



# **Monitoring the Planting and Removal of Plants at the Commander's House (41BX351) San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas**

*by*  
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Texas Antiquities Committee Permit No. 5595

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Technical Report, No. 19

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## **Abstract:**

In April 2010, the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) contracted with the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department (SAPRD) to monitor tree planting and removal at the Commander's House Park in downtown San Antonio. The monitoring took place on April 13, 2010, under Texas Historical Commission Antiquities Permit No. 5595. SAPRD crews removed 2 cycads and one palm planted along the front of the Commander's House, replanted the palm in an adjacent flower bed, and also planted three new palms and three new trees on the grounds of the park. The Commander's House, site 41BX351, was originally built before 1857 and is associated with the San Antonio Arsenal. The site is part of the U.S. San Antonio Arsenal National Register District (69000200). The structure is currently being used as a Seniors' Center. In addition, the San Pedro Acequia (41BX337), a State Archeological Landmark, runs past the house within the grounds.

Only one of the holes, Hole #5, in front of the house, encountered cultural materials consisting of a roughly trimmed limestone block set on top of another limestone block. Investigation of this feature was outside the scope of the project, so the nature of the features remains undetermined.

No other cultural materials and/or features were encountered during this monitoring project.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Project Introduction

In April of 2010, the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) contracted with the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department (SAPRD) to conduct archaeological services in conjunction with planting and removal of ornamental plants at the Commander's House Park in downtown San Antonio. SAPRD crews planned to remove two cycads and one palm planted along the front of the Commander's House, site 41BX351, and plant three new palms and three new trees on the grounds of the park. The site is located in downtown San Antonio at 645 S. Main (Figure 1-1).

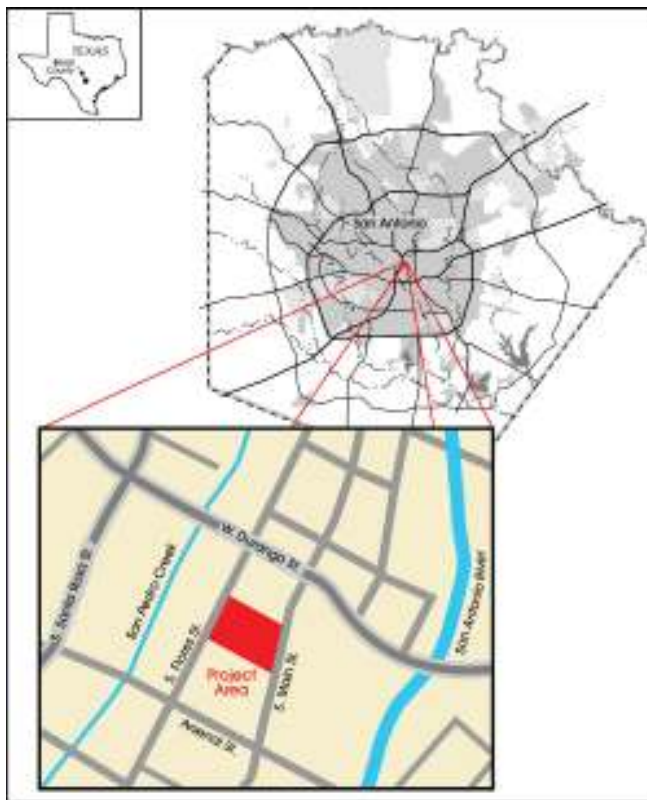


Figure 1-1. Location of the project area in San Antonio.

The Commander's House, site 41BX351, was originally built before 1857 and is associated with the San Antonio Arsenal. The structure is currently being used as a Seniors' Center. The site is part of the U.S. San Antonio Arsenal National Register District (69000200). In addition, the San Pedro Acequia (41BX337), a State Archeological Landmark, runs past the house within the grounds (Figure 1-2).



Figure 1-2. Map of Commander's House Park, showing the location of planted and removed plantings, and the location of the San Pedro Acequia and laterals encountered by Fox (1978).

Since the planned landscaping would occur within the boundaries of a National Register District and may also impact a State Archeological Landmark, archaeological monitoring was required as defined by the Antiquities Code of Texas. The project was conducted under Antiquities Permit No. 5595 granted by the Texas Historical Commission. Dr. Steve A. Tomka, Center Director, served as Principal Investigator and Barbara A. Meissner served as Project Archaeologist. The goal of the archaeological project was to document any significant cultural deposits or features that were encountered during the landscaping activities.

### Area of Potential Effect

The project sponsor contracted with UTSA-CAR to conduct archaeological monitoring due to the location of the project



area, and the proximity of the proposed plantings and removals to known historic features. The two cycads and one palm slated for removal were located along the front of the structure (Figure 1-2). The Area of Potential Effect was limited to the immediate location of the plantings and removals.

### Archaeological Laboratory Methods

No artifacts were collected during the project. Field notes, forms, photographs, and drawings were placed in labeled archival folders. All field forms were completed with pencil. Digital photographs were printed on acid-free paper, labeled with appropriate archival materials, and placed in archival-quality sleeves. Soiled field forms were placed in archival quality page protectors. Ink-jet produced maps and illustrations were also placed in archival quality page protectors. All project related documentation as well as a copy of all digital materials, including the report and digital photographs are housed at Center's curation facility.

### Previous Archaeology

In 1977, as part of archaeological investigations of the San Pedro Acequia (41BX337), CAR uncovered portions of the acequia on the grounds of the Commander's House (Fox 1978). At that time, most of the acequia was completely filled, though a small portion east of the small structure adjacent to the Commander's House was still in use as a drainage ditch (Fox 1978:4). The excavations traced the line of the acequia, encountering the gates for laterals that led to the west and east (see Figure 1-2).

The excavations showed that this portion of the acequia was stone-lined with a cement cap that had been added on top of the walls at some point in the past (Fox 1978:3). The excavations also found cement plugs at each end of the acequia. Fox (1978:7) speculated that this closed-off portion had been used as a fish pond after the acequia was no longer in use. There were also cement plugs blocking the two laterals that were encountered, one going west and the other east (Figures 1-2 and 1-3).

Of particular interest was the discovery that the east wall of the building referred to as the "Servants' Quarters" was built using the stone wall of the acequia as a foundation (Fox 1978:11).

This practice has been seen in other houses built along acequias in San Antonio (Schuetz 1970:15).

A final portion of the 1977 excavations uncovered part of the lateral that extended from the main acequia to the west, running just north of the house (Fox 1978:10). It was also discovered that a drain pipe, apparently coming from the house, emptied into this acequia lateral. Fox (1978:7) believed this was intended to drain rainwater from the roof of the older part of the house.



Figure 1-3. *Photograph of the west wall of the San Pedro Acequia on the grounds of the Commander's House taken during excavation by CAR, showing curve of the acequia and a gate to a lateral that led west (foreground). Facing North.*

## Chapter 2: Historic Background

### A Brief History of the San Pedro Acequia

The earliest records that describe what is now San Antonio are those of the Terán expedition, which passed through the San Antonio River Valley in 1692 (Hatcher 1932). The abundant water available there, as well as the friendliness of the natives, made the valley a prime location for a secure way-station between the Rio Grande and the missions that had been established in East Texas. Another visit in 1709 convinced Fray Antonio de San Buenaventura y Olivares that a mission should be established along the San Antonio River to convert the local inhabitants (Tous 1930:9).

The first permanent Spanish settlement in what is now San Antonio began in May 1718, when the newly appointed Governor of Coahuila (which at that time included Texas) officially dedicated an area near San Pedro Springs as the new Presidio San Antonio de Béxar (Hoffman 1938:38). Nearby, Mission San Antonio de Valero (later known as the Alamo) was established by Olivares. Over the course of the next few years, both the mission and the presidio were moved to the San Antonio River, with the presidio on the west bank of the river and the mission on the east (in its current location) (Chipman 1992:125). Families of the soldiers began to build houses around the presidio, creating Villa de Béxar.

In 1731, three missions were moved from East Texas to the San Antonio River valley, resulting in five missions dispersed along the river (Habig 1968:161). That same year, a group of 56 people from the Canary Islands were brought to the San Antonio valley, where they established Villa San Fernando de Béxar. An acequia was needed to bring water to the new villa and to water the fields being cleared south of the town. This area, known as the *Labor Abajo* or Lower Labor, lay between San Pedro Creek to the west and the San Antonio River to the east. The exact date that the new San Pedro Acequia was completed is not known, though Cox (2005:35) believed that it was probably in operation at the time that title to their lands was formally granted to the Canary Islanders in 1734. The San Pedro Acequia began at San Pedro Springs and meandered south roughly four miles to enter the San Antonio River just above its confluence with San Pedro Creek (Cox 2005:36). Each land owner along the acequia had the right to open gates to let water on to his fields at

specified times and this right was passed with the land when it was sold (Jones 2005:14).

The acequia continued in use as a source of water for San Fernando and the fields south of town throughout Mexico's bid for freedom from Spain and the Texas Revolution 14 years later. However, upkeep was often neglected and in 1840 the city council passed a new ordinance requiring the land owners along the acequia to do their part of repair and upkeep (Cox 2005:40-41). Other ordinances forbade the washing of clothes and dumping of sewage into San Pedro acequia (Cox 2005:42). Once Texas became a part of the United States, in December 1845, the ordinances concerning the acequias were reviewed and changed only a little. Instead of the mayor being responsible for enforcing acequia maintenance, a commissioner was given this task. In 1849, a cholera epidemic swept through the city, killing at least 600 people, 12 percent of the population (Cox 2005:45). It was believed that "filth" and associated bad smells were responsible for the epidemic. New Mayor James M. Devine ordered the land owners along the major acequias to appoint a ditch commissioner for each ditch and regulations concerning the dumping of dead animals, sewage, and other "filth" into the town water supply, were more stringently applied (Cox 2005:44-45).

Laws concerning maintenance of the acequias continued to be promulgated. In 1852, new acts required a ditch commissioner to control the dispersal of water from the acequia and supervise the upkeep. The law also required the acequias to be cleaned and repaired every January in preparation for the coming planting season (Cox 2005:47). That same year began the process of lining the acequias with stone in the downtown area (Cox 2005:49).

In 1878, a new method of providing water to the town was begun (Cox 2005:60). Water was pumped from the San Antonio River in what is now Brackenridge Park and dispersed through the town in pipes. Within a few years most of the town had piped water available. In addition, the farm lands that had once been watered by the San Pedro Acequia had become part of the rapidly growing town. By the turn of the century, the acequia functioned primarily as a storm drain (Cox 2005:62) and in 1912 the city closed the acequia and ordered it filled (Cox 2005:70).

## The Devine House

In 1847 Doctor James M. Devine purchased land along the “county road leading from Military Plaza to Mission San José”, known today as South Flores Street, from José Ignacio Cassiano (Bexar County Deed Records [BCDR] Book D2, page 411). The deed record for this transaction is only occasionally legible, but it does not appear that there was a house on the property at that time.

Devine was one of the early political leaders in San Antonio after statehood, serving as Mayor three times between 1849 and 1857 (City of San Antonio 2010). He is known as the man who, on July 29, 1856, while a serving Mayor, killed former mayor John S. McDonald, whose home was only two blocks further south on South Flores (Cox 1991:1). The “lamentable occurrence” took place during a fight caused by differences in their political opinions (Cox 1991:4-5). The mayor was acquitted of a charge of murder on the grounds of self-defense, based on the fact that McDonald had entered his store and started the fight. He was reelected in 1857 (Cox 1991:5).

At some time between 1847, when Devine purchased the property, and 1857, when he sold it to P.H. Bell, a house had been constructed, described in the deed as “And also being the same house and lot heretofore used & occupied by us as a homestead” (BCDR P1:376). One unanswered question is the origin of the small two-story house built using the stone lining of the acequia as part of the foundation (Figure 2-1). This structure, described by Fox (1978:4) as “servants’ quarters” is shown on the earliest known map of the area, the 1873 Bird’s Eye map (Figure 2-1). It is not mentioned in deed records, though it can be assumed to have been built after the acequia was stone-lined in 1852 (Cox 2005:49). It may have been built at the same time as the original Devine house.

A note should be made that the Commander’s House originally fronted on South Flores Street, as can be seen in Figure 2-1. Today the “front” of the house is considered to face South Main, which did not exist at the time the house was built and for some time thereafter (Figure 2-2). Unfortunately, the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps are of no value in this case. Beginning with the earliest available Sanborn maps, the project area is shown only as a blank labeled “U. S. Government” (Digital Sanborn Maps 2010).

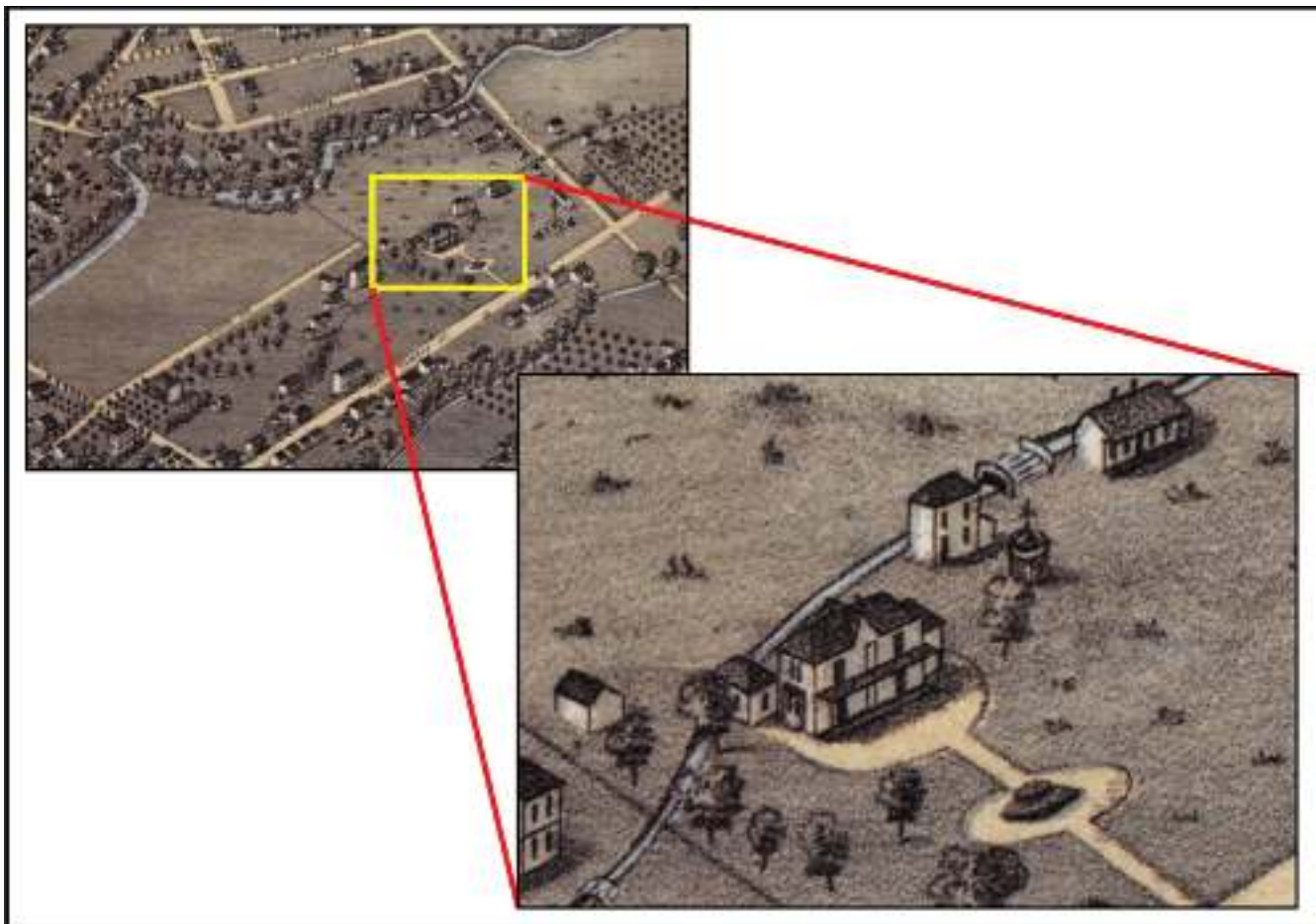


Figure 2-1. *The Commander's House in 1873, from a Bird's Eye map of San Antonio. The inset is a closer view of the grounds. Note the San Pedro Acequia and the small house built adjacent to it. Map faces southeast.*



Figure 2-2. Detail of the 1886 Bird's Eye map of San Antonio, showing the Commander's House. Map faces northeast.

### The Commander's House

During the war with Mexico (1846-1848), San Antonio served as the staging area for the U.S. Army (Cox 1994:12). The need for a more permanent military presence in Texas was clear by the end of the war, and the Army chose to lease the grounds of the Alamo to serve as a Quarter Master's Corps Depot. However, this was not considered a permanent solution to the need for a military depot, possibly because the Catholic Church refused to sell the property to the United States (Young 1991). In 1858, after San Antonio was formally designated as the location of the Arsenal for the U. S. Army Department of Texas, Captain Robert H.K. Whiteley arranged to purchase property south of Military Plaza, on the west side of the river (Garner 1968:2). Originally two properties were acquired, 8 -7/100 acres from Gregory T. Devine (BCDR R1:198) to the south and 7-3/4 acres from P.H. Bell (BCDR R1:192). As mentioned above, the latter property had belonged to James M. Devine, who built the original house. Whiteley occupied the house while he began the process of building necessary structures for the new Arsenal.

When the Department of Texas was surrendered to a secessionist state militia by General David E. Twiggs on

February 16, 1861, Whiteley was forced to turn over the Arsenal (Bowden 1986). At that time, some of the new buildings of the Arsenal were not completed, and though the Confederates did complete the building and added others, they were considered of inferior quality and removed when the U. S. Army once more took over (Garner 1968:4).

At some time between the original land purchase and the making of the Bird's Eye map in Figure 2-1, the Devine house had been expanded somewhat (Garner 1968:6). In 1870, the commander of the arsenal, Captain J.C. Bradford, informed the Department of Ordinance that

*The [Commander's House] on the east side has a balcony of 36 feet long by 8 feet wide, the pillars, railing and flooring of which is so rotten that it needs to be replaced. ... On the whole, the house needs a thorough renovation to make it habitable... (Garner 1968:5).*

Two years later some of the needed repairs appear to have been done, as Colonel Edmund Schriver reported that, though the Arsenal was still in need of several new buildings

to replace decrepit temporary structures, “The buildings and grounds are in good order and the stores are well cared for. The office books and papers are neatly kept and accounts and public funds are in a satisfactory condition” (Garner 1968:6). The 1873 Bird’s Eye map shows no railed balcony on the front of the building (Figure 2-1).

A visitor in 1882 noted:

*[The Arsenal] includes a tract of nearly 20 acres, the ample grounds being tastefully laid out with beautiful drives and walks and well-shaded with various varieties of trees, while semi-tropical plants are planted in convenient localities about the inclosure [sic] (Garner 1968:6).*

Another Bird’s Eye map of San Antonio drawn in 1886 shows that the balcony has been rebuilt on at least the visible sides of the house (Figure 2-2). A photograph, taken about 1888, shows the balconies, as well as the landscaping surrounding the building. Figure 2-2 clearly shows that the wing extending from the east side of the building had not been built at this time, though a bay window had been added on the ground floor room at the northwest corner of

the house. The bay window in the north wall was almost certainly added at the same time.

Several references, in particular the web site of the Office of Historic Preservation (City of San Antonio 2010b), state that the house was completely rebuilt about 1883. However, the drawing of the building in the 1886 Bird’s Eye map (Figure 2-2) appears to show the same building as that seen in the 1873 Bird’s Eye map (Figure 2-1), with the exception of the bay window, including the double narrow windows at the north and south ends of the building. Note that these windows are clearly evident in a photograph taken about 1888 (Figure 2-3).

The research done in 1968 at the time the building was recorded as part of the Historic American Buildings Survey did not find evidence that the Devine House was completely demolished, but instead simply expanded (Garner 1968:6). Based entirely on these documents, it seems that the building was added to in what was probably at least three phases, one sometime before 1873 when the main part of the building was expanded to its current size, one between 1873 and 1886, when the bay windows were added, and one more sometime after 1886 when the east wing was added. However, a more detailed review of Army records concerning the building and



Figure 2-3. Photograph of the Commander’s House taken about 1888 (Photograph is in the collection of the Institute of Texan Cultures, #073-1684).

examination of the building by historic architects would be necessary to document the changes to the building.

The Arsenal continued to function throughout both world wars, serving as a major depot for supplies going to American troops (Long 2010). During World War II, the Arsenal shipped more than 327 million tons of ammunition (Long 2010).

The year after the photograph in Figure 2-4 was taken in 1948, the Arsenal was closed, although the buildings were still used as office space by various federal departments. In 1968 these included: the General Services Administration, the Federal Housing Authority, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Sport Fisheries and Wildlife Agency, the U.S. Air Force Recruiting Station, the U.S. Army Recruiting Station, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In addition, the Texas National Guard used space at the Arsenal (Garner 1968:1).

In 1972, when the federal government no longer wanted the property, the Commander's House and its grounds were transferred to the City

of San Antonio. This allowed the City to establish the Commander's House Park. The U.S. San Antonio Arsenal National Register District, encompassing 200 acres, was established on December 30, 1969. The house itself was turned into a Seniors' Center in 1978 and continues in that use today.



Figure 2-4. *Photograph of the Commanders House taken in 1948. Note that the balconies have been enclosed (Photograph is in the collection of the Institute of Texan Cultures, #L-6432-F).*



## Chapter 3: Results

On April 13, 2010, the CAR Project Archaeologist monitored the removal of two cycads and one palm, the replanting of the palm, and the planting of three new palms and three new trees in Commander's House Park. Prior to beginning the project, the SAPRD had the various utility lines on the property marked by the utility companies so that they could be avoided. Unfortunately, the markings were not entirely accurate (see below). Each hole intended for a new tree was dug by a backhoe and measured roughly one meter in diameter. Depending on the size of the root ball of the tree, the depth of the planting holes varied between 60 and 80 cm below surface (bs). During all digging, the monitor stood where it was possible to see into the hole and to examine the matrix derived from each hole. Notes and photographs were taken during the process.

### Removal

Two cycads and one palm were removed during the project. The palm was replanted in a side flowerbed (see location #7 in Figure 1-2). They were removed by digging around them enough to cut most of the roots and then pulling them free of the ground with a backhoe (Figure 3-1). No artifacts of any kind were observed during this operation, nor were any cultural features impacted.

### Planting

During the day, holes were excavated for three new palms and three new trees. Hole #1, dug to plant a pine tree, was excavated near the house in what is now considered the back of the house, facing South Flores (Figure 1-2). The hole was originally excavated to a depth of approximately 55 cm below surface. However, following initial inspection, it was determined that the hole was too shallow. When the hole was expanded, an unmarked electrical conduit was encountered. The final depth of the hole was approximately 70 cm. The sediment removed from this hole was dark gray-brown silty clay loam with few inclusions. No historic cultural materials were observed.

Hole #2 was dug to plant a Mexican Buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*) tree west of the northern parking lot (Figure 1-2). The original hole had to be abandoned when the backhoe struck a 2-inch PVC water line that fed the irrigation system (Figure 3-2). The final depth of the hole was 58 cm. The sediment was brown sandy clay loam with ca. 5 percent small



Figure 3-1. Removing plantings from the front flower bed. The twin trunk of the final cycad to be removed is visible at the upper left of the photograph.



Figure 3-2. Moving Hole #2 after encountering an irrigation line. The final location is on the right. Facing North.



gravels until about 30 cm bs, below which reddish caliche and gravels were encountered. The matrix appeared to be fill derived from an old driveway. No cultural materials were observed.

Hole #3 was dug to place a pecan tree south of the house (Figure 1-2). The hole was 68 cm deep. The sediment was similar to that in Hole #1. No historic cultural materials were observed.

Hole #4 was dug to plant a palm south of the house (Figure 1-2). The sediment was slightly darker and contained a higher proportion of clay than the sediments in Holes #1 and #3. The hole was 58 cm deep. No historic cultural materials were observed.

Hole #5 was dug in front of the house (though, as noted above, historically this would have been considered the back of the house) (Figure 1-2). The sediment in the original location of the hole, which was southeast of the stump of a dead palm, was medium brown sandy clay loam with ca. 5 percent small gravels. The percentage of gravel increased and numerous caliche nodules became apparent with increasing depth. At 45 cm bs, the excavation exposed a large limestone block. The block was very roughly shaped into a rectangle and was stacked onto another large rock (Figure 3-3).

To limit disturbing this apparent architectural feature, Feature 1, the upper limestone block was not uncovered completely. The exposed portion measured 23 cm by 31 cm. Its location was measured from the sidewalks found to its west and north (Figure 1-2). The corner of the stone was 2.97 m east of the north/south running sidewalk and 3.25 m south of the sidewalk running east/west. The hole that exposed the limestone block was backfilled without disturbing the stones.

The limestone blocks appear to be part of an architectural feature such as the corner of the foundation of a structure of some kind,



Figure3-3. Limestone block in Hole #5.

possibly an outbuilding or the footer for a wall. Given the location, behind the house as it was originally used, it is possible that it is the upper part of a stone-lined privy. However, as the purpose of the project was not to investigate this feature, it was simply recorded, and an alternate hole was excavated.

The alternate location of Hole #5 was due west of the feature. It was terminated at approximately 50 cm below surface when an abandoned electrical conduit was encountered. A second alternate location was chosen for Hole #5 due west of the stump of the dead palm. This hole was 67 cm deep. The sediments were dark brown silty clay loam with about 5 percent small gravels.

Hole #6 was dug in the southwestern part of the park (Figure 1-2). The removal of the stump required the digging of a much larger hole than the previous holes (Figure 3-4). The final hole measured 3.45 m by 3.95 m and was 1.25 m deep. The sediment was medium brown silty clay loam to about 60 cm bs and then changed to a much lighter gray very sandy clay with approximately 50 percent gravels most of which were 5 to 7 cm in maximum diameter. This layer continued to the bottom of the hole and appeared to be a natural sediment. No cultural materials were observed.



Figure3-4. Removal of palm stump prior to planting of new palm.

Hole #7 was dug to replant the palm removed from the front flowerbed to a flowerbed along the east/west-running sidewalk (Figure 1-2). The hole was smaller than the others, measuring only approximately 60 cm in diameter and was only 50 cm deep. No cultural materials were observed.



## **Chapter 4: Summary and Recommendations**

On April 13, 2010, staff of the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) monitored the planting and removal of plant material within the Commander's House Park in downtown San Antonio. Staff of the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department removed two cycads and one palm from along the front of the Commander's House, replanted the palm, and planted three new palms and three new trees on the grounds of the Park. The Commander's House, site 41BX351, was originally built before 1857 and is associated with the San Antonio Arsenal. In addition, the San Pedro Acequia (41BX337) runs past the house within the grounds (Figure 1-2). The structure is currently being used as a Seniors Center.

Cultural materials and/or features were encountered in only one hole, #5. This hole, located in front of the house, encountered two roughly trimmed limestone blocks set on top of each other (Figure 3-3). The feature appears to be part of a foundation although this cannot be determined with certainty unless and until a larger area is exposed in the future

for inspection. No other cultural materials were encountered during this monitoring project.

### **Recommendations**

The Commander's House, site 41BX351, represents an important part of San Antonio's history. It was originally built as the home of Doctor James M. Devine, three-time mayor of the city, and was later used as the home of the Commander of the U.S. Army Arsenal. In addition, the San Pedro Acequia (41BX337) runs through the eastern side of the property and a lateral of the acequia runs just north of the house. Because of the importance of this site and the associated acequia, we recommend that any future projects involving sub-surface disturbances in the park be assessed for their potential to disturb historic features and/or deposits. At a minimum, any project that requires disturbance of the ground within the park should be monitored by an archaeologist. If future opportunities arise, also we recommend that the nature of the stacked limestone blocks found in the vicinity of planting Hole #5 be more fully investigated.



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