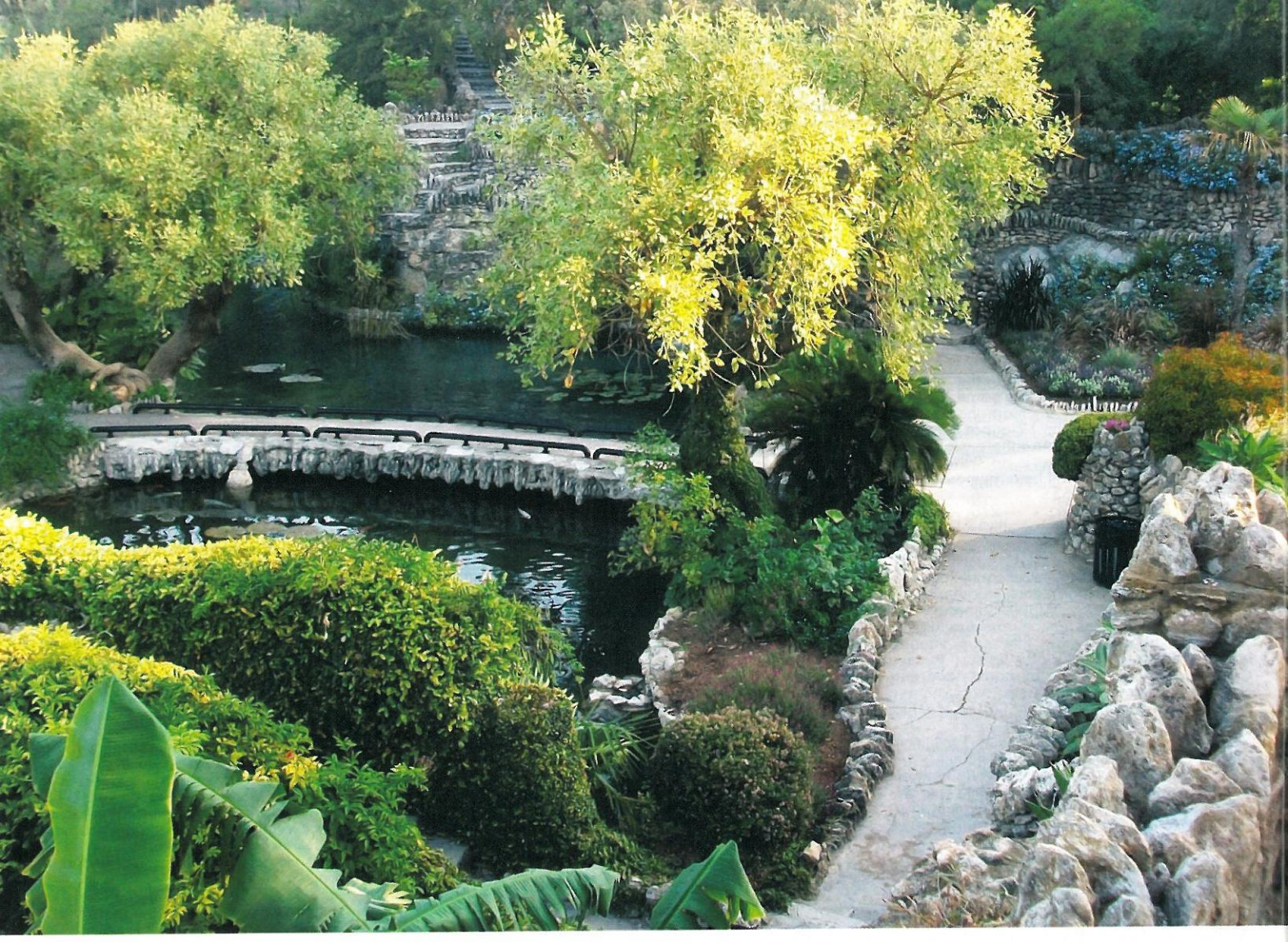


BRACKENRIDGE PARK

an urban paradise

by The City of San Antonio, Office of Historic Preservation
photos by Office of Historic Preservation

Looking for a natural getaway in the heart of the city? Then don't miss a visit to Brackenridge Park. Just minutes from downtown, Brackenridge Park is one of San Antonio's most beautiful natural resources, nestled into the urban fabric of the city. Encompassing over 344 acres, the park begins at Hildebrand Avenue, just south of the University of the Incarnate Word campus, and continues south along the course of the San Antonio River. Since its creation in 1899 the park has evolved from a natural preserve into an urban oasis of greenspace with amenities including the San Antonio Zoo, the Japanese Tea Garden, the Sunken Garden Theater, a municipal golf course, museums, a playground, a recreation center, pavilions, walking trails, public art, and even a miniature train known as the Brackenridge Eagle.

Philanthropist and businessman George W. Brackenridge donated 199 acres of land along the San Antonio River to the City for park space in 1899. Much of the land had been used previously by Brackenridge and others as a waterworks company, providing water to the city from springs at the San Antonio River headwaters and through a system of artesian wells. A series of scenic drives and a deer preserve were first developed in the park at the turn of the century.

The most historic features of the park are the two 18th-century Spanish colonial acequias, or irrigation ditches: the Alamo Acequia on the east side of the river and the Upper Labor Acequia and dam on the river's west side. Originally designed to provide irrigation water from the San Antonio River, remnants of these early engineering systems (although somewhat modified) are still visible within the park. In the late 19th century, a stone pump house and raceway were constructed along the river as part of the early municipal water system. Much of the park as it exists today was the work of City Park Commissioner Ray Lambert in the early 20th century. A natural swimming beach was created at the old pump house in 1915 and was converted into a public swimming pool in

Opposite Page: Japanese Tea Garden **This Page From Top:** Dionicio Rodriguez Faux Bois Footbridge, Sunken Garden Theater Entrance Drive, Berlin Iron Bridge formerly over the San Antonio River at St. Mary's Street.

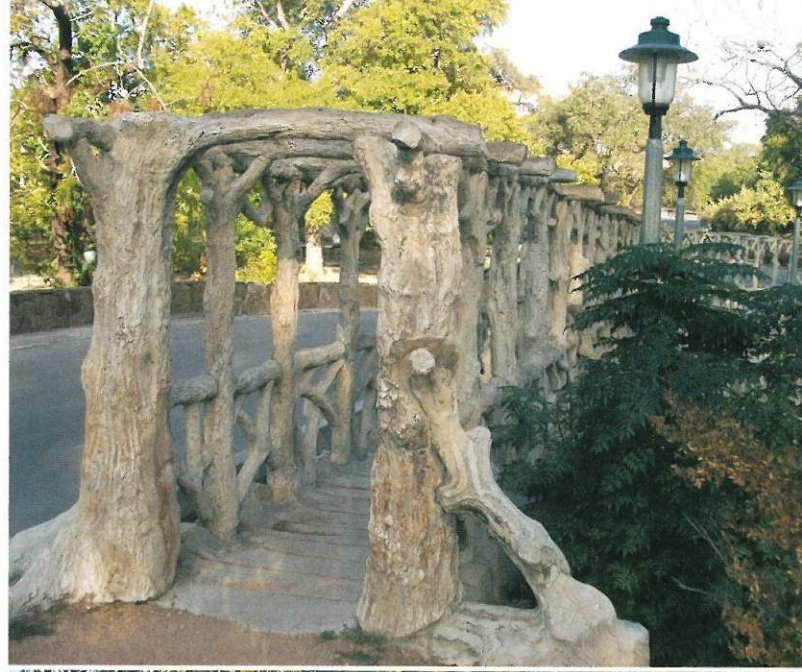
1925. A stone bathhouse with dressing rooms constructed for the pool remains in the park. The bathhouse roof was removed in the 1990s and the facility converted into a playscape.

The Berlin Iron Bridge, spanning the San Antonio River in the park was originally located downtown on St. Mary's Street. The imposing Joske Pavilion near the Berlin Bridge was donated to the park by Alexander Joske, of San Antonio's former Joske's Department Store. It was constructed in 1926 and is adjacent to the Eleanor Brackenridge Playground, named for the sister of the park's benefactor George Brackenridge.

Scattered throughout Brackenridge Park are numerous faux bois sculptural elements designed by Mexican artist Dionicio Rodriguez. He utilized a special technique to create concrete pieces that resembled natural wood. His most unique piece is a footbridge at the north end of the park. Constructed in 1926 and designed to represent a rustic wooden arbor, this whimsical creation was originally decorated with "gnome" figures peeping out from below the bridge. As you stroll across the footbridge see if you can spot the two places where the artist etched his name. Other Rodriguez faux bois pieces within Brackenridge Park include fountains, a table and benches, and tree stump planters.

For year-round outdoor fun, visit the San Antonio Zoo, also nestled within Brackenridge Park. San Antonio's first zoo was established in San Pedro Park in the late 19th century, but Brackenridge Park has been home to exotic animals since 1914 when deer, buffalo, and bears were introduced to the park. This collection developed into the San Antonio Zoological Society in 1928, and in 1929 San Antonio reportedly offered the first cage-less exhibits in the United States, the Barless Bear Terraces and Primate Paradise, commonly known as Monkey Island. Like many other features in Brackenridge Park, the San Antonio Zoo was designed within an abandoned rock quarry, and the natural limestone walls provide scenic backdrops for many of the exhibits. In the 1940s, many additions to the zoo were designed under the Works Progress Administration. Today, the San Antonio Zoo features a unique collection of native limestone buildings, meandering waterways from the San Antonio River, and over 3,500 animals from around the world.

The Japanese Tea Garden within Brackenridge Park is a must see! The Japanese Garden was created in 1917 under City Park Commissioner Ray Lambert at the site of the former Alamo Cement Company rock quarry. Alamo Cement Company relocated in 1908, and the vacated rock quarry was later transformed into a Japanese-style "sunken garden" with a lily pond, island, stone bridges, meandering paths, lush landscaping, and a Japanese-style pagoda. A rustic, faux-bois entrance gate was created by artist Dionicio Rodriguez. A Japanese-American family, the Jingus, moved into the park in 1926 to care for the grounds and opened a Japanese tea house called the Bamboo Room. The family was evicted in 1942 following anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II, and a Chinese-American family took over the facility. At that time the name was changed to the Chinese Tea Garden. In 1984, the park was rededicated as the Japanese Tea Garden, and recent work has restored the gardens to their tranquil beauty. The historic Jingu House is currently undergoing restoration that will be completed soon. At the base of the gardens are the remaining kilns and smokestack from the former Alamo Cement Company.

The Sunken Garden Theater near the Japanese Tea Garden is an open air amphitheater also constructed within the basin of the abandoned Alamo Cement quarry. Constructed in 1930, the design was inspired by ancient Greek amphitheaters, and the semi-circular basin of the former rock quarry provides natural acoustics for outdoor concerts and venues. The theater was expanded in 1937 for the Texas Centennial commemorating the 100th anniversary of independence from Mexico in 1836.

For additional information about Brackenridge Park contact the City of San Antonio Department of Parks and Recreation at www.sanantonio.gov/parksandrec/directory_brackenridge.aspx or the Brackenridge Park Conservancy at www.brackenridgepark.org/.