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Steven Gonzales wants to put you on the Camino Real de los Tejas

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Austinite advocates for the multipronged Spanish trails in Texas

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 16, 2014



BY [MICHAEL BARNES](#) - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Historians have often assumed that, in 1770, three Spanish missions were built – then quickly abandoned – near Barton Springs. After all, Spanish documents record temporary missions on that part of the Colorado River. And it’s a natural spot for settlement.

As such, for decades, an ornate Texas Historical Marker that explains the short-lived missions has stood sentinel over the springs.



El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail

Steven Gonzales, executive director of El Camino Real de los Tejas Historic Trail Association, thinks otherwise.

“The missions would have been at a Camino Real crossing,” Gonzales says, referring to the Spanish “Royal

Road” that crisscrossed eastern Texas. “On a ridge to the south or west side of a river crossing. They would have expected the French to come from the east.”

You see, in the 1770s, the Spanish hurriedly moved their East Texas missions south and west along the Royal Road to avoid French encroachments from Louisiana. The missionaries and their converts eventually moved on to San Antonio.

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Steven Gonzales is executive director of El Camino Real de los Tejas National Historic Trail Association.

If Gonzales' guess is correct, their settlement would have stood on the hills above the Colorado River shallows now traversed by the Montopolis Bridge, perhaps in what is now Roy Guerrero Park.

Gonzales, 40, brings a fresh perspective to the

Spanish period in Texas as the Austin-based advocate of the route that was named a national historic trail in 2004. Originally, the multipronged road, whose full name in Spanish refers to the Tejas Indians who gave the state its name, extended from Mexico City to Los Adaes, the first capital of Texas (now in the state of Louisiana near the town of Natchitoches).

"There are many layers of history to the road," he says. "From Native American to French, Spanish, Anglo and beyond. As a matter of fact, the road led to the founding of Texas. And it's easy to say that we would not be calling Texas 'Texas' without it."

The perfect man for the perfect job

Corpus Christi-born Gonzales, 40, seems to have been preparing for this role all his adult life. At the University of Texas, he studied cultural and historical geography, focusing on the Spanish missions and presidios on the northern frontier of New Spain. He was particularly interested in how Christian, Muslim and Jewish traditions mixed in New Spain.

Later, at Texas State University, he narrowed his research to trail-preservation groups and how they negotiated access across private land. His case studies included the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail in Arizona and California, Ice Age National Scenic Trail in Wisconsin and the California Coastal Trail.

Once, he joined other students exploring La Jornada de Muerto on El Camino de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail between Socorro and Las Cruces, N.M. One of his colleagues complained about the lack of cellphone service in the remote desert.

"We are on the Journey of Death," Gonzales responded. "Of course, there's no cellphone service on the Journey of Death. Sometimes, there's just a complete lack of connection to the physical world just

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outside the window. That world is the one Spanish explorers would have traveled through long ago.”

Since 2009, he has been working to raise awareness of the ancient trail that played such a key role in Texas history.

“I couldn’t be in a better position to do what I’m doing,” Gonzales says. “While it is the second oldest trail in the country, in terms of its designation as a national historic trail, El Camino Real de los Tejas is one of the newest. So we have a lot to do to help people understand its significance.”

His group runs several programs to enlighten schoolchildren, to raise roadside signs – like a recent one to mark the San Gabriel River crossing – and to protect trail resources. They specifically target fourth- and seventh-graders already studying Texas history.

The first official signs were placed on the trail by the National Park Service in Milam County. Gonzales thinks the signs not only educate, they help protect what remains of the trail.

“This is crucial,” he says. “Because the trail is destroyed little by little each day.”

Many trails as one

The Camino group that Gonzales heads was founded in 2007 and was housed at Texas State until 2011, when it moved to the AGE Building on East 38th Street.

Luckily for Gonzales, one of his Texas State teachers, Andy Samson, was the group’s first president.

Other groups had previously acknowledged El Camino Real de los Tejas. In 1918, the Daughters of the American Revolution and the state of Texas placed markers along one part of the trail. In 1991, Texas Department of Transportation commemorated the 300th anniversary of the first Spanish explorations along the road with a study.

That study informed the National Parks Service analysis of the trail.

“The wheels of government turn slow,” Gonzales says. “So it wasn’t until October 2004 that El Camino Real was designated as a national historic trail.”

Most people, even followers of Texas history, might be surprised that they already know parts of the trail, such as the string of missions, including the Alamo, that survive in San Antonio.

“Those missions are the crown jewels of the trail,” Gonzales says. “You can see how Mudéjar architecture, which combines influences from the the three religious cultures of Spain, mix in these New World constructions.”

The San Antonio missions, as a matter of fact, have been nominated for World Heritage status.

Other places can give the traveler a vicarious experience of following the trail as explorers did. For instance, great swales cut into the landscape near the Medina River in southern Bexar County show the wear of ox carts and wagons over time. Right here in Austin detect evidence at McKinney Falls State Park.

“At the Lower Falls area, where a large limestone slab sits, is a historical Camino crossing of Onion Creek,” Gonzales says. “You can see the swales there coming up from the bank from Onion Creek and toward old homestead. Because we don’t have signs out there yet, people don’t know it.”

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has directed more than \$1.5 million to enhance visitor experience and develop directional and interpretive signage at McKinney Falls State Park, Goliad State Park, Mission Rosario and Mission Tejas State Park.

“These developments will really bring the trail to life for the public in some of our nicest state parks, including our hometown park here in Austin,” Gonzales says. “So in the near future, look for ways you can learn about and explore the Royal Road. Much of it might be just on the other side of your window.”

Michael Barnes writes about Austin’s people, places, culture and history.

CORRECTION: This story has been updated to correct that the assumed date that Spanish missions were built near Barton Springs was 1770, not 1870.

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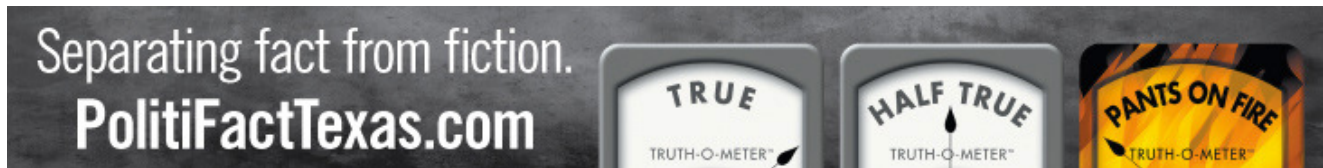
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