



The AHHA! Moment

Newsletter of the Alamo Heights Historical Association

March 21, 2023

At our monthly meeting on March 9th, a slide presentation on Ted Fehrenbach's 1972 History of Alamo Heights was given by Sarah Reveley, who included photographs. Here's the text.

ALAMO HEIGHTS IN PERSPECTIVE

T. R. FEHRENBACH

Two themes dominate the history of Alamo Heights, the heavily-wooded and spring-running hills that overlooked the old Spanish municipality of San Antonio. The first was the delight of newcomers in the headwaters of the San Antonio River as Nature made it; the second was and is the determination to make and keep these heights as a splendid place for homesteads.

Two distant travelers became entranced with the region about the middle of the nineteenth century. George W. Brackenridge acquired the old Sweet Homestead on lands that a San Antonio alderman had alienated from that city's original municipal grant and laid out a magnificent estate, "Alamo Heights," in which the natural beauty of the bluffs and greenery was preserved. Just north of the old municipal boundary, the Kentucky gentleman Charles Anderson envisioned a splendid horse ranch, and erected his headquarters-mansion on the Olmos bluffs. These two men, in effect dividing the heights between them, held the land in a way that retained its natural loveliness, a tradition that survived their passing proprietorship.

The meaningful history of Alamo Heights began in 1890, when Hiram McLane, whose family bought the Anderson property in 1861, sold his home and ranch to agents of the Chamberlain Investment Company of Denver. While in the 1890s the Brackenridge estate, like many Brackenridge properties came under public or institutional ownership and was enclosed in the grounds of the future Incarnate Word College, the greater part of the heights thus became available for development. A significant milestone had already been passed, in 1873, when the City of San Antonio, re-trenching, redrew its original boundaries back to a six-mile square centering on Main Plaza. The lands around the head of San Antonio's river were thus freed to evolve their own destiny.

The Denver-based investment company, through its local agents, the Alamo Heights Land and Improvement Company of Texas whose principals were Charles W. Ogden, R. H. Russell, and J. W. Ballantyne Patterson, planned a grandiose and quite admirable suburban residential development. The company turned the old Anderson-McLane mansion into a new hotel, "The Argyle", and laid out large lots around the hotel for

fine homesites. The company, as it advertised, began with "wooded, native hills" which it tried to civilize while retaining all their natural charm. A private waterworks was built, utilizing a large spring; streets were laid out — not by a drunken Indian on a blind mule, as some later residents claimed, but by a Denver engineer. The broad lanes followed natural contours, providing both grace and rapid drainage. The developers set aside broad parks; retaining the Head of the River area, with its lake, for public use. The "Loop" section, designed for a hilltop community in horse and buggy days, was actually "contoured" into the bluffs and oaks and elms. Its charm came from the fact that the developers never envisioned the automobile, or dreamed that someday houses would be built below it in the swales — where all its water ran. The great, centuries-old trees were left standing beside, and sometimes in the middle of the streets — though these, sadly, became casualties to the notions of later engineers.

Unfortunately, the developers were ahead of the times, not behind them. In 1890 the fashionable population of San Antonio, for which this area was designed, still lived entirely south of Commerce Street. There was no graveled road north of Josephine; the only way to the heights was by horseback, by carriage over a dusty lane, or by river canoe. While the company dickered with San Antonio to put in a road — River Avenue, now Broadway — and planned and put in operation its own rapid transit system, street cars pulled by mules, the distance, the lack of roads, and the slowness in getting the rail line in all caused the project to fail financially. Between 1891-1893 only twelve homes were built, and although water, electricity, and street cars all operated by 1893, within a few years most of these homes were up for sale. Significantly, those who stayed loved the area for what it was, and spoke unhappily of the day when "real development" would again begin.

The ephemeral developers, however, had stamped a lasting pattern into a large part of the future Alamo Heights. Their design, and restrictions, for large lots and above-average houses, almost country estates, remained.

Between 1894-1906 all growth stalled, while law suits decided who would inherit the old A. H. L. & I. Co. Finally, the corporation was reorganized as the Alamo Heights Company, under Judge M. H. Townsend and W. B. Willim. The new owners decided to keep the Loop properties, but open the outlying acreage to other developers. The Montclair section, between Chichester and Bluebonnet east of Broadway, was sold to the Middle Western development firm of Irish and Dickinson, of East St. Louis, Mo., which put lots on sale in 1907. These went fast, and by 1908 actual home-building began. Houses in Montclair were less expensive, going at about \$2,000 for a six-room home.

Meanwhile, Adams and Kirkpatrick, developers of Laurel Heights in San Antonio, acquired and opened the section south from Chichester to Terrell Rd., as Madeleine Terrace. This development quickly became better known than "Alamo Heights" up on the hill, which was considered "country-fied." Madeleine Terrace drew Pompeo Coppini and many fashionable people from San Antonio.

The new Alamo Heights Company, although it built a clubhouse and held onto all the restrictions of a fashionable suburb, did not do well. In 1909 the firm's properties in the Loop and most of the acreage west of Broadway were acquired by Clifton George, Sr., of Oklahoma, who was to become Alamo Heights' principal developer. George took over the clubhouse as his home, making it into a showplace on the street he renamed for his wife, Mary D. George also renamed many of the streets for earlier developers. Although Clifton George, heading the Clifton George Company, was an excellent promoter, willing to use any logical scheme to bring in buyers, and not afraid to prime the pump by donating land to worthy causes such as the future TMI and by building 20 homes himself, selling Alamo Heights proved rough going. He kept the tradition of large lots in the Loop, but allowed different restrictions in other sections, such as north of Hondondo gully. Connected by dusty roads and "dinky" street cars to San Antonio, the suburb could not grow vigorously until the coming of the auto changed the whole face of American urban life. By 1921, George had prevailed, and Alamo Heights was a going area.

Actually, this scattered, intermittent development, carried on in one broad tradition but on different levels by many hands, proved something of a blessing. Whole sections were built at different times under different plans. The city acquired different age groups and income classes, as well as a great variety in architectural styles. The Loop, particularly, gained a vigorous variety and intimacy, with splendid mansions erected side by side with modest homes — something rarely found in the sterility of the average quickly-built, quickly-deteriorating, one-income-class suburb.

Alamo Heights, whether Loop, TMI, Bluebonnet Hills, or Montclair, is a blend of many vintages, from which came both flavor and strength, and finally, renewal.

Alamo Heights was never intended to be anything but a residential suburb, a "city of homes" as the incorporators put it. The only real political controversies that have ever arisen in the civic community have stemmed from questions as to whether the city should be open to other forms of urban development, and whether its original character should be retained. The tradition has always triumphed, despite constant chipping under modern pressures, and probably, so far as Alamo Heights residents want in the majority, always will.

Since Alamo Heights residents mostly earn their livings elsewhere, they are really citizens of two worlds — their own neighborhood and the surrounding metropolitan area. The peculiar success of Alamo Heights as it has developed since 1922 is that unlike the great majority of American "bed room burgs" Alamo Heights has developed its own mystique, with a sense of intimacy and community.

No one who has lived in Alamo Heights will deny that the mystique exists. And it goes far deeper than satisfaction with locally-provided services and things like taxes. Three things are required to make a successful suburban civic community. The first is the ability to provide excellent services and conveniences at reasonable cost — without which no urban conglomeration can be considered a viable city. The second is the ability to retain an original character, or else change gracefully, resisting deterioration. The last requirement, without which there is no city, is the sense of community itself. True urban civilizations have never been, and never will be, made up of accumulations of strangers.

Alamo Heights, whatever else it is, reflects all three qualities: good government, stable neighborhoods, a feeling of intimacy. The intimacy is shown in the tremendous support for the local schools, and in the fact — unheralded but an increasing phenomenon — that younger generations return to live in the community whenever possible. Under this continuing mystique, old Loop houses are refurbished by younger buyers, or old ones torn down and new homes erected in their places by original families. The faces change — and the face of the community changes slowly — but without flight or deterioration. Much, even, of what made Charles Anderson and George Brackenridge fall in love with these tangled heights and want to preserve them, remains, in the great, spreading trees and winding roadways. The heights have never lost their essential charm or character.

As one resident wrote, "to live in Alamo Heights again is like returning to the village of one's childhood." May it be so through the next fifty years.

Our website (<https://ahha09.org/>) continues to grow. The Join Page now includes dues payment. There is a Members Page which houses a link to our cloud. The password is heights09.



The April 13th meeting will have socializing from 5:30 to 6, with the meeting starting promptly at 6 pm. We have adjusted the hours to accommodate members who can't be there by 5:30, and for members who have gotten to know one another and like to visit before the meeting. Once we start getting dues in, we may even provide snacks!

Michael Carroll will begin our series on Centennial homes with a presentation identifying the first 12 homes built in the 1890s, and their fates. We will be asking for volunteers to help research these old homes and their families for future presentations. Remember, Michael and Sarah can help you with how to do the research online. We hope you can interview the owners of the homes that are left, and get stories and photos.

SEE Y'ALL IN APRIL!

April **F**ool.



April fools and April weather,
Always come along together;
'Most any month for me will do,
I'm always foolish over you.

