La Villita

SAN ANTONIO’S “LITTLE VILLAGE”

by Elizabeth Pirtlefield
City of San Antonio Office of History Preservation

La Villita played a significant role in the Texas Revolution of 1836. The Casa Grande, one of the oldest structures remaining in La Villita, was the site of the surrender of Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cos in the Battle of Bexar in 1836. Cos arrived in San Antonio in October 1835 to suppress rebellious Tejano and Naco Tamales seeking independence from Mexico. After a defensive stand in Calaveras Mill and Military Plaza, Cos and his troops surrendered to the Alamo and eventually surrendered in December 1836. Cos’s surrender was reportedly agreed at the small building in La Villita that bears his name.

Just a few months later in March 1836, Mexican General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna arrived in San Antonio and defeated the Texian and Tejano forces at the Battle of the Alamo. A Mexican artillery battery during the battle was located at the eastern edge of La Villita near the present-day South Alamo and Nueva streets where the Farmhouse now stands.

Following independence from Mexico and later Texas statehood, La Villita became home to large numbers of German immigrants arriving in Texas in the 1840s and 50s. The eastern edge of La Villita along South Alamo Street was affectionately called “Little Bavaria” in the mid-19th century for its predominantly German population. The German English School, whose buildings are still located along South Alamo Street, was established in 1859 for the education of local German children. French, Swiss, and other European immigrants began settling in the area in the late 19th Century. Most of the remaining buildings within La Villita date to the period of this time.

By the early 20th century, however, the area of La Villita had severely declined. San Antonio Mayor Moses Minnich, along with the San Antonio Conservation Society, spearheaded the restoration of La Villita in 1939 to save the significant part of San Antonio’s early history. Many of the historic buildings were restored by the National Youth Administration and the leadership of San Antonio architect O.H. Held. New structures and additions within La Villita were also established during this time.

Today, La Villita is a center of arts and crafts village with small artisan shops, galleries, and restaurants. The area also hosts numerous public and private events throughout the year. The Fiesta tradition of this area is not limited to the Old San Antonio Arts Council, which hosts the San Antonio Conservation Society. This four-night fundraising event in April attracts 25,000 visitors to La Villita with food, music, performances, and casseroles (strawberry eagles).

A stroll through the peaceful “old world” charm of La Villita is well worth a visit. One stop you simply must visit is the Little Church of La Villita. Constructed in 1879 and originally a German Methodist church, it is now a non-denominational church that is a popular location for weddings. Next door to the Little Church of La Villita is the original site of what became St. Philip’s College. The “St. Philip’s Saturday evening serving class for black girls” originated in a small adobe house at this location in 1899. It soon became St. Philip’s Industrial School, and is now one of the few brick buildings that still stand today in La Villita. They were constructed. The school relocated east of downtown in 1917 and is now part of the Mission College.

Historic commercial structures along the eastern edge of La Villita include the 1854 MOSAIC House and Store and the original Bambach House and Store built in 1854. Both buildings now house restaurants including the Little River Steakhouse, named for the early German innkeepers in La Villita. Just behind the Bambach House and Store is the Grey-Gualdó House, now the Elegant Fig Tree Restaurant.

The numerous historic houses throughout La Villita reflect the early European influence that shaped San Antonio. Many of the houses are simple cottages of calcita block (limestone) construction with wide front porches and double front porches. Particularly noteworthy is the Daboll House, an unusual 1854 “bungalow” house not commonly found in San Antonio. Later 19th century houses with more elaborate Victorian detailing include the Davis-Young House and the W. Sheeler House along S. Presa and E. Nueva streets.

Interpretive markers throughout La Villita highlight the history and importance of this early San Antonio community. A walking talk with historic photographs is available at the Shops of La Villita History and the website (http://laillita.com/history). Visit La Villita and enjoy the beauty of historic San Antonio.