

INTRODUCTION PART 1

THE BRACKENRIDGE PARK LANDSCAPE

A CONDENSED HISTORY

Imagine a clear, cold river originating from a deep, gushing artesian spring, not trickling, but rushing, chasing itself through prairie grassland. It forges a winding path that stretches southeasterly, like a ribbon unraveling for nearly 250 miles. Life blooms and bursts in many forms along this river's upper banks for thousands upon thousands of years, until eventually, a city grows.

The Brackenridge Park landscape was once a stomping ground for mammoths and other prehistoric life. It was part of a ritual migratory route for Indigenous Americans. It is the origin of one of this country's earliest democratized water systems, executed through a Spanish system of acequias and built by Indigenous people to irrigate and provide potable water to the Spanish missions (1719 – 1724), and eventually to provide water to secular settlements for almost one hundred years (1770s–1850s). It is the site of early industrial development in the form of limestone quarries that first built up the city (1850s – 1880). It is the site of a Civil War Confederate tannery and sawmill where enslaved people labored (1863 – 1865) and the site of a cement company, which, by the hands of workers, further contributed to the building up of San Antonio (1880 – 1908).

This landscape then became a grand, shady, scenic driving park and a river swimming hole that attracted locals and tourists from around the country (1899) (**figures 1 and 2**). It became the grounds for a charming display of buildings that melded German architectural styles of “half-timbering or rock-and-mortar methods”¹ with native limestone materials that resulted in distinctly local buildings and structures that still dot the park and the city. Its limestone quarries eventually became exceptional, dramatic backdrops to what is today the historic

1 Hulbert G. H. Wilhelm, “Organized German Settlement and Its Effects on the Frontier of South-Central Texas” (Dissertation 1523, Louisiana State University, 1968), iv, accessed November 4, 2019, digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/1523.



FIGURE –1. View of a historic carriage way in Brackenridge Park, circa 1900s. Source: Witte Museum Collection



FIGURE –2. View of people canoeing and picnicking in Brackenridge Park, circa 1900s. Automobiles are parked along the riverbank, middle right. Source: Witte Museum Collection

San Antonio Zoo (1915), the Japanese Tea Garden (1917), and the Sunken Garden Theater, an outdoor theater (1930). It became a canvas for public art—whimsical *faux bois* bridges, benches, and tables created by Mexican-born Dionicio Rodriguez, as well as works by other notable artists. It is the original and long-time home to The Witte (1926), today a first-class natural history museum. It was a public space where civil rights for African Americans and Mexican Americans were once denied and, eventually, enacted (1950s). In 1997, it became home to the Tunnel Inlet, an engineering feat that protects downtown San Antonio from flood events and, alternatively, maintains the flow of water to the river during drought. This landscape contains many more defining layers as well.

“People have been grilling meat here alongside the river for 12,000 years. They are still sitting here, alongside the river, and grilling meat today.”² Speaking about Brackenridge Park, Ricardo Romo, a San Antonio native, urban historian, photographer, and former University of Texas at San Antonio president, made an on-the-record³ version of this remark in 2012. He has repeated the sentiment many times since, because the tradition persists year after year to the present.

Yet many San Antonians are aware neither of this landscape’s expansive natural and cultural heritage nor of its storied development as public parkland. To paraphrase another local historian, Lewis F. Fisher, many San Antonians think of Brackenridge Park as an “old shoe”⁴ rather than as a prized public landscape. Some locals possess nostalgic memories of the park’s prime periods of development and use, ranging between the 1920s and 1950s. And over the past fifty or more years, a purely San Antonian Easter tradition that local Mexican Americans embraced in the park has also become beloved and deeply rooted. But as a result of limited resources, lack of public awareness, benign neglect, and, in some cases, being “loved to death,” Brackenridge Park today mostly appears run down.

The site’s captivating and complicated ecological and cultural layers are barely evident; Brackenridge Park does not appear to be the landscape that its history merits. Circulation leading from city streets into the park is not well marked. No central welcoming visitor center or wayfinding system orients people to the relationship between the park and the resources and institutions situated in this landscape—it is unclear to users that the Japanese Tea Garden, Witte Museum, San Antonio Zoo, and Brackenridge Park Golf Course are each a component of a single substantial park. One cannot easily decipher how to move through the entire park, which contains a surprising variety of landscape experiences, from wooded trails to riparian banks to an arid desert-plant community and a view overlooking historic quarries. The Joske Pavilion playground, a space that bears its own worthy past, is teeming with vultures attracted to the site because of feeding activity in the zoo. The once airy woodland landscape through which historic carriage and motorways wind (today as pedestrian trails) is dense with invasive plant species is the accidental habitat of a feral cat colony.

Historic buildings and structures as well as live oak canopies need maintenance. Soil is bare, compacted, and eroding, endangering the health of existing trees and undermining

2 Ricardo Romo, CLR Draft Feedback and Treatment Workshop, August 2019.

3 Rivard, Robert. “Brackenridge Park: San Antonio’s Neglected Crown Jewel,” in *Rivard Report* (Institute for Nonprofit News, October 7, 2016), accessed October 1, 2019, therivardreport.com/brackenridge-park-san-antonios-neglected-crown-jewel/.

4 Lewis F. Fisher, CLR Draft Comments, August 2019.



FIGURE –3. View of erosion along the banks of the San Antonio River, February 2019. Source: Reed Hilderbrand

the river’s integrity. There is no young generation of trees to replace the aging canopy in the coming years. Natural bottomland woodland and riverbank plant communities that once protected and enriched the river are either nearing collapse or are gone. As a result, the San Antonio River, frequently described as containing crystal-clear water, appears dark and unhealthy in some areas. It is laden with duck, goose, and heron excrement, contamination from surrounding parking lots and roadways, and the excessive runoff that comes with urban development. Its WPA-era limestone retaining walls are crumbling, and its banks are eroding (**figure 3**).

There is a palpable disconnect between the landscape’s current conditions and its millennia-long thread of natural, cultural, and historic value. Traces of its significance are vaguely and disjointedly visible, but none of this landscape’s significance is truly understood. Visitors do not know that Brackenridge Park is a cultural landscape of major importance in San Antonio and in America—and yet it is exactly this!

Brackenridge Park’s cultural significance, historic character, and ecological health are diminished, and currently the park is not immersing people in its story. These issues deserve to be remedied. Successfully remedying them will require that they be addressed holistically.

SAN ANTONIO'S LARGE MUNICIPAL PARK

Brackenridge Park is San Antonio's first *large municipal park*⁵—so defined, in part, by its vast 343-acre size and its ownership and management by the city of San Antonio. The term *municipal park* and is a general baseline term that falls under the umbrella of the long history of park design in America. Naming and comprehending Brackenridge Park at this level is useful, because it is a starting point for illuminating the ways in which the Brackenridge Park landscape surpasses its basic classification.

America's first large municipal park, Central Park, was designed and began to be implemented in 1857. On the heels of Central Park, large municipal parks emerged around the country throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Brackenridge Park, envisioned and established in 1899 with an initial 199-acre donation by philanthropist George Brackenridge, was among this first wave of large American municipal parks.

In addition to being distinguished by size and city ownership and management, large municipal parks are defined by their inclusion of “such diverse amenities as zoos, outdoor theatres, golf courses, and public gardens.”⁶ They are also comprised of sequential spatial experiences “characterized by winding roads and paths, woodlands,...large expanses of lawn, and groves of trees.”⁷ In almost every way, Brackenridge Park fits the standard profile of a large municipal park.

These parks also often include artificial lakes. But flowing through the center of Brackenridge Park is a favorable natural feature, the upper course of the San Antonio River. The river originates from a complex of natural artesian springs located just north of Brackenridge Park. One of the largest of these, the San Antonio Springs, is locally known as the Blue Hole. It is within walking distance from the park on property owned by the Sisters Charity of the Incarnate Word, and it is widely considered the source of the San Antonio River. The banks of the San Antonio River and its immediate watershed were the locus of activity and occupancy in the region from prehistory to Indigenous bands,⁸ to imperialist and religious explorers and missionaries, and to the first settlers of European origin. All these features classify Brackenridge Park as a cultural landscape.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPES—TERMS AND TYPOLOGIES

Most San Antonians know that their city is brimming with culture and history. But they may not be aware that *cultural landscape* is a designated term with designated paths to protection. In 1984, the National Park Service (NPS) defined a cultural landscape as

a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person, or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values.⁹

⁵ Italicized, bold terms in this chapter are defined in the glossary at the end of this CLR.

⁶ Lewis F. Fisher, CLR Draft Comments, August 2019. “Large Municipal Park.” The Cultural Landscape Foundation. tclf.org/category/designed-landscape-types/public-park/large-municipal-park.

⁷ “Large Municipal Park,” The Cultural Landscape Foundation, accessed November 1, 2019, tclf.org/category/designed-landscape-types/public-park/large-municipal-park.

⁸ None of the Coahuiltecans of the area were considered tribes. They were, according to a 2014 article by Bobby L. Lovett and Russell K. Skowronek, smaller family groups described as bands.

⁹ “Understand Cultural Landscapes,” National Park Service, nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes/understand-cl.htm.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention began recognizing cultural landscapes internationally in 1992, defining them as “combined works of nature and man,” and

illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces”¹⁰

The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF), established in 1998, defined cultural landscapes as those

that have been affected, influenced, or shaped by human involvement. A cultural landscape can be associated with a person or event. It can be thousands of acres or a tiny homestead. It can be a grand estate, industrial site, park, garden, cemetery, campus, and more. Collectively, cultural landscapes are works of art, narratives of culture, and expressions of regional identity.¹¹

Perhaps the most compelling definition to date, specifically considering Brackenridge Park, was offered in 2000 by Dolores Hayden, Yale University professor emeritus of Architecture and American Studies. Hayden stated that a cultural landscape is

that combination of natural landforms and buildings that defines a particular place or region. It is the creation of the women, men, and children who lived their lives within that landscape.¹²

Hayden follows her definition with a critical statement:

Preserved and interpreted for the public, the cultural landscape tells us who we are, as Americans, far more effectively than most works of architecture or exhibits in museums ever can. Main streets and mail-order houses, *casitas* and steam baths, small towns and big parks, Pueblo Indian kivas and Midwestern flower gardens—all convey the specific traces of American material life as generations of diverse peoples have lived it.¹³

Brackenridge Park has no preservation plan, and it is not “interpreted for the public.” Yet it is teeming with every feature that is distinct to cultural landscapes, and the park is most certainly an expression of San Antonio’s regional identity. This CLR provides the starting point for an exacting and urgent endeavor. It is park leadership’s first opportunity to adopt and implement a preservation plan and to develop substantive interpretation.

10 “Cultural Landscapes,” UNESCO World Heritage Center, accessed November 1, 2019, whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#1.

11 “About Cultural Landscapes,” The Cultural Landscape Foundation, accessed November 1, 2019, tclf.org/places/about-cultural-landscapes.

12 Dolores Hayden, “In Search of the American Landscape,” in *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*, ed. Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Melnick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), vii-ix.

13 Hayden, “In Search of the American Landscape,” vii-ix.

SITUATING BRACKENRIDGE PARK AS A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Brackenridge Park, like its most prominent municipal park predecessor, Central Park, embodies the distinction of being both a large municipal park and a cultural landscape. The two parks represent categorically different types of cultural landscapes, however. The NPS differentiates four types of cultural landscapes: *designed landscapes*, *vernacular landscapes*, *historic sites*, and *ethnographic landscapes*. It is typical for a single landscape to contain overlap, and this is the case with Brackenridge Park.

A *designed landscape* is one that was “consciously designed and laid out...by a master gardener, landscape architect, architect, or horticulturalist to a design principle, or by an owner or other amateur according to a recognized style or tradition.”¹⁴

On the other hand, a *vernacular landscape* is one

whose construction, or physical layout reflects endemic traditions, customs, beliefs, or values; in which the expression of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions over time is manifested in physical features and materials and their interrelationships, including patterns of spatial organization, land use, circulation, structures, and objects; in which the physical, biological, and cultural features reflect the customs and everyday lives of people.¹⁵

Brackenridge Park most visibly possesses the qualities of a vernacular landscape. The differences between the park-making process for Central Park and the park-making process for Brackenridge Park also evidence this fact.

The process by which a designed landscape comes to be created is straightforward and predictable. For Central Park, locations were carefully deliberated, including an unoccupied “150-acre wooded landscape on the Upper East Side”¹⁶ and an area that included “Seneca Village, the largest community of African-American property owners in 19th-century New York”¹⁷ as well as Irish immigrants and German descendants. According to Sain-Baird, “this area was considered stable and prosperous,”¹⁸ compared with other African American areas in the city at the time. Ultimately, a value judgement was made, this was the site chosen, and “the New York State Legislature enacted a law that set aside 776 acres of land...to create the country’s first major landscaped park.”¹⁹ In 1856, this land was cleared “through eminent domain, which allowed the government to take private land for public use, with compensation to the landowner.... There were roughly 1,600 inhabitants displaced throughout the area.”²⁰

With the land designated and cleared, a design competition was held in 1857. The winning plan, by architect Calvert Vaux and by Frederick Law Olmsted, who is credited as being the “father of landscape architecture,” was selected; the process was administered by a board of commissioners; and construction began under the same administration. The chosen

14 “Defining Cultural Landscapes,” National Park Service, nps.gov/subjects/culturallandscapes/understand-cl.htm.

15 Defining Cultural Landscapes,” National Park Service.

16 Marissa Castrigno, “The Competition: 33 Plans for Central Park in 1858,” Central Park Conservancy (blog), April 18, 2019, accessed November 2, 2019, centralparknyc.org/about/blog/competition-33-plans-for-central-park.html.

17 Jessica Sain-Baird, “The Story of Seneca Village,” Central Park Conservancy (blog), January 18, 2018, accessed October 6, 2019, centralparknyc.org/about/blog/story-of-seneca-village.html.

18 Sain-Baird, “Story of Seneca Village.”

19 Sain-Baird, “Story of Seneca Village.”

20 Sain-Baird, “Story of Seneca Village.”

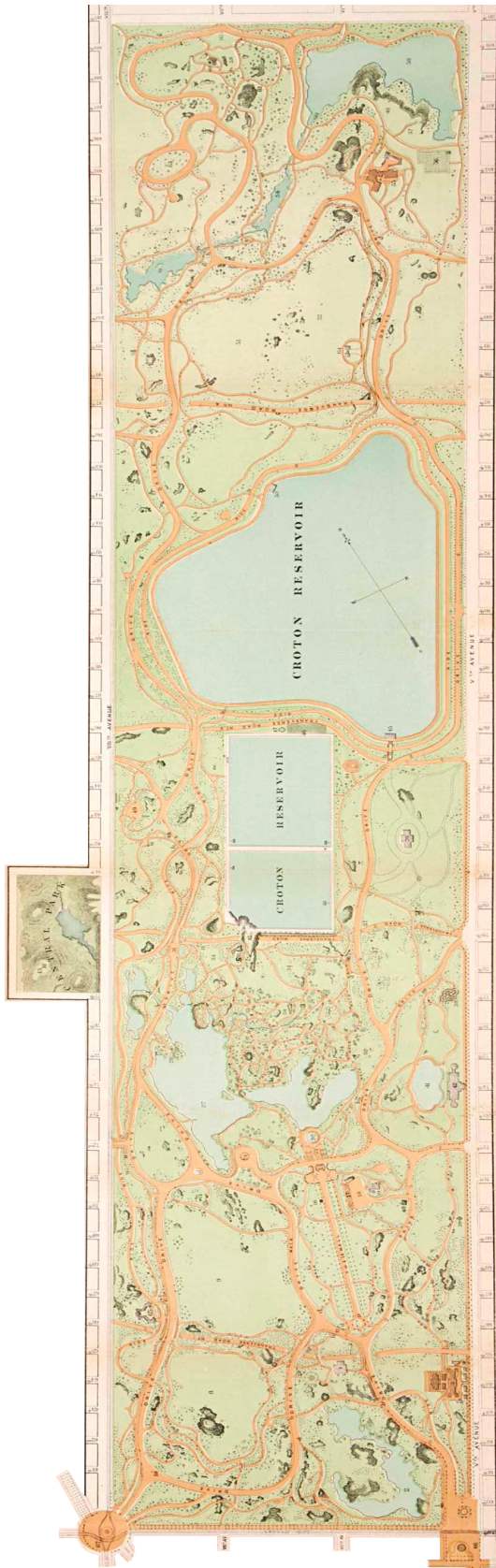


FIGURE -4. An 1871 plan of Central Park by Olmsted and Vaux shows the park integrated with city street grid. The Museum of Natural History, center left, is included in the plan. Source: Charles E. Beveridge and Paul Rocheleau, *Frederick Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape*

master plan, called the Greensward plan, guided the development that followed (**figure 4**). As social and political trends and forces have evolved, changes have been made, but the essential character and features of Central Park remain and have been sustained over time.

The process by which a vernacular landscape is created is different from that of a designed landscape in every instance. When George Brackenridge made his original 1899 bequest to the city of San Antonio, he paved the way for a park that would be influenced by Central Park and park design movements of the time, including the emergence of the national park system. But overwhelmingly, this landscape's transformation from forested and industrial use to a place of respite and recreation for the population of San Antonio can best be described as organic.

Unlike the making of Central Park, there was neither a deliberate governmental determination regarding park location nor any known formal discussion of a master plan for Brackenridge Park. Instead, with George Brackenridge's donation, the public value of lands bordering the San Antonio River—the city's reason for being—was removed from private development and dedicated to public access and use in perpetuity. Whereas Central Park was deliberately placed into a surrounding city grid, the San Antonio River provided Brackenridge Park's central unifying thread. Hundred-year-old acequias located east and west of the river inadvertently helped shape its overall boundaries and form. In essence, the form of the park followed the form of the site's major water features (**figure 5**).

The intention of the park making was unstated in the plan for Brackenridge Park beyond the idea that it would be a driving park, initially for carriages and soon followed by the introduction of the automobile—both transports of the elite. The park's acreage gradually increased, and a circuit of carriageways was constructed that allowed visitors to directly cross the river in two locations and to experience the beauty of the woodlands that characterized the landscape.

The growth and development of the park came out of a series of ordinary responses to the evolution

of various special-interest groups: cultural and neighborhood groups, political organizations, swimmers, exotic animal lovers, gardeners, golfers, childhood education alliances, polo players, civic boosters, and so on. As each of these “needs” were accommodated within the park acreage, no overarching plan or conceptual goal guided the site selection, and there was no prescribed method for evaluating the appropriateness of new land uses. The process was often what was most expedient, a response to those who lobbied the loudest or to those who had the best connections with decision-makers.

Central Park and Brackenridge Park are both magnificent parks but both also have contested histories. And although they are each in and of themselves nationally important, they exist at two ends of a spectrum. Central Park bears national significance as the country’s first large municipal park and the preeminent design precedent for all others. Brackenridge Park’s regional vernacular design of a municipal park, though distinctive, bears primarily local significance. Its national significance comes instead from the fact that it is a *historic site* and because it contains traces of an *ethnographic landscape*. But its manifestation as each of these two categories of cultural landscape is less apparent to the naked eye than its manifestation as a *vernacular landscape*.

A historic site is defined as one that is significant “for its association with a historic event, activity, or person.”²¹ Perhaps the most well-documented historic association at Brackenridge Park is the one it has with the acequias. Indigenous labor constructed the earliest acequia in the city. The Madre de Valero acequia was first constructed in 1719, beginning in today’s Brackenridge Park near the Witte Museum. Its associated mission was originally “on the west side of the San Antonio River, but it was moved to the east to its permanent location in 1724.”²² Charles Porter Jr. wrote that the “distribution of the water via acequias sowed the first seed of sustainable life for the settlement” and that “San Antonio would



FIGURE –5. A circa 1929 blueprint of Brackenridge Park shows its organic form. The park is shaped by the river course flowing through its center and the 1776 upper labor acequia, located west of the river. Source: San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department

21 Defining Cultural Landscapes,” National Park Service.

22 Charles Porter Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water: Early Development in San Antonio* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 26.

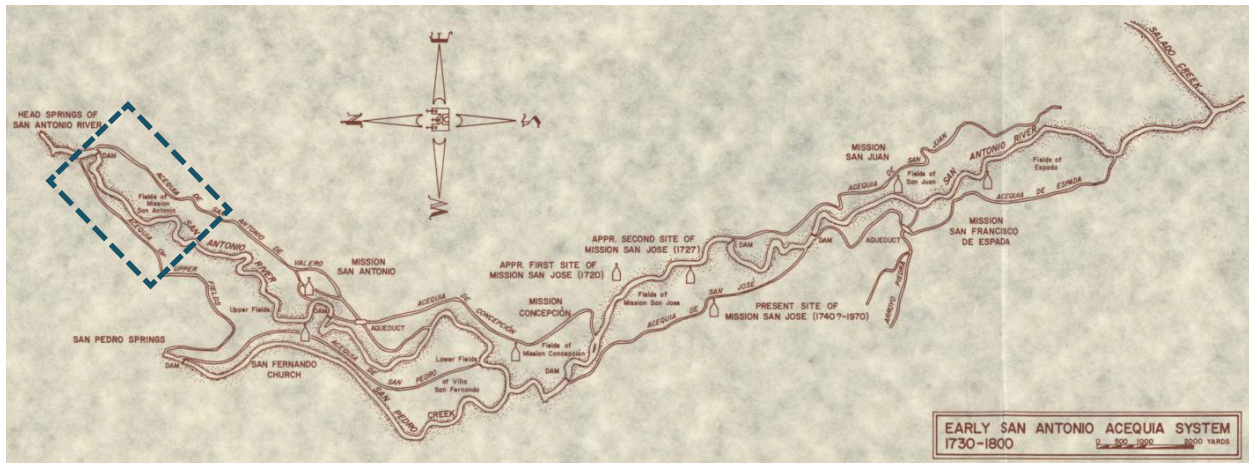


FIGURE –6. A 1730–1800s map of the San Antonio acequia system, created circa 1970s. Brackenridge Park is highlighted below the headwaters of the San Antonio River. Source: *The Portal to Texas History*, University of North Texas Libraries



FIGURE –7. Engraving of Indigenous people building the acequia at Mission San José between 1720–1730. Source: Weckler, 1883, published in Charles R. Porter, Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*

never have become a major community without its irrigation system to distribute water resources.”²³ Remnants of a later acequia, the Upper Labor, dating to approximately 1776, “branched from the river’s west bank within the park just below Hildebrand Avenue.”²⁴

At its completion, “there were over 50 miles of acequia ditches in San Antonio that served the missions, the secular settlement of B  xar, and the military presidio”²⁵ (figures 6 and 7). The acequias were the predecessor of a system of dams and ditches that would continue to be carved out of the river. In addition to providing irrigation, San Antonio’s acequia system “distributed water for all uses by all the settlers, including personal consumption

23 Porter Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, 26, 32.

24 Maria Watson Pfeiffer and Steven A. Tomka, “Brackenridge Park,” National Register of Historic Places, Texas Historical Commission, San Antonio, TX, June 15, 2011.

25 “Mission Trails Historic Sites, Acequias,” sanantonio.gov/Mission-Trails/Mission-Trails-Historic-Sites/Detail-Page/ArtMID/16185/ArticleID/4230/Acequias.



FIGURE –8. The White Shaman Rock Art Panel, a four-thousand-year-old, twenty-six-foot-long cave pictograph. Some interpret it as depicting cosmic beliefs and seasonal migration to the San Antonio River. Source: Rock Art Foundation White Shaman Preserve, Witte Museum Collection

and other household use. It can therefore be said to have been the first municipal water system in the United States,”²⁶ preceding a public water system dating to 1754 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which is typically cited as the country’s earliest public water system.²⁷ Today, the two acequias on the Brackenridge Park site, are largely intact beneath the ground, but are imperceptible to the human eye.

The NPS defines an ethnographic landscape as one “containing a variety of natural and cultural resources that associated people define as heritage resources.”²⁸ Another description states that

unlike vernacular landscapes which generally reflect, often unintentionally, repetitive human activities, such as farming or mining, ethnographic landscapes mirror the systems of meanings, ideologies, beliefs, values, and world-views shared by a group of people....

In a very real way, ethnographic landscapes reflect a distinctive way of transforming nature into culture. The transformation...affects land-use practices, responses to landforms and other features of the natural environment.... Ethnographic landscapes reflect not only quite different histories and cultural traditions but also the continuing process of world-making.²⁹

Without written accounts, early Indigenous populations are labeled prehistoric. But two hundred miles west of San Antonio, a twenty-six-foot-long ancient mural illustrates a developed pictographic language. Some San Antonian descendants of the Yanaguana, who were native to the area, interpret the mural as illustrating cosmic beliefs about an origin story and mapping a seasonal ritual that brought Indigenous Americans to the San Antonio River’s headwaters and the upper course of the river each year to honor that story (**figure 8**). Given existing archaeological research and the presence of Yanaguana descendants in the city, further research is merited to better understand the Indigenous traces of this landscape.

²⁶ Porter Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, 48-49.

²⁷ Porter, Charles, Jr., *Spanish Water, Anglo Water*, .49.

²⁸ Defining Cultural Landscapes,” National Park Service.

²⁹ Donald Hardesty, “Ethnographic Landscapes: Transforming Nature into Culture,” in *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*, ed. Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Melnick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 169–185.

Past links to native rituals are not the only suggestion that Brackenridge Park is an ethnographic landscape. The creation of ethnographic landscapes is a contemporary and ongoing process.

In America, ethnographic landscapes have been and continue to be created by Native Americans and more recent immigrants.... The mix of American cultures and ethnic groups coming at different times means that the same landscape may be simultaneously significant to people carrying quite different cultural traditions.³⁰

The twentieth-century yearly Easter tradition in which families descend on the park on Easter weekend to camp, grill, hold Easter egg hunts, break cascarones, and burst piñatas is a demonstration of San Antonio's Mexican American community "transforming nature into culture." The tradition emerged as early as the 1930s, however, from news clippings it is not clear whether it was initially a primarily Mexican American event, or whether it evolved to become a cultural event. No intentional physical reshaping of the landscape results from the tradition, but "components of ethnographic landscapes may be either material or nonmaterial."³¹ Put another way, just as "rock art panels...may carry significant meaning, [the] same significance may be attached to visible landforms or other landscape features with no evidence of human modification"³² (**figures 9 and 10**).

Brackenridge Park has been the subject of extensive archaeological research, as have many of the city's green spaces and other areas along the banks of the San Antonio River. This research has uncovered traces of the site's prehistoric and Indigenous history, which must be researched more deeply along with events over the past fifty years. But the existing information, limited as it may be, suggests that Brackenridge Park is an *ethnographic landscape*.

³⁰ Hardesty, Donald L. "Ethnographic Landscapes: Transforming Nature into Culture." 171.

³¹ Hardesty, Donald L. "Ethnographic Landscapes: Transforming Nature into Culture." 174.

³² Hardesty, Donald L. "Ethnographic Landscapes: Transforming Nature into Culture." 174-75.



FIGURE –9. Photo of a piñata is seen hanging from a tree in Brackenridge Park during the Easter celebration, 2019. Source: Edward A. Ornelas, *San Antonio Express-News*



FIGURE –10. Photo of a man barbecuing ribs during the Easter celebration in Brackenridge park, 2019. Source: Edward A. Ornelas, *San Antonio Express-News*

URBAN CULTURAL PARK SYSTEMS AND NATIONAL HERITAGE AREAS

A cultural landscape is a *single* landscape classification that may embody several landscape typologies. There are also cultural landscape *systems*. In 1981, at the same time as the early NPS work defining cultural landscapes, the New York State legislature sought to establish an ***urban cultural park system*** that would create a partnership between the state government, local governments, and private communities.

The partnership parks were to fulfill four goals.... Preservation of historic settings, natural features, and unique character; Education of residents and visitors about the locale's history, contribution to New York State's cultural and the relationship to current life; Recreational use for active and passive enjoyment; and Economic Development through private investment in adaptive reuse, interpretive attractions and other special activities.³³

An ***urban cultural park system*** is defined as a “designated historical area in a community which has been revitalized to interpret the community's role in the cultural development of the region and state.”³⁴

Brackenridge Park is not designated as part of a larger system or network of cultural landscapes, and it has not yet undergone this type of revitalization. But through preservation projects that will be implemented, including interpretation of the site, it contains the possibility to become part of a premier *urban cultural park system*.

The landscape that comprises Brackenridge Park is distinctive in the state of Texas, the nation, and even the world because of the relationship between its natural ecology and cultural history.

To reiterate, the landscape contains numerous stories, including the following:

- Prehistoric and historic life, recorded in and near the park through the investigation of sixteen prehistoric and historic archaeological sites,³⁵ including rare but real evidence of human and mammoth interaction documented along the San Antonio River (circa 9200 BCE – 1500 CE)³⁶
- Indigenous occupancy and rituals with the river and sacred springs (circa 1000 CE – 1530s)
- Mexican heritage from early human occupancy and development that continues to imprint the site today (circa 1000 CE – present)
- Spanish exploration and religious conversions in the Americas, notably defined by the five San Antonio missions, today comprising a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1535 – 1718)
- Spanish colonization of the northernmost lands of Mexico, before Texas achieved independence as a country (1718)

33 Jeanne S. Fagan, “New York State Urban Cultural Park System” (master's thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology, 1992), accessed October 7, 2019, scholarworks.rit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=5977&context=theses.

34 Fagan, “New York State Urban Cultural Park System.”

35 Clinton M. M. McKenzie with C. Stephen Smith, *Archaeological Investigations of the Alamo Dam and Upper Labor Dam, Brackenridge Park, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas*, archaeological report, no. 444 (San Antonio: Center for Archaeological Research, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2017).

36 Stephen M. Carpenter et al., “The San Antonio River Mammoth Site: Archaeological Testing Investigations for the Interstate 37 Bridge at the San Antonio River Improvement Project, Bexar County, Texas. Texas Antiquities Permit 4531” (Austin, TX: SWCA Environmental Consultants, 2013), 111.

- Early agricultural practices in the Americas and how humans have engineered land and water from the very beginning, defined by the city's systems of Spanish acequias that originated in the park and of which remnants remain (1724)
- Industrial development in San Antonio after Texas entered statehood, including the presence of a Civil War tannery and sawmill where enslaved people labored (1863) and, later, a quarry and cement factory by which workers built up the city with their hands (1850s – 1880)
- European immigration into the United States, with the arrival of Germans to San Antonio (1847–1861)
- Brackenridge Park as a park, which is written on the landscape (1899 – present)

Hidden in plain sight and buried beneath the ground, this entire developmental evolution is etched in the Brackenridge Park landscape.

In 1984, four years after the state of New York envisioned its urban cultural park system, Congress signed into law, with leadership from the NPS, its first designation of a National Heritage Area, which has a strikingly similar description to an urban cultural park system. National Heritage Areas (NHAs) are

places where natural, cultural, and historic resources combine to form cohesive, nationally important landscapes. Through their resources, NHAs tell nationally important stories that celebrate our nation's diverse heritage. NHAs are lived-in landscapes. Consequently, NHA entities collaborate with communities to determine how to make heritage relevant to local interests and needs.

NHAs are a grassroots, community-driven approach to heritage conservation and economic development. Through public-private partnerships, NHA entities support historic preservation, natural resource conservation, recreation, heritage tourism, and educational projects.³⁷

So long as the landscape is “lived-in,” the congressional designation of an NHA may occur in urban, rural, or wilderness areas. San Antonio would be an urban expression of an NHA, were it to receive the designation. Brackenridge Park, with other parks and historic sites in the city, contains the vast potential to become part of a premier urban cultural park system and to become an NHA. Intentional linkages between parks and historic sites that occur along the water—connecting Olmos Basin, Brackenridge Park, the San Antonio River Walk, the Alamo, San Pedro Springs Park, Confluence Park, the San Antonio Mission Park, and other sites—would illuminate the relationship between the city's natural hydrology and its cultural development. These sites all boast versions of the same history: twelve thousand years of documented occupancy that emerged along San Antonio's network of rivers, creeks, and springs; it is a *shared history*, although locals and visitors do not yet experience it as such.

³⁷ “What is a National Heritage Area?” National Park Service, accessed June 2, 2019, [nps.gov/articles/what-is-a-national-heritage-area.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/what-is-a-national-heritage-area.htm).



FIGURE –11. An 1894 plan of Boston's Emerald Necklace by Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot. Boston Commons is highlighted at lower right. Source: Charles E. Beveridge and Paul Rocheleau, *Frederic Law Olmsted: Designing the American Landscape*

There are currently fifty-five NHAs in the country, and some are in urban settings. For instance, the Baltimore NHA includes neighborhoods, waterfront, and portions of the city's park system that can be experienced as part of a 3.2-mile-loop Heritage Walk. Its website states that “the city's oldest urban trail leads visitors through three distinct areas of Baltimore: the Inner Harbor, Little Italy, and historic Jonestown,”³⁸ and it lists several cultural institutions and landmarks that the route passes by. But none of the urban NHAs represent or are distinctly tied to a cohesive, deliberately linked urban cultural park system.

A landscape-driven, congressionally designated heritage area in an urban context that visibly demonstrates, through a connected network of interpreted park spaces, the basic fact of early human settlement patterns along water, would be precedent-setting.

A LINKED PARK SYSTEM PRECEDENT FOR BRACKENRIDGE PARK

Though it is not a congressionally designated NHA, Boston's Emerald Necklace is the most important urban cultural park system precedent for the city of San Antonio. Like Central Park, the Emerald Necklace is also an Olmsted design, but because it is an entire system, it is more expansive. Devised later in Olmsted's career, between 1878 and 1895, the Emerald Necklace is a 1,100-acre chain of parks that traverses Boston and Brookline and

consists of five parks: the Back Bay Fens, the Muddy River Improvement (later named Olmsted Park and the Riverway), Jamaica Pond, the Arnold Arboretum and West Roxbury Park (later named Franklin Park). The parks were linked by a network of parkways resulting in a comprehensive system of water, meadows and woodland measuring five miles in length. The Necklace was one of the largest projects ever undertaken by the City of Boston or the Town of Brookline.³⁹

38 “Tours and Trails Heritage Walk,” Baltimore National Heritage Area, explorebaltimore.org/tours/heritage-walk.

39 “Emerald Necklace,” The Cultural Landscape Foundation, tclf.org/landscapes/emerald-necklace.

Boston's Emerald Necklace was a designed response to drainage and health issues related to the presence of water. The chain of parks began in an area of mud flats, salt marshes, and streams, and it connected to the Charles River as well. Also worth noting is that when Olmsted began designing parkways to link the parks, he began with a connection to America's first public park, Boston Common⁴⁰ (figure 11).

SAN ANTONIO'S URBAN CULTURAL PARK SYSTEM

In San Antonio, an *urban cultural park system* has developed organically, not as a response to drainage and health issues—although they certainly arose as the city developed—but as an expression of the natural pattern of early settlement along water. The city's oldest public parks, green spaces, and historic sites emerged along the city's network of springs, creeks, and the San Antonio River corridor.

A complex of natural artesian springs and seeps in San Antonio originate from the Edwards Aquifer, "one of the most prolific artesian aquifers in the world,"⁴¹ spanning eight thousand square miles and including "all or part of 13 counties in south-central Texas."⁴² This aquifer feeds "two parallel-running water courses, San Pedro Creek and the San Antonio River"⁴³ in San Antonio. San Pedro Spring is the origin of San Pedro Creek, and these springs are located in San Pedro Park. San Antonio Spring—or the Blue Hole, mentioned early in this introduction—is located above Brackenridge Park.

Within San Antonio, Brackenridge Park is preceded only by the forty-six-acre San Pedro Springs Park, which was declared public land in 1729 and is the oldest park in Texas and second-oldest park in the nation, after Boston Common.⁴⁴ Just as Boston Common is the beginning of the Emerald Necklace, San Pedro Springs Park, a smaller and primarily recreational park, is an important predecessor and partner to Brackenridge Park.

Above each of these major spring sources is the Olmos Basin, from which Olmos Creek flows. Olmos Creek is also fed by springs from the aquifer, and Olmos Creek and San Pedro Creek both feed into the San Antonio River. The city's system of missions, historic acequias, and dams; the River Walk; and public green spaces are all part of the intricate network of water. Today, viewed as a whole, the city possesses the physical framework of a vernacular urban cultural park system.

40 "San Pedro Springs Park," City of San Antonio, accessed September 30, 2019, sanantonio.gov/ParksAndRec/Parks-Facilities/All-Parks-Facilities/Parks-Facilities-Details/ArtMID/14820/ArticleID/2504/San-Pedro-Springs-Park/Park/216.

41 Gregg Eckhardt, "Hydrology of the Edwards Aquifer," Edwards Aquifer, accessed June 03, 2019, edwardsaquifer.net/geology.html.

42 SAWS, "About the Edwards Aquifer," San Antonio Water System, accessed June 3, 2019, saws.org/your-water/new-water-sources/current-water-supply-projects/edwards-aquifer/about-the-edwards-aquifer/.

43 Porter Jr., Spanish Water, Anglo Water, 10.

44 "San Pedro Springs Park," City of San Antonio, accessed September 30, 2019, sanantonio.gov/ParksAndRec/Parks-Facilities/All-Parks-Facilities/Parks-Facilities-Details/ArtMID/14820/ArticleID/2504/San-Pedro-Springs-Park/Park/216.

ENVISIONING BRACKENRIDGE PARK AS PART OF A NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

Brackenridge Park, with other parks and historic sites in San Antonio, contains the vast potential to become part of a National Heritage Area that is a premier *urban cultural park system*. Intentional linkages between parks and historic sites that occur along the water—connecting Olmos Basin, Brackenridge Park, the San Antonio River Walk, the Alamo, San Pedro Springs Park, Confluence Park, the San Antonio Mission Park, and other sites—would illuminate the relationship between the city’s natural hydrology and its cultural development (**figure 12**). These sites can be linked in such a way that the city’s hydrologic connections are made evident. These sites all boast versions of the same history: 12,000 years of documented occupancy that emerged along San Antonio’s network of rivers, creeks, and springs; it is a *shared history*, though locals and visitors do not yet experience it as such.

NHA designation of this kind is an avenue toward financial sustainability for San Antonio’s public land resources and cultural institutions. It would stitch together and make visible San Antonio’s larger significance as an American city. A landscape-driven Congressionally designated heritage area in an urban context that visibly demonstrates, through a designed connected network of interpreted park spaces, that demonstrates the basic fact of early human settlement patterns along water would be precedent-setting.

In March 2017, Charles Birnbaum, a national expert on cultural and historic landscapes and founder and CEO of TCLF, stated, “I don’t think there is another municipal park in America that can boast 11,000 years of history in one place.”⁴⁵ At this writing, that estimate is twelve thousand years of history, based on more recent archaeological discoveries. Birnbaum also asserted what many San Antonians intuitively sense—that “the story of San Antonio is the story of water. The Missions and Brackenridge Park are places connected by water.”⁴⁶ Finally, he articulated a broad vision for Brackenridge Park: to “become part of a National Heritage Area, encompassing the San Antonio River to the missions.”⁴⁷

Birnbaum is not the first landscape expert of national acclaim to recognize San Antonio’s cultural heritage and the remarkable importance of the San Antonio River and its headwaters. Frederick Law Olmsted visited San Antonio in 1853. In 1857, the same year he designed Central Park with Vaux, Olmsted’s remarks about his experiences in San Antonio were published in *A Journey Through Texas*. Of the San Antonio River’s headwaters north of Brackenridge Park, he wrote,

The San Antonio Spring may be classed as the first water among the gems of the natural world. The whole river gushes up in one sparkling burst from the earth. It has all the beautiful accompaniments of a smaller spring, moss, pebbles, seclusion, sparkling sunbeams, and dense overhanging luxuriant foliage. The effect is overpowering. It is beyond your possible conceptions of a spring.⁴⁸

45 Nancy Cook-Monroe, “Could Brackenridge Park Become a National Heritage Area?,” in *Rivard Report* (Institute for Nonprofit News, March 6, 2017), accessed June 3, 2019. therivardreport.com/could-brackenridge-park-become-a-national-heritage-area/.

46 Cook-Monroe, “Could Brackenridge Park Become a National Heritage Area?”

47 Cook-Monroe, “Could Brackenridge Park Become a National Heritage Area?”

48 Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas* (New York: Dix Edwards, 1857), 156-57.

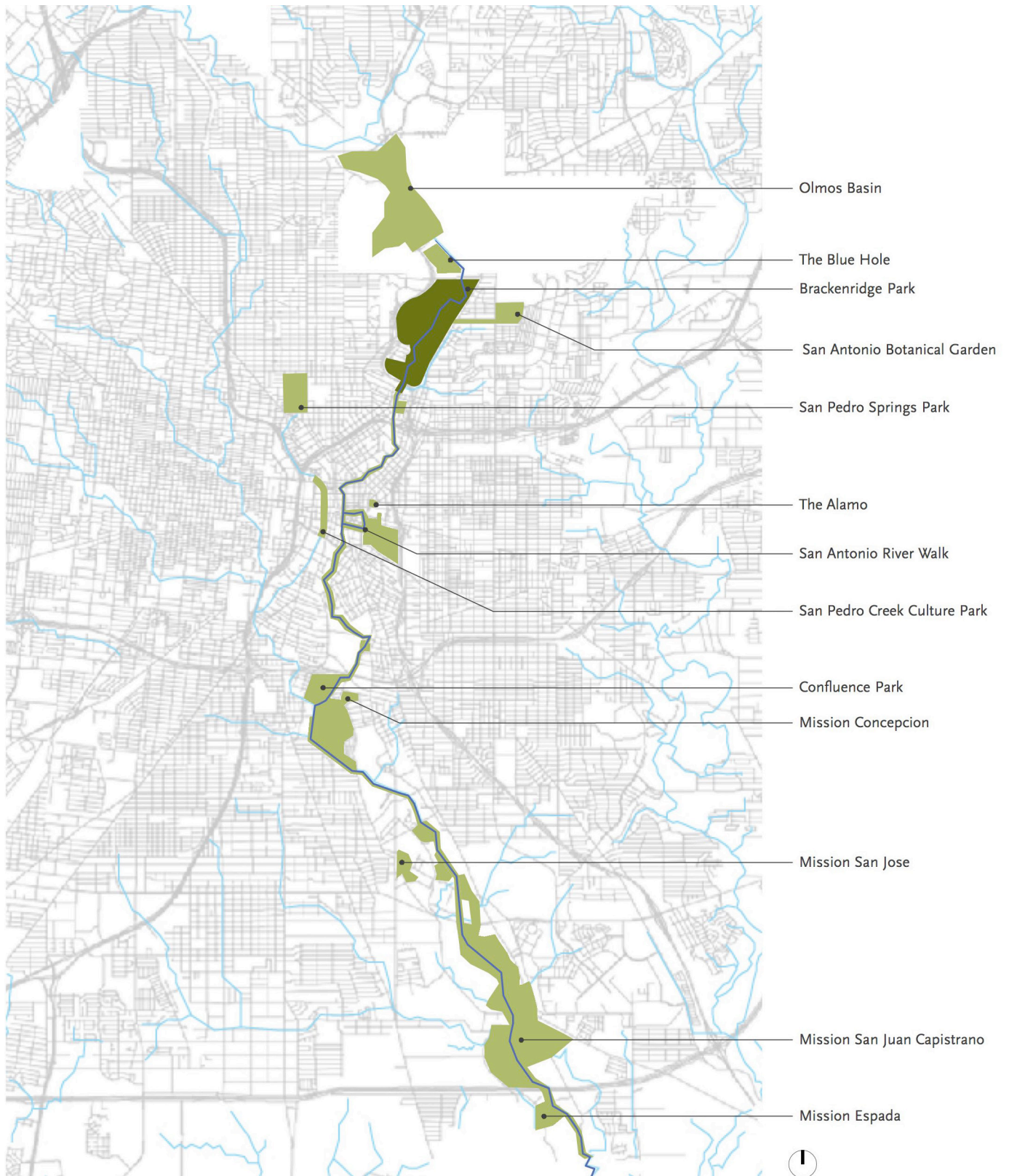


FIGURE –12. A map shows the potential National Heritage Area along the San Antonio River and associated spring and stream system. Source: Reed Hilderbrand

CULTURAL PARK SYSTEM

Of the historic acequias that have origins on the site of Brackenridge Park, Olmsted wrote,

The system of aqueducts, for artificial irrigation, extends for many miles around San Antonio, and affords some justification for the Mexican tradition, that the town, not long ago, contained a very much larger population. Most of these lived by agriculture.... These water-courses still retain their old Spanish name, ‘acequias.’ A large part of them are abandoned, but in the immediate neighborhood of the city they are still in use, so that every garden-patch may be flowed at will.⁴⁹

More than 160 years separate Birnbaum’s recognition of the San Antonio River as, in effect, the birthplace of San Antonio from Olmsted’s marvel over the San Antonio Springs and the city’s acequia system. But they affirm Brackenridge Park’s significance on a national and international scale.

Brackenridge Park is homegrown, with unique features that were creatively conceived and added both opportunistically and in response to the site’s ecology, resulting in excellent places and spaces of vernacular design quality. This organic “quilt” of uses and structures has resulted in a physical manifestation of the history of San Antonio and its relationship to the river, from the landscape’s initial beginnings to today. With its exceptional regional vernacular response to a complex ecology, it *should be* nothing short of a premier, sought-out cultural landscape. But there is work to be done.

⁴⁹ Olmsted, *Journey Through Texas*, 150-51.