

Behind the WALLS

Huntsville residents know that Walls refers to the "Walls Unit" which is the central prison unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice located in downtown Huntsville. Opened in 1849, it is the oldest prison in Texas. The unit's nickname comes from the surrounding massive red brick walls which were originally sandstone but were encased in the red bricks in 1940, giving it the current ominous appearance. The red bricks used for the wall as well as other prison buildings were made by prisoners.

The Walls Unit is best known as the location of the "death house" where condemned prisoners are executed by lethal injection. Until 1923 executions were by hanging, and from 1923 to 1964 by electrocution in an electric chair known as "Old Sparky." Old Sparky is now on view at the Texas Prison Museum.

The Walls Unit hosted the Texas Prison Rodeo from 1931 to 1986. The annual October event drew as many as 100,000 spectators along with popular musical acts like Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, George Strait, and The Judds. The last of the stadium was demolished in 2012 and is now a parking lot.

The Walls Unit is also the facility from which prisoners in this region are released when their term is completed or they are paroled. During the day you may hear a steam whistle emanating from the Walls. The whistle means that a prisoner count has been completed and that all prisoners are accounted for.

SOURCE: Walker County Historical Commission; walkercountyhistory.org

This restaurant is a tribute to the thousands of men and women in TDCJ gray who, for generations, have sacrificed comfort, and sometimes their lives, to protect and promote civil society.