

LOCAL

New signs mark El Camino Real in Hays County as more untold Hispanic stories are uncovered

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At Wonder World Drive and Hunter Road in San Marcos stands a new road sign marking the historic El Camino Real de los Tejas, a network of roads that led to the founding of Texas.

As many as 31 signs are being installed throughout Hays County, mostly along corridors that run through San Marcos, county officials said.

El Camino Real de los Tejas stretches across the state from Laredo at the Rio Grande to Nacogdoches in East Texas before heading into northwestern Louisiana.

It is one of only two nationally designated historic trails in Texas, the other being El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail in the El Paso area. It is also one of 19 in the United States with the designation.

Steven Gonzales, executive director of the El Camino Real de los Tejas Historical Trail Association, said not only is Hays County home to some of those roads, but San Marcos was right at the junction with a second route — the Camino Arriba — used by the Spanish from 1795 to the end of the Spanish colonial period in 1821, and then later by most Anglo settlers heading west. That route, which has been replaced by paved roads such as Texas 21, is now part of the Camino Real de los Tejas trail network.

“It was used by everyone from the Native Americans to French and Spanish explorers to African Americans seeking freedom to early Anglo settlers coming into the state,” Gonzales said. “All kinds of people used the trail at different times.”

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

Focusing on Hays County

As Hays County grows, Gonzales said the El Camino Real de los Tejas Historical Trail Association is working to establish local chapters to help raise awareness of the trail and preserve what is left.

Hays County is home to more than 241,000 people, a jump from 157,107 in 2010, according to census data. With housing and business developments springing up at an increasing rate, pieces of the trail get lost to construction, Gonzales said — and it's happening as San Antonio, New Braunfels and Austin continue to grow as well.

“We are trying to work with local leaders, planners, developers and the public to raise awareness of the trail so that doesn't happen,” Gonzales said. “We have to work together to protect that historic resource that is there and create it as an amenity to that development rather than have that historic resource destroyed.”

Gina Alba-Rogers, who leads the Council for the Indigenous and Tejano Community, a cultural advocacy group, said the Camino Real trail in Hays County is just one part of the history the group is trying to preserve.

“We want to preserve the rich culture of indigenous and Tejano people in Hays County and their histories,” she said. “The goal is to ensure that future generations hear the untold stories of our culture.”

Some of those stories tell of the original settlers of Hays County, such as Felipe Roque de la Portilla, who with his family of eight brought 51 people from the interior of Mexico to found San Marcos de Neve in April 1808 along the Camino Real, and Pedro Veracruz, one of the first vaqueros and rancheros in Kyle.

Alba-Rogers said the group is putting together narratives of the histories and applying for historical markers and other recognitions of these stories.

“It's amazing what you find in historical records and oral histories,” she said. “These are stories that have not been told for one reason or another, but we are lucky to now be able to tell these stories, and that is what we are trying to do.”

The history of El Camino Real

Originally used by Native Americans, one of the Camino Real trails follows what Gonzales referred to as the Texas spring line between San Antonio and Austin — connecting what you

would recognize today as the Blue Hole in Wimberley, Comal Springs, San Marcos Springs and Barton Springs in Austin.

The trail served as the ideal place for settlement because of the abundant water from creeks and springs and the heavy vegetation on the edge of the Balcones Escarpment that could be used to build homes, cook and generate heat. The trail was also home to wild game, such as deer and bison, and the adjacent Blackland Prairies provided grassland for grazing cattle and sheep.

Spanish explorers used the route to establish missions and presidios in Texas, Gonzales said.

In 1690, a party of soldiers and priests crossed the Rio Grande and headed to the Neches River to assist in the creation of the first mission in Texas, Mission San Francisco de la Espada, in what is today the East Texas town of Weches, established later that year. The mission was moved to present-day southeast San Antonio in 1731.

El Camino Real started to become a major travel route in the Spanish colonial period, Gonzales said, with the founding of several missions from San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande in 1700 and the settlement of San Fernando de Béxar and San Antonio de Valero in 1718.

But in 1719, a French attack on Mission San Miguel alarmed the Spanish, and they built the Presidio Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Los Adaes, now the Los Adaes State Historic Site in Louisiana, to counter any further French intrusion into Spanish territory, according to the National Park Service.

Gonzales said that is when the Spanish began to establish even more missions and presidios in Texas.

The Spanish established temporary missions near San Marcos in Hays County and Austin in 1721 until a more ideal location for the mission could be determined.

Eventually those temporary missions were moved to San Antonio. Five of the 26 missions that were built in Texas, including the Alamo, stand there.

“The Spanish were seeking not only gold but new converts to the Catholic faith,” Gonzales said. “That is why these locations were chosen, because there were places where they could recruit Native American people to become Catholic converts and faithful servants of the king.”

