

REMEMBERING THE ALAMO: WAYS TO INTERPRET WHAT REMAINS

OF THE ALAMO PLAZA COURTS IN A PRESENT-DAY CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the challenges that Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts face today. Often considered the first motel chain in America, these courts were once one of the most iconic motel prototypes around the country. Many have been demolished, yet a few still exist. This thesis traces the history of events in Waco from whence the Alamo Plaza chain originated and, in the changing hospitality industry in America, provides the context for which the courts developed and grew as a national chain. It provides strategies for adaptive reuse so that these sites might thrive once again.

The remaining sites have been treated in different ways and have drastically changed over the years, yet they share similarities. All were located on frequently traveled commercial strips that lead out of the city center. As the effects of suburbanization hollowed out American cities, interstate highways changed travel patterns and the hospitality industry and its customers moved in new directions. Many Alamo Plazas were forced to reinvent themselves. The sites have gone through changes of use and partial demolition as the surrounding environment was transformed.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Stevenson was born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania on January 8, 1990. In 2008 Jessica graduated from Central Mountain High School and headed west to California to begin her university education. While a student at Biola University, Jessica pursued a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in Communications, graduating in December 2012. Living in California, she spent her free time exploring the unique architecture around her. Visits to the Mission Inn in Riverside and Hotel Coronado in San Diego spurred her interest in hotel architecture. Jessica began her coursework in the Historic Preservation Planning Program at Cornell University in the Fall of 2016. After her first year, she spent the summer as an intern in Pensacola, Florida at the University of West Florida Historic Trust. While in Pensacola, Jessica visited St. Augustine examining the early 20th century resort hotels that Henry Flagler had built. As the topic for historic hotels became her passion, she chose to further explore the topic for her thesis. Jessica graduated on May 27, 2018.

For Tom and Jeanine Stevenson who encouraged and supported me

And for Erin Miller who has been a constant companion throughout many journeys in my life,
including this one.

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Many of the current owners of the remaining locations were extremely helpful and generously allowed me to tour the sites and to interview them. Thanks are due to Max Lopez Jr., who spoke with me in the Beaumont, Texas; to Mr. Patel in Tyler, Texas; and to Jaitendar Patel at a Savannah location. He shared with me his hopes to return the courts to their former glory. Thanks are due to Paul Bolster at the Santa Fe Villas, who updated me on the changes at his site in regards to the Domesticity Competition. Thank you, Professor Nisha Botchwey, from the Georgia Tech School of City and Regional Planning, who met with me at the Atlanta site and also provided insight about the Domesticity Competition. Thank you, Kerry McGuire at the McLennan County Archives, who generously spent one afternoon with me tracing every single detail about the property at 929 Elm Avenue.

Thank you to Martha Walker in the Architecture, Art, and Planning Library at Cornell University. Martha was extremely helpful during the early parts of my research process and helped point me in the right direction. Last but not least, thank you to Sean Sutcliffe at the Waco Public Library who continuously provided support and helped scavenge for information.

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INTRODUCTION

A few summers ago my best friend, Erin, and I decided to take the Lincoln Highway on a return trip from visiting her uncle in Gettysburg, PA. We documented the many exciting sites along our route such as the Shoe House in Hallam, Mister Ed's Giant Elephant in Orrtanna, the old Coffee Pot lunch stand in Bedford, and the Lincoln Motor Court in Manns Choice. Our trip was a fascinating voyage back in time and we enjoyed the journey more than the destination. This trip instilled in both of us a fascination for this interesting era in American hospitality and also a desire to learn more about this period in history. We began to notice relics from this era that we had passed dozens of times, yet never before appreciated. To someone born in the nineties, motels also seemed to carry a bit of a tainted reputation. After this trip, however, I began to notice the different styles and types of overnight accommodations. In fact, there had been a motor court less than five minutes away from my childhood home that I had never noticed before. Even when traveling to my grandmother's house along Route 6 in Northern Pennsylvania, I now saw a variety of ruins of former tourist accommodations for the first time.

Today, many trips that Erin and I take originate in Arizona where she now resides. We have traveled all throughout the Southwest together by car and have seen many sights along the way. Last year, we drove the entire length of the Old Spanish Trail from California to Florida at different parts throughout the year. The trips that Erin and I take are part of the reason that I chose the American approach to hospitality as my thesis topic. Through these travels and others that I have taken while living in California, I was able to see great hotels, motels, and motor courts, and even had the opportunity to stay in a few.

When I stumbled upon La Posada in the ghost town of Winslow, Arizona, I was in awe of the grounds, the hotel, the rooms, and the artwork. It all seemed like such a strange figment of a

long-forgotten time. Our room was decorated as if each piece of furniture and decoration had been methodically procured throughout the years from the surrounding region. Each room had an actual room key, something that I have never seen before in person, and also an extraordinary tile sink and vanity in the room. La Posada was a Harvey Hotel, a masterpiece designed by Mary Colter, that had opened to the public in 1930. It had closed in 1957 and a few years later been transformed into offices for the Santa Fe Railway. It remained in use until 1994 when just prior to its scheduled demolition, Alan Affeldt bought the property. With the help of his artist wife, Tina Moen, the couple have lovingly restored the structure and reopened it to the public.

My travels led me to question if there were solutions for the forgotten motor courts and motels of yesterday. So many of these structures have already been demolished and yet the few that remain are not protected and preserved. Many of these structures are vacant and left to rot along the same roads that once accommodated the traveling public more than half a century ago. These structures are a crucial piece to the story of how Americans travel. Tina Moen and Alan Affeldt had done such a wonderful job with the renovation of the La Posada, perhaps others could do just as well.

Statement of Purpose

This thesis examines the current state of Alamo Plaza courts throughout the country and seeks innovative solutions for the few structures that still remain. Sites in Dallas, Waco, Beaumont, Shreveport, Tyler, Oklahoma City, Charlotte, Savannah, Atlanta, and Augusta were visited for the purpose of understanding the current context for the site. This thesis details how each site has adapted over time to the changes in the environment and the changing world around them. While the Alamo Plaza Courts chain is the focus for this particular study, the greater question is “Do motels and motor courts of this era need to be preserved? If so, and they cannot

remain as they are, what purpose can this structure serve?” Motels and cabin courts were built in such a unique moment in American history and perfectly encapsulate American values stood for at that point in time. To lose all of the structures due to lack of innovation and disdain for their current state could be a great disservice for future generations trying to understand the history of hospitality in America. These structures continue to serve a purpose, whether or not it has remained the same or morphed over time. The fate of these structures within the next ten years is unknown. Most likely, several more will be demolished. The time has come to determine whether we value these structures, the history and the legacy. If so, solutions need to be proposed so that the structure can remain viable. If not, these structures will continue to fade as ruins on the American commercial landscape.

Methodology

Much of my research involved reading through the extension of the *Tourist Court Journal* accessed through the Cornell University Library System and through the New York Public Library System. Additional sources included newspaper articles from the different cities that the Alamo Plaza was located in, found through Newspapers.com. The research used to gather information for my thesis was pulled from historical advertisements, motoring periodicals, hotel periodicals, academic and trade journals, motor court manuals, and literature related to the covered topics. A number of sources used for the chapter on Waco were made available through the Waco Public Library and the Texas Collection at Baylor University. Visits to locations in Dallas, Waco, Beaumont, Houston, Shreveport, Tyler, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Claremore, Charlotte, Savannah, Augusta, and Atlanta allowed for empirical research in addition to interviews conducted with various contacts in each location. The visit to Waco also allowed the

author to peruse the files of E.L. Torrance donated to the Waco Library and to access documents held in the McLennan County archives.

Books made available through the Cornell Library System such as *Americans on the Road*, *The Motel in America*, and *Hotel: An American History* provided additional secondary research material. Current newspaper articles from throughout the country provided information on the status of the remaining sites today and highlighted several motel/ motor courts that have been repurposed in recent years.

Limitations

There were several limitations that affected this thesis. One major limitation is that there are few surviving individuals connected to the Alamo Plaza chain who could have provided a more thorough understanding of the subject. Another major limitation was the lack of a centralized archive of data and artifacts concerning the Alamo Plaza. While the book, *The Motel in America* by John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers provides a detailed history of the chain, its decline over the past fifty years has left physical artifacts few and far between. John A. Jakle donated a collection of items acquired through research and travel to the library in downtown Waco. Prior to the donation, no place in Waco had any collection of this sort despite the fact that it has numerous library depositories, including The Texas Collection at Baylor University, and the Historic Waco Foundation. Perhaps the short amount of time that the original Alamo Plaza operated in Waco and the demolition of its site in the 1970s led to less familiarity within the community. It is as though the city of Waco had forgotten one of its greatest contributions to the nation: a motel chain that revolutionized the way Americans traveled.

Chapter Overview

This thesis contains eleven chapters. Chapter One begins with influential books that pertain to the traces the history of hospitality in the United States that set the stage for an innovative chain like the Alamo Plaza to revolutionize the hospitality industry. Next, the chapter details the importance of the stagecoach for early settlers to be able travel throughout the nation. Hotels were then introduced and proved to be a tremendous asset for growing cities. The introduction of the railroad altered the course of travel with its rigid schedule and fixed destination. The development of the West spurred by railroad expansion provided a new way for wealthy Americans to travel. Resort hotels began to spring up in unchartered territories now accessible by train such as Santa Fe, New Mexico and Pasadena, California. Autocamping became a way for travelers to revolt against the fixed train route and leave behind the grim realities of increasingly industrialized cities. Travelers were able explore nature on their own terms. As automobiles became readily available for the middle class, the hospitality market began to cater to the new customers. Compared to the ostentatious resorts frequented by wealthy travelers, the common traveler was able to stay in mom and pop accommodations that harken back to the day of the stagecoach inn. Lodging became more sophisticated to lure in travelers who chose accommodations based on external appearance. As highways developed throughout the nation and accommodations more plentiful, business owners experimented with ways to market themselves and stand out among the competition.

Chapter Two explores the development of the impact of highways in central Texas from their early beginnings as cattle trails. In particular, the Meridian Highway, part of a larger Pan-American network, was vital to growth in Texas as it connected Fort Worth to Waco, Temple, and then Taylor, cities that served as major commercial and transportation hubs for the rest of the

state. Chapter Three traces the history of Waco. This chapter documents its rise to becoming one of the most important cotton growing regions in the South, where at one point it was larger than Dallas, Fort Worth, and El Paso. Waco also became known for its reputation the only city to legalize prostitution in the state of Texas and an important education hub for the region. The chapter ends with the development of businesses along highways in Waco, which would lead to the rise of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments.

Chapter Four discusses the development of East Waco and its fraught relationship with greater Waco. The role of the Brazos River plays a crucial role in various stages of development for the community. Chapter Five and Chapter Six explain the factors that led to the development of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments in 1929. These chapters also follow the history of the Waco location and its subsequent branches. Chapter Seven explores the state of the site as of 2018 when the building had been demolished nearly 40 years prior. It also surveys the status of sites still in use today throughout Texas and the Southeast. Of the former Alamo Plaza sites left standing, Chapter Eight explores what remains from its first use. Palimpsest becomes a common theme that links many of the sites today. Forgotten pieces remain scattered throughout the varying locations that provide a link from one location to the next. Many elements were shared, such as the original tile in the footprint of demolished motel rooms. The palimpsest that remain are archaeological remnants that tell the story of an earlier era of hospitality effectively and unintentionally acting as a form of preservation in itself.

Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven provide case studies on what is happening at the Dallas, Atlanta, and Savannah locations as of 2018. Each of the former Alamo Plaza sites has found new life since its beginning, these three case studies prove to be especially interesting. Both the Dallas and Atlanta site have garnered media attention nearly sixty years later as the sites shed

their old skin and take on new roles. The final chapter, Chapter Eleven, addresses the Savannah location and its current manager's desire to reintroduce the motel as a boutique motel in one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. With a successful motel revitalization project haven proved to be a great success, the manager hopes to use Savannah's stellar tourism reputation, favorable preservation and hospitality policies, and the recent push for hospitality development out of the protected historic district to reimagine the Alamo Plaza Motor Courts. This chapter then explores the broader issues faced by the sites today and for the structures that remain intact, is there a formula that would best preserve that can be universally applied? The trend for motel revitalization is explored as one possible option for the Alamo Plaza Courts of today.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN HOSPITALITY

Introduction

A comprehensive history of accommodations and travel in America can be found in Warren James Belasco's *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (1979); Lori Henderson's *America's Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel*; Chester Liebs' *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (1985); John Jakle, Keith Sculle, and Jefferson Roger's *The Motel in America* (1996). In these books the authors discuss travel accommodations at different eras throughout the years, some more focused on earlier periods than others. The majority of the texts discuss the switch from railroad accommodations along fixed routes to the rise of auto-camping, and finally to the advent of the tourist court and motel with its ease and affordability that made the American roadside a favorite pastime for the nation.

This chapter explores the history of the hospitality industry in the United States from its early stagecoach inn accommodations of the Colonial era until the introduction of motel chain in the middle of the twentieth century. The chapter also highlights how cyclical in nature trends become in the hospitality industry. As innovative transportation methods were made readily available to the general public, ways to accommodate travelers also reflected that change. The end of the chapter leads into the rise of roadside accommodations made possible by highways that connect towns and cities and sets the stage for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments to arrive on the scene.

Stagecoach Travel

In such a vast country, travel has always been at the forefront of the American lifestyle. The ways in which we travel, however, have changed drastically throughout the years. The earliest mode was by horse and stagecoach, with travelers staying overnight at stagecoach inns. Each inn was strategically placed about a day's length apart, which created a pattern that allowed for travelers to be sure of overnight accommodations along their trip.

American "stage travel" was modeled on similar transportation in England. The term is believed to have been derived from the way that journeys took place in stages. Service started in North America in the early eighteenth century with a few routes that connected major population centers. After the Revolutionary War, stagecoach travel began to spread more rapidly in the East. The nineteenth century spurred further development of routes, with stage coach travel reaching its golden era from 1820-1840. Mail had been delivered by stagecoach for decades, especially after Congress established legislation allowing mail to be delivered along already established stagecoach routes.¹

Within a cultural context, these institutions served different purposes. Colonial communities were deeply untrusting of outsiders who would venture into their town. While certain professionals such as circuit-riding judges were welcomed, others, such as preachers, itinerant peddlers, those without work, and fortune-tellers were thought to disrupt the social and moral order of the community. Strict laws were enforced concerning outsiders. Those

¹ Vineyard, Ron, "Stage Waggon and Coaches," *Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series-RR0380*. (Williamsburg, Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, August 2000).

community members who provided lodging were tasked with particular duties to maintain social order, serving as both guardian and sentry. The innkeepers were often required to report all outsiders or face fines and penalties.²

Known as public houses, taverns, inns, and sometimes ordinaries, these institutions accommodated travelers and were the designated community space where one could purchase and consume alcohol, a privilege granted the innkeeper in exchange for the accommodation of travelers. Because public drunkenness caused upheaval in pious colonial communities, taverns needed to be licensed by state or local officials. These licenses were given only to upstanding citizens of the community whom officials felt could keep order and prohibit drunkenness, gambling, and other wayward vices.³



Illustration 1.1. The Green Tree Tavern in Germantown, Pennsylvania, built in 1748. A.D. White Architectural Photographs, Cornell University Library. <http://cidc.library.cornell.edu/adw/albumen.html>

² Sandoval-Strausz, A. K, “*Hotel: an American History*,” (Yale University Press, 2009), 11.

³ Ibid, 16.

Public houses in America were typically not intended to be architecturally appealing. Many were dwelling houses or structures that had been repurposed to provide refreshment and lodging. No one significant identifiable feature of these exterior of these structures indicated their use. Rather, these properties followed the forms and styles of other vernacular buildings of the region. The only identifiable feature of a public house was its sign emblazoned with symbols and the name of the business.⁴

The activities needed to fit into the existing layout of the structure. The interiors of the inns were often crowded, since the few rooms needed to serve a variety of uses such as kitchen, bedchambers, bar, public room, and/or quarters for the innkeeper's family. With space at such a premium it was not uncommon for guests to share rooms, or even beds, much to the disgust of the more respectable wayfarers and single women traveling alone. Sharing beds was not the only complaint of travelers, public houses ranged widely in terms of cleanliness and comfort. Guests considered many public houses dirty and complained of filthy, uncomfortable, and insect ridden beds. Other complaints focused on food quality and expense. The food the innkeepers provided was obtained locally, as at that time, it was all that was available. Many guests complained about lack of variety and cleanliness of the food and drink, often cider and beer. Liquor was imported and often sold at a premium. Even for the worst accommodations, prices were quite high for the quality of comfort and service provided.⁵

Not all public houses were subpar, however. Establishments such as the famous Fraunces Tavern in New York City and the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg were converted from family mansions to inns fit for the elite. Both inns offered more meeting rooms, private

⁴ Ibid, 16.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

quarters, fewer public rooms, and no more than fifteen guest chambers. Several purpose-built inns began to appear around 1770 as wealthy merchants financed elaborate inns such as Philadelphia's City Tavern.⁶

Early Hotel Development

The tours that George Washington took of public houses throughout the country were thought to have led to the creation of the American Hotel.⁷ The diaries written by George Washington enlightened the nation on the standards of public houses by location, but also pushed the public to demand better accommodations. With the seal of approval by the President, some hotels began to soar to new heights. After the Revolutionary War, hotels became a symbol of prosperity for the city. The first city hotel, the Union Public Hotel, was constructed in Washington D.C. just as urbanization began in the city. The hotel was backed by Samuel Blodget, Jr., a man who had used his wartime friendship with George Washington to secure the position of the supervisor of buildings and improvements for the Capitol. Unable to secure funds for the project from the national budget, Blodget financed the building through a national lottery. The winner of the lottery would be given the keys to the hotel. A competition was held for the design of the hotel. The winning plans were drafted by James Hoban, an Irish architect who had designed the White House. The Georgian style structure was built of brick and stone with elaborate ornamentation of classical columns and an impressive pediment. On the interior, the hotel had large public meeting rooms on the first floor with an impressive number of bedchambers on the upper floors.⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁸ Ibid, 22.

Unfortunately, the proceeds from the lottery were not enough to cover the construction of hotel. The project was plagued with financial difficulties throughout the process. When the lottery winner had stepped forward to claim his prize, he was dismayed to find the hotel unfinished. City commissioners became concerned with what appeared to be land speculation by Blodget in the Federal City. He was quickly removed from his position. Blodget had used his personal assets and real estate holdings throughout the city as collateral for the construction of the hotel but they were insufficient to secure an additional loan. Unhappy with an unfinished hotel, the lottery winner sued Blodget for the funds to have the hotel finished. When the assets were not enough to cover the costs, he was thrown into debtor's prison.⁹

While Blodget never benefitted from the project, the hotel went on to become an important building for the development of the city. It served as the first headquarters for the Postal Service and Patent Office. During the war of 1812, the public meeting rooms of the hotel were used by Congress for fourteen months in 1814-1815 after the Capitol had been set on fire. Although the property never lived up to its intended purpose, it did inspire similar structures throughout the nation.¹⁰

Hotel construction boomed during the 1820s along Atlantic Seaport cities, spreading along eastern rivers, and finally advancing westward. Early hotels included Crawford's Hotel in Georgetown, the City Hotel in New York, The Benjamin Latrobe Hotel and theatre complex in Richmond, VA, and the Crowell Hatch and Boston Exchange Coffee House and Hotel in Boston. The City Hotel was seven stories tall with a five-story atrium protruding with balconies. With more than 200 rooms, this hotel was said to give the "appearance of a small city".¹¹

⁹ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 26.

At the time lodging was very expensive, to stay in a hotel symbolized that one was wealthy and thus became a status symbol for the city elites.¹²



Illustration 1.2. The Boston Exchange Coffee House. Caleb Snow, *History of Boston*, 2nd Edition.

As cities began to rapidly develop, hotels became local landmarks due to their large size and distinct architecture. One could see a hotel from blocks around, which allowed hotels to be easily identified by travelers looking for a place to spend the night. Taverns, however, blended into the environment with small signs to inform the traveler of their location. The preference of hotels to taverns also signified the transformation from a primarily agrarian society to an urban society in the midst of industrialization. Hotels touted the benefits of a trading context which created a more commercial path for the nation. At the time, hotels served three complementary

¹² Ibid, 28.

purposes; they “facilitated trade by providing shelter and refreshment to an elite traveling public”, they were “intended to increase the value of surrounding property”, and their “imposing architecture symbolized commerce and valorized its pursuit in a republic that was still overwhelmingly agrarian”.¹³ Hotels became economic hubs for the city as the public filled the lobbies, parlors, shops, offices, restaurants, and libraries.

By the 1840s, hotels could be found in nearly every settlement with more than a few thousand people, and the number of hotels in the country numbered in the hundreds. The American railroad system had become the most extensive of its kind by 1844. As trains linked goods and services to different communities throughout the nation, hotels were established near train stops. Transportation and accommodation became inherently linked during this time as the railroad rapidly spread urbanization throughout previously uninhabited areas of the nation. Hotels were essential to accommodate railroad workers and those who traded goods and services along the route. Trains began to carry passengers as well as freight, which pushed demand for hotels even further.¹⁴

Hotels became more plentiful throughout the land as both transportation and lodging commercialized the once-pristine American landscape. These pursuits were sponsored by the same people, utilized the same financing strategies, and were justified in a similar rhetoric. Urban cores and frontier boomtowns both utilized the expanse of railroads and hotels to better secure themselves in the emerging urban hierarchy. Both were presented as a service to the public that would spur further development and benefit the community. As hotels were constructed in remote areas only accessible by train, their elitist connotation was lost as they

¹³ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid, 48.

were increasingly seen as “palaces of the public”.¹⁵ Different types of hotels began to form: commercial hotels, luxury hotels, middle-class hotels, marginal hotels, railroad hotels, resort hotels, and settlement hotels.¹⁶

Commercial hotels were built specifically with business travelers in mind, whether they were salesmen, agents, clerks, or buyers. The rooms were affordable compared to the high cost of larger, more upscale urban hotels. One added incentive for the hotel of this type was the sample rooms that were provided. Salesmen were able to display their merchandise to the public. Commercial hotels were usually built at a much smaller scale and had less frills. While luxury hotels had the potential to fill an entire city block, commercial hotels could fit nicely into a single lot on a street with other commercial businesses.¹⁷ Middle-class hotels bore many similarities with commercial hotels in price and layout. The largest difference between the two was the intended audience. These structures provided hospitable accommodations for families that included men, women, and children.¹⁸

Marginal hotels allowed for the working-class and poor lodging for the night. These structures were often housed in converted tenements in the seedy part of a town or city. They were very basic and lacked the public spaces of other hotel types. Rooms were usually very small and minimally furnished. Some marginal hotels had crowded bunk beds squeezed into rooms so they could accommodate as many people as possible. In some cases, there were no beds at all, but rather patrons slept on wooden pallets and shelves with mattresses where patrons slept.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 81.

¹⁷ Ibid, 82.

¹⁸ Ibid, 85.

¹⁹ Ibid, 87.

Resort hotels began to emerge shortly after the rise of urban hotels. This type of hotel catered to the urban, elite crowd that had hoped for a respite from busy city life. Husbands worked at their job in the city and sent the rest of the family to spend the winter in warmer locations such as Pasadena and St. Augustine by train or in closer locations like Saratoga Springs during the summer months. As in earlier hotel history, resort hotels became a status marker. Those with the means to do so would spend months at the resort, away from the cold climate in their home cities in the Northeast. Many visitors fell in love with the areas and opted to stay. The resort hotels in Southern California and Florida were partially responsible for the large influx in population that helped turn small resort industries into fully formed towns with a steady population year-round.



Illustration 1.3. Hotel Green, Pasadena, California. Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2008678110/>.

Fred Harvey worked with the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad to develop a network of resort hotels along the train routes. At the time, he developed a successful chain of restaurants. Harvey saw a need in the market to accommodate travelers on the trip westward and provide them with decent meals, a unique local experience, and a place to spend the night. In an effort to ‘domesticate the west’, Harvey was the first to hire exclusively young women from across the plains. The women were required to sign at least six-month contracts and were forbidden to get married while working for the chain. The Harvey Hotels allowed travelers to experience the ‘wild west’ in a safe and controlled manner. Excursions were led to nearby native American settlements and many of the hotels often had a space designated where Native Americans could sell their wares to the traveling public.

The Rise of Auto-camping

In 1903, Henry Ford formed the Ford Motor Company, completely altering the way Americans traveled. His adoption of standardization in the manufacturing process led to a greater number of automobiles produced in a shortened period of time, thus allowing for the creation of an affordable vehicle for the middle-class. Road construction boomed after Congress passed the Federal Highway Act in 1916 leading to the creation of a national road system. Within five years, more state and federal legislation was passed that allowed national highway networks to link cities across America. Hotels spaced along train routes soon fell out of favor with the public.²⁰

No longer were trips confined to a set destination along a train route; the invention of the automobile and the roads that subsequently developed allowed travelers to forge their own path. A desire for more autonomy with travel led to the rise in auto-camping. The ‘horseless carriage’

²⁰ Ibid, 134.

allowed for more freedom as Americans gained a new appreciation for the art of motor touring.²¹ During this era, the American middle class was on the rise. The increase in more leisure time and disposable income led to the quest for Americans to “seek adventure, witness the natural beauty of their country, strengthen family bonds, and commune with fellow travelers on the road”.²² New changes in the environment caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization further pushed Americans to seek out a way to be one with nature again.



Illustration 1.4. *Lake Public Auto Camp Party, probably in or near Yellowstone Park. Dec. 14.* Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/93512831/>.

Another benefit of auto-camping was that travelers were no longer held to the time constraints made by train schedules. According to the *American Motorist*, the traveler “must go with the crowd at the time the crowd wants to go and he must go with the crowd at the time the

²¹ Henderson, Lori, “America’s Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel,” *Historia*, (Eastern Illinois University, vol. 19), 2010.

²² *Ibid.*

crowd wants to go and by the route the crowd takes,”²³ meaning that while travelers were able to span much larger distances than any previous era, to gain this benefit the traveler needed to conform to the strict schedule upheld by the transcontinental train network. By 1910, trains ridership had risen to nearly one billion passengers per year. Passengers with stops in smaller towns were sometimes made to disembark at all hours of the night.²⁴ The increased availability of the automobile allowed travelers to set their own schedules and routes.

With only the equipment in their cars, Americans set out on the open road and avoided both set rail routes and crowded, stuffy hotels. Cars, at first, parked by the side of the road to set up camp for the night. Many sites were chosen for their scenic views and proximity to streams for drinking, bathing, and fishing.²⁵ Travelers were anxious to spread information to other travelers looking for a place to spend the night. A variety of pamphlets, travel diaries, manuals, and magazine columns were used to disseminate the knowledge to others. Organizations including highway associations, automobile clubs, camping goods manufacturers were eager to sponsor published material.²⁶

Motorists from modern industrial cities, fueled by nostalgia, traveled to idyllic villages that harkened back to an earlier time. Unlike trains, cars could reach any small town within driving distance. While trains traveled the outskirts of a town or village, cars were often led through the heart of communities down charming main streets.²⁷ Tourists did not travel to every small village and town, however. A picturesque village with colonial and revolutionary era

²³ Belasco, Warren James, “*Americans on the Road: from Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945*,” (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 22.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

structures was favored over Victorian towns. Structures like old roadhouses, taverns, mansions, and farmhouses were converted into lodging and tearooms with names such as The Tally-Ho and Ye Ragged Robin.²⁸ Other nostalgic gestures included gas stations constructed in a neo-Tudor or Mission Revival style, and wrought-iron street signs with stagecoach silhouettes and wooden placards like those used at historic inns.²⁹ This new wave of development ultimately led in the 1920s to the rise of tourist cabins built in revivalist styles that reflected earlier eras.

Early motor travelers spent the days on the road and nights in a hotel. While the traveler enjoyed the freedom that the automobile allowed by day, at night, many were anxious for a warm meal, hot bath, and soft bed that a hotel provided. Not until the rise of cabin camps did stuffy hotels fall out of favor. At the time, there were three major types of hotels to accommodate travelers: summer resorts, large city hotels, and “drummer” hotels scattered in small towns around the country.³⁰ Ever the contrarians, autocampers took supplies that allowed them to create a camp for the night, seeking the greater unity with nature that camping allowed.³¹ Over time, supplies adapted to better serve the needs and wants of these travelers.

Autocampers viewed nature as a resource to utilize for their benefit while at the site. Many of the sites were on private property, yet the travelers did not see them as such. Travelers left trash behind, broke off fruit tree branches, picked flowers, fruits, vegetables and in some cases, even milked cows. The once idyllic countryside setting was filled with debris left from the travelers. Farmers and landowners became annoyed by the mess that autocampers would leave behind and began to push for designated areas within towns to accommodate the growing

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 29.

³⁰ Ibid, 41.

³¹ Ibid, 44.

number of visitors. Municipal autocamps developed to meet this need and at the outset charged nothing for the travelers to stay. Towns made their camps as hospitable as possible in an attempt to lure the ‘wealthy travelers’ to their commercial districts downtown. The autocamps had lots set aside for camp sites and many contained amenities like running water and, sometimes, electricity. Larger camps such as Denver’s Overland Park provided a grocery store, clubhouse, showers, barber shop, lunch counter, and laundry room.³² As autocamping became more comfortable, convenient, and affordable, its popularity exploded. By 1923 there were over 1,800 public autocamps operating throughout the country. The following year the number had risen to over 2,000.³³

The rise in the number of tourists at the camps led municipalities to question whether or not they had made the right choice. As it turned out, the wealthy travelers who they had envisioned in their campgrounds never appeared. To the contrary, many travelers took up permanent residence and were considered undesirable vagrants. Others had eschewed domestic life and instead traveled year-round. The competition between camps in neighboring towns grew as travelers spread the word about towns with the best facilities. Communities felt the need to provide better sewer systems, piped-in water, garbage pickups, regular maintenance, better restroom facilities. It soon became too daunting a task for communities to spend so much money on tourist accommodations when the tourists contributed nothing in return. By adding a fee, registration requirements, and time limits, towns hoped to filter out the guests who would establish residency. Camps often became overcrowded during the busy season. Smaller, private

³² Ibid, 72.

³³ Henderson, Lori, “America’s Roadside Lodging: The Rise and Fall of the Motel,” *Historia*, (Eastern Illinois University, vol. 19), 2010.

camps developed in response.³⁴ Travelers who were tired of the rowdiness and noise at larger camps were able to seek out camps with less travelers in a more idyllic setting.

In the early twentieth century private camps were unable to compete with the services provided at free public camps. Private camps would only thrive in isolated areas where they were the only court around or in areas where public camps were not supported. When public camps began to charge a fee, private camps became more profitable. The centrally located public camps were bypassed as tourists began to fill up the campsites scattered along the route. Farmers who owned the land could also provide a gas station and restaurant to earn more money. Gradually, cottages were built to accommodate the tourists who wanted to spend the night indoors.³⁵

Cabin Courts

At first, the cottages were very simple structures where travelers were required to bring their own cots, chairs, and camp stoves. The original intent was to provide shelter for travelers caught in a storm. Over time the cottages evolved so that travelers were required to bring less items with them. Cabin owners began to charge higher fees for items like sheets, blankets, soap, towels, hot showers, stoves, steam heat, and a radio. Most cabins began as shacks that the owner would improve over time to increase revenue.³⁶ The owner would then use the earnings from the previous touring season to expand his operation.

Cabin courts became popular for their homelike atmosphere. Cabin courts were typically run by a couple, in which the wife was often responsible for day-to-day business while husband

³⁴ Belasco, Warren James, *Americans on the Road: from Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 118.

³⁵ Ibid, 129.

³⁶ Ibid, 134.

built and repaired the cabins. Unlike many commercial hotels and high-end urban hotels that felt stuffy and had awkward furniture, cabins had chintz curtains, doilies on the dresser, rocking chairs, and flower boxes. Many families, especially the wives, enjoyed this touch of home while on the road. Other benefits of the courts were that they had free parking, a great location, did not require reservations, and provided much desired privacy.³⁷

Conclusion

The continual development of the nation created many opportunities for Americans to pay for lodging for the night without the need of a friend or family member to accommodate them. With such newfound freedom, the public was able span broader distances, first with the stagecoach, then the train, and finally the automobile. An increasingly mobile society meant further expansion for a young nation with an ever-growing population. In turn, the more people traveled further, the greater the need became to accommodate such travelers. While travel tended to reflect one's economic status, new developments in transportation allowed for more Americans to travel than ever before. As the notion of travel began to grow as an American lifestyle, new developments in accommodations began to increasingly improve to make overnight stays more comfortable and homelike.

³⁷ Ibid, 139.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPACT OF THE HIGHWAY IN CENTRAL TEXAS

Introduction

The following chapter outlines the importance of the transportation network in Texas connecting it to the rest of the nation. Railroads and highways spurred adjacent development and created pockets of economic growth throughout the state. One major highway was the Meridian Highway that spanned from Canada to Mexico. This heavily traveled road network brought traffic through communities in Texas such as Fort Worth, Waco, Temple, and Taylor. These communities became transportation hubs where agricultural and other goods produced in Texas were then shipped to bigger markets.

The Meridian Highway

The Meridian Highway has been the major north-south highway in Texas since the early twentieth century. The Highway was originally conceived by the International Meridian Road Association in 1911 with the intention of stretching from Canada to Mexico by way of the Great Plains. When the Texas Highway Department was created in 1917, the Meridian Highway was designated as SH 2, which deemed the road to be the second-most important thoroughfare, after the Bankhead Highway. With the adoption of the AASHTO Interstate highway numbering system, the Highway gained another designation, US 81. This became the most commonly used name for the route. Today, it is part of IH 35/ IH 35 W, which is one of the nation's busiest highways and a vital trade route connecting Canada to Mexico. The route is also part of the Pan-American Highway that connects Alaska to Argentina (Figure 2.1).³⁸

³⁸ *The Development of Highways in Texas, Evolution of Named Highways: The Meridian Highway*. Austin, TX: The Texas Historical Commission. May 2016.

The road networks of Texas evolved rather slowly by comparison to railroad construction. Railroads that began in Houston and Galveston connected rich agricultural lands and would later serve cities on the Meridian Highway. One of the earliest railroad lines was the Houston and Texas Central Railway. The route ended in Millican, Texas, a small town near Bryan-College Station where Texas A&M University is located. Other early railroads that served cities along the Meridian Highway included the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad and the International-Great Northern Railroad.³⁹

The original north-south trail linked some of the earliest settlements along the Meridian Highway. Gainesville in North Texas developed as a stop on the stagecoach route in the 1830s. The route extended south towards San Antonio and very much resembled the early path of the Meridian Highway. A bit further south was the trail that linked settlements from San Antonio to Laredo as early as 1841. A trail that closely followed the route of the Meridian Highway was shown on the 1858 Colton's *New Map of the State of Texas*. Noted settlements on the map where the Meridian Highway would develop included Fort Worth, Hillsboro, Waco, Belton, Georgetown, Austin, San Marcos, New Braunfels, San Antonio, and Laredo.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

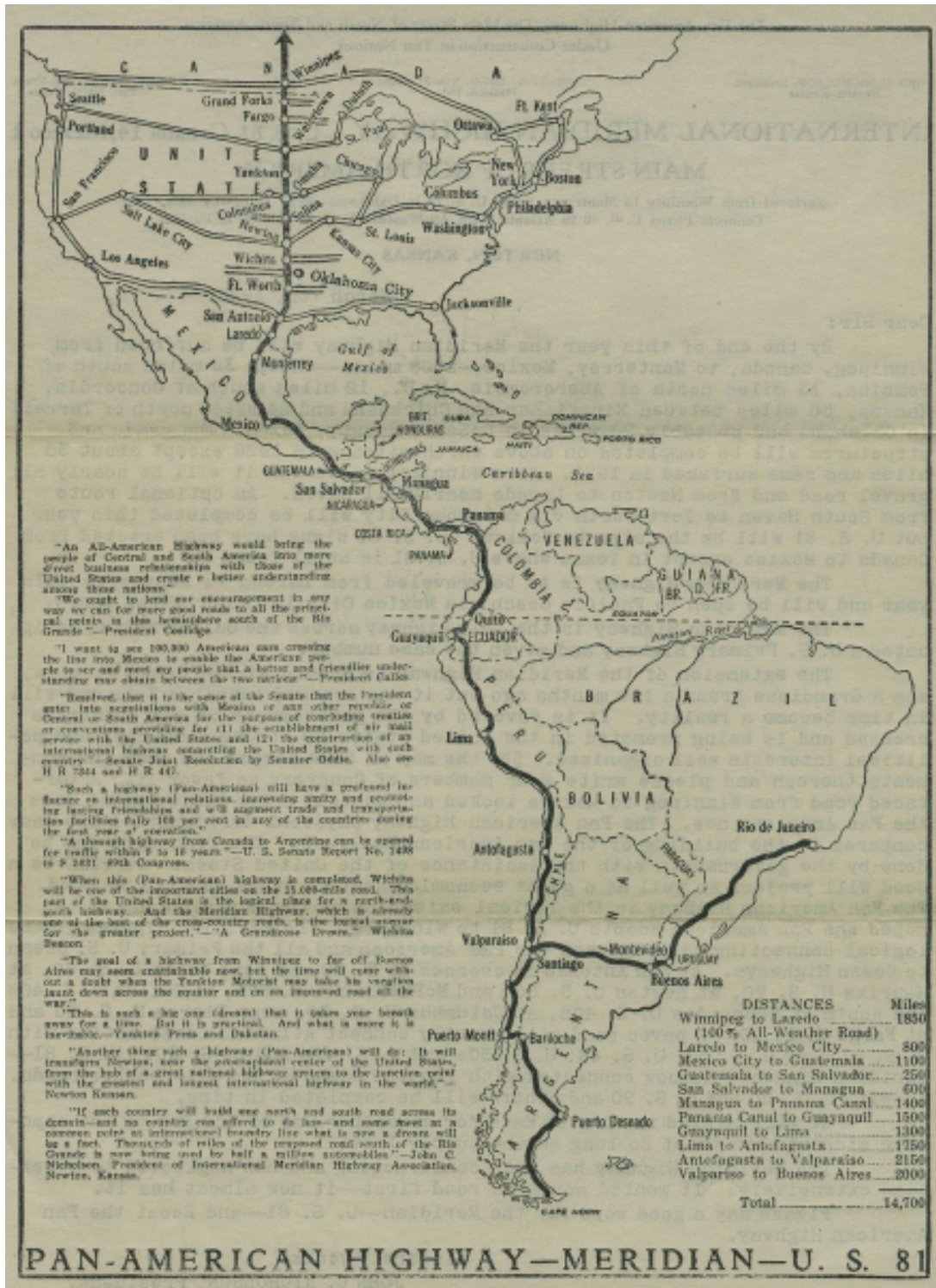


Figure 2.1. International Route. Meridian Highway Association, 1928. John Charles Nicholson, "Meridian Highway International," Kansas Memory Collection, Kansas Historical Society

From 1880 until 1912 the route that would later become the Meridian Highway followed the path of the Fort Worth and Denver City Railway that extended from Wichita Falls, through Fort Worth, and then southeast through Waco, Temple, and Taylor. All three cities were major rail and commercial centers for the region. The rich agricultural land in the surrounding region produced cotton and corn. Cotton gins and mills quickly sprouted up along the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Line. Industrial development also occurred along the International-Great Northern Railroad line further south where cotton gins, compresses, and cottonseed oil mills dotted the landscape. Cities along the route, such as Taylor, Austin, New Braunfels, and San Antonio, also had textile factories where local cotton, wool, and mohair were processed. The population in nearby San Antonio boomed during this period when both European immigrants and Anglo Americans from the South migrated to the area. Development slowed south of San Antonio.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid.

FORT WORTH TELEGRAM LIVESTOCK, RAILROAD AND COTTON EDITION.



The New Road

The Texas Road

The International & Great Northern R. R.

Look at the Map A New Territory Opened up to Fort Worth.

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will be established
with
Luxurious Chair
Cars
and
Pullman's Latest
Sleepers
Fort Worth to
Houston and
Galveston

Without having to change cars some miles out.

TRAIN LEAVES 7:15 A. M.
FOR

Venus,
Maypearl,
Italy,
Mertens,
Waco,
Marlin,
Calvert,
Heame,
Bryan,
Navasota,
Houston,
Galveston,
Taylor,
Georgetown,
Austin,
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WORTH HOTEL BUILDING

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Figure 2.3. The New Road, The Texas Road. Fort Worth Telegram Livestock, Railroad, and Cotton Edition, 1903. <http://hometownbyhandlebar.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/04/trains-IGNRR-1903-623x768.jpg>

Land near the depots attracted not only agricultural processing facilities, but also other kinds of commercial development. Hotels, retail stores, warehouses, and lumber yards soon became important local hubs of economic activity. The Meridian was purposely placed along these trade nodes to extend the reach of their many amenities and commercial opportunities. Because of the significance of the railroad investment, it ultimately influenced land development

patterns and the physical evolution of both small and large cities. Tourism related development increased along this route with many resort, recreational, and health-related services. San Antonio was one example that not only boasted many popular tourist sites but also the Hot Wells health resort. Clustered along the Main Plaza and Alamo Plaza were many hotels and boarding houses that accommodated the tourists.⁴²

In 1917, the Meridian Highway was designated as SH 2 with its route entering Texas at Burkburnett, traveling to Wichita Falls, Fort Worth, Meridian, and Waco. The main route headed south at Waco to Temple, Taylor, Austin, San Antonio, and then Laredo. A branch of the route called the Gulf Division split off at Waco and then extended southeast to Marlin, Calvert, Bryan, College Station, Navasota, Hempstead, Houston, and then on to Galveston. Another branch of the road, the Mineral Wells Branch, left the main road at Henrietta and then passed through Jacksboro, Perrin, and Mineral Wells. At Mineral Wells, the route connected with SH 1. The 1920 version of the route was shorter than the one laid out in 1917. The main route at Fort Worth traveled south and passed through Alvarado, Hillsboro, Waco, Temple, Salado, Bartlett, Georgetown, and Manor before reaching Austin. Both the route that passed through Waco by way of Meridian and the route that traveled Temple to Austin by way of Taylor became loops.⁴³

The Commission designated certain parts of SH 2 as integral elements in the Major State Highway System in 1921. The noted segments were Burkburnett to Burleson, Waco to Temple, and north of Austin to Laredo. Other parts of the system included Segments 2-A from Burleson to Waco and 2-C from Temple to north of Austin. In 1921, bonds were passed in Texas so that road work could begin as the highway had become difficult to maintain. Road work included

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

eliminating turns so that distances between towns would be shorter and making bridges wider. Tourist camps were constructed in the communities of Waco, Navasota, and Houston. Signs were constructed along the main route by 1922 which served as guides for tourists. The first signs to appear were near Waco and Marlin. In 1923, the Meridian Road Association added markers every mile on rural highways and two or three per city block. The Association also published a tourists' directory that included write-ups of cities and local businesses. The directory was distributed throughout the country in hopes to bring publicity to the wonders of Texas.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid.



Figure 2.4. Meridian Highway: The Main Street of North America. Harvey County History Museum. The Meridian Highway. The Texas Historical Commission

Conclusion

The tourism industry had already significantly developed between Fort Worth and San Antonio by 1916. A guidebook from that year noted 50 modern hotels. Electrical lights were planned for the road between Fort Worth and Taylor by 1916. The Official State Highway Map of Texas from 1928 noted numerous tourist attractions that ran along the highway. Another purpose of the map was to attract industry to the cities that lined the Meridian Highway. The publication advertised the Stephen F. Austin Hotel, Driskill Hotel, Texan Hotel, the University of Texas, Mount Bonnell, State Cemetery, Elisabet Ney Studio, and the Confederate Home in Austin. The publication also highlighted Austin's future water power based industrial growth, "high-class unionized labor supply," access to railroads, low taxes, a notation that highlighted Austin as home to the largest chili canning plant in the world and also the South's largest book binding plant. The guide noted the Chamber of Commerce and Tourist Bureau on West 6th Street, the Deep Eddy Camp, a tourist camp on Congress Avenue, and the Barton Springs Free Tourist Camp. Waco also had a guide published by the Humble Oil Company in 1928. Included were Waco's parks, the Cotton Palace (Figure 3), City Hall, and the Tourist Camp.

It may well be said that Waco is the heart of Texas, being in the center of the State and center of population. What Cameron Park is to Waco, the Cotton Palace at Waco is to Texas. No wonder Waco is rich in people and wealth, for they live right in the Valley of the Nile or the Brazos. Waco now has 43,000 inhabitants, with every indication of a marvelous increase; but we cannot write here all the advantages of the capital of McLellan [sic] County. It's the city of big springs, big hotels, big parks, the tallest building in the country; and the site of the great Baptist University, Baylor. There is so much of interest in and around Waco, that the tourist will conclude he has seen it all when he gets through Waco, and want to go no further. It is tarviated roads into Waco and its [sic] tarviated roads out of Waco; and so the going is good.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Ibid.; G.A. McNaughton, *The Meridian Road in Texas*. San Antonio, TX: International Road Association, Texas Division, 1916.

CHAPTER THREE

WACO, TEXAS

Introduction

As one of the most important cities along the Meridian Highway, Waco is important for being the site where the route separates into two branches. Even before the Meridian Highway was imagined, Waco had been a major center for trade in the Backland Prairie, the rich, fertile agricultural belt that sweeps through central Texas.⁴⁶ This chapter traces the history of Waco from its early days as a tribal village to its time as a haven for vice and center of cotton growing region west of the Mississippi River until the mid-twentieth century, when tourist courts, gas stations, and food joints lined its newly constructed highways. This chapter also provides an introduction to the separation of the city of Waco and the area known as East Waco. As the downtown core of Waco began to lose its business to more suburban development, routes that led out of Waco, like Elm Avenue, where the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments were located, attracted the businesses that fled the city. This wave of development is crucial to understand the role of the Alamo Plaza as an innovator in the modern development of hotels and motels.

Waco Beginnings

Waco adopted its name from a local Indian tribe, the Hueco/Huaco Tribe, who developed a village on the same land. The first group of white settlers arrived in the area in 1837, but abandoned the site just a few months later. An outpost was established by several companies of Texas Rangers at the abandoned settlement. At the time the area was known as Waco Spring.

⁴⁶ *The Development of Highways in Texas, Waco*. The Texas Historical Commission. May 2016.

The site of the original village was part of a two-league land grant sold in 1848 to John S. Sydnor who subdivided the leagues and sold each at one dollar per acre with the help of land agent Jacob De Cordova. Another land agent, George Erath, attempted to persuade De Cordova to plan a town on the site of the abandoned Hueco village as it was above swamp lands and many water courses. In 1849, George Erath surveyed the first block of the newly formed town, which was carved into lots sold for five dollars each. Lots for farming sold for two to three dollars each. At this point the newly formed village was named Lamartine. It was planned so that a main street ran from the spring westward to a spot designated for the town square. At this point, the town was named Waco to honor the original inhabitants of the site. Settlers began to trickle into the town, constructing houses of hewn logs and crudely-made brick.⁴⁷

Milam, Navarro, and Limestone Counties each contributed land to form McClennan County on January 22, 1850, and Waco became the county seat. Lots donated by De Cordova and his partners were set aside for public use, including a space designated for the county courthouse. De Cordova persuaded several key figures to help make the village a success including Captain Shapley P. Ross, who would go on to found the first hotel in Waco. Another key contribution that Captain Ross made was the development of a ferry route that ran across the Brazos River. This ferry allowed for settlement in what is now known as East Waco.⁴⁸ Four years later the small village of Waco was incorporated as a town; by 1859 it had over 700 residents. Settlers were drawn to the area as it quickly became an established trade center.

⁴⁷ Pylant, James, and Sherri Knight. *The Oldest Profession in Texas: Waco's Legal Red Light District*. Stephenville, TX: Jacobus Books, 2011, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Farmers were drawn to the region as soon as it was discovered that cotton grew extremely well in the rich and fertile soil.⁴⁹

Like many other cities in the Antebellum South, slavery and cotton contributed much, but it was dependent on slave labor. Prior to the Civil War, the slave population grew to be over 1,938. During the Civil War, the Waco economy stagnated because half of its population went off to war. Over 2,200 men from McLennan County went to fight while their wives stayed behind. The defeat of the South further devastated the economic conditions, and vice began to flourish in Waco.⁵⁰

Vice in Waco

Waco was not only known as Central City for its ideal central location, but also a “Six-Shooter Junction” due to its wild reputation of crowded saloons and gambling halls. An increase in sexual assaults and related offenses led to the acceptance of prostitution in the community. Newcomers, wandering cowboys, and Yankees stationed nearby increased the demand for prostitution. On April 26, 1871, the twelfth Legislature of Texas approved in the charter for the incorporation for the city of Waco the right to:

. . . to license, tax, and regulate billiard tables, tippling houses and dram shops, and to suppress gambling houses and other disorderly houses, or to suppress bawdy houses or license the same.⁵¹

Although Texas had outlawed prostitution statewide, Waco was given the right to regulate or suppress its bawdy houses. No other city in the state was given this power, although, many cities tried to add the provision later to no avail. On July 7, 1871, the Waco City Council approved an

⁴⁹ *The Development of Highways in Texas, Waco*. The Texas Historical Commission. May 2016.

⁵⁰ Pylant, James, and Sherri Knight. *The Oldest Profession in Texas: Waco's Legal Red Light District*. Stephenville, TX: Jacobus Books, 2011, p. 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

ordinance that allowed for the regulation of prostitution. The city recorder was to issue licenses as long as the \$200 per annum license fee was paid to the city, along with the assurance that a madam would run an “orderly disorderly house” in the form of a \$500 bond.⁵²

The population of Waco continued to grow; by 1880 the population had risen to nearly 8,000 residents. The steady population increase created even more demand for the vices. Prostitution had become totally legal by 1889 and was sectioned off in a corner of the city known as The Reservation. The first site in the Reservation was located two blocks north of Second Street and followed the path of Barron’s Creek to the edge of the Brazos River. A small section of East Washington Street fit within the boundaries as well as all of North First Street. New boundaries for the Reservation were established in 1905 in several blocks of North Second Street.⁵³

Waco had also become a minor educational center, a trading hub and city of industries in central Texas. In 1886, the consolidation of Waco University and Baylor University formed Baylor University, which further boosted the economy.⁵⁴ Waco also boasted two cottonseed oil mills, two planing mills, a woolen mill, and a cotton factory that produced mainly socks and yarn. By the end of the nineteenth century, the community served as the center of one of Texas’ prime cotton-growing regions, helped by the fact that the railroad network expanded into Waco and helped distribute its cotton products. Farmers from over one hundred miles away brought their cotton to be ginned in Waco. Cotton buyers opened offices in downtown Waco,

⁵²Ibid, 13.

⁵³ Ibid, 72.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 13.

and then shipped the cotton by rail to Galveston and on to New Orleans, where it was then shipped to Europe, South America, and India.⁵⁵



⁵⁵ Wood, Leslie. "Waco's Cotton Palace - A Texas Family Tradition - Hadley Court", *Hadley Court - Interior Design Blog*, 16 Nov. 2016.

Illustration 3.1. 1870 Suspension bridge over the Brazos. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

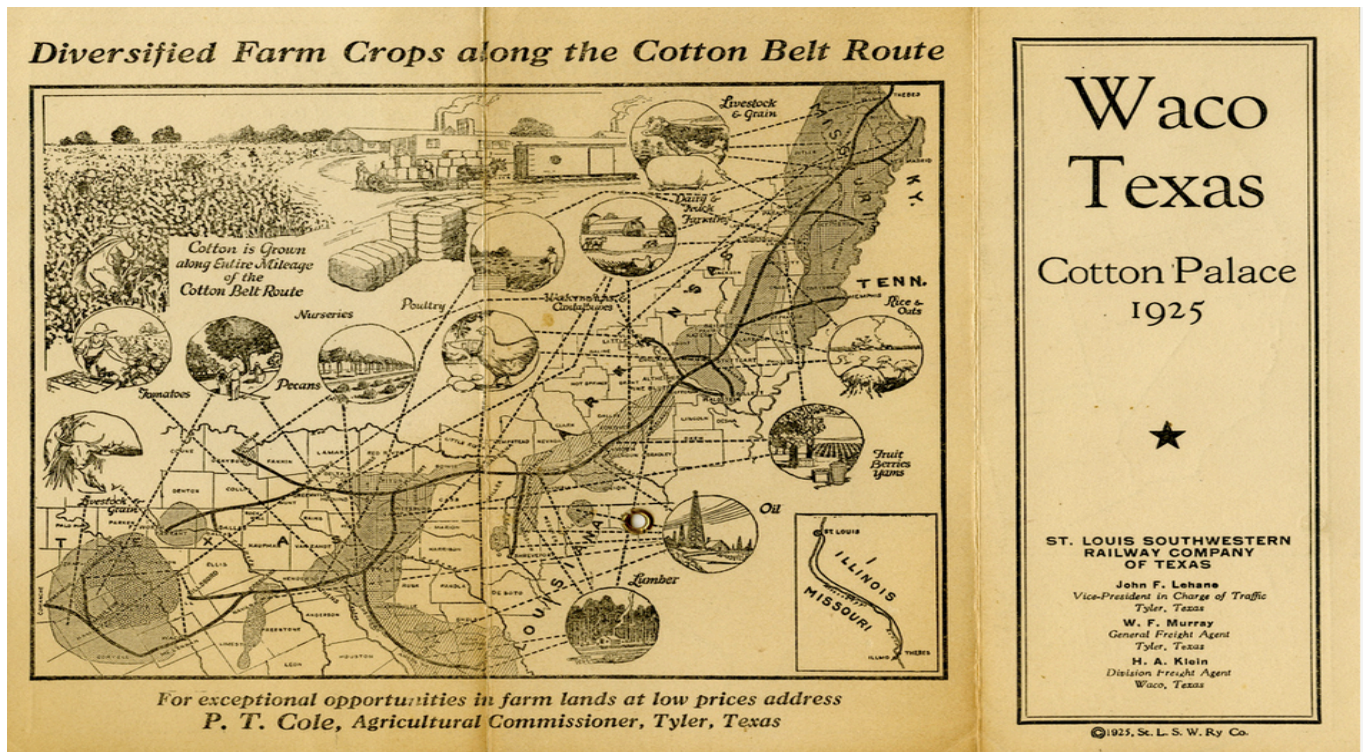


Figure 3.1 Diversified Farm Crops along the Cotton Belt Route.

The large abundance of cotton in the region left the city with a problem. Cotton was extremely bulky to ship after it was just picked, and would require more space during shipment. Neighborhood cotton gins began to appear to meet this need. Nearly "every wide place in the road," had its own cotton gin which often were very lucrative. Payment for the ginning service was either paid in cash or swapped for seed.



Illustration 3.2 City Hall Square with cotton trading in the foreground. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Even after being processed, the cotton was still too bulky. Businessmen soon brought to the region the latest innovation, the cotton compress. Soon, other surrounding communities brought their cotton to the city. With its growing population and well-traveled trade routes, Waco grew to become one of the most important cotton growing regions in the South by the year 1890.⁵⁶ That year, Waco became a larger city than either Dallas, Fort Worth, or El Paso.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Conger, Roger N. "Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54-76. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.

⁵⁷ Wood, Leslie. "Waco's Cotton Palace—A Texas Family Tradition—Hadley Court," *Hadley Court, Interior Design Blog*, 16 Nov. 2016.

The Cotton Palace Exposition

The rising success of Waco inspired a group of community civic leaders in 1894 to begin plans for an ambitious enterprise, The Texas Cotton Palace Exhibition. An exposition hall deemed the “Cotton Palace” with seating for up to 5,000 people was built by Architect Roy E. Lane in 1894, the same year the festival opened. The building was erected in Padgitt Park on Clay Avenue.⁵⁸ November 8, 1894 was opening day for the Cotton Palace Exposition and included Governor James Hogg as the guest of honor. Visitors from all over the state poured into Waco to experience the festival. Only six weeks after the festival, the Cotton Palace burned to the ground.



Illustration 3.3. The second version of Texas Cotton Palace in Waco. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁵⁸ Conger, Roger N. “Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos.” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.

The Festival did not continue until 1910 when it was reestablished and the Cotton Palace was rebuilt. The reopened exposition was situated on a twelve-acre lot shaped in a triangle that connected Clay Avenue, Dutton Avenue, and South Sixteenth Street.⁵⁹ The original main structure was less elaborate in design compared to the new structure. The new design was built in a Moorish architecture style with a turreted main building topped with an onion dome. The exterior walls of the structure were covered with grains, grass, cotton, minerals, and timber that were all products of Texas.⁶⁰ The most notable feature of the site was the giant eagle with a twenty-foot wingspan that was comprised entirely of red and yellow corn. Other attractions at the site included a racetrack, football field, pageant, and carnival with a Ferris wheel and wooden roller coaster.⁶¹ The new coliseum was capable of seating up to ten thousand people.⁶² The Festival then began to occur annually, with each year becoming more elaborate, until 1930. The Depression had severely impacted the number of visitors who could afford to go to the Fair and the crowds decreased significantly.⁶³

⁵⁹ Jim Stingley, "The Texas Cotton Palace," *Waco History*, accessed July 16, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/15>.

⁶⁰ Selcer, Richard. "People's Palaces." *American History*, vol. 49, no. 1, Apr. 2014, pp. 58–65.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Jim Stingley, "The Texas Cotton Palace," *Waco History*, accessed July 16, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/15>.

⁶³ Wood, Leslie. "Waco's Cotton Palace - A Texas Family Tradition - Hadley Court", *Hadley Court - Interior Design Blog*, 16 Nov. 2016.

Education played a prominent role in early Waco. Known as “The Athens of Texas,” Waco had several universities including Waco Classical School which became Waco University, then became Baylor University; Paul Quinn College founded in 1872; Waco Female College founded in 1857; and Ad-Ran College, which moved to Waco and became Texas Christian University in 1902. Not only did Waco have a plethora of universities, it had many great schools. One of these was Sacred Heart Academy, reportedly the first Catholic school in Texas. Sacred Heart Academy was founded by the Sisters of St. Mary of Namur who relocated to Waco from Lockport, NY. Other esteemed schools in Waco were the Waco Academy, Waco Select School, and Leland Seminary. In fact, it was probably due to the excellence of private, ecumenical schools that the public-school system was not established until 1882.⁶⁴ East Waco The Waco Elementary School was the first public school built with tax dollars.⁶⁵

World War I brought in a new era of development to Waco as it was chosen as the site for the five thousand-acre military outpost, Camp MacArthur. Twenty-five thousand American soldiers were stationed in Waco at the time.⁶⁶ The United States government pressured Waco to clean up its image. Hence, Waco began to push vice out of its city center. The presence of Baylor, a large conservative Christian college, further sought to change the reputation of Waco. Parents were hesitant to send their children to Baylor with houses of vice in the same area as apartments for students. On August 4, 1917, the Reservation was officially shut down and the vice network in Waco went underground.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Conger, Roger Norman. *A Pictorial History of Waco: with a Reprint of Highlights of Waco History*. 2nd ed., Texian Press, 1964, p. 13.

⁶⁵ Ryan, Terri Jo. Brazos Past: Tracing East Waco’s Roots, Waco Tribune-Herald, Aug 7, 2010.

⁶⁶ Conger, Roger N. “Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos.” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.

⁶⁷ Pylant, James, and Sherri Knight. *The Oldest Profession in Texas: Waco's Legal Red Light District*. Stephenville, TX: Jacobus Books, 2011, p. 72.

Hospitality in Waco

Waco has a long history of hospitality with not only commercial travelers, but also tourists who were drawn to several hot springs in the area. As the demand for temporary housing grew in the city, new hotels and boarding houses were being built in rapid succession. One candidate in the 1912 mayoral race even promised to build the “most modern hotel in Texas.” He went bankrupt soon after the election and his prized hotel, The Raleigh, became another Albert Pick Hotel.

Both the arrival of the railroad and addition of the Suspension Bridge made it more possible than ever for travelers to visit the city. As the city began to evolve into an urban center, a new hotel was built at the corner of Fourth Street and Austin Avenue. Renowned Waco Architect, Milton W. Scott, who had designed the ALICO Building and the Waco Hippodrome, also built the McClelland House Hotel in 1871 to accommodate the abundance of visitors. The hotel was well known by both businessmen and tourists alike. In 1920, the hotel was put up for sale and bought by Conrad Hilton. The purchase would make this hotel the third Hilton in the state of Texas. Hilton was forced to sell this hotel during the Great Depression, along with three others.

In 1934, the new owners purchased the property and changed its name to the Roosevelt Hotel to honor Franklin D. Roosevelt. According to the *Waco Tribune-Herald* in 1936, the Waco hotel was known as the “acme of hoteldom.” The hotel was owned and staffed strictly by Waco natives. It soon became known for its friendly atmosphere and the attentiveness to guest’s needs. The hotel survived not only the Great Depression, but also the 1953 tornado, which had decimated Waco’s downtown. It was one of three buildings in the path of the storm to remain standing. Part of the reason that it endured so well was the solid architecture and steel frame that

helped keep it in place. Even the rooftop sign remained intact. The hotel did finally succumb, however, when downtown businesses began to move out to the suburbs. The dwindling number of guests at the hotel paralleled the dwindling number of retailers and shoppers downtown. The hotel closed for good in 1961 and became the Regis Retirement Home two years later.⁶⁸

Other hotels were built after the Roosevelt. The first was the Hotel Metropole constructed in 1881. It had the first elevator in a Waco hotel. The Hotel Wiggins, later renamed the Raleigh, was built in 1913 and was recently rehabilitated.⁶⁹

After highways began to cut through Waco and automobile ownership became more prevalent, downtown hotels began to fall out of fashion in the same way that downtown stores and downtown residences had. Meanwhile car courts began to mushroom around the periphery of the city. Each court was unique in its style and taste in an attempt to catch the traveler's attention and persuade him to stay for the night. The Grande Hotel had an unusual façade made of petrified wood. The Circle Courts contained small individual bungalows that guests could rent. Lodging was not the only type of business that catered to travelers, as restaurants were known to fight for the attention of customers as well. Popular restaurants in Waco included Bill Woods' Triple XXX, Elite Café, and the Chicken Shack.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Amanda Sawyer, "Roosevelt Hotel," *Waco History*.

⁶⁹ Claire Masters. "Portals to The Past: Fond Memories of Sharing Waco's Stories." *Waco Today Magazine*, 30 July 2015.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*



Illustration 3.4 The Elite Café. The Tichnor Brothers Collection, Boston Public Library.



Illustration 3.5 Bill Wood's Famous Food. The Tichnor Brothers Collection, Boston Public Library.

As the number of automobiles increased, Waco became more integral to commerce and trade throughout Texas. Several in- and out-of-state highways traveled through the city. Besides the Meridian Highway, other highways included Gulf-to-Colorado Highway, the King of Trails,

and the Central Texas Highway.

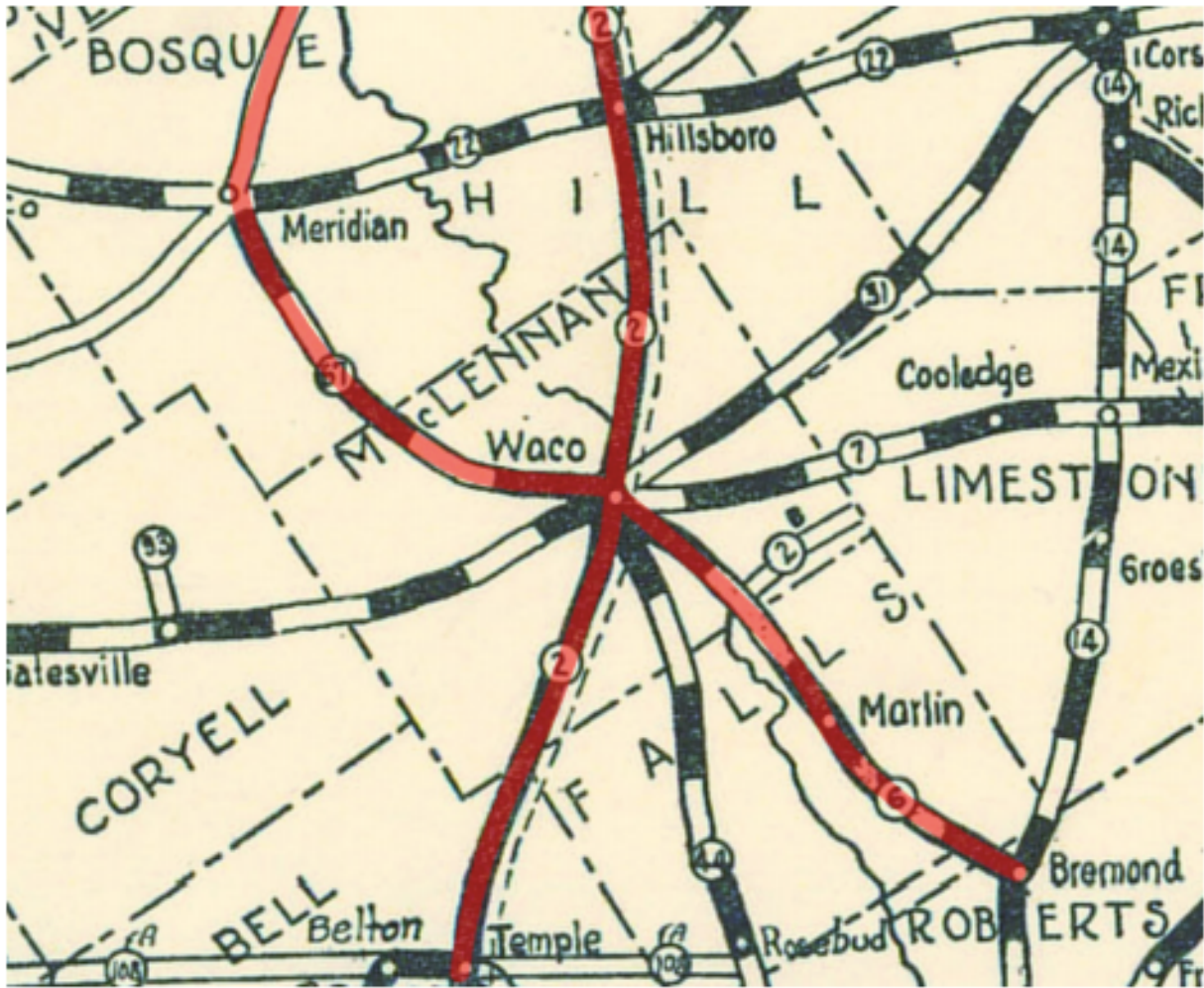


Figure 3.2. Official Highway Map of Texas, 1926. State Highway Commission. Texas State Library and Archives Commission. Waco Case Study Final, Texas Historical Commission.

Another bridge was added in 1904 to augment the 1870 bridge, the new one linking Elm Street in East Waco, the street where the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments were located, to Washington Street in the downtown core of Waco. The Washington-Elm bridge, like the suspension bridge, was also an engineering feat with reportedly the longest single-span metal bridge in the nation. The Washington-Elm Bridge became particularly important to the Meridian

Highway as it enabled the Gulf Division to cross back over to the east side of the Brazos River and extend southeast as it paralleled the waterway and H&TC Railway.⁷¹



Figure 3.3. Map of the Meridian Road, 1915. American Geographical Society Library Digital Map Collection, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

⁷¹ *The Development of Highways in Texas, Waco*. The Texas Historical Commission. May 2016.

Early maps of Waco show the earliest highway networks evolved in the mid-1910s. The A B.F. Goodrich Tire Company travel guide showed the many highways that would pass through Waco. The map shows a highly complicated road system, particularly downtown, with multiple at-grade railroad track crossings and routes that extend outward to various locations. The Meridian Highway went through the heart of downtown (Figure 3.3).

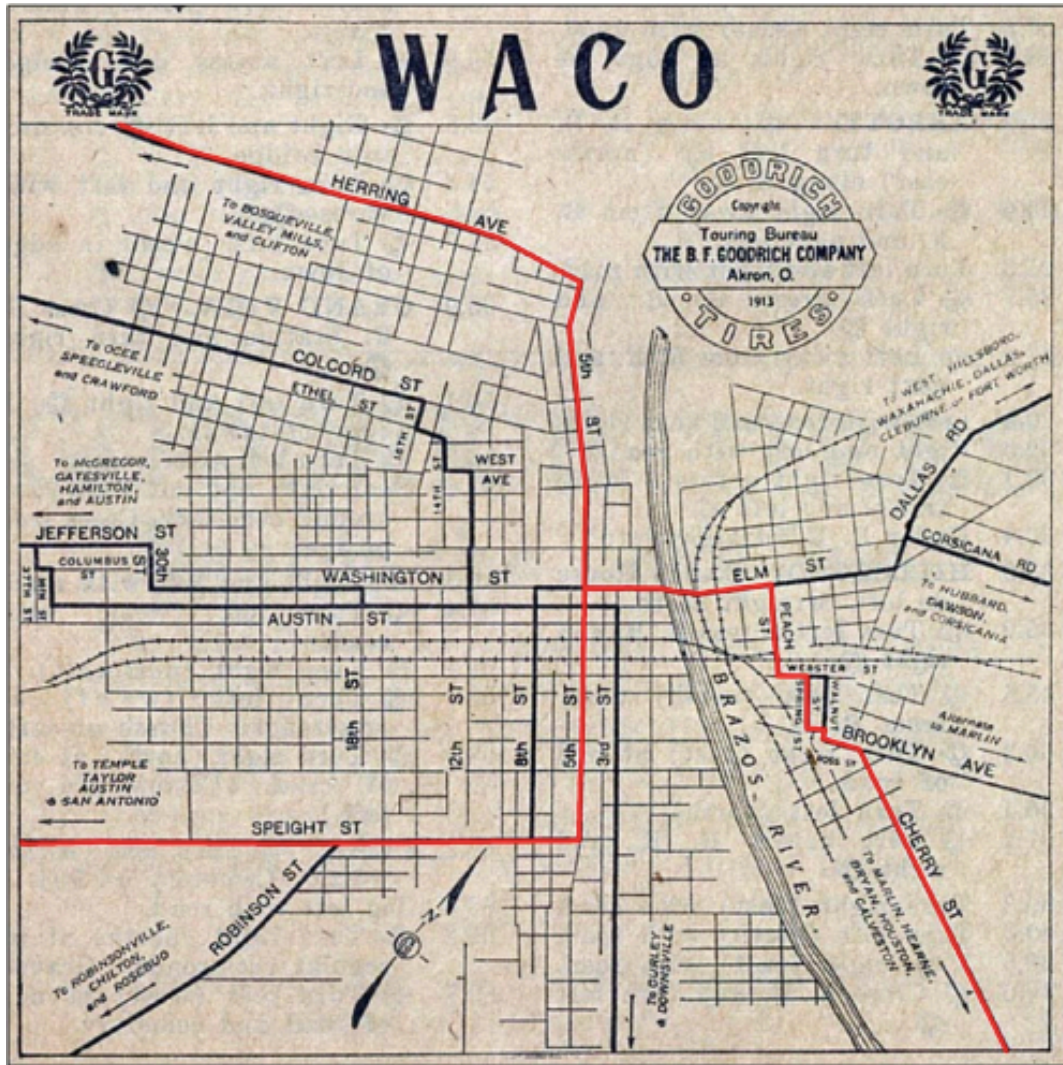


Figure 3.4. Waco City Map. B.F. Goodrich Tire Company, 1915. Waco Case Study Final, Texas Historical Commission.

It extended on Herring Avenue and then continued onto 5th Street. At Washington and Fifth, and also McLennan County Courthouse, the road split. Travelers who wanted to continue towards

the Gulf Division Route turned onto Elm Street and then continued on Peach, and then Cherry. Travelers driving toward San Antonio and Laredo continued on 5th Street and then turned south along Speight Street. Located along Elm Street were a number gas stations, tourist courts, and other travel-related businesses. The Grande Courts Tourist Apartments were one such business located along Elm Avenue (Figure 5.1). A year after the construction of the Grande Courts Tourist Apartments, Lee Torrance had built his very similar version across the street, The Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts.

The Meridian Highway provided entrepreneurs with the opportunity to develop businesses that catered to the growing number of motorists traveling along its route. Gas stations, restaurants, tourist camps, and tourist courts began to line the roadside of the Meridian Highway as it ebbed through the urban clusters. Although many businesses suffered greatly during the Great Depression, business on the Meridian Highway boomed. Federal aid money intended to stimulate the economy and provide jobs for unemployed workers was used for road construction and improvements⁷².

The amount of traffic along the Meridian Highway led to greater “decentralized and linear” patterns of commercial development. Land located long the outskirts of cities were attractive to owners and operators of tourist courts, gas stations, and restaurants greeted passing motorists as they entered urban areas through the Meridian and other similar highways. Unlike commercial development in city centers, auto-oriented development was more dispersed and catered to accommodating the automobile⁷³.

Conclusion

⁷² *The Development of Highways in Texas, Evolution of Named Highways: The Meridian Highway*. The Texas Historical Commission. May 2016.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

With the completion of I-35 in 1972, Elm Street was no longer a main thoroughfare. The interstate cut through East Waco without regard to the existing street grid. Highway 84 went through Elm Street, which allowed for businesses such as motor courts and motels to thrive, such as the Alamo Plaza and the Grande Courts. Highway I-35 bypassed Elm Street, cutting off these businesses from their potential customers. The once important intersection where the New Dallas Highway and Elm Street would meet had I-35 built directly on top of it. The simple intersection turned into a massive 6-way interchange. During this construction, Elm Street was closed. Customers were not able to use this once reliable route of transit.⁷⁴ No longer was Elm Street a vibrant business district that accommodated the needs of the traveler. Elm Street essentially functioned as the heart of East Waco. With a sudden downturn in business, the neighborhood declined rapidly. Many businesses that were once vital institutions in the community failed or relocated elsewhere, as was the case for Paul Quinn College. This disinvestment in East Waco is a problem that continues today with the stark contrast in appearance between both banks of the River.

⁷⁴ Sanderson, Dale. "Highway History of Waco Texas." *usends.com*, 8 Mar. 2017, www.usends.com/blog/highway-history-of-waco-texas.

CHAPTER FOUR

EAST WACO

Introduction

Although Waco and East Waco have been linked since the time the first settlers arrived, the Brazos River has kept the two communities separate. As Waco Village began to rise to prominence, East Waco formed as an industrial core across the River. Brick kilns, cotton mills, planing mills, and cotton seed mills characterized the development. This chapter details the rise of East Waco, the community where the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments were located. It has long been known as of a center for transportation and industry, with many of the important local “gritty” businesses.⁷⁵ The first cotton gin west of the Mississippi River was the East Waco Cotton Mill, located on the same plot of land where the Alamo Plaza Apartments would eventually be located. Transportation changes, the rise of artificial fiber in clothing, natural disasters, and suburbanization after World War II all played a major role in the decline of East Waco.

Early East Waco

In 1844, George Barnard opened a trading post on the east bank of the Brazos River. Two years later, Jesse Sutton established a blacksmith shop nearby. Families flocked to East Waco between 1847 and 1848 so that a small village appeared.⁷⁶ The village land was once part of the Tomas De La Vega land grant.

⁷⁵ Ryan, Terri Jo. “Brazos Past: Tracing East Waco’s Roots,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Aug 7, 2010.

⁷⁶ Conger, Roger Norman. *A Pictorial History of Waco: with a Reprint of Highlights of Waco History*. 2nd ed., Texian Press, 1964, p. 6.



Illustration 4.1. View of East Waco with the John Baylis Earle cotton mill displayed on the far right. Beck, Hester M. B. Willis Photograph Collection, The Portal to Texas History, UNT Libraries.

The East Waco Cotton Mill was started by John Baylis Earle in the late 1860s. Earle had acquired the elements of a cotton mill in England during the Civil War. He had purchased the equipment, disassembled it, and smuggled the dismantled through Mexico and over the border to Waco.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Amanda Sawyer, "Cotton," *Waco History*, accessed July 12, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/119?tour=5&index=3>.

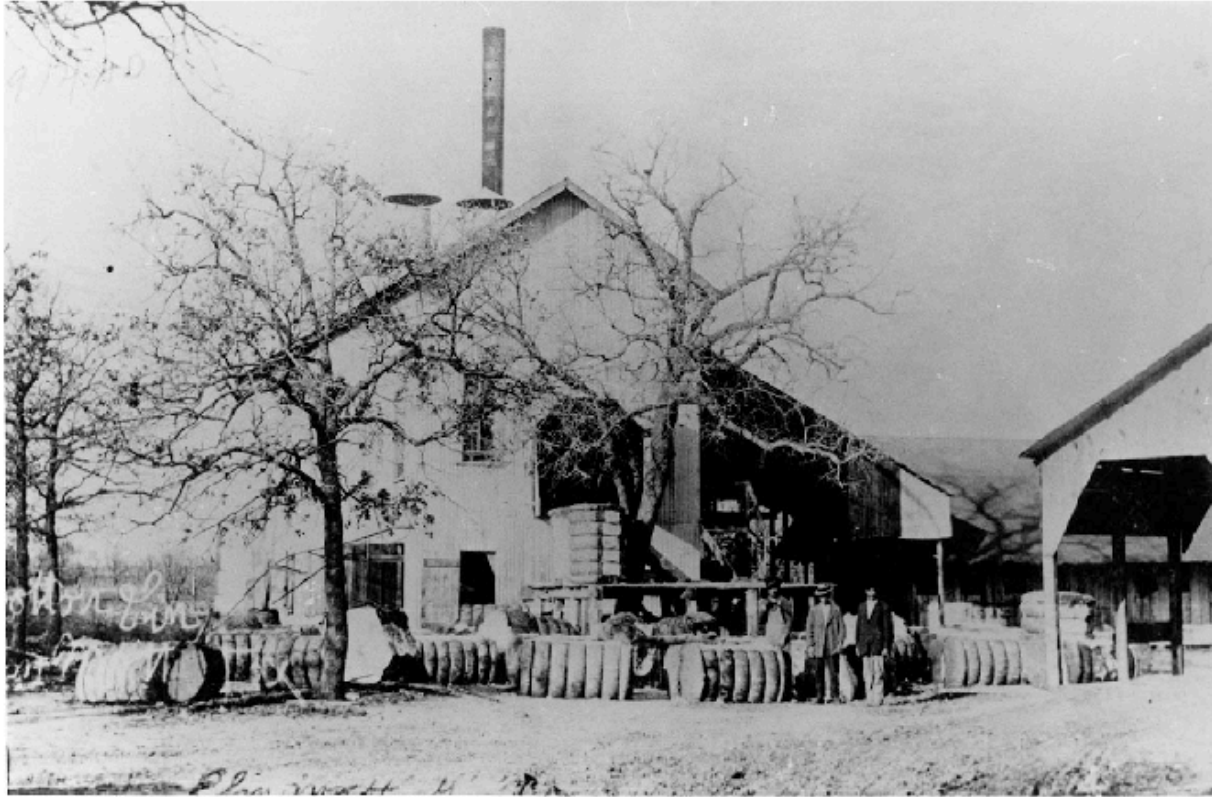


Illustration 4.2. The First cotton gin built west of the Mississippi River was located in Waco. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Captain Shapley Ross opened a primitive ferry in 1849 that connected East Waco to Waco Village, but the ferry was not always reliable as the River was subject to sudden rises which would shut down the service for days, weeks, even months at a time. The addition of the Waco Suspension Bridge allowed for easier passage crossing the Brazos River. With the new bridge, businesses sprang up near the banks to better accommodate the needs of the travelers. Waco also sat at the heart of one of the principle famed cattle trail routes, The Chisholm Trail. The Brazos River was known for its quicksand and jump-offs. With the addition of the bridge,

animals on the trail were able to safely pass for a small fee. In 1889, McClennan County purchased the bridge and made it toll-free.⁷⁸



Illustration 4.3. Photograph of a ferry crossing the mighty Brazos River. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁷⁸ Conger, Roger N. "Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.



Figure 4.1. The Chisholm Trail was one of the famed cattle trails that went through Waco. Texas Historical Commission.

By the 1870s, East Waco already had a bustling main street, Elm Street, and a railroad line to transport goods. The first railroad in Waco originated in Bremond and connected to the Houston & Texas Central Railway. Its spur was the Waco & Northwestern, also known as the “Waco Tap.” The passenger and freight station were built across the River in East Waco. This spurred commercial and residential development, and eventually the formal annexation of the

east side in 1871. Two more rail lines reached Waco shortly after: the Cotton Belt in 1881 and The Katy in 1882.⁷⁹

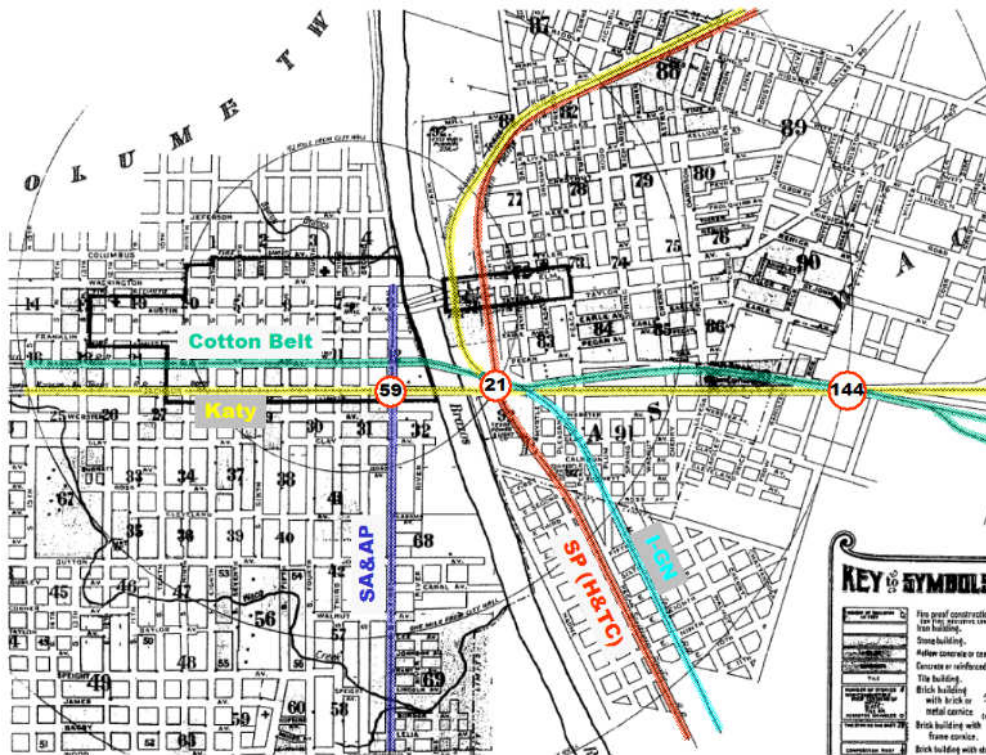


Figure 3.5. 1926 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Waco with the three railroads (SP, Katy, and Cotton Belt). Texas Railroad History. The circles represent the stations along the route. Station 21 is at the heart of East Waco.

East Waco also faced many challenges over the years. Floods were a common threat to businesses and industries along the east bank of the Brazos. The western bank sat at a higher elevation which protected the downtown core of Waco. Major floods occurred 1885, 1898, 1913, and 1936. In 1929, Lake Waco was constructed as a reservoir. The dam was built to control the constant floods and allowed the city to have a reliable source of water.⁸⁰ The dam was no match for the flood of 1913 when a torrential downpour brought record water levels to

⁷⁹ Conger, Roger N. "Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.

⁸⁰ Amanda Sawyer, "Lake Waco," *Waco History*, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/44>.

Waco. Although the dam had a crest of over 41 feet, it was no match for the rushing water. The dam burst which sent a cascade of water into the heart of the city. The damage in East Waco far exceeded anywhere in the area. The flood caused over \$1.5 million dollars' worth of damage in East Waco and also left more than two thousand residents homeless.⁸¹ The new dam constructed in 1961 replaced the earlier structure to prevent another catastrophic flood.

Despite the devastation caused by the flooding, the early twentieth century was a time of economic development for the community. With Elm Avenue as a major thoroughfare, businesses prospered. Development continued to grow with businesses like Kestner's Family Department Store, which started as a bank and grocery store in 1914, and later transitioned to dry goods by the early twenties.⁸² Businesses shifted focus to better accommodate the traveler including the Grande Courts and Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. A number of African-American owned businesses grew because East Waco had a sizable African American population.

The College View Court-Hotel was an African-American hotel in East Waco during the early twentieth century. The hotel offered comfortable and modern rooms at a reasonable rate. The African-American middle class was on the rise and travel became an attractive pastime. While many white owned businesses refused to serve non-white patrons, African-American owned businesses were a welcomed respite for weary non-white travelers. The College View Court-Hotel first appeared in the Green Book in 1951 and continued to be advertised throughout

⁸¹ Amanda Sawyer, "1936 Flood," *Waco History*, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/63>.

⁸² Amanda Sawyer, "Kestner's Family Department Store," *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://wacohistory.org/items/show/83>.

the 1960s. The owner was Dr. J. W. Yancy II, who had served as president of the neighboring Paul Quinn College from 1939 to 1942.⁸³

Paul Quinn College has the reputation of being the “oldest historically black college in Texas.”⁸⁴ Known as the “Athens of Texas,” Waco had been a proven power-house for higher education. Originally based in Austin, the school opened in Waco in 1877. At the time, African-American students were excluded from other colleges but Paul Quinn College offered courses to all, teaching English, Latin, Theology, math, and music.⁸⁵

On Monday, May 11, 1953, a disastrous tornado hit downtown Waco. The funnel traveled from the southwestern corner of the city in a northeasterly direction right into the heart of the city. The death toll was 114, with 145 others listed as having major injuries and 952 having minor injuries. At least 150 homes were destroyed in the disaster and 196 business buildings in the downtown were classified as demolished and beyond repair. Over 370 others were deemed “unsafe.” The total damage was thought to be approximately \$51 million. Spectators stated that the scene was unimaginable with buildings collapsing in on themselves, brick walls crumbling, and plate glass flying through the air.

⁸³ Amanda Sawyer, “College View Court-Hotel,” *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/147>.

⁸⁴ Brandice Nelson, “College View Court-Hotel,” *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/79>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.



Figure 4.3. Tornado path in 1953, *Tornadoes over Texas*.

Not only was the downtown core in rough shape, but East Waco was hit first by the full force of funnel. Several structures near the site of the Alamo Plaza site were heavily damaged. A block north of Elm Avenue was demolished. Heavily damaged structures were interspersed with slightly damaged structures and even undamaged structures. Elm Avenue appeared to have been just a block or so away from the path of the tornado.

W.C. Connor of the New Orleans Weather Bureau visited the Waco after storm and studied the wreckage. Upon close inspection, he realized the funnel from the storm was elevated fifteen to twenty feet above where it attacked the second and third stories of buildings while leaving the one-story structures less damaged. The tornado traveled for five miles through Waco before its return to the sky.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Hankamer School of Business. *Baylor Business Studies: Retail Trade Survey of Waco March 1953*. Waco, Tex.: Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, pp. 5-6.

Despite the tornado, East Waco rebuilt and continued to thrive. By the mid-1950s and 1960s, it hit its prime. Streets were busy with shoppers and patrons as they scurried among shops and restaurants. The community then faced a sudden downturn in business with the arrival of I-35. After that Elm Street was no longer a vibrant commercial strip. Businesses moved out to the suburbs to join the residents who moved earlier. A new wave of immigration occurred in East Waco.⁸⁷ Poor Hispanic and African American families who had left the stagnant farming communities throughout Texas moved into the vacated structures left behind due to suburbanization.⁸⁸ The disinvested Elm Avenue became a hub for illicit activity, including prostitution and drug trafficking. The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments that had once provided quality accommodations for travelers looking for a place to spend the night became the Utopia Motel, a center of the prostitution network in East Waco.⁸⁹ Several motels were condemned by the Sub-Standard Housing Officials of Waco in March of 1976. The Utopia Motel had been open for fifteen years at the time of its demolition, the same year.

Site of the Alamo Plaza Courts

The Utopia Motel, located at 929 Elm Avenue, was owned by Albert Marlow at the time of it was demolished. Albert had purchased the courts in 1958 from D.W. Bartlett and Hugh Schrader, the latter having bought his share from E.L. Torrance in 1940 after he had moved on. Marlow had also purchased the Grande Courts property next door at around the same time, which he subsequently renamed the Mona Plaza Motel. The café on the Mona Plaza site, formerly the Texas Café Restaurant, was turned into a beauty shop.

⁸⁷ Arnold, Watson. (Fall, 2012) "Don't Forget East Waco. It Has a History, Too." *Waco Heritage & History*. Fall 2012: 1. Print.

⁸⁸ Castro, Tony. *The Prince of South Waco: American Dreams and Great Expectations*. Bloomington, IN: IUUniverse, Inc., 2013, 79.

⁸⁹ "Fire Damages Utopia Courts," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, May 30, 1976.



Illustration 4.4. Demolition of the Utopia Courts. *The Waco Tribune-Herald*.

In 1941 the Waco tax records list the 900 and 1000 block of Elm Avenue as occupied by the Grande Hotel at 915 Elm, the Alamo Plaza Courts at 929 Elm, and the Grande Courts Tourist Camp and Texas Café Restaurant at 1000 Elm.⁹⁰ The site of the Alamo Plaza Courts could be traced back to 1890 when it was owned by Cameron, Seley, and Sanger.

⁹⁰ McLennan County Archives, *Tax Records, 1890-present*. McLennan County Records Management, Waco, Texas.



Figure 4.4. Waco, Texas, 1892. D. W. Ensign & Co. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.

Conclusion

The present-day lot of 929 Elm Street is an integral part of local history. It was the site for the Waco Cotton Mill during that time as seen in the McLennan County Tax Records and in the 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for the City of Waco (Figure 4.4 and 4.5). Across the street from the lot was Paul Quinn College, the first African American college west of the Mississippi River.⁹¹ While the factory itself was not on Elm Street, other structures associated were such as the warehouse and engineer’s cottage.

⁹¹ Brandice Nelson, “Paul Quinn College,” *Waco History*, accessed July 31, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/79>.

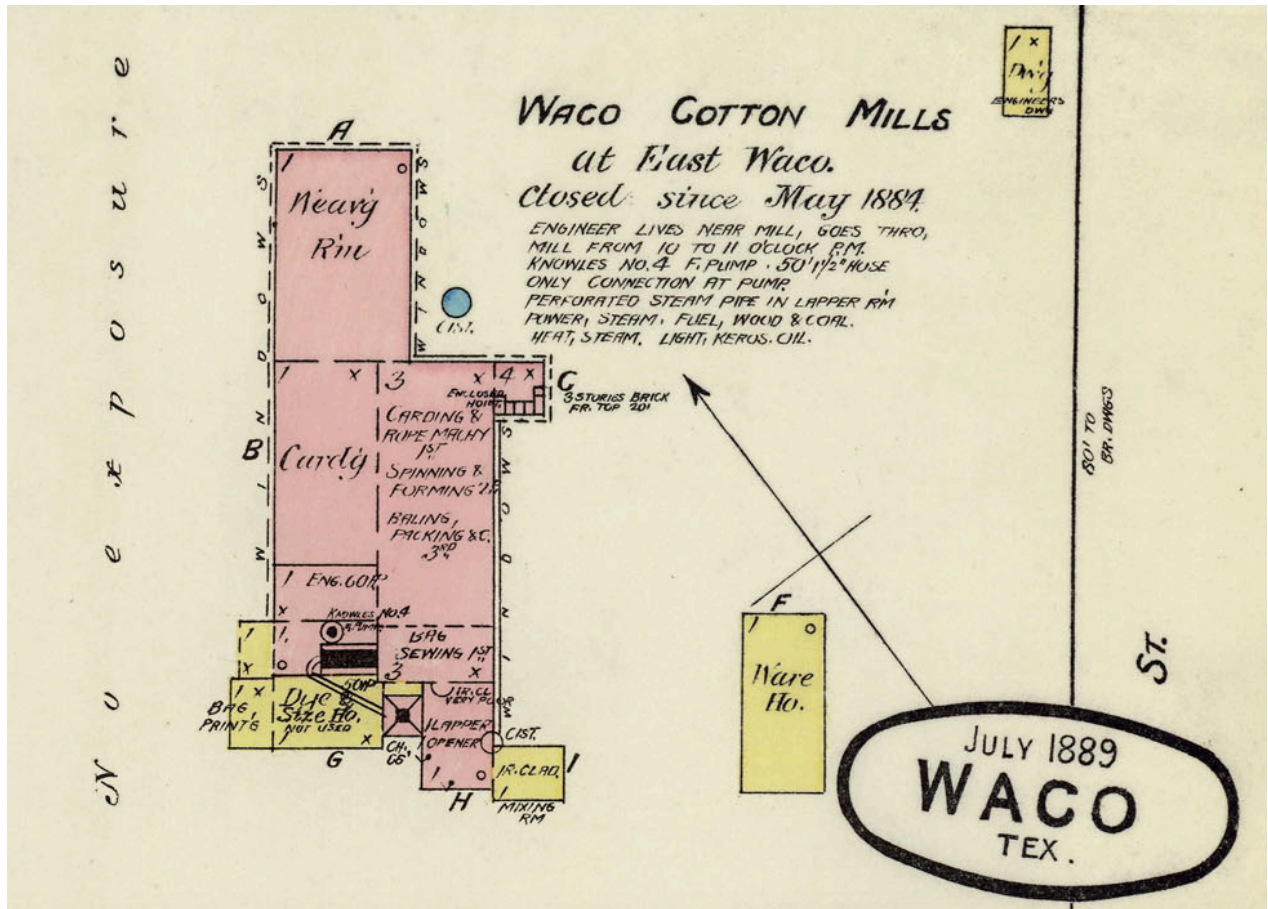


Figure 4.5. July 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Waco, Texas.



Illustration 4.5. John Baylis Earle's Waco Cotton Mill. Photo by Fred Gildersleeve, *A Pictorial History of Waco*.



Figure 4.6. 1877 Map of East Waco recorded in the Deed Record of McLennan County, Book 35, page 223.

Today, the block consists of the East Waco Library at 901 Elm Avenue, the Kelly Napier Justice Center at 929 Elm, and residences in the 1000 block. Few remnants are left that reveal the story of this area as a bustling commercial hub spurred by automobile-centric development. There are several remaining structures nearby that hold importance, such as an old gas station and the disinvested commercial blocks that once formed the backbone of the East Waco community. The East Waco Library was originally part of an HEB grocery store constructed in 1949 and had been repurposed as a library in 1976 with help from the Cooper Foundation.⁹²



Illustration 4.6. East Waco Library in the 900 Block Elm Street in East Waco. Photo by Author.

⁹² Smith, J.B. East Waco Library to get makeover, *Waco Tribune-Herald*, May 7, 2013.



Illustration 4.7. The Kelly Napier Justice Center in East Waco. Photo by Author.



Illustration 4.8. Elm Avenue in East Waco. Photo by Author.



Illustration 4.9. Historic gas station in East Waco. Photo by Author.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ALAMO PLAZA TOURIST COURTS

Introduction

The previous chapters pave the road for understanding what would become the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. This chapter provides a brief biography of the founder and describes the events that led the Alamo Plaza to become one of the most innovative pieces of the hospitality industry in America. The narrative begins with the early roots of life for E. L. Torrance in McLennan County. He eventually moved to Waco and operated a number of businesses throughout his early career. As a car-salesmen, Torrance saw a great opportunity to serve patrons who wanted temporary but high-quality accommodations. The Tourist Apartments proved successful and Torrance decided to bring his innovative idea to different cities throughout Texas. Eventually, the Alamo Plaza name would be seen throughout the Southeastern portion of the United States with nearly identical sister chains like the Park Plaza Courts sprouting in locations like West Tulsa and Flagstaff.

Edgar Lee Torrance

Edgar Lee Torrance was born in Elk, Texas, in rural McLennan County on September 13, 1893 to Robert Blake and Jeannette E.S. (Dixon) Torrance. He attended Douglas Select School and later Toby's Business College, where he became its bookkeeper. Around 1913, Torrance began purchasing and selling used cars. By 1918, he turned his side business into a full-time

occupation.⁹³ He married the former Miss Ruth McGrady in 1913, two years after she first arrived in Waco. They had one daughter, Helon T. Lee.⁹⁴ The couple was very active in civic affairs and sat on a few different civic boards. The Torrance family were heavily involved in equestrian pursuits. He owned and operated Lee Torrance Stables where prize-winning Tennessee walking horses were raised and also served as a horse-show judge.⁹⁵

With automobile sales on the rise, Torrance saw an opportunity with the new traveling market. He had noticed the rise of auto-centric development along the Meridian Highway across the Brazos River in East Waco. Waco had tourist courts, but Torrance wanted to provide a respectable place for visitors to rest their head at night. He did not want to add just another tourist court, but a place where for a good deal one might have access to a comfortable and clean place to sleep.

⁹³ Harold T. Purvis, "Torrance, Edgar Lee," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association 2010).

⁹⁴ "Mrs. Torrance Dies; Funeral Rites Today." *The Waco News Tribune*, 8 Feb. 1971.

⁹⁵ Harold T. Purvis, "Torrance, Edgar Lee," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association 2010).



LEE TORRANCE
FOUNDER AND FATHER
Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts

The battle cry of "*Remember the Alamo*" has been altered with the traveling public today to "*Remember the Alamo Plaza*" — for rest and relaxation.

LEE TORRANCE, of Waco, Texas, a recognized leader in the business of playing host to traveling America, is founder and father to 24 ALAMO PLAZA HOTEL COURTS (7 of which he owns and operates) in 10 states, each state having undoubtedly contributed a hero or two in the Battle of the Alamo.

Although his career background has been dedicated to the idea that there's no substitute for a "*good night's rest for the traveler*", at 59 he is a bundle of restless energy — taking time out each fall to deer hunt down in south Texas. For years his hobby was training fine saddle horses and is still frequently called on to judge at horse shows.

Remember the ALAMO PLAZA when you travel, and LEE TORRANCE, the man who helped "*take the ravel out of travel*" for our guests.



Illustration 5.1. Alamo Plaza Advertisement Card. Waco Public Library, courtesy of Keith Sculle.

The Alamo Plaza was not just any tourist court or tourist cabin. It had all the respectable traits of a clean home. The first Alamo Plaza would be called the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Torrance partnered with local judge and friend, D.W. Bartlett to create the new “beautiful and modern” tourist apartments to be located on Elm Street. Originally the duo had hoped to build an apartment complex for bachelors.⁹⁶ Instead, they chose to construct a “luxury motel in the bustling city.”⁹⁷

Bartlett was born in Wise County but had spent most of his life in Plainview and Wellington. At the beginning of World War I he joined the 36th Division and fought overseas for more than a year. When he returned in 1919, he enrolled at Baylor University and became the first graduate of the school’s renewed law program in 1923. He opened a private law practice in Waco in 1924 and was then elected to the 39th Legislature where he served a term. Bartlett was elected in 1925 as city judge where he served two terms. He was then elected as judge of the 34th District Court where he had served more than three decades. Judge Barlett was best known as the first judge in the country to allow his trial to be televised with the Washburn Trial in 1952.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ “A Veteran Motel Operator Speaks,” *American Motel Magazine*, November 1953, 34.

⁹⁷ Amanda Sawyer, “Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts,” *Waco History*, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/134>.

⁹⁸ “Bartlett Steps Out as Judge.” *The Waco News Tribune*, 15 Sept. 1961.



YOU ARE INVITED TO INSPECT WACO'S FINEST TOURIST APARTMENTS

In 900 Block On Elm Street

Alamo Plaza Holds Open House

Today from 2:00 to 9:00 p. m.

Special Concert by American Legion Drum And Bugle Corps

ALAMO PLAZA OFFERS EVERY HOME COMFORT TO TOURISTS

25 Beautiful Apartments

All Outside Rooms—Hot and Cold Water—Private Shower Baths

TWO- THREE- AND FOUR-ROOM SUITES, \$1.50 AND UP

A Sealy Mattress On Every Bed

Gas Stoves for Cooking

Special Rates by Week

E. L. TORRANCE and D. W. BARTLETT, Owners

Figure 5.1. Advertisement for the Alamo Plaza Open House in Waco. *Waco Tribune-Herald* in Waco, Texas, Sunday May 12, 1929, p. 15.

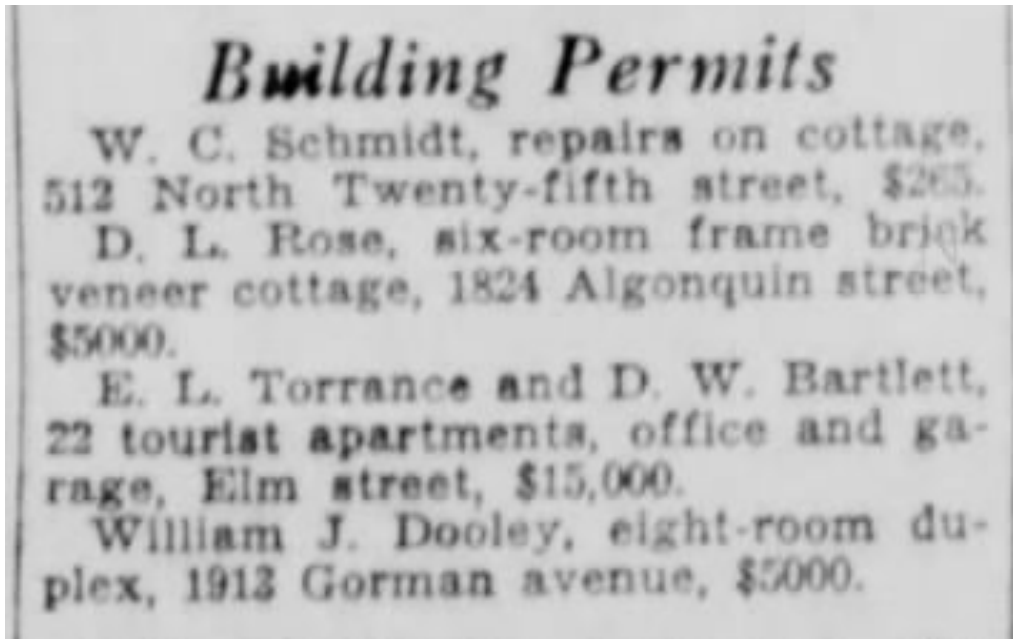


Figure 5.2. Building permit issued for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments in Waco. *Waco News-Tribune* in Waco, Texas, Wednesday, Feb. 20, 1929, p. 14.

The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments

Torrance and D.W. Bartlett held the open house for the original Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments on Sunday, May 12, 1929. In the newspapers the motel was touted as “Waco’s Finest Tourist Apartments” and boasted outside rooms, hot and cold water, private shower baths, gas stoves for cooking, and a Sealy on every bed.⁹⁹ At the open house were the American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps to help liven up the festivities. Torrance believed in the power of having a good open house, one that the community would remember and in turn suggest this particular establishment when others would ask where to stay. Since residents were not staying in motels in their hometown, this was a great way to let the community know exactly what the Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts had to offer.

⁹⁹ “Beautiful Alamo Plaza Holds Open House Today.” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 12 May. 1929.



Figure 5.3. Advertisement for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments in Waco. *Waco Tribune-Herald* in Waco, Texas, Thursday, April 11, 1929, p. 3.

The new structure was located in the 900 block of Elm Street and had a frontage that spanned over 350 feet. The structure had five wings connected by a front that that held true to its namesake and served as a replica “of the old fortress about which clusters such tragic memories of sacrifices for Texas independence.”¹⁰⁰ “Of course, we have slightly streamlined the original Alamo” Torrance stated.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.



Illustration 5.2. The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Flickr, Don O'Brien.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/2716321527/in/album-72157605669174491/>.

The structure was built on a gradually sloping terrace and presented a palatial appearance from the street. The central section of the structure was two stories with a broad and beautifully arched driveway “beckoning a hospitable welcome to the wayfarer.”¹⁰¹ The common and very practical U-shaped or horse-shoe shaped design for motels was not a good fit for the Alamo Plaza chain. In an article published in the *American Motel Magazine*, Torrance stated, “it looks like a dairy barn! It’s not an inviting motel!” The front room of the section was outfitted in the modern hotel office style and even included long distance telephone booths for patrons. There was a gravel court of about 30 feet wide between each of the five rows. The arrangement provided each of the 25 apartments with outside exposure on two sides and with enough distance

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

between the rows to allow the “untrammelled circulation of a breeze.” The majority of the apartments contained two rooms. The front and rear apartments of the two outside wings contained apartments with three-rooms. Four-room apartments were located in the front of the two inside wings. At full capacity, the Tourist Apartments held 60 adults. The interior arrangement of the kitchenette, breakfast room, bedroom, and bathroom included high quality furnishings. The beds set on steel bedsprings and each bed contained a Sealy mattress. The floors were highly polished hardwood. The contractor for the project was W.N. McGrady, the brother-in-law of Mr. Torrance.¹⁰²



Illustration 5.3. Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments on June 5, 1939. Flickr, Don O’ Brien. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/2715774441/>

Torrance was able to reduce his cost tremendously just by hiring his brother-in-law as contractor, thus eliminating a large contract fee. McGrady hired local men to work on the site

¹⁰² John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

and only contracted out for electrical and plumbing. “To get us a contractor would cost us about 25-30% more money. First of all, he would sublet part of the job such as electrical and plumbing. Then he would figure in his overhead, and his profit and then some more to be safe and the costs would soar”, Torrance once stated during an interview.¹⁰³

McGrady used reinforced concrete for the structure. An apartment that adjoined the Office was set aside as a residence for the Manager.¹⁰⁴ According to speculation, James Monroe Bush was thought to be the architect for the project. Bush also was responsible for Waco’s first apartment building, the Palm Court, in the 1900 block of Austin Avenue.¹⁰⁵

Second Location: Tyler, Texas

After the success of the first court, Torrance decided to bring his model to a new setting, Tyler, Texas, in 1931, approximately 110 miles east of Waco. At the time, Tyler was in the midst of an oil boom and there was a prime market for accommodations. Steady industries, such as fruit growing and cotton harvesting, with Tyler’s good railroad connections had previously been a major economic driver for the city. Just as cotton’s productivity declined, a succession of oil wells within a thirty-five-mile radius of Tyler had developed. The city rapidly turned into a boomtown. A vast network of roads within Smith County with Tyler at its core quickly developed to accommodate the new influx in population. A number of new types of people crowded into Tyler. The oilmen, gamblers, lawyers, and other followers all needed to be housed. Up to that point, Tyler had never needed to accommodate such a large population. Offices were constructed, work shanties popped up, and existing structures were hurriedly converted to better fit the needs of the populace. The city represented the oil-boom landscape seeming

¹⁰³ “A Veteran Motel Operator Speaks,” *American Motel Magazine*, November 1953, 34.

¹⁰⁴ “Beautiful Alamo Plaza Holds Open House Today.” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 12 May. 1929.

¹⁰⁵ *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 30 July. 2008.

impermanent, haphazard, and unkempt. The Blackstone Hotel, one of the nicest hotels and the largest hotel in Tyler built during the prosperity of the 1920s, had slumped by the Great Depression. The Blackstone hotel desk clerk had ordered lodgers to sleep in the lobby on cots or move elsewhere. Many people slept in their automobiles in Tyler during this time.¹⁰⁶

Lee Torrance opened his second Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments location on Erwin Street on July 5, 1931, located on the west side of town. By 1932, four other competitors were clustered in the same location and created the first motel strip in Tyler. Torrance had placed a full-page ad in the local Sunday paper that proclaimed the motel as dignified roadside lodging. Every “tourist apartment” included indoor plumbing, major-brand mattresses, and “hardwood” floors. Individual need determined the number of rooms in an apartment, anywhere from one room to four rooms were available.¹⁰⁷

The Tyler Alamo Plaza location, however, did not resemble the Waco location. Tyler and later Chattanooga, would be the only two motels in the chain that were not identical to the original model. Torrance wanted to create an oasis in the harsh industrial oil boom landscape. He designed this location with “snow white court apartments” that significantly contrasted against the harsh landscape. With such a distinction, Torrance bragged that these were “America’s Finest Tourist Apartments.” With two successful locations up and running, he announced his plans to extend the chain.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 92.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Third Location: Shreveport, Louisiana

The third location was not completed until August 1, 1935, located in Shreveport, Louisiana. The city had long been associated with East Texas, harking back to the days when the wagon road that extended west out of town was deemed the “Texas Trail.” “G.T.T.” (Gone to Texas), was a familiar phrase used by those traveling westward to seek better opportunities.

Shreveport claimed to be the “Heart of “Ark-La-Tex” just as Waco was considered “The Heart of Texas.” “Ark-La-Tex” is the surrounding 100-mile radius that included parts of Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana. Shreveport was first a river port and then became a successful rail center for a healthy and robust local economy with natural gas and oil adding to the already booming economy. As cotton production declined in Texas and oil production increased, wealthy East Texas oilmen began to invest in Louisiana, and more specifically Shreveport. In 1930, a big gas field opened in nearby Rodessa. Yet, the Barksdale Air Field, established in 1932, proved to be the biggest resource to the city. A sharp demand for temporary housing struck when the more than nine hundred laborers worked in shifts to construct the base.¹⁰⁹

Torrance put his third location at the west end of Shreveport where the Greenwood Road, the old trail west, and a major Gulf Route, the Mansfield Road, intersected. Both roads were some of the earliest paved that spread out from Shreveport. By this time, Torrance changed the name from Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments to Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts as “courts” was becoming a “hot word” in the industry. Torrance targeted businessmen who traveled with their wives and married couples who were in need of temporary housing before purchasing a house in Shreveport.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Unlike many motels of the times that boasted no tipping policies, many of the Alamo Plaza workers relied on tips as the largest portion of their income. Just as he had done in the previous locations, Torrance took out advertisements in local newspapers that invited the community to the grand opening celebration and smaller ads that highlighted the various local contractors who created high-quality work in such a short amount of time.

Torrance was right again with his financial instincts. Shreveport had no run during the Great Depression on its bank accounts and the Barksdale Air Force Base continued to boost the local economy prior to World War II at the end of the 1930s. Torrance had chosen his nephew, W.G. McGrady, to manage the new location and keep a close eye on its operation. W.G. McGrady would later train another branch founder at this location.¹¹⁰

Torrance had profited greatly at his shrewd business decisions with the three sites he selected. He had far surpassed any competitor, most of which were small, often rude, courts that mushroomed along highways but also hotels located in the heart of the downtown core.¹¹¹

Conclusion

The Alamo chain was begun with an idea of providing quality accommodations and continued to use the same formula in later locations. The Alamo façade that had proved successful in both the Waco and Shreveport location, the grand opening day celebration with full-page ads in the local paper, the high standards of cleanliness for the guests, comfortable beds for every guest marked these resting places as the best available in their class. Torrance expected all of the staff to provide the best customer service possible and go above and beyond to satisfy each guest. With this model set in place, it is no wonder that the Alamo Plaza chain

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

proved to be so successful when other courts were continually struggling. Torrance had enough experience as a salesman to know to keep overhead low but sell a quality product. He was steadfast in his approach to cut costs when possible but not to compromise the experience for the guests. As the first motel chain in America, the Alamo Plaza Courts set an incredible standard that few motels were able to live up to.

CHAPTER FOUR

EAST WACO

Introduction

Although Waco and East Waco have been linked since the time the first settlers arrived, the Brazos River has kept the two communities separate. As Waco Village began to rise to prominence, East Waco formed as an industrial core across the River. Brick kilns, cotton mills, planing mills, and cotton seed mills characterized the development. This chapter details the rise of East Waco, the community where the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments were located. It has long been known as of a center for transportation and industry, with many of the important local “gritty” businesses.¹¹² The first cotton gin west of the Mississippi River was the East Waco Cotton Mill, located on the same plot of land where the Alamo Plaza Apartments would eventually be located. Transportation changes, the rise of artificial fiber in clothing, natural disasters, and suburbanization after World War II all played a major role in the decline of East Waco.

Early East Waco

In 1844, George Barnard opened a trading post on the east bank of the Brazos River. Two years later, Jesse Sutton established a blacksmith shop nearby. Families flocked to East Waco between 1847 and 1848 so that a small village appeared.¹¹³ The village land was once part of the Tomas De La Vega land grant.

¹¹² Ryan, Terri Jo. “Brazos Past: Tracing East Waco’s Roots,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, Aug 7, 2010.

¹¹³ Conger, Roger Norman. *A Pictorial History of Waco: with a Reprint of Highlights of Waco History*. 2nd ed., Texian Press, 1964, p. 6.



Illustration 4.1. View of East Waco with the John Baylis Earle cotton mill displayed on the far right. Beck, Hester M. B. Willis Photograph Collection, The Portal to Texas History, UNT Libraries.

The East Waco Cotton Mill was started by John Baylis Earle in the late 1860s. Earle had acquired the elements of a cotton mill in England during the Civil War. He had purchased the equipment, disassembled it, and smuggled the dismantled through Mexico and over the border to Waco.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Amanda Sawyer, "Cotton," *Waco History*, accessed July 12, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/119?tour=5&index=3>.



Illustration 4.2. The First cotton gin built west of the Mississippi River was located in Waco. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Captain Shapley Ross opened a primitive ferry in 1849 that connected East Waco to Waco Village, but the ferry was not always reliable as the River was subject to sudden rises which would shut down the service for days, weeks, even months at a time. The addition of the Waco Suspension Bridge allowed for easier passage crossing the Brazos River. With the new bridge, businesses sprang up near the banks to better accommodate the needs of the travelers. Waco also sat at the heart of one of the principle famed cattle trail routes, The Chisholm Trail. The Brazos River was known for its quicksand and jump-offs. With the addition of the bridge,

animals on the trail were able to safely pass for a small fee. In 1889, McClennan County purchased the bridge and made it toll-free.¹¹⁵



Illustration 4.3. Photograph of a ferry crossing the mighty Brazos River. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

¹¹⁵ Conger, Roger N. "Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.



Figure 4.1. The Chisholm Trail was one of the famed cattle trails that went through Waco. Texas Historical Commission.

By the 1870s, East Waco already had a bustling main street, Elm Street, and a railroad line to transport goods. The first railroad in Waco originated in Bremond and connected to the Houston & Texas Central Railway. Its spur was the Waco & Northwestern, also known as the “Waco Tap.” The passenger and freight station were built across the River in East Waco. This spurred commercial and residential development, and eventually the formal annexation of the

east side in 1871. Two more rail lines reached Waco shortly after: the Cotton Belt in 1881 and The Katy in 1882.¹¹⁶

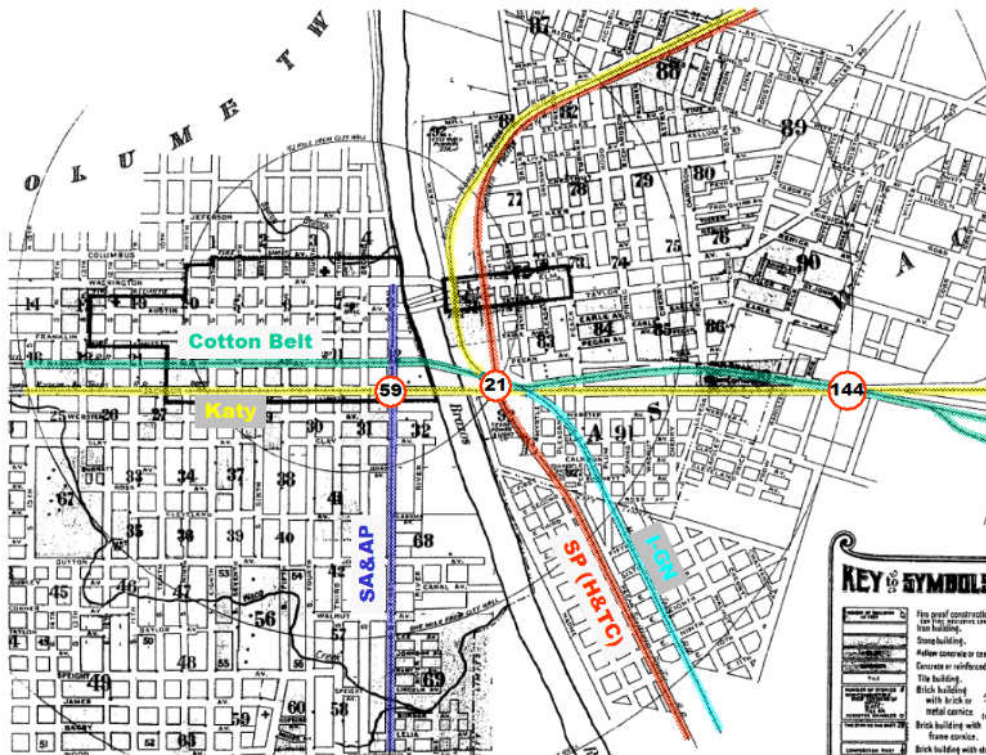


Figure 3.5. 1926 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Waco with the three railroads (SP, Katy, and Cotton Belt). Texas Railroad History. The circles represent the stations along the route. Station 21 is at the heart of East Waco.

East Waco also faced many challenges over the years. Floods were a common threat to businesses and industries along the east bank of the Brazos. The western bank sat at a higher elevation which protected the downtown core of Waco. Major floods occurred 1885, 1898, 1913, and 1936. In 1929, Lake Waco was constructed as a reservoir. The dam was built to control the constant floods and allowed the city to have a reliable source of water.¹¹⁷ The dam was no match for the flood of 1913 when a torrential downpour brought record water levels to

¹¹⁶ Conger, Roger N. "Waco: Cotton and Culture on the Brazos." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1971, pp. 54–76. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/30236685.

¹¹⁷ Amanda Sawyer, "Lake Waco," *Waco History*, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/44>.

Waco. Although the dam had a crest of over 41 feet, it was no match for the rushing water. The dam burst which sent a cascade of water into the heart of the city. The damage in East Waco far exceeded anywhere in the area. The flood caused over \$1.5 million dollars' worth of damage in East Waco and also left more than two thousand residents homeless.¹¹⁸ The new dam constructed in 1961 replaced the earlier structure to prevent another catastrophic flood.

Despite the devastation caused by the flooding, the early twentieth century was a time of economic development for the community. With Elm Avenue as a major thoroughfare, businesses prospered. Development continued to grow with businesses like Kestner's Family Department Store, which started as a bank and grocery store in 1914, and later transitioned to dry goods by the early twenties.¹¹⁹ Businesses shifted focus to better accommodate the traveler including the Grande Courts and Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. A number of African-American owned businesses grew because East Waco had a sizable African American population.

The College View Court-Hotel was an African-American hotel in East Waco during the early twentieth century. The hotel offered comfortable and modern rooms at a reasonable rate. The African-American middle class was on the rise and travel became an attractive pastime. While many white owned businesses refused to serve non-white patrons, African-American owned businesses were a welcomed respite for weary non-white travelers. The College View Court-Hotel first appeared in the Green Book in 1951 and continued to be advertised throughout

¹¹⁸ Amanda Sawyer, "1936 Flood," *Waco History*, accessed July 26, 2018, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/63>.

¹¹⁹ Amanda Sawyer, "Kestner's Family Department Store," *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://wacohistory.org/items/show/83>.

the 1960s. The owner was Dr. J. W. Yancy II, who had served as president of the neighboring Paul Quinn College from 1939 to 1942.¹²⁰

Paul Quinn College has the reputation of being the “oldest historically black college in Texas.”¹²¹ Known as the “Athens of Texas,” Waco had been a proven power-house for higher education. Originally based in Austin, the school opened in Waco in 1877. At the time, African-American students were excluded from other colleges but Paul Quinn College offered courses to all, teaching English, Latin, Theology, math, and music.¹²²

On Monday, May 11, 1953, a disastrous tornado hit downtown Waco. The funnel traveled from the southwestern corner of the city in a northeasterly direction right into the heart of the city. The death toll was 114, with 145 others listed as having major injuries and 952 having minor injuries. At least 150 homes were destroyed in the disaster and 196 business buildings in the downtown were classified as demolished and beyond repair. Over 370 others were deemed “unsafe.” The total damage was thought to be approximately \$51 million. Spectators stated that the scene was unimaginable with buildings collapsing in on themselves, brick walls crumbling, and plate glass flying through the air.

¹²⁰ Amanda Sawyer, “College View Court-Hotel,” *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/147>.

¹²¹ Brandice Nelson, “College View Court-Hotel,” *Waco History*, accessed January 16, 2019, <http://www.wacohistory.org/items/show/79>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

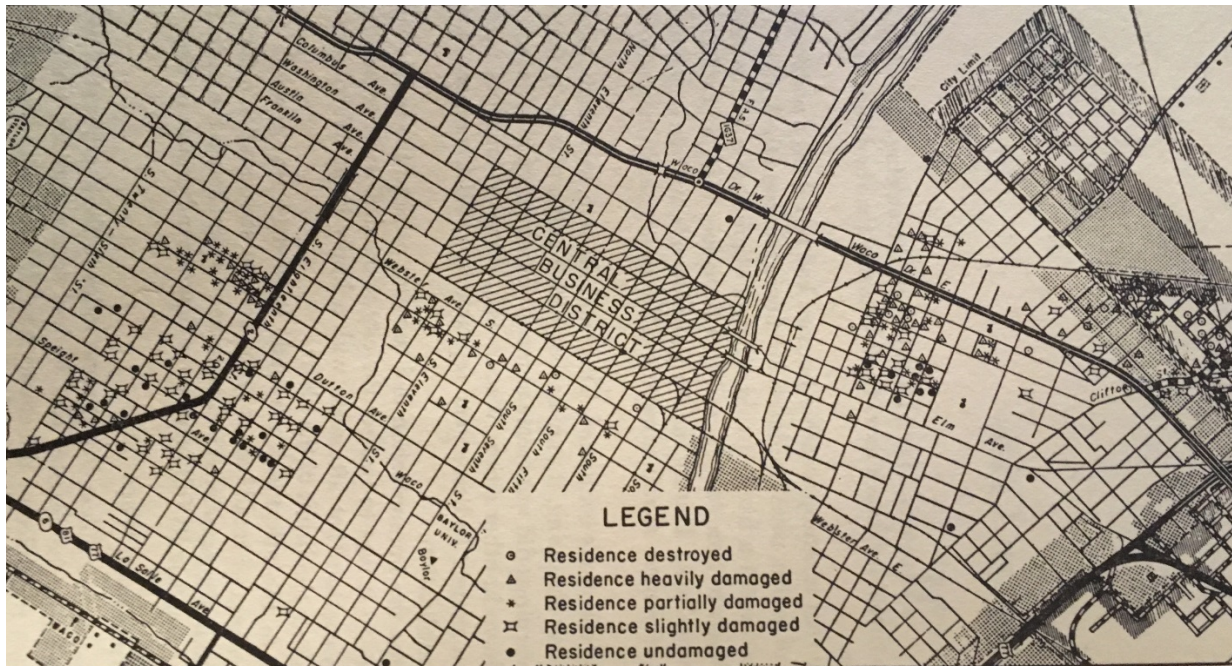


Figure 4.3. Tornado path in 1953, *Tornadoes over Texas*.

Not only was the downtown core in rough shape, but East Waco was hit first by the full force of funnel. Several structures near the site of the Alamo Plaza site were heavily damaged. A block north of Elm Avenue was demolished. Heavily damaged structures were interspersed with slightly damaged structures and even undamaged structures. Elm Avenue appeared to have been just a block or so away from the path of the tornado.

W.C. Connor of the New Orleans Weather Bureau visited the Waco after storm and studied the wreckage. Upon close inspection, he realized the funnel from the storm was elevated fifteen to twenty feet above where it attacked the second and third stories of buildings while leaving the one-story structures less damaged. The tornado traveled for five miles through Waco before its return to the sky.¹²³

¹²³ Hankamer School of Business. *Baylor Business Studies: Retail Trade Survey of Waco March 1953*. Waco, Tex.: Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, pp. 5-6.

Despite the tornado, East Waco rebuilt and continued to thrive. By the mid-1950s and 1960s, it hit its prime. Streets were busy with shoppers and patrons as they scurried among shops and restaurants. The community then faced a sudden downturn in business with the arrival of I-35. After that Elm Street was no longer a vibrant commercial strip. Businesses moved out to the suburbs to join the residents who moved earlier. A new wave of immigration occurred in East Waco.¹²⁴ Poor Hispanic and African American families who had left the stagnant farming communities throughout Texas moved into the vacated structures left behind due to suburbanization.¹²⁵ The disinvested Elm Avenue became a hub for illicit activity, including prostitution and drug trafficking. The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments that had once provided quality accommodations for travelers looking for a place to spend the night became the Utopia Motel, a center of the prostitution network in East Waco.¹²⁶ Several motels were condemned by the Sub-Standard Housing Officials of Waco in March of 1976. The Utopia Motel had been open for fifteen years at the time of its demolition, the same year.

Site of the Alamo Plaza Courts

The Utopia Motel, located at 929 Elm Avenue, was owned by Albert Marlow at the time of it was demolished. Albert had purchased the courts in 1958 from D.W. Bartlett and Hugh Schrader, the latter having bought his share from E.L. Torrance in 1940 after he had moved on. Marlow had also purchased the Grande Courts property next door at around the same time, which he subsequently renamed the Mona Plaza Motel. The café on the Mona Plaza site, formerly the Texas Café Restaurant, was turned into a beauty shop.

¹²⁴ Arnold, Watson. (Fall, 2012) "Don't Forget East Waco. It Has a History, Too." *Waco Heritage & History*. Fall 2012: 1. Print.

¹²⁵ Castro, Tony. *The Prince of South Waco: American Dreams and Great Expectations*. Bloomington, IN: IUUniverse, Inc., 2013, 79.

¹²⁶ "Fire Damages Utopia Courts," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, May 30, 1976.



Illustration 4.4. Demolition of the Utopia Courts. *The Waco Tribune-Herald*.

In 1941 the Waco tax records list the 900 and 1000 block of Elm Avenue as occupied by the Grande Hotel at 915 Elm, the Alamo Plaza Courts at 929 Elm, and the Grande Courts Tourist Camp and Texas Café Restaurant at 1000 Elm.¹²⁷ The site of the Alamo Plaza Courts could be traced back to 1890 when it was owned by Cameron, Seley, and Sanger.

¹²⁷ McLennan County Archives, *Tax Records, 1890-present*. McLennan County Records Management, Waco, Texas.



Figure 4.4. Waco, Texas, 1892. D. W. Ensign & Co. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.

Conclusion

The present-day lot of 929 Elm Street is an integral part of local history. It was the site for the Waco Cotton Mill during that time as seen in the McLennan County Tax Records and in the 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for the City of Waco (Figure 4.4 and 4.5). Across the street from the lot was Paul Quinn College, the first African American college west of the Mississippi River.¹²⁸ While the factory itself was not on Elm Street, other structures associated were such as the warehouse and engineer's cottage.

¹²⁸ Brandice Nelson, "Paul Quinn College," *Waco History*, accessed July 31, 2018, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/79>.



Illustration 4.5. John Baylis Earle's Waco Cotton Mill. Photo by Fred Gildersleeve, *A Pictorial History of Waco*.



Figure 4.6. 1877 Map of East Waco recorded in the Deed Record of McLennan County, Book 35, page 223.

Today, the block consists of the East Waco Library at 901 Elm Avenue, the Kelly Napier Justice Center at 929 Elm, and residences in the 1000 block. Few remnants are left that reveal the story of this area as a bustling commercial hub spurred by automobile-centric development. There are several remaining structures nearby that hold importance, such as an old gas station and the disinvested commercial blocks that once formed the backbone of the East Waco community. The East Waco Library was originally part of an HEB grocery store constructed in 1949 and had been repurposed as a library in 1976 with help from the Cooper Foundation.¹²⁹



Illustration 4.6. East Waco Library in the 900 Block Elm Street in East Waco. Photo by Author.

¹²⁹ Smith, J.B. East Waco Library to get makeover, *Waco Tribune-Herald*, May 7, 2013.



Illustration 4.7. The Kelly Napier Justice Center in East Waco. Photo by Author.



Illustration 4.8. Elm Avenue in East Waco. Photo by Author.



Illustration 4.9. Historic gas station in East Waco. Photo by Author.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ALAMO PLAZA TOURIST COURTS

Introduction

The previous chapters pave the road for understanding what would become the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. This chapter provides a brief biography of the founder and describes the events that led the Alamo Plaza to become one of the most innovative pieces of the hospitality industry in America. The narrative begins with the early roots of life for E. L. Torrance in McLennan County. He eventually moved to Waco and operated a number of businesses throughout his early career. As a car-salesmen, Torrance saw a great opportunity to serve patrons who wanted temporary but high-quality accommodations. The Tourist Apartments proved successful and Torrance decided to bring his innovative idea to different cities throughout Texas. Eventually, the Alamo Plaza name would be seen throughout the Southeastern portion of the United States with nearly identical sister chains like the Park Plaza Courts sprouting in locations like West Tulsa and Flagstaff.

Edgar Lee Torrance

Edgar Lee Torrance was born in Elk, Texas, in rural McLennan County on September 13, 1893 to Robert Blake and Jeannette E.S. (Dixon) Torrance. He attended Douglas Select School and later Toby's Business College, where he became its bookkeeper. Around 1913, Torrance began purchasing and selling used cars. By 1918, he turned his side business into a full-time

occupation.¹³⁰ He married the former Miss Ruth McGrady in 1913, two years after she first arrived in Waco. They had one daughter, Helon T. Lee.¹³¹ The couple was very active in civic affairs and sat on a few different civic boards. The Torrance family were heavily involved in equestrian pursuits. He owned and operated Lee Torrance Stables where prize-winning Tennessee walking horses were raised and also served as a horse-show judge.¹³²

With automobile sales on the rise, Torrance saw an opportunity with the new traveling market. He had noticed the rise of auto-centric development along the Meridian Highway across the Brazos River in East Waco. Waco had tourist courts, but Torrance wanted to provide a respectable place for visitors to rest their head at night. He did not want to add just another tourist court, but a place where for a good deal one might have access to a comfortable and clean place to sleep.

¹³⁰ Harold T. Purvis, "Torrance, Edgar Lee," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association 2010).

¹³¹ "Mrs. Torrance Dies; Funeral Rites Today." *The Waco News Tribune*, 8 Feb. 1971.

¹³² Harold T. Purvis, "Torrance, Edgar Lee," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Texas State Historical Association 2010).



LEE TORRANCE
FOUNDER AND FATHER
Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts

The battle cry of "*Remember the Alamo*" has been altered with the traveling public today to "*Remember the Alamo Plaza*" — for rest and relaxation.

LEE TORRANCE, of Waco, Texas, a recognized leader in the business of playing host to traveling America, is founder and father to 24 ALAMO PLAZA HOTEL COURTS (7 of which he owns and operates) in 10 states, each state having undoubtedly contributed a hero or two in the Battle of the Alamo.

Although his career background has been dedicated to the idea that there's no substitute for a "*good night's rest for the traveler*", at 59 he is a bundle of restless energy — taking time out each fall to deer hunt down in south Texas. For years his hobby was training fine saddle horses and is still frequently called on to judge at horse shows.

Remember the ALAMO PLAZA when you travel, and LEE TORRANCE, the man who helped "*take the ravel out of travel*" for our guests.



Illustration 5.1. Alamo Plaza Advertisement Card. Waco Public Library, courtesy of Keith Sculle.

The Alamo Plaza was not just any tourist court or tourist cabin. It had all the respectable traits of a clean home. The first Alamo Plaza would be called the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Torrance partnered with local judge and friend, D.W. Bartlett to create the new “beautiful and modern” tourist apartments to be located on Elm Street. Originally the duo had hoped to build an apartment complex for bachelors.¹³³ Instead, they chose to construct a “luxury motel in the bustling city.”¹³⁴

Bartlett was born in Wise County but had spent most of his life in Plainview and Wellington. At the beginning of World War I he joined the 36th Division and fought overseas for more than a year. When he returned in 1919, he enrolled at Baylor University and became the first graduate of the school’s renewed law program in 1923. He opened a private law practice in Waco in 1924 and was then elected to the 39th Legislature where he served a term. Bartlett was elected in 1925 as city judge where he served two terms. He was then elected as judge of the 34th District Court where he had served more than three decades. Judge Barlett was best known as the first judge in the country to allow his trial to be televised with the Washburn Trial in 1952.¹³⁵

¹³³ “A Veteran Motel Operator Speaks,” *American Motel Magazine*, November 1953, 34.

¹³⁴ Amanda Sawyer, “Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts,” *Waco History*, accessed December 16, 2017, <http://wacohistory.org/items/show/134>.

¹³⁵ “Bartlett Steps Out as Judge.” *The Waco News Tribune*, 15 Sept. 1961.



YOU ARE INVITED TO INSPECT WACO'S FINEST TOURIST APARTMENTS

In 900 Block On Elm Street

Alamo Plaza Holds Open House

Today from 2:00 to 9:00 p. m.

Special Concert by American Legion Drum And Bugle Corps

ALAMO PLAZA OFFERS EVERY HOME COMFORT TO TOURISTS

25 Beautiful Apartments

All Outside Rooms—Hot and Cold Water—Private Shower Baths

TWO-THREE- AND FOUR-ROOM SUITES, \$1.50 AND UP

A Sealy Mattress On Every Bed

Gas Stoves for Cooking

Special Rates by Week

E. L. TORRANCE and D. W. BARTLETT, Owners

Figure 5.1. Advertisement for the Alamo Plaza Open House in Waco. *Waco Tribune-Herald* in Waco, Texas, Sunday May 12, 1929, p. 15.

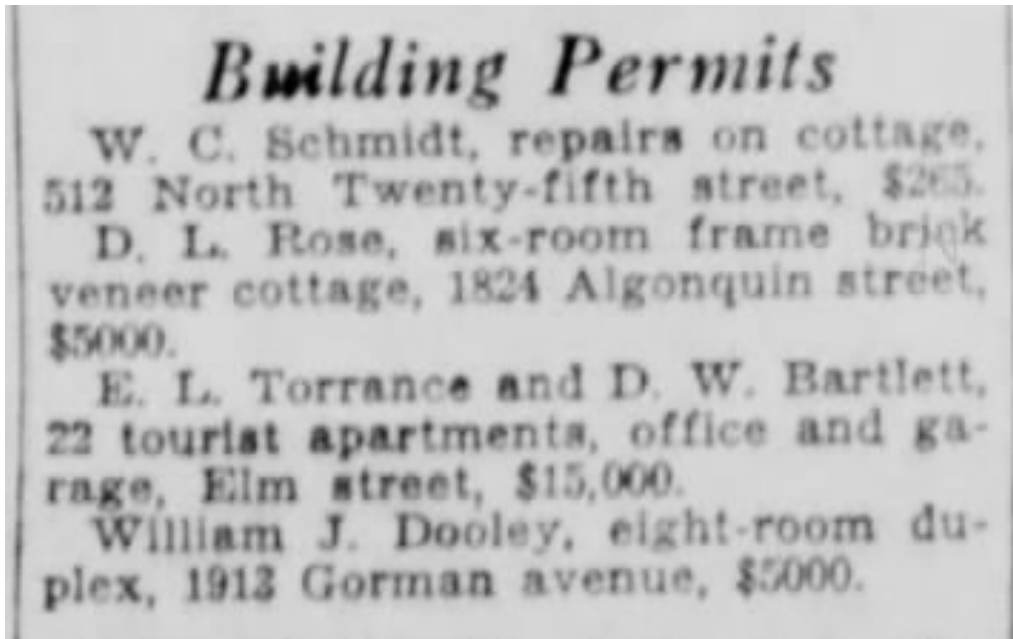


Figure 5.2. Building permit issued for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments in Waco. *Waco News-Tribune* in Waco, Texas, Wednesday, Feb. 20, 1929, p. 14.

The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments

Torrance and D.W. Bartlett held the open house for the original Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments on Sunday, May 12, 1929. In the newspapers the motel was touted as “Waco’s Finest Tourist Apartments” and boasted outside rooms, hot and cold water, private shower baths, gas stoves for cooking, and a Sealy on every bed.¹³⁶ At the open house were the American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps to help liven up the festivities. Torrance believed in the power of having a good open house, one that the community would remember and in turn suggest this particular establishment when others would ask where to stay. Since residents were not staying in motels in their hometown, this was a great way to let the community know exactly what the Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts had to offer.

¹³⁶ “Beautiful Alamo Plaza Holds Open House Today.” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 12 May. 1929.



Figure 5.3. Advertisement for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments in Waco. *Waco Tribune-Herald* in Waco, Texas, Thursday, April 11, 1929, p. 3.

The new structure was located in the 900 block of Elm Street and had a frontage that spanned over 350 feet. The structure had five wings connected by a front that that held true to its namesake and served as a replica “of the old fortress about which clusters such tragic memories of sacrifices for Texas independence.”¹³⁷ “Of course, we have slightly streamlined the original Alamo” Torrance stated.

¹³⁷ Ibid.



Illustration 5.2. The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Flickr, Don O'Brien.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/2716321527/in/album-72157605669174491/>.

The structure was built on a gradually sloping terrace and presented a palatial appearance from the street. The central section of the structure was two stories with a broad and beautifully arched driveway “beckoning a hospitable welcome to the wayfarer.”¹³⁸ The common and very practical U-shaped or horse-shoe shaped design for motels was not a good fit for the Alamo Plaza chain. In an article published in the *American Motel Magazine*, Torrance stated, “it looks like a dairy barn! It’s not an inviting motel!” The front room of the section was outfitted in the modern hotel office style and even included long distance telephone booths for patrons. There was a gravel court of about 30 feet wide between each of the five rows. The arrangement provided each of the 25 apartments with outside exposure on two sides and with enough distance

¹³⁸ Ibid.

between the rows to allow the “untrammelled circulation of a breeze.” The majority of the apartments contained two rooms. The front and rear apartments of the two outside wings contained apartments with three-rooms. Four-room apartments were located in the front of the two inside wings. At full capacity, the Tourist Apartments held 60 adults. The interior arrangement of the kitchenette, breakfast room, bedroom, and bathroom included high quality furnishings. The beds set on steel bedsprings and each bed contained a Sealy mattress. The floors were highly polished hardwood. The contractor for the project was W.N. McGrady, the brother-in-law of Mr. Torrance.¹³⁹

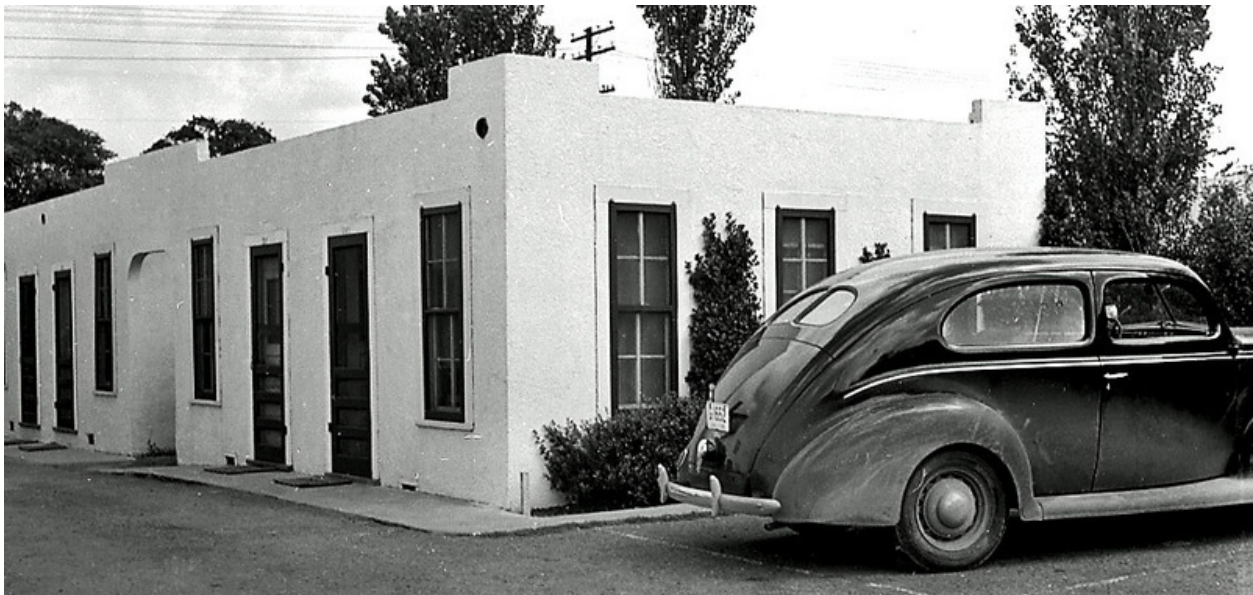


Illustration 5.3. Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments on June 5, 1939. Flickr, Don O’ Brien. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/2715774441/>

Torrance was able to reduce his cost tremendously just by hiring his brother-in-law as contractor, thus eliminating a large contract fee. McGrady hired local men to work on the site

¹³⁹ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

and only contracted out for electrical and plumbing. “To get us a contractor would cost us about 25-30% more money. First of all, he would sublet part of the job such as electrical and plumbing. Then he would figure in his overhead, and his profit and then some more to be safe and the costs would soar”, Torrance once stated during an interview.¹⁴⁰

McGrady used reinforced concrete for the structure. An apartment that adjoined the Office was set aside as a residence for the Manager.¹⁴¹ According to speculation, James Monroe Bush was thought to be the architect for the project. Bush also was responsible for Waco’s first apartment building, the Palm Court, in the 1900 block of Austin Avenue.¹⁴²

Second Location: Tyler, Texas

After the success of the first court, Torrance decided to bring his model to a new setting, Tyler, Texas, in 1931, approximately 110 miles east of Waco. At the time, Tyler was in the midst of an oil boom and there was a prime market for accommodations. Steady industries, such as fruit growing and cotton harvesting, with Tyler’s good railroad connections had previously been a major economic driver for the city. Just as cotton’s productivity declined, a succession of oil wells within a thirty-five-mile radius of Tyler had developed. The city rapidly turned into a boomtown. A vast network of roads within Smith County with Tyler at its core quickly developed to accommodate the new influx in population. A number of new types of people crowded into Tyler. The oilmen, gamblers, lawyers, and other followers all needed to be housed. Up to that point, Tyler had never needed to accommodate such a large population. Offices were constructed, work shanties popped up, and existing structures were hurriedly converted to better fit the needs of the populace. The city represented the oil-boom landscape seeming

¹⁴⁰ “A Veteran Motel Operator Speaks,” *American Motel Magazine*, November 1953, 34.

¹⁴¹ “Beautiful Alamo Plaza Holds Open House Today.” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 12 May. 1929.

¹⁴² *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 30 July. 2008.

impermanent, haphazard, and unkempt. The Blackstone Hotel, one of the nicest hotels and the largest hotel in Tyler built during the prosperity of the 1920s, had slumped by the Great Depression. The Blackstone hotel desk clerk had ordered lodgers to sleep in the lobby on cots or move elsewhere. Many people slept in their automobiles in Tyler during this time.¹⁴³

Lee Torrance opened his second Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments location on Erwin Street on July 5, 1931, located on the west side of town. By 1932, four other competitors were clustered in the same location and created the first motel strip in Tyler. Torrance had placed a full-page ad in the local Sunday paper that proclaimed the motel as dignified roadside lodging. Every “tourist apartment” included indoor plumbing, major-brand mattresses, and “hardwood” floors. Individual need determined the number of rooms in an apartment, anywhere from one room to four rooms were available.¹⁴⁴

The Tyler Alamo Plaza location, however, did not resemble the Waco location. Tyler and later Chattanooga, would be the only two motels in the chain that were not identical to the original model. Torrance wanted to create an oasis in the harsh industrial oil boom landscape. He designed this location with “snow white court apartments” that significantly contrasted against the harsh landscape. With such a distinction, Torrance bragged that these were “America’s Finest Tourist Apartments.” With two successful locations up and running, he announced his plans to extend the chain.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 92.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Third Location: Shreveport, Louisiana

The third location was not completed until August 1, 1935, located in Shreveport, Louisiana. The city had long been associated with East Texas, harking back to the days when the wagon road that extended west out of town was deemed the “Texas Trail.” “G.T.T.” (Gone to Texas), was a familiar phrase used by those traveling westward to seek better opportunities.

Shreveport claimed to be the “Heart of “Ark-La-Tex” just as Waco was considered “The Heart of Texas.” “Ark-La-Tex” is the surrounding 100-mile radius that included parts of Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana. Shreveport was first a river port and then became a successful rail center for a healthy and robust local economy with natural gas and oil adding to the already booming economy. As cotton production declined in Texas and oil production increased, wealthy East Texas oilmen began to invest in Louisiana, and more specifically Shreveport. In 1930, a big gas field opened in nearby Rodessa. Yet, the Barksdale Air Field, established in 1932, proved to be the biggest resource to the city. A sharp demand for temporary housing struck when the more than nine hundred laborers worked in shifts to construct the base.¹⁴⁶

Torrance put his third location at the west end of Shreveport where the Greenwood Road, the old trail west, and a major Gulf Route, the Mansfield Road, intersected. Both roads were some of the earliest paved that spread out from Shreveport. By this time, Torrance changed the name from Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments to Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts as “courts” was becoming a “hot word” in the industry. Torrance targeted businessmen who traveled with their wives and married couples who were in need of temporary housing before purchasing a house in Shreveport.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Unlike many motels of the times that boasted no tipping policies, many of the Alamo Plaza workers relied on tips as the largest portion of their income. Just as he had done in the previous locations, Torrance took out advertisements in local newspapers that invited the community to the grand opening celebration and smaller ads that highlighted the various local contractors who created high-quality work in such a short amount of time.

Torrance was right again with his financial instincts. Shreveport had no run during the Great Depression on its bank accounts and the Barksdale Air Force Base continued to boost the local economy prior to World War II at the end of the 1930s. Torrance had chosen his nephew, W.G. McGrady, to manage the new location and keep a close eye on its operation. W.G. McGrady would later train another branch founder at this location.¹⁴⁷

Torrance had profited greatly at his shrewd business decisions with the three sites he selected. He had far surpassed any competitor, most of which were small, often rude, courts that mushroomed along highways but also hotels located in the heart of the downtown core.¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

The Alamo chain was begun with an idea of providing quality accommodations and continued to use the same formula in later locations. The Alamo façade that had proved successful in both the Waco and Shreveport location, the grand opening day celebration with full-page ads in the local paper, the high standards of cleanliness for the guests, comfortable beds for every guest marked these resting places as the best available in their class. Torrance expected all of the staff to provide the best customer service possible and go above and beyond to satisfy each guest. With this model set in place, it is no wonder that the Alamo Plaza chain

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

proved to be so successful when other courts were continually struggling. Torrance had enough experience as a salesman to know to keep overhead low but sell a quality product. He was steadfast in his approach to cut costs when possible but not to compromise the experience for the guests. As the first motel chain in America, the Alamo Plaza Courts set an incredible standard that few motels were able to live up to.

CHAPTER SIX

ORIGINS OF THE ALAMO PLAZA

Introduction

This chapter describes the factors that led to the branding of the Alamo Plaza chain in both appearance and identity. In the early twentieth century businesses that catered to travelers, such as gas stations, motels, and restaurants, were in heavy competition to lure in travelers. Many would decide on external appearance and word of mouth. Three or four motor courts located along the same strip competed for the same customers and thus had to compete to gain their attention. The Alamo Plaza was not unique in its attempt to lure in travelers by selling both a fantasy and an image. As was common, this chain created an identity that would create a recognizable brand to consumers, create loyal customers who would continue to stay at other Alamo Plazas, and instill a feeling of both pride and possibility.

The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments at Their Start

The Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments were not the first auto court complex in their location. The Grande Courts across the street were constructed the previous year. Even though the Alamo Plaza was thought to have copied the earlier court, Torrance had other intentions with his choice of façade for the structure. For one thing, the name Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments carries several connotations. The first is an homage to the Alamo a few hours south of the first site. Torrance was a proud Texan who wanted to incorporate a symbol of strength and honor in Texas history as a way to attract customers to his location.

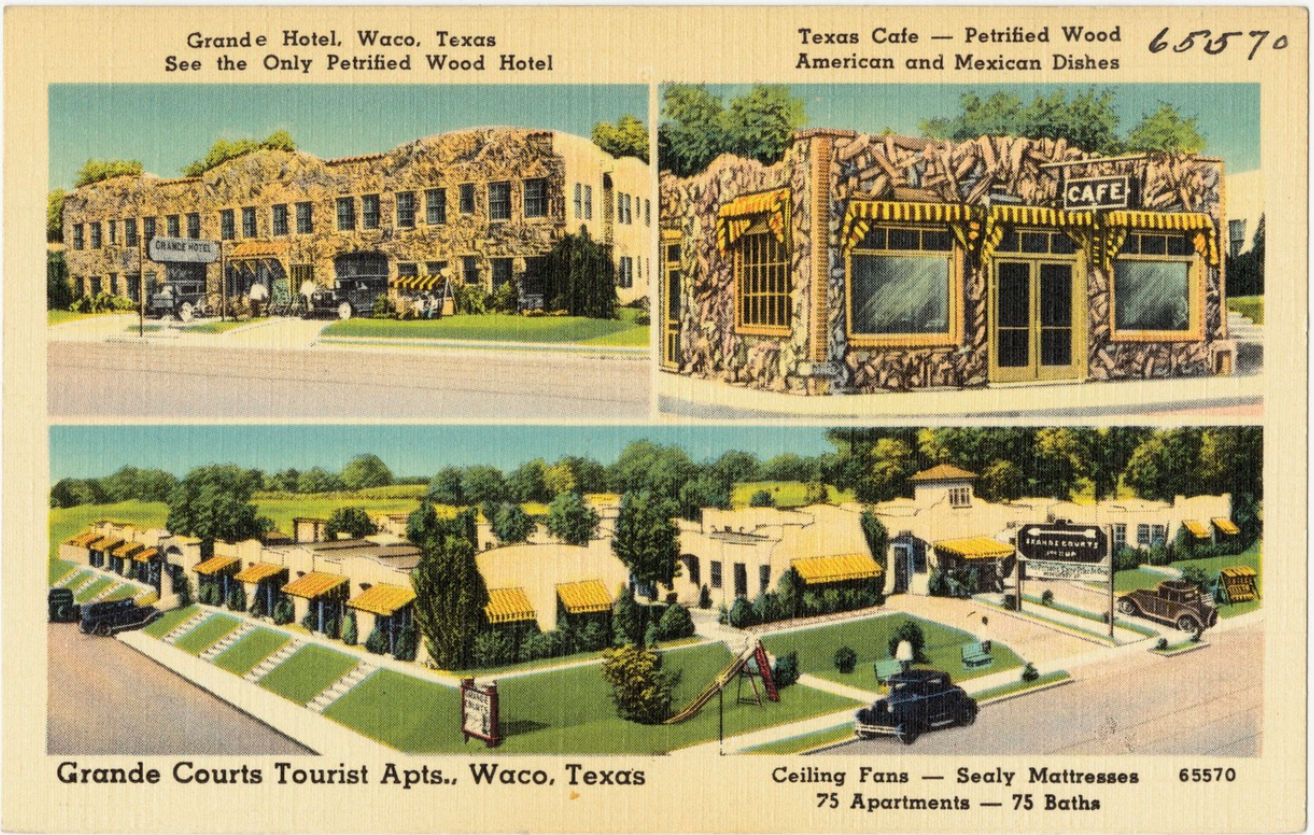


Illustration 6.1. The Grande Courts Tourist Apartments. The Tichnor Brothers Collection, Boston Public Library.



Illustration 6.2. The Grande Courts on Elm Avenue. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

The use of the mission-style façade was tied to a growing Spanish Revival trend in American architecture. This style was used not only in places where Spanish missions had been established a century earlier--such as Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas, but also in

the Northeast. The Mission Revival was phase one of the Spanish Colonial Revival era. The structures did not represent early Spanish ecclesiastical architecture, but rather resembled Spanish domestic buildings made out of adobe. Architects who built in the Mission Revival style used suggestive details to conjure up the vision of a Mission with parapet, scalloped gable ends, simple arcades, bell towers, tile roofs, and broad, unbroken exterior rough cement stucco surfaces.¹⁴⁹

The Pueblo or Santa Fe Revival would also be included in this phase just as Santa Fe was undergoing a rapid change in their conversion to “Santa Fe style” buildings. These structures were inspired by the provincial Spanish Colonial buildings found near the Rio Grande River Valley in New Mexico. The next phase would be the Mediterranean Revival, which imported not only Spanish and Mexican elements, but also those from Italy and Islamic North Africa. This style spawned another, the Monterey style, also included in the second phase.¹⁵⁰

Even though California had long been a haven for a variety of groups with different housing styles, the Spanish Colonial style—which encompassed the Mission-style, the Pueblo/Santa Fe Revival style, and the Churrigueresque—was one of the most popular modes. In California, as writers such as Charles Lummis and Helen Hunt Jackson arrived in the West in the 1880s, they created a romantic vision of Mission-era California that portrayed characters such as dignified Native Americans living amongst Spanish priests and dons. Several early structures in this style include A. Page Brown’s California Building at the World Columbian Exposition of

¹⁴⁹ Crawford, Margaret. “Bertram Goodhue, Walter Douglas and Tyrone, New Mexico.” *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984), vol. 42, no. 4, 1989, pp. 25–33. *JSTOR*, [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1425018), www.jstor.org/stable/1425018.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

1893 and the Mission Inn in Riverside, the first part of which was designed between 1890 and 1901.



Illustration 6.3. The Garden of the Bells at the Mission Inn. *Baja California and the West*. Postcard Collection, Special Collections, UC San Diego Library.

Those with ties to the West were eager to capitalize on this version of Paradise. Both the railroad companies and real estate speculators used this image of California to sell their services and products through newspapers and magazines. This interest was further amplified with numerous articles and illustrations detailing the Mission style in California first in regional publications like *Outwest* and *Western Architect*, and later in national publications such as *the Craftsman*, *Sunset*, and *The Architect and Engineer*. Resort hotels built in this style began to spring up in California by the first decade of the twentieth century. These included the Raymond Hotel and the Hotel Maryland, which began to represent California to Easterners as a place of

leisure and rest. Easterners began to flock to these resorts to avoid the harsh winters and city life, staying for months at a time. Shortly after, Midwesterners and Southerners arrived in the Golden State ready to take advantage of the job opportunities and live the California lifestyle.¹⁵¹

This “booster era” spanned from approximately 1885 to 1925. During this time artists, real estate tycoons, and creative writers teamed up with civic leaders, all with a vested interest in the development of Southern California to attract new settlers. The image they portrayed was one of perfect weather, affordable land, and an abundance of jobs. In fact, from February 1898 to February 1899, more than 127,000 pieces of literature that touted the benefits of Southern California living was distributed in Omaha, Nebraska, alone.¹⁵²



Illustration 6.4. Southern Pacific Advertisement. Internet, <https://www.magazine-advertisements.com/uploads/2/1/8/4/21844100/southern-pacific-sunset-route-1.jpg>

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Meares, Hadley, “Sunkist Skies of Glory,” *Los Angeles Curbed*, May 24, 2018, <https://la.curbed.com/2018/5/24/17350622/los-angeles-history-promoted-boosters-ads>.

Railroads were now able to span the entire country, and encouraged sales in East Coast cities. The Southern Pacific and the Santa Fe competed to draw in as many tourists and settlers as possible. Oranges shipped from California were packaged in crates that shared the same iconic image of California as paradise. Other crate labels focused on the *Ramona* era.



Illustration 6.5. Crate Label for the Orange Fruit Company, Orange, CA, 1945. Orange Public Library and History Center.

The citrus industry also began to sell the California Dream. One key role that the Southern Pacific Railroad Company played were the numerous brochures and periodicals, including *Sunset Magazine*. *Sunset* contained numerous articles that encouraged perspective immigrants to Southern California to grow their own Garden of Eden with the addition of a citrus orchard. Citrus cities like Anaheim, Riverside, Santa Barbara developed where orange groves

were plentiful.¹⁵³ Riverside was even deemed by *Sunset Magazine* to be the “greatest orange growing district in the world”.¹⁵⁴

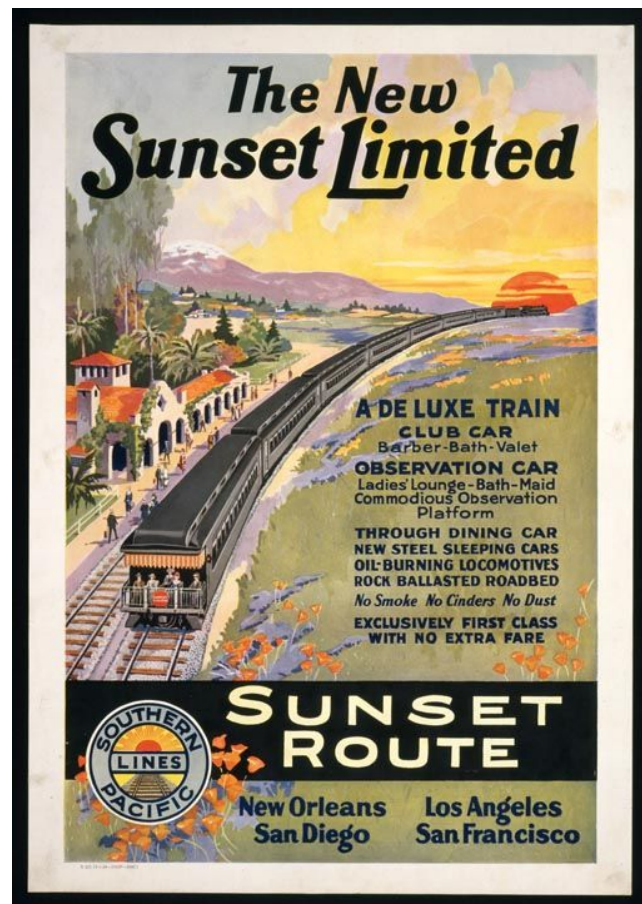
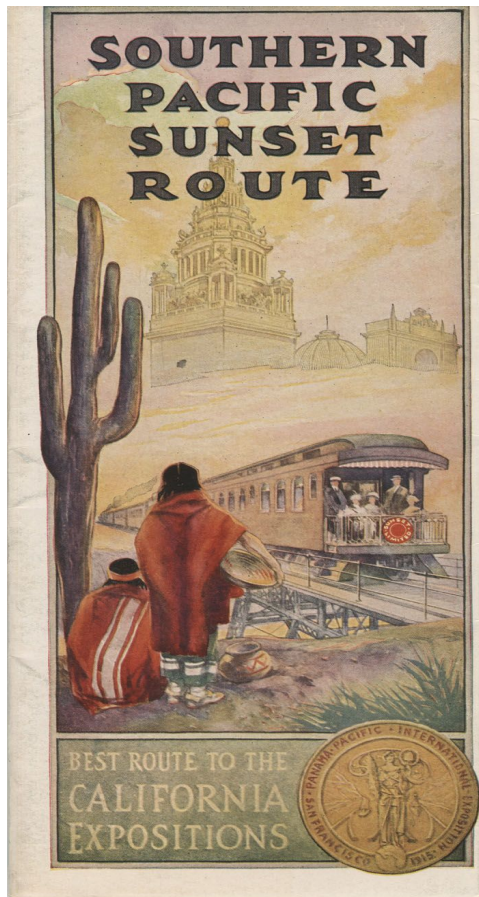


Illustration 6.6. Southern Pacific Sunset Route: Best Route to the California Exposition. Collections, Programs, and Events. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego Library.

Illustration 6.7. The New Sunset Limited: Sunset Route. California State Library.

This widely idealized and widely published vision of California spread throughout the country over the ensuing decades. Architects like Bertram Goodhue, Arthur Henrik Stibolt,

¹⁵³ Jenkins, Benjamin, “The Octopus’s Garden: Railroads, Citrus Agriculture, and the Emergence of Southern California”, (Master’s Thesis, UC Riverside, 2016), 276.

¹⁵⁴ “The Greatest Orange Growing District on Earth: Riverside, California” advertisement, *Sunset* 5, no. 2 (June 1900).

Frank Mead, Richard Requa, Carleton Winslow, and Lilian Rice all created masterful works of art in the newly popular style. An important event that further boosted the expanse of the style was San Diego's Panama-California Exposition of 1915, which served as a catalyst to spread the style throughout the nation. The romantic influence from Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* was ever-present at the fair as the buildings were a majestic sight for their hordes of tourists. On the ornate tower at the California Quadrangle, Spanish Kings, Friars, and Explorers were prominently displayed. Just past the Tower was the Plaza de Panama. All of the buildings displayed the grandiosity and majesties of the style.



Illustration 6.8. The California Building and Tower. A.D. White Architectural Photographs, Cornell University.

Junior architect Clarence Stein, while working in the office of the Exposition architect Bertram Goodhue, contributed to the Spanish style of the buildings and grounds. Stein relied heavily on his earlier travels, particularly to Spain and Italy as inspiration. One identifiable piece of evidence is the Cabrillo Bridge at the entrance of the exhibit, which is similar to Stein's sketches made during a trip to Toledo, Spain. Stein had hoped to create a sweeping and majestic entrance for the Exposition to welcome visitors and portray the exhibition's grandiosity just as he had seen in Toledo.



Illustration 6.9. Toledo, Spain. Adem Aykanat. Online Photo. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/114054954@N05/>.

Illustration 6.10. Watercolor of Toledo, 1910. Clarence Stein. Clarence Stein Papers, #3600. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Illustration 6.11. Watercolor of Balboa Park, 1915. Clarence Stein. Clarence Stein papers, #3600. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Stein began to look past the Beaux Arts arrangement of the site and incorporated some elements of Latin American cities to break up the strict monotony and introduce smaller attractions like out of the way shops and buildings. His approach to the site was to create a more intimate, livable space that can really connect with visitors to the site which carried over in designs for planned communities laid out in this style such as Planada, California.

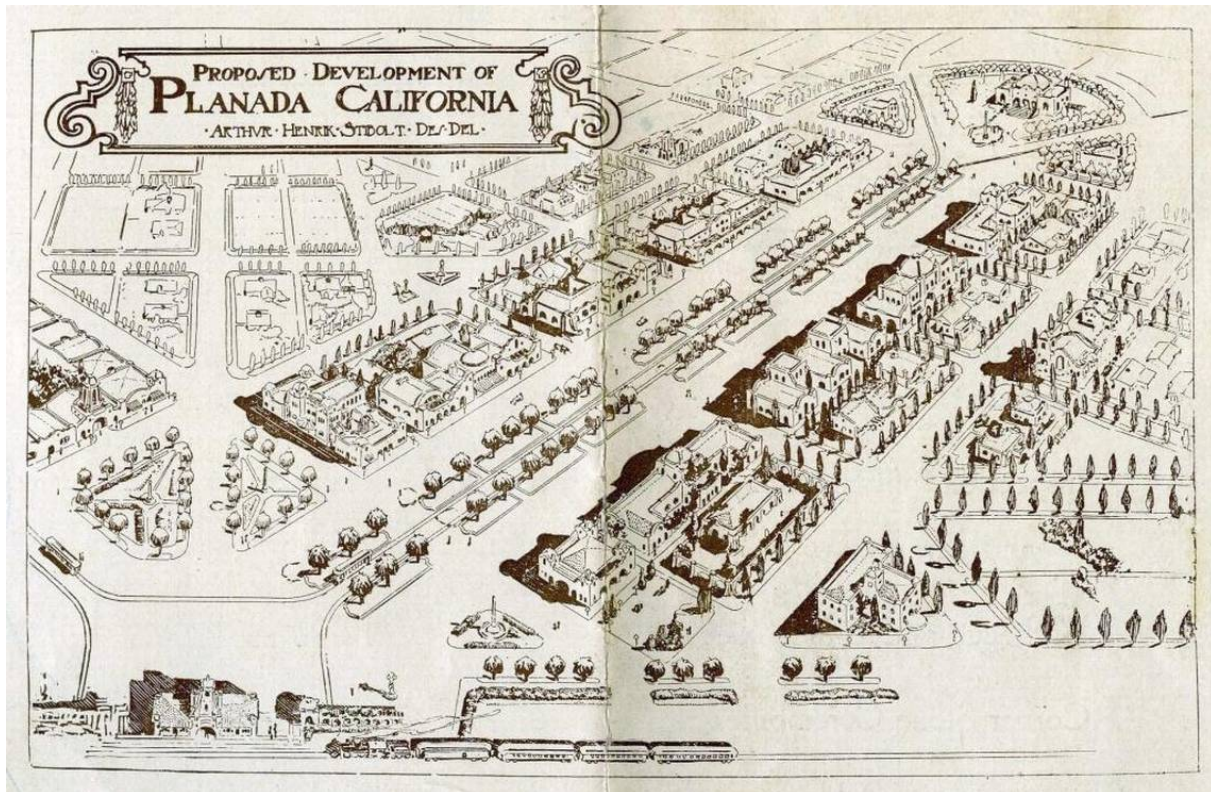


Figure 6.1. Proposed Development of Planada, California. Merced County Courthouse Museum.

Another important feature of the Exposition was the layout of the community, as it nominally followed the guidelines provided by the Law of the Indies. As the West began to urbanize, planned communities were a way of providing food, services and housing in order to increase the population. In these cases the plan and the architectural style were often unified.

While the Spanish Colonial Revival style had been found throughout the state since before the romantic era, it reached an apex with its re-introduction through the Panama-California Exposition of 1915. Many architects employed this fashion, and created their own versions of little missions and haciendas. The style was used indiscriminately on every type of building from a house, to a church, school, grocery store, and even a gas station. Places like the Alamo Plaza fit within the Mission Revival style, as the Alamo was originally the Mission San Antonio de Valero.

The History of the Alamo and Its Inspiration Value

Native Americans were the first inhabitants of the area where the Alamo would later be constructed. Small bands of hunting and gathering peoples moved throughout South Texas. A settlement of Coahuiltecan was said to be within present San Antonio city limits around 1691. The group was also known as the Payayas and had a range that extended 50 miles south of the San Antonio River. The Payaya was one of the first tribes to enter Mission San Antonio de Valero when it was established in 1718; other groups in subsequent years. By the 17th century, all of the bands of hunting and gathering had either been reduced or assimilated into Spanish society.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, Edgar D, et al, "HemisFair Park, San Antonio, Texas: An Archival Study for the Convention Center Expansion." *Archaeological Survey Report*, no. 249, (Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio.), 1997.

After a group of French settlers landed on Matagorda Bay, Spain was spurred into action. Missions were established in east Texas to further strengthen the Spanish claim in the area. Father Antonio de San Buenaventura y Olivares had a clear vision to establish a mission in a rich valley he saw in 1709. In 1713, he petitioned the new viceroy, the Maqués de Valero, Don Baltazar de Zuniga, to support his dream of establishing a mission in the San Antonio River valley. The viceroy gave his approval and charged Don Martín de Alarcón, newly appointed governor Texas, to assist Olivares with the establishment of his mission, and creating a presidio and villa to support it. One of the first protocol measures was to create the acequia system. Olivares had specifically chosen the site, where “the water rises to the top of the ground, and the entire work is matter of using a plow.” The original site was on present-day Breckenridge Park. In 1724, a hurricane destroyed the mission, and a new site was chosen.¹⁵⁶

By 1790, Mission San Antonio de Valero had steadily declined. The population had dropped enough that there were hardly any Indians left to tend the fields, so that they were divided into plots and given to 14 family heads and unmarried adults that resided in the mission. This area was known as the labor de abajo, the lower farm. The upper farm was given to 45 “converted heads of families” from the Adaesanos group. The remaining lands were given to nine other Spaniards and two townsmen.¹⁵⁷

The abandoned mission was then used as living quarters by the Light Calvary Company from the town of Alamo de Parras, Coahuila. This occupation is how the mission became known as the Alamo. The first hospital was established in 1805 and cared mostly for the troops and

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

their families. These built homes on the high bluff that overlooked the San Antonio River south of the old church. This settlement became known as La Villita, or “little village.”¹⁵⁸

Political unrest in Mexico soon spread to the area. In a remote mining district in Mexico, a group of Indians, mestizos, and a few creoles declared their independence from Spain in 1810 which sparked revolution throughout all of the North American Spanish colonies. The following January a retired colonel, Juan Bautista Casas, declared independence from Spain and appointed himself as head of the government. His administration was overthrown on March 2. He was sent to Mexico to be tried and his head was shipped back to San Antonio, packed in ice, to be displayed in the plaza to warn other rebels of the cost of revolting. The fighting continued with severe results. In 1814, General Joaquín de Arredondo invaded with 4,000 troops, killing 600 men in the field and imprisoning most of the city’s population. The city declined as private property was confiscated and residents either fled or died.¹⁵⁹

The economy and workforce of the city floundered for decades. As agriculture was the main industry for San Antonio, without the men, there was no one to harvest and tend to the fields or maintain the acequia system. Attacks from Indian tribes also became more aggressive and frequent. In response to outcry from the citizens, the governor temporarily sent troops to aid farmers with planting and harvesting. At the height of planting season, however, the troops were recalled.¹⁶⁰

One lead miner from Missouri, Moses Austin, presented a solution. He would begin a colony of Anglo settlers to help repopulate the city. He was given permission to settle 300 families on 200,000 acres throughout the lower Brazos valley. Unfortunately, he died but his

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

son, Stephen F. Austin, began to implement his plan. Unfortunately, after Mexico won its independence from Spain the new government did not recognize Stephen Austin's grant from the old regime. He then rushed to Mexico City and persuaded the legislature to reestablish the law that had allowed the empresario program. The new government agreed and Stephen Austin brought another 300 families to the region. By that time, the population had risen to 1,625 residents. Although Texas and Coahuila were originally lumped into one state with Saltillo as the capital, by the following year, Texas had become a separate department and San Antonio de Bexar was established as its new capital.¹⁶¹

Mexico was still in a rocky transition of changing governments and leaders. Manuel Mier y Terán, an avid critic of the colonization of North America, was placed in charge of Texas. He garrisoned troops in Texas, which was seen as a hostile act by colonists. In June of 1834, the president of Mexico was ousted and Santa Anna seized the government. During this time Stephen Austin had been put in prison in Mexico while Santa Anna reinforced the troops in Texas. Having been imprisoned, Austin realized that because the new Mexican government and the Texas colony were irreconcilable, it was time for a revolution.¹⁶²

Troops began to march to San Antonio under Austin's command on October 1, 1835 to capture General Cós, who prepared his troops for battle. Cannons were positioned around the plaza and Mission Valero was fortified. The siege held off and then stagnated. It had almost ended until December 4th when under Colonel Ben Milam, a group of volunteers planned their attack on the city. General Cós was defeated as the troops attacked in house-to-house combat. After a humiliating defeat, Santa Anna swiftly sent troops to Texas to catch his enemy by

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

surprise. Upon arrival, the Texans were forced to hide behind the makeshift walls of the Alamo. The battle had lasted for thirteen days when on the morning of March 6, 1836, Santa Anna had won. He drove Houston's army to the edge of the territory when he was caught by surprise by Texans at San Jacinto. He was then defeated and captured in a short battle.¹⁶³ After Santa Anna's defeat at the battle of the Alamo and the emergence of Texas as a Republic, San Antonio began to experience a three-decade period of tremendous growth with over 136% increase in population. The place of the Alamo was fixed in the history of Texas and the narrative of the battle became legendary.

Conclusion

The story of the Alamo provided an instantly recognizable link for visitors to Texas, a history that Torrance would use to draw in his customers. Americans needed to be reminded of their strength as a nation and ability to overcome, just as they had done at the Alamo less than a century before. The Alamo became a symbol for endurance and longevity for Americans, especially Texans. While many other businesses floundered throughout the Great Depression, auto courts and other businesses that catered to the tourist were on the rise. Many Americans wanted an affordable way to escape. The Alamo Plaza Courts provided this kind of experience to their guests, in a familiar Spanish mission context. Lee Torrance's business proved to be especially lucrative due to the way it was adventurous yet hospitable, engaging yet comfortable. The brand was both exciting and familiar to its customer base and more branches were strategically opened over the next few decades.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CURRENT STATE OF THE SITES

Introduction

This chapter explores several former Alamo Plaza Court sites visited in the Spring of 2018. The sites selected include the original location in Waco, the former site in Houston, and two previous locations in Shreveport. The sites are a mix of completely demolished sites, completely intact sites, and sites which have been reinterpreted in a modern context. Although the Waco location was the most important location because it set the tone for future growth, little remains of the original property. The site in Houston, however, still has its structure intact and is operating as SRO housing. While the Waco site was demolished in the 1970s, the Houston Alamo Plaza was still in operation until 2006 and has only had one owner since its operation as a motel. Shreveport had three Alamo Plaza locations as the traveler's market had fully embraced the chain. In early 2018, the last structure completed was still in operation as a motel. Acquired by Travelodge, patrons can still be seen unloading luggage and swimming in the original pool. The first Shreveport location has been demolished. The second location faced a similar fate, however, one of the former structures is extant today.

Alamo Plaza Courts, Waco

On the former site of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts is the Napier Criminal Justice Center built in 1996. One wall remainx on the site located at the north end of the lot near the East Waco Library. The Kelly Napier Justice Center sits almost exactly on the same spot of the

former tourist apartment site. The Justice Center also utilized the slope that elevated the Alamo Plaza above competition.



Illustration 7.1. 929 Elm Street, East Waco. Site of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.2. 929 Elm Street, East Waco. Wall from the Alamo Plaza Court. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.3. Photo of the former site of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments. Photo by Author.

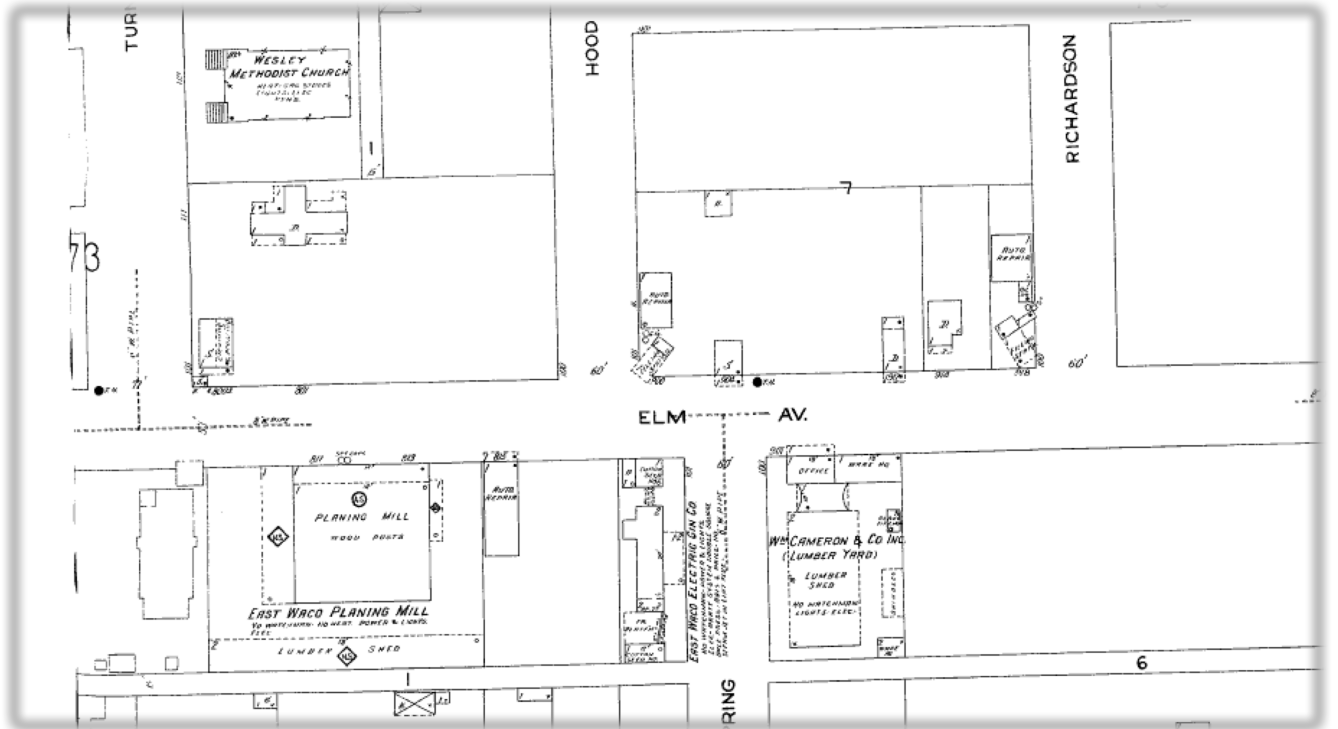


Figure 7.1. 1926 Waco Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 74. This map shows the site for both the Grande Courts and Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments several years prior to construction.

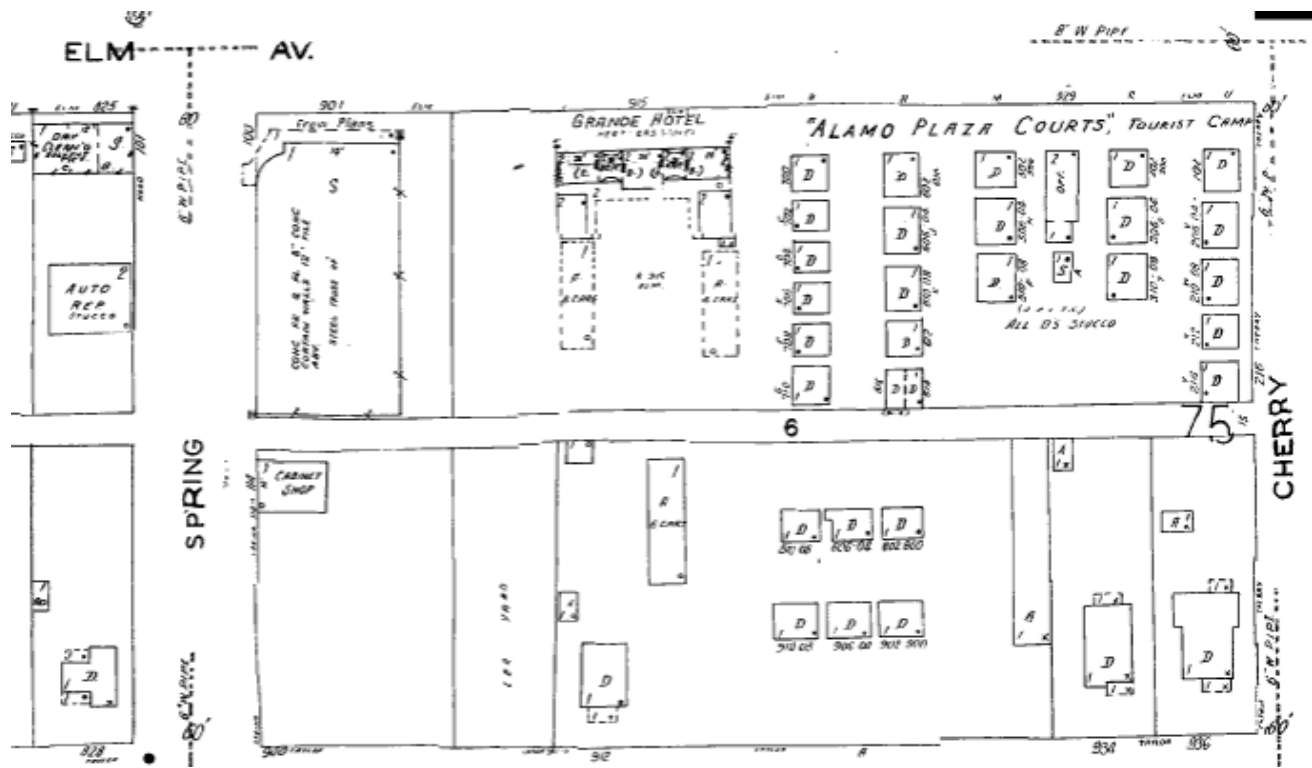


Figure 7.2. 1926-1950 Waco Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 74. This map shows the site for the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments.

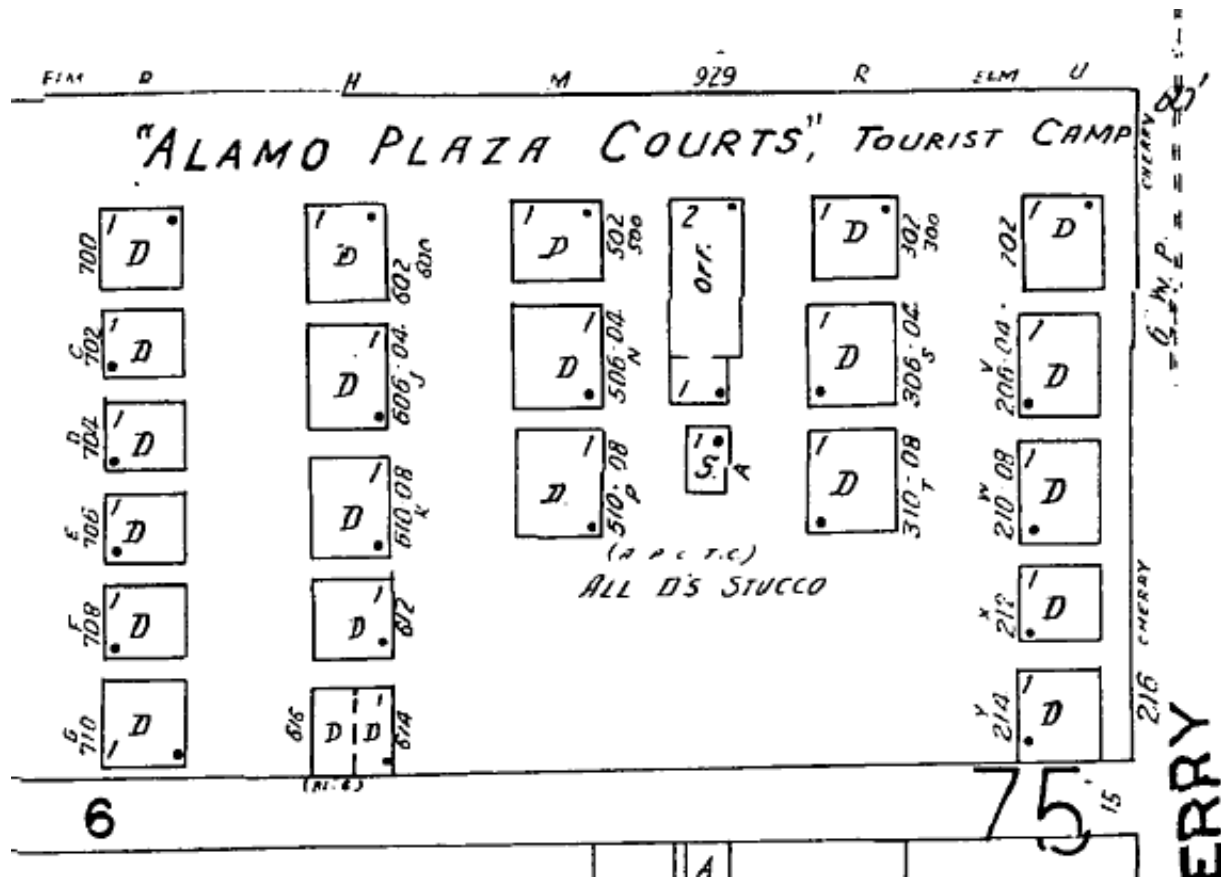


Figure 7.3. 1926-1950 Waco Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Sheet 74. Close up of the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments.

General Layout

The layout for the Alamo Plaza Courts was fairly standard until the mid-1960s, when a modern plan was adopted. The Memphis Alamo Plaza Courts shown below provide a typical example. All of the traditional courts initially had six or seven rows of units. The complexes would expand when more capital became available. The additions were seen in various arrangements behind the original cluster. Units were even added on adjacent parcels as displayed in the Waco and Memphis locations. The added rows were usually in straight lines perpendicular to the original rows.

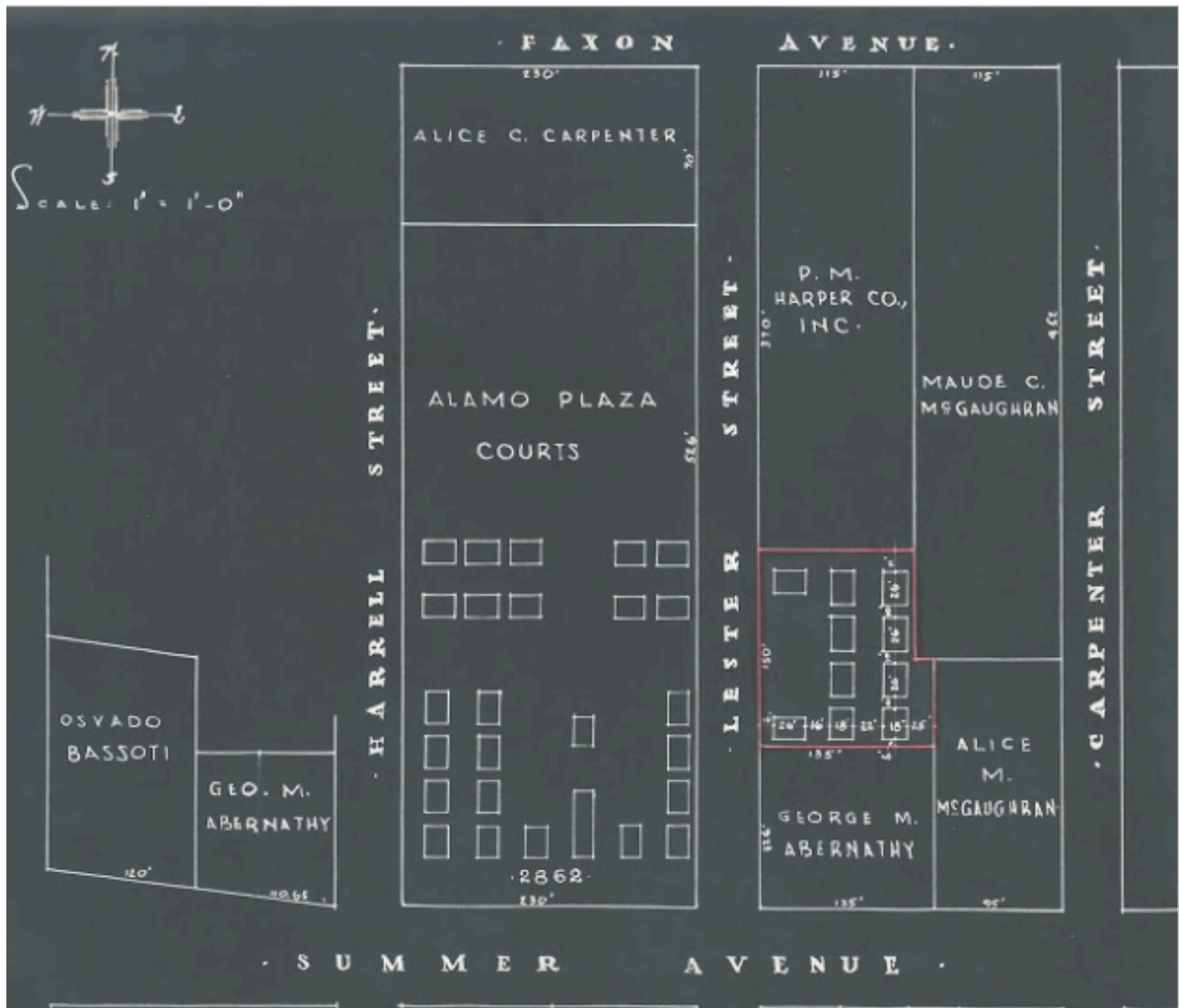


Figure 7.4. Site Plan for the Alamo Plaza Courts in Memphis. Memphis Board of Adjustment, Josh Whitehead. Notice the layout is nearly identical to the Waco location.

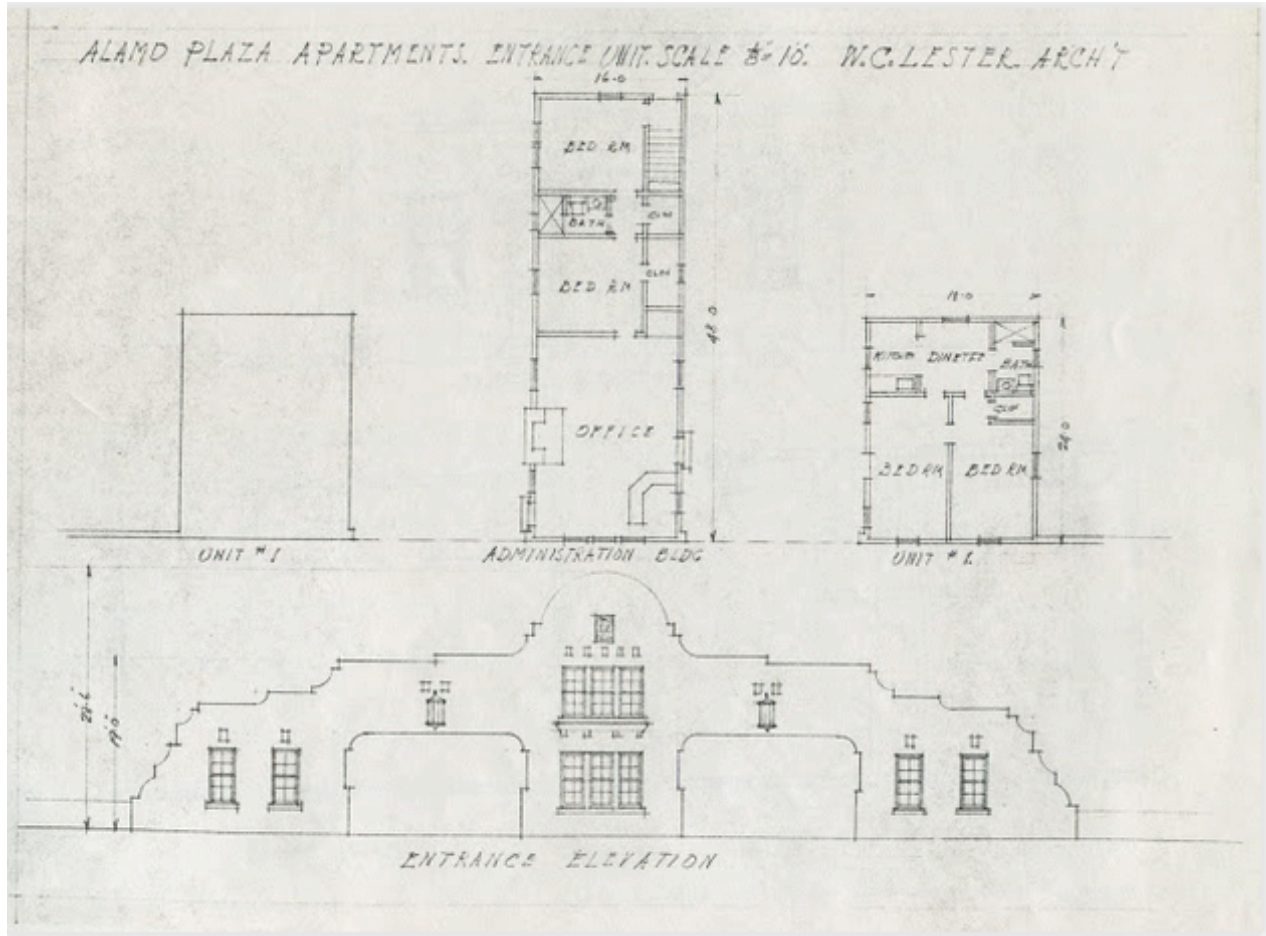


Figure 7.5. Entrance Elevation for the Alamo Plaza Courts in Memphis. Memphis Board of Adjustment, Josh Whitehead.

The office was either in the third or fourth row. The office was the only building on the lot that was two-stories tall because it also housed the living quarters for the manager, as indicated in Figure 7.5. The Charleston location living quarters still houses the manager's family although some alterations have been made. Directly behind the office is the kitchen followed by the living room along with a master bedroom. The upstairs contained two more bedrooms. The Atlanta location used its manager's quarters exclusively for offices for the Santa Fe Villas.

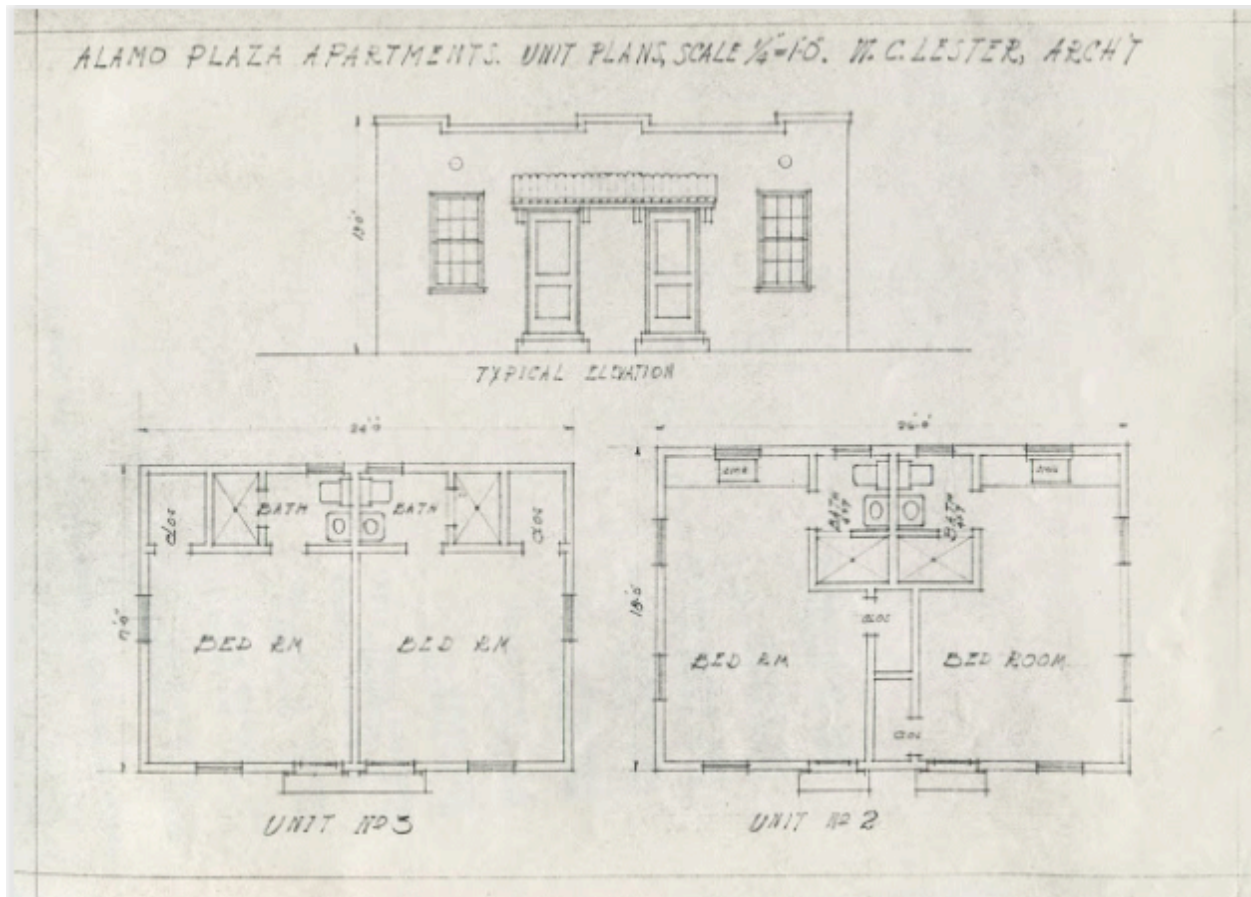


Figure 7.6. Alamo Plaza Apartments Unit Plans in Memphis. Memphis Board of Adjustment, Josh Whitehead.

Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts, Houston



Illustration 7.4. Photo of the Alamo Plaza Efficiency Apartments in Houston. Photo by Author.

In 2018, the Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts in Houston, Texas was in fair shape. No major demolition had occurred at the site. Although the structure exhibited wear due to its age and use, overall the property is intact and could be restored should one want to give the Courts a second chance. The Alamo Plaza Motor Hotel opened in Houston in 1948 by Bill Farner and Charles Mooney.¹⁶⁴ The Motor Hotel closed its doors in 2006 when it was purchased to convert into low-income housing, which it continues to serve in 2018. In May 1986, the *Houston Chronicle* described the Alamo Plaza chain with an emphasis on this Houston location. At that point, many of the key early practices were still followed. The owner, Eugene Taylor, was still very proud of his establishment. The Alamo Plaza filled a void that competitors with more trendy

¹⁶⁴ John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 111.

establishments often lacked, such as metal lawn chairs under oak trees.¹⁶⁵ The structure provided a touch of nostalgia for those tired of chain motels and hotels. The kitsch structure still had western décor, circa 1940, and was an affordable option at only \$18 a night.¹⁶⁶ The lifespan of the Alamo Plaza Motor Hotel in Houston should speak to its potential for reuse. Nearly forty years later customers were still drawn to this slice of nostalgia.



Illustration 7.5. 1986 Alamo Plaza Motel office with owner, Eugene Taylor. Carlos Anthony Rios, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.

¹⁶⁵ Turner, Allan. “Beyond Its Time: Alamo Plaza Survives Tourist Court Days.” *Houston Chronicle*, 17 June 1986.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*



Illustration 7.6. Eugene Taylor, 1986. Carlos Antonio Rios, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.



Illustration 7.7. Houston entrance, 1986. Carlos Antonio Rios, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.



Illustration 7.8. Outside the Alamo Plaza Motel. Carlos Antonio Rios, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.



Illustration 7.9. Alamo Plaza Motel. Steve Ueckert, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.



Illustration 7.10. Alamo Plaza Motel. Steve Ueckert, *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986.



Illustration 7.11. Alamo Plaza entrance, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.12. Alamo Plaza Efficiency Apartments units, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.13. Row two at the Alamo Plaza Efficiency Apartments, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.14. Alamo Plaza apartment with garage, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.15. Alamo Plaza entrance, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.16. Alamo Plaza right wings with filled in pool, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.17. Alamo Plaza with sign, Houston. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.18. Alamo Plaza Motor Hotel sign, Houston. Photo by Author.

Alamo Plaza Tourist Courts, Shreveport



Illustration 7.19. Former structure of the second Alamo Plaza in Shreveport. Photo by Author.

Shreveport proved to be an especially hospitable market for the chain, with three locations within the city limits. The first location, at 2134 Greenwood Road, was built in August of 1935 and was the third location for the chain.¹⁶⁷ The site was demolished in 1986 to accommodate a new distribution center for Federal Express. The second Shreveport location was built at 1280 North Market Street in 1947. Both Alamo Plazas have been demolished except for one of the buildings at the second location which is currently occupied by a Pawn shop. The third location at 2136 Greenwood Road is still standing. It is rather interesting that the third location was built next to the original location that was eventually demolished for the distribution

¹⁶⁷ “38 Furnished Apartments in the Alamo Plaza.” *Shreveport Times*, 4 August 1935.

center. As of 2018, the structure is a Travelodge. While the motel has undergone extensive renovation, the original design for the structure is still visible. One unique characteristic of the structure is that the pool is still intact and operational. Guests visiting the site can use the same pool that was built for the chain in the 1960s.

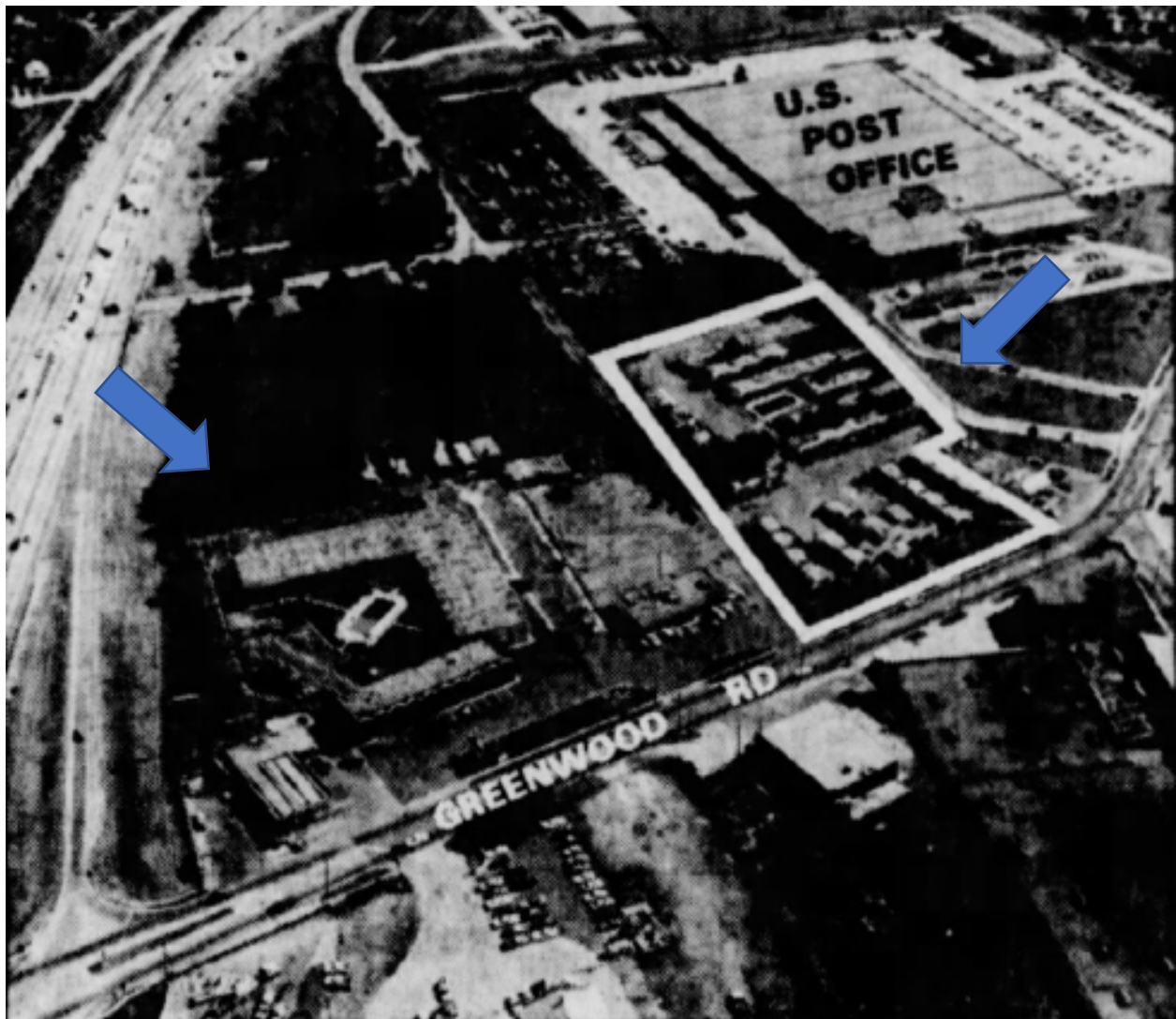


Illustration 7.20. The third Alamo Plaza in Shreveport and the first Alamo Plaza. Photo by *Shreveport Times*, Dec. 19, 1986.

Air raid



Times photo/BILLY UPSHAW

Nothing but rubble is left after the demolition of the old Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts on Greenwood Road. The demolition makes way for a distribution center

for Federal Express. The U.L. Coleman Co., Ltd. and the Kinsey Interests are developing the \$1.5 million center.

Illustration 7.21. Demolition of the first Alamo Plaza in Shreveport. Photo by *Shreveport Times*, Jan. 31, 1987.



Illustration 7.22. Postcard of the third Alamo Plaza in Shreveport. The Lee Torrance Files donated by Keith Sculle, The Waco Library.



Illustration 7.23. Front entrance of the third Alamo Plaza, Shreveport, now a Travelodge. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.24. Close up of pool left from the Alamo Plaza, Shreveport, now a Travelodge. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.25. The eastern building of the Travelodge, Shreveport. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.26. The northern building of the Travelodge, Shreveport. Photo by Author.



Illustration 7.27. The southern building of the Travelodge, Shreveport. Photo by Author.

Conclusion

All of the former Alamo Plaza sites have made an impact on their community in a number of ways. The three case studies from this chapter explored different variations of status for the site; demolished, extant, and altered. Some properties continue to serve in the hospitality industry, but others have been transformed into housing. In the coming chapters, other sites are explored and interpreted. Chapter Eight explores the sites from an archaeological perspective with remains from former sites serving as a form of preservation of its history. Chapters Nine and Ten explore community attachments to site and emphasize the ways the sites are being interpreted today. The final chapter, Chapter Eleven, explores a new alternative for an extant site that could be used as a blueprint for future success.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PALIMPSEST AND RUINS ON THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Introduction

One form of ruin in the American landscape is the decaying vernacular roadside structures that harken back to the era when the automobile was king and the cross-country road trip was America's favorite pastime. Motor courts, gas stations, restaurants and other commercial roadside structures were forced to adapt when their original purpose was changed. Many Alamo Plazas have been demolished over the years such as locations in Gulfport, Nashville, Charlotte, Knoxville, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans. Many sites where Alamo Plazas once stood have few traces of these once massive complexes. One Alamo Plaza in Shreveport was replaced by a Federal Express distribution center; the Alamo Plaza site in Columbus, Georgia is now a Piggly Wiggly; and the site for the former Alamo Plaza in Gulfport is a complex for high-rise condos. Most motorists who pass by each former location of the chain have few visual cues about what occupied the space. Even more peculiar are cases like the Alamo Plaza in Tyler and Beaumont, Texas, where the ruins of former buildings lay mere feet away from the units occupied by travelers. These forgotten remnants are invisible to nearly everyone that steps foot on the property. This chapter explores what remains of the original structures at Alamo Plaza sites.

Palimpsest

A palimpsest is “something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form.”¹⁶⁸ In the motel’s earliest form, Alamo Plaza hotels catered a middle-class clientele: tourists, families, and businessmen. At the time, the motel was clean, comfortable, and affordable. Formerly one of the first major motel chains, the Alamo Plaza was on the cutting edge of what was happening in the hospitality industry. It was one of the first sets of motels that provided a comfortable uniformity. Tourists knew what to expect every time they stayed in an Alamo Plaza, regardless of its location. Today, the courts no longer cater to the middle-class but rather serve a lower class clientele, as do many motels.

The former Alamo Plaza in Beaumont is now the Deluxe Inn and Suites. Although the owner was not there during a visit in April of 2018, the manager filling in, Max Lopez Jr, was able to provide some background on the hotel including the alleged rumor that Elvis Presley stayed at that location. He also had several original postcards of the Alamo Plaza that he graciously provided. The location in Tyler, now the American Inn, was very similar to the Beaumont location. Both remained motels, long after their use as an Alamo Plaza.

¹⁶⁸ “Palimpsest,” Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition, August 2018.



Illustration 8.1. The American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.2. Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.3. Foundation at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.4. Sidewalk at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.

The palimpsest left at the Deluxe Inns and Suites was located near the northwest corner of the lot, away from most of the courts and out of eyesight from many of the guests. Foundations, sidewalks, bricks, nail holes, pipes, and tile were visible in this location. Several ads from *Tourist Court Journal* mentioned that the bathrooms at the Alamo Plaza Courts had pastel color bathroom tile, some of which was still highly visible as of April 2018.



Illustration 8.5. Tile at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.6. Empty row at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.7. Remains at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.8. Former walkway at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.9. Two former bathrooms at the Deluxe Inn & Suites in Beaumont. Photo by Author.

The Tyler property was in a similar state as that in Beaumont. The American Inn had several pieces not seen at the Beaumont location such as the tile surrounding the site of the pool and walls left over from an earlier structure. One unique feature about the American Inn is they incorporated the unattached wall as part of landscaping for the site near the front entrance. The Tyler location was the second location built for the chain and as such does not resemble other Alamo Plazas built at that time. Another unique feature about the Tyler location was that it was built on such an incline so that, when passing by the site, one could not see the structure from the road. The motel remains private which may have been desirable during the early years of operation, but leaves the activity occurring on the site less accountable so patrons with unsavory intentions can continue their activities without worry of public surveillance.



Illustration 8.10. Location of the former pool at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.11. Wall near the entrance at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.12. Foundation near the entrance at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.13. Wall near the entrance at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.14. Room markings at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.15. Foundation at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.16. Tile at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.17. Linoleum fragments at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.18. Foundation walls at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.19. Former room configuration at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.



Illustration 8.20. Remains at the American Inn in Tyler. Photo by Author.

Conclusion

Hugh Hardy, an architect who restored many New York landmarks, states that “as physical uniformity increases across America, cities become a more and more valuable source of authenticity; their dialogue between old and new is essential to contemporary culture and cannot be simulated in vacuum-molded plastic. The immediate cultural discoveries found in landmark structures help define both the past and present city, giving each generation responsibility for passing on their record of ambition and achievement to those who follow.”¹⁶⁹ The same concept can be applied to these landmarks of the road. Once this form of vernacular roadside architecture is gone, nothing can quite fill the void that it leaves behind. The buildings encompass a snapshot to a time in American history where leisure was the way of life.

When one structure no longer serves its intended purpose, it is either demolished to make room for a new viable building or the structure can be adaptively reused. Many vernacular commercial structures from the mid-twentieth century are believed difficult to repurpose, including properties such as the Alamo Plazas. Shreveport provides an interesting case study where one building of former units was able to find new life as a pawn shop. Structures that have been reuse are either motels (Shreveport #3, Beaumont, Tyler, Savannah) or low-income housing/housing for the homeless (Atlanta, Houston), not straying far from their intended purpose. Other purposes can be proposed, but often creative solutions have not been presented.

¹⁶⁹ Kroessler, Jeffrey A., "The City as Palimpsest" (2015). CUNY Academic Works. http://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/42

CHAPTER NINE
THE DALLAS SIGN CONTROVERSY

Introduction

While the downtown was still part of the main commercial hub in the early twentieth century, many businesses had signs that were attached or near their buildings. With the rise in automobile sales, however, more people than ever before were able to move easier. As the downtown was very crowded and congested, businesses sprang up along commercial strips, like Elm Avenue.¹⁷⁰ With more space available, signs were able to stand alone to advertise the businesses. Out-of-town customers with no prior experience in a certain location often had little information about where to spend the night, so that motel accommodations needed an alluring sign to compel travelers to stop.

This chapter explores the importance of signage for businesses during this auto-oriented era. As was discussed in Chapter Six, competition was fierce between neighboring businesses and the image and fantasy that a business portrayed was what was actually sold to customers. Customers bought into the fantasy that, by staying at the Alamo Plaza, they could experience life in the West. The signs along the highway were important in advertising. The introduction of electricity with incandescent bulbs and neon tubes allowed signs to be visible at night, when tourists were looking for accommodations.

The latter part of this chapter discusses the Alamo Plaza sign at the former site in Dallas. Located in the Oak Cliff neighborhood, the property had become a local icon for the community.

¹⁷⁰ Mahan, Lisa. *American Signs: Forms and Meaning on Route 66*. New York: Monacelli Press., 2002, 13.

The site was located on a busy stretch of the Bankhead Highway, the major route connecting Dallas and Fort Worth. As the number of motel visitors declined, the Alamo Plaza had become a local landmark for the community that was in the midst of an economic regeneration. Other beloved motels along the same stretch of highway fell to the wrecking ball so that the fate of the Alamo Plaza seemed similar. When a developer bought the site, the community rallied together to save the integrity of the sign.

The Importance of Signage

The first neon sign in America was introduced at Earl Anthony's automobile dealership in Los Angeles in 1923. As this type of sign became more popular with automobile dealers it was used to lure customers to different motels and motor courts.¹⁷¹ After World War II, the roadside was often decorated with neon advertising, in all colors.

Unfortunately, by the late 1970s the craft of make the tubing for the neon signs faded and fewer people were skilled in the fabrication. Existing signs were difficult to maintain as the number of sign experts familiar with the gas decreased, and cheaper and more plentiful forms of plastic signage triumphed. When Holiday Inn began to replace their giant marquee sign with one made of back-lit plastic, it seemed as though the medium was doomed.¹⁷² Neon signs were replaced with the newer, cheaper alternative.

¹⁷¹ Witzel, Michael. *The American Motel*. Osceola, WI: Motor Books International Publishing Company., 2000, 18.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 19.



Illustration 9.1. The Desert Hills Motel in Tulsa. Photo by Author.

The resurgence of interest in neon signage has grown quite steadily over the last decade, however, linked to towns with connections to Route 66. The heart of Route 66, Tulsa, is in the process of creating neon sign overlay district on its segment of Route 66. Tulsa’s goal is to encourage business owners with neon signs to continue use. The Route 66 Commission in Tulsa is eliminating current roadblocks for preservation of the sign by waiving permitting fees, offering grants that help offset the cost of the sign and by loosening sign regulations that allow for more creativity with placement options and design.¹⁷³ As a major tourist draw for Tulsa is Route 66,

¹⁷³ “City of Tulsa looking at ways to encourage use of neon signs along historic Route 66.” *The Frontier*, 10 August 2017.

the commission hopes to encourage other businesses along integral routes to consider installing neon signs as well to keep with the theme.

In Tucson, neon signs were replaced with newer alternatives to attract customers during the latter half of the twentieth century. Due to a 1966 city code that was often interpreted as finding the neon signs too big or in an illegal location, many signs were left in place because if taken down, they could not be put up again. Some drivers thought the signs to be unsightly. As attitudes changed, ideas surfaced about how to treat the signs.

Tucson enacted a Historic Landmarks Sign Preservation Program in 2011 to encourage the “maintenance, restoration and reuse of historic signs.”¹⁷⁴ Two years later, the city invested \$125,000 into a preservation program for signs along Tucson’s historic Miracle Mile. The incentives for those who wished to fix their signs meant that owners only paid twenty-five percent for the cost of the sign with the city stepping in to cover the remaining expense. Owners are required to maintain their sign for at least ten years after restoration.¹⁷⁵

As interest in sign preservation has grown museums dedicated to the art of the commercial sign have begun to grow, as seen in Cincinnati with the American Sign Museum, the Neon Museum in Las Vegas, the Museum of Neon Art in Glendale, Arizona, and the recently opened Ignite Sign Art Museum in Tucson. With so many structures and iconic signs from this era quickly disappearing, these local landmarks can become the center for great controversy such as the case for the Alamo Plaza in Dallas, Texas.

¹⁷⁴ Romero, Regina. “Tucson’s old places matter to the health of our businesses.” *Arizona Daily Stars*, 22 June 2011.

¹⁷⁵ Poon, Linda. “Keeping Arizona’s Neon Lights Aglow.” *CityLab*, 3 Aug 2015.

The Bankhead Highway

The Dallas Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts had long been a local landmark on the Bankhead Highway. As a transnational highway that spanned from Washington D.C. to San Diego, the route went through the heart of Dallas through Oak Cliff to downtown Fort Worth. The latter stretch was known as the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike. By the 1920s, the Turnpike had become the most heavily trafficked road in all of Texas. With so many automobiles passing through, commercial development sprang up. Businesses such as cafés, gas stations, drive-ins, and motels lined Oak Cliff on Fort Worth Avenue.¹⁷⁶

The Avenue's motor courts and motels were listed on Preservation Dallas' list of *Most Endangered Historic Resources* in 2007, including the Alamo Plaza Courts, The Mission Motel, and The Ranch Motel. As the Alamo Plaza had become so derelict, Preservation Dallas stated that the only viable structure on the site was the sign itself and not the actual motel. The Alamo Plaza sat at a crucial corridor along the Bankhead Highway and served as a local landmark for the community behind it. With the Mission Inn demolished and a preserved but renamed Ranch Motel, the sign was the last chance to “mark the importance of the corridor”.¹⁷⁷

The Site, Structure and Sale

Developer Brent Jackson moved into the neighborhood and after meeting neighbors discovered a need in his new community for an “organic grocer presence.”¹⁷⁸ “Quite frankly, I was also bothered in how far I had to go to get groceries and healthy alternatives such as Whole

¹⁷⁶ Stone, Rachel. “Oak Cliff History: A look at the old Bankhead Highway.” *Oak Cliff Advocate*, 24 July 2015.

¹⁷⁷ Cadmus Owens, Kim. “Alamo Plaza/ Sylvan 30.” Received by Brent Jackson, Oaxaca Interests, Sylvan/30 Developers, Dallas, Texas.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Foods and the like. There was just a demand that wasn't being met."¹⁷⁹ At the time, Oak Cliff was in the process of revitalization. Several structures were being rehabilitated or built. The South Dallas area had experienced little investment for many years. Crime became prevalent and those with the means to do so left the neighborhood. With the lack of investment, old commercial structures along the Bankhead Highway remained, but when the neighborhood began to improve, many of the old commercial structures were at risk.

Developer of the Belmont Hotel, Monte Anderson suggested that Jackson look into the Alamo Plaza. "The only place you can do that in north Oak Cliff is Sylvan and I-30," the only lot in the neighborhood with enough traffic to support a grocer.¹⁸⁰ Across the street from the Alamo Plaza was the Belmont Hotel, another local landmark from the automobile era that had recently been renovated by Anderson. He was very familiar with the Alamo Plaza site as he had to pass it every time he would visit the Belmont Hotel. The two worked together combining Anderson's longtime experience with development in the neighborhood and Jackson's fervor for mixed-use development. After Anderson helped Jackson broker deals for adjacent parcels, the two gradually saw less and less of each other. When Jackson finally showed Anderson his intended set of plans, the latter became enraged at what he saw. "I saw buildings with their backs to the road, 4-foot sidewalks and a horrible tall apartment building that's in the parking lot and doesn't face any street." The proposed "Sylvan Thirty" drawings called for 200 lofts and studios, 30,000 square feet of restaurant and retail space along Sylvan, and an 11,000 square feet grocery store, Cox Farms Market.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Mitchell, Keri. "Who knows best for Sylvan Thirty." *Oak Cliff Advocate*, 22 July 2012.

After the fiasco, the two quickly parted ways. City council was convinced by Jackson to change planned development zoning PD 714, which tells developers precisely what can and cannot be built on select lots, while Anderson pleaded that they not do so. PD 714 overlays Fort Worth Avenue from Westmoreland to the River. Created by the Fort Worth Avenue Development group, PD 714 attempted to curb piecemeal development that had grown steadily along Fort Worth Avenue with undesirable businesses such as used car dealerships, dollar stores, and chop shops. A rift was formed over the direction of Fort Worth Avenue, some siding with Anderson while others sided with Jackson.¹⁸²

In July of 2010, Brent Jackson threw a going away party for the Alamo Plaza Courts along Fort Worth Avenue. The intent was to allow the public to have a final look at the courts and a chance to say goodbye to the landmark. Local community members, Old Oak Cliff Conservation League, and Preservation Dallas were heartbroken over the news that they would lose their beloved Alamo Plaza. Katherine Seale, former executive director of Preservation Dallas, agreed along with the rest of the board that they did not oppose the demolition of the motel due to its poor state. To soothe the sting, the developer assured the community that the sign would be used. Michael Amonett, former president of the Old Oak Cliff Conservation League, was even shown drawings of how the sign would be incorporated in the future site. According to Michael Amonett, “. . . the sign was going in the center of the development between all the buildings in a sort of public gathering place. After the demolition, when I asked again about the sign, I was told ‘This is the Sylvan Thirty development, not the Alamo Courts development.’” The developers assured preservationists, local reporters, and city planning staff

¹⁸² Ibid.

that the sign would remain on site during the early planning stage in 2010.¹⁸³ "We are keeping that a bit of a surprise, but we have committed to reincorporate it back into the project. That was my promise to myself first and foremost, a promise to my investor group, and then we made a promise to Katherine Seale, of Preservation Dallas, and Michael Amonett, president of the Old Oak Cliff Conservation League."¹⁸⁴

Dissent grew between the two sides as the community members' distrust of the developer began to rise. Michael Amonett also stated that, "I think at this point all anybody wants is for what was promised to come to be. . . . Wherever the sign ends up, it is Sylvan/Thirty's responsibility to see that it gets there in one piece and that it be visible and secure for the future."¹⁸⁵ Katherine Seale of Preservation Dallas personally spoke with Brent Jackson and was led to believe that the sign would remain. "There was never anything written, never anything official. It was a gentleman's handshake if you will. We felt very strongly the sign would do as much [as the motel buildings] to preserve the legacy of Fort Worth Avenue." She also added that if the sign were to be moved elsewhere along the corridor, that it could irreparably damage the legacy of the site as it would be removed from the context that made it historical.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Appleton, Roy. "Sylvan Thirty developers backtracking on iconic Alamo Plaza sign." *Dallas News*, March 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Wilonsky, Robert. "Eat, Drink, Rock and Remember the Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts Saturday Night" *Dallas Observer*, 22 July 2013.

¹⁸⁵ Appleton, Roy. "Sylvan Thirty developers backtracking on iconic Alamo Plaza sign." *Dallas News*, March 2013.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*



Illustration 9.2. Alamo Plaza sign in Dallas. Photo by Heather Ezell, *Oakcliff Advocate*, Mar. 25, 2013.

After demolition, the developers announced that they were looking for new ways to bring new life to the sign with the help of the public. “The iconic Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts sign that sits on Sylvan Thirty’s construction site is a beloved landmark and an important part of the visual identity of West Dallas. Because our community’s bond with the sign is so important, we’re turning to you—our neighbors and friends—to help us figure out how to give it new life. We’d like for you to submit ideas for the sign’s future. We’re open to repurposing it, moving it somewhere else in West Dallas, donating it . . .”¹⁸⁷ The developer backtracked on what he had promised to the city planners, reporters, local preservation groups, and the rest of the community,

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

and again asked for public input on what to do with the sign. The spokesperson for the project, Cooper Smith Koch responded to the *Dallas News* about backtracking and he stated, “We're not saying it's not going to live on the site; if it stays in the community I don't see what the problem is.” When questioned whether moving the sign elsewhere was a broken promise, he once again conceded that ultimately “public will and community involvement trumps that.”¹⁸⁸

The following month, in April of 2013, the sign had been taken down and put into storage.¹⁸⁹ By May of that year community members formed a group named “The Alamo Sign Gang” whose mission it was, was to save the Alamo Plaza sign. The first major step that the group took was to send a letter to Oaxaca Interests, the developer behind the Sylvan Thirty project, urging them to keep the sign in its original location as a tribute to the history of the thoroughfare. According to the group, “The sign is one of Dallas’s most-recognizable examples of mid-20th century roadway signage—and it’s a direct link to the history of Fort Worth Avenue and a time in our country’s past when novel architecture and neon signage were widely used to attract customers. Communities across the country are working quickly to preserve the last remaining examples of this unique signage, and we must do the same.”¹⁹⁰ A major goal of the group was to find solutions by working with the developer, not against him stating, “It is true that we are worried about your intentions, but we are not against Sylvan Thirty. In fact, we are excited about your project and the valuable resources it will bring to our community. That said, we do not believe much-needed new development and preservation of our important shared

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Stone, Rachel. “Photos: The Alamo Plaza sign comes down.” *Oak Cliff Advocate*, 12 April 2013.

¹⁹⁰ Ezell, Heather. “Neighbors: Keep the Alamo Plaza on Fort Worth Avenue.” *Oak Cliff Advocate*, 3 May 2013.

history are mutually exclusive. We can and should have both.”¹⁹¹ The spokesman for the developer, Cooper Smith Koch stated that he spoke with one of the signees, and told them that the sign did not work when Jackson purchased the property and that it was in the process of being analyzed to see if repairs were possible.¹⁹²

Other members of the community became involved with the public discourse. A group Facebook webpage was created for interested parties to be able to contribute to the discussion surrounding the sign. Photos were also available for members of the Facebook group. Another webpage sprang up as well, savethealamo.org. Local artists paid tribute to the iconic sign by creating t-shirts with the logo of the courts and through paintings and art exhibits. No one could deny that the community was very attached to this sign. One local artist, Kim Cadmus Owens, wrote an open letter to the developers on ways to honor the sign yet still support the rest of the Sylvan Thirty project. In the letter she wrote,

I am a resident of both North Oak Cliff where I own a residential property that I call home and West Dallas where I own a commercial property where I work as an artist. The Alamo Plaza sign is a significant landmark for both neighborhoods. The site of the sign on Fort Worth Avenue at Sylvan is a major landmark on a primary thoroughfare for both areas and has a long and important history. Your development at that intersection will provide a much needed and desired grocery store in Cox Farms as well as housing and potentially desirable retail. The Sylvan/30 development has the opportunity to not only provide much needed services but also to insure its own success by acknowledging and

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

embracing the area's history and draw for the many intelligent, locally conscious, creative, and potentially loyal patrons to your new establishments.¹⁹³

Later in the letter Owens discussed that Dallas has a poor record of adaptive reuse. When a building is no longer needed, it was often times demolished. She then purports that Dallas should embrace itself as a vibrant city rich in history, and that the existing fabric should be embraced. As important as the Sylvan Thirty development is for the Oak Cliff area, it has the opportunity to “both embrace our city’s history through a thoughtful incorporation of a sign that signifies the historical development of the city’s connection to automobile culture... and a renewed interest in urban development and a generational return to the city.”¹⁹⁴ Owens thoroughly believed that given the work that had been done in the past by Lake Flato, the architecture firm associated with the development, it was well within their means to be able to find a way to incorporate the Alamo Plaza sign effectively in the development of the site.¹⁹⁵ The Old Oak Cliff Conservation League sent Jackson a letter again saying the group would not oppose the demolition of the structure as long as the sign remained. Stated in the letter, “OOCCL is in favor of the Alamo Sign remaining lit, intact and on-site at Sylvan Thirty,” the letter states. “If this does not suit your development plans, we encourage you seek guidance from our group and the community for an alternative rather than destroying the integrity of the sign.” From the perspective of the League, ‘ripping up the sign and scattering it into pieces’ is not a good option for the sign as it would destroy its integrity. Michael Amonett, president of the League stated, “Nobody wanted that thing torn up in pieces.” Amonett said “Once it’s all busted

¹⁹³ Cadmus Owens, Kim. “Alamo Plaza/ Sylvan 30.” Received by Brent Jackson, Oaxaca Interests, Sylvan/30 Developers, Dallas, Texas.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

apart, it's no longer what it was. It's taken out of its context. [Jackson] obviously didn't listen, and he just wants to do what he wants to do.”¹⁹⁶ Twenty days later it was announced that the developer had decided to keep the sign on site, but in separate pieces. Lake Flato and Brent Jackson, who conveniently has a BFA in sculpture from the University of Texas at Austin, designed the sculpture themselves.¹⁹⁷

As of April 2018, the Sylvan Thirty project has been completed and opened to the public. Scattered around the lot, mostly in the parking area, are remnants of the Alamo Plaza sign. Out of context with the rest of the sign, the pieces appear trendy but provide no historic merit nor background to the history and context of the site. They just appear as basic art installations.

¹⁹⁶ Ezell, Heather. “Alamo motel sign to become three sculptures at Sylvan Thirty.” *Oak Cliff Advocate*, 23 May 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.



Illustration 9.3. The star from the Alamo Plaza sign in Dallas. Photo by Author.



Illustration 9.4. The arrow from the Alamo Plaza sign in Dallas. Photo by Author.



Illustration 9.5. Sylvan Thirty parking lot with arrow. Photo by Author.



Illustration 9.6. Sylvan Thirty parking lot. Photo by Author



Illustration 9.7. The former Alamo Plaza sign. Photo by Author



Illustration 9.8. Truck art installation, Dallas. Photo by Author



Illustration 9.9. Truck art installation and Sylvan Thirty Apartments, Dallas. Photo by Author

Conclusion

The degradation of the Alamo Plaza sign caused a considerable amount of controversy in the Dallas area. It is the only location where a community had fought so hard not only to commemorate the Alamo site, but also the iconic sign. The devastation that this community felt at the loss of the sign signifies what an integral piece of history these sites often have been. All of the locations were placed along similar stretches of highway in their respective city and are reflective of an innovative age in American history where the automobile had revolutionized not only travel, but also created a lifestyle that is still evident today. The automobile age, and the neon signs that kept businesses lit and advertised at night, is as important to American culture as apple pie and baseball itself.

CHAPTER TEN
THE ATLANTA DOMESTICITY COMPETITION

Introduction

In August of 2017, the city of Atlanta with support by the Enterprise Community Partners and Assist Inc., Community Design Center, launched the domesticity competition. The design competition intended to explore the “. . . best practices and innovative strategies for the planning, design, construction and operation of affordable and sustainable developments in the City of Atlanta.”¹⁹⁸ On the website for the competition Tim Keane, the Commissioner of the Department of City Planning is quoted as saying, “This is but the first of an endless campaign by the Department of City Planning to engage the private sector on creative ideas for affordable housing. It’s time that we approach affordable housing with beautiful design in mind.”¹⁹⁹ As “the first” design competition for affordable design in the Southeastern part of the United States, the competition “called for teams to propose creative and replicable models for designing multi-family affordable housing units. Site specific requirements were based on the potential renovation of Santa Fe Villas, a four-acre 147-unit supportive housing development in southwest Atlanta.”²⁰⁰ This chapter explores one of the most creative interpretations of the modern-day Alamo Plaza site. As this Alamo Plaza location had seemed to outlive its purpose, a plan was introduced to reinterpret the site.

¹⁹⁸ “DomestiCITY.” *DOMESTICITY*, The City of Atlanta Planning Department, domesticity.org/.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Santa Fe Villas in Atlanta

The Atlanta Alamo Plaza was built in 1948 by Bill Farner who had operated the motel until his passing. After his death, his wife continued the operation and sold the property to the Urban Residential Development Corporation Non-Profit in 1995 with the intention of repurposing the motel into SRO facility.²⁰¹ The facility was to house the residents and provide support for other aspects of their lives. The agency gained support through federal grant funds from the City of Atlanta, the State of Georgia, and HUD.²⁰²



Illustration 10.1. Entrance to the Santa Fe Villas. Photo by Author

²⁰¹ Stevenson, Jessica. "Paul Bolster Interview." 14 June 2018.

²⁰² "Santa Fe Villas." *Santa Fe Villas/URDC*, Urban Residential Development Corporation, www.santafevillas.org/.



Illustration 10.2. The Santa Fe Villas. Photo by Author



Illustration 10.3. Units at the Santa Fe Villas. Photo by Author



Illustration 10.4. Facing toward the entrance. Photo by Author

The former Alamo Plaza of Atlanta became the site for one of the most innovative housing competitions in the nation. The problem that arose, however, is that the majority of the design submissions called for the demolition of the existing motel. Out of the six remaining candidates, only two had incorporated ways to reuse the existing Alamo Plaza structure. The 41 Eco Living Proposal, designed by Lord Aeck Sargent, is one of the sites that reworked several existing buildings including three of the most notable several structures at the front entrance that form the iconic Alamo Plaza design. That firm even included a historical context portion on their board that discussed the Alamo Plaza chain and the history and context of the site.

In the existing buildings, services for residents of the community were provided. The first structure housed case worker offices and a barbershop, the second structure housed a medical clinic, and the third structure was the location for the property manager, communal dining, and kitchen. Other amenities provided at the location include a coffee shop/pop up store, a computer lab and library, a laundromat, and community gym.



Illustration 10.5. The 41 ECO Living Submission by Lord Aeck Sargent for domesticITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.

HISTORY/CONTEXT

- Metropolitan Parkway as former Dixie Highway, travel route
- Era of vacation travel and auto dominance post WWII
- Creation of vacation motel courts for travelers (similar sites throughout the Southeast)



ALAMO PLAZA HOTEL COURTS

"CATERING TO THOSE WHO CARE"

BATON ROUGE, SHREVEPORT AND NEW ORLEANS, LA. ATLANTA, GA. LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS
MEMPHIS AND NASHVILLE, TENN. OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLA. CHARLOTTE AND RALEIGH, N. C.
DENVER, DENVER, HOUSTON, TYLER AND WACO, TEXAS GULFPORT AND JACKSON, MISS.



- Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts (current Santa Fe Villas)
- Similar typology across the US, but dwindling examples remain
- Aspects that are significant and/or inform our design moves on the site
- Architectural style was used to draw visitors (something they haven't seen before, innovative or experiential), large open space for outdoor enjoyment, single loaded bar buildings, caretaker / manager living on site

Illustration 10.6. The 41 ECO Living History/Context. Submission by Lord Aeck Sargent for domestiCITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.

Another contestant, Sadyr Khabukhayev from the Izmir Institute of Technology, Kazakhstan, incorporated many of the original structures from the Alamo Plaza in his design, Garden. His design focused primarily on conservation of the site and looking for ways to make everything as green as possible. His site incorporated multiple types of housing accommodations such as apartment towers, the SRO rooms currently being occupied, and detached housing. Multiple gardens are located on the site. Green roofs are also added to the existing structures.



Illustration 10.7. Garden. Submission by Sadyr Khabukhayev for domestiCITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.



Illustration 10.8. SRO housing development at Garden. Submission by Sadyr Khabukhayev for domestiCITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.



Illustration 10.9. Leasing and Community Facilities at Garden. Submission by Sadyr Khabukhayev for domestiCITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.

Part of the design for Garden is the transformation of the structures along the street façade. With so many planned alterations made for the entrance, perhaps the same point can be made for the Atlanta sight as was the case in Dallas, without its proper context, is the design really honoring the former Alamo Plaza Courts? Is this piecemeal approach considered a justifiable action that both honors the heritage of the side but is adapted to meet the current needs?

One characteristic of the property it is just how many original structures were left intact, which far exceeds any other submissions. Even additional structures that were added over the lifespan of the motel were given new life in the proposed design. Instead of demolition, Sadyr chose to incorporate multistory infill development that will house apartments to allow for more residents. According to the submission, “the goal is to preserve almost all of the existing structures and foliage on the site . . . and to only demolish motel buildings if they are beyond repair.”²⁰³ Other major green improvements made in the proposal included the elimination of all the asphalt behind the entrance of the building and replacing it with permeable pavements and gardens as well as using the foundations of the Town and Country Hotel Courts and allowing residents to build their own houses on top.

Like the submission by Lord Aeck Sargent, Garden also provides multiple amenities for residents like a cafeteria, cafes and retail options, a computer lab, and working spaces. Community spaces are located on the bottom floor of the apartment towers with amenities like laundry facilities, shared cooking spaces designated for socialization.

²⁰³ Khabukhayev, Sadyr. “Garden Design Boards.” *DomestiCITY*, The City of Atlanta Department of City Planning, Jan. 2018, domesticity.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/4219A0_Boards.pdf.

BUSINESS AND CULTURE HUB (PHASE IV)

7. Adding New Floors to Create More Spaces

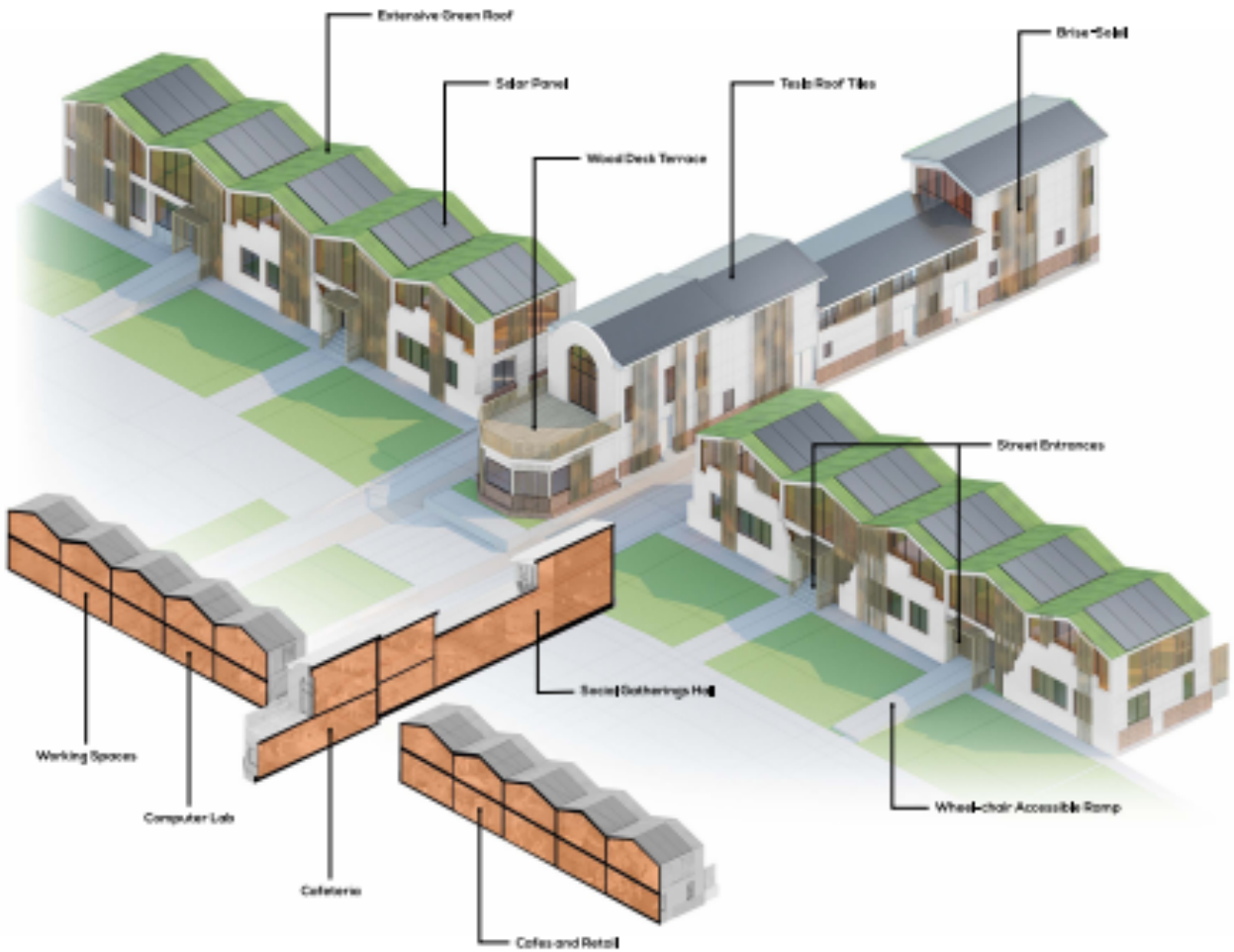


Illustration 10.10. Business and Cultural Hub at Garden. Submission by Sadyr Khabukhayev for domestiCITY Design Competition, The City of Atlanta.

One of the major pushes for the competition was to find more efficient ways of housing socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. The city of Atlanta is expected to grow by 2.5 million residents by 2038.²⁰⁴ This is part of a national trend when middle and higher income classes are once again returning to urban centers. With such rapid growth in cities like Atlanta, housing has become a scarcity. One mission of the Planning Department for the City of Atlanta is to find creative solutions to address the need for affordable housing not just for Atlanta, but as an example for other cities throughout the cities dealing with the same challenges.

Conclusion

As the Santa Fe Villas had operated as SRO housing for over twenty years, city planners chose this site for the competition. The site has 4 acres and 147 existing units for housing. The site also includes the adjacent Town and Country Hotel Courts, a three-acre parcel, that lay abandoned next door. The site is located in the southern most point for the City of Atlanta in Perkinson Park.²⁰⁵ The intended purpose for the site is to “serve as a built prototype for affordable housing solutions along under-developed commercial corridors in Atlanta and in other rapidly growing population centers throughout North America.”²⁰⁶ Perhaps this particular location could serve as an example for underutilized Alamo Plazas who are still struggling to thrive in the development era of today.

²⁰⁴ “DomestiCITY.” *DOMESTICITY*, The City of Atlanta Planning Department, domesticity.org/.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ Green, Josh, “Could Atlanta’s dilapidated hotels be crucial affordable housing pieces,” *Atlanta Curbed*, Feb. 22, 2018, <https://atlanta.curbed.com/2018/2/22/17040270/atlanta-domesticity-affordable-house-dilapidated-hotels>.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MOTEL REVITALIZATION IN SAVANNAH

Introduction

The Alamo Plaza Motel in Savannah, Georgia may be the last in the nation to have kept its name. This location most closely resembles the Beaumont Alamo Plaza. Like the Beaumont and Tyler locations, this budget motel no longer has the middle-class tourists it had, but rather a more varied set of short term visitors. The motel manager, Jaitendar Patel, is full of optimism for the site. Over the next few years he hopes to purchase the property and turn it into a boutique hotel. This may not be such a far stretch as Savannah was recently ranked one of the best places to visit in the world according to *Town and Country Magazine*.²⁰⁷ This chapter explores the potential for this property. If the plans to reinvent the structure as a boutique motel succeed, perhaps other tourist friendly cities with similar structures could be persuaded to follow this path. Savannah is a preservation friendly city so that, with a successful historic motel revitalization already in place, it might spark nation-wide reinvestment in forgotten motels and motor courts.



Illustration 11.1. Alamo Plaza Motel, Savannah. Photo by Author.

²⁰⁷ Dennis, Zach. "Savannah named one of the best places in the world to visit in April." *Savannah Morning News*, 21 Mar. 2018.

This chapter explores the preservation, development, and hospitality environment in Savannah to examine the factors that could contribute to either the success or downfall for the reinvention of the local Alamo Plaza. Other successful motel revitalization projects have been explored, including Savannah's Thunderbird Inn. The aim of this chapter is to push for creative solutions for underutilized structures, like the Alamo Plaza, and find a way to not only re-utilize the space, but bring the properties back to life.

Savannah

In Savannah, 2017 was the most profitable year tourism ever, with over 14.1 million visitors who spent nearly \$3 billion dollars during their time in the city. Much of the growth has been attributed to increased demand, with hotel prices, higher end restaurants, and new products brought to the market. The majority spent by visitors went to lodging expenses, which totaled over \$1 billion dollars, followed by food and beverage at \$761 million, and retail at \$489 million.²⁰⁸ The heart of the tourism industry is the Savannah Historic District. Designated in 1966, this National Historic District was selected for its “unique, well preserved city plan and historic building stock.”²⁰⁹ Preservation began much earlier in the community, thanks to one local woman, Anna Colquitt Hunter.

Early Preservation in Savannah

Miss Hunter was born into a “proper” Savannah family. She became a journalist for both the *Savannah Morning News* and the *Savannah Evening Press* in which her assigned sections were the society beat where she wrote book reviews, editorials, art, and Savannah society.

²⁰⁸ Nussbaum, Katie. “More money, more visitors in Savannah during 2017.” *Savannah Morning News*, 12 May 2018.

²⁰⁹ “National Register Historic Districts.” *Historic Savannah Foundation*, www.myhsf.org.

Hunter became especially concerned with buildings like the one she resided in, particularly their balconies. Due to the fear that these balconies might one day disappear, she began to reach out to wealthy Savannah bachelors to help save the balconies. At the time, much of the historic fabric in Savannah was in risk of demolition due to the lack of interest and also the increase of the automobile. Several historic structures such as the old City Market were demolished to make way for parking garages. The Isaiah Davenport House, built in 1820, was slated to be demolished but Hunter knew she needed to put a stop to it. She assembled a group of women, eventually known as the “Seven Ladies” who would work with businessmen and bankers to assure them of the value that the historic buildings provided to the city. In 1955, the Historic Savannah Foundation formed. The first order of action was to purchase and restore the Isaiah Davenport House. The group had two main goals; not only find ways to adaptively reuse existing structures but also promote tourism within the City of Savannah. In total, the Historic Savannah Foundation has worked to save over 350 buildings that may have been lost without their help.²¹⁰

Hotel Development in the City

With such a thriving tourism sector in Savannah, planning policies needed to be implemented to protect the historic fabric. Naturally, development would occur in the most in demand areas of a city, but the tourism sector could face severe impacts damage to the harmonious historic fabric. In 2017, as developers raced to construct more hotels, a temporary moratorium was imposed on new construction.²¹¹ By 2018, proposed zoning regulations were introduced to allow for hotel construction in commercial areas of the historic district after a hotel

²¹⁰Dembling, Sophia. “Saving Savannah: The Preservation Legacy of Anna Colquitt Hunter”. *Historic Savannah Foundation*, <https://savingplaces.org/stories/saving-savannah-the-preservation-legacy-ofanna-colquitt-hunter>.

²¹¹Curl, Eric. “Savannah may halt new hotels as it wrestles with growth,” *Savannah Morning News*, 27 Jan. 2017.

overlay district was developed by hotel industry representatives, the Savannah Downtown Neighborhood Association, the Historic Savannah foundation and the City of Savannah. According to city Alderman Bill Durrence, “At some point you get so many hotels that you really change the character of what people came here to see.”²¹² With the new zoning regulations, developers will be able to build hotels in some areas where they were not able to before, but also the number of prohibited zones near residential areas increased. The hopes of the new zoning implementation are to push development further west which has historically been an underutilized resource of the city. Large-scale development and tall hotels are relegated near the newly proposed Canal District.²¹³ This district will be the largest single project in the recent history of city. It is intended to revive an under-appreciated canal and expand the tourist district west. A \$140 million-dollar project, Savannah’s Canal District would include a 9,000-seat arena and a repurposed 1893 waterworks building with various amenities.

²¹² Curl, Eric. “Large, small matters in proposed downtown Savannah, Historic District hotel zones,” *Savannah Morning News*, 29 Jan. 2018.

²¹³ Ibid.



Figure 11.1. Streets Where Hotels Are Permitted, The City of Savannah.



Illustration 11.2. Savannah’s Canal District, The City of Savannah.

The incorporation of parking spaces for the site will not be visible at the street level and gateway bridges across the canal and multi-purpose paths will connect the site to the rest of Savannah. According to Jones Lang Lassell’s managing director for Southeast project and development services, Brian Terrell, “The arena and Canal District will attract visitors, businesses, and a new wave of investment into the neighborhoods of West Savannah.” The arena is expected to be completed by as early as 2021.²¹⁴

²¹⁴ Green, Josh, “Savannah’s Canal District, among largest projects in city history, cleared to launch,” *Atlanta Curbed*, Mar. 29, 2018, <https://atlanta.curbed.com/2018/3/29/17176618/savannah-canal-district-georgia-historic>.



Illustration 11.3. Savannah’s Canal District, The City of Savannah.

Other areas of West Savannah are ripe for revitalization as well. In August of 2017, the city’s redevelopment team presented a plan for expansion of the street improvement initiative for the West Bay Street corridor just west of the Historic District. The idea is to make West Bay Street more inviting as it serves as one of the main gateways to downtown. As a large investment by Richard Kessler, the Plant Riverside Hotel, nears completion nearby, more investment will be brought to this end of Savannah.²¹⁵

Motel Revitalization

The term motel often carries a questionable reputation as they are considered cheap, dirty, and harbingers for illicit activity. Many of the Alamo Plaza locations have acquired this reputation, but several locations that have still have potential.

²¹⁵ “Editorial: Neighborhood revitalization: Go West, city leaders,” *Savannah Morning News*, 25 Aug. 2017.

As motels have begun to shed their seedy reputation, they are becoming destinations. Recent motel revitalization has sprung up in cities across the nation such as San Francisco, Austin, Palm Springs, Los Angeles, and New Orleans with hoteliers purchasing rundown motels and converting them into a boutique experience. Travelers are now more informed than ever before. They know exactly what to expect when they arrive at a destination as they have thoroughly checked the reviews online, liked all the photos on Instagram, and read other traveler's blogs. Social media has completely changed the way Americans travel, particularly for the younger generations with all the information available at the touch of a phone. Journalists are catching on to the trend as well. Articles on motel revitalization has become a growing trend in the hospitality industry. Within the past few years, motel revitalization has been covered by popular magazines like *GQ* and *Vogue* and other news outlets like Yahoo! and the Travel Channel.



Illustration 11.4. The pool at the Drifter. Design Hotels, *Curbed*.

With the right marketing, social media presence, traveler reviews, and an up-and-coming neighborhood, motels that were forgotten relics twenty years ago have once again found new life. This “motel revivalism” as coined by Curbed.com, “cashes in on inexpensive property, employs adaptive reuse, and plays to the country’s obsession with updated midcentury design.”²¹⁶ Not only do these properties have appeal for their aesthetic, but many are an affordable alternative to more expensive chain hotels.²¹⁷

The resurgence of the return to the city movement, particularly by young people, can be partially responsible for several cases of motel revitalization. The new emergence of the creative class in the cities is creating incubators for reuse of underutilized structures in often forgotten parts of town. Motels are prime for this type of redevelopment. The combination of limited capital, a can-do attitude, social media, and creativity create the perfect storm for this type of transformation. Second-tier cities that have seen growth in the past decade are where one can most likely expect this development to occur. According to interior designer Nicole Cota, “There is a love affair with midcentury modern that is sort of taking over design, and often these properties are so neglected that they offer a great value to investors and developers. The success of the current projects seems to be sending a clear incentive to developers and hoteliers that these are properties that have a lot of life still.”²¹⁸

As is the case with hospitality, other small businesses in retail, beauty, wellness, and healthcare are noticing the same trends as approachable and experience-driven establishments. Two partners in a Brooklyn design firm, William Brian Smith and Jou-Yie Chou, say that there

²¹⁶ Sisson, Patrick, “Motel revivalism: How hipster hoteliers created a new roadside attraction,” *Curbed*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.curbed.com/2018/6/22/17493336/motel-midcentury-design-hotel-lodging-adaptive-reuse>.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

is a confluence of that factors that are behind the boom in motel revitalization. One factor is that the hospitality industry is looking for ways to branch out of cookie-cutter chain hotels and provide more experience based accommodations such as boutique hotels. The other major factor is many family owned motels passed down through generation are readily available. With such an interest in small-scale hospitality development and the ease of both scale and affordability of motels, developers and first-time hotel owners are able to open a competitive boutique motel.²¹⁹

Life Returns to Route 66 Motels

Another area where this type of revival is happening is along Route 66. As iconic as Route 66 motels have become, nostalgia for the motels is spurring reinvestment back into the properties. Recently, the El Vado Motel in Albuquerque underwent an extensive renovation process becoming a boutique motel, with retail stores, food pods, a brewery, and other amenities. The extensive project cost over \$18 million dollars and received \$3 million dollars in aid from the City of Albuquerque.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Warnicke, Ron, "El Vado Motel inches closer to reopening," *Route 66 News*, April 5, 2018.



Illustration 11.5. El Vado Motel in Albuquerque. Courtesy of Daniel Heron.

Another motel in Albuquerque, the De Anza Lodge, is set to undergo a similar transformation presumably after being inspired by the revival of the El Vado Motel. Built in 1939 by a former trading post owner, Charles Wallace, the De Anza Lodge was a thriving motor lodge during the automobile era. On the site was a motor lodge, Native American trading post, and the Turquoise Room, a restaurant most notably known for thousands of turquoise pieces imbedded in the linoleum floor. One key piece of information is the fact that priceless Native American artworks are stored in the basement conference room, a series of seven, 20 by 4 foot murals depicting the Shalako ceremony celebrated by the Zuni tribe.²²¹ After undergoing two

²²¹ “The De Anza Motor Lodge,” National Park Service Department of the Interior, https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/route66/de_anza_motor_lodge_albuquerque.html.

failed prior attempts at revitalization, The De Anza Lodge is about to undergo an extensive renovation. The 50,000-square-foot property will house office spaces, a boutique hotel, retail, apartments, workout facilities, movie room, communal kitchen, and game room.²²²



Illustration 11.6. Monterey Court in Tucson. Courtesy of J.D. Fitzgerald.

In Tucson, the Monterey Court on the Miracle Mile underwent an extensive renovation in January of 2011. Kelly McLear & Greg Haver purchased the court and began to re-envision it as an artisan enclave.²²³ Haver mentioned to *The Arizona Daily Star* that, “It was a gamble, but

²²² Perea, Shelby, “High-profile Route 66 redevelopment breaks ground,” *Albuquerque Business First*, Nov. 29, 2017.

²²³ “The History of the Monterey Court”. *Monterey Court Studio Galleries and Cafe*, www.montereycourtaz.com/.

at the same time, we feel like Miracle Mile is going through a renaissance, and we wanted to add to that story.”²²⁴ Today the site houses artist studios, galleries, shops, a café, and an outdoor live music venue.²²⁵ According to Greg Haver, the idea was to transform the space into a destination for the community. “You've got the dining, entertainment and shopping all in one. Miracle Mile is kind of a tough area, so in order to attract people I thought we needed to do it all, make it fun like a date night.”²²⁶

The Boutique Alamo Plaza of Savannah

The manager for the Alamo Plaza location has high hopes for his court on West Bay Street in Savannah. This Plaza is a short drive from the downtown core. West Bay Street is a fairly busy street that leads into the heart of the historic district in less than a mile where several other desirable hotels are located. Another benefit of the Savannah site is that the historic West Bay Street corridor is the focus of an economic redevelopment initiative. As development continues to creep west in Savannah, the potential for reuse of the site rises.²²⁷

With such a booming, eclectic, and tourist friendly city, one can easily see how the West Bay Street Alamo Plaza has potential to be restored. The Thunderbird Inn was built in 1964 in downtown Savannah. When owners purchased the site they began to restore the property. General Manager Mark Thomas was voted among Savannah’s 40 under 40 young professionals and the motel has earned the distinction of being one of USA Today’s “Top 10 Best Retro Hotels

²²⁴ Quinn, Dale, “Monterey joining Miracle Mile rebirth,” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 24, 2011.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Matas, Kimberly, “Entertainment venue rises from timeworn motor court,” *Arizona Daily Star*, Aug. 16, 2012.

²²⁷ Curl, Eric, “Large small matters in proposed downtown Savannah, Historic District hotel zones,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 29, 2018, <http://www.savannahnow.com/news/2018-01-29/large-small-matters-proposed-downtown-savannah-historic-district-hotel-zones>.

in the USA” (July 2014).²²⁸ The location of the site is adjacent to the Savannah College of Art and Design and within a block of the heavily trafficked Savannah Visitor Center. The Thunderbird Inn has great branding and social media presence. Visitors are able to see the amenities and traveler reviews online. The original neon Thunderbird sign is proudly displayed in front and all of the motel rooms are outfitted with retro décor.



Illustration 11.4. The Thunderbird Inn of Savannah. Photo by Author.

²²⁸ “Get To Know Our Savannah Hotel”, *The Thunderbird Inn*, www.thethunderbirdinn.com/hot-off-the-press.html.



Illustration 11.5. Corridor at the Thunderbird Inn. Photo by Author.



Illustration 11.6. Rooms at the Thunderbird Inn. Photo by Author.



Illustration 11.7. The Thunderbird Inn. Photo by Author.

CONCLUSION

While the Savannah Alamo Plaza has incredible potential, it does also have some disadvantages. One major deterrent is the neighborhood surrounding the site has higher levels of crime than other areas where hotels are located. Although development is reaching this side of the city, the long burden of disinvestment is still highly apparent. The city would need to provide support to increase surveillance in the area and boost further development of neighboring structures. Another large disadvantage is the lack of funding. The manager has hopes to purchase the property from its current owner in the next year or so, yet does not have the necessary funding to repurpose the site quite like the Thunderbird Inn. The Alamo Plaza is in great shape with many, if not all, of its original buildings intact. Several notable structures on the site include single unattached units in great condition that represent the era of the motor court. The Motel even has the telephone units used transfer calls from the front desk to each room. Although the site is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places or the state or local registers, it could be, because much of the historic character of structure completely intact. As Savannah is a very preservation-friendly city, the manager could work with the historic preservation officer for the city in an effort to secure funding and tax credits.

CONCLUSION

As the few remaining Alamo Plaza structures continue to disappear from the American landscape, one cannot help but wonder whether there was an alternate use for interesting and historic sites. In my thesis, I discussed the history of Waco that eventually led to the development of the Alamo Plaza Hotel Courts and the impact that the Courts had and still have on the community today. When a beloved structure has been a local landmark for the community for so long yet seems to have outlived its intended purpose, the lines can be confusing on the best way to approach and care for the site. I have demonstrated how some communities have completely erased this part of history altogether such as Memphis and Waco, ways that the Alamo Plazas have adapted to the current era but have not necessarily thrived like Beaumont and Tyler, how communities still feel deeply attached to their piece of American history as was the case in Dallas, how Atlanta is looking for a new innovative approach to affordable housing to set a national model based on their Alamo Plaza, and how one manager hopes to reinvent his location using redevelopment in the area and the booming tourist economy to better increase his odds to become a boutique motel catering to the many tourists that grace the streets of Savannah.

While this thesis focuses on one particular chain, it also tells the story of many other motor courts, motels, and hotels that developed during this time and have steadily declined as the surrounding areas become less desirable. Other brands of accommodations are facing similar situations when it comes to the longevity of the structure and finding new uses. Communities are constantly questioning whether this longtime familiar structure still provides value that if demolished could never be replaced. The formula for the location of each Alamo Plaza is

replicated in nearly every city they are found in. The Alamo Plazas are situated along the main highway that connect one major market area to another. For example, the Dallas location along the Bankhead highway was placed directly along the route of those traveling from Dallas to Fort Worth. At the time, these corridors were part of the new roadside economy that catered to travelers heading from one city to the next along the new highway system. The courts were located at the edge of city limits, where space was readily available and lands were cheaper. As these outlying city areas declined to further disinvestment and sprawl, patrons became less likely to choose the Alamo Plaza Courts over new competition in a more desirable location.

As investment is steadily poured back into these until recently underutilized areas, the question becomes, “What can be done with these structures?”. Demolition has been a common answer as a way to wipe the slate clean and allow developers to completely transform the site while capitalizing on the Alamo Plaza’s prime location in relationship with downtown. Other, more creative solutions, are also being presented.

In tandem with the need for underutilized structures is the breakdown of the institution educating the younger consumer whether that be in banking systems, products, or in this instance, travel. More than ever before, travelers are able to set their vacation completely on their own terms. Internet and social media have completely transformed the way millennials travel. No longer are tourists planning vacations around one specific location and then booking reservations available chain hotels nearby. With services like Airbnb and HomeAway, travelers are able to connect with hosts around the world and plan vacations completed based on desired lodging. With social media, travelers can discover locations and experiences not previously marketed as vacation destinations. This immense freedom has compelled travelers to buck the

trend of traditional prescribed travel with the focus on a set location as the destination and instead encouraged travelers to make their own way and enjoy the journey along the way. The new model has allowed small travel oriented businesses to thrive. Forgotten motels in hot markets such as Austin and Palm Springs are being renovated to accommodate this new traveling class.

Both the need for reinvestment in outer city neighborhoods and emerging travel trends create a unique opportunity for not only remaining Alamo Plaza Courts, but also other motels in similar situations. The close proximity to the city and unique character are certain advantages that could lure in travelers. With the right use, these locations could once again be prosperous. The Savannah location could utilize both State and Federal Historic Tax Credits, New Market Tax Credits, and even Opportunity Zone funding. Even more resources are available at both the state and local level to reinvest in historic structures. The City of Savannah has the Historic Savannah Foundation which provides grants for historic structures.

With Savannah as the primary example, the same process can be easily replicated in nearly every state throughout the country. The Federal Tax Credit is available for all fifty states while only twelve states do not have tax credits available at the state level. Because many of these locations are in underutilized neighborhoods, New Market Tax Credits can be used to attract private investors and was as funding for areas deemed as Opportunity Zones primed for redevelopment.

While this thesis did address many issues, there is room for further study on the topic. One opportunity could be the investigation of other lodging chains that emerged around this time, like Best Western, with a comparison of the chain to the Alamo Plaza locations. Another opportunity for exploration could include an open source map that allowed users to input

locations and update with information and changes. These findings could provide more insight on trends facing these structures and identify similarities and differences to provide a more accurate assessment of the current state of the site and track as changes take place.

When E.L. Torrance created his first court, the Alamo Plaza Tourist Apartments, one cannot help but wonder if he had any idea of the eventual eclectic state of his motels today. All have lived very different, yet very similar lives. Perhaps he never intended for any of his locations to last this long or maybe he did not attempt to forecast the ebbs and flows of the hospitality industry nearly one hundred years later. The year 2029 will be the hundred-year anniversary for the history of the chain. One can only wonder what stories will be told of the Alamo Plazas at that time.

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