

Old mission irrigation system to be restored

By John W. Gonzales

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SAN ANTONIO — Nearly three centuries after it nourished San Antonio's Spanish settlers, a colonial-era irrigation system near the headwaters of the San Antonio River will be showcased in a \$1.4 million interpretive center on the grounds of the Witte Museum and Brackenridge Park. The Acequia Madre Interpretive Project was conceived in 2007, but it wasn't until last year that stone remnants of a diversion dam and clay-lined canals were uncovered by the museum by University of Texas at San Antonio archaeologists.

The 1719 water system, one of seven developed by the city's early settlers, traversed what is now museum property and Broadway en route to the Spanish presidio at Mission San Antonio de Valero — the Alamo. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, "the acequias of San Antonio represent one of the earliest uses of engineered water supply and irrigation systems in the United States."

With funds set aside in 2008 from Bexar County's visitor tax, an interpretive center and overlook will be built at the start of Acequia Madre, which ran more than 2 miles to the presidio.

In work slated for completion in 2016, the project will feature uncovered dam remnants and a restored acequia segment. The overlook will be on the park side of the river and will be connected to the museum property via a new footbridge.

"It's the first time in the Witte's history that we'll have access directly over the river to the park," Marise McDermott, museum president, told the San Antonio Express-News (<http://bit.ly/1jAvKDi>).

The historic site is near a sharp bend in the river where gravity and the curving stream sent water rushing down the acequia to the presidio.

"We want to show the power and the majesty of this in 1719," McDermott said. "It fed the farms along that acequia until it got to the presidio. ... It was very important for sustaining the Alamo."

She described the project late last month to the Commissioners Court, which unanimously authorized use of \$1.1 million of county visitor tax proceeds for the interpretive center and \$300,000 for the overlook. The San Antonio River Authority will review the museum's plans and oversee the work, which will reflect design features from Mission Espada and the recently completed Mission Reach on the South Side.

The Acequia Madre project represents a final piece of the long-running, \$358.3 million San Antonio River Improvements Project. The Witte project will complete the Museum Reach, from the river's initial stretch in Brackenridge Park to downtown.

In a separate project underway, SARA is finishing the Museum Reach trail system by extending paths about 2 miles north from Josephine Street, under U.S. 281, to Hildebrand Avenue. The new trail will pass by the acequia site and overlook on the park side of the river.

Citing "design challenges," SARA officials abandoned plans to re-establish wetlands near the Witte, but the interpretive center and overlook will "illustrate the majesty and astonishing brilliance of this diversion dam," McDermott said.

The designs are part of the museum's larger effort to display the region's reliance on the river and aquifers, along with the role played by acequias. Acequia Madre, 20 feet wide in places, is believed to be the settlement's second major canal, built one year after a smaller one at San Pedro Springs. Both were completed with indigenous labor.

The site by the Witte was excavated last year after the UTSA Center for Archaeological Research uncovered walls, gates and overflow channels of the Upper Labor Acequia, built in 1778 at the north end of the park.

"As part of the Witte Museum Campus Expansion, the Witte will excavate and restore the acequia in order for visitors to experience this vital piece of South Texas history," the museum's master plan states. "The acequia will carry water from the San Antonio River to an above-ground aqueduct reaching out to Broadway, recycling itself back into the river."