

Confederate Tannery

In the 1850s, Pedro Flores was farming the land bounded on the north and west by the Upper Labor ditch, by the river on the east, and on the south by property belonging to the heirs of Anastacia Zambrano. Today, much of this tract lies within the boundaries of the San Antonio Zoological Gardens. Flores and the City were involved in litigation over this property at the beginning of the Civil War.¹ The war was in its second year when the Confederate States of America made plans to establish “a system of home manufacturers” in western Texas to supply critical materials and benefit the local economy. Confederate representatives wanted to build a tannery in San Antonio and approached the City to purchase the 75-acre tract on the river. The City was willing to sell only if the Confederacy assumed litigation with Flores, an offer that was refused. The matter was settled in January 1863, when the City Council and Flores both accepted \$5,000 from the Confederacy for their interest in the property.²

The tannery was under construction by April 1863, when the City Council granted permission for the Confederate government to “quarry hard rock from No. 24 and 25 quarries at no charge for constructing their works at the head of the San Antonio River.”³ Though the full extent of the tannery’s operation and production has not been researched, it is known that the completed facility also included a saw mill.

Period accounts and maps provide some details about the facility. The tannery and mill were reportedly capable of processing 15,000 hides annually and 3,000 feet of lumber daily. Water was provided by a hewn stone raceway that ran between the Upper Labor ditch and San Antonio River. When advertised for sale after the war in 1867, the facility consisted of “twelve stone lime vats, fifty-two wooden vats, seven stone pools...one steam saw-mill capable of sawing 3,000 feet of lumber daily...one small stone building.”⁴ **(Figure 2)**

The tannery was leased after the war and the City Council became alarmed that the occupants were making unauthorized use of water flowing through the raceway. There was further concern in January 1867, when the United States Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands advertised the property for sale at an estimated value of \$150,000. Not wanting to lose control of this valuable asset, the City had the property appraised and offered the government \$25,000.⁵

No resolution had been reached in May 1868, when a storm devastated the city, badly damaging the tannery. The planned sale of the plant’s moveable property was canceled, and the tannery stood in ruins for two more years. Negotiations continued between the City and Federal government, and in July 1870, the tannery property was transferred to the city for \$4,500. There have been no archaeological excavations to document the tannery.⁶

The City continued to own the tannery property for another four years, leasing it to the banking firm of Bennett and Thornton. In late 1874, the council voted to subdivide approximately 47-acres of the 75-acre tract into ten lots that were sold at auction in January 1875. The City retained the

¹ BCDR K2:428-430, November 22, 1852; S2:497-99, January 13, 1863. It is unclear if Pedro Flores purchased it in the land sale of 1852 or if he inherited it.

² CCM C:377-379, September 9, 1963; BCDR S2:498-499, January 13, 1863.

³ CCM C:392, April 20, 1963.

⁴ San Antonio *Herald*, January 25, 1867.

⁵ CCM C:588, February 20, 1867; San Antonio *Herald*, January 25, 1867.

⁶ CCM C:655, May 21, 1868; BCDR U2:593, July 22, 1869.

property at the junction of the Upper Labor ditch and river that that included the greatest amount of river frontage as well as some springs.⁷

Six of the tannery tract lots were acquired by prominent local individuals and firms: J.H. Kampmann (Lots 1, 3, and 4, totaling 16.65 acres); F. Groos and Company (Lots 2 and 5, totaling 9.3 acres); and Lockwood and Manning (Lot 8, totaling 3.33 acres). Most significantly, prominent banker George W. Brackenridge purchased four of the five uppermost lots— Lots 6, 7, 9, and 10, totaling seventeen acres.⁸

⁷ CCM D:14, February 1, 1871; CCM D:134, December 16, 1874. The property was leased to Bennett and Thornton for \$10,000 “to meet current expenses and liabilities contracted.” No further explanation is given.

⁸ BCDR 2: 237, November 19, 1875; 2:243, January 15, 1875; BCDR 2:237, January 19, 1875; 2:249, January 15, 1875. Brackenridge paid \$3,271 for the lots.