

**Archaeological Monitoring for the
Valley Ditch at the Intersection
of East Commerce and North
Cherry Streets, San Antonio,
Bexar County, Texas**

by
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Abstract:

In late May 2007, the Center for Archaeological Research at The University of Texas at San Antonio (CAR-UTSA) monitored construction by CPS Energy at the intersection of East Commerce and North Cherry Streets in San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas. The historical archives of the City of San Antonio and CAR-UTSA's records indicate that a portion of the *San Antonio Valley Ditch* runs along North Cherry Street and crosses East Commerce Street in the area where trenching was planned. This work was conducted under Texas Antiquities Permit # 4487, issued to Dr. Steve Tomka, Principal Investigator.

Monitoring occurred on May 29th and 30th of 2007. No remnant of the San Antonio Valley Ditch was found during monitoring. No artifacts were collected during the project. All project-associated documents are curated at the CAR-UTSA according to Texas Historical Commission guidelines.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On May 29 and 30, 2007, the Center for Archaeological Research at The University of Texas at San Antonio (CAR-UTSA), monitored construction excavation at the intersection of East Commerce and North Cherry Streets in San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas (see Figure 1-1). The work was contracted by CPS Energy of San Antonio as part of utility upgrades along a six-block portion of Commerce Street. The work included trenching for the installation of utility ducts, manholes and several light poles. This area can be seen on the San Antonio East USGS topographic quadrangle (Figure 1-1). The historical archives of the City of San Antonio and CAR-UTSA's records indicate that a portion of the *San Antonio Valley Ditch*, a component of the acequia system, runs north-to-south along North Cherry Street and crosses East Commerce Street in the area of the planned trench (Cox 2005: 57). This work presented an opportunity to investigate the actual location of the San Antonio Valley Ditch. CPS Energy contacted Dr. Steve Tomka, Director of CAR-UTSA, prior to construction in accordance with the City of San Antonio



Figure 1-1. Location of the project area and San Antonio Valley Ditch on the San Antonio East 7.5 Minute Series USGS Quadrangle map.

Uniform Development Code and the Antiquities Code of Texas. The Center for Archaeological Research and the Texas Historical Commission (THC) recommended archaeological monitoring and documentation of any remnant portion of the San Antonio Valley Ditch. CPS Energy contracted with CAR to conduct archaeological monitoring at the intersection of Commerce and Cherry streets. This work was conducted under Texas Antiquities Permit #4487, issued to Dr. Steve Tomka, Principal Investigator.

Location and General History of the Project Area

The project area is an urban environment in downtown San Antonio, Texas. It is surrounded by older residential housing, light industrial and commercial buildings (Figure 1-2). The project area lies within the Denver Heights neighborhood and a short distance from several significant archaeological and historical properties (see Figure 1-3). Selected historic properties include St. Paul Methodist Episcopal Church (c. 1880), the Southern Pacific Depot (1902), the sites of the Steve's Lumber Yard (1883; see Figure 1-4), Alamo Iron Works (1884), and the site of Otto Zirkel Marble Works (ca. 1880). Approximately three blocks to the west of the project area is the Carver Community Cultural Center, and the original city cemeteries.

History of the San Antonio Valley Ditch

The history of the San Antonio Valley Ditch reflects the changing aspirations and objectives of the city of San Antonio as it modernized and became a significant economic center at the close of the nineteenth century. In large part, the founding and success of the City of San Antonio was based upon its proximity to water and early Spanish efforts to control and manage this resource through the creation of an acequia system (Cox 2005). The San Antonio Valley Ditch is one of the last structures of the acequia system to be built and symbolically represents a close to this era.

Originally, the project area at North Cherry and East Commerce Streets was part of the farmlands surrounding Mission San Antonio de Valero (Cox 1997). Between 1845 through 1880, the area was gradually settled by German immigrants (Cox 1997). In 1877, the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad was built through the project area. The railroad spurred economic growth changing the rural nature of the area to an industrial, commercial and residential environment (Cox 1997).

The San Antonio Valley Ditch (the Valley Ditch) was proposed in response to local demands following the devastating flood of March 26, 1865 (Cox 2005:52). The flood destroyed the business center of San Antonio leaving hundreds homeless and causing thousands of dollars in

damages (Cox 2005:52). In 1867, the city council was petitioned by the East Alamo Ditch Co. to construct a channel to provide storm drainage within the city and irrigated water to farm fields located to the south and southeast (Gross and Mendez 1997:243). The city council concurred with this privately financed initiative citing “incalculable advantage to the city”



Figure 1-2. Project area showing views north (top) and south (bottom) on Cherry Street ;

(Gross and Mendez 1997:243). Unfortunately, the project was delayed following the death of one of its major proponents and sponsors, but was revived in the early 1870s (Cox 1997:21; Gross and Mendez 1997:243). The city council approved construction of the Valley Ditch and six bridges to span the channel in May, 1874 (Cox 2005:57; Gross and Mendez 1997:243). The



Figure 1-3. Project area showing location of monitored excavation, the San Antonio Valley and Young Valley ditches, and selected historic sites .



Figure 1-4. *Photograph of Steves Lumber Company in 1881 with the Valley Ditch crossing diagonally in the foreground (photo courtesy of the Witte Museum, San Antonio, Texas).*

construction of the channel was completed in December 1874; a spur channel known as the Young Valley was built in 1875 (Cox 2005:57; Gross and Mendez 1997:243). An additional channel was constructed in 1879 to alleviate overflow during heavy rains and floods (Gross and Mendez 1997:245).

Gross and Mendez (1997), using city maps dating to 1877 and 1889, located the probable course of the Valley Ditch (See figures 1-1, 1-2). They surmised that the Valley Ditch ran along the east side of Cherry Street. The maps indicate that it originates at an unknown point north of Sherman Street and runs south past present day Durango Street (Gross and Mendez 1997:243). The Young Ditch begins at Idaho Street and turns southeast for two to three miles to a tributary of the San Antonio River near Mission Concepción (Cox 2005:57). The 1889 map shows the 1879 extension of the Valley Ditch beginning at Acequia Madre. The Valley Ditch addition runs north to south along Walnut Street and turn east at Centre Street (Gross and Mendez 1997:243).

The promise of the Valley Ditch never met the expectations of the public. The Valley Ditch both overflowed its channel during heavy rain, and with its main source diverted by the San Antonio Water Works, never flowed adequately (Gross and Mendez 1997:245). The Valley Ditch required numerous annual and emergency expenditures to keep it operational even at a reduced capacity (Gross and Mendez 1997:243). Perhaps more importantly, the growing awareness and importance of public health is cited as the ultimate reason for abandonment of the Valley Ditch,

as well as the overall acequia system. City health officials cited the acequia system as “the receptacles of all manner of filth and refuse matter” contributing to unsanitary conditions and a detriment to public health especially in lower- income areas (Gross and Mendez 1997:246). By 1890, the Valley Ditch was abandoned. The filling of the Valley Ditch and other acequias in San Antonio coincided with the drive to modernize the public infrastructure of the city. It also signaled the economic shift of San Antonio from essentially a rural village to a major urban center (Gross and Mendez 1997:246).

Chapter 2: Archaeological Field Methods

CPS Energy contacted and later contracted CAR-UTSA to monitor utility construction along East Commerce Street. The monitoring had one principal goal to identify any remnant of the *San Antonio Valley Ditch* and document, through photography, scaled drawings and mapping, any remaining portion of the canal and its exact location. Mark Denton of the THC advised that only the intersection of East Commerce Street and North Cherry Street would need to be monitored to fulfill the goal of identifying the remnant of the canal.

A project archaeologist monitored trenching at East Commerce and North Cherry Streets to document any remnant of the *San Antonio Valley Ditch*. As part of the monitoring, and as stated in the Texas Antiquities Committee Permit Application, CAR staff photo-documented the excavations and also profiled sections of both wall of the trench. The matrix derived from the construction excavation was not screened but back dirt from the excavations was inspected for artifacts.

Chapter 3: Summary of Results

Archaeological monitoring took place on May 29 and 30, 2007. Traffic safety and movement required that only one lane at a time were to be closed during trenching. Trenching was divided into east and west lane segments and occurred on May 29 and May 30 respectively. No remnant of the San Antonio Valley Ditch was found in either of the profiles of the excavated trench at the intersection of East Commerce and North Cherry Streets. Figure 3-1 shows east and west section profiles of the trench. Excavation revealed the eastern section of the trench to be highly disturbed by previous utility work to the depth of 1.5 to 2 meters below surface. A 12-inch cast iron water pipe was found 1.5 meters below the surface in the eastern section of the trench. The western section of the trench (See Figure 3-1), revealed a less disturbed context. A layer of brick pavers was noted in the profile immediately below the asphalt road base. In addition, an upright wooden pole was found. Items observed in the backfill included a rail road spike, a clay sewer pipe fragment, a horseshoe, and a broken brick. These materials were not collected.

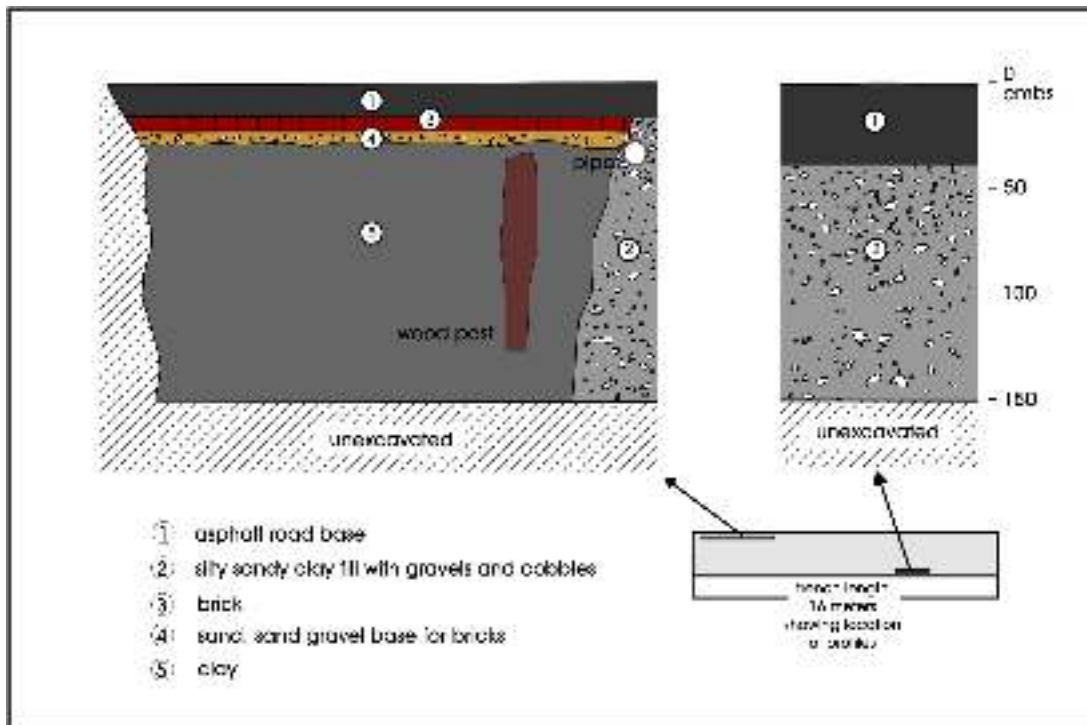


Figure 3-1. Profiles of the west (right), and east (left) sections of the trench excavation at East Commerce and North Cherry streets.

No indication was found of the Valley Ditch. Based upon previous research, the location of the Valley Ditch ran along the east side of Cherry Streets. Visual reconnaissance of the intersection showed a storm drain running north to south along the east side of North Cherry Streets. The profile of the eastern portion of North Cherry Street showed a highly disturbed context consistent with previous construction activity. It is likely that the construction of the storm drain removed any remnant of the ditch. No artifacts were collected during the project. All project-associated documents are curated at the Center for Archaeological Research according to Texas Historical Commission guidelines.

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