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# Historical Survey of the Lands within The Alamo Plaza - River Linkage Development Project

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# Historical Survey of the Lands within The Alamo Plaza - River Linkage Development Project

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HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE LANDS  
WITHIN  
THE ALAMO PLAZA - RIVER LINKAGE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Anne A. Fox  
and  
James E. Ivey

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Center for Archaeological Research  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
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## INTRODUCTION

In December 1977 the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, entered into a contract with the City of San Antonio to compile a history of a section of the city bounded by Alamo Street, Crockett Street, the San Antonio River and Houston Street. Plans for the area include removal of a number of buildings and construction of a major hotel, a parking garage, and a park linking Alamo Plaza with the San Antonio River Walk. The area to be affected includes the sites of a number of important historical structures, including the southwest corner of Mission San Antonio de Valero and the site of one of the first commercial ice plants in the city.

The document produced by this study is to be used as a basis for planning archaeological excavations in the area to be disturbed by construction. Research has been carried out by the authors under the supervision of Dr. Thomas R. Hester, Director of the Center and Jack Eaton, Assistant Director.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Every conceivable resource has been consulted in the reconstruction of the history of the study area. All available archival sources and land records at the Bexar County Courthouse and in Austin have been searched for references both to the area and to the individuals who have lived and worked there over the years. Local histories and eyewitness accounts, both published and unpublished, have been used extensively, as have city directories and newspapers. Person papers, clipping files, historic maps and paintings, and photographs in local libraries have yielded a tremendous amount of information which is essential to the understanding of the area's history.

Both authors have collaborated on much of the research. Ivey has concentrated primarily on the time period from secularization of the missions in 1793 to Texas statehood in 1846; he has traced land ownership as it evolved from public or mission land to private residential plots and has attempted to discover what happened to the structures on and around the west wall of the mission during these times. Fox has concentrated on the rebirth of the area after the battle of the Alamo and its commercial development in the last half of the 19th century. The sites of historical structures which are mentioned in this report and which will be affected by the project are shown in Fig. 1.

All pertinent notes, copies of documents and maps are now on file at the laboratory of the Center for Archaeological Research and will be continually consulted as archaeological monitoring and excavations proceed. This report consists of a summary of the information compiled during the research effort.

## CULTURE HISTORY OF THE AREA

### Prehistoric Period

Human settlement in Texas has for thousands of years been directly linked to its water courses. Numerous archaeological surveys in Bexar County and the surround-

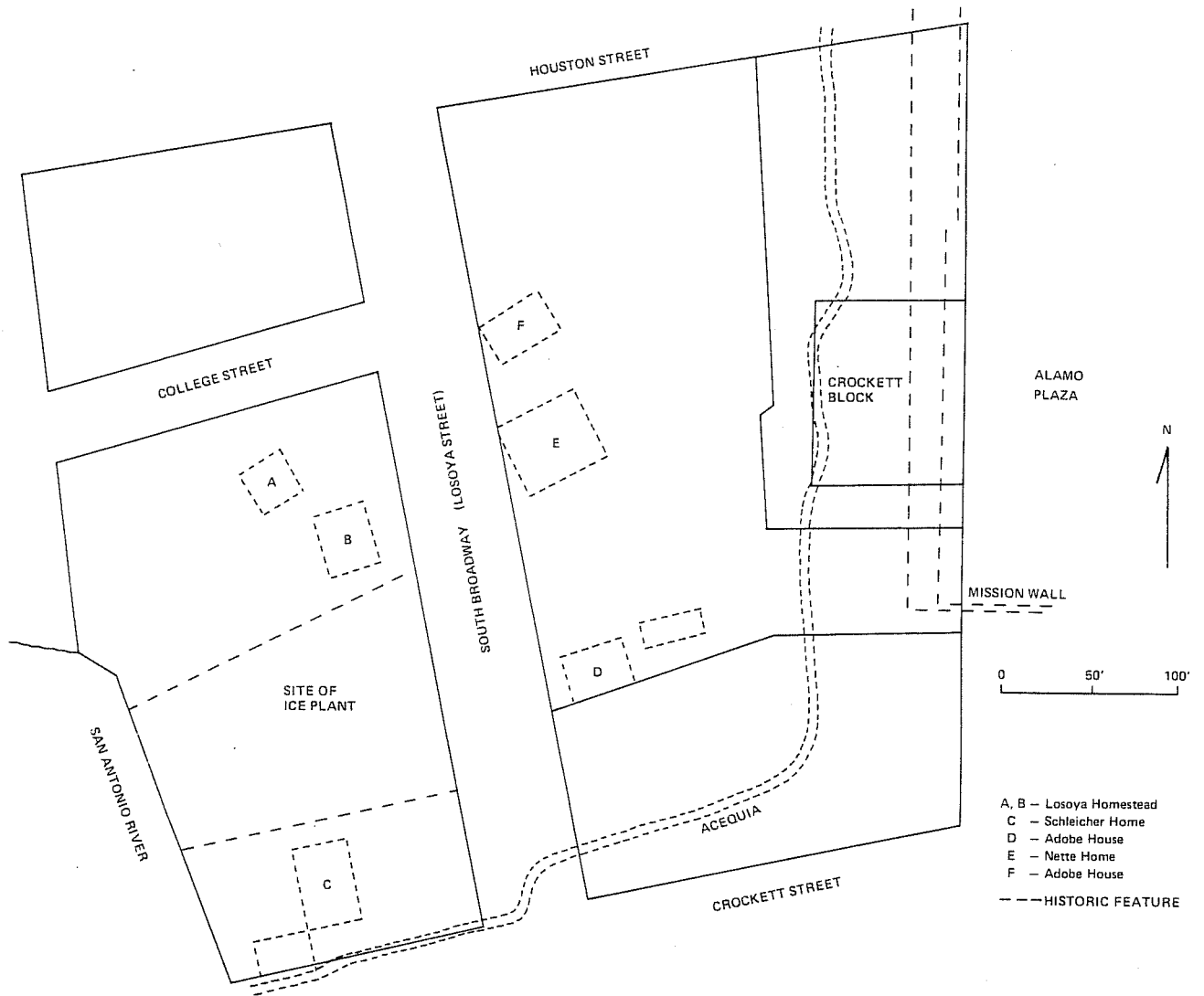


Figure 1. Plan of the Area to be Disturbed by the Alamo Plaza-River Linkage Project. Shown are the sites of significant historical features.

ing area have found that this dependence directly influences the location of prehistoric camp sites. The San Antonio River and its tributary creeks are lined with these habitation sites, dating as early as the Paleo-Indian period some 11,000 years ago (Fox 1975; Hester 1978).

Locations which were particularly attractive to human settlement in prehistoric times were around permanent springs and waterholes (Fox 1977:18); these areas were more dependable during drought periods when water in the creeks had disappeared and the water level was low in the larger streams.

According to early accounts (Cooley 1900:55), there were in the 19th century two major springs in the east bank of the San Antonio River, one near the Commerce Street bridge and one behind the old Losoya homestead. The fact that the latter spring still flows testifies to its probable size and importance in prehistoric times when the water table was higher. It is reasonable to assume that a high, sloping bank containing large springs which flowed perennially would have attracted prehistoric settlement. For this reason, we postulate that the study area may contain the remains of prehistoric encampments in its lower levels.

### The Spanish Period

The first Spanish settlement in the San Antonio area in 1718 was located on San Pedro Creek. Within a year, the site of Mission San Antonio de Valero had been moved to the east side of the San Antonio River to a location slightly south of the present site; by 1724 the mission buildings were being constructed on the east side of what is now Alamo Plaza (Habig 1968:77). The history of the development and operation of the mission has been treated in detail by Fr. Marion Habig (1968) and the history of the plaza by Fox, Bass and Hester (1976). The following brief summary of the history of the southwestern corner of the mission which is directly involved with the proposed construction project is sufficient for this report.

The early descriptions of the mission do not include any mention of a perimeter wall along the west side of the compound. However, in 1762 the area to the west of the convent and church was a walled enclosure with a fortified gate to the south and stone Indian houses built against the west wall (Habig 1968:57). An acequia ran through the compound, parallel to the west wall. At some point, possibly in mission times or perhaps later, this section of the acequia was filled in and the ditch was rerouted outside the west wall.

In 1786 Fray Jose Francisco Lopez, Father President of the Missions in the province of Texas, granted a house and workshop and their lots of land together with a large garden at the southwest corner of the mission to Pedro de los Angeles Charle, as a reward for 13 years of service to Mission San Antonio de Valero as carpenter, barber and sacristan (BCDR G1:1). The grant specified that the house was made of stone and measured 8 varas square, while the carpenter's shop was a jacal measuring 6-3/4 by 7-3/4 varas. The lots on which these houses stood faced eastward onto the road running north into the Mission, the road later called Alamo Street. Pedro Charle died between 1786 and 1792, leaving his property to his wife, Maria de Estrada.

In 1793 the missions were secularized and the lands of Mission Valero were distributed among the Indians of the mission and to refugees from the disbanded East Texas settlements. The lands on the north and west sides of the Plaza de Valero were granted to Miguel and Cipriano Losoya (BCDR Sp. 3:302). Later, Maria de Estrada's daughter, Concepcion Charle, married into the Losoya family and eventually inherited title to most of the land on either side of Losoya Street within the project area.

After secularization of the mission, the buildings were used for a number of years as a military barracks and hospital (Nixon 1936:16). By the late 1820s, portions of the west wall were being sold to military officers (BCDR FL:206-208).

As a result of disorders and unrest in Texas, in October 1835 General Martin Perfecto de Cos arrived in San Antonio and began to fortify the old mission, by that time popularly called the Alamo (Green 1952:29). After Cos's defeat at the hands of the Texan army, the Alamo was further fortified and prepared for the famous battle of March 1836. It is not known which of the numerous fortification features later recorded by participants in this battle were constructed by Cos and which by the Texans. However, a Mexican officer tells in his memoirs of a fortification ditch which had been built "to reinforce the Southwest corner because here the main wall was too low" (Sanchez Lamego 1968:31).

After the Mexicans' defeat at the battle of San Jacinto, General Vicente Filasola sent orders to General Andrade to destroy the Alamo's defensive capabilities. Dr. J. H. Barnard, a prisoner in San Antonio at the time, said "the Alamo was completely dismantled; all single walls were leveled, the fosse filled up, and the pickets torn up and burnt" (Huson 1949:45). With the destruction of the fortifications of the Alamo by Andrade, the use of the old mission as a military position ended, and private interests soon began to encroach upon the area.

### The Period of Rebirth

During the period directly after the battle of the Alamo and its subsequent destruction, the area was deserted and superstitiously avoided by the local populace. Apparently a few adobe and jacal structures remained on the west wall, which gradually came to be inhabited by squatters (Corner 1890:10). In 1849 the United States Army officially took possession of the Alamo buildings for use as a Quartermaster's Depot; they began cleaning up the debris and rebuilding fallen walls and roofs of the major buildings. During this same year, Concepcion Charle divided her lands to the west of the Alamo walls into six lots, half on either side of a street which later became known as Losoya Street.

The decade between 1850 and 1860 saw the area on the east side of the River undergo a transformation from ruins and desolation to a busy commercial center. An influx of Anglo-American and European settlers caused the population of the town to grow from 3,500 in 1850 to 8,200 in 1860 (Woolford 1963:144). The plaza was a staging point for Army wagon trains which supplied the chain of frontier forts to the north and west of San Antonio. The Menger Hotel was built to cater to this traffic. Small shops and houses of military families grew up around the plaza, and a market house was constructed in the center of the plaza to accommodate the residents on the east side of the river.



At the same time, the lands to the west of the plaza were becoming a fashionable residential area. Gustavus Schleicher, distinguished State Representative, then Senator and later United States Congressman, built a home on the northwest corner of Crockett and Losoya Streets (BCDR 1858 P2:630), south of the old Losoya family home. Across the street, Dr. August Nette, one of San Antonio's first druggists, was acquiring property to build a residence (BCDR N1:348). Slightly to the north and backing up to these lands, newly arrived citizens were building spacious homes along the south side of Paseo Street, renamed Houston Street in 1851 (Heusinger 1951:25).

After the Civil War and the difficult period of reconstruction which followed, San Antonio recovered its equilibrium and began to grow and develop rapidly. The Army acquired the property which was to become Fort Sam Houston and moved away from the plaza. In 1871 the city acquired the remaining mission buildings in the plaza, demolished them and formed one open plaza from Houston Street to Blum Street (Fox, Bass and Hester 1976:22).

In 1868 the first commercial establishment came to Losoya Street with the construction of the San Antonio Ice Company by J. B. Lacoste, Honore Grenet and J. Brunet (*San Antonio Express* 1929). Originally the ice plant was a two-story frame structure close to the river (Koch 1873). By 1890 the plant had been reconstructed and its processes updated to the point where it occupied a number of buildings in a significant area on the west side of Losoya Street (Lochbaum 1965:48).

Koch's bird's-eye view map of the city in 1873 also shows three small houses on each side of Losoya Street, and indicates that the street had then been cut through to Commerce Street. There are a number of small adobe structures shown facing Alamo Plaza. The acequia still ran between these structures and the homes on Losoya Street, crossing under Losoya and entering the river behind the Schleicher house.

The 1877 Sanborn map shows no change on Losoya Street. The small adobe structures along the west side of the plaza are identified as a feed store, a watch shop, a barber shop, a warehouse and a saloon.

Significant changes began to appear in the area in the late 1870s as modern technology invaded the city. Water mains, a telephone system, an electric system and the first street railway were all inaugurated between 1878 and 1882 (Corner 1890:131-137). However, the event of most importance to the city at this time was the arrival of the first railroad, the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio (Schuchard 1951:28). A new era of expansion and prosperity had arrived, and the effects were rapidly seen in the Alamo Plaza-Losoya Street area. By 1885 (Sanborn 1885) the small houses on Losoya Street were just beginning to be encroached upon by commercial interests. A mattress factory, two hotels, the headquarters of San Antonio Rifles and a warehouse had appeared. The ice plant now occupied most of the area between Crockett Street and the old Losoya homestead. The acequia was by this time buried and forgotten, and the small shops fronting on the plaza had been joined on the north by the handsome, three-story stone Crockett Block building designed by architect Alfred Giles (Jutson 1972:95). The south side of Houston Street was then lined with one story buildings containing various business establishments such as saloons,

printing shops and a Chinese laundry.

The Sanborn map of 1888 reveals that little had changed on Losoya Street, except for the construction of the new Grand Opera House at Crockett Street and Alamo Plaza, and the replacement of most of the adobe shops on the west side of the plaza with more modern buildings which contain a variety of small shops and a drug store. The ice factory was still in operation, having been purchased by the Crystal Ice Company after the death of Mr. Lacoste in 1887 (Morrison 1891: 101-102). By 1895 the plant had been bought by Thomas H. Gray and turned into a steam laundry (Appler 1895:217).

The 1904 insurance map (Sanborn 1904) indicates numerous changes had taken place in the study area. Except for the three small houses on the east side, Losoya Street had become a commercial street, paved with wood blocks and lined with warehouses, hotels and the steam laundry. In place of Mr. Schleicher's home, the Masonic Temple stood on the northwest corner of Crockett and Losoya Streets. The old Losoya homestead had been replaced by a two-story warehouse. A three-story building which housed a restaurant with hotel above was sandwiched between the two northern-most houses on the east side of the street, and the center house had a second story added. Facing Alamo Plaza, the last small adobe building had just been replaced with a modern one-story commercial building. The buildings facing onto Houston Street had remained unchanged.

#### Period of Decline

The period from 1904 to the present has seen a gradual deterioration of the Losoya Street neighborhood. The few remaining dwellings eventually gave way to commercial buildings. The area directly behind the Crockett Block became the Palace Theater in 1922 (Sanborn 1952). A number of store buildings facing onto the plaza and Houston Street were replaced in the 1920s with structures built with modern materials and construction methods. The Grand Opera House burned in 1950 and was replaced by a two-story fire-proof concrete and steel building (*ibid*). Gradually, as buildings stood vacant or were condemned, they were torn down and the area used for parking. Presently the entire west side of Losoya Street and a large portion of the east side are used for this purpose. Having come full circle, the area currently approaches the open sloping river bank which it was before the arrival of the Spanish 260 years ago.

#### FEATURES TO BE INVESTIGATED

Clearly it would be impractical, as well as pointless, to attempt to identify and archaeologically investigate each structure or feature encountered during construction of a project of the magnitude of the one planned. One object of this historic reconstruction of the study area has been to develop criteria for deciding which features should be considered of primary importance. Logically, one criterion for choice should be sites and structures about which little or nothing is known and whose recording would add appreciably to our understanding of the pre-history and history of San Antonio as a whole. Another important reason for excavating any historical site is to recover details about construction or technology of past times which were never adequately recorded. An equally important object of archaeological investigation is to recover information about the lives

of individuals who lived at a particular place during a specific time. Keeping in mind these guidelines, we propose that the following investigation be carried out:

1. The possibility of the presence of a prehistoric site in the study area will be considered, and if one is found it will be adequately investigated.
2. The exact location of the southwest corner and west wall of the San Antonio de Valero mission will be determined, and any remains of the wall, and any structures connected with it, will be carefully recorded.
3. Should any remains be found, the location and method of construction of the acequia to the west of the wall will be recorded and an attempt will be made to determine its date of construction.
4. Any remaining structures or ditches built at the time of the fortification and subsequent battle at the Alamo will be investigated and recorded.
5. The location, methods of construction, and details of material culture of the inhabitants of the six residences which are known to have stood on Losoya Street will be investigated where they are still present beneath the surface. This will include test excavations of any house foundations, wells, cisterns and other such features likely to contain information. A search will also be conducted for traces of earlier, unrecorded structures which may have been in the area during the mission period and the early 19th century.
6. A concerted effort will be made to uncover and record any remaining foundations of the original ice plant and to investigate any remnants of its technology which may still be present.

We propose to conduct a systematic investigation by first monitoring the demolition and removal of structures presently standing on the site in order to determine if any walls or portions of walls are part of earlier historic structures. This will be done in order to tell where earlier remains may possibly be preserved or where later basement and foundation construction has eliminated them. We will also monitor the removal of the asphalt paving over areas where the houses and the ice plant were located, to determine what may be left and where disturbances have eliminated the evidence. Then, as areas are cleared in this manner, archaeological excavations will begin. These will consist of selective excavations designed to examine and record subsurface cultural resources as outlined above.

The overall objective and focus of the archaeological project will be to study and record the growth and change within this one block of downtown San Antonio, from prehistoric times to the present day. The investigation of the remains of significant periods in the history of San Antonio will provide a unique opportunity to produce information useful to understanding the history of the city as a whole.

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