

## A Brief History of Big Sam

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Christina Ellison

Lovingly called Big Sam, the statue of Sam Houston standing along I-45 titled “A Tribute to Courage” has watched over that stretch of interstate for decades. The following piece presents an overview of how this landmark came to be. Information regarding the statue was curated from newspaper articles and other materials found in the Sam Houston State University Archives, the City of Huntsville’s website, the Sam Houston Statue Visitor Center, and local news sources.

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You can see it as you round the curve between mile marker 104 and 105, going north on I-45: a small, white shape in the distance. You’re not surprised by this; you’ve seen him a million times—because the shape is more of a *be* than an *it*, a statue more than a shape: the towering form of Sam Houston, watching his stretch of highway. But this time, as you near him, something’s different. This time, the day is April 23, 2024, and he’s wearing a jersey, bearing the number 24 on the front and “Houston” on the back.

As a collaboration between the Houston Texans and the City of Huntsville to promote the team’s new branding, the large statue of Sam Houston donned a 200-pound, 330-square-yard shirt of red, white, and blue that, like the statue itself, can be seen from six miles away. The clothing change took 125 hours to complete, including the use of two large cranes to make sure the jersey fit just right. Big Sam only wore the jersey for two weeks, but his doing so left a big enough impression that passersby had to stop to gaze at Sam Houston’s fashion statement.

But where did Big Sam even come from? It may seem like he has always stood guard along the highway, but he had to have come from somewhere, from the mind of someone. Big Sam marks the town where the real Sam Houston lived and died, but how did the statue of his likeness come to be?

The answer lies in David Adickes, the creator of Big Sam—or, rather, “A Tribute to Courage,” as the piece is actually called. Adickes is a Huntsville man, through and through: he was born in the town, as was his father and grandfather, and his great-grandfather served as

Huntsville's postmaster in 1854, during the same time Sam Houston had residence; Adickes grew up in Huntsville, and graduated from Sam Houston Teacher's College in 1948. And though afterward he traveled far from Huntsville—to Paris, Japan, the White House, and more—he had a soft spot for his hometown. So when the day of Sam Houston's bicentennial birthday celebration was approaching, Adickes knew how he wanted to celebrate: by gifting the city a landmark. Everything's bigger in Texas, and his replica of the state's first president would be no different.

Adickes wanted to have the statue completed by March 2, 1993, but the construction would prove difficult to keep to that schedule, largely due to both the size and material of the statue. The body of Adickes' statue was going to be sixty-seven feet tall, and such a height needed the proper manufacturing in order to sustain it. What's more, Adickes wanted to make sure that what he created would survive to see Huntsville's tricentennial, quadricentennial, and quincentennial celebrations of Sam Houston, so the material used would have to be able to withstand any and all types of weather that may be thrown its way.

Adickes decided to build the statue using steel armature, expanded metal, white concrete, with a reinforced fiber glass mesh, allowing for maximum strength and thickness. This combination ensured that the statue would practically last forever; although the material made to look like white marble from afar, the actual "ingredients" of Big Sam wouldn't erode like marble or sandstone would have, and could withstand winds up to 500 miles per hour. In the end, the construction bore thirty tons of steel and concrete—five layers of concrete over the mesh and welded steel framework—which meant the process took longer than expected.

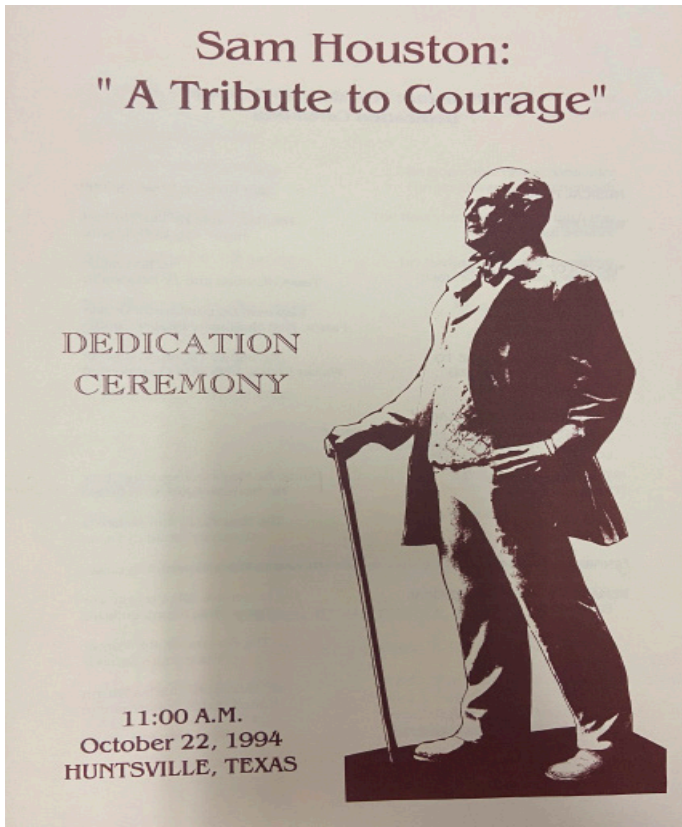
Thirty tons of materials did not come cheap, so "A Tribute to Courage" got creative in terms of fundraising. Adickes financed the project mostly out of his own pocket, but Huntsville also found ways to contribute. With the "Stand with Sam" fundraiser, people could donate to have something engraved on a brick surrounding the base of the statue—bricks you can still find beneath the feet of the statue. Other donations paid for the creation of the visitors' center and the ten-foot-tall pedestal on which Big Sam would be standing.



Construction of “A Tribute to Courage,” seen in the Oct. 16, 1994, issue of the *Huntsville Item*, retrieved from the SHSU Archives

Though Adickes’ original goal of completing his work by March 2, 1993 came and went, he was not too far off. By July 1994, Adickes, his assistant welder Keith Benthall, and the rest of their team had finished all the different parts of the statue, from Sam’s ten-foot-long feet to the three components that would make up his head. The new dedication date for Big Sam was set for October 22, 1994, about a year-and-a-half later—not too bad, considering Adickes and his team were engineering the statue without a blueprint.

Though the dedication day was delayed from the original, there was no less excitement. This anticipation grew as they crept closer to the big day; anywhere from 1,000 to 10,000 visitors to show up to the dedication, and there were plenty of VIPs who planned to be in attendance. Among those who accepted invitations were Governor Ann Richards, then-CBS News anchor Dan Rather, and direct descendants of Sam Houston and Joshua Houston. Martin Anisman, the president of Sam Houston State University at the time, was scheduled to introduce David Adickes at the ceremony, and Adickes’ daughter, Mary, was set to christen the statue with a bottle of champagne, as she had done with each of his sculptures since she was little.



"A Tribute to Courage" dedication ceremony pamphlet, Oct. 22, 1994, courtesy of the SHSU Archives

Leading up to the dedication, concerns rose. One was the weather: fear of rain and flooding created unease about the veracity of the ceremony's pre-determined schedule. Additionally, there was the concern about parking: finding spaces for thousands of people to park would be no easy feat. To prepare for the latter, newspapers gave detailed descriptions and diagrams outlining what visitors should do and where they should go, should they wish to attend the celebration; and to assist with the crowds, the Huntsville police, DPS, and Texas National Guard would help direct traffic so the interstate would not be blocked from those who wanted to pass, and the ceremony was going to be televised for those who did not want to attend in person. As for the former, the *Huntsville Item* reported that should rain occur, the ceremony would still

take place—though, of course, they had a backup plan should the rain become torrential.

On the big day of Big Sam, the sun shone brightly, like the weather knew the importance of what was going to happen. At 9:30 AM, the ceremony's special guests met at Huntsville's City Hall for a reception, the room buzzing with enthusiasm and eagerness. Forty-five minutes later, an escorted convoy left City Hall and made its way to the monument everyone came to see. And at 11 AM on October 22, 1994, the dedication ceremony for "A Tribute to Courage" began. Finally, according to plan, Big Sam took his place.

At seventy-seven feet tall—the sixty-seven-foot-tall likeness, plus the ten-foot-tall base of Sunset Red granite—"A Tribute to Courage" remains the tallest statue of an American hero in the world, a fact confirmed by the Smithsonian Institute. Adickes had said that each city deserves an icon, and Big Sam is a fitting one for Houston's hometown.

As they drive by the statue, some people wave, some say hello, some even salute. Some people stop to gawk at the giant man in a three-piece suit—or a football jersey, depending on the day—either stopping at the visitors' center or stopping on the shoulder of the highway. With each greeting, the legacy and courage of Sam Houston, Huntsville, and David Adickes lives on.

## Biography

Christina Ellison is an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing program at Sam Houston State University. When she saw Big Sam wearing his own Texans jersey for a few weeks during the spring semester, she knew exactly what she would write about for this issue of *The Measure*. Once again, Christina has put a creative nonfiction twist on the editor contribution, and she hopes you have enjoyed her. Don't forget to wave hi to Sam when you pass him by, or perhaps consider stopping to see him in person!



"A Tribute to Courage," 2024, photo by Christina Ellison