



## Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature from the Lone Star State

Volume 1976

Article 1

1976

# An Historical and Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed San Antonio Botanical Center

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### Recommended Citation

Black, Stephen L. (1976) "An Historical and Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed San Antonio Botanical Center," *Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature from the Lone Star State*: Vol. 1976 , Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.21112/ita.1976.1.1>

ISSN: 2475-9333

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ita/vol1976/iss1/1>

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# An Historical and Archaeological Assessment of the Proposed San Antonio Botanical Center

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**AN HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE  
PROPOSED SAN ANTONIO BOTANICAL CENTER**

**Stephen L. Black**

**Center for Archaeological Research  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 24**

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## INTRODUCTION

During late July and early August, 1976, the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio conducted an archaeological and historical assessment of the proposed San Antonio Botanical Center. The project was authorized by the City of San Antonio Department of Parks and Recreation, Ronald Darner, Director.

The archaeological and historical investigations at the proposed Botanical Center were carried out under the terms of Permit for Archaeological Investigation, No. 122, issued by the Texas Antiquities Committee.

## LOCATION OF THE PROJECT

The proposed San Antonio Botanical Center will be located in a 40-acre area at the eastern end of Ludwig Mahncke Park. This area is just east of the San Antonio Garden Center parking lot. The area is bounded by Pershing Avenue on the north, the Old Austin Road on the east, Funston Place on the south and Millie Lane on the west.

The proposed site is situated on the crest of a large ridge running north-south between Salado Creek on the east and the San Antonio River to the west.

## PREVIOUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL WORK

No archaeological work has been done in the immediate area of Mahncke Park. There are, however, numerous known archaeological sites within a few miles along the San Antonio River and along Salado Creek. A survey conducted by the Center for Archaeological Research in the southern portion of the Olmos Basin in 1975 recorded six prehistoric sites (Fox 1975). Amateur collectors have long been active in the Olmos Basin. Materials recovered from the Olmos Basin span the entire prehistoric culture sequence for south-central Texas. The major periods include: *Paleo-Indian* (9200-6000 B.C.), *Archaic* (6000 B.C.-1000 A.D.), *Late Prehistoric* (Neo-American, 1000-1600 A.D.) and *Historic* (beginning ca. 1600 A.D.). These categories are broad cultural traditions which took different forms in various areas. The Olmos Basin with its natural springs has long been utilized by man. Excavations have recently been conducted in the Olmos Basin by an Incarnate Word College field school directed by Susanna and Paul Katz.

A number of prehistoric sites are known to exist all along the San Antonio River in Brackenridge Park (Anne Fox, personal communication). Prehistoric sites also occur along the Salado Creek drainage (records on file, Center for Archaeological Research; T. R. Hester, personal communication). Excavations along the Salado Creek drainage have uncovered materials dating from Paleo-Indian and Archaic times (Hester and Kohnitz 1975).

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND\*

Prior to 1877 the upper or eastern end of Mahncke Park was used for rock quarry activities to obtain limestone for building purposes. Details of the rock quarry operations are not known but they apparently were located primarily east of Mahncke Park. In 1877 J. B. LaCoste and Associates contracted with the City of San Antonio to construct a water works system. These water works included an open storage reservoir which was built on the eastern end of Mahncke Park. The contract mentions that the reservoir would be built on the rock quarries and that the building materials would be supplied from same.

On April 5, 1877 the *Daily Express* of San Antonio published the accepted contract:

"He further proposes to erect a storage reservoir of six acres of ground on the upper part of the rock quarries, which shall have the capacity of at least five (5) millions of gallons.....the principal objects of the construction of the said reservoir being to insure a regular and adequate supply of water at all times....." (paragraph 20).

"The City shall lease to said LaCoste and Associates for the said storage reservoir six (6) acres of ground or more on the upper or western edge of the quarries...." (paragraph 23).

The results of the construction terminated with the City of San Antonio accepting the water works on July 5, 1878. The reservoir located on the ridge between Salado Creek and the San Antonio River held water pumped by turbine generators from a pumping station powered by an eight to 10 feet drop in the river (located in Brackenridge Park). Water was supplied to the City from the reservoir utilizing gravity, as the reservoir on the ridge top was higher than the surrounding city area.

LaCoste and Associates sold the water company to G. W. Brackenridge in 1883. "Brackenridge became convinced in 1888 that there was danger of complete failure of the San Antonio River as a source of water supply in the event of a long period of drought" (McLean n.d.). Brackenridge then drilled a well near the reservoir to supplement the reservoir supply. The well was too small, too deep, and its flow too slow to pump water successfully. It was abandoned soon after completion (ca. 1889).

By 1890, city residents became alarmed at the possibility that the river and the open reservoir would become contaminated. During this period (early 1890's) wells supplying pure artesian water began to be used to the exclusion of the surface water supply system. At this time the

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\*Compiled by Stephen J. Vollmer

reservoir was abandoned. In 1899, Brackenridge deeded the water works land and properties to the City.

The City of San Antonio has not, to date, developed the property. The undeveloped park land has been overgrown and was used in the past as an unofficial dumping ground. The dense undergrowth and countless mounds of trash and building refuse have masked any undisturbed surfaces which may have existed after the reservoir was abandoned.

#### FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

The proposed Botanical Center site was visited several times by one- and two-man crews from the Center for Archaeological Research. Despite a careful search, no evidence of prehistoric occupation was observed. As mentioned above, very little natural terrain in the form of undisturbed surfaces exists. Piles of broken building material form a mantle over much of the area. Several small gravel roads weave in and out of the overgrown area around the reservoir, and provide access to those individuals responsible for dumping.

On top of the ridge are two depressions which must represent quarry pits. Both are approximately 10-12 feet deep and measure 100 x 50 yards and 120 x 40 yards. The old reservoir was built in the southernmost depression. Still standing today are many of the walls which were built to provide a water storage facility for San Antonio.

Many of these walls have been torn down until now they reach only a few feet in height. A few scattered limestone blocks suggest most of those torn down were hauled away to be used again. Several sections of the reservoir wall remain in good shape and reach a height of approximately 12 feet above the filled-in floor of the reservoir. Fig. 1 provides a plan of the existing reservoir walls.

Walls were constructed from limestone blocks ranging from several hundred pounds to "brick-sized" pieces mortared together and capped with cement. The inner walls of the reservoir are three feet thick at the top of wall, sloping in a stairstep fashion on the outer side to a thickness of approximately five feet. Larger, more massive, blocks were used at the bottom of the wall with progressive courses being smaller stones. Several joints are visible along the walls, representing various stages of construction. The outer wall (U-shaped) is two feet thick (top to bottom) and is much higher than the inner wall. No detailed plans of the reservoir are known to exist, making it difficult to envision the exact mechanism of water flow. No traces were visible of the stone aqueduct which apparently lead to reservoir, until approximately 250 yards toward the San Antonio River. The visible section of the stone aqueduct runs for about 75 yards beginning just east of the Garden Center parking lot and heading east-northeast toward the reservoir. The walls are approximately one foot thick and are 20 feet apart. The walls protrude about 1/2-inch above surface.



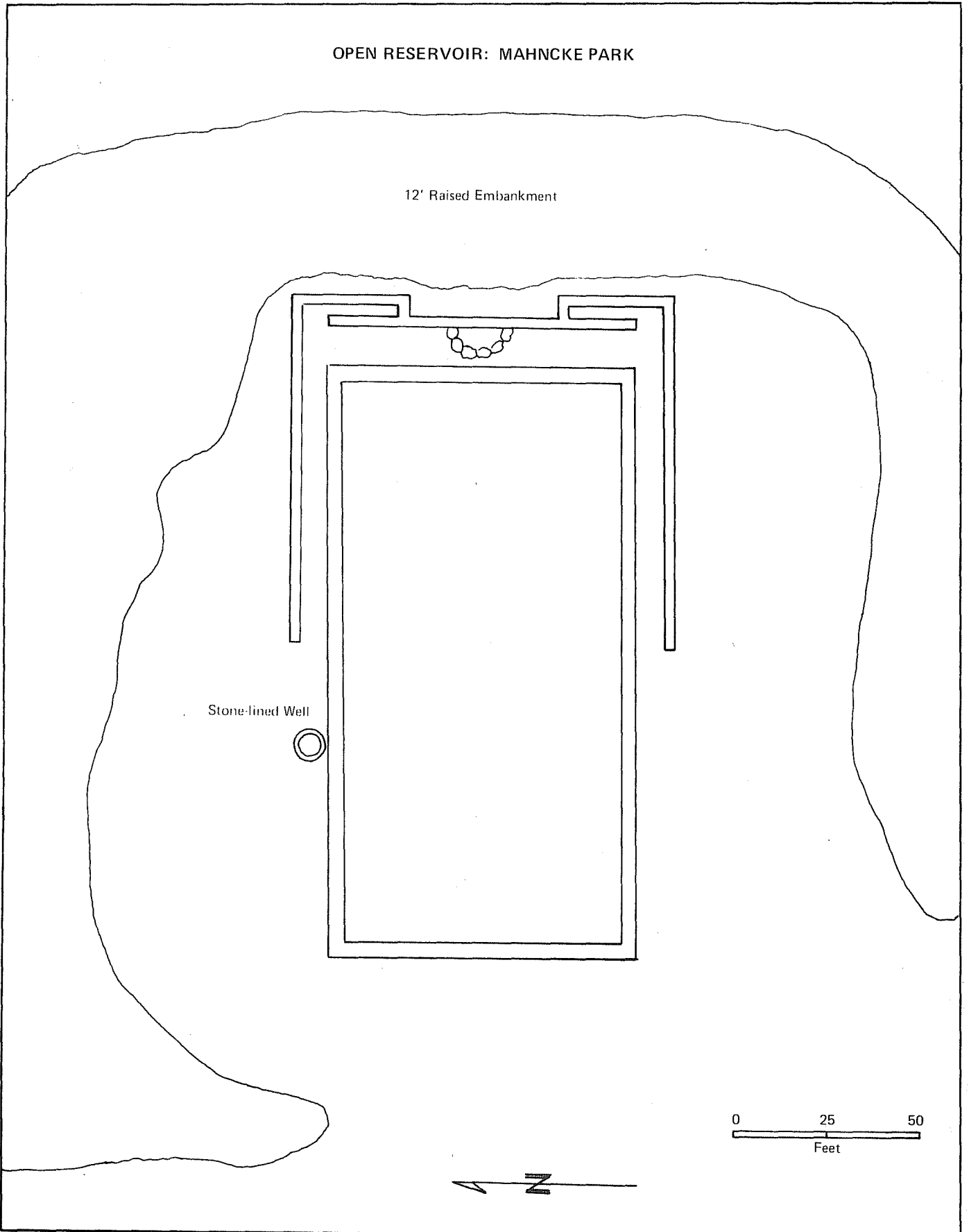


Figure 1. Plan of Open Reservoir, Mahncke Park (San Antonio Botanical Center).

The well dug by G. W. Brackenridge in 1889 is located adjacent to the north wall of the reservoir (Fig. 1). The well was very carefully constructed out of curved pieces of shaped limestone. The interior diameter of the well measures approximately four and one-half feet. The walls are one foot thick. The well is now filled in to a depth of six feet with stone and refuse.

#### CONCLUSIONS

No prehistoric archaeological remains are known to exist and none are likely to be affected by construction of the Botanical Center. It is possible, however, that buried archaeological remains may exist. If any obvious archaeological material is uncovered during construction, it is recommended that a qualified archaeologist be promptly notified. The Mahncke Park site has been significantly altered during the last 100 years. Any prehistoric archaeological resources which may have existed were probably destroyed by quarry activity, reservoir construction, and later dumping.

Historical remains were found during the assessment and have been described in this report. Current plans for the Botanical Center call for incorporation of the reservoir walls as part of the park. As the old open reservoir provides an interesting insight into late 19th century city life, preservation of the existing structure enhances the educational value of the Botanical Center. It is recommended that the stone-lined well made of carefully shaped limestone also be incorporated into the Botanical Garden plans. The proposed Botanical Center will not adversely affect any of the presently known historical resources.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Stephen J. Vollmer aided the author by researching historical data and by assisting field investigations. Thanks are due to Ronald Darner and the Department of Parks and Recreation for providing topographic maps of Mahncke Park. Historical research was facilitated by the helpful staffs of the Alamo Library and the *Express-News* archives.

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