



# King William preservationist Mathis, 86, dies

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Walter Nold Mathis, an investment banker and preservationist who led the effort to restore and revitalize the King William Historic District in the 1960s, died Friday at age 86.

The cause of death was a stroke. Funeral arrangements were pending at Porter Loring Mortuary.

In 2005, he was honored by the Texas Society of Architects with its Cornerstone Award for his "lifelong efforts to preserve and restore important historical and architectural icons in Texas."

Inaugurated in 1999, the Cornerstone Award is the society's highest public recognition. Former recipients include Lady Bird Johnson.

In 2003, the National Register for Historic Preservation bestowed on Mathis its most prestigious prize, the Crowninshield Award, for his work in protecting Texas heritage.

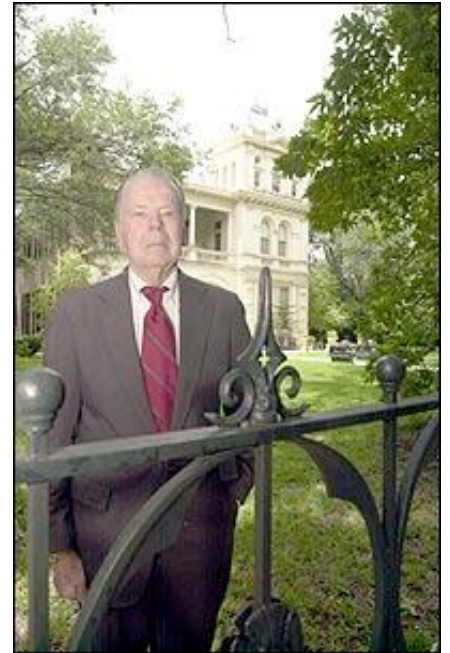
Richard Moe, president of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said Mathis had a pioneering preservation spirit.

"Walter Mathis was one of the most important and influential preservationists in the last half-century, not only in Texas but in the United States. His magnificent restoration of Villa Finale, his revitalization of the King William Historic District, all that he did for San Antonio was of the highest quality and the most generous intentions," Moe said. "We will miss him very much."

Mathis might never have begun working in King William had it not been for the McAllister Freeway being built across his house, then at Mulberry Avenue and Stadium Drive.

Although Mathis was opposed to the freeway construction, he did not fight it and began looking for a new house.

He found one at 401 King William St. in the King William District south of downtown.



Express-News file photo

Walter Mathis' house, valued at \$1 million, will become the first Texas museum operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Known as the Norton/Polk house, it had been divided into eight apartment units.

"The porches had been closed, and the entire back yard was a big gravel parking area," Mathis told journalist Sterlin Holmesly in an oral history interview in 1995.

But Mathis, a genteel, eccentric bachelor who retired every afternoon with his signature concoction of Cherry Pepsi and rum, liked the limestone four-story house so much that he purchased it in 1967.

At the time, the 25-block neighborhood consisted of run-down houses that fewer than 100 years earlier had been the mansions of wealthy German merchants who settled here.

The main street had been named King Wilhelm in honor of Wilhelm I, king of Prussia in the 1870s. The street was renamed Pershing Avenue during World War I. After the war, the street took the English version of the original name and became King William Street.

Mathis spent the next year and a half living in a downtown hotel while a team of 16 men worked on restoring the house.

With architect O'Neil Ford as consultant, the house was completely gutted, new copper plumbing installed, and 15 stained-glass windows that had been removed and dumped in the basement installed. A gazebo and formal gardens were added.

He filled the house with eclectic collections, from art by early Texas artist Julian Onderdonk to Texas furniture.

One of the most complete collections was of items related to French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

"I became interested in Napoleon when I was 11 years old, and I was just fascinated by his military career," Mathis told the San Antonio Express-News in July 2002. "I've spent a lifetime collecting everything I could about Napoleon. I have weapons, helmets, medals, books, art — everything you can think of. I've really focused on trying to make it as comprehensive a collection as I could."

Also known as the Norton/Polk/Mathis House, Mathis named the elegant mansion Villa Finale because, he said, "it's going to be my last home. I'll never have another house."

The house was recorded as a Texas Historical Landmark in 1971. It also is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Happy with the outcome, over the next 10 years Mathis purchased 14 other houses, and on each fixed the foundation and put on a new tin roof.

"And then," he said, "I would attempt to sell the house to either someone I knew or someone I didn't know, who would use their money to restore it. And I did many of those deals with nothing down. I carried the paper and enabled them, particularly young couples, to spend their money to remodel. But they had to agree to restore the house properly."

For years, Mathis welcomed new residents to the neighborhood by sending them a Christmas tree ornament.

Later, the San Antonio Conservation Society got involved by helping to save and restore the Wulf House. The house serves as the society's headquarters.

In 1968, King William was designated the first historic neighborhood in Texas. Four years later, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Mathis' house, valued at \$1 million, will become the first Texas museum operated by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Mathis established a \$4.5 million endowment to maintain the museum.

For his effort to preserve and redevelop the King William District, the Downtown Alliance gave him its "Downtown's Best" award in March 2001.

The Texas Association of the American Institute of Architects made him an honorary member and the Texas Historical Commission gave him the Ruth Lester Lifetime Achievement Award, the state's highest award for historic preservation.

In recent years, Mathis and Tony Bradfield, partners in the Revel Group, have been buying up buildings downtown and restoring them. The Revel Group renovated the Toltec Apartments near Municipal Auditorium and restored the historic six-story Gibbs Building overlooking Alamo Plaza and the Savoy Hotel/University Block at Soledad and Houston streets.

Descended from the pioneering Canary Islanders who arrived here in 1731 to establish the first civilian government, Mathis was born in San Antonio on Aug. 13, 1919.

He was the grandson of Thomas Henry Mathis, founder of the city of Mathis and co-founder of Rockport.

Mathis joined the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II and flew 65 missions over Germany as the pilot of a B-25 bomber. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

A vice president of the brokerage firm Salomon Smith Barney, he was a lifetime trustee of the McNay Art Museum, the River Walk Commission's first chairman and chairman of the city's Historic Review Board for more than 20 years.

Mathis, who never married, is survived by numerous nieces and nephews.

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*Staff Writer Amy Dorsett contributed to this report.*

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Online at: [http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA123105.01B.Mathis\\_Obit.21d01563.html](http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/metro/stories/MYSA123105.01B.Mathis_Obit.21d01563.html)