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Meet Me at the Plazas

Comprised of two adjoining plazas, this San Antonio historic district remains a vibrant part of the city

Text by **GENE FOWLER**

The courtyard of the Spanish Governor's Palace, on the west side of Military Plaza, has a long, romantic history. It's still a popular spot for San Antonio weddings.



See!

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TWO ADJACENT PLAZAS IN THE heart of Old San Antonio teemed with life in the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, Main Plaza, or Plaza de las Islas—named for the Canary Islanders who settled around it in 1731—and Military Plaza, or Plaza de Armas, still bustle with activity and anchor the 13-block Main and Military Plazas Historic District. Thanks to a major redesign in 2008, Main Plaza offers a pedestrian-friendly space for concerts and other events. And in Military Plaza, the only visible evidence of the Spanish garrison built here in the 1720s—originally the presidio captain's residence, now known as the Spanish Governor's Palace—reopened this past spring after receiving a new roof and other improvements.

San Fernando Cathedral, begun in 1738 and completed in 1749, stands between the two plazas. The cathedral's French Gothic façade was constructed from 1868 to 1873. The church's original, 18th-Century walls can be seen inside the sanctuary; the original exterior of the

church's apse is visible from Military Plaza.

The inscription on a marble sarcophagus here states that some of the remains of the Alamo defenders are contained within. Historians disagree about the matter, but church records indicate that restoration workers in 1936 turned up a box of charred bones and fragments of clothing that appeared to be uniforms.

Other major historical events took place on and around Plaza de Armas and Plaza de las Islas. For example, according to Elizabeth A.H. John's 1976 book *Storms Brewed in Other Men's Worlds*, Spanish officials and Apache leaders held a treaty ceremony here in 1749. Priests joined the soldiers, Apaches, and citizens in a ritual peace dance,

Today, Main Plaza features splash fountains where kids can frolic, food kiosks, and tables and benches where you can eat, read, and watch the world go by.

followed by the burial of a hatchet, a lance, arrows, and a live horse. "There are conflicting hypotheses about whether the burials took place in Main or Military Plaza," says Kay Hindes, City Archaeologist with San Antonio's Office of Historic Preservation.

Though Plaza de Armas appears to have lost its military presence in the late-18th or early-19th Century, the plaza's important role in San Antonio history continued. Alamo defender James Bowie married Ursula de Veramendi at San Fernando Cathedral in 1831. David Crockett, after telling his fellow Tennesseans that they could go to hell and he'd go to Texas, orated an address in Main Plaza in 1836. Weeks later, after the arrival of the Mexican Army force that attacked the Alamo, Santa Anna raised a flag on San Fernando's tower demanding "no quarter" for the Texian defenders.

As a noted outpost of the Old West, San Antonio was not short on saloons, and

many of the gambling and imbibing emporiums lined the plazas. Historian Charles Ramsdell wrote in his 1959 book *San Antonio, A Historical and Pictorial Guide* that in the second half of the 19th Century, when Military Plaza no longer quartered soldiers, it became "the liveliest spot" in Texas. By day, a farmers market occupied the old Plaza de Armas. Come sundown the plaza became a torch-and-lantern-

lit bazaar. From portable stoves, women known as the chili queens sold chili-concarne, tamales, and enchiladas. Their legend attracted writers such as *Red Badge of Courage* author Stephen Crane, who joined other diners at long wooden tables. Crane wrote that the chili hit his palate like "pounded

firebrick from Hades," but more than a century later, historian Marian L. Martinello noted in her book *The Search for a Chili Queen* that many accounts did not mention the heat. (The dozens of vintage images in Martinello's book reveal that the outdoor cafés operated in daylight, as well.)

During this same period, mesmerizing medicine men hawked their wondrous elixirs from carnival wagons with colorful performers and exotic displays, and strolling troubadours vied for attention with shell-game operators, curio peddlers, and silver-tongued shysters.

The curtain came down on Plaza de Armas' starring role in San Antonio nightlife around 1890 with the construction of a new city hall in the center of the plaza. The French Second Empire structure of native limestone still stands, as does the Bexar County Courthouse, a magnificent Romanesque edifice of red sandstone and granite, which arose on the

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Speaking of Texas

Main and Military Plazas Historic District

MAIN AND MILITARY PLAZAS LIE BETWEEN WEST COMMERCE and West Houston streets, about a mile west of the Alamo, in downtown San Antonio. The Main Plaza Conservancy hosts concerts, film screenings, story-



telling, a weekly farmers market, and many annual events. Call the Main Plaza Conservancy, 210/225-9800; www.mainplaza.org.

San Fernando Cathedral, on the west side of Main Plaza, offers self-guided and docent-guided tours highlighting its art, history, and architecture. Call 210/576-1365 or 210/227-1297; www.sfcathedral.org.

The patio of the Spanish Governor's Palace, on the west side of Military Plaza, offers an attractive site for weddings and other events. Call 210/224-0601; www.sanantonio.gov/dtops/parks_plazas/governorspalace.aspx.

—Gene Fowler

Pedestrian-friendly Main Plaza showcases local culture, offering space for music performances, artists' displays, and a farmers market.

southern side of Main Plaza four years later.

By 1915, the captain's house on Military Plaza had fallen into such disrepair that pioneer preservationist Adina De Zavala identified the structure only by the Hapsburg coat of arms above the entrance and by the inscription, "*año 1749 se acabó* (completed in 1749)." Announcing her discovery, the *San Antonio Express* ran the headline, "Governor's Palace With Imperial Coat of Arms Tells of the Spanish Rule." Though the structure originally housed the presidio captain, it also served as the residence of the last ad-interim Spanish governor of Texas from 1816 to around 1820.

The palace had become a private residence by 1820. From the 1870s to the 1920s, it housed a cantina, produce market, pawn shop, and clothing store. The city bought the building in the late 1920s and restored it in 1930. New vigas, or ceiling beams, were created from telephone poles. A new outdoor patio was

paved with pebbles from the San Antonio River. Black walnut doors carved by master craftsman Peter Mansbendel depict the saga of Spanish America in bas relief.

Plaza visitors never know when the hallowed ground may yield more mysteries. In 2003, archeologists uncovered a portion of the 18th-Century presidio wall at Commerce and Camaron, across the street from the Spanish Governor's Palace. Marian Martinello hurried to see the structure, one step ahead of the bulldozer.

"I approached the wall and touched it," she wrote in her 2006 book *The Search for Pedro's Story*. "At that moment, I sensed that the soldiers of Presidio San Antonio de Bejar and I were connected across the centuries by this place, this wall. ...I resolved to stand where they might have stood, walk where they probably walked. ..."

And thanks to the efforts of preservationists, we can walk there still. **TH**