

HISTORIC HUGMAN RIVER WALK TOUR

Interpretive Smartphone Tour Highlights San Antonio's Historic River Walk Sites

by The City of San Antonio
Office of Historic Preservation

The San Antonio River Walk is an internationally recognized tourist attraction and one of the country's most unusual urban linear parks. With its winding, tree-lined walks, lush tropical landscaping, and array of restaurants, hotels, and shops, the River Walk provides a scenic destination for visitors and locals alike in the heart of the city. The River Walk is visited by millions every year and has been a model for other cities in the redevelopment of river corridors.

The San Antonio River itself is an ancient water source that has sustained life for thousands of years. From its headwaters north of Hildebrand on the University of the Incarnate Word campus to its final outflow into the Gulf of Mexico over 130 miles away, the San Antonio River is a vital component of both the natural and built environment. The river was, however, subject to periodic flooding, and the need for flood control became a serious issue as the city developed. An original flood control plan in the 1920s proposed the channelization of parts of the river through downtown.

While the need for flood control was acknowledged, the San Antonio Conservation Society, the public, and concerned officials believed that the natural setting of the River must also be maintained and preserved. It was at this point, in 1929, that a young architect named Robert H. H. Hugman began a visionary plan for the development of the river. He called his plan the "Shops of Aragon and Romula." Hugman's plan not only provided for beautification of the river, but also proposed commercial development at river level. The concept of shops and restaurants along the scenic river met with skepticism, delaying implementation.



In 1939, formal development of the River Walk commenced utilizing Works Progress Administration (WPA) funding. Officially overseeing the River Beautification Project, Robert Hugman and WPA engineer Edwin P. Arnesan completed drawings for the River Walk design, based largely on Hugman's earlier designs from the previous decade. Flood gates were established at the north and south ends of the horseshoe bend of the River providing flood protection for potential development. Hugman served as supervisor of the River Walk project for only one year before he was dismissed. At the time, his designs for stone paving, bridges, stairways, and the Arnesan Theater were considered too great a deviation from the bend's natural setting and character.

Due to Hugman's early dismissal from the project, some of his proposed designs were never constructed. However, much of Hugman's vision for the River Walk was realized in the work that was completed by 1941. In that year, the River Walk officially opened with nearly 50,000 people attending the dedication ceremony. The completed River Walk design featured 17,000 feet of new sidewalks, 31 stairways, 3 dams, 4,000 shrubs and plants, and countless benches. The River Walk was not immediately considered a success, and little of the projected commercial development along the River Bend occurred for many years. It wasn't until 1968 and the development of HemisFair that the River Walk received renewed interest and attention. In the 1970s Robert H. H. Hugman was officially recognized for his contribution to the development of the historic River Walk.



Today, the River Walk is consistently ranked among the nation's top tourist attractions, bringing millions of visitors each year to San Antonio. Indeed, Hugman's design is recognized as the genesis of the River Walk as we know it today. His legacy to San Antonio will live on.

In recognition of Hugman's vision for the River Walk, the City of San Antonio has installed more than fifty bronze plaques that replicate the architectural seal used on Hugman's original drawings. The plaques identify original Hugman-designed features along the River Walk.

Using state-of-the-art technology that makes history accessible, the City has also developed the Hugman River Walk Tour – the only free interactive self-guided tour of the San Antonio River Walk. With a smart phone or pad device, visitors access the tour by scanning a quick response (QR) code to navigate along the internationally-recognized tourist attraction. The tour's QR codes are found on the River Walk's wayfinding and interpretive signs.

The tour application features historic photos and history provided by Lewis F. Fisher, author of the River Walk: The Epic Story of San Antonio's River. The website and GPS-enabled mobile application are available, at no charge, at www.hugmantour.com or can be downloaded as an audio podcast tour at iTunes.

We invite you to explore San Antonio's River Walk using this Historic Hugman River Walk Tour. Get lost in the history of Hugman's River Walk...and enjoy your discovery!

Photos provided by The City of San Antonio, the Institute of Texan Cultures, and Lewis S. Fisher with Maverick Publishing Co.

How To Access the Historic Hugman River Walk Tour

To access the tour on a smart phone or pad device, users must download a QR reader application to scan QR codes on signs along the River Walk between the south flood gate near South St. Mary's and Villita Street and the original Hugman dam on the north at 4th Street. Navigating the nearly two-mile horse-shoe bend developed according to Robert Hugman's 1929 design drawings, the application guides users to 12 points-of-interest, marked by the bronze Hugman seal. Between the 12 stops on the tour, smaller bronze plaques mark additional architectural elements that are original to Hugman's design.

