

ARNOLD - SIMONTON HOUSE  
Montgomery, Texas  
Historic Structure Report

ARNOLD-SIMONTON HOUSE  
MONTGOMERY, TEXAS  
HISTORIC STRUCTURE REPORT

SEPTEMBER, 1980

FREEMAN + DOTY ASSOCIATES

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## FOREWORD

The following document, *Arnold-Simonton House, Montgomery, Texas, Historic Structure Report*, is the result of work which began in the summer of 1980. Initiated by members of the Montgomery Historical Society, architectural and historical work was funded by the Society and by the Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, provider of a Survey and Planning Grant-in-Aid. Administration of the grant was provided by the Texas Historical Commission under provisions of the National Register Act of 1966.

Completion of necessary field work and research was made possible due to the generosity and interest of numerous members of the Society and residents of Montgomery County. Mr. B. Carroll Tharp led us to Mrs. Bessie Owen who, in turn, shared the results of her exhaustive research into the history of the Arnold-Simonton House. Equally important, she introduced us to other knowledgeable individuals such as Mrs. Vivian Furlow, Mrs. T. C. (Cricket) Simonton, Mrs. Anna Weisinger, Mr. Martin Simonton, and Mr. R. D. Simonton. Mr. Rhett Butler, President of the Montgomery Historical Society, and Mr. Henry J. Blasick and Mr. David Calloway, the County Librarian and his assistant, respectively, offered expert guidance and advice concerning the future use of the Arnold-Simonton House as a County library. Mr. J. B. McDonald of Rosenberg shared a valuable photograph of another important Montgomery home; and in San Antonio, Mrs. Ella Daggett Stumpf went to

great lengths to make available important photographs, interviews, and family documents which shed light on the architectural and social history of the House and its occupants. Completion of the *Report* was made immeasurably easier and more pleasurable by the cooperation of all these present and past residents of Montgomery County.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Arnold-Simonton House is a significant example of Greek Revival architecture in mid-nineteenth-century Texas and holds, in both its rich history and physical attributes, an important place in the development of Montgomery County. Historically, the House has sheltered and nurtured some of Montgomery County's most notable citizens, including Dr. E. J. Arnold, builder of the House; John Womack, wealthy Montgomery resident; and numerous members of the Simonton Family.

Architecturally, the Arnold-Simonton House is complex. Beyond its simple and elegant classical proportions and detailing, and its typical mid-nineteenth-century braced frame wood construction, the Arnold-Simonton House recalls the Connecticut central-hall arrangement. A rare interloper in the range of architectural form in early Texas, the Arnold-Simonton House was made according to the architectural traditions of Arnold's home and Connecticut origins. Distinguished by a central hall and pairs of rooms sharing interior double fireplaces, the building differs from the more typical dog-trot house form in both its closure of that hallway at both ends with classical doors and adjacent sidelights and transom lights, and in the specific placement of fireplaces along interior walls. Well-proportioned classical elements fully integrated with the plan's arrangement indicate a conscious and complete architectural statement.

Although significant deterioration has occurred to the House due primarily to moisture infiltration and termite activity, much original historic fabric still exists. Doors, hardware, and trim are extant and in place, and structural morphology is clear. Exterior features such as the Classical portico and cornice remain intact.

The Arnold-Simonton House was built and used as a residence for more than a century. More recently, the building has been proposed for use as a library-museum, an adaptation to which its physical arrangement should lend itself admirably.



## A HISTORY OF THE ARNOLD-SIMONTON HOUSE

### Introduction

The Arnold-Simonton House<sup>1</sup>, a one-story Greek Revival structure located in Montgomery, Texas, was built by Dr. E. J. Arnold, noted Texas doctor and community leader, and subsequently owned by John C. Womack, one of Montgomery County's wealthiest individuals, and various members of the Simonton Family, one of whom, R. D. Simonton, was the County's first Democratic sheriff after Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

The outstanding quality of the families who were associated with the House over a span of more than 125 years is reflected in the structure itself, a remarkably pure and sophisticated example of mid-nineteenth-century Greek Revival architecture in Texas. Probably constructed in the late 1840s, the House is a central-hall type which departs from the more typical Texas layout in that its two chimneys and four fireplaces were located on the inside of the building in what seems to have been a copy of a plan popular in Connecticut in the last third of the eighteenth century and first third of the nineteenth century.

### Dr. E. J. Arnold and the Construction of the Arnold-Simonton House

Because of the unusual nature of its interior organization, the history of the Arnold-Simonton House begins, not with its actual construction, but with the background of its builder. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, on February 15, 1811, Epaphrus J. Arnold was descended from a long line of Connecticut residents. He attended the Connecticut Medical School, and sometime in the mid-1830s, married Rhoda Ann Warner, a resident of Chester, Connecticut.

While it is unclear when or why Arnold left Connecticut, records indicate that he had immigrated to New Orleans by the time of the Texas Revolution. Family tradition maintains that he had reached Montgomery County by 1835, but a ship list appearing in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* on March 31, 1838, noted that he actually arrived in Galveston from New Orleans on the ship, *Correo*, on March 31, 1836, when he and a number of other individuals signed their names to a note expressing gratitude for the "urbane and gentlemanly treatment" they received on the trip.

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1. While the house was constructed by Dr. E. J. Arnold, numerous members of the Simonton Family owned it between 1886 and 1977 when the Martin Simontons deeded it to the Montgomery Historical Society. Therefore, for the sake of consistency, the building will be referred to throughout this study as the Arnold-Simonton House regardless of the historical period under discussion.

2. W. N. Martin, "A History of Montgomery" (M. A. thesis, Sam Houston State University, 1950), pp. 18-19.

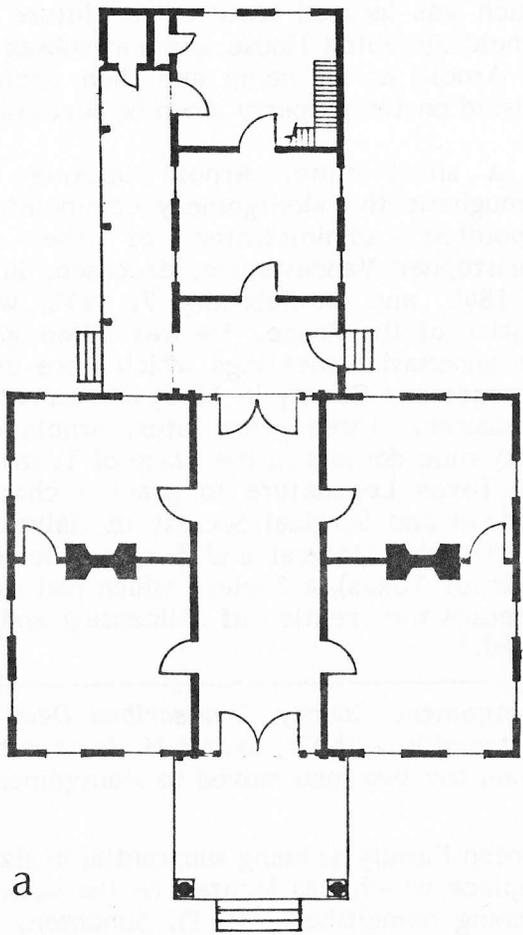
Figure 2. The Arnold-Simonton House and the Connecticut Plan: A Comparison

a. Arnold-Simonton House. As built in the late 1840s, the Arnold-Simonton House was comprised of four main rooms, a central hallway, front porch, and kitchen ell. The placement of fireplaces on the inside of the house, as well as the existence of an enclosed central hall, rather than the more common open breezeway, differentiated the building from most Texas houses of the same period.

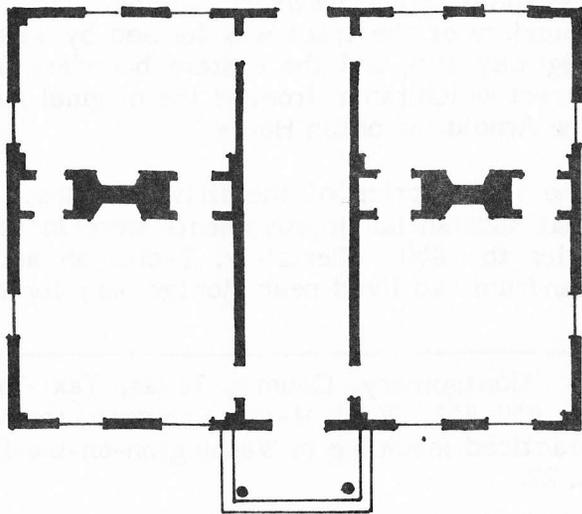
b. Connecticut Plan. According to Isham, Brown, and Kelly, the Connecticut Plan had developed by the last third of the eighteenth century and remained a preferred plan until the 1830s. The classic layout of a central hallway flanked by two rooms on each side, each set of which had fireplaces on interior walls, was also popular in North Carolina and other Middle Atlantic states by the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Norman M. Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses, An Historical and Architectural Study* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), pp. 6-11; J. Frederick Kelly, *The Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), pp. 14-19; Doug Swaim, editor, *Towards Preservation of Place. In Celebration of the Carolina Vernacular Landscape*, North Carolina State University, The Student Publication of the School of Design: Volume 26 (N.p.: The Student Publication, 1978), p. 40.



a



b

Although appropriate tax lists are missing, Arnold can be presumed to have stayed briefly in the vicinity of Houston until 1839 when he first appeared on Montgomery County tax rolls. In that year, he was a resident but owned no land or other property until the following year when he purchased fifty acres for \$200 from Zachariah Landrum's widow, Letitia, on March 4, 1840. The land on which Arnold's house was subsequently built was located in the northeast corner of the Landrum Survey, southwest of the town of Montgomery; it measured 531.3 *varas* on a side. The northern boundary of the tract was formed by what is now Highway 105, and the eastern boundary by Louisa Street which ran in front of the original location of the Arnold-Simonton House.<sup>4</sup>

The selling price of the fifty-acre tract suggests that substantial improvements were located there prior to 1840. Certainly, Zachariah and Letitia Landrum had lived near Montgomery for a number

of years, and it is possible that a large log cabin, which was located south of the future site of the Arnold-Simonton House and was subsequently used by Arnold as his home and then doctor's office, existed on the property when he purchased it.<sup>5</sup>

In a short time, Arnold became well-known throughout the Montgomery community. He was appointed administrator of the estate of Christopher Vandevender, deceased, in December of 1840, and on February 7, 1842, was elected Justice of the Peace. He was called upon to chair the annexation meetings which were organized in Montgomery County in 1845, and served as County Treasurer. Three years later, Arnold was one of forty-nine doctors in the State of Texas to petition the Texas Legislature to grant a charter to the Medical and Surgical Society of Galveston (subsequently the Medical and Surgical Society of the State of Texas), a Society which had as one of its purposes the creation of a licensing and examining board.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Montgomery, County, Texas, Tax Rolls, 1838-1840; Montgomery County, *Transcribed Deed Record E*, pp. 450-451. W. N. Martin also noted that Arnold formed a partnership with Dr. James H. Price with whom he practiced medicine in Washington-on-the-Brazos until 1839 when the two men moved to Montgomery. Martin, p. 22.

5. The log house which was described by members of the Simonton Family as being substantial in size, having a loft which was reached via an interior stair, and a stone fireplace which was located on the back, or south, wall, was used for storage for a number of years before being demolished. R. D. Simonton, Mrs. T. C. (Cricket) Simonton, Vivian Furlow, and Bessie Owen, June 25, 1980, Montgomery, Texas, interview with Martha Doty Freeman.

6. *Telegraph and Texas Register*, January 6, 1841; May 21, 1845; Republic of Texas, *Election Register, 1836-42*, Texas State Library; Pat Ireland Nixon, *A History of the Texas Medical Association 1853-1953* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953), pp. 5-6; *Montgomery Patriot*, July 2, 1845.

It was probably about this time that Arnold began to consider building a new home. His status in the Montgomery community was steadily rising as the prosperity of the town itself was increasing, and he may have felt a desire to own a house which reflected his economic and social stature. Certainly, the County tax rolls for the period 1847-1850 not only testify to Arnold's wealth, but also help support the suggestion that the Arnold-Simonton House was indeed constructed in the late 1840s. By 1846, Arnold owned not only the former Zachariah Landrum property, but also 640 acres in the E. J. Arnold grant, 500 acres in the L. H. Ford grant, 320 acres in the F. Cooke grant, 20 acres in the T. Taylor grant, 162 acres in the T. Chatham grant, 2 lots in Montgomery, 2 Negroes, and sundry property.

An examination of the renditions on the Landrum property, where the Arnold-Simonton House was built, strongly suggests a construction date for the House of 1848: in 1847, the land involved was assessed at a little more than fifty cents per acre. The following year the Landrum property was assessed at \$4.00 per acre, a difference in assessment which demonstrates that improvements of a substantial nature had been made.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Arnold-Simonton House: Some Architectural Precedents**

When it was completed, the Arnold-Simonton House included four main rooms, a central hallway, front porch, and kitchen ell, and displayed classic Greek Revival detailing (Figure 2). To a great extent, it was very similar to a number of other mid-nineteenth-century homes in America which found their inspiration in England and Ireland, where the central-hall type with exterior gable chimneys was a preferred house form.<sup>8</sup>

However, the placement of fireplaces on the inside of the House lifts the Arnold-Simonton House out of the ordinary Texas pattern. Rather than constructing them on the exterior gable walls, Arnold chose to locate two chimneys on interior walls so that fireplaces warmed each of the four rooms, two of which were located on either side of the central hallway.

A brief discussion of the evolution of what is commonly known as the Connecticut house plan (Figure 2) suggests a possible origin for the floor-plan of the Arnold-Simonton House. Architectural historians Norman Isham, Albert Brown, and J. F. Kelly have all pointed out that sometime in the latter half of the eighteenth century the layout of many Connecticut houses changed dramatically.

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7. Montgomery County, Texas, Tax Rolls, 1847, 1848.

8. Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Log Buildings, a Folk Architecture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), pp. 95, 123.

Where previously the typical house had consisted of two rooms with a chimney between, after 1730 or 1735, an increase in colonial wealth and a concomittant desire to follow English fashions resulted in the adaptation of the central-entry floorplan. The older entry with the chimney behind it was replaced by a passage or hall which ran from the front to the back of the house. Two rooms were built on each side of the passage. Chimneys were at first in the end walls of the house, but eventually were located between each pair of rooms. In a still later development, an ell was added to contain the kitchen and its dependencies. The general spaciousness, formality, balance, and refinement of the new floorplan were ideally suited to the elegance of the Greek Revival style when it became popular in Connecticut in the 1830s.<sup>9</sup>

What has been called the "Connecticut plan" was well defined by the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and was representative of houses built after that period. Likely it was a house type with which Dr. Arnold and his family members were familiar prior to their move to Texas in the 1830s (Figure 3).

### **The Arnold-Simonton House, Later Years**

Dr. E. J. Arnold only lived to enjoy his new home for a brief decade. On September 12, 1857, he died, leaving his wife and three children: Francis A.,

Eveline, and Louise (Ludy). His estate, which consisted of almost 5,000 acres, town lots in Montgomery, and lots in the E. J. Arnold addition to the town, also included numerous household items, a listing of which makes it possible to reconstruct some of the interior appearance of the Arnold House shortly after it was constructed. There were curtains at the windows and some carpeting. Fireplace items included three pairs of andirons and two pairs of shovels and tongs. Furniture included a piano, melodeon, bureau, one dozen chairs, three rocking chairs, a center table, three beds and bedsteads, one couch, a candlestand, a clock, two glass shades, a dressing table, looking glasses, two wash stands a bookcase and desk, three chests, three tables, one safe (piesafe?), one cupboard, six dining-room chairs, two old guns, one chest with tools, four candlesticks, four lamps, and between sixty and seventy books, including volumes on medicine, poetry, history, and travel.<sup>10</sup>

Rhoda Ann Arnold, Arnold's widow, continued to own the House, although she did not always live there, until January 25, 1873, when she sold it, along with some other property, to John C. Womack. On that date, Womack paid Arnold \$3,300 in gold. He may have moved into the House soon after, for a descendent still recalls that what was formerly known as the Arnold House was always identified in her family as the Womack House.<sup>11</sup>

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9. Isham and Brown, pp. 6-11; Kelly, pp. 14-19.

10. Montgomery County, *Probate Minutes 10*, pp. 385-386, 427.

11. Mrs. Ella Daggett Stumpf, San Antonio, telephone conversation on July 2, 1980, with Martha Doty Freeman, Austin.

Womack, one of Montgomery's more colorful early residents, was also one of the wealthier residents of the County, a major slave owner, and a farmer who dealt in large amounts of real estate. However, like Arnold, John Womack was not a long-time resident of the House, and on January 17, 1886, his widow, Lucy J. Womack, sold the fifty-acre house tract, as well as a number of other parcels of land, to Montgomery resident Reuben Davis Simonton.<sup>12</sup>

With Simonton's purchase, the Arnold-Simonton House once again passed into the original family's hands for on December 7, 1865, Simonton had married one of Arnold's daughters, Louise (Ludy). Born in Robertson County in the early 1840s, Simonton had moved with his parents, William and Eliza M. Simonton, to Montgomery. During the Civil War he served in Terry's Texas Rangers. With the end of the War, he settled down in Montgomery, was elected the first Democratic sheriff of Montgomery County following Reconstruction, and raised a family that consisted of two daughters and four sons, one of whom, R. C. Simonton, received the one-acre house tract in 1919.<sup>13</sup>

Various members of the Simonton Family lived in the old Arnold-Simonton House for some ninety years, and it is presumed that they were responsible for most of the changes made to the structure. Descendants recall that until the 1930s, the House was very much as it had been when Arnold built it.<sup>14</sup> The windows on the front and sides of the house had been changed, but the interior was basically unaltered. A sitting room was located in the right front, or northeast portion of the House and a bedroom in the northwest portion, a plan that was reflected in the south one-half of the House. Identical chimneys were located between the two sets of rooms so that the four main rooms were warmed by four fireplaces which terminated in two chimneys.

At the west end of the central hallway, opposite the front door, another main door led out to a breezeway which was oriented north/south across the back of the House. A doorway was located on the north end of the breezeway so that family members could pass outside to use a pump attached to a well.

Directly to the west of the breezeway, and generally in line with the central hallway, was a room which

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12. Montgomery County, *Deed Record* 7, p. 383. According to a family member, Womack kept a peacock in the yard, which was filled with beds of flowers such as pansies. An orchard was located in back of the House. Mrs. Ella Daggett Stumpf, *Reminiscences of Mrs. Alice Woodson Lee (Mrs. Robert E. Lee)*, transcription in the possession of Ella Daggett Stumpf.

13. Anonymous, [Notes on the Simonton Family] (N.p.: n.p. n.d.), n.p.; Montgomery County, *Deed Record* 100, pp. 258-259.

14. Simonton, Simonton, Furlow, and Owen, interview.

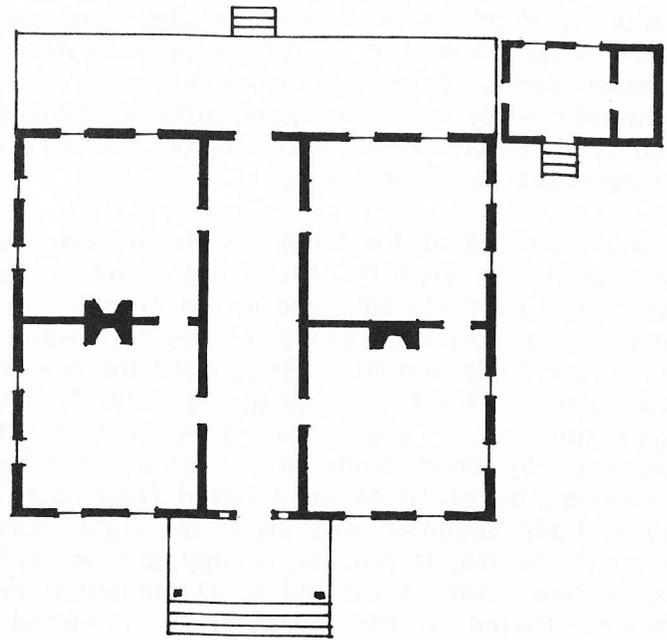
Figure 3. The Martin-McDonald House, Montgomery, Texas

a. The Martin-McDonald House, as it appeared in a photograph made about 1900, was almost identical to the Arnold-Simonton House before certain alterations were made to it, such as the replacement of earlier 6 over 6 windows with 2 over 2 units. The similarity of the two houses is not surprising. Like the Arnolds, Mrs. R. B. Martin came from Connecticut and was, in fact, Dr. E. J. Arnold's sister-in-law. Photograph courtesy of Mr. J. B. McDonald, Rosenberg, Texas.

b. Floorplan of the Martin-McDonald House, as adapted from a drawing by Mr. J. B. McDonald.



a.



b.

functioned as a dining room. Adjacent to this room, on the west, was a kitchen. A long porch ran east/west the length of the dining room and kitchen, on the south, at right angles to the breezeway. No door separated the breezeway and porch.

Columns which were located on the front porch were wood, and the house initially rested on wooden piers. Interior finishes were not clearly remembered by any informants, although Simonton family members noted that the original flooring in the house was wide-plank.

Many members of the Simonton Family continued to live in the vicinity of the old house on land which had formerly belonged to the Arnolds. R. Q. and Emma Simonton, son and daughter-in-law of R. D. and Ludy Simonton, designated the one-acre housesite as their homestead on July 8, 1920, approximately a year after they received the property by deed from other family members. However, by partition deed dated November 28, 1927, Ludy Simonton was given the right, during her natural life, to possess, occupy, and use as her home "one room in the old R. D. Simonton residence situated on the 1 acre tract . . . owned by [R. Q. Simonton] and included in Lot No. 4 [16.392 acres] of this subdivision . . ." <sup>15</sup>

It was during the tenure of R. Q. and Emma Simonton that the Arnold-Simonton House was altered to the greatest extent. They hired Mr. H. A. Daut, who changed the configuration of the central hallway, adding a partial partition half-way through it, and moving the old south wall approximately two feet to the south in the back half of the hall. He removed the four fireplaces and two chimneys, installed two bathrooms where the fireplaces had once been, and blocked in the door which had been located on the north side of the northernmost fireplaces and had provided a passageway from the sitting room in the front of the House to the bedroom in the back. He moved the interior partition walls between the two sets of front and back rooms, and very likely installed the wainscotting presently in the bathrooms. Outside, with the assistance of Lloyd Griffin, he replaced the older wooden footings with brick piers and replaced deteriorated sills and studs. He was probably responsible for adding the small apartment located on the north side of the House in about 1935-1938. <sup>16</sup>

In 1959, the Arnold-Simonton House and associated 16.392 acres were deeded by Mrs. Emma Gay Simonton and R. D. Simonton to Martin W. Simonton who retained possession of the property until 1977. In that year, Martin W. and Essie D. Simonton deeded to the Montgomery Historical Society 0.3 acres of the Zachariah Landrum Survey

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15. Montgomery County, *Deed Record 100*, pp. 257-259; *Deed Record 118*, pp. 244-246.

16. Simonton, Simonton, Furlow, and Owen, interview; R. D. Simonton, interview with Mrs. Bessie Owen, June 4, 1979, in Montgomery, Texas.

to which the House had been moved by the Society.<sup>17</sup> The House was reoriented so that it faced north, and a portion of the kitchen ell was removed.

Despite these changes of siting and structure, the Arnold-Simonton House was deemed sufficiently significant to be nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in the fall of 1979. Its subsequent inclusion on the Register provided official recognition of the importance of its various owners and of its architectural merit.

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17. Montgomery County, *Deed Record 1036*, p. 338.



## GENERAL ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

The Arnold-Simonton House is a one-story, Greek Revival cottage constructed symmetrically about a central hall. The structure reflects, in its simple, yet sophisticated, detailing and in its ordered arrangement, the architectural heritage of its builder, Dr. E. J. Arnold, as well as the regional influences of the Greek Revival style in Texas prior to 1850. Although the Arnold-Simonton House also reflects the classical vocabulary of the ante-bellum style, it is not purely Southern. Instead, the House is distinguished by interior fireplaces and structural detailing which are typical of a central-hall type popular in Connecticut and the Middle Atlantic states in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Significant extant features of the Arnold-Simonton House include a classical portico, a deep dentilated cornice, pedimented end gables, a classical entrance with transom and side-lights, and carefully determined proportions.

## ARCHITECTURAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Structure

The Arnold-Simonton House is of typical braced-frame construction. The underpinning, which consists of sills at the exterior walls, lateral intermediate beams, a central longitudinal summer beam, and floor joists, sits on piers and supports a superstructure of studs and braces mortised into the sill. Original sills and beams were rough-hewn.

All the other elements of the underpinning are rough-sawn.

The superstructure's studs and corner posts are braced at the corners, top and bottom, with short diagonal sway braces. The stud walls support a top wall plate which in turn supports the ceiling joists which look out beyond the wall plane to form an overhanging eave and cornice. A secondary plate sits on the outside extremity of the overhanging ceiling joists and supports the rafters which are butted to the ridge. The ceiling joists are not continuous across the structure but are lapped and notched over a central longitudinal summer beam which corresponds to the longitudinal summer beam of the underpinning. A stud wall originally projected from the lower summer beam to the upper summer beam and formed a longitudinal wall which separated pairs of rooms on either side of the central hall. The summer beams were offset about 1'-0" from and parallel to the ridge line to facilitate penetration of the chimneys through the structure. Both the portico and the projecting kitchen wing at the rear of the structure follow similar framing methodology. Generally, the structural detailing is simple and lacks complicated joinery such as dovetailing and fitted joints.

### TABLE 1: STRUCTURAL MATERIALS SCHEDULE

**Sills:** Original sills are extant only at the kitchen wing. They are 8" x 8" rough-hewn oak, lapped and pegged at corners and intermediate joints. The original sills around the main part of the House have been replaced by