

# Street-Names in San Antonio: Signposts to History

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THE METHOD OF NAMING STREETS in American cities differs sharply from that practiced in Europe. While the cities of the Old World developed slowly through many centuries and names for streets were established gradually and as needed, American cities have usually been mapped or plotted in advance, allowing for use of systems for street designation. The typical American city has followed the example of Philadelphia in having a block plan design with streets crossing one another at right angles, and for designating the streets cities have often adopted the method first used by Major L'Enfant in his plan for Washington: the use of one system of names for one tier of streets and another system for the cross-tier. In Washington, numbers were used for one direction and letters for the other. It is this systematizing of names which is the most common aspect of American street naming. Philadelphia, moreover, uses numbers one way and names of trees the other, and still other systems are common which use the names of presidents or famous Americans. Even in the selection of second members for compounds, the use of a system has prevailed in those places which followed the example of Manhattan in designating roads in one direction as "Streets" and those in the other direction as "Avenues."<sup>1</sup> This concern for a system of street-names in American cities has provided convenience in finding addresses at the expense of the distinctiveness and historical sense of place which marks European street-names. For example, in London streets have names unique to their location and situation. External characteristics such as width and nature

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<sup>1</sup> The typical method of American street planning and naming is described by A. H. Marckwardt, *American English* (New York, 1958), pp. 163–165, and H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York, 1936), pp. 544–547. [For an account of the system used in Philadelphia, see Richard Pillsbury, "The Street Name Systems of Pennsylvania before 1820," *Names* 17: 3 (September 1969), 214–222 (Ed. note).]

of the roadway gave rise to Broad Street and Crooked Lane. Streets like Bread Street and Fish Street indicate commodities produced or offered for sale there. Famous persons or groups are represented in such designations as King Edward Street and Lombard Street. Also, streets are named for location or prominent features or buildings. Hence, we find Thames Street and Bridge Street.<sup>2</sup> The striking characteristic of the street-names of San Antonio is that in this Texas city features like those of London can be found along with aspects of the typical American city. At the same time, the mark of the Spanish-Mexican culture which is so much a part of the history of San Antonio can be seen in the street-names. Therefore, to consider the street-names in the oldest sections of San Antonio is to experience a feeling of history like that felt in visiting the cities of the Old World.

As one might expect, the oldest streets in San Antonio can be recognized because they still bear the names given them by the Spanish settlers of the area in the eighteenth century. Because Spanish continues to be spoken in the city, the original names, with one exception, have not been Anglicized. Therefore, we still find streets with names which have existed since the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Running north-south, these are Laredo, Flores, Soledad, and Nacogdoches; running east-west, Dolorosa. Originally called Camino de villa Laredo and Camino de villa Nacogdoches, Laredo and Nacogdoches streets represent where "El Camino Real," the Royal Highway, ran through San Antonio and took the Spanish from Mexico to East Texas. The naming of these streets for the towns with which they connect is the first example of a principle of designation used throughout the history of the city for important inter-city links. Flores, originally Calle de Flores, was so named because, in the days of the Spanish, houses along it were fragrant with jasmine, vanilla, roses, and wild honeysuckle which grew in gardens irrigated from the main canal which ran near the street and brought water from San Pedro springs to the village.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the names of the early streets have legendary sources. Soledad, Calle de Soledad (solitude or loneliness), was the site of

<sup>2</sup> Eilert Ekwall, *Street-names of the City of London* (Oxford, 1964), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> A map of San Antonio in the 1790's is presented in E. W. Hensinger, *Early Exploration and Mission Establishment in Texas* (San Antonio, 1936).

<sup>4</sup> *San Antonio: A History and Guide* (San Antonio, 1941), p. 70.

the Veramendi Palace, residence of the vice-governor of Texas. In 1830, all of the members of the vice-governor's family were killed by the plague while visiting Mexico, leaving the street truly one of loneliness.<sup>5</sup> Dolorosa Street recalls an event of 1813 which occurred during the Mexican Revolution. On the night of August 20, the Spanish general Arredondo, who had recaptured the town after a hard battle, ordered three hundred Mexican rebels locked in a small, almost airtight granary situated on Military Plaza, and 18 men suffocated. Consequently, the night is traditionally called "la noche triste" (sad night), and the lamentations of the bereaved women are said to have inspired the name of the street, Calle de Dolorosa (Street of Sorrow).<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately these legends which are usually presented as fact in guide books must be questioned. A reproduction of a map of San Antonio of at least 20 years earlier than 1813 shows Dolorosa Street,<sup>7</sup> and the name may have come from an iconographic representation of a weeping Virgin Mary known as "La Dolorosa" which existed at nearby Mission San Francisco de la Espada.<sup>8</sup> In regard to the legend of Soledad Street, one historian notes that land was granted to a family on a "Soledad" as early as 1736.<sup>9</sup> No doubt, however, the connection of these streets with such colorful history has contributed to the preservation of their original names.

Other early street-names have been lost. The Calle de Acequia (canal) which followed the water ditch into town from San Pedro springs became at the middle of the nineteenth century ordinary Main Street, the most prevalent of all American street-names, and at the same time the original plaza around which the colonists from the Canary Islands settled in 1731 lost its designation of "Plaza de las Islas" to become Main Plaza.<sup>10</sup> One of the most frequently renamed streets has been what is now called Commerce Street. In the 1740's merely a footpath linking the mission "Alamo" with the Spanish Governor's Palace, it was known as Calle de Real (Royal Street). Later in the century it became known as Calle de Presidio because a garrison was located on the roadway at the Plaza de las

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. footnote 3, *supra*.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Ramsdell, *San Antonio* (Austin, 1959), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick C. Chabot, *With the Makers of San Antonio* (San Antonio, 1937), p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> *San Antonio*, p. 53.

Armas (Military Plaza). Then, one of the Spanish governors created a parkway along the street by lining it with cottonwood trees, and the road was called "Alameda" (poplar grove, park). In the early nineteenth century, the street was used as a horse pasture, and, consequently, called "El Potrero." Finally, by the middle of the nineteenth century when the street had become the business center of San Antonio, it got its present name of Commerce Street.<sup>11</sup> One example of the Anglicizing of an original Spanish name is King Philip V Street which borders La Villita (little village), the original Spanish settlement in the area. The street was obviously named Calle de Rey Philip for the illustrious Spanish king.

The streets already discussed represent the earliest known streets in the San Antonio settlement, all of them dating in location if not name from the eighteenth century. Other streets developed during the first half of the nineteenth century to complete the random layout of what is now the downtown area of the city. St. Mary's Street was called River Avenue until recently because it followed the path of the San Antonio River into town from its headwaters in the area of the present Brackenridge Park. The present name of the street honors the Catholic church and school founded on the street in 1852.<sup>12</sup> Navarro Street was named for the family of José Antonio Navarro, signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence and Constitution, who served in the first state Senate. The family owned property on the street in the eighteenth century, and their name became appended to the road by their house which remains today.<sup>13</sup> Presa Street, Calle de Presa, got its name from a dam across the river which provided water for irrigation.<sup>14</sup> Alamo Street, of course, received its name from the mission and fort which faces on it. Contradictory accounts of the origin of the unofficial designation "Alamo" for Mission San Antonio de Valero have been advanced. The simplest account is that the term, meaning "cottonwood," was given to the mission because of trees in the area, but another account says that the name was bestowed by a company of Spanish soldiers assigned to the place in 1801 who had previously been stationed at a town in Mexico called San Jose y

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<sup>11</sup> Ramsdell, *op. cit.*, pp. 34, 79, 152; Hensinger map.

<sup>12</sup> *San Antonio*, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pp. 202—206.

<sup>14</sup> Boyce House, *City of Flaming Adventure* (San Antonio, 1949), p. 10.

Santiago del Alamo de Parras and commonly shortened to "El Alamo."<sup>15</sup> South Alamo Street was once called Mill Street because of Lewis' grist mill located on it.<sup>16</sup> Losoya Street, recently renamed as an extension of Broadway, is another street named for a family which owned property and established a homesite in the area in the eighteenth century. The Losoyas purchased their property in 1784.<sup>17</sup> Of those streets running east-west, apparently the first major road added to the south of the settlement was Nueva Street (New Street), just below Dolorosa Street. Calle de Calabozo (dungeon) became Market Street with the construction of a new municipal market house on it in 1858.<sup>18</sup> Pecan Street was obviously named for the trees so prevalent in the area. College Street joins St. Mary's Street at the old church and was named for the college which was begun on the site in 1852. The remainder of the east-west streets created in the first half of the nineteenth century were named for heroes of the fall of the Alamo, the first use of a system for naming San Antonio streets. Therefore, Crockett, Travis, Martin, and Fannin were laid out as straight crosstown streets. Most of the present downtown streets were in existence by the middle of the nineteenth century with the remarkable exception of the present Houston Street which remained simply a path to the Alamo shown on maps as the "Paseo" (walkway). Houston Street was not developed until the 1870's and did not become the main street of the city until the twentieth century. Roads to adjoining communities in existence before 1850 took their names, like Laredo and Nacogdoches earlier, from the towns to which they led. These communities were created by new arrivals to the West. Castroville was founded by Henri Castro in 1844 for a colony of French, Germans, and Alsatians. Fredericksburg was founded by German colonists in 1846 and named for their Prussian ruler, King Frederick William IV.<sup>19</sup> Somerset was named for the county of that designation in Virginia. In this way, early settlers in the San Antonio region influenced local place-names, and, consequently, the street-names in the area.

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<sup>15</sup> Ramsdell, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>16</sup> *San Antonio*, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-220.

<sup>18</sup> *San Antonio*, p. 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

In 1852, the design of the town was fixed by a survey map drawn by Jore Gentilz. This map, two copies of which are in the San Antonio Public Library, provided the first real design for the area, and its primary purpose was to mark off plots of land for future development. The significance of the map for the streets of San Antonio was that formal surveying of the land ended the accretive growth without design which gave an Old World aspect to the town in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the future development of the city often, though not always, followed the model of the typical American city.

A second important map of San Antonio was drawn for insurance purposes in 1883, the Morrison-Fourney map. This map, a reproduction of which is in the San Antonio Library, shows that during the 30 years of growth after the drawing of the survey map of 1852 efforts were made to name streets following the block plan of Philadelphia and Washington. Around the central core of the original unplanned settlement, consequently, we find evidence of attempts to establish systems of street-names. Perhaps because of the irregularity of the old town, no comprehensive plan was ever devised, and we see in the street-names the results of the use of various plans at different times. Different systems spread out from the old town like irregular petals of a flower growing out from the stem. Each system is independent of its fellows, indicating that in spite of some systematic effort the city lacked overall planning for its growth. The following attempts at street-name systems may be noted. To the northeast can be found the "Washington plan" with avenues lettered alphabetically one way and streets numbered consecutively the other: Avenues A through E, 3rd through 13th Streets. This briefly employed system has been broken in recent times by the renaming of Avenues B and C as Broadway and Alamo and 11th Street as Jones Street. North and across the river from the "Washington plan" a less rigorous system was tried by which streets in both directions were named haphazardly for towns. Hence, we find Richmond, Lexington, Baltimore, Brooklyn, Erie, Atlanta, and Wilmington in one direction, and Augusta, Dallas, Camden, Quincy, Elmira, and Euclid in the other. A quite extensive system was devised at this time for streets running east-west to the north of the downtown area. Inspired by the example of Philadelphia, names of trees were given by developers of these

streets. Therefore, we find, starting closest to the old town, Maple, Poplar, Cyprus [sic], Laurel, and Evergreen. This system was continued after several blocks of intervening streets for naming streets created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The plan of development to the west of the old town was that streets running north-south were named for Texas rivers and those running east-west were named for Mexican towns. Consequently, starting from the old town area, we find these names: Concho, San Saba, Pecos, Leona, Frio, Medina, Salado, Comal, San Marcos, Colorado, Brazos, San Jacinto, Trinity, Nueces, Cibolo, and Navidad. These streets are in no particular order unlike Austin, Texas, where north-south streets are named for rivers in the order of their occurrence west to east geographically in the state. Located in the "west side" of San Antonio, the area of greatest Spanish speaking population, the cross streets have names familiar to people arriving from Mexico: Merida, Saltillo, Tampico, Chihuahua, Santiago, Vera Cruz, San Luis, Durango, and others. To the north of these streets and parallel with them are streets commemorating certain prominent Spanish-Mexican settlers in San Antonio. Salinas was named for a family which purchased property in 1742. Perez and Menchaca were both commanders of the Presidio and have streets named for them. The Delgado family settled with the colonists from the Canary Islands and were noted for their peaceful dealings with the Indians. Rivas Street was named for a family which purchased property and built a house at the corner of the present street and Camino de villa Laredo. Ruiz Street recalls a most illustrious family who provided leadership for the Mexican rebellion against Spain in the figure of Francisco Ruiz whose son Francisco Antonio was mayor of San Antonio during the siege of the Alamo. The mayor attempted to remain neutral, but he did take charge of burning the bodies of the fallen defenders and ordered the Mexican dead thrown in the river.<sup>20</sup> Other systems of naming are evident east and south of the original settlement. Trees – and an occasional vine – are used again for north-south streets to the east, and we find there Elm, Live Oak, Chestnut, Grape, Cherry, Mesquite, Hackberry, Olive, Pine, Willow, and Palmetto. Crossing these streets are roads named for states but without discernible order:

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<sup>20</sup> The histories of all of these families can be found in Chabot, *op. cit.*, pp. 194, 94–97, 103–105, 171–174, 221–222, 198–202.

Idaho, Montana, Kansas, Wyoming, Dakota, Nevada, Alabama, Nebraska, Iowa, and others. To the south-east of the old town is a section of short streets all named for places in South Texas. The major streets of the section are Matagorda, Indianola, and Goliad, and connecting them are streets with such names as Victoria, Lavaca, and Refugio.

While these various plans were being tried, other streets came into being and were named in a more informal way. In the 1850's German and French settlers arrived and took up land directly south of the old town in the area between the river and San Pedro Creek. By the 1870's fine homes had been built by the German community along King William Street which they named to honor Wilhelm I of Prussia. King William Street ends at Guenther Street, named for Carl Hilmer Günther, who on the bank of the river at the present street established the first flour mill in the city in 1859. The mill remains to this day and is called Pioneer Flour Mills.<sup>21</sup> In the same area is Herff Street named for another German settler. Dr. Ferdinand von Herff came to America for political freedom and after first locating at New Braunfels went to San Antonio in 1850 where he gained a wide reputation as a physician and surgeon.<sup>22</sup> French influence in the same area is indicated by Guilbeau and Beaugard streets. Francois Guilbeau and his son arrived in 1839. The elder Guilbeau had been decorated with the cross of the Legion of Honor by Napoleon; his son established the first bakery in the city and was French counselor agent.<sup>23</sup> He later served as mayor. Beaugard Street received its name from the Toutant de Beaugard family who settled there in the 1850's.<sup>24</sup>

While the French and German settlers established themselves to the south of the old town, the Anglo-American settlers of the period chose the north side. As a result, several of the north-south streets in the area bear the names of these families. Maverick Street was named for the most colorful of these settlers. Samuel Maverick arrived in 1835 as the town was being besieged by the Texas Army of Volunteers. He was promptly arrested but escaped to act as scout for Ben Milam's attack. Later he helped write the

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<sup>21</sup> Ramsdell, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>22</sup> House, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Chabot, *op. cit.*, pp. 264-265.



Texas Declaration of Independence, and during the Republic he served in the legislature. At that time Maverick was thought to be the owner of the most land in Texas, and he gave his name to the term meaning unbranded cattle.<sup>25</sup> Belknap Avenue was named for Colonel Augustus Belknap who founded the first streetcar system in the city between San Pedro springs and the downtown area.<sup>26</sup> Lewis Street took its name from Nathaniel Lewis who arrived about 1840 to become a merchant, cattleowner, and real estate speculator. The street named Howard honors Major George T. Howard who fought Indians on the court house lawn in 1840, served with the Sante Fe Expedition, fought in the Civil War, and engaged in business in San Antonio. Ogden Street received its name to honor Duncan C. Ogden who was held prisoner in Mexico during the Texas rebellion, served in the legislature during the Republic, and was a business partner of Major Howard.<sup>27</sup> Finally, McCullough Avenue commemorates the Reverend John McCullough, a Presbyterian, who in 1846 erected the first Protestant church in San Antonio.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, in the street-names of San Antonio can be traced the pattern of settlement during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Two other streets which came into being during this period should be mentioned. Arsenal Street was named for the military arsenal facing on it which was established shortly before the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>29</sup> In the area to the west of Military Plaza an open market developed for local farm products. The block of markets consisted of individual stalls standing in a line from which different products were sold, and the area was designated Produce Row, a name employing the particularly British term "row" to describe a continuous line of shops.

After the drawing of the Morrison-Fourney map of 1883, no new developments in the naming of streets occurred unless one considers the commercial extravagances of recent real estate developments. The city simply expanded along many of the roads

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<sup>25</sup> House, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> The histories of all of these families can be found in Chabot, *op. cit.*, pp. 327–330, 344–345, 339–344.

<sup>28</sup> *San Antonio*, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

already in existence and developed new thoroughfares to serve the new areas. A few of the roads in the area of growth were given significant names. Some bear the names of the nearby communities to which they go such as Blanco, Bandera, Frio City, and Pleasanton. Some streets take their names from natural features which characterize their passage such as San Pedro Avenue, now extended for several miles past the springs from which it took its name, Zarzamora (blackberry), named for the bushes along the creek of the same designation which is located by the road, and Nogalitos (little walnuts), which signifies the kind of trees which grew in its path. Other roads have been given the names of the families whose property they pass or penetrate. This kind of informal street-naming, however, has been replaced for the most part by streets planned by developers with artificial names to attract the home buyer. Consequently, the Old World manner of naming streets has almost disappeared in San Antonio, but obscured within the modern city can still be found signposts to the exciting past.

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

In the early summer of 1971, the Modern Language Association will publish its first collection of abstracts on English and the modern languages and their literatures, developed through the MLA abstract system. *Names* has joined the more than 70 journals already participating in this system and has sent MLA abstract forms to those of its 1970 contributors whose articles fall into any of the three following MLA Bibliography classifications: English and American literature (General; Mediæval; Neo-Latin; Celtic), Foreign Literature (General; Romance; Germanic; Oriental; African; Modern Greek; East European) and Linguistics.

The abstracts, of no more than 200 words, are prepared by each author, then forwarded to the editor of *Names* for collation and transmittal to MLA which, in 1971, will begin publishing them in three fascicles, according to the above classification. Each fascicle will contain an author index and each abstract will have an identification number in the MLA Bibliography. A topical index will be set up later.

MLA members will receive the individual abstract fascicles as part of their dues; eventually it is hoped that the system can be automated for search and retrieval.