

Mission San Antonio de Valero, Church
Alamo Plaza, between Houston and Crockett Streets
San Antonio
Bexar County, Texas
Texas

HABS No. TX-318-A

HABS
TEX
15-SAND
ISA

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS
TEX
15-SANT,
ISA-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MISSION SAN ANTONIO DE VALERO,
CHURCH

HABS No. TX-318-A

- Location: Alamo Plaza, between Houston and Crockett Streets, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.
- Present Owner: The State of Texas.
- Present Use: Public museum.
- Significance: The church is an important architectural monument of a Spanish mission and is physical evidence of building practices and techniques of the Spanish colonial period as employed by the Franciscan Fathers on the Texas frontier.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1744. The church was never finished, although it was reconstructed in the 1760s.
2. Original and subsequent owners: See History section of Mission San Antonio de Valero, HABS No. TX-318.
3. Original plans and construction: In 1777 Fray Juan Augustin de Morfi visited the Valero mission and recorded the description of the church:

"The church of this mission, although finished perfectly with its tower and sacristy, tumbled to the ground because of the bad intelligence of the maker and is being built again of harmonious architecture with hewn stone, half finished with the solidity and perfection that is required for its beauty and to sustain the vaults. Serving as the church is a room of 35 varas long, which was built with the intention of a granary, in which is found an altar, its wooden table with steps of the same. Arranged (about) a niche with the carved image of Christ Crucified of one vara and a third in height, two images of Blessed Mary of Sorrows, and another of San Juan with their clothing of ribbed silk, cloaks, shirts, and everything needed.

On the other altar is found arranged an image of our Lady of Sorrows of one vara, with her litter, and two very adequate dresses, by which the pueblo takes her out weekly to recite the rosary, at the end of which she has a pall of flowered silk stuff (to cover her) and the necessary lanterns. Another altar is found in the choir loft with a very pious image of Jesus the Nazarene adorned with various pictures surrounding its baldachin for the best effect: as also has the main altar; there is also found in the church

two benches, two confessionals, holy water font, copper baptismal font with its cover, bells, candlesticks, and four large bells.

A commodious room serves as a sacristy, in which are found the boxes of ornaments which contain three chalices with patens, two ciboria, a shell, four cruets, Cruz Magna, a holy water pot, two processional candleholders, aspergillum, censer with spoon, an inceasor, all of these ornaments of silver, as well as three chrismatics."

The mission was secularized in 1794. As a result of this action an inventory of the mission buildings was undertaken by Antonio Salazar, a master builder, and Don Pedro Guizar, a carpenter. They described the church in its unfinished appearance as follows:

"The vault of the Presbiterio (presbytery or chancel) was finished with its tower arch, and the other three were closed without vaults, and in a condition to receive the Zimbornio (base of cupola or dome). Two other arches were finished in the Canon (?) of the church, Under the one of the choir was placed the capital with its two Salmenes (?). The Bapistry was finished, with its fronteriza (facade), its Bobeda Aristes (?), with frames of carved stone, but without wooden doors.

The principal doorway of this edifice was beautiful. The first body was finished with four niches, two of which were ornamented with stone images of San Francisco and Santo Domingo; the other two of the second body, were unfinished as the columns had still to be placed, but its alquitrabes (architraves) were finished; the stone cornice was lacking as well. The Sacristy was in good condition and in use. It had two doors of carved stone. There were stalls Puestas (spaces) to the East and North with two windows looking to the South and West, and the doors had their transoms with knockers, the one to the east, having an iron grating. Thus was this room, as were the others of the convent, all in need of repairs if they were not to suffer greater ruin."

4. Alterations and additions: From 1849 to early 1850s the U.S. Army had San Antonio architect John Fries put on the church a new front facade and windows. In 1861 the church roof was destroyed by a fire and was rebuilt by William G. Cotton, a local San Antonio builder and contractor. That roof was replaced again with a tin roof in 1877 when the church was being rehabilitated for use as a storehouse.

From 1912 to 1920 when the mission was in custody of the State of Texas, little restoration of the buildings had been accomplished. In 1920-21 the State undertook the first major reconstruction of

the church, involving installation of reinforced concrete vaulted roof. After 1921 electricity was installed in the church. In 1928 the church received its gas heating system.

In 1961 new heating and air conditioning systems were installed.

B. Historical Context: See Mission San Antonio de Valero, HABS No. TX-318.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church was built with a cruciform plan and contains a rectilinear nave, a chancel and transepts with two flanking front towers. The church's main decorative feature is its front facade.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 70' x 110'.
2. Foundations: The foundations for the church are dressed face rubble masonry of local limestone and lime mortar. These extend approximately 2'-6" above the present grade and are offset from the wall with a torus molded water table in the offset angle.
3. Walls: A part of the walls, principally on the front facade, is random coursed ashlar, a local cream-colored limestone, laid in lime mortar. Other and by far the larger portions of the walls are rubble, again of the local limestone and lime mortar. All decorative trim including the frontispiece elements are the local cream-colored soft limestone.

As in all of the San Antonio Mission churches, the architectural sculptured decoration forms the notable feature of the buildings, and typically, the greater part is allocated to the frontispiece on the center of the main facade. The parti of the Alamo facade is typical and may be found in sixteenth century churches in Mexico. This characteristic arrangement, consisting of post and lintel forms framing an arched doorway, is categorized by Kublar as classicizing in intent. A further categorization by Baird of Mexican church fronts of the period 1680-1730 may also be applied to the Alamo with its facade parti of a single variant frontispiece consisting of paired vertical elements with niches between each pair, all of which flank a central arched doorway.

The frontispiece is divided into the invariable three parts by two sets of paired columns with the doorway occupying the central area and the flanking areas containing large niches all visually organized by the architrave-cornice. Only the lower frontispiece has survived today, the upper one undoubtedly of the same design, either destroyed or never completed.

The architrave-cornice surmounts a set of horizontal moldings that extend the full width of the frontispiece and which are, in effect, an adaptation of the classical parti of abacus, echinus and astragal, here all reduced in the vertical dimension. The architrave is plain but shows traces of solid fresco color. Above the architrave is the cornice, again an adaptation of classical form with a cyma reversa as the dominant molding. In plan the line of the architrave-cornice is irregular with rectilinear projections at each column and over the keystone of the doorway.

The vertical elements are classicizing in design with the standard division of pedestal, column, and architrave. In this case, the architrave is reduced to a rectilinear block resting on the capitals in dossier fashion. Columns also follow the classical division into three parts; base, shaft, and capital. The capitals are greatly mutilated today but it can be seen that they were Corinthianesque in style. A heavy astragal separates the capital from the shaft while another astragal divides the shaft into halves, the upper half enriched with thick helical toros moldings in the spiral "Salomonica" style, while the lower is treated as reeded work.

The column base is a wide-spreading toros preceded by several moldings and resting on a round plinth.

Each of the pedestals is also classical in style with molded toros base, dado and classical capital and anta moldings. The front corners of the dado are carved with an inset toros or boulet molding and the center of the field was occupied by a floral relief which is now badly mutilated.

The four niches, two below and two above, are identical and typical, treated as arched openings with the concave quadrant carved in the standard scalloped shell motif. The surrounding frame or architrave is carved with a simple floral motif and follows the outline of the opening with small impost moldings at the beginning of the scalloped quadrant.

The doorway, framed by columns on either side and the architrave-cornice above, consists of an arched opening and a door-panel in the spandrel. All of the decoration is to be found above the simple molded impost blocks for the jambs are plain and unenriched, being later replacements. The arch-ring itself is defined by borders separated from the field by carved channels. This panelized concept is carried out in the spandrels. All of these areas are covered by the same simple floral relief as found in the niche frames.

In characteristic fashion, at the crown of the arch is a heavily enriched projecting "keystone" which merges with a block above, in turn merging into the cornice moldings. On the keystone is carved the date 1757.

4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing masonry walls reinforced with plain buttresses. The roof system was originally vaulted but none of the nave, transept or chancel vaults, nor the crossing dome (or vault) has survived. These areas are presently spanned by a reinforced concrete tunnel vault erected in this century.

There are several courses of masonry of the arch-rings which indicate the original construction. The arch-rings, of course, coincide with the pilasters of the nave and were treated in the same manner with the identical boulet molding carved along the outer edges.

Traces of other arch-rings are also evident in the north wall of the north transept where several vouissoirs are preserved on either side.

A complete and apparently unaltered arch-ring is found in the large north room adjoining the north transept. Here the ring has no defined impost, the springer being simply set out from the face of the wall several inches, nor any decorative carving. Apparently the vault in this room is also unaltered. It is a groined masonry vault complete with carved foliate boss. There is, then, in this room one complete vaulted bay with its arch-ring across the northern end of the room. Another groin vault adjoined this arch-ring but now only two feet or so of this vault remain, the rest has not survived and the present north wall is obviously a later addition.

In the smaller north room between the north tower and the large north room may be found the springers and one or two vouissoirs on either side of an arch-ring that originally divided the space into two rooms. This was a low vault of one story.

In both of the tower rooms, the "baptistry" and the "sacristy," the original masonry groin vaults, have survived and seem to be unaltered.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The entrance to the church nave is centered in the west facade and the elaborate frontispiece. The doorway itself is an arch construction, seemingly of skew-vouissoirs although this is difficult to determine because of the carving. The opening is a round masonry arch, the face carved with a simple flora motif, an enlarged, embellished "keystone" and molded impost blocks. The present stone jambs are replacements for the original as the floral motif was originally carried down the reveal of the jamb.

There is no evidence of the original door. The present wood door is of double type with irregular-shape panels each side. Above a wood transom bar at impost level is the glass filled arch protected on the exterior by a metal bar grill.

There is another wood double paneled door in the north wall of the north transept but this is not original to the church.

- b. Windows: There are three embellished original windows in the west facade. The openings are spanned by flat arches and surrounded with stone architraves. The rectangular choir window is centered over the frontispiece and doorway. The architrave is plain with a channel carved near the inside edge and one near the outside edge leaving a plain center field with simple borders. The keystone is carved with the date 1757.

The other two windows light the "baptistry" and "sacristy" respectively and are alike, having a wide plain stone architrave with crossets or ancons at the lower corners.

A fourth window located in the north wall of the north tower shows traces of once having had a decorative architrave.

All of the windows are ca. 1939 wood casements and hung sash.

6. Roof: Reinforced concrete tunnel vault; lead sheathing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The church has a typical cruciform plan of the period, which corresponds to Baird's eighteenth century parish church classification with a rectilinear four-bay nave, a sanctuary and transepts with flanking front towers.
2. Stairway: None.
3. Flooring: Flagstone set in mortar, on grade. This floor was placed ca. 1936.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls are rubble limestone with traces of the original plaster. Pilasters mark the bays and have classical molded bases and capitals.
5. Doorways and doors: Two principal interior doorways lead to the two tower rooms, the "baptistry" and "sacristy" respectively. These are identical, spanned by a flat arch that merges with the surrounding architrave, plain stone with rebated inner edge, and molded plinths. Classical cornices project over the doorway.

Other doorways are spanned by segmental arches and are splayed. All doorways have modern iron gate closures.

6. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Lighting: Modern electrical fixtures.
 - b. Heating: Electric forced air system; central unit air conditioner.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church's longitudinal axis is oriented east to west, and faces west.

The Alamo church is located in the heart of the present urban center of San Antonio on a large landscaped block of land but situated on the western edge where it fronts on a busy open space, largely street surfaces, and defined on the western boundary of the space by commercial buildings. The area immediately in front of the church is paved with flagstone.

Prepared by: John C. Garner, Jr.
Director, Bexar County Architecture Survey
1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, Chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS office in the former Ursuline Academy buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., Director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress.