

## *A Creek Tells its Story*

### **The Mythic Narrative of San Pedro Creek**

**By John Phillip Santos**

*San Antonio de Bejár wears its glistening halo of river, creeks, and arroyos like an ageless crown, as if this place at the edge of the arid country west and south has been blessed by time, receiving a long span of years with the grace of a thousand springs and endlessly flowing water. Maybe it is an accidental oasis, a singular place in a singular part of the world, with a singular story to tell, a story of how a city was imagined into being on the banks of the humble stream that would come to be known as San Pedro Creek.*

Without San Pedro Creek, the city's history would've looked very different. As the place where San Antonio was born, the story of the creek and the city are forever intertwined.

If you follow the *ruta* of San Pedro Creek, you are on a pilgrimage rooted in the past, destined for the future.

As in some ancient legend, a city emerged out of these waters. A city bubbled forth out of this spring-fed stream, running from long before there was anyone here to witness it---or drink from it.

300 years long, the story of San Antonio is *but a brief episode* in the millennial chronicle of San Pedro Creek.

If this creek could speak, in whispers of song, or poetry, it might tell the story of the city that it birthed, brought to the light of history, its most extraordinary, and perhaps unexpected, progeny.

Whispers of memories, echoes of song, rhythms of poesy, drumbeats and bugles, punctuated by cannonades---and long intervals of peace.

Then all the bustle of building the great city, whining saws, hammers pinging, whirring engines of industry and commerce, the wail of locomotives and engines, ebbing and flowing between the past, present, and future.

***And we walk on. We flow with these waters, into the city created by these springs of ancient origin.***

Archaeology tells us that the creek's mother springs and shady environs were an ages-old place of shelter and succor. Archaeologists have found evidence along San Pedro Creek of settlement reaching back 10,000 years. Evidence of those first settlements, *a hidden legacy*, is under the earth near the corner of Camaron and Santa Rosa streets.

The path of the creek, long hidden by strata of asphalt and urban development, traces an arc through the very heart of downtown San Antonio, a route that carries much of the city's earliest history and lore, a reminder of how deeply the landscape and human enterprise have been linked in this Central Texas oasis.

San Antonio is the *modern* chapter in the epic history of San Pedro Creek. On the occasion of our city's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we remember that we would not be here if not for the clear running waters that are the original blessings of this *tierra*.

San Antonio is a city whose existence was ordained by this graced geography, birthed in the swath of alluvial basin land nestled between what came to be known as San Pedro Creek and the San Antonio River, *the onetimes Yanaguana*.

An early Spanish explorer, the Fray Isidro Félix de Espinoza, wrote in 1709 of a lush valley with a plentiful spring, and prophetically noted: "*The river, which is formed by this spring, could supply not only a village, but a city, which could be founded here.*"

Nine more years would pass before his words would come true.

The saga of the city's creation is *a chronicle of meetings between strangers*, an incomparable historical drama underway in the earliest days of the New World, the meeting point between the epics of Mexico and the United States.

Intrepid Spaniards first encountered the native peoples of these lands here, and eventually the city that emerged from that fateful meeting became a *frontera* crossroads of the world---a place of *mestizaje* and transformation.

Today, it is home to people of every nation on Earth.

While there have been episodes of misunderstanding and conflict, the deeper story of San Antonio is one of exchange, triumph and hope, a tale of humanity's capacity to build *a new kind of home* out of the wilderness, *becoming a city that embodies the world*.

San Antonio's long history testifies to the unique mingling of cultures and heritages that has shaped the Southwestern borderlands of the United States.

Indeed, our history is a *testimonio* to the way this legacy of encounters between peoples has manifested a new kind of humanity. We are older than the Republic, but we are also an emerging capital of America's undeniably *mestizo* destiny.

San Pedro Creek is a pathway into the deepest currents of San Antonio's history and memory.

Spaniards were tireless scribes and cartographers of their journeys in the New World.

A series of maps, by the Marqués de Aguayo, Luis Antonio Menchaca, and José de Urrutia, among many others, document the evolving place and importance of San Pedro Creek in San Antonio's infancy.

Later, the creek became a dividing line between the city's Hispanic and Anglo American communities, a partition that was breeched as often as it was observed, resulting in the deeply *mestizo* culture of today's San Antonio.

San Pedro Creek harbors many stories of San Antonio's "becoming," the myriad ways a place in the wilderness of the ancient New World became a modern American city, uniquely rooted in the deeply braided epics of Mexico and the United States.

Two presidios were built near here, before the Alamo. San Fernando Cathedral, as well as other temples and sanctuaries, arose nearby. The courthouse, City Hall, garrisons and jails, San Antonio's first train yards, all found their places near San Pedro Creek.

The creek's story unfolds like a pilgrimage tale---hearkening to such legendary paths as the journey to the Tepeyac shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, the *Ruta de Santiago* in Spain, the paths of pilgrims in Mecca.

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## ***La Ruta de San Pedro***

Each of the following themes are associate with one of the twelve figures in the Tree of Life Plaza, perhaps with icons that could be used in signage throughout the park to connect back to their core thematic reference. It's a way of organizing and encapsulating the encyclopedia of material developed around the historical and cultural legacy of the creek. The Plaza would be a sort of gallery of all of these themes, the place in the park for a panoramic view of the story the park has to tell.

These themes are broadly imagined, inviting everyone to find and explore their own place in the tale:

### 1) ***Los Manantiales*** (Water from the Earth)

The primordial section in the narrative for geological and other facts and histories relating to the local geography and history of water. This would be the “deep time” sequence of the story, reaching back eons to put in place the backstory of the emergence of the aquifer, serving the region both as a filtration and reservoir system. It might also foreshadow the development of hydrological engineering and the flood control aspect of the modern-day creek.

### 2) ***The Heron*** (Place of Origins)

The Aztecs called their original homeland “The Place of Herons,” a bird that is common to our part of South Texas. Everyone in San Antonio has stories of their own family origins, and some of them lie along the creek’s path. These are the places of first settlements, from the oldest known modern settlement area around Camaron and Santa Rosa, but perhaps also places along the way that connect to stories of first homes, historical zones of early ethnic-cultural importance, like the Navarro House Italian Church, etc.

### 3) ***Sacred Earth, Hill & Sky*** (The Wild)

The abiding presence of the natural setting, ever present, despite the many years of the creek’s suppression and asphalt insults. References would capture aspects of the original details of the wild, from natural plants and grasses, to trees, wildlife (such as the freshwater shrimp of the creek), and other aspects of the creek’s panorama of natural expressions.

### 4) ***Nogales y Pescados*** (Pecans & Fish/Sustenance)

The fecundity of the natural setting in offering first settlers succor. The emergence of San Antonio cuisine in its myriad expressions from the Chili Queens to Schilo’s and Mi Tierra.

5) ***Los Antepasados*** (Ancestors)

The myriad stories of the city's earliest families and their genealogies.

6) ***Footprints*** (Migrations)

Histories of journeys that brought people to San Antonio, as well as important migration routes within the early city.

7) ***Las Jacalas*** (First Dwellings)

The theme of the built environment, with its historical inventory of the earliest buildings, streets and gathering places.

8) ***Las Castas*** (Mestizaje)

The long history in San Antonio of encounters between peoples, and the mixing of cultures and destinies that followed.

9) ***Crossed Swords & The Treaty*** (Legacies of Conflict & Peace-Making)

San Antonio's legacies of battles, conflicts, and struggles, from the Council House Massacre and the Battle of the Alamo to the Pecan Sheller's Strike. The documents and places where the history of San Antonio's heritage of reconciliation and agreement was established.

10) ***Canción y Espectáculo*** (Arts & Entertainment)

The creek's long connection to places of the arts, Alameda, Nacional and Progreso Theaters, parades, etc.

11) ***The Train*** (Industry & Commerce)

The emergence of the modern, urban American city, beginning powerfully with the trains that brought goods, and exported the myriad products of the nascent industry of San Antonio and South Texas.

12) ***Ciudad Cosmica*** (Mestizo Park & the Future)

In addition to a part of the narrative that evokes the city's future as a capital of America's *mestizaje*, this theme could encompass many aspects of the city's past: government, religion, urban evolution, etc.

Along the “ribbon walls,” you might consider incorporating strings of litanies, full of the rich field of names, words, and phrases from the creek and city’s past.

**Possible Litanies:**

**Maps and early depictions**

(...*Aguayo, Menchaca, Urrutia,, Giraud, Gentilz, Allen, Mauermann, Koch...*)

**Barrios/Places/Plazas**

(...*Barrio del Sur, Barrio del Norte, Barrio del Alamo, La Villita, El Portrero, Barrio de Laredo, Chihuahua, Plaza de Armas, Acéquia San Pedro...*)

**Street Names**

(...*Santa Rosa, Concho, San Saba, Perez, Morales Monterey, Salinas, Travis, Houston, Commerce, Dolorosa-Buena Vista, Matamoros...*)

**Families**

**Wildlife/Plants**

**Technical Language (Hydrology)**