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Texas Beyond History: The Virtual Museum of Texas' Cultural Heritage

<http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net>

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Maintained by the Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory, University of Texas at Austin; accessed on May 23, 2005; July 16, 2005; September 9, 2005.

The stated purpose of the *Texas Beyond History* website is “to interpret and share the results of archeological and historical research on the cultural heritage of Texas with the citizens of Texas and the world.”⁽¹⁾ The Texas Archaeological Research Laboratory (TARL) at the University of Texas at Austin is the primary website sponsor and content provider, with 12 other organizations contributing data or assistance. The consortium includes one nonprofit organization, one local cultural resources management firm, two volunteer groups, three academic departments, and five state and federal agencies.

The *Texas Beyond History* website is geared toward archeologists, historians, anthropologists, and, to a lesser extent, ethnographers and architectural historians. Although the website content might not be relevant to all heritage stewardship professionals, the website may prove helpful in other ways. For example, the site’s layout, presentation of maps, engravings, historic and contemporary photographs, private and public documents, and artifacts may provide museum professionals with a conceptual framework for a similar online project.

The website offers assistance with teaching Texas heritage. Two sections include materials tailored to elementary school students and teachers. The “Kids” section includes links such as “Fantastic Facts,” “Fun Stuff to Do,” “Ask Dr. Dirt,” “New Words,” and “Cool Links.” The

“Teachers” section includes lesson plans, unit plans, teacher links, as well as an open-ended survey on the usefulness of the site for instructors. Despite its educational focus, “Cool Links” contains 19 links to governmental, academic, and professional websites that would appeal to anyone interested in the state’s cultural resources. Topics in “Cool Links” include “Texas Archaeology,” “Rock Art,” “North American Archaeology,” “General Archaeology,” and “World Archaeology.”

Texas Beyond History achieves its goal of interpreting and sharing the state’s cultural heritage by focusing on the stories of the peoples who have settled the land. The “Special Exhibits” section of the website was of particular interest to this reviewer. Not only are the exhibits rotated like they would be at a physical museum, previous exhibits are archived with active links and dates that the exhibits premiered. Moreover, the addition of new exhibits, newly acquired historic documents, and recently recovered artifacts are announced with a special link on the homepage. These features allow website users to scan the site quickly for new contributions on subsequent visits.

“Special Exhibits” covers the history and prehistory of Texans and of those who have crossed the region. Virtual exhibits present the state’s prehistoric treasures and discuss topics ranging from the contact period between local American Indians and Europeans, Spanish presidios and missions, and antebellum plantations, to German farmers, Mexican laborers, and 19th-century logging in East Texas. One of the site’s four theme exhibits highlights the Caddo Nation, one of the state’s indigenous populations, and presents prehistoric Caddoan life through artifacts and features, modern Caddoan life through profiles of tribal members, and modern and prehistoric aspects of the culture.

Elsewhere on the site, visitors can learn about the role of the Buffalo Soldiers—the U.S. Army, 9th Cavalry Troopers—on the Texas frontier. *Texas Beyond History* also highlights the descendants of the Jornada Mogollon who established pit houses and pueblo dwellings in the valley and foothills of the Hueco Mountains of far western Texas. These examples demonstrate the breadth of the Lone Star State’s cultural legacy and the sizeable task of bringing

this information to the Web.

The “About Texas Beyond History” section allows users to glean additional information about the virtual exhibits and the professionals responsible for disseminating facts and theories regarding Texas’s cultural heritage.

The strengths of *Beyond Texas History* are in the presentation of the complex cultural heritage of Texas and the region. The text is easy to read and accessible without being parochial. When professional jargon is necessary, sidebars offer definitions. The site is very colorful, well designed, and easy to navigate. The “Kids” section uses whimsical fonts and children-friendly terminology (e.g. “cool”). All images are in high resolution, making for sharp visuals, which is not always the case with websites.

Finally, the *Texas Beyond History* homepage includes a useful map of Texas marking the locations and names of select cultural resources. Dragging a cursor over each resource activates a preview of what lies beyond the hyperlink, and double clicking on that link takes the reader to detailed information on that resource. By presenting a modern map of Texas, readers not familiar with Texas and its geography can peruse the exhibits based on their area of interest.

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