

Stop 28 – Historic Preservation

The amazing confluence of cultures expressed in the San Antonio Missions is reflected in a city with charm and dignity and the courage to preserve historic treasures. If you're lucky enough to have a real passion for your work, then you can relate to historic preservationist Harvey Smith, Jr. The native of Minnesota began his love affair with five old mission ruins over 100 years ago when he first came to San Antonio. Preserving historic buildings was not a popular cause in the early 20th Century. Many community leaders championed big buildings and modern cities. There was even a group that suggested covering over the San Antonio River to make room for more buildings and the increasingly popular automobile.

In 1928, architect Harvey Smith directed his first major architectural restoration project—the Spanish Governors' Palace located in downtown San Antonio. For decades Smith led excavations, made sketches, and immersed himself in Spanish Colonial research, including taking several trips to archives in Mexico. Harvey Smith stabilized and restored the Alamo Chapel and *convento*. He was one of the first architects in the area to work with archeologists to document structural foundations, pottery remnants, and *acequia* or irrigation ditches from the Spanish Colonial period. Smith stabilized the church at Mission Concepcion.

When he turned his attention to the “Queen” of the Missions, San Jose, he first restored the Granary with its flying buttresses. Then he focused on the sad condition of the main church and *convento*. While the beautifully carved entrance façade was intact, the vaulted roof on the church had collapsed and at least three of the walls were partially collapsed. The reconstructed walls and mission buildings you see today appear as they originally stood after their completion in 1768.

The San Antonio Conservation Society, along with other passionate preservationists such as artist Ethel Harris, whose unique home is located behind the San Jose gristmill, are also credited with great efforts to preserve and restore the San Antonio Missions.