

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

Acequias: God's Holy Water

To early Spanish explorers, it seemed their plan to expand their colonies north of Mexico could not fail. After all, had not a similar strategy succeeded centuries ago in their Reconquest of Spain from the Moors? Spanish royal administration believed in building upon that success of small *companas*--bands of individuals as opposed to their large national army--seizing, controlling, and re-establishing authority region by region as they slowly advanced through the Iberian Peninsula. Their plan for colonizing New Spain--Mexico and northward into what is now Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico--was more intricate and dependent on achieving three major goals in each region conquered: establish a mission to Christianize the Natives; include a presidio for protection against hostile Indians and French incursion; and found an adjacent community, especially using the newly converted and trained Indians to sustain the community through farming and ranching. Historians estimate that between 1632 and 1793, Spain established as many as 35 missions in what is now Texas. This number is an approximate because some missions closed within days of their opening. History does record 28 Texas missions, of which 18 are now either archaeological sites with visible ruins or else nothing significant remains and, indeed, the exact geographical location may have been lost. Of the ten remaining, all of which are either active Catholic churches, state or national parks or both, five are in San Antonio, either having been founded in or moved here. One of the chief reasons the San Antonio missions survived is the wealth of God's holy waters found in the natural spring-fed San Antonio River and San Pedro Springs, and the resulting systems of irrigation canals that sustained life and helped build a metropolis. "To distribute water, seven gravity-flow ditches known as acequias, five dams, and an aqueduct were constructed in a network covering over fifteen miles," San Antonio River Authority records show .

In what is now the United States, agricultural irrigation--used for millennia in various parts of the world--is thought to have its beginnings in desert areas of West Texas, where explorers such as Francisco Coronado found that Native Americans had devised a crude but effective system of collecting and diverting runoff waters from the Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers to water their crops. Some had even built brush dams and fashioned reservoirs for the treasured rains or occasional thunderstorms that fell, forming *arroyos* (streams). Toward the end of the 17th century, Spanish colonists brought with them highly technical knowledge of how to build sophisticated irrigation systems. Pueblo Indians dug the earliest of these acequias in a mission at Ysleta (south of El Paso) under the supervision of Franciscan friars.

The most extensive, most effective, and most intricate acequias, however, were constructed in San Antonio. The first, begun a decade before the Canary Islanders arrived, was the Pajalache (or Concepcion) Ditch. It was so wide and deep that Franciscans were able to travel on it in boats. This acequia mainly watered the lands of Mission Concepcion. The six others included Alamo Madre (1724) that supplied water to Mission San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo); San Jose Acequia (1730) that flowed around Mission San Jose, watering its herds and supplying power for the water wheel of its mill; San Juan Acequia (1731) that supplied water to farmland

on the east side of the San Antonio River; the Espada Dam, Acequia and Aqueduct (begun in 1731 and completed in 1745) that diverted water south from the Alamo toward Mission Espada; and, Alazan Ditch (1872) built after the secularization of the missions to water lands west of San Pedro Creek. "The initial success of...any new mission depended upon the planting and harvesting of the first crop," Mary Ann Noonan Guerra states in her book *The San Antonio River*. "Need of water for irrigating the fields and for direct use by the settlers gave priority to the building of acequias...(which) forever changed the land, turning it from a place of wild game and Indian hunters into an oasis of gently flowing tributaries tended by farmers and ranchers." It is no wonder the San Antonio Missions flourished.

Today, five historic missions remain in San Antonio. In March, two--Mission Concepcion and San Juan Capistrano Mission--will mark the anniversary of the founding of their churches (both founded in March, 1731). Visit the San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum, 1201 Donaldson in the St. Paul Community Center, to find information on all of the missions as well as view other exhibits celebrating the rich faith history of the Archdiocese of San Antonio. Call 210-733-7152 for information.



San Antonio River Falls, Espada Dam at Mission Park, General Photography Collection No. 109-0261, courtesy UTSA Special Collections