

The Museum at the Scene of the Crime

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In Buffalo, New York, there is a small plaque marking the spot where President William McKinley was shot, in 1901. The former site of a train station in Washington, D.C., where President James Garfield was shot, in 1881, lacks any marker at all. But the place in Dallas where Lee Harvey Oswald fired the rifle that killed President John F. Kennedy in 1963 can be rented out for parties.

Walking through Dealey Plaza, the Dallas site of the Kennedy assassination, you can see several stone monuments and a glittering reflecting pool. But striking as they are, they aren't memorials to that tragic day. The real memorial is at 411 Elm Street, a looming seven-story building on one end of the plaza—the former Texas School Book Depository.

The Sixth Floor Museum, near the top of that blocky, utilitarian structure, inhabits the spot from which, on November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald, a temporary worker hired for the holiday rush, aimed his rifle at the President's motorcade from a corner window and pulled the trigger.

It took decades for the Book Depository to be transformed into an official tourist attraction. The private company that owned the building sold it in the early 1970s, and in 1977 it was taken over by Dallas County. Its lower floors still house several county offices. One of them is the Dallas County Historical Foundation, which operates the museum.

Not everyone was happy when the museum was founded, in 1989, and some locals balked—at least at first. “When it opened, I think there was maybe some trepidation from the local community, but it has since become the best-visited site in north Texas,” says Deborah Marine, its manager of public relations and advertising. “Of course, the event was 42 years ago, so there is a little bit of a time distance.”

The museum's exhibits lead the visitor chronologically through the grim events. Several videos start off the tour, among them one of Kennedy delivering his inaugural address and others of speeches he made about the space race and the Cuban missile crisis. Then, inevitably, comes November 22, 1963. “It takes them through the day,” Marine explains, “the motorcade through downtown, the assassination, the trip to Parkland, the arrest of Oswald and his shooting, and then through the Warren Commission Report, and then really through President Kennedy's legacy—how it impacted the world over the years.”

The many exhibits include a detailed model of Dealey Plaza built by the FBI for the Warren Commission. But perhaps the most striking one is the so-called “sniper's nest,” the perch at the corner window from which Oswald fired his shots. It has been fitted with a webcam (www.earthcam.com/jfk), so that Internet visitors can see Dealey Plaza as Oswald saw it 42 years ago. “We've preserved the original wood floor, have positioned boxes that replicate that day's scene, so visitors are able to see that corner on the sixth floor,” Marine says. “And of course all the other windows are available for viewing of the plaza below.” You can look out at the plaza's “grassy knoll”—a favorite location of assassination conspiracy theorists who are convinced that Oswald didn't act alone.

The museum addresses those myriad conspiracy theories but endorses none. “We present the facts as they're known,” Marine says. “We give the visitors that information and then allow them to, of course, record their own thoughts and develop their own ideas.”

The museum also owns the seventh floor of the building, which is available for rental, mainly for corporate meetings and business receptions. The Dallas Press Club, for example, has held its annual meeting there. Attendees at these functions can visit the floor below, and this is what creates the strange tableau of partygoers mingling at the scene of an assassination.

At the end of the tour, after viewing a 10-minute film about President Kennedy's legacy, you can visit a gift shop. Among the items for sale are T-shirts emblazoned with a full-color picture of the Texas School Book Depository and the logo of the Sixth Floor Museum.

Walking through the museum, you see quite a few photos of the Kennedy family dotting the exhibits. One depicts the family after John and Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding. Which raises a question: Is the Kennedy family involved with the museum at all? They are not, Deborah Marine says.



Visitors look out at Dealey Plaza. On the left, behind glass, is the corner from which Oswald shot.

(COURTESY OF THE SIXTH FLOOR MUSEUM)