

History

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The King William Association has the distinction of being what may be the only neighborhood association in the entire state with three historic districts within its boundaries, including the state's oldest district created by city ordinance and two districts recognized by the National Register of Historic Places. All three districts are equally protected by city ordinances and share a common theme of historical and cultural importance.

KING WILLIAM NATIONAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

The King William area was originally farmland, irrigated by acequias flowing from the San Antonio River, owned by the 1718 Mission San Antonio de Valero. By the beginning of the 19th century, the missions were fully secularized, and the land belonging to Mission Concepcion was bought, sold, and divided into tracts by land speculators, beginning in the 1840s.

One of the earliest to settle was Carl Guenther, a German immigrant who built Pioneer Flour Mills on the lower bend of the San Antonio River. A number of other successful and influential German immigrants discovered the area and began building mansions, using Greek Revival, Victorian, and Italianate architectural styles. Ernst Altgelt, the first to build on current-day King William Street, is credited with naming his street after King Wilhelm I of Prussia.

When neighborhoods to the north began drawing King William residents away in the 1920s, many of the grand mansions were turned into apartments and the district fell into decline. But in the 1960s, creative young professionals rediscovered King William and began a renaissance, which continues to this day. The district was expanded in 1984 to include a more eclectic neighborhood of cottages south of Alamo Street.

SOUTH ALAMO STREET-SOUTH ST. MARY'S STREET NATIONAL HISTORIC DISTRICT

The South Alamo Street-South St. Mary's Street National Historic District is a residential area sited roughly south and west of Alamo Street. Separated from the city center by La Villita and the Hemisfair grounds, the district retains intact most of its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fabric and as such, indicates the density and type of development that once spread from the city's core south to the San Antonio River. The district's 450+ structures include frame vernacular dwellings that were little affected by stylistic movements except for decorative details. There are, however, many finely crafted houses that illustrate the stylistic eclecticism emblematic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architecture. Bungalows dominate the southern portion of the district and commercial structures are largely limited to South Alamo Street. The district is characterized by the high concentration of dwellings sharing form and stylistic elements, its cohesive architectural fabric, and the low percentage of intrusive structures.

The shape of the South Alamo Street-South St. Mary's Street National Historic District was fixed early by the courses of the Acequia Madre (now South Alamo Street), the Acequia Concepcion (now South St. Mary's Street), and the San Antonio River. Ernst Wehrhahn, who was the first to accumulate and develop land in the district, appears to have decided the path of the present Cedar Street. The major north/south streets — Mission, Adams, Wickes and East Guenther — and the east/west streets were largely plotted by the activities of the developers. Wickes Street covers the route of the Acequia Madre as it turned south to empty into the river. Crofton Street curves to follow the flow of the river.

The district's streets vary significantly in character. While the two oldest structures in the district are found on Cedar Street, the remainder of the street and most of Mission and the east/west streets are composed of simple frame vernacular structures. The dwellings on Adams and Wickes Streets retain many of the same forms and plans of those on Cedar and Mission Streets but generally exhibit a greater variety of materials and stylistic references. Houses along East Guenther, and especially Crofton, are larger and more elaborately detailed than those found in other areas of the district. Commercial buildings exist along South Alamo Street and South St. Mary's Street.

The district's first recorded use was as farm land for laborers cultivated to support those living at the Alamo. It is possible that some portion of the land was occupied by those who worked the fields. If so, they likely lived in jacales, a traditional structure constructed of vertical poles set into the ground without interrupted sills. A combination of branches, mud, and animal hair was woven between the vertical members to form the walls and strengthen the structure.

Ernst Wehrhahn purchased land in the northeastern portion of the district in 1858 and 1860. He farmed much of the property but constructed his own house in the 100 block of Cedar, and is credited with the construction of another house in the 200 block of Cedar. Wehrhahn's caliche block house was built circa 1865 and took the form of three rooms laterally arranged. As the house type is not among the repertoire of the traditional American builder, it is likely that Wehrhahn constructed a dwelling similar to those remembered from his native Germany.

Augustus Koch's 1873 bird's eye map of San Antonio shows that early development in the district was concentrated in the triangular area formed by South St. Mary's, South Alamo, and Pereida Streets above Cedar

Street. His 1886 map indicated that construction in the thirteen-year interval had largely been confined to South Alamo and Pereida Streets. The L-plan form dominated in the district and in the years between his two maps, several very fine stone and caliche block L-plan houses had been built along the two streets, most by German immigrants.

The real estate partnership of Hardin B. Adams and E.D.L. Wickes was the next significant developing force in the district. In 1871, they purchased a tract of land that ran from mid-block between Adams and Mission Streets between South Alamo and Forcke Streets west to the river. The developers apparently sold only the lots, leaving the actual construction to the buyer and the large number of lumber yards, builders, contractors, and architects who were vying for business.

Axel and Paul Meerscheidt purchased two separate tracts in 1888 and 1890. The first, known as the Meerscheidt's Fifteen Acre Subdivision, extended from mid-block between Cedar and Mission Streets to the east side of Wickes and from Forcke south for two blocks. The eighteen-acre Meerscheidt River Subdivision was purchased in 1890 and extended the earlier subdivision boundaries west to the river. Within a few years, the Meerscheidts entered business with the lumberman C.A. Stieren, and they offered buyers the option of purchasing only the lot or a completed dwelling on the property. Most of the houses they offered for sale in the Fifteen Acre Subdivision were frame or brick L-plan structures. Paul Meerscheidt's own house in the 300 block of Adams was a large, brick L-plan dwelling.

The River Subdivision was seen as more of an elite development meant to compete with the new suburban developments, and utilizing contemporary real estate rhetoric, the Meerscheidts advertised the lots as "exceptionally large and long . . . eminently adapted for villa and choice residences." Many of the lots were purchased undeveloped. On those developed by the Meerscheidts, they usually placed a large two-story version of the L-plan houses they were building along Adams and Wickes Streets. Other buyers took advantage of the generous lots and river frontage to build substantial dwellings embellished by jig-sawn trim and Palladian openings. All were under construction in the 1890s and are the most intricately detailed structures in the district.

Because of the general uniformity of scale, form, siting, material, and style found in the two Meerscheidt additions, the southern boundary of the development remains highly visible. Most of the structures located south of this boundary are bungalows, and as a whole they illustrate the large number of architectural permutations available to the bungalow builder. The 500 block of Adams and the 600 block of Mission are dense collections of relatively unaltered bungalows. Each block contains several examples of forms similar to those illustrated in period publications.

Since 1930, there has been little construction in the district. By that time, no large parcels of land were available and the city's development interests were centered in the growing suburban areas to the north. A few houses have been built in the intervening years, but for the most part change has been restricted to the conversion of single family dwellings into multifamily dwellings.