ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF A SEGMENT OF THE PROPOSED SALADO CREEK HIKE-AND-BIKE TRAIL, SAN ANTONIO, BEXAR COUNTY, TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

In April 2012, personnel with Prewitt and Associates, Inc., conducted an archeological survey of a 1,130-m-long proposed hike-and-bike trail along Salado and Panther Springs Creeks between West Avenue and U.S. Highway 281 in San Antonio, Texas. Eight shovel tests were excavated. Recent artifacts were observed on the surface throughout the project area and in one shovel test, and a mid-twentieth-century concrete well head was observed just east of West Avenue. However, no historic materials old enough to warrant designation as archeological sites were found. With the exception of two stream-rolled tested cobbles that appear to have been washed in, no prehistoric artifacts were observed. Strong creek flows scour this area regularly, and a manhole cover indicates that the bed of Salado Creek has been disturbed. Given these findings, the surveyed area has no potential for archeological sites that could contain important information. Hence, construction of the hike-and-bike trail will not impact any archeological resources that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or designation as State Archeological Landmarks. No further archeological work is recommended.

CURATION

No artifacts needing curation were collected during the archeological survey. Project records and photographs will be kept on file at Prewitt and Associates, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2012, personnel with Prewitt and Associates, Inc., conducted an archeological survey for the proposed construction of a hike-and-bike trail between West Avenue and U.S. Highway 281 in San Antonio, Texas (Figure 1). The project will consist of construction of about 1,130 m of trail along Salado Creek and its tributary, Panther Springs Creek. Specifically, the route begins on the east side of West Avenue and follows Panther Springs Creek east and south to North Loop Road. Panther Springs Creek merges with Salado Creek just south of the road, and the proposed route follows Salado Creek eastward on the south side of North Loop Road, ending ca. 125 m west of U.S. Highway 281. The project area was well marked with a combination of flagging tape, lathe survey markers at turns and corners, and periodic stake chasers in the ground. Details of trail construction are unknown, so the archeological survey covered a corridor at least 30 m wide, far wider than needed to accommodate the trail itself. Hence, the horizontal Area of Potential Effects will be less than 8.5 acres of creek bottom, floodplain, and valley wall. The vertical Area of Potential Effects will be shallow, generally 1 m or less, given the noninvasive nature of the planned activity.

The archeological survey was done to satisfy the requirements of the State of Texas Antiquities Code (Texas Natural Resource Code of 1977, Title 9, Chapter 191, VTCS 6145-9), Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and the City of San Antonio Unified Development Code (Article VI, Historic Preservation and Urban Design). The survey was conducted under Texas Antiquities Permit No. 6221.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Bexar County is in south-central Texas and straddles the Balcones Fault Zone, which separates the Edwards Plateau from the Blackland Prairie of the Gulf Coastal Plain to the southeast (Arbingast et al. 1973:6; Bureau of Economic Geology 1983). The Edwards Plateau margin has been heavily dissected by stream downcutting and headward erosion, resulting in a rugged landscape of limestone hills and canyons, whereas the Blackland Prairie is typically rolling tall grasslands underlain by soft limestones, marls, and chalks.

The climate of the Blackland Prairie region can be classified as modified humid subtropical with Gulf-influenced hot summers and continental-influenced mild winters; the Edwards Plateau region is subtropical steppe with low summer humidity (Natural Fibers Information Center 1987:10–12). Summer temperatures can exceed 100°F, and freezing temperatures can occur during the winter months, although such extremes are more frequent in the Edwards Plateau region. The mean annual precipitation for Bexar County is 29.1 inches (739 mm). Rain falls throughout the year, with slight peaks in the late spring and early fall months (Natural Fibers Information Center 1987:49).

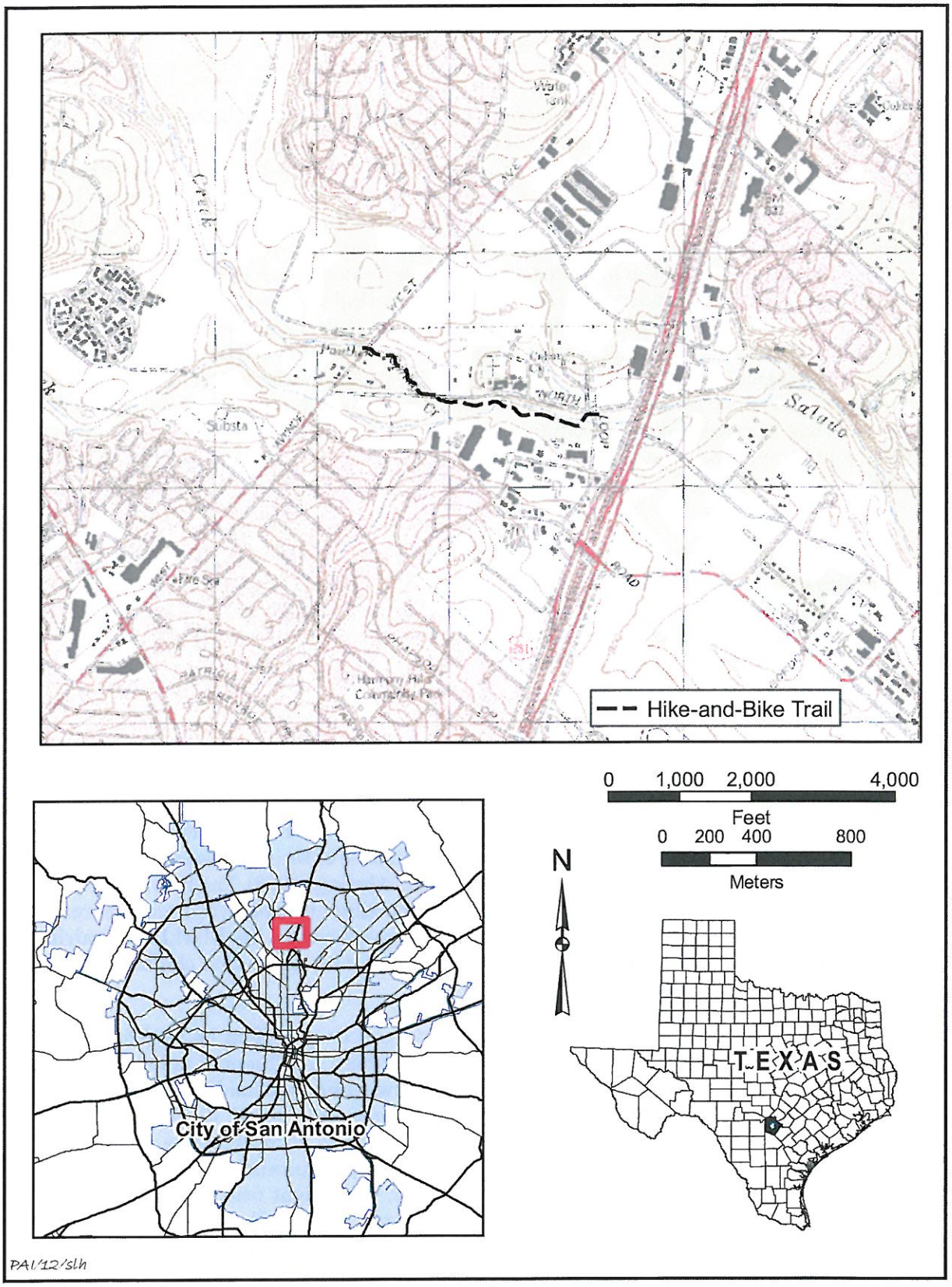

Figure 1. Project location map.

Like the landscape and climate, the biota of Bexar County differs from east to west, although there is geographical overlap of some species. The flora and fauna of the Edwards Plateau are defined as Balconian, while those of the Blackland Prairie are characterized as Texan (Blair 1950).

The proposed trail is on the floodplain of Salado and Panther Springs Creeks, just downstream and upstream from where these creeks join. Holocene fluviatile terrace deposits are mapped here, along with the Upper Cretaceous Austin Chalk Formation (Bureau of Economic Geology 1983). Trinity and Frio soils are mapped over most of the area (Taylor et al. 1991). This portion of the valley appears to have thin gravelly deposits rather than thick fine-grained alluvium, and thus any sites present should be shallowly buried at most and are likely to have been affected by channel cutting and shifting. Recent aerial photographs show that creekside areas here are undeveloped and wooded, though some adjoining lands have been altered by urban development and before that gravel quarrying.

RESULTS OF THE FILE SEARCH

The Texas Historical Commission's Archeological Sites Atlas shows that there are eight recorded sites within 1 km of the project area: 41BX184, 41BX222, 41BX223, 41BX947, 41BX948, 41BX996, 41BX1062, and 41BX1271. Four are on Panther Springs Creek upstream from the project area and were recorded during surveys of the Walker Ranch National Register District or the proposed Wurzbach Parkway. Sites 41BX947 and 41BX948 on Salado Creek downstream from the project area and 41BX1062 to the north of it also were recorded during the Wurzbach Parkway project. All seven of these sites are prehistoric lithic scatters, with varying quantities of lithic debris, lithic tools, burned rocks, and burned rock features. Where depths are documented, they tend to be shallow, ca. 60 cm or less. The eighth site, 41BX1271, is between Salado and Panther Springs Creeks west of the project area; the only thing recorded about it in the sites atlas is its location.

Two previous archeological surveys were conducted immediately north of and within the project area. In April 2011, Abasolo Archaeological Consultants surveyed just north of the current project area on the Coker Methodist Church tract (Shafer and Hester 2011a). Though the project was on private property, the survey was conducted at the request of the City of San Antonio. No cultural resources were observed, and no further work was recommended. In November 2011, a second survey by Abasolo was conducted along the eastern half of the current project area (ca. 2,500 linear ft) from W. North Loop Road to N. North Loop Road (Shafer and Hester 2011b). No cultural materials other than modern flood debris and a homeless-persons occupation site were observed, and no archeological sites were recorded.

Historic maps and aerial photographs depict two areas of historic interest near the project area. The Coker community (founded 1841) consisted of a cluster of homes, businesses, a church, and a cemetery. The community, now subsumed by the City of San Antonio, was

primarily north of North Loop Road between U.S. Highway 281 and West Avenue. Several homes and a restaurant dating to the mid-twentieth century that could be remnants of this community are immediately south of the west end of the proposed route. Second, the Walker Ranch Heritage Park is immediately west of West Avenue just south of the west end of the proposed route.

RESULTS OF THE ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Field investigations consisted of a 100 percent pedestrian survey and surface examination of the 1,130-m-long project area (Figure 2). Surface visibility varied significantly throughout. Seven shovel tests were excavated in the eastern and western thirds, which had less surface visibility than the central third and a greater chance for shallowly buried archeological remains; this equates to a shovel testing intensity of 10 tests per kilometer, consistent with the requirements of the Texas Historical Commission's Archeological Survey Standards for Texas. An eighth test was in the central third.

The eastern part of the proposed route crosses the heavily vegetated floodplain south of Salado Creek, with surface visibility of 0–10 percent. Flood debris and a vagrants' campsite were noted, but no archeological sites were found. Sediment accumulations 10–30 cm thick were observed in cut banks, and three shovel tests were excavated here (Shovel Tests 5–7). These tests reached 10–30 cm deep and exposed dark brown clay loam overlying large gravels. No cultural materials were recovered.

The central part of the hike-and-bike trail route crosses braided streambeds with exposed gravels and excellent visibility (70–100 percent). Here, the proposed route is north of Salado Creek, just downstream from the confluence with Panther Springs Creek. Strong flow from both creeks and drainage from industrial buildings, parking lots, and streets to the south of the project area have cleared most vegetation from this area. The lack of vegetation combined with long segments of drainage exposures precluded the need for shovel testing. Small flood debris (glass bottle fragments and plastic items) was observed in this area. Cut banks and numerous eroded washes expose thin gravel deposits with little sediment accumulation. Two stream-rolled tested cobbles were observed in one of the washes, and the bank nearby was explored with Shovel Test 8; no additional lithic materials were observed, and it is likely that the two tested cobbles had been washed in. A manhole cover observed near the center of the project route indicates that buried sewer lines may lie beneath the bed of Salado Creek, indicating substantial disturbance.

The western part of the project area traverses the southern valley wall of Panther Springs Creek. This portion of the proposed route is lightly wooded with some small meadow-like clearings. Visibility was fair (40–80 percent). Several homes (originally associated with the Coker community) are immediately west of the proposed route, and the route skirts several backyards. Sparse scatters of recent historic materials including bricks, mortared slabs of limestone, tin can fragments, container and window glass, tires, a paint can, sewer

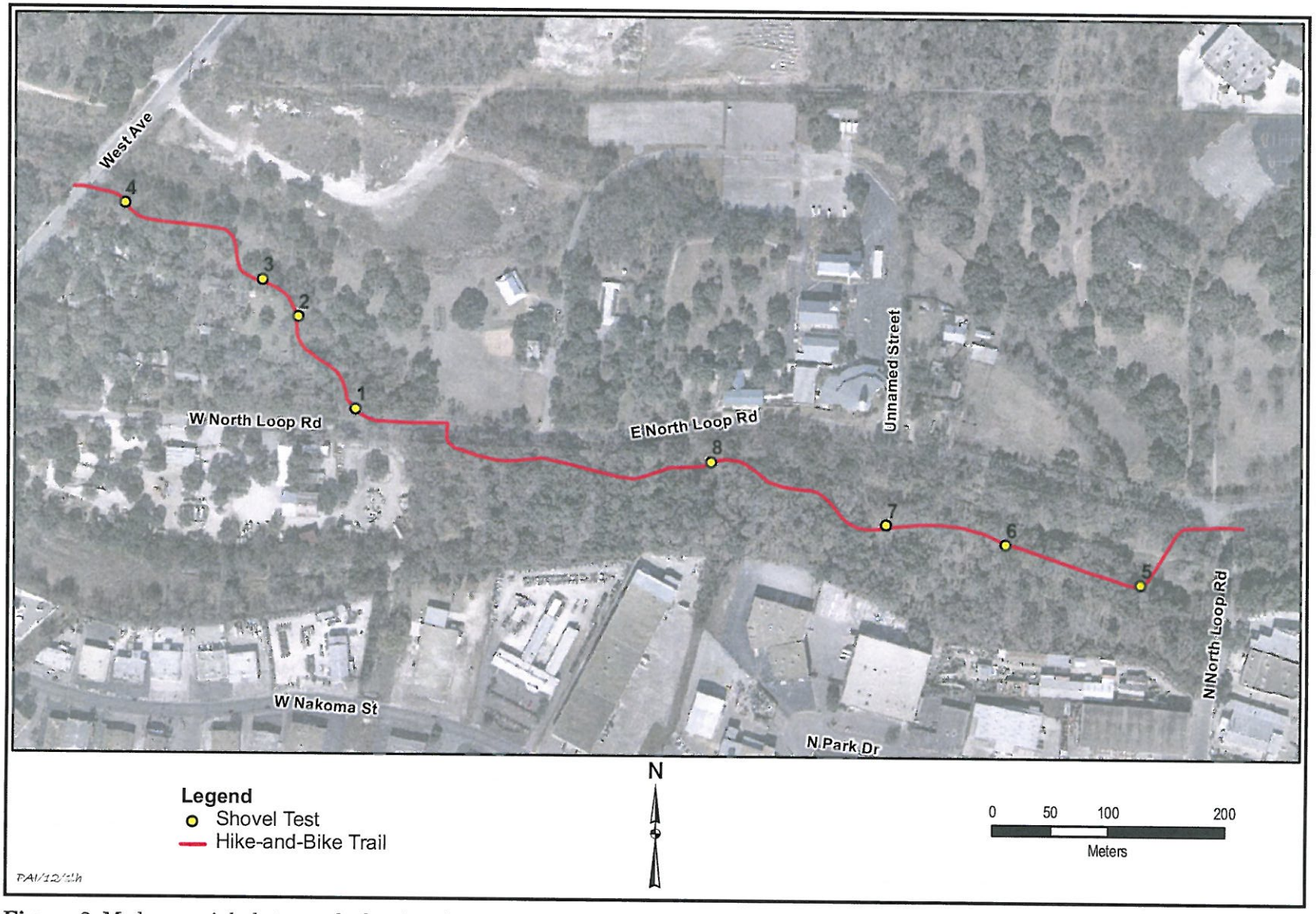

Figure 2. Modern aerial photograph showing the survey areas and shovel test locations.

pipe fragments, and a window air conditioner unit were observed in this area, but none appeared old enough to indicate historic archeological sites. Despite good visibility, three shovel tests (Shovel Tests 1–3) were excavated in this portion of the project area based on the presence of recent historic material on the surface. These tests reached 20–30 cm and exposed dark brown silty clay overlying thick gravels. What appears to be a water well dating to the mid-twentieth century was observed ca. 40 m east of West Avenue. The metal well pipe sits atop a 7x8-ft concrete pad and is encased in a block of concrete measuring roughly 2 ft wide by 3 ft long and 3 ft high. Several large bolts are embedded in the concrete block, presumably to secure a superstructure such as a windmill base or pump. Shovel Test 4 was excavated ca. 5 m northeast of the well and exposed 20 cm of dark brown silty clay over gravels. One piece of flat glass and one piece of thin clear container glass were recovered but were not diagnostic and not collected. Given the apparently recent origin of the well and the lack of any associated historic archeological deposits, the feature was not recorded as an archeological site. It is presumed that this well relates to residential, agricultural, or ranching improvements in the vicinity, perhaps fronting on West Avenue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recent artifacts were observed on the surface throughout the project area and in one shovel test, and a mid-twentieth-century concrete well head was observed just east of West Avenue. However, no historic materials old enough to warrant designation as archeological sites were found. With the exception of two stream-rolled tested cobbles that appear to have been washed in, no prehistoric artifacts were observed. Strong creek flows scour this area regularly, and a manhole cover indicates that the bed of Salado Creek has been disturbed. Given these findings, the surveyed area has no potential for archeological sites that could contain important information. Hence, construction of the hike-and-bike trail will not impact any archeological resources that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or designation as State Archeological Landmarks. No further archeological work is recommended.

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