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PLANNING DEPARTMENT



HMOH 06-15-006

NOMINATION FORM  
HALF MILE OF HISTORY

**Section A: Nomination Information**

Name of Nominated person, place or event: W. D. Swann

The nominee is being honored for outstanding contributions in the area(s) of (please check all that apply):

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/Media	<input type="checkbox"/> Philanthropy
<input type="checkbox"/> Architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> Government/Military	<input type="checkbox"/> Religion
<input type="checkbox"/> Arts and Culture	<input type="checkbox"/> Industry	<input type="checkbox"/> Science
<input type="checkbox"/> Aviation	<input type="checkbox"/> Invention/Innovation	<input type="checkbox"/> Sports
<input type="checkbox"/> Business/Corporate Leadership	<input type="checkbox"/> Law	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community Service	<input type="checkbox"/> Medicine	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Oil/Gas	

**Section B: Nominator's Information**

Name of person making nomination: Elizabeth Swann Marsh Ellis (Betsy Ellis)

Address: 801 Troup Highway

City: Tyler State: TX Zip: 75701

Daytime telephone: 903-531-8897 Email: betsysmith@etmc.org

Relationship to nominated individual: great granddaughter

Nominated Individual's year of birth: 1845 Nominated Individual's year of death: 1935

**Section C: Narrative**

The narrative section of the application is the most important. It is the primary source of information judges use to make their selection of new inductees. The two-page narrative submittal must utilize size 12 Times New Roman font and be double spaced. Please include a recommended 25-30 word marker caption at the end of the narrative. Any additional material will be referred to only for verification of accuracy of the nomination. No submitted materials will be returned.

The narrative section must contain an explanation of the nominee's enduring contribution that make this person/place/event worthy of the honor. Please describe the impact the nominee has had on the community, county, region, nation and/or world. For Individuals, please include any honors earned by the nominee as well as a list of organizations in which the nominee has been involved. Also, please indicate their educational background as well as the length of time the individual has lived in Smith County. Inclusion of photos is preferred but optional. Do not send original photos. All submitted materials will become property of the City of Tyler and its Historical Preservation Board.

Please submit nominations to:  
City of Tyler Historical Preservation Board  
Attention: Half Mile of History  
P.O. Box 2039  
Tyler, Texas 75710

# The Swann Family

by P. J. Furse

It doesn't take long for a newcomer to learn of at least one role played by the Swann Family in Tyler's history. Delivery vans and newspaper ads inform the public Swann Furniture Company...since 1895. A second, yet less visible family enterprise, is Swann Estates & Rental, a real-estate holding company that has owned and managed properties in the downtown vicinity since the 1920s. Then there's the community of Swan on Highway 69. Many think the berg to be named for a different family - after all, it is spelled with only one *n*. But it, too, takes its name from a member of the clan, a son of one of seven brothers who migrated to Smith County from Sumpter County, Alabama, before and immediately following the Civil War.

Thomas Rowan Swann was the first on record in Smith County, arriving in time to be listed in the census of 1850. That document recorded him as twenty-four years old, a merchant, and residing in the household of Rice Wells, Sr., about a mile north of Starrville. Mr. Rice and his wife, Chaney, had an eighteen year old daughter, Louisa, and two years later, she and Thomas were married. The couple moved a few miles north to the fledgling settlement of Belzora, founded in 1850 to take advantage of one of only two ferry landings on the Sabine River. There, Thomas opened a general store and in addition to those duties also served as a Smith County commissioner. In January of 1853, he was a founding member of the Starr Lodge #118 and later that year appointed postmaster at Mt. Carmel, a communi-

ty seven miles to the west. The family continued to live in Belzora, however, and in 1855, Thomas purchased 487 acres bordering the Sabine. His optimism was unrewarded. The larger steamboats could not navigate the narrow banks and shallow waters of the upper river; businesses dependent on trade began to falter, and within two year's time, Belzora was abandoned. Thomas moved his family to Mt. Carmel and changed his occupation to farming. By 1860, his and Louisa's family had grown to include three daughters, Laura, Sallie, and Anna. (Sallie married Frank Bell in 1880. See *Tyler Today*, Winter, 1993.)

In the meantime, four of Thomas's brothers, Elam Franklin, James Harris, William David, and Andrew 'Jack' Jackson, had responded to Thomas' reports of rich, fertile farmland at the going price of \$1.50/acre. Between 1855 and 1860, they also had become residents of Smith County, the third wealthiest county in the state until 1861.

Elam Franklin and his wife, Sarah, appear on deed records dated 1855. He secured his place in history as a staunch supporter of the Houston, Trinity, and Tyler Railroad, a project to connect with fifty miles of completed track between Houston and Galveston. The undertaking was figuratively and literally derailed by the Civil War, but if one can deduce anything from county deeds, Elam remained a prominent man, successful enough to be buying land well into the post-war years.



W. D. Swann

Next, in 1856, came the eldest of the brothers, James Harris, with his wife and seven children. The family settled on the road between Hopewell and Sand Flat, and in 1858, he and others established the old Hopewell Baptist Church. The 1860 census listed him as a farmer, forty-eight years old, with an estate valued at twenty thousand dollars, a respectable sum in those days.

Andrew "Jack" Jackson Swabb, the youngest of the brothers, apparently preferred city life to farming. In 1859, he bought two Tyler lots and half interest in Dr. Davenport & Company Drug Store. A few years after the war, he and a partner built the Tyler Hotel on Cherry Street (now Ferguson Street) just east of the square.

Swann family records say William David also traveled to Smith County before the war, but had settled in Grimes County before the census was taken in 1860.

The Civil War erupted in 1861, and the family's migration came to a halt as Thomas, Elam, William, and Jack fought with the Confederate Army in Texas; Isaac and Samuel, the two brothers yet to leave home, in Alabama. Amazingly, all brothers survived. Isaac and Samuel headed west soon after the war's end. In 1870, six

Swann brothers were included in the Smith County census. It had taken close to twenty-five years, but the family pilgrimage to Texas was complete.

In 1876, a writer stated in *The Reporter*: "Tyler is now one of the most quiet, orderly and temperate towns in the United States. Probably if the whiskey was better it would be different."

Thomas Rowan, the family pioneer, served as a delegate to the Democratic convention the year that little jewel was written. Widowed in 1866, he had moved to Tyler, married Alicia Evans, and was once again the father of a growing family. When he died twelve years later, (1888), he left, besides three grown daughters, a widow and six children. Among them was thirteen year old Thomas Elam, founder of what became Swann Furniture Company.

Thomas Elam was an enterprising young man, and soon after his father's death, took a job at a drug store for the grand salary of 25 cents a week. Certainly other money-making

endeavors followed, because in 1895, he had saved enough to open his first store. Five years later, he proposed to Carrie Rowland, daughter of Ben Rowland who had owned and operated

*"Tyler is now one of the most quiet, orderly and temperate towns in the United States. Probably if the whiskey was better, it would be different."*

a drug store on the square. She was, therefore, well acquainted with retail and took an active part in the business.

In 1901, Thomas was running ads as "T.E. Swann, the Furniture Man." By 1904, the presentations had become a tad more sophisticated, proclaiming, "Swann Furniture and Carpet Company," and listing "furniture, carpets, pianos and organs," with the added reassurance that "Your Credit is Good." Evidently, so was

business, because about 1910, Thomas purchased the RCA Victrola franchise for the entire state of Texas! Stores were opened in Marshall and Palestine, and the company became known as Swann Furniture and Music Company. A few years later, the business expanded to include coffins and an undertaking service (not uncommon in those days). It was as Swann Furniture and Undertaking Company that the business was sold to Thomas' first cousin, Elam Franklin, in 1920.

After selling the furniture store, Thomas bought Tyler Motor Company (the local Ford dealership) and also became one of Tyler's leading real estate developers (the beginnings of Swann Estates and Rentals).

Besides being recognized as an outstanding businessman, Thomas and Carrie (he publicly gave her credit for sharing in his ventures) were equally well known for their generosity, especially where children were concerned. Having no children of their own, they centered much of their attention on nieces, nephews and other young people, throwing annual Christmas parties



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for the city's disadvantaged youth. In 1927, Thomas started the Audobon Awards whereby six boys a year were selected through the public schools to attend Camp Audobon in Colorado. He would take others along on his own. He also set up a college loan fund for young women. Churches, too, were beneficiaries of Tom and Carrie's generosity. One example is the lot donated to Marvin Methodist, occupied today by the church's chapel. These and many other community contributions were recognized in 1937 when Thomas was named recipient of the T.B. Butler Award.

T.E. Swann died in 1938 at the age of sixty-three. In his lengthy front-page obituary, he was extolled as "an institution in this section. He made it his practice to provide something worthwhile for Tyler people every year...His active brain was always working, planning, and thinking along progressive lines..." (*The Tyler Courier-Times*, June 7, 1938.)

Carrie died the same year. Their home on the corner of South Broadway and Front Streets, place of

some of the city's most lavish parties, was moved in 1950 and is now located at 2201 South Robertson. The lots on the corner of S. Broadway and Front Streets, Ferguson and N. Broadway (a

*"Uncle Billy was always my idea of a polished, Southern gentleman with his gold-headed cane, white Van Dyke beard, and military posture."*

former furniture store location) are among those properties still held by Swann Estates.

Years earlier and back on the Swann farms near Hopewell, the son of James Harris Swann, William "Billy" David, had become something of a local celebrity. When war broke out in 1861, he ran away from home and joined the battery being recruited by Major James Douglas. Only sixteen years old and weighing a mere 90 pounds, he enlisted as a drummer, but

was later assigned the role of caisson driver, transporting ammunition to the troops.

Following the war, W.D. married Sallie Hitt (For the record, the 1870 census listed her name as Sarah), and over the years became prosperous enough so to act as a banker of sorts for his neighbors. But it was the employees of the I. & G. N. Railroad that immortalized his name (albeit misspelled) on county maps. Maybe it was because W.D. owned so much land in the area, maybe it was because he was so highly respected, or maybe the railroad telegraphers simply preferred the shorter name of Swann - shortened further by dropping the second *n*. Whatever the case, they consistently referred to the Hopewell stop as Swann, and by 1900, the name change had been made official.

About 1908, W.D., Sallie and their seven children moved to Tyler and bought the house at 911 West Houston. He joined the Guaranty State Bank as Vice President, serving under T.B. Butler. The bank later merged with Citizens National Bank, and he

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served as a Director until the last years of his life.

Always interested in politics, he ran for the State Legislature when he was seventy-five years of age, was elected, and served two terms. When W.D. died in 1935, he was one month short of his 90th birthday and the last survivor of the Douglas Battery.

A nephew once wrote of him: "Uncle Billy was always my idea of a polished Southern gentleman with his gold headed cane, white Van Dyke beard, and military posture. At 70 he still walked like a grenadier guard..."

It was W.D.'s son, Elam Franklin, who bought the Swann Furniture and Undertaking Company. He was a quiet man, reticent almost to the point of shyness, but he was also a brilliant businessman and steered with determination. As a young man he had worked at Jester State Bank in Tyler and kept books at night in order to earn enough money to go into business for himself. That year came in 1915, and family members related he used to say that he got married (to Ruth Baldwin, Carrie's niece), quit his job at the bank, and

bought a jewelry business, all in one year - and he wasn't even drunk!

Five years later, with profits from the jewelry store, Elam bought Swann Furniture and Undertaking Company. He was uncomfortable with the undertaking side of his new business, however, and when the manager of that department, Mr. Thorndike, offered to buy him out and move the funeral business to another location, Elam sold, ambulances and all. The company thereafter went by its present name: Swann Furniture.

In 1926, Elam moved Swann Furniture from its location on East Ferguson and North Broadway to 215 W. Erwin. In the 1940's, both of Elam's son's, Franklin and Thomas, joined him in the family business. Business expanded again in the 50's when Swann's bought out Burks-Walker Furniture next door and renovated the combined space.

Although Elam never played the role of salesman, he stayed actively involved in the management of the store until a few weeks before his

death in 1978.

In addition to guiding Swann Furniture through fifty-six years, Elam served on the Board of Directors of both Cooperative Savings and Loan Association (1929-'78) and Citizens National Bank (1940-'76), and supervised the family's real estate and investment interests.

"He could add rows of numbers in his head," says his son, Franklin. "He was a gentleman in every sense of the word."

Swann's Furniture moved to its present location on West Loop 323 in 1988. Franklin is officially retired, but still spends time at the store, managed now by his son, Elam Franklin III. Thomas Rowan Swann oversees the management of Swann Estates and Rentals. And the name of Swann, Texas, continues to provoke questions caused by railroad telegraphers, who over a hundred years ago, opted for expediency and dropped the final *n*.

Special thanks to Mrs. Thomas R. Swann who provided invaluable and time-saving information for the writing of this article.



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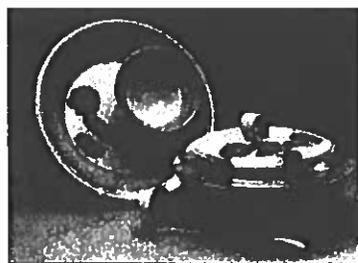
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Ronber -

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with me today. Enclosed  
is article re Wm. David  
Swann, my great-grandfather  
who was the last Confederate  
veteran to serve in the  
Texas Legislature.

Thank you for your  
consideration. Please call  
me at 903.531.8897 if  
any questions.

Sincerely,

Peter Ellis  
(Elizabeth Swann Marsh Ellis)