
The Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas

Historical and Archival Research of the Community



by
Kristi Miller Ulrich

Prepared for:
San Antonio Housing Authority
818 South Flores Street
San Antonio, Texas 78204



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Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Special Report, No. 31

2005

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Cover photograph: Victoria Courts, 1941. The San Antonio Light Collection, UT Institute of Texas Cultures at San Antonio, No. L-2863-C, Courtesy of The Hearst Corporation.

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Abstract:

In March 2005, Carleton Development, CBG Southwest, Inc. of Dallas contracted with the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of The University of Texas at San Antonio to conduct archival research associated with the Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project. The purpose of the research project was to highlight the history of one of San Antonio's first and oldest housing projects. The study made use of deed records, historic maps, and photographs that helped document the history of the area and its relation to the growth and development of the City of San Antonio as a whole. The history of the project area was researched from the colonial period to present day.

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In addition to the contribution of the individuals mentioned above, several CAR employees have been instrumental in the completion of this document. Bruce Moses and Rick Young aided in the preparation of the maps and figures found in this report and Johanna Hunziker formatted the final report. Also, the author would like to thank Dr. Steve A. Tomka, CAR Director, for his guidance in preparation of this report and for performing the internal review of the manuscript.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In March 2005, Carleton Development, CBG Southwest, Inc. of Dallas contracted with the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of The University of Texas at San Antonio to conduct archival research associated with the Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project in San Antonio. The objective of the research is to create a document reviewing the history of one of San Antonio's earliest public housing projects, Victoria Courts.

The Victoria Courts public housing project consisted of 660 units built in the early 1940s, and remodeled several times into the 1990s. The housing project was demolished in the late 1990s and the new master redevelopment plan was created. The new Victoria Courts, or Victoria Commons as it is known today, will consist of a mix of market, affordable, and public housing in the form of multifamily rentals, single-family homes, and town-homes—totaling over 600 housing units.

The plan for redevelopment has created the need to highlight the long history of the area, and celebrate the role of the groups that lived in the area and their contributions to the community. This report presents the archival and historical background research conducted on the area known today as Victoria Commons.

Location of the Project Area

The area known today as Victoria Commons is located in the southeast portion of downtown San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas. The property is bordered on the north by Durango Boulevard, on the south by Leigh Street, on the east by Labor Street, and on the west by IH-37 (Figure 1-1). Two major public works border Victoria Commons. Across Durango Boulevard, to the north, is HemisFair Park, constructed in 1968 (Johnson et al. 1997). To the northeast, on the opposite side of IH-37, is the Alamodome, completed

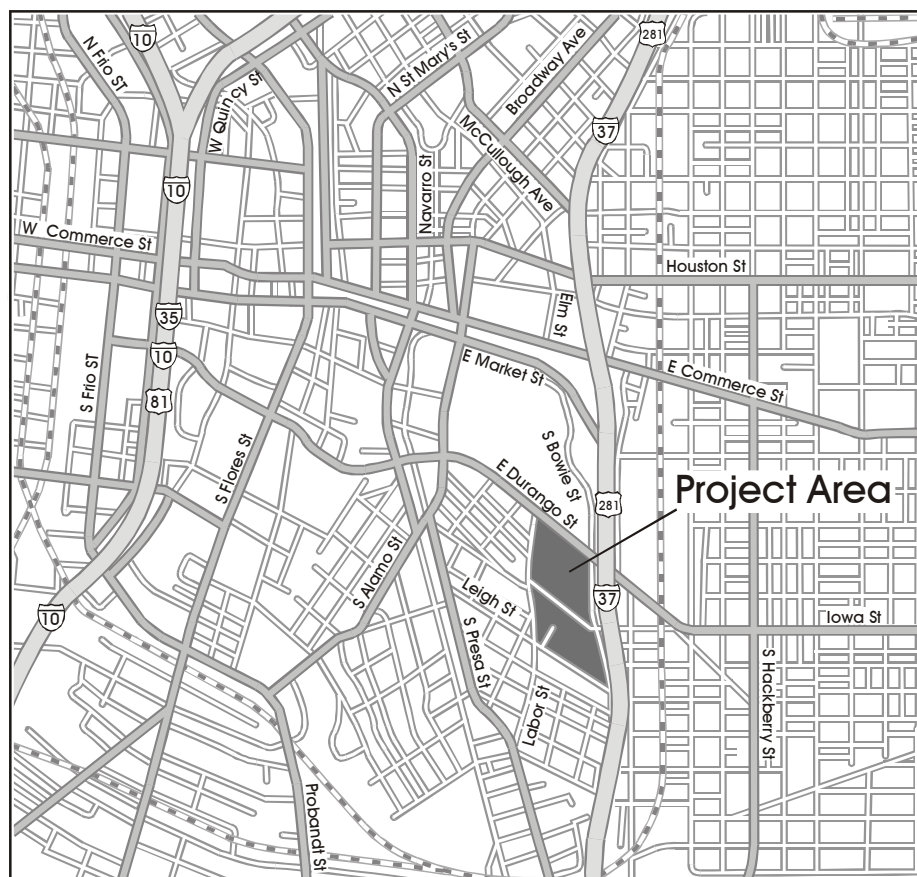


Figure 1-1. Map of Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project within San Antonio.

in May of 1993. The San Antonio River is located approximately 1,070 meters to the west of the community from the intersection of Labor and Refugio streets. The historic Yturri House and the San Antonio Arsenal are located approximately 520 meters and 1,020 meters southwest, respectively. The Historic King William District is approximately 920 meters to the west of Victoria Commons.

The project area covers New City Blocks (NCB) 709, 710, 711, 883, 884, 885, 886, 887, 1024, 3591, and 6135.

To investigate these topics, the study made use of deed records, historic maps, and photographs that helped to document the history of the area and its relation to the growth and development of the City of San Antonio as a whole. The records utilized included the Bexar County Archives, Spanish Archives (BCA, SA), and the Bexar County Deed Records (BCDR). Additional information was obtained from many publications highlighting nearby communities and detailing the sociocultural history of San Antonio.

Scope of Work

A portion of the funding for the redevelopment project will come from the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) which was awarded a multimillion-dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). SAHA worked closely with Ms. Kay Hindes from the City of San Antonio's Historic Preservation and Design Division to develop a Scope of Work and a list of topics to be addressed and investigated as part of the archival research. As part of this collaboration, it was determined that the background historical/archival review should address the following topics:

- (1) A history of the land from the earliest Spanish colonial occupation including, but not limited to, the lands as they pertain to any mission use and occupation;
- (2) The network of early routes of exploration, trade, and commerce that are associated with this area, e.g., La Bahia Road and the Refugio and Victoria roads;
- (3) The association of the Acequia Madre and its relationship to the development of the area;
- (4) Early settlement and occupation in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century including, but not limited to, ethnicities and occupations of the inhabitants, and architectural styles in the area;
- (5) An overview of the decline of the area as an historical residential area and the construction of one of the earliest public housing developments in the city.

Chapter 2: Spanish Colonial Occupation and Use of the Area

Early Ownership of the Victoria Courts Area

In 1716, Mission San Antonio de Valero was originally granted the land later occupied by Victoria Courts. Father Antonio de San Buenaventura y Olivares was given approval by the Marques de Valero, Viceroy of New Spain, to relocate the mission to the area Olivares had visited in 1709 and named San Antonio (de la Teja 1995). The property in question was part of the Labor de Afuera, farmlands located down the San Antonio River from the mission. The land received its water supply from a branch of the Acequia Madre located to the west of the property. Acequia Pajalache and Acequia del Alamo branch into the portion of the Acequia Madre serving the site to the west and north, respectively. Camino de La Bahia (Goliad Road) was located north of Victoria Courts, a portion passing through present-day HemisFair Park and possibly connecting to modern-day East Durango Blvd.

The lands of the Labor de Afuera were granted to the refugees of Las Adaes, known as the *adaesanos*, in October of 1780 (Fox et al. 1997). The *adaesanos* had petitioned for 20 years for this piece of land before it was distributed among the families “of converted Adaes Indians and others” (BCA, SA 3:305-315). The lands that were granted to the *adaesanos* had never been utilized by Mission Valero.

The project area was owned by Lorenzo Ramos (BCA, SA, LGS 362) at one point but was confiscated by the Spanish Government for alleged treason. In 1819, the property was sold to Joseph (Jesus) Lafore for 50 pesos. The boundaries for the property were formed by the land owned by Francisco Martinez on the north and Padre Arocha on the south, the road leading to the missions on the west, and an alley on the east. Lafore occupied the property throughout the remainder of his life, passing the property to his heir, Maria Terresa Bustillos. On July 31, 1837, Maria Terresa Bustillos sold the property to Franco (Francisco) Antonio Ruiz. At the time of this transaction, the property was said to border Manuel Cabrera to the south (BCDR B1:204).

A map showing the ownership of *suertes* of land in 1837 (Figure 2-1) indicates that property owned by Ruiz was bordered by tracts owned by Miguel Arciniega to the north and Elario Montajo to the south. The sale of the Arciniega

property in 1841 to John Riddle also confirms that Francisco Ruiz owned the portion of land to the south (BCDR A2:403). During the mid-nineteenth century, Francisco Ruiz and his son, Eugene, began selling partitions of land to incoming settlers, though the exact details and locations of these partitions could not be determined due to the faded state of some of the deed records.

The Acequia System

In January of 1719, Governor Martín de Alarcón ordered that the construction of acequias in San Antonio begin. Documents indicate that Captain Álvarez Barreiro, of the Royal Corps of Engineers, accompanied Alarcón to San Antonio. It was most likely Captain Álvarez Barreiro who planned the layout of the acequias (Cox 2005). Two separate acequias were ordered to be constructed, one for the villa and one for the mission, though only one was needed to supply both at that time. The planning of the second acequia (Alamo Acequia) indicated that Mission Valero was likely to be moved to a new location. By 1727, the Alamo Acequia extended three and one-half miles between the ford of Paso de Tejas and the largest bend in the San Antonio River (Cox 2005). Further additions at later dates extended this acequia to the south and east in reach of farmlands that would include the project site. One branch followed along the west side of present-day IH-37, one of the boundaries of the Victoria Courts housing project. Another branch appears to have been located halfway between Presa Street and IH-37 running north-south (Figure 2-2), possibly following the path of present-day Labor Street.

With the introduction of additional missions to the area, new acequias were constructed to service the new inhabitants. The Mission Concepción acequia exited from the San Antonio River below the horseshoe bend and followed the path of present-day Saint Mary’s Street to service the mission before returning to the river near Mission Road and Roosevelt Avenue. The Concepción Acequia, also referred to as the Pajalache Acequia, was most likely constructed before the arrival of Mission Concepción in 1731. The original location of Mission San José was within the same area, though it was relocated farther down-river to appease the protests of Father Olivares who was concerned with the proximity of Valero to the Zacatecan mission of San José (Cox 2005).

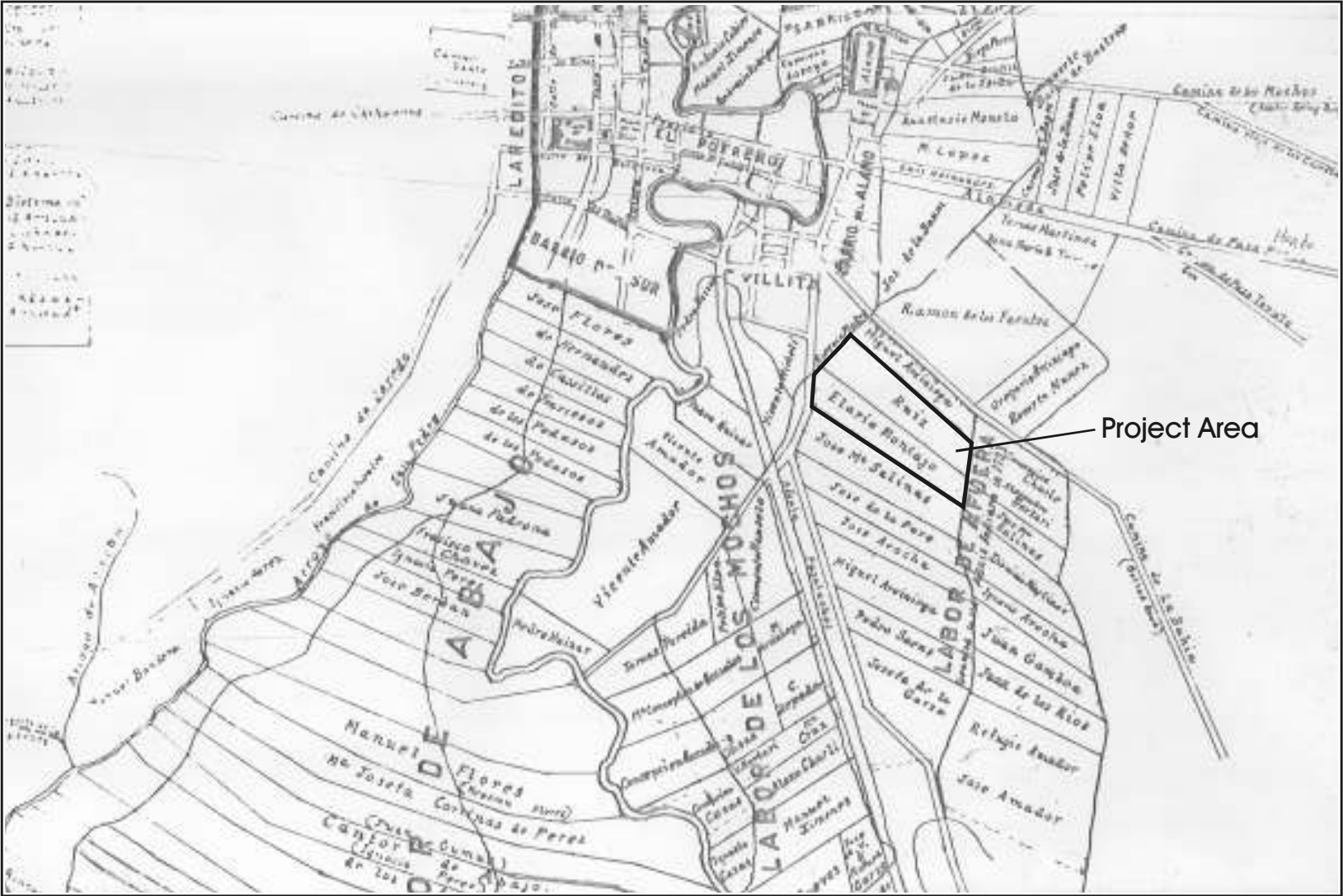


Figure 2-1. Map of Old San Antonio de Bexar as it was in 1837, drawn in 1912 by John D. Rullman.

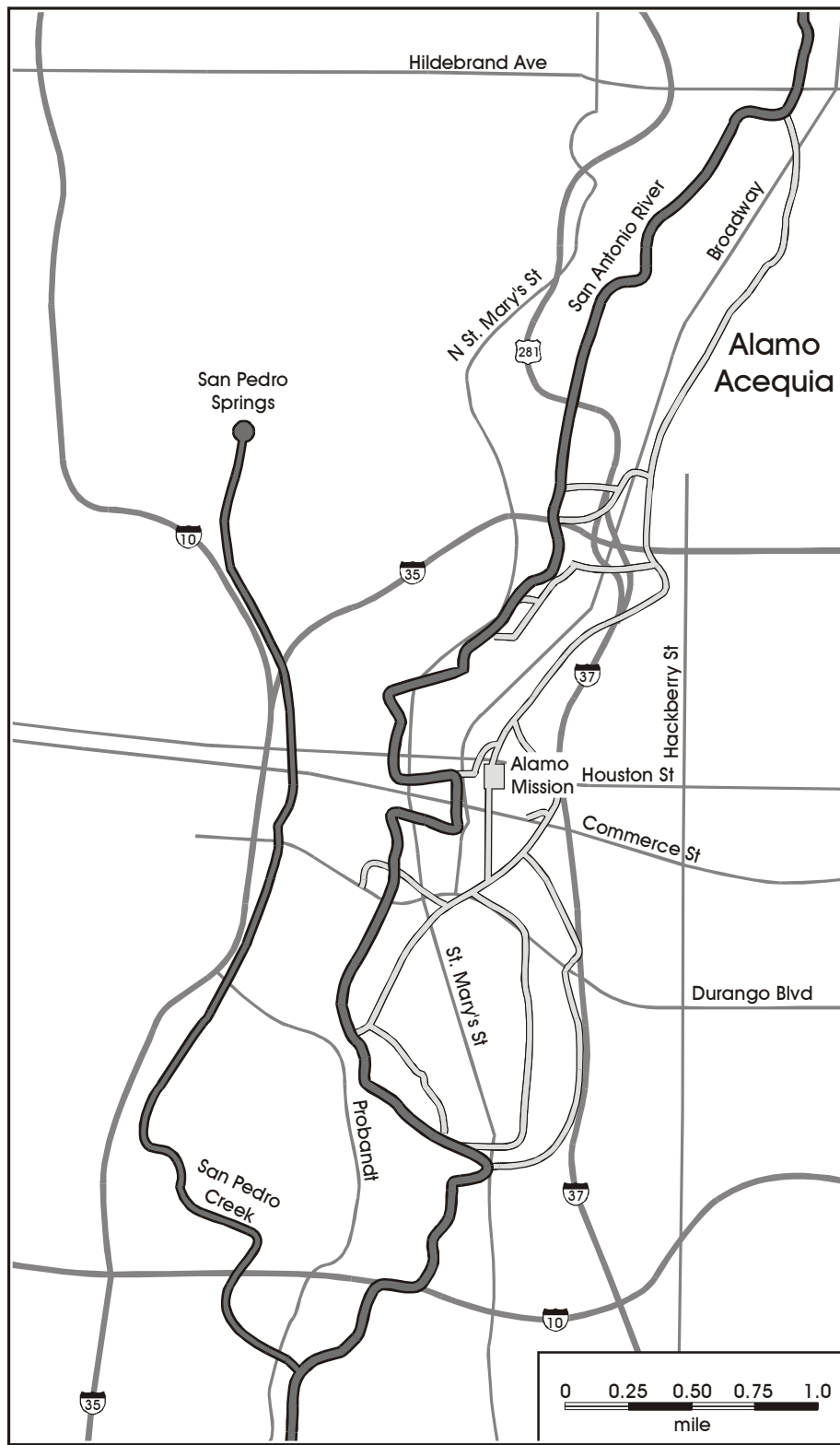


Figure 2-2. Map of the Acequia Madre (Alamo Acequia).

The arrival of the Canary Islanders in 1731 prompted the construction of the San Pedro Acequia that ran from San Pedro Springs south to the San Antonio River just before its confluence with San Pedro Creek. This acequia serviced not only the new arrivals, but the presidio and the *barrio del norte* as well.

After Mexico achieved independence from Spain, the town council became increasingly concerned with the state of waterworks in San Antonio. In 1828, the governor recommended that the Concepción Dam be destroyed because of its state of disrepair. The town council also required that San Antonio citizens maintain the acequia during the month of February. In 1830, the acequias were lined with caliche to reduce erosion. Additional ordinances were established in 1840 concerning the upkeep of the acequias, many of them resulting in fines for anyone who did not do their part to keep the water flowing. European immigration in 1844 led the council to publish water regulations in French and German. By 1852, regulations enacted required that by the 10th day of January, the acequias be dammed, cleaned and repaired. Also during the same year, bids were taken to line the acequias with stone and lime.

Heavy rainfall on March 26, 1865, resulted in flooding that significantly damaged the acequia system. At this time, the San José Acequia was abandoned due to the destruction of the San José Dam. Debates concerning the existence of the Concepción Dam continued, until it was finally removed in 1869, closing the Concepción Acequia (Cox 2005). In 1883, the branch of the Alamo Acequia from the Acequia Madre to Goliad Street was condemned.

Drilling for artesian wells, prompted by a severe drought during the 1890s, resulted in the lowering of the water table in San Antonio. These wells reduced the flow of water from San Pedro Springs and the San Antonio River, sometimes causing San Pedro Creek and the river to go dry. By 1913, all of the urban acequias were closed. The San Juan and Espada acequias continued to irrigate fields. Due to the artesian wells and the closure of the acequias, the lush gardens and fields in San Antonio soon dried out.

The Road System

With the establishment of Mission San Antonio de Valero in 1718, the routes of travel within Texas utilized San Antonio as a major hub, providing routes to East Texas, Goliad, and

Laredo. The Camino Real (King's Highway) passed through San Antonio creating a thoroughfare between Mexico and East Texas. Guided by Juan Andrés, Alonso De León began blazing the trail in 1689 that would be the first route of the Camino Real (McGraw et al. 1998). Within Texas, the Camino Real was a system of roads rather than one route. Three routes led south from San Antonio during the Spanish colonial period (Figure 2-3). One route, known as *el camino de en medio* (Lower Presidio Road), was the middle road that led from San Antonio southward through several branches. The main branches of the road, which headed southwest of San Antonio, passed by present-day Poteet and Pleasanton, merged just before San Miguel Creek and continued to San Juan Bautista Presidio. The southern branch of the route was the Laredo Road, which crossed the Rio Grande and headed to Monterrey. The San Antonio-Laredo Road was utilized frequently between 1755 and 1860, serving as the major route of commerce between Louisiana, Texas and Mexico well into the nineteenth century (McGraw et al. 1998:160). Detachments from the presidio often traveled to Laredo using the Laredo Road to meet convoys bringing supplies from Mexico City during the mid-eighteenth century. The Camino Real network provided the routes to move goods between Mexico and Texas similar to the freight business of today. Goods were moved both ways using the road system. The freight charges were calculated based on the threat of Indian attacks, the conditions of the roads and the distance of the journey, so merchants would take the opportunity to turn a higher profit by always transporting a load.

From Mission Valero in 1837, the Camino de Nacogdoches extended northeast towards East Texas, with a branch leading to Seguin (Camino de Actillero). From San Antonio, the route moved northeast, crossed the Guadalupe River to Natchitoches, Louisiana, along the Red River.

El Potrero acted as the end point of the Mission Roads that skirted the west side of La Villita. The route known as Camino de Concepción led to Mission Concepción, following the Pajalache Acequia and continuing to Mission San José. This route connected with another mission road just below a *suerte* of land located to the south of La Villita, referred to as Camino de San Juan, that was the route to Mission San Juan and Mission Espada. Camino de San Juan began at Alamo Plaza, skirted the east side of La Villita, and continued south to the missions. Camino de San Juan acted as the eastern boundary of the *suertes* of land located in the Labor de Afuera, including the land of Francisco Ruiz in which Victoria Courts was located.

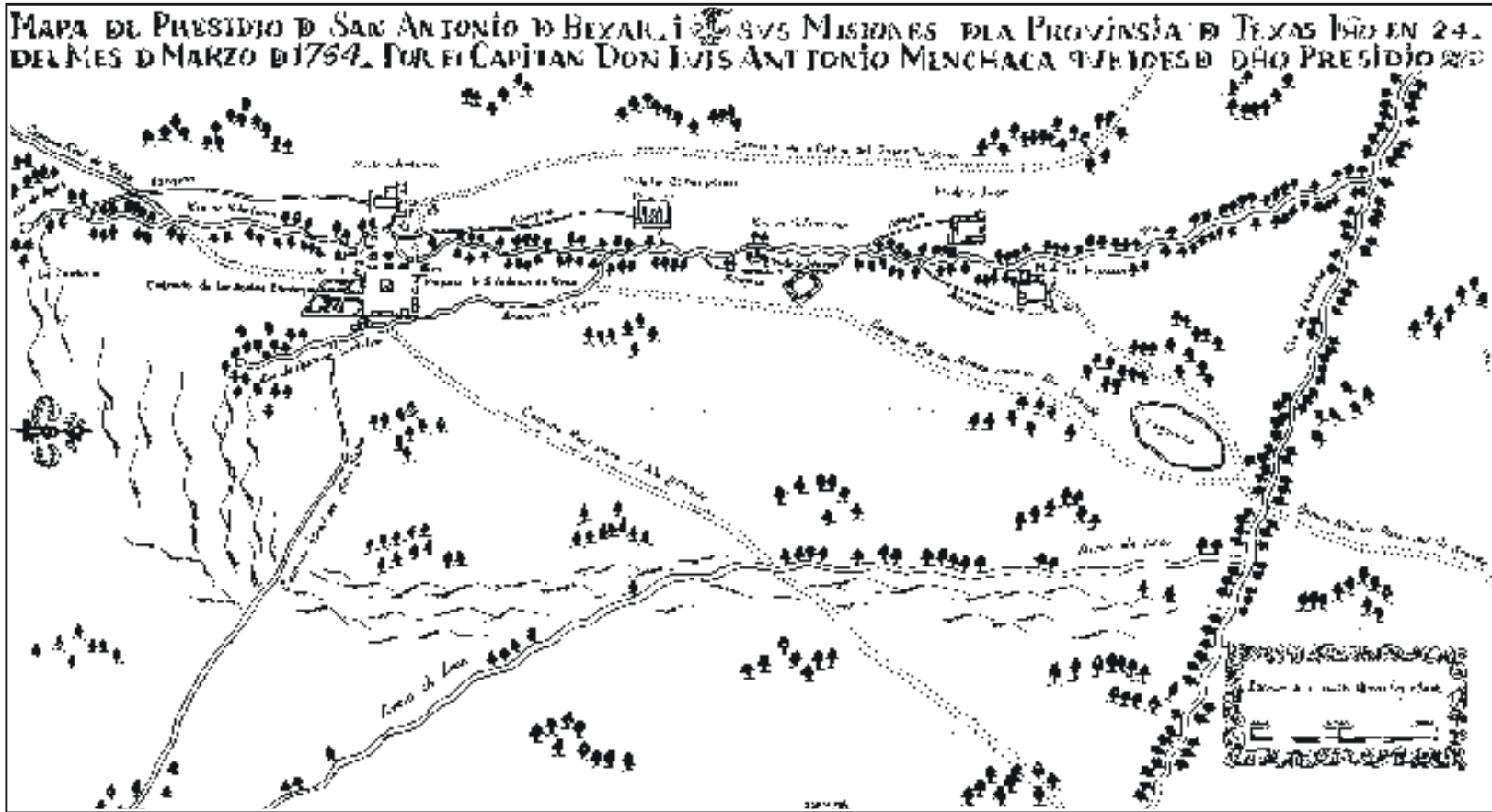


Figure 2-3. Map of San Antonio and the Camino Real system drawn by Captain Don Luis Antonio Menchaca in 1764. Courtesy of John Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Acting as the northern boundary of the Labor de Afuera was the Camino de La Bahia (Goliad Road), which provided the route to Mission Espiritu Santo, Mission Rosario and La Bahia. Ox carts provided the major mode of transportation of goods up and down Camino de La Bahia, unlike the other *caminos* that utilized mule trains (McGraw et al. 1998:45). Corn was one of the more popular goods transported between San Antonio and Goliad. Espiritu Santo was a renowned ranching mission, but produced very little in the way of crops and often had to rely on the San Antonio missions for their supply. The lower portion of Goliad Road still exists south of IH-10 from Fair Avenue. In 1909, Goliad Road had provided the northern border of the project site. In 1968, a portion of Goliad Road north of Victoria Courts was incorporated into HemisFair Park as a walkway through the plaza.

During the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, the Camino Real system was utilized as a cattle trail. Drives occurred along the roads from Natchitoches, Louisiana, to Laredo and the Rio Grande. The most common destination in later years was Saltillo, during the annual fair in September. The trip usually lasted three months, though the profit of the journey was questionable (McGraw et al. 1998).

Beginning in 1779, the need for a more efficient mail service set in motion a monthly postal service that utilized the Camino Real system. Initially, Commandant General Croix ordered that the service run from Nacogdoches to Arispe, Sonora. The mail service proved to be so popular that service was offered every fifteen days by 1785.

By the mid-1800s, San Antonio became a popular hub for the stage lines. Previously, many of the stage lines bypassed San Antonio due to the threat of Comanche raids. The Mexican War supported the need for a route connecting Austin to more populated towns. By 1845, the first mail route to Austin was initiated, and soon encouraged entrepreneurs to incorporate San Antonio into the line. Between 1847 and 1881, over 50 stage lines operated either in or through San Antonio (Thonhoff 1971). Various lines competed for U.S. mail contracts during this period. The loss of a mail contract usually caused the stage line to go out of business.

Chapter 3: Mid-Nineteenth Century Context

The project area appears to be part of a large piece of land east of the town of San Antonio that remained undeveloped until the mid-nineteenth century. Two pieces of artwork dating to 1848 depict the town and the powderhouse, one by Seth Eastman and the other by Theodore Gentilz (*Corrida de la Sandía*). They reveal that the land between the town's outskirts and the powderhouse was undeveloped (Pfeiffer 1997:71). Koch's 1873 Bird's Eye View of the City of San Antonio begins to show the increased use of the land east of the town. In the 1886 version, the project area can be clearly seen, with the Mount Zion First Baptist Church as the prominent feature (Figure 3-1).

At the turn of the century, San Antonio became a booming city focused on manufacturing and commerce. The change from the small, agricultural town was due, in part, to the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1877. Many ethnic groups entered San Antonio during the 1860s and 1870s. San Antonio resembled the ethnically divided cities of New York and Chicago more so than the other growing cities of the South. German immigrants became the dominant ethnic group living in San Antonio by 1870, mainly occupying the eastern part of the city. Mexican Americans composed the next largest ethnic group, and they tended to settle on the west side of San Antonio. Other European immigrants were

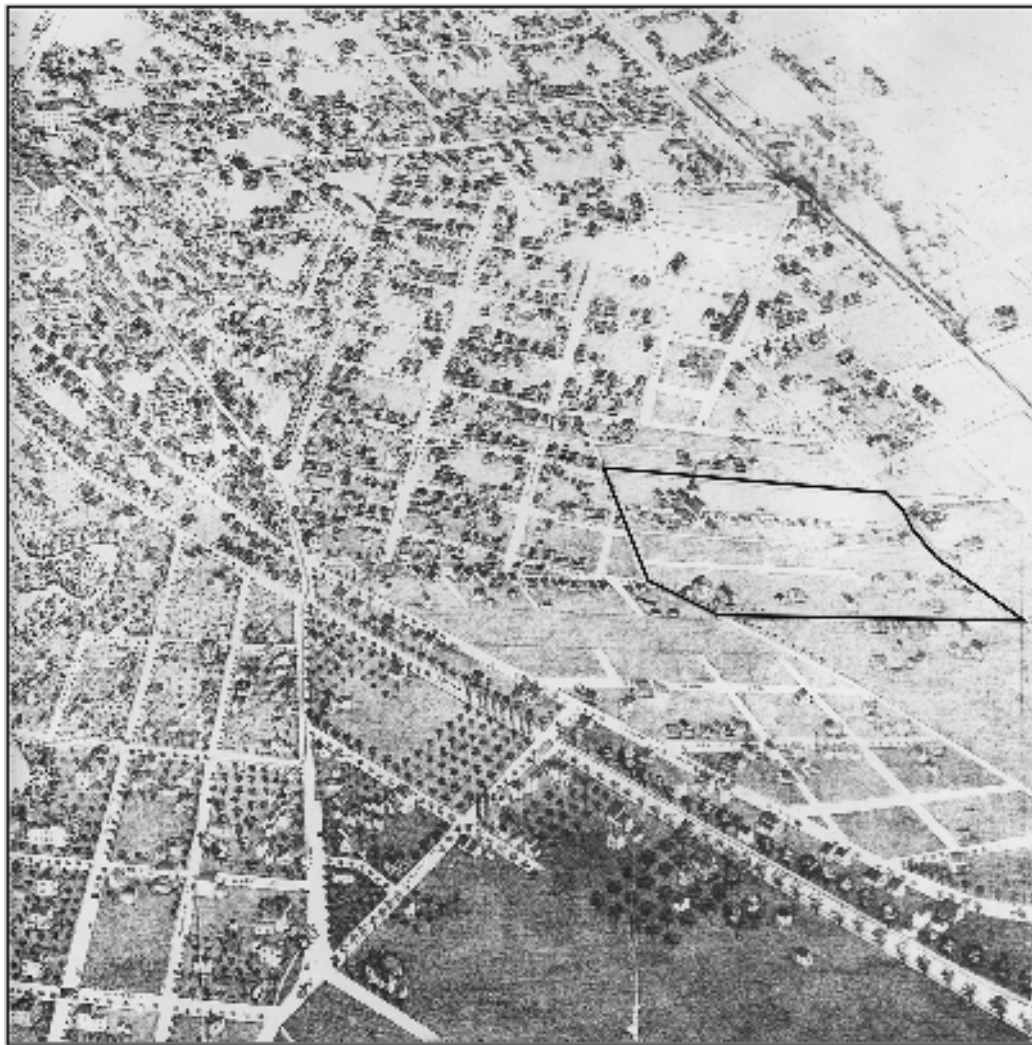


Figure 3-1. Augustus Koch's 1886 Bird's Eye View of San Antonio with the project area outlined. Note Mount Zion First Baptist Church as the prominent structure within this area.

also drawn to the city and settled where they could. African Americans in San Antonio comprised a small portion of the population up to 1860, living mainly as slaves within the Anglo populated regions of town (Mason 1998). Their numbers took a dramatic jump after the Civil War, when recently freed slaves either remained in San Antonio or moved to the city from nearby plantations (Fehrenbach 1978). German immigrants and African Americans were the predominate groups living in the project area during the middle part of the nineteenth century.

With the arrival of the railroad, neighborhoods underwent a dramatic change by 1880. Industrial and commercial expansion created areas in San Antonio that were deemed unattractive and unacceptable to wealthier citizens. These individuals moved away from the inner city leaving the less desirable areas open for working-class people who could not afford to move out of the area (Mason 1998). The improvement in public transportation allowed middle-class Anglo families to move into new subdivisions away from the inner city. The new subdivisions refused to sell property to “undesirables” which left fewer areas where Hispanics and African Americans could reside (Mason 1998). This movement of people aided in the creation of

black communities throughout San Antonio. One such community, called “Baptist Settlement” located in the Fourth Ward, was established as a direct result of mass public transportation routes (Figure 3-2).

During 1990 and 1991, intensive collections of archival and oral histories were collected pertaining to the area occupied by the present-day Alamodome (Pfeiffer 1997). The work was conducted to detail the site on which the Alamodome was to be built, but additional information concerning surrounding areas came to light during the process. During several oral history interviews, individuals who had first-hand knowledge of the community made references to the Baptist Settlement. In one interview session, the Victoria Commons project area was referred to as a poor neighborhood, occupied by African Americans, that covered a ten-square block area that was bordered by Labor Street, included Peach and Refugio streets and “back to where Victoria Courts ends” (Pfeiffer 1997:73). The community was dubbed the “Baptist Settlement” due to the number of Baptist churches in the area. Another individual remembered the demographics of the area were “mostly blacks...about 20 percent would be Spanish” (Pfeiffer 1997:73).

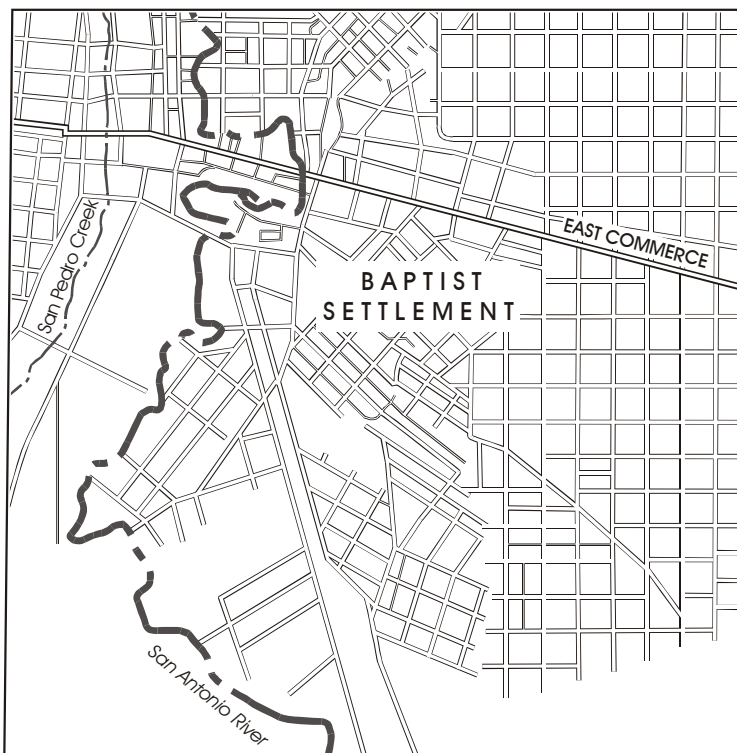


Figure 3-2. Map of the Baptist Settlement in 1880.

The Baptist Settlement was located a short distance from the Galveston, Houston and San Antonio Railroad Depot, and later the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot (known today as Sunset Station), which offered a source of jobs to the inhabitants of the area. Prominent jobs for African Americans on the railroad consisted of porters, redcaps and freight loaders. Repairing and servicing the railroad track were seen as less prestigious railroad jobs. Edward Steves had established a lumber business during the late 1860s at Bonham and Blume streets, and expanded it to the corner of Walnut and Alameda (Commerce) after the arrival of the railroad in 1883 (Fox et al. 1997). The lumberyard could have provided additional job opportunities for the residents of the Baptist Settlement and surrounding communities, though the business only employed 20 to 25 individuals (Fox et al. 1997). In 1878, George Holmgreen and his sons acquired a foundry located at Market and Presa streets. The iron works business boomed soon after, though many local citizens complained of the noise emanating from the foundry. In 1884,

Holmgreen moved the foundry to a new location at Montana and Walnut streets, renaming the business the Alamo Iron Works. The movement of the foundry to the new location attracted Polish artisans to the community. The Alamo Iron Works was predominately manned by Polish immigrants (Fox et al. 1997).

In 1871, twenty-two freed slaves established Mount Zion First Baptist Church along Santos Street (from the 2001 Mount Zion First Baptist Directory cited in Salas 2004). Though Santos Street no longer exists, Mount Zion was located on NCB 1024. Initially, the church was a one-room structure. In 1879, Mount Zion was renovated (Figure 3-3). Records of the church indicate that Mount Zion was the heart of the Baptist Settlement, providing not only spiritual guidance, but also serving as the social center of the settlement (Mason 1998). The church remained at the Santos Street location until 1925 (or 1927, according to Salas 2004).

By 1878, the city waterworks were well underway and in operation for certain parts of San Antonio. Over the next few years, the waterworks company expanded its service, with the downtown area benefiting the most. The installation of water mains did not extend east of Labor Street, leaving a major portion of the Fourth Ward, including the project area, without running water for an additional decade (Fox et al. 1997).



Figure 3-3. *Photo of Mount Zion First Baptist Church located on Santos Street.*
UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, No. 073-1218, Courtesy of Mount Zion First Baptist Church.

Chapter 4: Victoria Courts in the Twentieth Century

The Victoria Commons project area began to witness increased transformation as San Antonio moved into the twentieth century. The changes were not confined to just the community, but rather on the larger scale of city, state and country. Though the Baptist Settlement continued to hold on to its African-American identity until the late 1930s, the dynamics of the neighborhood were altered due to improved public transportation, the introduction of a new railroad station, and the onset of the Great Depression.

The Early Decades (1900-1940)

Further population growth in San Antonio was witnessed after the establishment of the new East Commerce railroad station in 1903. Germans were the predominant group brought in by the railway (Fehrenbach 1978), though a mixture of many ethnic groups including German, Polish, Mexican, Spanish and African inhabited the project area. Informants interviewed for the Alamodome project noted the diversity in the area (Fox et al. 1997). Individuals remember playing with other children of different ethnic, and often socioeconomic, backgrounds. Within the neighborhood, the children were not conscious of the differences until they went to stores, cafes, or movie theaters where African-American children were either not allowed access, or had to use a separate section (Mock 1997:88).

The architectural styles of the homes within the Baptist Settlement were similar to the styles recorded during the Alamodome project in 1992, though no specific structures were documented at the time the area was razed for the construction of Victoria Courts. The 1912 Sanborn map reveals the outline of the houses located in the Victoria Commons project area (Figure 4-1). Typical houses during the period from 1880 through 1930 were small frame bungalows that lacked individuality (Mock 1997:86), had small yards, and were of the variety often rented to the African-American community. The shotgun style house was also popular in the African-American community. The shotgun house was a one-room-wide structure with a gabled front. This style was common in the middle- to lower-class neighborhoods of expanding southern cities (McAlester and McAlester 1984). Some researchers speculate that the style has African and Haitian roots, constructed by Black freedmen subsequent to the Civil War. Others believe that it is a direct result of the lot size found in urban communities

(McAlester and McAlester 1984). Anglo-Americans most likely constructed these houses in order to rent to lower-income individuals (Mock 1997:87). The majority of the houses occupied by poverty stricken individuals did not contain basic plumbing well into the 1930s, and in some cases, like Denver Heights, plumbing was not installed until the 1970s. Reverend Claude Black recalls that the ownership of a bathtub, the presence of hot water, and a house with two or more rooms indicated affluence in the community (Mock 1997:87).

Goliad Street provided access to the streetcar from the Baptist Settlement. This allowed individuals access to downtown and to the railroad depot. The Heinz Drug Store, at the corner of Goliad and Santa Clara streets, was the closest drug store to the community. A mercantile store was located at Iowa Street and Hoefgen Avenue, on the eastern side of IH-37 (Pfeiffer 1997:78).

Located on the corner of Labor and Refugio streets on the 1912 Sanborn map is the Jenner Manufacturing Company. In 1899, E. J. Jenner opened the Jenner Manufacturing Company at its original location on St. Mary's Street. The factory produced hard candies, peanut brittle, and fudge bars. In 1910, J. W. Judson purchased a portion of the company, leading to the construction of a new location. The company's history states that the factory was moved to South Flores Street, though the Sanborn map places it differently. The factory remained at the South Flores location until 1998, when it was moved to Division Street. It is possible that the factory located on the Sanborn map was an offshoot of the main factory. No additional information concerning the structure could be found. The building would have been razed during the early 1940s to make way for Victoria Courts (Judson-Atkinson™ Candies, Inc. 2005).

By the 1920s, the main African-American population had moved southeast of the Southern Pacific Railroad depot, into an area well known for gambling and prostitution. Further movement into the Durango and Fairchild streets area occurred later, with many black-owned businesses flourishing along Commerce Street. These areas, such as Denver Heights, had previously been occupied by poor southern Anglos and European Jewish immigrants (Mason 1998). Denver Heights became the neighborhood for the city's prominent African-American citizens (Fox et al. 1997).

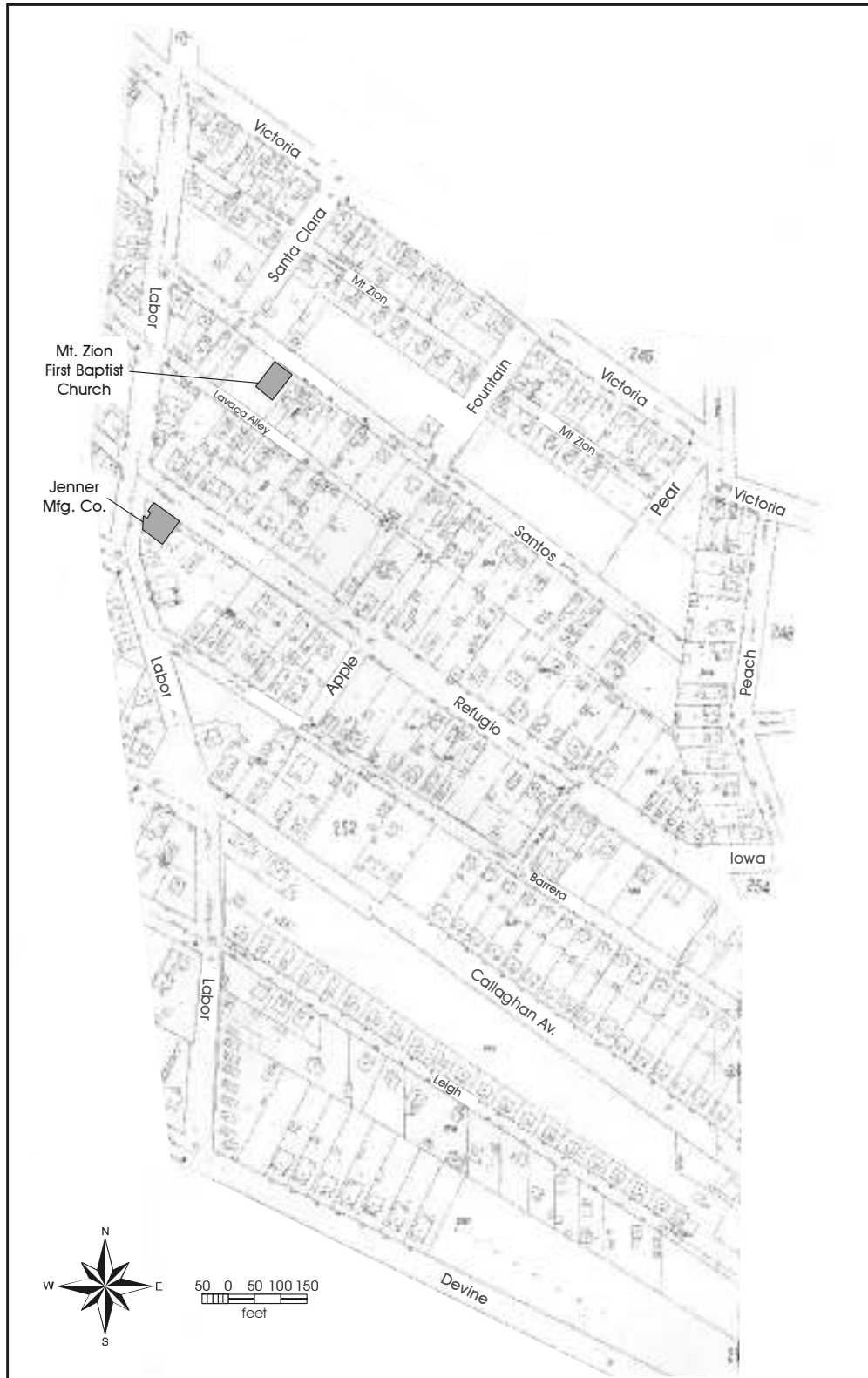


Figure 4-1. A 1912 Sanborn map of the project area.

Many of the African-American families residing in the Baptist Settlement before the construction of Victoria Courts were “middle-class survivors of the Depression” (Pfeiffer 1997:78). Sylvester Jones recalled that many of the men who worked were Pullman porters or construction workers. The Pullman porter was the top-ranked job because it was the highest an African American could get in the railroad industry. Other highly thought of jobs included bellboys and waiters. Working for the city, in lumberyards, as clerks, cooks or domestic servants was considered less desirable because during the Depression these were the first workers to be let go (Mock 1997:90).

As the Depression era neared its end, the settlement patterns of the inhabitants of San Antonio began to shift again. The older homes, most in deteriorating condition, were sold or rented to individuals of lower socioeconomic status. In many cases, Anglo Americans moved to the north and sold their property to African Americans (Mock 1997:89). The houses within Denver Heights and the Baptist Settlement were desirable to the African-American community due to their proximity to jobs and public transportation.

On August 9, 1940, the original location of Mount Zion First Baptist Church was sold to members of the Church of God for a sum of \$1,100. Five days later, the Church of God sold the property to the San Antonio Housing Authority for a sum of \$5,000. The in-depth details of these two transactions are unknown, leaving the logic behind these deals a question.

The Creation of Victoria Courts

The need for public housing in San Antonio came as a result of the Depression of the 1930s. The Depression created a surge in the number of unemployed and homeless individuals and families. In 1937, the United States Housing Authority was established to provide better housing for those with low incomes, as well as provide work throughout the nation. In June of the same year, the San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) was founded to address the local situation (Zelman 2005a). Father Carmelo Tranchese was one of the staunchest advocates for housing projects in San Antonio. In September of 1937, Fr. Tranchese and four other SAHA commissioners were able to secure funds leading to the development of five housing projects in San Antonio (Hughes n.d.). The five projects were to be created to serve different local ethnic groups: Alazan and Apache Courts to serve the Mexican-American population, Lincoln Heights and Wheatley Courts

to serve the African-American population, and Victoria Courts to serve the Anglo-American segment.

Victoria Courts was completed in 1942 (Zelman 2005b). The Housing Authority reported in 1940 that:

“428 sub-standard dwellings were eliminated by demolition on this site, representing 100% of all dwellings previously located thereon. The acquisition of 223 parcels comprising the site of Victoria Courts was an outstanding accomplishment...On the site formerly resided 35 white families, 194 Latin American families, and 179 Negro families...This project is to rehouse 796 white families.” (SAHA 1940 Annual Report 1.1:A78 cited in Salas 2004)

Many families that qualified welcomed the opportunity for housing assistance at the time (Figure 4-2) due to the economic hardships they endured. The construction of Victoria Courts was considered progressive at the time (Figures 4-3 and 4-4), given the style of architecture and the presence of electricity, heating, and plumbing.

During the early months of 1941, the City of San Antonio was still utilizing funds produced by the Works Progress Administration in 1935. The river beautification project was nearing its end, and the gates to let water back into the downtown channel of the San Antonio River were finally open on March 13, 1941.

The attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, stopped all forms of festivity in San Antonio. Beginning in 1942, except for an event at the Alamo honoring those who fell in the fight for liberty, all Fiesta events were cancelled for the next five years. The city did not set aside funding for the upkeep and patrolling of the Riverwalk, leading the area to succumb to rampant crime. By the 1950s, the area was forbidden to the military trainees, and very few visitors frequented the Riverwalk. The heart of San Antonio was not a place of pride and beauty, and its effects began to seep into the adjacent neighborhoods. Many of the communities were neglected, including the recently established Victoria Courts.

The 1960s heralded a new concern with city pride and the need to increase tourism and tourism-derived revenue. Once again, the Riverwalk was returned to its former beauty, while city planners looked for additional ways to attract visitors. During 1968, the idea of a world's fair had taken form in the construction of HemisFair Park. The area north of



Figure 4-2. *Photo taken in 1941 of one of Victoria Courts' first families.* The San Antonio Light Collection, UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, No. L-2863-C, Courtesy of The Hearst Corporation.



Figure 4-3. *Construction of Victoria Courts office.* UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, No. 086-0067, Courtesy of Florence Collett Ayres.



Figure 4-4. *Photograph (taken in 1941) of a typical Victoria Courts building.* The San Antonio Light Collection, UT Institute of Texan Cultures, No. L-2863-A, Courtesy of The Hearst Corporation.

Victoria Courts, which was noted as “an area of declining homes, businesses and churches,” was cleared to make way for the park (Fox et al. 1997).

The Demise of Victoria Courts

The idea of demolishing the Victoria Courts housing project had been toyed with soon after its construction was finished. The housing project was supposed to be a temporary solution to the effects of the Great Depression on San Antonio citizens (Hayward 1998). During the 1960s, the idea of incorporating the property into the HemisFair Park plans was entertained. The Victoria Courts neighborhood was in need of urban renewal (Tumiel and Aradillas 1998). A decade later, a committee interested in the redevelopment of HemisFair Park suggested razing the housing to construct a stadium and hotel in its place (Tumiel and Aradillas 1998). Some suggest that the housing project survived due to the efforts of U.S. Representative Henry B. Gonzalez who promised “he would never allow developers to displace a single brick in the city’s largest downtown housing development for the poor” (Tumiel and Aradillas 1998).

In 1995, SAHA asked Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide approval and funds to demolish Victoria Courts so that SAHA could gain funding to rebuild the project. HUD approved the request in 1996, but did not provide replacement funds due to the end of the “one-for-one” Replacement Rule policy that required housing authorities to construct one new unit for every unit demolished (Tumiel and Aradillas 1998). The lack of replacement funding led SAHA to stall the demolition for several years so as to allow time to find the money, but HUD also pulled the funding for the annual operating subsidy for Victoria Courts making the situation more difficult. SAHA continued to reapply for the HOPE VI Grant over the next few years, but was passed over three times due to the numerous applicants for the grant. The grant had been previously awarded to SAHA on two separate occasions, but the competitive nature of the process did not ensure them success in the first rounds. In December of 1998, residents of Victoria Courts were given notice by the president of the Victoria Courts tenant association to attend a meeting that would allow them the option of purchasing the development for a price of \$50 million, though the property was appraised at an “as is” value of \$8.8 million. Five percent

of the residents of the Victoria Courts project were present during the meeting which ended with the residents declining the purchase (Tumiel 1998). The residents were not interested in the prospect of purchasing the property; rather, they were worried about what would happen to them. The Spurs basketball organization briefly considered the site for the location of their new arena in July of 1997. The next year, Richard Tankerson, VIA Metropolitan Transit board chairman, began pushing the idea of an entertainment and retail complex on the site (Crouse and Tedesco 1998). Victoria Courts was razed in 1999 to comply with the HUD order. In 2003, after the fourth application submission, SAHA was awarded an \$18.8 million HOPE VI grant (Greenberg 2004). Work began in 2003 to revitalize the area with the proposed Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project. At the time of this report, the Refugio Place apartments, the first phase of redevelopment, had been completed. Additional phases of construction are planned for later dates.

Chapter 5: Summary of Historic Trends

The Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project area exhibits a rich history concerning the development of San Antonio over the past 200 years. The site of Victoria Commons is linked to Mission Valero as farmland, indicating that it was one of the first tracts of land to be connected to the Spanish colonial occupation in San Antonio. Though the portion of land appears not to have been utilized at the time of the mission's operation, it later became an important part of the lives of the inhabitants of the town. The refugees from Los Adaes were given a new chance at providing for their families after receiving tracts of land in and around the project area. The road system linking San Antonio to the rest of Texas was located in close proximity, allowing the landowners to benefit from the movement of goods.

During the mid 1800s, San Antonio exhibited a surge in population due to the influx of various ethnic groups, many of which settled within the neighborhood associated with the project area. The neighborhood became a multi-cultural melting pot, in which later inhabitants remember much intermingling between peoples of differing cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. At the same time, the neighborhood became the religious heart of the Baptist community, boasting the establishment and construction of one of the first Baptist churches in San Antonio. Improved forms of transportation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to shifts in the dynamics of the neighborhood, nonetheless, influences from various ethnic and cultural groups continued. The African community, though, tended to have the deepest roots in the Victoria Commons area until the establishment of several public housing projects in the area.

The Depression hit San Antonio hard, and some believe it was the hardest hit city in Texas. To cope with the lack of work and the increasing poverty of the citizens, public projects were undertaken to provide relief. The San Antonio Housing Authority was created to deal with the need to provide homes to many of the destitute families. This led to the construction of several projects throughout San Antonio, including Victoria Courts. Although the housing projects were to be a temporary solution, these complexes survived for a good portion of the twentieth century. Victoria Courts was demolished in 1999, and the Victoria Commons Redevelopment Project is well underway.

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Mount Zion First Baptist Church, Santos Street, San Antonio, Texas. Date unknown. Courtesy of Mount Zion First Baptist Church.
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Mother hanging wash on line at Victoria Courts, 1941. Caption: "Mrs. F.C. Scwed's family were first tenants to move into courts ...One hundred and eighty families this week moved their possessions into Victoria Courts, the latest low-cost housing project to be completed in the city by the United States housing Authority." San Antonio, Texas. Published in San Antonio Light (December 7, 1941). Courtesy of The Hearst Corporation.
- Page 15: 086-0067; UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.
Construction of Victoria Courts, San Antonio, Texas, 1941. Exterior of office at Victoria Courts shortly before it was completed. Sign reads: "Victoria Courts / A Development of The Housing Authority of the City of San Antonio, Texas / This Project is part of the Low Rent Housing Program of the United States Housing Authority / Federal Works Agency." Courtesy of Florence Collett Ayres.
- Page 16: L-2863-A; The San Antonio Light Collection; UT Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.
Apartment block at Victoria Courts, 1941. Caption: "This building is typical of the neat, livable structures in Victoria Courts Project / 180 families already have moved into the new low-cost housing project built for white families." San Antonio, Texas. Published in the San Antonio Light (December 7, 1941). Courtesy of the Hearst Corporation.