

# Rancho De Las Cabras

## A Spanish Colonial Mission Ranch Offers Partnership Opportunities

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**I**t isn't every day that the staff of an established park has the opportunity to develop a site literally from the ground up. This exciting prospect presented itself to us at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park (SAAN) on September 15, 1995, when then Superintendent Robert Amdor and incoming Superintendent Steve Whitesell, along with Congressional delegation members and other dignitaries, witnessed the recording of the original deed to Rancho de las Cabras in the County Clerk's Office, Wilson County Courthouse.<sup>1</sup> With that event, Rancho de las Cabras, literally translated "The Goat Ranch," came full circle, once again being affiliated with an entity which includes its original grantee, Mission San Francisco de la Espada, one of the mission sites in the park.

About 30 miles southeast of San Antonio, in what is now Wilson County on the outskirts of the city of Floresville, Texas, this Spanish colonial ranch site has endured a history of changing use and ownership since it was first designated as grazing lands for Mission Espada by royal authorities. Each mission on the San Antonio River had a ranch located within a radius of 25-30 miles which supplied cattle, sheep, and goats for their inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

Mission Espada was one of three missions moved from what is now eastern Texas and re-established on the San Antonio River in March 1731. Permission was granted to use tracts of land for grazing beyond that on which the mission itself was located. All of the Texas missions were allowed use of such tracts in order to provide for their increasing herds of livestock. At first, animals were few in number and could be kept on the lands beyond the farmlands (*labores*). However, as the herds increased, the competition for limited fields nearby led to incursions of livestock on farmlands of the town, the Villa de San Fernando. By the 1750s and 1760s, efforts to acquire full legal title to the distant ranchlands designated earlier for the use of each mission began in earnest.<sup>3</sup>

In 1772, all the Querétaran missions in Texas were turned over to the administration of the missionary College of Zacatecas. As part of the

transfer, a complete and detailed inventory of each mission was compiled. The inventory for Espada described the ranch as follows:

The mission has on this river at a distance of eight leagues [about 21 miles] a ranch for the protection of the herdsmen from the hostile Indians. It is enclosed by a wall of stone of a vara [about 3 feet] in width and three varas [about 9 feet] in height. The said wall has a length, or circumference, of one hundred fifty-eight varas [about 474 feet]. Item: It has two entrances with their gateways and gates, one towards the river and the other towards the plain. Item: It has on the inside four jacales of wood and thatch...<sup>4</sup>

Beginning in the 1770s, the residents of San Fernando increased pressure on the missions, which they believed took up too much of the river valley, leaving insufficient pastureland for their livestock. Therefore, local residents strongly opposed the missions' efforts to gain legal title to the lands that had been allocated for their use in 1731. These efforts led to a judgment which permitted mission lands to be leased by local residents. The remainder of Espada ranchlands, including the las Cabras buildings, continued in use by the mission at least through 1787 and probably until the secularization of the mission's property in 1794.<sup>5</sup>

Gradually, from the 1760s to 1773, Rancho de las Cabras grazing lands began to be acquired by neighboring civilian ranchers from the town who had lands abutting that of the mission ranch. In about 1773, Ignacio Calvillo, one such rancher, bought the northern portion of grazing lands bordering on his Rancho del Paso de las Mujeres. Gradually the rest of the rancho was acquired by private citizens.<sup>6</sup>

In 1845, María Calvillo, who inherited the property from her father, Ignacio, sold her segment of the ranch, including the buildings, to Edward Dwyer. Upon his death, his son Joseph sold this parcel and thus began the chain of sales of the property until parcels passed from private ownership to the State of Texas.<sup>7</sup>

From 1981 to 1985, a team of archeologists and archeology students from the Center for

Archeological Research, the University of Texas at San Antonio, spent five seasons excavating the area within what had been the compound at the site of the ranch buildings at Rancho de las Cabras. At the completion of this series of digs the structure remains were covered in sand and the 1936 State of Texas historical marker was returned to its place in the center. The site was fenced and remained a restricted entry area bounded by farmlands, pasturage, and a State of Texas Parks and Wildlife preserve area.<sup>8</sup> After much negotiation, the combined parcels totaling 99.5 acres were transferred in 1995 to the National Park Service, to be managed by San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.<sup>9</sup>

The park's General Management Plan (GMP), authorized in 1982, permits for fee simple interest by donation to be obtained where "historic resources are presently owned by state or local governments or by private interests."<sup>10</sup> In that manner, a portion of Mission Espada's historic Rancho de las Cabras, including the ruins of ranch structures, was acquired by the park.

This remnant of a vital aspect of mission history became the focus almost immediately of park staff for planning and development. By the spring of 1996, several meetings had taken place with Don Goldman of the Support Office in Santa Fe. He traveled to San Antonio, viewed the site, reviewed the GMP and Concept Plan and began working with the park in project planning for development of the Las Cabras site, integrating it into the park.

A series of meetings was held, first with park staff, interested parties within the Park Service, and Don Goldman. The outcome of these meetings was the development of a park strategy for achieving a General Management Plan Amendment and Environmental Assessment, including alternatives for development and use of the Las Cabras unit.

The site's proximity to the community of Floresville led to many residents' interest in this, to the point of generating local political support in the Texas legislature for the acquisition of the site by the National Park Service. School groups (Junior Historians) and a living history/web site project (Texas Through Time) were deeply interested in the positive implications for the community stemming from this acquisition of the ranch site. Therefore, part of the process in developing this project was to involve the people of Floresville in the planning aspect. Alternatives for development and use were an outgrowth of the planning meetings with Don Goldman and subsequent community meetings with the citizens of Floresville.

Input from all these sources resulted in the following alternatives:

- no action;
- partial exposure of ruins; outdoor visitor facility;
- full exposure of ruins, indoor visitor facility;
- full exposure of ruins, outdoor visitor facility (the proposed plan).<sup>11</sup>

In keeping with this commitment to involvement of the interested public in the development of the park site, Andrew Perez, a professor of architecture in the Master of Architecture Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio and a group of students visited the site, studied the alternatives, and each developed a plan for a parking lot and visitors' center for the rancho.<sup>12</sup> These concepts were innovative and creative, combining a sense of the historical significance of the site, visitor safety and enjoyment, and a sensitivity to the environment, both cultural and natural. Further refinement of such planning by the park in close partnership with the community hopefully in the near future will result in the development of a site rich in history of mission life, origins of western cattle ranching as we know it, and the further enhancement of the heritage of native and hispanic peoples.

Rancho de las Cabras serves as a glowing addition to this park, a unique Spanish Colonial Heritage Site. Further historical research in conjunction with the development of wayside exhibits and interpretive programs as well as additional archeological investigation will aid in revealing the life led by those at Rancho de las Cabras and its ties to the rest of the mission community. Such information will provide for informed development and preservation efforts at the site. Acquisition of such a significant element of Spanish Colonial history serves as a challenge to us as historians, preservationists, and interpreters on the cutting edge of the future of such sites in the National Park Service.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Program, Transfer of Deed of Rancho de las Cabras from the State of Texas to the National Park Service, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, September 15, 1995, Floresville, Texas.
- <sup>2</sup> Courtenay J. Jones and Anne A. Fox, "Archeological Testing at Rancho de las Cabras, Wilson County, Texas, Third Season," Center for Archaeological Research, the University of Texas at San Antonio, 1983, 3; Rosalind Z. Rock, "Rancho de las Cabras—Historical Background Information for Interpreters at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park," September 29, 1995: 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Rock, "Rancho de las Cabras", 2-3; James Ivey, Marlys Bush Thurber, Santiago Escobedo, *Of Various Magnificence—The Architectural History of the San Antonio Missions in the Colonial Period and*

- the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. I. Santa Fe, New Mexico: National Park Service, Southwest Regional Office, Southwest Cultural Resources Center, Professional Papers, No. 11, 1990, 70.
- 4 Rock, "Rancho de las Cabras", 4; 1772, Gumiel, Inventory of Mission San Francisco de la Espada, Archives of the College of Zacatecas, collection at Our Lady of the Lake University, Old Spanish Missions Research Library, Microfilm Roll 15, Frames, 1371-1373, Roll 10, Frames 4224-4226; Fox, "Archeological Testing, Second Season", 1981, 27; Ivey, et al., *Of Various Magnificence*, 87-88.
  - 5 Rock, "Rancho de las Cabras", 4-5; Fox, "Archeological Testing, Second Season," 30.
  - 6 Rock, "Rancho de las Cabras", 4-6; San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, "Rancho de las Cabras—Progression of Ownership from the Mission Era to the Present", 1.
  - 7 "Progression of Ownership", 1.
  - 8 Anne Fox, et. al., "Archeological survey and Testing at Rancho de las Cabras", San Antonio: Center for Archaeological Research, the University of Texas at San Antonio. A series of reports beginning in 1981 and ending in 1985 for each of five seasons of excavation at Rancho de las Cabras. Season four report has not been published.
  - 9 "Progress of Ownership", 2-3.
  - 10 National Park Service, Southwest Regional Office, *General Management Plan/Development Concept Plan*, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, July, 1982, 15.
  - 11 National Park Service, "San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, Amendment to the General Management Plan and Environmental Assessment—A Plan for the Rancho de las Cabras Unit, Floresville, Texas", September, 1996, 8-11.
  - 12 Steven Lin, "Rancho de las Cabras & Mission Espada—Exhibition and Information Center Concept, September, 1996; Mercedes Martinez Gueric, "Rancho de las Cabras: Proposed Visitor Information Center—A Pre-Project Analysis, September, 1996; Richard Speer, "Rancho de las Cabras National Historic Park Visitors' Center," October, 1996.

*Rosalind Z. Rock is park historian with San Antonio Missions National Historical Park.*

## ***Post and Park: A Brief History of the Presidio of San Francisco***

**B**y nearly any measure, the Presidio of San Francisco is a military post of exceptional national significance. Its association with a wide spectrum of historical events helps educate us about the development of California and the American West. The importance of the Presidio comes not only from the resources within its boundaries but also from its location guarding one of the world's finest harbors and surrounded by the city of San Francisco.

Stephen Haller's treatment of the Presidio in *Post and Park* explains to the reader the history of this remarkable site from the year 1776, when Lieutenant Colonel Juan Bautista de Anza trekked northward from Sonora, Mexico, to the present day. Haller discusses the strategic importance of the great harbor named for St. Francis, its history as a fort during the Spanish, Mexican, and American periods, and the evolution of the Presidio into a unit of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Haller's book is illustrated with period photographs, maps, and drawings and provides a concise, readable history of this important park.

Stephen A. Haller. *Post and Park: A Brief Illustrated History of the Presidio of San Francisco*. San Francisco, Golden Gate National Parks Association, 1997, 42pp. Illustrations, paperback.

—Harry Butowsky

