

Stop 4 – San Juan Acequia

Look for the ditch at the tree line – along the outer perimeter of the parking lot. The ditch continues across the road and south and west toward the river. There is no water in it now but imagine the sounds of creaking gates, flowing water, and a thriving farming community. The Spanish called this ditch an *acequia* –an Arabic word meaning canal or irrigation ditch. In the 1700s, 50 miles of *acequias* supplied water to the farm lands of all four missions and the civil settlement of *San Fernando de Bejar*.

The technology of *acequias* is ancient. The Spanish learned this method for moving water from their Moorish conquerors during medieval times. Mission Natives and skilled *acequiadores* dug, scooped, and measured (pause) with bone and iron tools to carve the gravity driven system. A dam up stream diverted the water from the San Antonio River into the *Acequia Madre*, the main mother ditch. Lesser ditches split off from the *Acequia Madre* to carry water to the fields. A ditch master, the *Mayordomo*, systematically raised and lowered the gates along the ditch network to control the flow of water back to the river.

The *acequias* quenched the furrows and nourished the plentiful crops. Acres of corn, beans, chilies, melons, cotton, and squash grew in abundance. Crops from this mission traveled to settlements up and down the *Camino Real* – the King’s Highway- from Mexico to Louisiana. From 1740 to the late 1800s, the seven miles of San Juan’s *acequias* carried water, fish, and life to this community.