“Remember the Alamo” is a phrase every Texan learns at a tender age and keeps close to their heart throughout their lifetime. The site serves as a symbol of state pride and stands as a reminder that freedom, no matter the cost, is worth fighting for. While the massacre of William B. Travis and his men during the Texas Revolution is the main event that is meant to be remembered by the famous phrase, it is also worth remembering the so-called “Second Battle for the Alamo” and the subsequent efforts that have been taken to preserve its property (Ables, 1967). The problem the site presents is a complex one; the area has been a hub of business for over a century and the city of San Antonio has grown up closely around it. It has been neglected, rebuilt, utilized, and taken care of by several different entities over its 182-year history. Viewing the history of preservation of the Alamo property helps illuminate the decisions the state is poised to make about preserving it in the future.

One Site, Many Battles
By the end of the Texas Revolution, the nearly century-old San Antonio de Valero mission, also known as the Alamo, was in ruins. Not only had it served as the site of one of the war’s most famous battles, but it had also been sacked by the Mexican troops that occupied it upon their retreat after the final Battle of San Jacinto (Meissner, 1996). Though the newly minted Texas legislature had granted the property to the Catholic church after the war was won, its buildings remained dilapidated and unused for ten years until Texas joined the United States in 1846. War soon broke out again with Mexico over Texas’ annexation, and “the need for a permanent military presence in San Antonio had become clear” to the United States Army (Meissner, 1996). Rather than build a completely new base of operations from the ground up, they chose to lease the old Alamo church and barracks from the Catholic church and restore them for use as a Quartermaster’s Corps depot. By 1854, the army had put a roof on the church, adding the Alamo’s now-famous silhouette, as well as repaired the long barrack building directly northwest of the chapel. The army also constructed several small new buildings by the long barrack (Meissner, 1996).

During the army’s occupation, the Alamo church became a center of commerce. The lots surrounding the chapel and long barrack were sold and occupied by local businesses such as a brewery and a meat market (Meissner, 1996). However, this came to an end once Texas chose to secede from the Union and join the Confederacy in the Civil War. The army’s depot was
surrendered to the secessionists peacefully and suffered no damage, but later in 1861 the church suffered a major fire started by two young boys smoking (Meissner, 1996). This destroyed the second floor and the roof, though these were both rebuilt by the Confederate Army.

After the Civil War, the remains of the mission’s south gate were bought and demolished by the city of San Antonio, while the remaining property, save the church itself, was sold to local businessman Honorè Grenet (Meissner, 1996). He very quickly began work on renovating the convent, “adding a wooden exterior and many decorative flourishes…to make the building look like a fortress” (Meissner, 1996). He sold groceries and liquor out of the long barrack building, and he repaired and used the church as a warehouse for his store. However, this flippant use of the church did not sit well with many Texans who remembered the last stand of Lt. Colonel Travis and in 1883, the state purchased the chapel for $20,000, with the city of San Antonio assuming its upkeep (Meissner, 1996). With this transferal of power, it seemed that the preservation of the Alamo property would finally be considered. The city Committee on Markets, Parks, and Public Building published a report in 1885 with the aim of correcting the Alamo’s “neglected condition” (Meissner, 1996). The report recommended the removal of storage materials from the chapel, prohibiting transactions from taking place inside it, and clearing all the modern buildings built by the U.S. Army from the surrounding area. However, any preservation efforts undertaken by the city were short-lived. The proposed method of removing whitewash from the building’s walls by using steel brushes was deemed too destructive to be implemented. Additionally, the chairman of the Committee on Markets, Parks, and Public Buildings “changed his mind” and wanted souvenirs to be sold in a building adjacent to the Alamo (Meissner, 1996). Little action was ultimately taken.

Thus was the situation when the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (or DRT) came into being. The Daughters are a genealogical legacy organization that continues operations to this day, but their members’ interest in the Alamo predates the organization’s very conception. Adina Emilia De Zavala, the well-educated granddaughter of former Texas vice president Lorenzo De Zavala, had organized a group of women interested in the discussion and preservation of Texas history in 1889 (Ables, 2010). Her society quickly became more serious, and she obtained a verbal promise from the successors of Honorè Grenet “not to sell or offer the [long barrack] to anyone else without…giving the Chapter the opportunity to acquire it” (Ables, 1967). After De Zavala’s organization joined the Daughters of the Republic of Texas in 1893, one of their missions became to “repair, preserve, and mark…the missions around San Antonio” (Ables, 1967). This goal became a reality in 1904 when De Zavala secured the purchase of the Alamo property with the funds of fellow Daughter, Clara Driscoll. On January 26, 1905, the Texas legislature passed an act authorizing $65,000 from state funds to go towards the purchase and preservation of the Alamo property from Driscoll. The whole Alamo property, including the chapel and the long barrack, was then remanded to the care of the Daughters (Ables, 1967).

Unfortunately, disagreements soon arose between rival factions of the DRT, one led by De Zavala and the other led by Driscoll. The Driscollites believed that the chapel was the only building left standing from the 1836 battle and so they wished to raze all other structures on the property, including the long barrack, in order to create a reverent park space for people to enjoy peacefully. The De Zavalans (correctly) held that the long barrack, though built up with modern materials, still had walls original to the Texas Revolution. They wished to retain those walls and restore them, as well as construct a museum and “Hall of Fame” honoring the fallen defenders elsewhere on the property. These disagreements came to a head when Adina De Zavala
barricaded herself in the long barrack building to prevent the Driscollites from renting it to San Antonio business interests (Ables, 1967).

Though De Zavala was successful in preventing the building from being rented out, the Driscollites maintained control of the DRT’s leadership. At this point, the Daughters’ disagreements began to attract the attention of state authorities. Texas governor Oscar Colquitt called a meeting in May 1911 and invited both De Zavala and Driscoll to discuss their wishes for the property (Ables, 1967). The Driscollites asserted their amended view that only one wall of the long barrack building was original to the 1836 battle and that they wished to preserve it by tearing down the surrounding structure and “training ivy and vines” over the wall to preserve it (Ables, 1967). Naturally, Adina De Zavala firmly disagreed with this assessment and plan. After his mediation attempt failed, Colquitt cancelled the order which gave custody of the Alamo to the Daughters on the grounds that they had taken no action to preserve the property in six years of ownership (Ables, 1967). In 1912, he began his own restoration work by removing all the modern additions to the Honorè Grenet long barrack building except the west and south walls. He then commissioned an architecture professor from the University of Texas at Austin to design plans for the restoration of the building. These designs drew heavily from the renovation work done by the U.S. Quartermaster’s Department in 1849. The governor got as far as rebuilding the first level of the long barrack before his funding dried up, and the Texas Supreme Court ruled in 1913 that control of the property would be remanded back to the Daughters (Meissner, 1996). They assumed restoration and by 1914, a park was constructed to go along with the governor’s efforts (Meissner, 1996).

The Daughters somewhat regularly worked on the Alamo property over the next 80 years. The roof of the chapel was replaced once in 1920 and again in 1938 with lead. In 1936, the Daughters were granted money from the United States government for restorations and to purchase “the remaining private property on the east side of Alamo Plaza” (Meissner, 1996). Part
of this money was used to pave the inside of the church with flagstone. Technological improvements were made over time, including the installation of a lawn sprinkler system in 1955 and an air conditioning system in 1960. However, only “a few relatively minor improvements and conservation efforts in and near the chapel were made between 1938 and 1984” (Meissner, 1996).

One preservation concern that the Daughters did attempt to deal with is caused by the very materials that were used to construct the Alamo. Both the chapel and the long barrack building were made with local limestone (www.thealamo.org). Limestone is a soft, sedimentary rock, and easily absorbs groundwater. This absorption is called “rising damp” and can be visible as a dark band on the lower part of the chapel walls (see Figure 1). As the water is absorbed into the walls, it brings with it dissolved mineral salts. When the water evaporates, the salts are left behind to crystallize. This crystallization “eventually pushes a thin layer of stone off the exposed surface” and leaves the remaining wall fractionally thinner than before (Meissner, 1996). Over time, the affect can be devastating.

The Daughters worked to mitigate this damage by removing the lawn sprinkler system and hiring a stone preservation specialist in 1994. This specialist recommended a plan that “involved placing a physical barrier of metal through the stone foundation at a point below ground surface” (Meissner, 1996). It was hoped that the introduction of this barrier would keep any more groundwater from rising into the upper walls of the buildings. A test area at the south transept of the chapel was chosen to measure the effectiveness of this treatment. Additionally, the DRT hired an archaeological team to excavate the area and ensure that any potential cultural information was not lost in the course of treatment (Meissner, 1996). However, it is unclear if the Daughters embarked on a full adoption of this conservation plan once the excavation was completed.

**The Daughters’ Last Stand**

During the 1990’s, the Daughters’ preservation efforts began to come under scrutiny from their fellow Texans. Due to an Associated Press article detailing the organization’s multimillion-dollar budget surpluses and their reluctance to add certain commodities to the site, state representative Ron Wilson introduced legislation to remove them as custodians and replace them with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (Sedeno, 1989). Though this legislation ultimately languished in committee, his fight lasted nearly ten years and proved to be the trickling stones of discontent that ultimately turned into an avalanche against the DRT. Minority groups began airing their own grievances about the Daughters’ stewardship around this time as well. Texans of Native American, Hispanic, and African-American descent took issue with the “Anglo vs. Mexican” narrative that the Daughters promoted and condemned “the Alamo as a symbol of white racism and the DRT as an agent of Anglo oppression” (Winkler, 2015).

The true beginning of the end of the Daughters’ stewardship of the Alamo came in the form of a report by the *San Antonio Express-News* in 2009. It detailed that of the $213,000 the organization had raised by selling specialty license plates to the public, only $37,000 was spent on the Alamo and “almost none went to preservation” (San Antonio Express-News, 2009). The rest of the money was allocated to other properties managed by the Daughters. Compounding this very public and damaging revelation was a crippling betrayal from within the DRT’s own ranks. In February of 2009, member Sarah Reveley filed an official complaint with state attorney general Greg Abbott to request that the DRT be removed as official custodians of the Alamo.
(Russell, 2010). She included over 30 documents, the most incriminating of which accused the Daughters of failing to act after a report was released two years earlier identifying leaks and cracks in the roof of the chapel (Russell, 2010). She cited other instances of the Daughters ignoring calls for much-needed preservation work, though they had hired a full-time conservator.

Reveley’s complaint launched a full investigation by the attorney general’s office. The resulting pressure combined with the wavering support of the public and governor Rick Perry proved too much for the organization to overcome. In 2011, three bills were filed in the Texas legislature to remove the Daughters as official custodians of the Alamo (Winkler, 2015). On January 1, 2012, the Daughters struck a deal with the General Land Office to maintain day-to-day operations of the Alamo. The attorney general’s report was released later in 2012 and in part concluded that “the DRT did not properly preserve and maintain the Alamo, misused state funds for the organization’s own benefit,…and allowed its own organizational prerogatives to interfere with its duty to act in the best interests of the State of Texas and the Alamo” (Winkler, 2015). The General Land Office did not renew their contract with the DRT, and it officially expired in 2013. The Daughters’ oversight, though key in ensuring that the Alamo had survived directly following the Texas Revolution, had come to an end.

The Alamo Master Plan

Currently, the Alamo property rests in the hands of state politician George P. Bush. Elected in his first race for public office to head the General Land Office (GLO) as Texas Land Commissioner in 2014, the Alamo seemed like the perfect project for a greenhorn to cut his teeth on and win public favor along the way. During his swearing-in ceremony, Bush promised to “preserve…and protect the hallowed grounds and story of the Alamo…a story about the triumph of freedom over tyranny” (Ballotpedia).

In addition to building up his résumé, Bush had a more pressing reason to propose a new plan for the Alamo property. In 2014, British musician Phil Collins donated his extensive collection of Alamo artifacts and memorabilia to the state of Texas free of charge. The collection spans hundreds of items, including such treasures as a letter written by Stephen F. Austin in 1834 and a sword belt “believed to have been worn by Travis” (Spong, 2014). However, one of the conditions of Collins’ donation is that a visitor’s center must be built or prepared to house the collection. If this new center is not realized by 2022, Collins can revoke his donation and it will again be unavailable to the public (Batheja, 2015).

Therefore, Bush quickly got to work on backing his campaign promises by allowing the Daughters’ contract to expire and assembling a new plan for the Alamo property in coordination with the city of San Antonio. Developed over four years from the beginning of his tenure, the Alamo Master Plan contains many recommendations that are in line with best preservation practices. The plan has five key concepts:

1. “Restoring the Church and Long Barracks;
2. Delineating the historic footprint of the Alamo;
3. Recapturing the Historic Mission Plaza and create a sense of reverence and respect on the historic battlefield;
4. Repurposing of the Crockett, Woolworth and Palace buildings into a world-class visitor center and museum that tells the story of the Battle of the Alamo and over 300 years of layered history; and
5. Creating a sense of arrival to the site and enhancing connectivity between the site and other nearby public spaces” (United States, 2018).

It intends to accomplish these goals first by closing the streets surrounding the Alamo to vehicular traffic and rerouting public parades that happen annually near the Alamo grounds (Save The Alamo, 2017). In Figure 5 below, the Alamo Plaza (highlighted in blue) is currently owned by San Antonio, while the Alamo grounds in red are owned by the state. The Master Plan proposes to unite these two areas and delineate the footprint of the historic battlefield, marked by the red dotted line, with a wall.

Additionally, a mandate would be passed so that public events and protests would no longer be allowed to be held in front of the chapel building. The Master Plan’s intention is to create a reverent park space for visitors to enjoy in peace, which is made difficult by public demonstrations that often take place at the site. Instead, the Plaza de Valero area (in yellow) currently owned by the city of San Antonio would be designated as a free speech area and available for such gatherings 24 hours a day (Save the Alamo, 2017).

Figure 5: Layout of the current three regions of the Alamo property. Under the new Alamo Master Plan, the state would combine the red and blue regions (Save the Alamo, 2017).
The Alamo Master Plan also proposes that wherever possible, “the mission and battle wall footings will be displayed and preserved under glass” (Save The Alamo, 2017). These displays would be updated as new archaeological excavations reveal more historic foundations in the future. Finally, the preservation plan proposes to “[lower] the current surface in the historic footprint about 18 inches” to the ground level where the Alamo once stood (Save The Alamo, 2017).

Many of these goals are admirable and badly needed. Simply closing the street in front of the Alamo will do wonders for protecting the outside of the buildings from pollutants such as car exhaust. Also, moving rallies and demonstrations further south to the Plaza de Valero will further help to protect the space from vandals and protest-related accidents. Finally, lowering the surface of the battlefield to its original ground level could help protect the upper walls of the Alamo buildings from groundwater and halt the spread of rising damp.

Figure 6: One of many political rallies that have been held on the Alamo property. The Alamo Master Plan would move such demonstrations away from the chapel and long barrack buildings (Krantz, 2009).

However, Bush’s Alamo Master Plan did not encounter the statewide acclaim that he no doubt expected. The first supposed slight was Bush’s choice to hire historical preservation experts from an out-of-state design firm, rather than native Texan preservationists who understand “what [the Alamo] means to Texas” (Hooks, 2018). This disdain of outside influence also extended to the plan’s previous proposal of erecting glass walls where the Alamo’s outer walls once stood. Critics called for using limestone, which is native to Texas, rather than “modern-day see-through German-made glass” (savethealamo.us). It should be noted that the Master Plan has since rescinded this proposal.
The main point of public contention with Bush’s Alamo Master Plan concerned the Cenotaph, the 60-foot-tall granite monument bearing the names of the defenders who perished in the Battle of the Alamo. The Master Plan proposes moving the Cenotaph from its current location near the Alamo chapel to the Plaza de Valero area, away from the historic battlefield (Save The Alamo, 2017). In the process, the Cenotaph would undergo a much-needed restoration, and additional names of previously unidentified Alamo defenders would be added to its face. However, critics complained that this move would place the Cenotaph too far from the Alamo chapel and it would be “secluded by new condominiums” (savethealamo.us).

It should be noted that one of the Master Plan’s goals is worthy of criticism for reasons other than the (perhaps imagined) signs of disrespect towards its fallen defenders. The fourth goal, which states the intent to transform the Crockett, Woolworth and Palace buildings into a visitor’s center, may inadvertently disservice one history while honoring another. Though the buildings, which stand across Alamo Plaza Street, were certainly not standing when the Texas Revolution took place and were built upon the mission’s historic outer walls, are notable for other reasons. Most notable is that in March of 1960, the Woolworth Building “became the first in the South publicly recognized for desegregating its lunch counter” (Dietel, 2016). During the Civil Rights movement, San Antonio was one of the rare Southern cities that integrated peacefully. If the General Land Office follows through with its plan to delineate the walls of the historic battlefield, the Woolworth Building would be in jeopardy. There is widespread consensus that the gaudy tourist businesses which currently operate out of those buildings should be moved elsewhere. However, if the buildings are allowed to stand, but are then converted into a visitor’s center (presumably to house the Collins collection), would their Civil Rights history be told satisfactorily? This question needs to be soberly considered before any action is taken regarding those buildings.

Figure 7: The Woolworth building, directly across the street from the Alamo chapel (Preservation Texas).
These complaints, along with others concerning different aspects of Bush’s job performance as Land Commissioner, escalated to the point that there were serious questions if he would be reelected in 2018. His predecessor, former Land Commissioner Jerry Patterson, challenged him in the Republican primary and eventually threw his support behind Bush’s Democratic opponent (Hooks, 2018). However, Bush emerged victorious in November. His election to another four-year term insures that the Master Plan will be enacted over the next four years.

Conclusion

The history of the Alamo did not end with the lives of Davy Crockett and William B. Travis. Its preservation has been hotly contested since the Texas Revolution and continues to be a point of contention today. It faces all the preservation concerns of a historic site with all the pressure and visibility of a national landmark. The Alamo Master Plan should alleviate some of its largest preservation issues, but conversations remain to be had about its focus and implementation. Ultimately, the Master Plan will go far in ensuring that the Alamo will be present for future generations of Texans to enjoy as well as remember.
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