhibits in chronological order and upgrade labels for improved readability. *Establish a clear boundary from the Wharton County Historical Museum to the 20th Century Technology Museum. *Revise brochure narrative and graphics to more effectively entice visitors. *Revamp the museum's website and provide links to the Wharton Chamber of Commerce, other area museums, and the Texas Association of Museums.

*Pursue other grant and funding opportunities to restore and renovate the Wharton County Historical Museum and 21st Century Technology Museum and its exhibits. *Sources include the **Texas Historical Foundation** (<https://texashistoricalfoundation.org/grant-application/admin@texashistoricalfoundation.org>) which funds bricks-and-mortar restoration projects, those promoting Texas history education, and archeological projects. Another potential funding source is the **Texas Preservation Trust Fund**. TPTF investment earnings are distributed as matching grants to qualified applicants for the acquisition, survey, restoration, preservation or for the planning and educational activities leading to the preservation of historic architectural and archeological properties and associated collections of the State of Texas. Competitive grants are awarded on a one-to-one match basis and are paid as reimbursement of eligible expenses incurred during the project. Additional information about this THC grant can be found here: <http://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/texas-preservation-trust-fund> . And don't forget about the THC's **Museum Services Program**. There is a wealth of information about grants for museums, as well as historic organizations that can be found here: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/museum-assistance/grants-funding>. And don't hesitate to reach out to Dan Rather himself, to see if he is interested in contributing money towards the renovation of his childhood home.

*Once the museum has reopened continue conducting and holding educational forums and seminars in the space, as well as other community gatherings. *Continue exploring ways to extend the museum's reach by exhibiting artifacts and other memorabilia at a downtown location, either on a temporary or permanent basis. *Consider inviting Dan Rather and/or Dr. Gregg J. Dimmick, author of *Sea of Mud*, and a local Wharton resident to be the keynote speaker/s for the museum's grand reopening, to attract locals, as well as visitors to see the newly renovated space. Dr. Dimmick and Mr. Rather could also conduct book signings at the event. *Kick off a capital fundraising campaign for the renovation of Dan Rather's childhood home at an exclusive dinner that evening at the museum featuring Mr. Rather.

*Once you upgrade your exhibits, do not hesitate to charge reasonable entrance fees to recoup some of your costs. Visitors generally expect to pay for high quality visitor experiences. *Feature a tour of Dan Rather's childhood home at set intervals and post scheduled tour times on the door at the museum so drop-in visitors know when they can expect to be given a guided tour. I feel that the museum is overlooking Dan Rather's appeal and interest in his life as he is relevant again. Most visitors won't stick around for an extended period of time just hoping for a tour guide to show up! Also add some interpretation and memorabilia for Dan Rather in the main museum when tours aren't available. *Ensure that you archive original paper items and photographs; display only copies and properly display textiles. For more information on collections care and exhibit development, go to the THC's Museum

Services at <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/museum-services>. Consult THC Museum Services staff for additional tips on museum projects and funding sources. *When the museum reopens, ensure that you prominently display visitor information for other Wharton and regional attractions at the entrance of the museum. *Create an interpretive video of the site. *Add additional interpretation of the exhibits, artifacts and memorabilia for those who prefer a self-guided tour and to explain how Dan Rather's childhood home was brought to the site. *Expand the selection of gift items for purchase that relate to the museum's mission to include additional keepsakes for adults and items for children. *Continue developing dynamic programming for children. You have built-in audiences of children and their parents and the opportunity to start building the next generation of preservationists who understand and value their community. *Ensure that whatever products are developed from these various experiences are featured prominently in all promotional materials, on the website and in advertising campaigns. *Offer additional appropriate on and off-site educational opportunities to audiences of all ages. *Consider adding an event that will directly appeal to Wharton County Junior College students to reach a new potential audience.

3. Southern Pacific Railroad Depot & Wharton Depot Park

OPPORTUNITIES: *The Wharton depot is significant for the economic and social contributions it made to Wharton County. The depot was the nucleus of great activity in the west end, an extension of downtown. The Wharton depot represents the transition from the earlier second-generation wooden depot that preceded it, to a more substantial fireproof masonry structure. The Southern Pacific depot is significant for its location on Sunset Street, the original highway to Houston. It is also significant because of its close proximity to other important historic structures on the National Register of Historic Places, including the 1903 Southern Pacific – T & NO Railroad Bridge, West Milam Street Mercantile Historic District, and the Wharton County Courthouse Historic Commercial District. The last regularly scheduled freight train ran from Rosenberg to Victoria in 1985, and after that, the line fell into disrepair. *In order to restore community pride in this historic treasure, the City of Wharton received federal grant money to transform the depot into a museum and commuter hub, and to restore the park to its original design. The restoration was completed in 2000.

*While the beautifully renovated depot is open for tours by appointment, is used as meeting space for local community groups, hosts a Christmas train for children, and uses the depot grounds for family gatherings, it is still woefully underutilized primarily because the prime responsibility for running the depot falls to a small number of dedicated and devoted volunteers. The only way that this historic treasure can live up to its potential is if city staff absorbs some responsibility in managing it. This can be done in several ways, but the most obvious one would be to utilize the depot as Wharton's official Visitor Center (see below). That way, tourism staff could also work on products and services for the depot as outlined in the next paragraph and in the report overall.

*Ensure that you prominently display visitor information for other Wharton and regional attractions at the entrance of the depot. *Create a rack card and/or brochure for the depot. *Add additional interpretation of the exhibits, artifacts and memorabilia for those who prefer a self-guided tour. *Friendly, knowledgeable volunteer. *Volunteers offer guided tours by appointment. *A few "gift shop" items that relate to the depot's mission would enable visitors to contribute financially to the depot. *Develop dynamic programming for children. You have built-in audiences of children and their parents and the opportunity to start building the next generation of preservationists who understand and value their community. *Ensure that the depot is a stop on any bus tours that are ultimately arranged, and is featured in all promotional materials, on the website and in advertising campaigns but let people know that it is currently only open by appointment. *Continue utilizing the railroad and grounds for special

events and tours (for a fee!), when it makes sense to do so. *Continue expanding special events at the depot as volunteers and demand allow. *Reach out to railroading fans and history buffs of all ages in your marketing efforts. *Installation of additional directional signage to the depot would ensure visitors are able to find the site more easily.

*Strongly consider utilizing the Wharton Depot to serve as Wharton's Visitor Center. Check out Visit Palestine as an example (<https://www.visitpalestine.com/>). The city of Palestine utilizes their restored depot as its Visitor Center and also offices the Tourism Director. This arrangement ensures that the depot is open to visitors as well.

4. Morris Ranch and Carriage House Museum

OPPORTUNITIES: *Open by appointment only, the Carriage House Museum is home to a large collection of beautifully restored carriages, including an official Wells Fargo stagecoach and the carriage that carried Vivian Leigh in the film *Gone with the Wind*. *Ensure that you prominently display visitor information for other Wharton and regional attractions at the entrance of the museum. *Create a rack card and/or brochure for the museum. *Good interpretation of the exhibits, artifacts and memorabilia for those who prefer a self-guided tour. *Friendly, knowledgeable volunteer. *Volunteer offers guided tours by appointment. *Ensure that the Carriage House Museum is a stop on any bus tours that are ultimately arranged, and is featured in all promotional materials, on the website and in advertising campaigns but let people know that it is currently only open by appointment.

5. Tee Pee Motel

OPPORTUNITIES: *Built in 1942 in the era of grand road trips and family adventure to serve travelers heading across Texas on State Highway 60, this iconic motel featuring teepee shaped rooms operated for 40 years until the new interstate highway system was developed and the motel was abandoned. *The property was purchased in 2004 and the motel was reopened in 2006 but it is currently closed, although an RV park developed on the adjacent property by the new owners is open. *Even though the motel itself is not open for travelers, the iconic neon sign and teepee structures remain. Do not make the mistake of overlooking the appeal of kitsch, as the property is still a photographer's dream! As one of the most photographed historic assets in Wharton, it is featured on www.roadsideamerica.com, an online guide to offbeat tourism attractions, as well as in other publications and websites devoted to early highway travel and unique highway attractions. *Capitalize on visitors' continuing interest in this attraction by ensuring that any developed wayfinding signage includes this property and sends travelers to other attractions. That way you are more likely to get them to visit other Wharton sites that they may not have known about otherwise. *Erect a visitor kiosk on the property and display visitor information for Wharton and regional attractions in it. *Continue to feature the Tee Pee Motel in visitor guides and other Wharton area promotional information as a photography stop, but make sure that you let visitors know that the hotel is no longer open. *Include the property as a stop in any bus tours that are ultimately arranged for Wharton area attractions, both for general visitors and affinity groups such as photographers. Work with the property owner to ensure that at least one of the rooms in the Tee Pee Motel is unlocked and available for visitors to see and photograph when on these tours.

6. Pierce Ranch House Event Venue and Lodging

OPPORTUNITIES: *Founded in the early 1800's and still in operation under the management and ownership of the descendants of A. H. Pierce, the 1886 Pierce Ranch House is the headquarters residence of a 32,000 acre working agribusiness operation and is marked by a State Medallion. In 1932 the state of Texas erected a monument in the front yard to honor "Shanghai" Pierce for his contribution to early Texas history. The business is diversified, but all departments depend on the ranch's natural

resources. Ranch operations includes raising F-1 Braford cattle, and farming for rice, corn, grain sorghum, cotton and soybeans, and cultivates live oak trees and prairie seed. The ranch is also a hunting outfitter base for waterfowl, deer, hogs and upland birds. Small scale wind generation is currently being explored on the ranch. The newest venture on the ranch is hospitality. *The ranch now offers premium accommodations at the Pierce Ranch House and rustic accommodations at the Manager's House and KPO Lodge, as well as catering options for hunting parties, weddings, corporate events, family gatherings/reunions, and other special events. *Continue expanding ways that visitors can access and utilize the ranch facilities and grounds as appropriate. *Ensure that the Pierce Ranch is included in any bus tours that are organized and in all promotional materials regarding Wharton. *Consider adding a ghost tour to your menu of services. Certain visitors would love to hear the ghost story (and would be willing to pay for it) that the assessment team heard while at the Pierce Ranch and it could be an additional source of income for the ranch. They could be prearranged on certain dates/times initially to gauge interest.

7. Riverfront Park, Santa Fe Trail and/or the undeveloped levee walking trail and other park areas

OPPORTUNITIES: *Consider developing hike and bike trails to serve multiple purposes in Riverfront Park, on the Santa Fe Trail and/or on the undeveloped levee walking trail and other Wharton park areas. Some parks may be better suited for this purpose than others. *Utilize low-tech interpretive choices like signage and maps, giving hikers and bikers rest areas that serve as health and history stops. Aransas County is doing this on their hike and bike trail from Rockport to Fulton. Collectively known as Aransas Pathways, more information can be found here: <http://aransaspathways.com/category/hike-bike/> . (Figure 2) And in Maryland, the Montgomery County Department of Public Works and Transportation has designed its new bikeway using a similar format. You can explore more here: <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/dot-dte/Resources/Files/2014-06-25-20BTT-20Wayside-20Boards.pdf> . (Figure 3) *Ensure that whatever interpretive signage type that is utilized is durable and made of weather-proof materials. While they may be more expensive to purchase initially, this expense will be offset by decreased maintenance and replacement costs, as well as increased visitor and resident satisfaction.

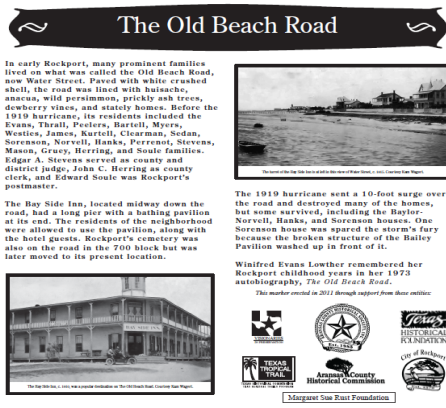


Figure 2. Interpretive signage along the Aransas County hike and bike trail from Rockport to Fulton.



Figure 3. The Bethesda Trolley Trail displays interpretive signage at historical stops for hikers and bikers.

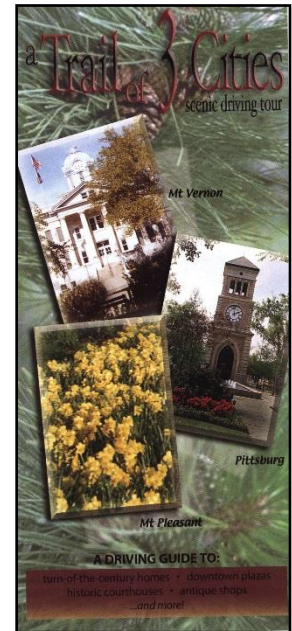
8. Accommodations

OPPORTUNITIES: *There are currently three hotels, two motels, several RV Parks with a new upper-end hotel on the horizon in Wharton. *Development of boutique hotels and Bed & Breakfast offerings are desperately needed and will encourage more heritage tourists, high value visitors, to spend the night in Wharton as these tourists are looking for unique accommodation experiences. *As circumstances arise, the redevelopment of historic offerings for lodging purposes on the Courthouse Square would further appeal to heritage tourists and others, as well as encourage them to spend more time and money downtown. This type of project may be eligible for the Texas Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program. More information on this tax credit, as well as eligibility criteria, can be found here: <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/preservation-tax-incentives/texas-historic-preservation-tax-credit> . *Recruitment of a high-end chain hotel, when possible, will also attract heritage tourists and others looking for a more upscale experience.

*Additional **signage** is needed throughout Wharton and on-site to inform travelers of the existence of your assets and to direct visitors to sites. *Ensure that up-to-date and current visitor information is

displayed prominently at the Chamber of Commerce, including in the information kiosk. Also display local brochures of the sites, restaurants and shops to potential visitors at other sites where visitors stop, including your antique stores and specialty shops throughout the community is also important. Wharton is missing a huge opportunity if it doesn't provide tourism information at these venues.

*Develop a **regional heritage tourism itinerary** with other Wharton County communities that are within an hour or so drive to Wharton (such as Danevang and Egypt) that have some heritage and cultural assets, but no or little lodging. This regional approach could be a win-win for all communities involved by enticing tourists to visit every community in the itinerary (some which travelers might not visit otherwise), spend money, and return to Wharton to spend the night. This regional approach is actually the basis of the **Texas Heritage Trails Program (THTP)**. A good example of a regional heritage tourism itinerary was a Partnership Grant that the THTP funded in 2002. (Unfortunately, due to a greatly reduced agency budget, these grants are no longer offered.) The project was titled "A Trail of Three Cities" Heritage Driving Tour and was a tri-city heritage tourism brochure for the Main Street Communities of Mount Vernon, Mount Pleasant and Pittsburg in East Texas. The mission of the project was to target the heritage tourist, foster cooperation between the three cities, and retain the tourist in the region for a longer period of time, thereby increasing tourism traffic and revenue. At the time of submission, only one of these communities had lodging - Pittsburg. The brochure featured points of interest in and between the three cities and provided a mapped driving tour designating historic sites along the "trail" between the three cities. When completed, it was a 9" x 3" full color, glossy tri-fold publication. The brochure was very popular and has been updated and reprinted through the years although it is currently not available. The THC does have a single copy of the brochure should you be interested in seeing it, and/or using it as a model for a Wharton/Wharton County regional heritage tourism itinerary. *Empower everyone involved in tourism to be ambassadors for Wharton through mini FAM tours of area attractions and hospitality training. (SEE Downtown Wharton Area).



9. **Wharton area attractions including Wharton County Courthouse Historic Commercial District (Wharton County Courthouse, Plaza Theatre & downtown murals), Wharton Mercantile Historic District (Wharton Depot), Wharton Historic Linn Street District (Horton Foote House and other historic homes), Wharton County Museum (including Dan Rather's childhood home) and 20th Century Technology Museum, Riverside Park (and life-size Dinosaur), Historic 1930 Highway 59 bridge, Tee Pee Motel, Wharton City Cemetery, Morris Ranch and Carriage House Museum, Pierce Ranch, Brahman Cattle, and Bagley Pecan House (seasonally)**

OPPORTUNITIES: *Although most of these historic, cultural and natural assets are not destinations unto themselves, the resources in totality are extremely enticing for a heritage tourist. Expanding the authentic and unique heritage offerings at each of these sites and then packaging them together could equal an experience that visitors would thoroughly enjoy! *To attract additional heritage tourists, consider ways of interpreting the natural heritage and history, such as through the use of interpretive panels and rack cards, as time and resources permit. *Ensure that the sites are featured prominently in all promotional materials, on the website and in advertising campaigns, but let visitors know which sites are available by appointment only. *Cross promote the heritage aspect of these experiences with the natural heritage and the variety of activities each of them offers to present a more complete picture of what is available to visitors. *Strategically placed **interpretive panels** provide another opportunity to

convey the stories of places where history occurred, but no physical evidence remains. *Create **thematic and time specific itineraries** based on your assets to help visitors more easily plan a trip to Wharton. Consumers are stretched thin these days and the more ideas you can give them up-front, the higher the likelihood they will visit your community. Expand on the single day trip itinerary included in the 2020 Visitors & Newcomers Guide to appeal to varied audiences.

*Consider packaging some or all of these experiences for visitors as half day, day long, or two-day experiences through the **American Bus Association** (<http://www.buses.org/>). The motor coach, travel and tour industry creates jobs, provides access for rural communities, and contributes to environmental sustainability. Provide step-on guides to tell the historic significance and other stories of these resources.

*Since the majority of your heritage tourism sites are open by appointment only or in some cases are not open the public at all, I would suggest that you try the bus tours monthly to start with and see how those go. You may wish to “stage” the first tour with local townspeople, dignitaries, and other interested parties (make sure you represent the target market/s you wish to attract) and use this to market future tours. Ensure that you take plenty of photographs, videos and other media to use in your marketing efforts. You might even wish to invite local and area press along for the ride (and publicity). Once these take off, consider adding more tours and/or specific type/s of tours.

10. Investing in Tourism

OPPORTUNITIES: *Tourism is an industry, and like traditional “smoke stack” industries requires investment if you expect it to be successful. Part of that commitment involves product development as outlined above in this report. The other part involves assigning dedicated staff to produce that product, market your community, and then welcome those visitors to Wharton with open arms and assisting them once they are here. This is a huge job!

*While some smaller communities can combine this function with the Chamber of Commerce, it can be difficult to do since chambers are membership based and tourism are not. And while it is perfectly reasonable for Chamber of Commerce offices to be open from 8am – 5pm on Monday – Friday, Visitor Centers need to be more flexible to respond to visitors’ needs. Since visitors normally travel on weekends, it is preferable that Visitor Centers are also open at those times to provide travelers with information, suggestions, as well as restrooms!

* The information kiosk in the Chamber of Commerce parking lot is a good idea, but unless it is frequently and **only** stocked with current and up-to-date visitor information, it serves no useful purpose. In fact, by disseminating old brochures and fliers, it does just the opposite! It tells visitors that you don’t even think enough of them to provide them with good information! For all visitors, but especially for those just passing through, this is a huge turn-off and in all likelihood those potential visitors won’t spend time in Wharton that day or ever!

* If you are truly interested in elevating tourism in Wharton, you should hire a separate tourism director to handle those functions and let the Chamber of Commerce continue handling membership-based chamber functions. Of course, they would still work together hand-in-hand on certain projects, but this arrangement lets each focus on their core constituents. It also assures their constituents that they are the priority. You must think of this as an investment the same way you would for a traditional industry. The Wharton Depot could be utilized as the Visitor Center, as it is currently a city property that is woefully underutilized and has sufficient parking. Visit Palestine can be used as an example on how to

do this as their Visitor Center and offices are in their restored train depot. The prime location also serves to bring attention and recognition to this important historic asset. See <https://www.visitpalestine.com/>.

Regional and Statewide Heritage Tourism Resources

The Texas Historical Commission (THC) plans and implements heritage tourism activities across the state through the **Texas Heritage Trails Program (THTP)**. This initiative fosters preservation and economic development by encouraging communities, especially rural ones, to work together to promote Texas' historic and cultural resources. (Figure 4)

The THTP facilitates local assistance and promotion through 10 heritage regions that stretch across the state. Regional organizations partner with the THC to facilitate individual site development and involvement of regional communities as well as promotion of the entire region as a heritage tourism destination.

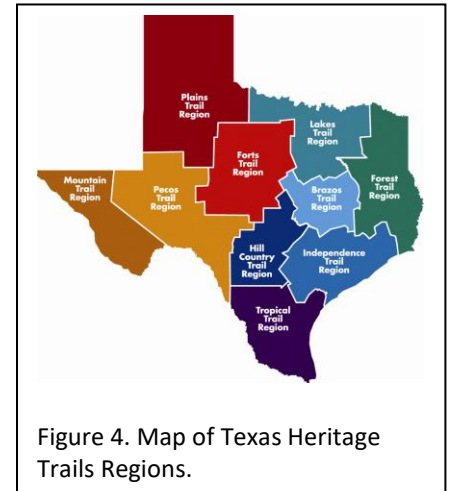


Figure 4. Map of Texas Heritage Trails Regions.

Wharton is part of the **Texas Independence Trail Region**. Board meetings for the Independence Trail Region organization are paired with opportunities to learn about topics related to heritage tourism development through workshops and educational seminars, as well as visiting other towns in the region. The Wharton Chamber of Commerce has partnered with the Independence Trail Region off and on throughout the years (specifically on co-op ads) but has never been a Texan Benefits member. I encourage Wharton Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture President, Ron Sanders, and other interested parties in Wharton to attend Independence Trail Region board meetings and other events arranged by the region and serve on its board of directors. This will allow the community to become more involved by working on specific Independence Trail Region projects that may be of particular interest to the city and county. One upcoming opportunity is the Texas Independence Texian Rally workshop scheduled to take place November 4 – 5, 2020 in La Grange.

Wharton should ensure that heritage and cultural events are listed on the Texas Independence Trail Region website calendar of events which can be accessed at <http://texasindependencetrail.com/events> for additional exposure to potential visitors. This is a free service and Wharton currently does not take advantage of this opportunity as there are no Wharton event listings on the statewide calendar.

Contact Seneca McAdams to learn more about the current initiatives of the Texas Independence Trail Region, to collaborate on additional ways Wharton can participate, and determine how the Independence Trail Region can continue to serve and promote your visitor programs.

Texas Independence Trail Region

Seneca McAdams, Executive Director
2305 S. Day Street #208, Brenham, TX 77833
Office/Cell: 979.353.1800
info@texasindependencetrail.com
www.texasindependencetrail.com

THC heritage tourism staff is available to answer questions regarding the Texas Heritage Trails Program or to consult about heritage tourism. Tourism and marketing specialists can assist communities and sites with heritage tourism needs.

Texas Heritage Tourism Program

Community Heritage Development Division
Texas Historical Commission
P.O. Box 12276, Austin, TX 78711-2276
Phone: 512.463.6092; Fax: 512.463.5862
Email: community-heritage@thc.texas.gov
Website: www.thc.texas.gov

The Heritage Tourism Guidebook

Learn more about the benefits of partnerships and heritage tourism for the community by reading and distributing a resource offered by the Texas Historical Commission (THC), the *Heritage Tourism Guidebook*. This guide will walk the reader through the National Trust for Historic Preservation's four-steps of tourism development:

1. Assess the potential
2. Plan and organize
3. Prepare, protect and manage
4. Market for success

Following each of these steps will ensure careful planning based on community needs. The Guidebook is available as a PDF download from the THC web site at <http://www.thc.texas.gov> .

Thank you for hosting us. It was a pleasure to visit Wharton

You have much to be proud of, and we witnessed many people who care and want to be involved. Take advantage of this interest and be deliberate about including these stakeholders in moving Wharton forward. There are some wonderful ideas that need to be heard. It should be all hands on deck.

Progress will hinge on everyone working together on the behalf of Wharton. I'm aware small communities can have personality conflicts, but I trust that everyone can separate the personal from business to help Wharton shine.

WHARTON'S IDENTITY

First and foremost, know Wharton's identity. What sets it apart from other destinations? What will visitors come to know it to represent? Austin conjures notions of music. Vegas is known for gambling. What is Wharton's niche? Examine it collectively, as a community, and use that consistently in marketing/branding. This is crucial. This identity is your marketing hook.

Until you know what your community represents, you will be challenged in trying to make a pitch to visitors.

But to be clear, community leaders should focus on creating events, public spaces and soliciting businesses that will enhance the lives of its residents. Done well, visitors will also want to be a part of that Wharton.

STRENGTHS

Horton Foote. This can be the biggest asset that Wharton can claim for itself. Since the home is not (currently) available to the public, get traction through events, such as:

- Annual Horton Foote fest with screenings; docents, leaders and guests dressed as Foote characters or in the character's time period; character look-alike contests; special Horton Foote tour offerings, etc.
- Bank on Wharton being "Bountiful" – It seems like a missed opportunity to not make the connection in marketing. Consider hosting something like Bountiful Market Days – maybe one major event that stands apart from other market days. Give locals prime location, but invite others from county and across the state that want to participate. Make it a destination event. Promote a "trip to Bountiful Market Days." Perhaps incorporate a Bountiful Brunch (extra charge for sit-down meal in the middle of the main street (closed off to traffic, of course). Just ensure that visitors get an experience that lives up to "bountiful." Why not aim to grow a market that is as notable as Canton or Round Top?
- Horton Foote Murals – Many communities feel that murals are the way to go, and they certainly can be if they are created with purpose, and reflect the community. If you are considering murals, consider having a community identifying theme – example, each have a quote by Horton Foote (a few listed at end).

DOWNTOWN SQUARE

It is an attractive square with so much more potential. The Plaza Theater appears to be a great community partner. It is a definite asset and seems like it would/should play a central role in major events.

The Wharton Downtown Business Association, along with the Chamber or Economic Development office should work to bring in businesses that will help make the Square a destination for visitors and residents – restaurants, shops, specialties. Be diligent about diversity of products, restaurants, etc. A walkable square where people can spend a full day is priceless.

We ate at Provisions Bistro. That is a wonderful establishment and, quite frankly, a bit of a great surprise. Support/continue to support businesses that are bringing their A-game. They are making an investment in your city. See that they are getting what they need. TripAdvisor has more curated information about Wharton restaurants than is available on Wharton sites, but you should be the Wharton's experts. More information should be easily found on an official Wharton site.

While the Milam Street Cafe is not a unique concept, it is a progressive concept that is unexpected in some small towns. It has great potential to draw in a young crowd, which helps wake up a sleepy downtown. Presumably, the owners are reaching out and marketing to the college population. But I also love that the 100+-year-old gentleman is a regular. Visitors seek out places that exude the local feel. Milam Street Café does.

INSTAGRAM HOT SPOTS

You have two spots that are Instagram gold - the Dinosaur and the TeePee Motel. Add some signage to both (with motel owner's permission) that encourages people to share on social media by giving them a designated hashtag or two, i.e. #WhartonTeePeeMotel #WhartonDino...). That will help spread the word, and curate some image content for use on social media and web pages (photo gallery?)

The city should have one hashtag, too. So, when you Google search the specific hashtag, you'll be able to see a gallery of images. Examples: e#WhartonTx #VisitWharton #HortonsWharton

The Plaza Theatre does a great job of this with its photo "frame" at the entrance. It has 3 hashtags - #whartonplazatheatre #wharton and #seeyouattheplaza

OPPORTUNITY

Get creative by what you promote. I understand cyclists have enjoyed the area for its terrain. Work with cyclists to get a route or two, and promote Wharton as a destination for cyclists. Stories on your website and blogs are a great way to do this. Likewise, I also hear Wharton's geographical position makes it perfect for hang gliding. That's cool information and promotes something that is somewhat unique to Wharton. Birdwatching, too. Find your target market and brag about those assets.

WEAKNESSES

Few attractions

Because Wharton does not have an abundance of attractions that are open to the public with regular hours, events will have to be created/reassessed to make sure it is highly reflective of the community's identity. Not a bunch of small events, but put effort into a signature event or two (Horton Foote). Make these destination events that out-of-towners will come to enjoy.

Establish regular tours

Wharton has many attractions that are not open to the public or “by appointment only.” Work with the attraction owners to establish a set time where they are all open, such as 11 a.m.-2 p.m. First Saturday of the Month” or more regularly if possible. Then promote that window of opportunity. That’d give visitors more to see and with regular hours, they can be listed in the Texas State Travel Guide.

The Chamber could also sponsor a regularly scheduled tour of these attractions. If so, this could be included in the events calendar. Create a tour that spotlights Wharton for the visitor.

Tourism center challenges

In the absence of a Visitors Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce must beef up its tourism game. Ideally, there would be a separate department for that, but having at least one person in charge of that would help. Chamber should at least be clear that Chamber and Tourism duties are not always the same. One promotes all members, the other curates the information and presents only businesses that are relevant to travelers.

The Chamber, as the visitor portal, should have a schedule conducive to being useful for travelers – at peak travel times, which is typically Friday and Saturday. Currently, if you need local information from the Chamber, you have to do it between 9-5 on a weekday. Staffing is always a consideration, so if that’s the case, pick the slowest day of the week and close or close early. Then add Saturday to the schedule.

Exterior brochure display needs updating/refreshing. Make it as inviting as you can. The care given to that case becomes representative of the community. Give it your best. It should be as fully stocked as possible.

Also, some of the brochures in the lobby were long outdated. Establish a system for keeping those fresh. Reach out to stock up on official Texas State Travel Guides, maps and events calendars. (See attachment).

Again, the care that you demonstrate reflects on the community. When you care, they care.

When trying to attract visitors, be careful to not promote run-of-the-mill municipal offerings (pools, parks) unless they have something unique about them. If they have it at home, they won’t travel to get it in your community.

What’s the deal with the TeePee Motel? –We drove passed this and we asked to stop because it was something I knew about ahead of time and was interested in seeing. Many others are curious, too. Perhaps you understand something about the condition, but if you can find a way to work with the owners to establish a spot for the curious to look and take photos, that responds to traveler desires.

WEB and SOCIAL MEDIA

Because these are two crucial ways to reach potential visitors, I'd like to go through some details about what's currently on your website(s) to point out a few things. I'll follow with some Social Media suggestions.

If you want people to visit/discover Wharton, you have to have a solid web presence. That is a visitor website that is clean, concise, vibrant and easy to navigate. It spotlights your community's assets and, done right, makes those looking at it want to participate or see for themselves. You cannot afford to not have that online presence.

Your community and the local businesses should also have a social media presence, starting with Facebook, then Instagram. This is how people research their destinations. Lack of an online presence is not quaint. It leaves the first impression that you are not in business. And remember, 3 seconds is about all most will give you, so second impressions are rare.

Anyone interested in visiting Wharton will go to your website – most likely it will be their first stop. Does the current site invite them in or turn them off? <http://www.cityofwharton.com/>

Your website is like your front door. When they knock, do you invite them in and give them a taste of what makes Wharton special? Maybe make a few suggestions for things to not miss? Or do you give them a phone book and let them sort it out themselves?

Your current visitor website – buried within the city's municipal site – is not a welcome wagon. You leave the potential visitor to fend for themselves, and guess what? They are expecting you to be the experts and to give them a snapshot of what to expect. Web browsing habits dictate that you have 3 seconds to get their attention. If you fail, they move on. There is plenty of competition for your business/attention.

Create a Visitor Web Page: Your best bet is to **create a separate website strictly for the visitor experience**. That means no rudimentary community offerings. Ask yourself if what you present can be found in the visitors' own hometowns. If so, skip it. Showcase Wharton. The digital **Visitors Guide** is great and that content could help populate a strictly visitor portal.

That said, let me speak to what you have now.

Navigating the site: Using the dropdown menu from **I Want to...**

When I click on **Stay and Play**, it automatically takes me to the Hotel tab. That should not be a link if there's not a home page for those three subcategories.

Things to do: Clicking on the different headers should open a new page. This is especially beneficial for the Antiques and historic homes where you could use more space, images to help attract attention to it.

Content must be clean, clear, concise: The content is not as concisely written as it could be. A skilled writer/editor needs to step in and clean up the copy to make sure it's easy and clean for the visitor to read.

Remove: Horton Foote, Cattle Country, Friendly People are not Things to Do.

Have call-to-action: The Outdoors – Using this as an example, but it goes for others in this section and elsewhere on the site. You've said Wharton offers birdwatching and hunting, but now what? Where is

the call to action for visitors? Where do they go to get more information about what outdoor activities they can expect in Wharton? How about cycling? Or hang gliding? They are looking on your site for information. All they get is a general tease. They should not have to go elsewhere to find the information.

More itineraries: A Trip to Wharton is a great itinerary idea. Try to create multiple itineraries to reach different demographics. It's OK if some locations find their way on multiple itineraries. How about an itinerary for cyclists? Birdwatchers? Families? Couples? Shoppers?

Suggested itineraries could be its own tab along with Stay, Things to do...

This is the sort of expertise a potential visitor will hope to find.

Give info they want: With Historic Home Tour, you list locations, but no information. Kick this section off by explaining what this is Ex: *Enjoy a self-driving tour featuring some of Wharton's best historic homes.*

Make this as concise as possible. Remove directions ("around the corner," "turn left") and keep it simple and uniform. A map graphic (even if it's not interactive) will allow the visitor to choose where they want to start and travel.

Suggested Home Tour format: To make it easier for visitors to see quickly, I suggest this format (or something similar)

Address: Relevant description. Perhaps include a "more" button for visitors that want extra information such as architectural style, photos etc.

Descriptions are a bit convoluted. Hire a professional to write, proof, edit everything on your website.

Ex.

415 W. Burlison: Currently Larry's Mexican Food Restaurant, the building was originally constructed at the turn of the century by Horton Foote's aunt and uncle (names?). It served as their residence until they outgrew it and built the larger dwelling behind it. The original home has been used for various businesses over the years.

The larger home is currently undergoing restoration, and will soon serve as home to two-time Emmy Award winner and Wharton native Van Broughton Ramsey. Ramsey is most noted as costume designer for the Sarah, Plain and Tall series and Lonesome Dove.

128 S. Houston Street: Home to the Community Theater of Wharton. (Where's information on its history?). I

PLACEMENT: Prioritize bigger draws: If you want to be known for the availability of antiques, why bury Texas Gulf Coast Antique & Junkin Trail on the page? Anticipate what visitors want or what most represents Wharton's identity and present that first. I'm thinking of the intro to Gilligan's Island. They start with the Captain and end with "and the rest." Don't start with "and the rest."

DINING: Here is a strong reason why you need a separate visitor portal. A visitor asks you what you recommend for dinner. Do you direct them to this Dining Page? Or do you send them to a curated list of

local establishments on a Visitor web page? You likely have some obligation to include the chamber members on this chamber site. But a visitor site demands a more curated list because, again, the potential visitor wants your expertise. A list containing McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Sonic ... immediately becomes a useless list, and the potential visitor has to dig deeper to find the answer they want. They have all those establishments at home.

Also important for food, attractions, etc. If it is of interest to visitors, include it. Do not let Chamber membership get confused with everyone's role to promote tourism in the community. Let the Chamber site include McDonald's. Let a visitor portal include a popular establishment, even if they aren't a Chamber member. Visitors don't care who is/isn't a chamber member. Some communities shoot themselves in the foot by missing this mark.

LODGING: There are only three listed on the Chamber Portal, but a few more are listed on the City of Wharton page. Perhaps you are showing expertise and not mentioning lodging that would reflect poorly on the community. Continue to curate that for potential visitors. Because additional lodging would be great, do what you can to help encourage other hotel/motels to meet a higher standard.

EVENTS: Again, visitors need their own page so they don't have to weed through fish fry, pancake suppers to find events that are of interest to visitors.

SOCIAL MEDIA

1. Social Media Strategy

First, establish a social media strategy. It's crucial to have a well-thought out strategy that ties into your objectives and target markets.

Like charting a course for a destination, you need a roadmap and the tools to get you there. You need a strategy to guide you and help you know when you're headed in the right direction.

If a strategy is not in place, you're not alone. Create one.

To develop the strategy, you must ask/answer a few questions.

What is your objective? What do you want to achieve through social media? How can you do that in the most efficient and inexpensive way? Who are you trying to reach?

Presumably, your objective is to build an online community that you can connect with and reach out to on a regular basis through social media to increase your database, promote your community, build your brand, share a promotion and, on occasion, make a sales pitch.

Being clear of your message/focus will help you stay on point and relevant. Your postings should reflect that message. People will come to have expectations, and you'll lose them if those expectations are not met.

Be the expert and go-to resource for Wharton. Own it!

On Thursday, March 25, Wharton Chamber posted:

“Updated at 9 am Thursday, March 26.

The following is a list of Wharton dining establishments and their phone numbers. This way, you can call and find out if they are open and taking orders. Please let us know if corrections or additions are needed. Contact Ron Sanders directly at ron.sanders@whartonchamber.com or 979-358-0758. We will update each morning as needed.”

How much nicer it would have been if you have posted: *These Wharton restaurants remain open and taking orders. Support local. We'll continue to update the list. Feel free to let us know of any changes.*

Be the expert. Don't just throw information at people and expect them to do the work.

2. Brand Messaging

Figure out how you want to be perceived and then post, respond and share accordingly.

Depending on resources, there may be one or many people posting on your organization's behalf. That social media staff is on the front lines of branding. Establish a tone that is reflective of your business. **All postings should be in one, unified voice that embodies that brand.** No one should see “the man behind the curtain,” nor do you don't want your organization to sound schizophrenic.

3. Social Media Calendar

A great time-management tool to implement is a social media calendar. Planned postings ensure consistent coverage, give you the opportunity to look at your postings more thoughtfully and strategically, and give you an overall picture to ensure you're staying on point with your objective.

Other posting possibilities will arise, and there is always room for those last-minute postings that come with being as timely and relevant as often as possible, but a base calendar is the foundation.

At minimum, post daily. Each day, you have an opportunity to sell people on Wharton. Use that opportunity. As with Chamber vs Tourism, have a separate social media account for tourism. Promote only things of interest to tourists (no official city business)

3. Monitor and Tweak

Every post and action should be evaluated on its own merits. Take note of whether a posting or website content is receiving great or little response. Analyze, tweak and/or eliminate the failures. Reproduce the formulas that are successful. Those patterns speak for the audience, and you should listen to what the audience wants.

Always write in a way that connects with YOUR audience. When your audience can begin to count on you to give them what they want, and feel like you are truly addressing them and not just sending automated jargon, they will keep coming back. In turn, you win their loyalty.

4. On Target

Invest in target advertising offered in social networking services like Facebook. It targets the audience you want to reach and can be successful and putting your brand in front of many new faces. Be strategic about what you promote, such as bigger picture items with greater appeal. Also, pay attention to audience response. If a posting proves particularly popular with your followers, it could have the power to draw in a new batch of loyal followers. Take the readers' cue and boost it.

5. Be genuine. Be Social.

Don't just DO social. Be social. Take the time to build relationships with your followers. Be friendly, accessible, informative, impactful, focused and responsive. When someone shares a thoughtful comment, return the favor. People like feeling like they have been heard.

6. Get Visual

Include a visual element with **every** posting. The more compelling, the better. As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Consider its share-ability factor. You want readers to like a posting, but you want them to share it, too. That gets your brand out there. Each share multiplies your reach exponentially.

7. Respond and participate in the conversation.

View the exchange as customer service and give followers the best customer service experience possible. Those positive experiences translate into compelling word-of-mouth. Again, that's more ambassadors for your brand.

As your following grows, you'll find your audience becomes a community where they start sharing with each other. This best-case scenario is your goal, and it makes your job easier.

8. Handle Negatives in a Positive Manner

Of course, this also entails dealing with more negative comments. Like any group of people, there will be those who are unhappy or combative about almost anything. It becomes your task to keep the conversation focused and free of drama. A skilled communicator can turn the situation around in a respectful way that does not instigate more negativity. The lesson learned early in life is crucial here: "If you can't say anything nice ..."
One mishandled social media response has the power to dismantle all the good work you've done in one viral chain of postings. That's why it's important that you trust the ones handling social media.

POSTING IDEAS

- Polls or questions: What's your favorite thing to do in -----?
- Post a branded image. Create a shareable graphic that includes your branding. Works great for holidays, Daylight Saving Time, etc. and can be used for any shareable quote (still related, in some way, to your objective).
- A representative Wharton image with a simple "Good morning!" or "Thank you." It's a chance to bond with readers, build on your love of Wharton and Texas, and help pull your followers together by asking them to share their photos of Wharton. Compliment it, too. They like getting positive feedback and will contribute more and more.
- Quotes: Inspiring or funny quotes that are relevant to your topic of expertise – Wharton. So many great Horton Foote quotes from which to choose. Use social media to remind people this is Horton Foote Country.
- Spotlight destination hotspots. Sell it with compelling pictures. A chance to promote those local businesses and attractions.
- Share old photos from your archives (Throwback Thursday) or "This Day In Wharton History" type of posts. Maybe something the museum can share, and give the museum credit.
- Give new life to old information, such as promoting itinerary suggestions. And updating and re-promoting them as you see fit.
- See what's trending and participate in any conversation that you can tie to your community. You can be fun/creative about it, too. Example, on Veterans Day, the top hashtag may be #VeteransDay. Create a posting about a local veteran or Veteran's Day event, adding the #veteransday hashtag to your posting. Then, your posting will show up for anyone in the world searching under that #VeteransDay hashtag. Or maybe the popular hashtag that day is simply #takemeaway. You could do a post about a special place to relax in town. Then include the trending hashtag. Again, people searching the top hashtag will be directed to your posting. That means more eyes from unexpected places.
- Share and re-share one of your popular blog postings (those suggestions made earlier to promote local hot spots), itineraries, or any popular content you have. Blogs are pretty essential content, though. Find a schedule that can be managed and have a blog posting about something that makes the community special. Not a local newsletter, but something that both locals and visitors can appreciate about what makes your community special. Fun facts, little known secrets, history of ... etc. all make fascinating content.
- Link to your blogs that further establish you as an expert source. If anyone is going to be an expert about your community, that's you.
- After asking a question in a posting (Like "What's your favorite thing to do in Wharton?"), write a blog post and promote the collective results/answers. "Our readers say ---- is the best place to get barbecue in ..." and give those that are new to the topic a chance to chime in by asking, again, "Do you agree with the results?"

Post Details

Reported stats may be delayed from what appears on posts

TEXAS **Texas Highways Magazine: The Official Travel Magazine of Texas** ▼
 March 7 · Edited [?] · 🌐

#DaylightSavingTime begins Sunday. Don't forget to move your clock ahead one hour! #TexasHighways #SpringForward



266,368 people reached Boost Unavailable

Like · Comment · Share · 👍 2,156 🗨️ 56 ➦ 3,071

266,368 People Reached

10,561 Likes, Comments & Shares

6,347 Likes	2,156 On Post	4,191 On Shares
832 Comments	63 On Post	769 On Shares
3,382 Shares	3,071 On Post	311 On Shares

7,675 Post Clicks

2,053 Photo Views	23 Link Clicks	5,599 Other Clicks ⓘ
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NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

244 Hide Post	43 Hide All Posts
0 Report as Spam	0 Unlike Page

TEXAS **Texas Highways Magazine: The Official Travel Magazine of Texas** ▼
 July 24 · 🌐

Amen.



335,104 people reached Boost Post

Like · Comment · Share · 👍 11,763 🗨️ 302 ➦ 3,568

335,104 People Reached

35,138 Likes, Comments & Shares

29,658 Likes	11,763 On Post	17,895 On Shares
1,767 Comments	315 On Post	1,452 On Shares
3,713 Shares	3,568 On Post	145 On Shares

3,082 Post Clicks

3,082 Photo Views	0 Link Clicks	0 Other Clicks ⓘ
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NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

235 Hide Post	66 Hide All Posts
0 Report as Spam	0 Unlike Page

HORTON FOOTE QUOTES (mural suggestion)

I've redone plays of mine and made changes. A play is a living thing, and I'd never say I wouldn't rewrite years later. Tennessee Williams did that all the time, and it's distressing, because I'd like the play to be out there in its finished form.

I've lived long enough to know things go in and out of fashion, and things not well received now can be totally reversed years later.

I believe very deeply in the human spirit, and I have a sense of awe about it. I look around and ask, 'What makes the difference? What is it?' I've known people the world has thrown everything at - to discourage them, to kill them, to break their spirit. And yet something about them retains a dignity. They face life and they don't ask quarters.

I don't think I'll ever stop writing. I write almost every day. I'd write plays even if they were never done again. You're at the mercy of whatever talent you have.

I so earnestly believe that prayer can be helpful and guide you and protect you and inspire you. I mean, I'm in awe.

I have enormous respect for the human being because they're asked to take on a lot. And I don't think there's any easy solution. But I think the journey is what you have to finally be satisfied with, but not be afraid of the lessons one has to learn... it ends up as grace. And you grow; you find a way to continue.

My first memory was of stories about the past - a past that, according to the storytellers, was superior in every way to the life then being lived. It didn't take me long, however, to understand that the present was all we had, for the past was gone, and nothing could be done about it.

Early on, I said to myself that I would like to write a kind of moral and spiritual history of a place. It sounds a little pretentious, I know. But that's really what I set for myself.

A writer has an inescapable voice. I think it's inherent in the nature, and I think that we don't control it any more than we control what we want to write about.

But I don't really write to honor the past. I write to investigate, to try to figure out what happened and why it happened, knowing I'll never really know. I think all the writers that I admire have this same desire, the desire to bring order out of chaos.

You have to watch out with my plays. They're like yeast. You think they're one thing, then all of a sudden subtext gets to working.

Writing is the thing that props me up.

I came out of a strong oral tradition in the South.

TXDOT MARKETING HELP

TxDOT's Travel Information Division offers many resources to help get the word out on what's happening in Wharton. The full scope is included in the attachment, but most especially your community can be included in the Texas State Travel Guide and the Texas Events Calendar if it qualifies and isn't already in there. Requirements includes at least one bonafide attraction that has regular hours. Make sure your community is taking advantage of this.

The Division also can help you get your community brochures into the 12 Texas Travel Information Centers across the state. You may also request Texas State Travel Guides, maps and events calendars for placement in your racks.

TxDOT also sponsors programs such as Keep Texas Beautiful campaign, which offers grants toward community improvement.

WHARTON: TEXAS COMMISSION ON THE ARTS ASSESSMENT

In general, from the arts perspective:

Wharton's unique identity can be centered on writer Horton Foote and his portrayal of the small Texas town of yesteryear. This identity can be extended to include related historical assets like the county courthouse, Plaza Theatre, historically relevant architecture, the Morris Carriage House, the Wharton County Museum, the 20th Century Technology Museum, and the Pierce Ranch. One of the few positive byproducts of COVID-19 is a stronger sense of nostalgia for "making due," being present in one place, and finding pleasure in simpler pursuits. This is likely to be something Wharton can offer to future visitors as an element of Foote's writing and the sense of place it conveys. The arts (including storytelling, theater, music, literary arts, visual arts, and film) can be strategically used to augment and reinforce this theme, and/or to attract visitors to a more general performing arts series or a festival such as the Monterey Square Wine and Arts Fair.

Wharton is a fairly convenient drive from Houston. It is far enough away to feel like a trip and "getting away from it all," but it is close enough to be either a day trip or a trip that is easy to repeat and expand on with an overnight stay once the first-time visitor has identified what they'd like to do the next time they visit. *Texas Highways'* Lois Rodriguez suggested this tagline for Houston-based marketing of Wharton: "An hour away; a world away."

This assessment visit was conducted February 25-26, 2020, shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States. Briefly setting aside the pandemic and the large long term impact it is making across many industries, Wharton's general limits to tourism at the time of the assessment include:

1. Many tourism assets are only available by appointment only, which limits the sense of access/welcome for many tourists, who want to be able to make some decisions on the fly.
2. It's not clear how well Wharton's tourism assets are marketed outside of the community.
3. Wharton lacks a dedicated entity helping to align, organize, and market all possible tourism assets and coordinate related programming. Several entities do exist with some overlapping interests, including the Wharton Chamber of Commerce, the City of Wharton, Wharton Economic Development, and the Wharton Downtown Business Association.
4. There are limited town assets/marketing seen from Highway 59 to encourage a spur-of-the-moment stop in Wharton (aside from Buc-ee's).
5. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey caused considerable flood damage to some tourism assets and parts of town that are awaiting final design approvals/funding before remediation.
6. Printed tourism marketing materials were not up-to-date; some community events were considered tourism events but would have limited appeal to tourists. Some design element examples for those events used clip art that would not help the event attract visitors.

Resources for Wharton available from the Texas Commission on the Arts include:

- Arts Respond Performance Support grants for nonprofits and governmental entities (tied to the Texas Touring Roster): <https://www2.arts.state.tx.us/tcagrant/TXArtsPlan/CC6.htm>
- Grants for established arts nonprofits like Wharton Plaza Theatre: <https://www2.arts.state.tx.us/tcagrant/TXArtsPlan/ARP.htm>; <https://www2.arts.state.tx.us/tcagrant/TXArtsPlan/LAP.htm>
- Texas Touring Roster: <http://www.arts.texas.gov/artroster/roster/>. The current roster consists of over 125 artists, including Texas Comedies. Texas Comedies is an Austin-based theater group that performs Texas-specific historical plays, including a Bonnie and Clyde-related performance.

- Consultations with Texas Commission on the Arts staff members on specific topics
- Professional development webinar recordings, including tourism topics:
<https://vimeo.com/txartspd/videos>

ASSESSMENT NOTES:

Hinze's BBQ

Strengths: Very popular with locals, busy drive-through and dining room, nice casual food. Nice story on the Hinze family on the website.

Weaknesses: Not clear whether the restaurant has a reputation outside of the immediate area—website does not feature any prizes won, relevant quotes from BBQ experts, or press coverage of the food.

Opportunities: Grow the restaurant's reputation to take advantage of BBQ-focused travelers.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the restaurant and tourism industries.

Teepee Motel

Strengths: Iconic, well-known, unique; perhaps the best-known thing in Wharton for some travelers.

Weaknesses: Damaged by Hurricane Harvey flooding. Currently the teepees are closed to travelers and there are no known plans to refurbish or update them. Online presence includes an outdated Facebook page that seems to indicate teepees are still available for rent.

Opportunities: Several local residents expressed interest in "adopting" a teepee to be refurbished, but it is unclear what the current owners intend or want to do. Even refurbishing one and offering a quick look inside as part of a historical tour would offer visitors considerably more access.

Threats: The largest specific threat is the damage done to the teepees by Hurricane Harvey and the continued neglect of them. The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry.

Wharton County Museum & 20th Century Technology Museum

Strengths: This is a very large county museum filled with displays and items of interest to tourists, including Dan Rather's birthplace, archeological information relevant to the Texas Revolution, an architecturally interesting home and wild game trophy collection, and the intriguing 20th Century Technology Museum. A meeting room is also part of the facility. The meeting room would be able to host some events when the museum reopens.

Weaknesses: The museum building sustained considerable damage due to Hurricane Harvey flooding and is closed until federal and other funding is available to refurbish it (The majority of artifacts are photographs; the collections we saw are still in relatively decent shape thanks to swift mold remediation). It is not clear what programs the museum might offer once it is rehabbed. The Museum of Technology collections were intriguing but may not stay at this location.

Opportunities: The museum(s) may consider renting (or partnering for) a temporary space on the square to display some of the more popular and least fragile collection pieces. That might allow them to share some of their collections with visitors and engage community members more actively. Particularly with materials that may need to be moved during repairs to the museum's building anyway, this would be an opportunity to sustain/revive interest in the museum. It also wasn't clear whether the museum held anything relevant to Horton Foote in its collections—that may be something to pursue and display.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry and may further delay federal efforts to provide relief for flood damage. More generally, further delaying any programming or access to collections until the building is repaired can mean decreased interest/morale in the board

members, donors, and volunteers who are sustaining the museum now, and the people who potentially could do this in the future.

Wharton Plaza Theatre

Strengths: Appealing historic 200-seat theater. Some collaboration with area business owners to encourage opportunities for theater patrons to dine and shop before a show happens, but limited outcomes so far. Leadership is enthusiastic and engaged. Space next door may be used for visual art exhibitions.

Weaknesses: Generally, community theater programming alone is not a significant draw for new visitors.

Opportunities: The theater could act as one of the centers/focal points for a Horton Foote weekend in Wharton. It was unclear whether the theater has the capability to show movies, but if so, a screening of a Foote-scripted movie with a guest speaker may be a good component to attract visitors. Alternatively, a live performance of a Foote script could be appealing, or a table read by actors with some name recognition. The theater could also expand its general offerings by presenting intimate touring performances that might attract out-of-towners for a special event, or screening classic movies during targeted tourist events that don't line up with the theater's performance schedule.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry and the arts industry.

Wharton County Courthouse

Strengths: This is a gorgeously restored courthouse. The architect in charge of the restoration is a Wharton native and was able to provide much context and many stories about the courthouse's place in history and in Horton Foote's work, and about the restoration process. His stories are an asset. The County Attorney is another Wharton native who was able to share stories about the courthouse and events there. Having citizens who can help add a fuller sense to a place is a great asset. The courthouse's clock and bell are also historically significant elements of the courthouse.

Weaknesses: Tours are limited—it is not clear how to get them and who normally conducts them.

Opportunities: The courthouse could be a featured asset in a tour geared toward history buffs. There is already a handout from the Chamber of Commerce ("Legends at Monterey Square, Wharton, TX") that discusses shootouts/murders/ etc. that happened around the courthouse, so fans of the macabre, Bonnie & Clyde, and some of the wilder days of Texas history may be attracted to the courthouse for these stories as well as for the architecture of the courthouse. (It is not clear how a visitor can come across this handout.) As well, since Horton Foote featured the courthouse in one of his early plays ("Texas Town"), it could be another site used for a Horton Foote event/weekend. Courtroom scenes from *To Kill a Mockingbird* might be performed in the courtroom, for example.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry and limiting public access to buildings.

Horton Foote home

Strengths: Horton Foote is a significant figure in Texas letters. His strong ties to Wharton include a lengthy residence there, plus featuring a slightly fictionalized Wharton in several of his scripts. The home is still owned by Mr. Foote's family, and is not open for tours. However, on the windshield tour of the home, we heard stories from many Wharton residents about their interactions with Mr. Foote; those stories added dimension to our experience. It was inspiring to think of all the significant work Mr. Foote did in that house and the adjacent one, which served as his office.

Weaknesses: Younger Texans may not recognize Horton Foote's name and may need some context to understand his significance. Footeophiles (you're welcome) may be disappointed not to get to go in the

house, but personal stories and clarity in advance about what visitors can (and cannot) do would mitigate this.

Opportunities: History buffs and architecture fans would appreciate a tour of the places that Foote wrote about and frequented, particularly those places that have been maintained and have not been significantly changed since his younger years, including the historic cemetery and historic residences. This could be a guided tour offered as part of a larger event, or a driving tour that is provided as a handout/app/website that tourists can use on their own schedule (note: the Chamber of Commerce includes a self-guided driving tour of historic homes on their website, but this does not seem to be widely known).

Threats: None Identified.

Southern Pacific Railroad Depot

Strengths: Meticulously restored historic railroad depot with relevant displays. Hosts a holiday-themed train stop over an afternoon/evening on one day, but not clear that this has tourism ties. Open Saturdays 9 am – 1 pm according to the “Visit Historic Wharton” brochure.

Weaknesses: It was not clear what the average visitor’s experience would be—is there a guide or hands-on experiences regularly available? The street-side grass outside was overgrown, which made the depot look less active and less inviting.

Opportunities: This would be a good building to feature on a historically-themed tour. Another historical topic that can be included with the depot is the history of orphan trains. This would be of interest to descendants of orphan train children.

Threats: None identified.

Pierce Ranch

Strengths: The ranch claims significant ties to Texas history: J. Frank Dobie wrote about its founder, and its breed of Brahman cattle has made a significant impact on the Texas/American beef industry. The ranch currently offers several different ways for visitors to enjoy nature on the ranch, including hunting and (possibly) bird watching. The ranch also includes polo grounds, and hosts polo matches, although often at the last minute. Group overnight rentals are available in ranch homes (some historic) on the property, and some creature comforts are available, including a pool and tennis courts. Family members still live on the grounds and are good at telling stories about the ranch and the characters who have been part of it, some of them as ghosts.

Weaknesses: It’s not clear how tied the ranch is to Wharton—are visitors encouraged to visit Wharton as part of their stay, or do they go straight to the ranch and bypass Wharton? Rental rates and the activities/amenities available to the public were not immediately clear, and some tourism is limited by hunting seasons. Promotional materials about what is offered through the ranch were hard to obtain, but two separate websites helped show the full picture.

Opportunities: Ranch leadership may wish to set some shared goals about how to focus on access to the public (Hunters? Multi-day event rentals for weddings/corporate events/family reunions? Historical groups? Naturalists? Venue-run events—rather than rentals—such as one tied to Texas History Day? A mixture, depending on seasons?) and develop materials/outreach strategies around these goals.

Scheduled polo matches or practices open to the public might be of significant interest to visitors.

Wharton community members may want to consider what kind of partnership makes the most symbiotic sense with the ranch, since it is several miles outside of Wharton.

Threats: Family members expressed concern about the financial sustainability of the ranch. The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism and wedding industries.

Holiday Inn Express (and other hotels in Wharton)

Strengths: This is one of the few hotels in Wharton and as a chain hotel with a recognizable name, it offers a reliable product for travelers.

Weaknesses: Community members reported that occupancy at this hotel was “terrible”—I assume this is reflective of tourism income in general for Wharton, rather than a fault of the hotel’s. Overall, Wharton does not have many hotels to choose from, particularly for travelers who are looking for a special experience.

Opportunities: Wharton might consider opportunities to diversify its lodging inventory. A bed and breakfast in Wharton might be a great opportunity to attract travelers looking for a unique/boutique experience.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry.

Milam Street Coffee & More

Strengths: Good location, regularly serves as a venue for concerts, friendly, engaged owners/staff, supports local artists by selling books written by locals. Has a good claim to being “Wharton’s Living Room.” Also sells ice cream. Good social media feed reinforces their community engagement.

Weaknesses: None identified.

Opportunities: If they are not already staying open to serve Plaza Theatre ticket-holders, this would be a good step. Also, the venue might considering offering a gallery option for local artists or the frame shop on the square.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is limiting gatherings, which currently limits events and dine-in options at the coffee house.

Wharton Civic Center

Strengths: Includes a large open event room with a center dance floor.

Weaknesses: None identified. Our visit did not include access to a staff member who could tell us about how the civic center is currently used.

Opportunities: The auditorium can be used/rented out to present touring bands, particularly those that inspire audience members to dance. The right band, or a regular series, could bring visitors to Wharton.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is limiting gatherings and in-person events. The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry.

Provisions Bistro & Market

Strengths: Friendly, personable staff, yummy made-from-scratch locally sourced food, gorgeous décor, nice upscale special-occasion feel. The restaurant also sells locally-made and grown food and goods.

Weaknesses: The restaurant has struggled to build regular patronage and fill their dining room. Changes in lunch service have possibly been confusing to diners who don’t know lunch is currently being offered (hours of operation are correct on Google).

Opportunities: Consider following the coffee house’s example and hosting events that help bring in new diners. A classical guitarist might go well with dinner (or after dinner drinks), for example. Another option to explore is hosting artist exhibitions and scheduling a reception-style event (outside of key dining hours) to dovetail with festivals or other events that bring in tourists. This might bring the tourists back for their next meal.

Threats: At the time of the assessment, there seemed to be some feelings of burnout for the proprietor. Now, the COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the restaurant industry.

Downtown Wharton Businesses

These include several antique/junk stores, event rental venues, and Montgomery Gallery and Frame, a framing shop. Another storefront on the square was Wolf Pak Radio and recording studio (open by

appointment only). It had one of the more intriguing window displays on the square. I wasn't able to learn much about their local offerings from their website, but there is the possibility that some of their past local events have attracted visitors to Wharton. They may be a good partner to tap in advertising relevant local events to a demographic Wharton may be overlooking.

Strengths: The square's exterior architecture feels relatively preserved and the view of the courthouse is nice. There are some murals along walls just off the square. The frame shop had some framed photos for sale but the gallery component seemed fairly limited. An area antiques/junk store trail brochure has been developed to help lead visitors to these stores, and a related "pick and flip" event is planned for June.

Weaknesses: There is not a lot of variety of stores for the casual shopper/tourist. Most stores focus on antiques/junk, with one or two of those also offering some new goods like clothing. Not all stores keep the hours they have posted, in part because they are owner-operated with few other staff members to rely on. Because of this it was hard to tell whether stores are open during times that tourists would want to visit them. Several stores did not feel welcoming to visitors, were very poorly curated/organized, did not set themselves apart from neighboring stores, and/or did not seem to be cleaned regularly. One business's display window on the square still had Christmas decorations in it.

Opportunities: Partner with store owners to feature unique locally produced goods and to hold extended store hours during targeted tourism events. Include these store owners/managers in hospitality trainings. Encourage other types of visitor-friendly businesses to occupy space near the square to diversify offerings. Notably missing for this area was an outdoor outfitter store.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the retail industry.

Hesed House/Dinosaur Park

Strengths: A big, odd statue like Wharton's dinosaur is always a fun way to encourage visitors to stop, take a picture, and wander the town. This doesn't seem to be something the town is taking advantage of via highway signage right now. Hesed House is currently serving community members but is interested in hosting retreat-style events around art and yoga. This might be a nice way to regularly bring in small groups looking for a restorative weekend away. Hesed House currently has an outdoor bulletin board used to promote community events.

Weaknesses: There are limits to Hesed House's capacity—one large room is used for most group activities, and it has to be changed over through the day to address specific needs. Currently, the retreat model can't be pursued because of staffing limitations and a concern about there not being lodging within walking distance (this last concern seems surmountable). There is uncertainty about changes to the neighborhood that can come as plans for flood mitigation development are finalized. Some neighboring houses will be lost as the park is redeveloped, and eliminating a pedestrian byway currently used may cut off some access.

Opportunities: There is an opportunity to make a stronger effort to attract visitors off the highway to the dinosaur—perhaps on-site signage could explain the dinosaur's strange provenance. Hesed House envisions a future event center, perhaps at the old Queen Theatre. The Hesed House Backyard Farm tour is a great tie to agriculture and would be appealing to tourists visiting from the city. The park will be redeveloped to include some possible river access, a green corridor, and an open-air venue, which will offer new entertainment opportunities. A kayak/standup paddleboard outfitter would be an ideal partner for more access, but initial inquiries have been rebuffed. It is hoped that the redevelopment will allow visitors and existing community members to feel included in the offerings, and will preserve the history and heritage of the neighborhood.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is limiting gatherings, which currently limits events.

Wharton Chamber of Commerce

Strengths: Their parking lot includes an information kiosk that visitors can use to get tourist information when office is closed. Produces the Monterey Square Wine and Arts Fair (In seeking more information about this, I found that the URL given in the 2020 visitors' guide leads to an adult website, and the Chamber's website didn't feature information on this event, either.).

Weaknesses: The chamber is balancing its mission of serving member businesses (some of which have nothing to do with tourism) with selling the town to tourists. In general, this is a hard balance for a chamber of commerce to maintain. Tourism brochures featured prominently inside the building were for attractions outside of Wharton, which implies the message, "Welcome to Wharton! Now here's where you really should go for fun." The Chamber did not produce a stand-alone tourism brochure for 2020. Some materials inside the chamber building were out-of-date—the "Visit Historic Wharton" piece indicates the Teepee Motel and the Wharton County Museum/20th Century Technology Museum are operational. It's not clear whether the Chamber or anyone else is making tourism-related marketing buys on behalf of the Wharton community.

Opportunities: The chamber has a driving tour published on its website that could be used as a resource for tourists. The chamber (or another entity focused on tourism) could work with area businesses (not limited to chamber members) to conduct hospitality training and to coordinate and market designated weekends (perhaps starting quarterly or monthly) where appointment-only venues are open to visitors and marketed outside of Wharton.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry.

Morris Carriage House

Strengths: Charming, well-preserved carriages in a temperature-controlled building.

Weaknesses: Appointment-only limits access for visitors. It was hard for the Wharton-based tourism assessment host to schedule our visit.

Opportunities: Consider making the carriage house open to visitors one weekend day a month, in collaboration with other community resources that are open that day and attracting tourists.

Threats: The COVID-19 pandemic is immediately threatening the tourism industry.

OTHER ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

- A wayfinding project is scheduled to start in April, looking at what to point to, how to do this, and what design elements to use. Not clear what partners are involved and who will lead this.
- The City of Wharton is considering investing in a "mini-mural park" with hopes of creating graphics that will be spread via Instagram, and will apply for grant funding for this.
- Wharton's flood remediation projects must balance community needs, historical preservation & authenticity, and expanding tourism amenities. The ideal mix would result in Wharton citizens feeling pride in their town and welcoming tourists rather than feeling inconvenienced or forced out by them.
- Several studies have been conducted for Wharton, but it is not clear what action has resulted from the studies.
- No website exists to specifically promote tourism to Wharton, which is a lost opportunity.

IN SUMMARY

Wharton has several all-season unique and authentic tourism assets that are waiting to be made more available to visitors and marketed to them. What seems lacking is a centralized entity that can coordinate scheduling, events, programming, and marketing focused on tourism. That ideal entity might also be able to facilitate incentives to draw in targeted businesses to sustainably diversify Wharton's

offerings to tourists. The community should also work to establish festivals and events that would significantly draw overnight tourists to the area, or to augment already occurring events so that they cross-promote other offerings to people visiting the area to (for example) hunt or play polo. Ultimately, these ideal events would each happen at a regular point in the year (such as an annual festival that happens during spring break, or Friday night late hours on the square for a Plaza Theatre performance, with other cross-promoted opportunities offered the next day), and together, the different events would be spread across different parts of the year, which helps the visitor plan a timely, eventful trip—hopefully more than once per year.

Wharton Tourism Assessment Notes

Texas Department of Agriculture – Kristin Lambrecht

Overview: Wharton is beautiful town with a lot to offer any visitor. Whether it's cinema and theater, agriculture, architecture or history, Wharton has a variety of opportunities for every type of tourist. When driving through town you can see the rich history, but not until you hear the stories do you know just how deep that history goes. It will be important to capitalize on the tourism inventory already available, but Wharton is in a unique situation to take advantage of some new things coming with the new levee system. One way to make sure all opportunities are utilized regarding tourism, is to have a dedicated tourism person for the city. While several people do a great job when and how they can, a dedicated person will make sure that tourism is a focus and figure out ways to market the city as a wonderful tourist destination.

Strengths:

Location – With only being a short drive from Houston and also not far from the coast, Wharton is in a great location to attract visitors. Marketing is a must in the greater Houston area to attract people wanting a day trip from Houston or for visitors wanting to stay a while and experience all the town has to offer.

People – There are so many people in Wharton that are either grew up there or moved there to start a life in a great small town. There is so much historical knowledge walking around and it would be a great idea to make sure if it hasn't been already, that it is recorded in some way. You can tell there are people with a definite heart for Wharton and they want people to experience the town they love.

Local Attractions/Historic sites – Wharton has such a variety of attractions and historical sites that can really appeal to several different types of tourists. These include:

Tee Pee Motel & RV Park – Great photo op and nostalgic place to visit

Wharton County Museum/ 20th Century Technology Museum – Once museum is up and running this museum has some great exhibits and rich history for museum visitors to explore. Texas history and Mexican army artifacts are a great draw. The Trophy room is really a neat part of the museum. The architecture of that room should also be highlighted. Dan Rather home is a great addition and should definitely be touted.

Historic Homes – This could be a great driving tour. People who love to see a historic home or those interested in architecture would be interested in this. Expand some on the home tour in the Visitors & Newcomers Guide, update and add photos to chamber website. An "open house" type tour might be a good event to showcase the inside of the houses as well.

Historic Monterey Square – A very charming downtown square that many Texas travelers seek out. It was great to see so many of the buildings being used and restored. Continue to hold events here and look into other events that might bring visitors to the square.

Wharton County Courthouse – Such a great story of the restoration and it is beautifully done. More information should be available for visitors or maybe a little more signage to explain the restoration.

Plaza Theater – Really neat to see the history here. It sounds like this is a big draw on the weekends there is a play. Maybe see about extending some of the shows or adding some film, especially since there is a history of film in the area.

Train Depot – Restored really well and a great opportunity for train enthusiasts. This is a niche market of tourists that should be tapped into.

Pierce Ranch – This is a great option for visitors who don't want to stay in a hotel. While some visitors to the ranch may not plan to do much off the ranch, it is an opportunity to make sure their visitors know all the options in town.

Morris Ranch and Carriage House – This is an amazing collection of carriages that many visitors would love to see. It is very generous that the ranch accepts visitors.

Nature sites – Being on the Colorado River is a huge advantage for tourism as long as the city can capitalize on it. The hunting and birding in the area is a huge attraction and has the potential to bring a large number of visitors to the area.

Agriculture – Agriculture is a major industry in the area and can be a big draw for visitors. Cattle, cotton, rice and pecans are some of the products that come out of the area. A harvest festival for one of these might be a good draw and way to celebrate the area.

Town murals – These murals were great to see around town and a way to celebrate the history of the town. They should be included in tourism information.

Horton Foote history – This is a big draw for film and theater enthusiasts.

Weaknesses:

Cooperation – Having all city leaders working together is key to attract tourism to the area. It seems that not everyone in Wharton is working together or on board to work on tourism for the city. This is key to getting the locals' support which is needed for tourist to feel welcome.

Transition – Unfortunately Wharton is still recovering from flooding and this presents problems for visitors to the city. Some things are not open at the moment and that needs to be communicated to people who potentially want to visit the town.

Tourist Info – The Chamber is supposed to be the main tourism hub for the city, but they did not seem real interested in making it a focus. There is a kiosk outside the office and that helps, and then if a tourist is able to go inside, the office is not organized and there is outdated material. I know they

mentioned a renovation to the building, so hopefully that can help the tourism area of the office. The Chamber is not open on the weekends when is most critical for tourists. There isn't much of a Wharton tourism information presence online. The Chamber had some places to stay, restaurants and attractions, but it wasn't all-inclusive and seemed to only be listed if they were Chamber members.

Tourism marketing materials – While there are several pieces that highlight the events and attractions in the area, the 2020 Visitors & Newcomers Guide was the most concise and organized. It helps to not have multiple pieces to have to juggle if a visitor can just pick up one piece that has everything.

Attraction/business hours – Some of the great attractions or businesses that tourists would want to see or visit are only open by appointment or not open on weekends. This greatly decreases the chances that visitors will stick around or come at all if they can't see certain things.

Riverfront – This is not being utilized to the full potential. Some of this area will be addressed as the levee project gets underway, but people love being able to be near the water. Having the park kept up or finding ways to provide access for kayakers in town will be beneficial.

Town murals – No one really talked about these on our visit. These should be highlighted in tourist information.

Opportunities:

Marketing – Work with neighboring towns to promote the region/county. Bastrop County Tourism is a great example of several towns coming together to get visitors to the region. Create one piece to cover all Wharton has to offer and make sure it gets to tourist information centers (TXDOT and private). Distribute around town to businesses. Take advantage of low-cost marketing efforts on social media. There are opportunities through social media ads to do direct target marketing to even a small audience. Birdwatching enthusiasts, people interested in trains, foodies, historical tourists and more can be directly targeted to show what Wharton has to offer. Invite Houston and state media out for a media tour to show off the town. Work to get shows like the Daytripper or Texas Bucket list out to highlight tourist spots and restaurants. It was mentioned that the city will be having a Way Finding Study done to help with branding. This would be huge to be able to market under a cohesive brand and know the directions and identity Wharton wants to be known for. Continue taking advantage of the free billboard space along 59.

Online presence – Have an actual tourism webpage, not just the Chamber and link to many other sites in the city. Utilize free social media to highlight all there is to do in the town and even area. Do videos at some of the sties. Have businesses take over for a day or week to highlight what they do or offer.

Tourism staff – Hiring a person dedicated to tourism would make a huge difference in the opportunities Wharton can take advantage of. They can focus on the needs of the hospitality industry in the city to be able to provide a better experience for visitors. They would be available to attend workshops or conferences across the state to learn and gather ideas to help Wharton tourism.

State and regional programs – Research and take advantage of grants, programs and partnering opportunities that are provided by regional and state entities.

Events – Create events based on what is highlighted in the city. A harvest event could draw people to the area. Have a film festival to highlight the film and theater history. Evaluate the events already held in the city to see if they are a benefit or if the site the event is being held is the best.

Hospitality industry – A great opportunity to have ambassadors for the city. Educate waitstaff, hotel/motel staff and other businesses that might see visitors so they can tell them of all the great things Wharton has.

Threats:

Surrounding cities – Many surrounding cities have similar backgrounds as Wharton that can draw the same kind of visitors. While it would be great to work with some of these to get visitors to the area, Wharton should work to find out what makes them different or what sets them apart from the neighboring towns.

Funding – It takes money to accomplish some of these items, but many are free. Take advantage of the free opportunities and work together as a city to come up with the funding for others. If one business or city entity is spending money for marketing or advertising, it many time benefits others in the city. Cross promote or go together for advertising to leverage funding. If tourism is a priority, some funding must be tied to it.

Construction on Hwy 59/I-69 – While this will eventually be an opportunity, it is currently a threat to getting visitors to Wharton. It makes it hard to get to Wharton and it makes traffic unpredictable.

Weather – Until the levee project is complete there is still the threat of flooding. This could discourage visitors and take resources away from tourism.

Opportunities available at the Texas Department of Agriculture:

[GO TEXAN](#) – Businesses, restaurants, the Chamber, EDC, city, downtown business district can all become members to take advantage of marketing and business opportunities.

[Certified Farmers Markets](#) – A program to certify farmers markets. Could help with marketing the Wharton farmers market with listing on GO TEXAN website.

[TxCDBG Downtown Revitalization and Main Street Programs](#) - The DRP/MS program objective is to provide infrastructure improvements to address the conditions that contribute to the deterioration in an area designated as slum or blighted in the applicant community's downtown or main street area.

[Other TDA Grants and Programs](#)