

San Antonio Express-News (TX)

July 21, 2016

Digs underway that could unearth Alamo's multilayered history

Scott Huddleston Staff Writer

Staff Writer

Archaeologists are giving Alamo Plaza its most thorough examination to date, hoping to find footings of the original walls of the mission and 1836 fortress, and possibly artifacts from up to 10,000 years ago.

"People were living here then. We won't know until we start recovering artifacts," Nesta Anderson, lead investigator on the project and senior archaeologist with Pape-Dawson Engineers, said during the first daily briefing Wednesday.

For three to four weeks, an archaeological team will dig with trowels and shovels up to 4 feet deep, looking for traces of the west and south walls that date to the Alamo's 1700s mission era. Joining Pape-Dawson in work to support a long-range Alamo area master plan are Raba Kistner, city archaeologists and the Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Visitors may attend daily briefing at 10:30 a.m. weekdays at the southwest corner of the plaza, across the street from the Alamo's famed mission-era church.

Anderson said the teams will use mesh screens to sift through soil, concrete and gravel, possibly revealing fragments of Native American pottery, battle ordnance or other artifacts, while seeking physical confirmation of the boundaries and elevation of the Alamo's outer walls. Based on an encased display of an adobe wall at the plaza's southwest corner, from a 1979 excavation, other wall footings may be 2 feet below street level, she said.

The teams will avoid areas where human remains are known to exist. On the plaza's north end, remains of dozens of people, presumed to be indigenous mission inhabitants, were uncovered in the 1930s construction of the Hipolito F. Garcia Federal Building.

This month, members of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio and elders with the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation held a blessing in the plaza and in the mission church to "do everything as respectful as possible," said **Ramón Vásquez**, executive director of the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions.

His group, which persuaded the city in 1994 to close a short street in front of the Long Barrack to traffic to protect a mission cemetery, will monitor the digs and offer spiritual consultation and support if new remains are found, he said. But **Vásquez** was hopeful that the work will help shape a larger story of the Mission San Antonio de Valero, which operated from 1724 to 1793 before it became the Alamo, site of a famous siege and battle for Texas independence, then a U.S. Army depot and center for commercial activity.

"The wall they're looking for right now is the wall from about 1760," he said. "These are the same walls that children who were baptized within the mission put their hands on. We can clearly, finally participate in telling our story as native descendants of the missions of San Antonio."

City Archaeologist Kay Hindes said the state-owned Alamo and city plaza are being studied comprehensively for the first time. Ground-penetrating radar is being run throughout the plaza and walls of the Alamo to find trenches, acequias and other clues or artifacts.

There is a "low possibility" of finding prehistoric objects "displaced from previous excavations," Hindes said.

The excavations may reveal post holes or other traces of the site's evolution from an open mission, with simple huts or jacales before outer walls were built of adobe, which disintegrated, giving way to limestone construction,

she said.

"It's possible that we could find structures related to each of those construction sequences," Hindes added.

Alamo Director Becky Dinnin said the project offers a chance for Texas history teachers to engage students in the fourth and seventh grades. "It is a good chance for a classroom to come down," she said.

A public meeting on the plan is set for 6-8 p.m. Aug. 2 in the Convention Center's Stars at Night Ballroom. The public can follow the archaeological project at www.reimaginethealamo.org or on the Reimagine the Alamo Facebook page.

shuddleston@express-news.net

Twitter: [shuddlestonSA](#)

ExpressNews.com

More: [An interactive look at the excavation sites in Alamo Plaza](#)
