

Republic Square

Interpretive Panel Draft - 11/21/17

Produced by Fermata, Inc. for the Downtown Austin Alliance

Sign 1: Republic Square – General Description

Edwin Waller's original design of Austin consisted of a grid with a central square (Capitol Square) and four smaller "public squares." In 1888 the squares were named Brush, Hamilton (now First Baptist Church), Bell (now Wooldridge), and Hemphill (now Republic).

Initially Austin invested little in parks and public spaces. Although the original city plan set aside public land, people quickly found other ways to use these spaces. Between 1950 and the early 1970s, Republic Square was used as a parking lot.

As part of the U.S. Bicentennial celebration in 1976, Austin sought to return the square to its original purpose. The city chose the current name, Republic Square, (in honor of or as a tribute to) the Republic of Texas.

In 2017, the Downtown Austin Alliance, Austin Parks Foundation, and Austin Parks and Recreation Department decided to give Republic Square a dramatic makeover. The civic space that you experience today is a reflection of the spirit and intent of Waller's original inspiration.



Earliest known photograph of Republic Square looking south toward the Colorado River, 1869

Credit: H.B. Hillyer. [View of Austin, TX], photograph, 1869; (texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht124900/; accessed November 20, 2017), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu; crediting Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

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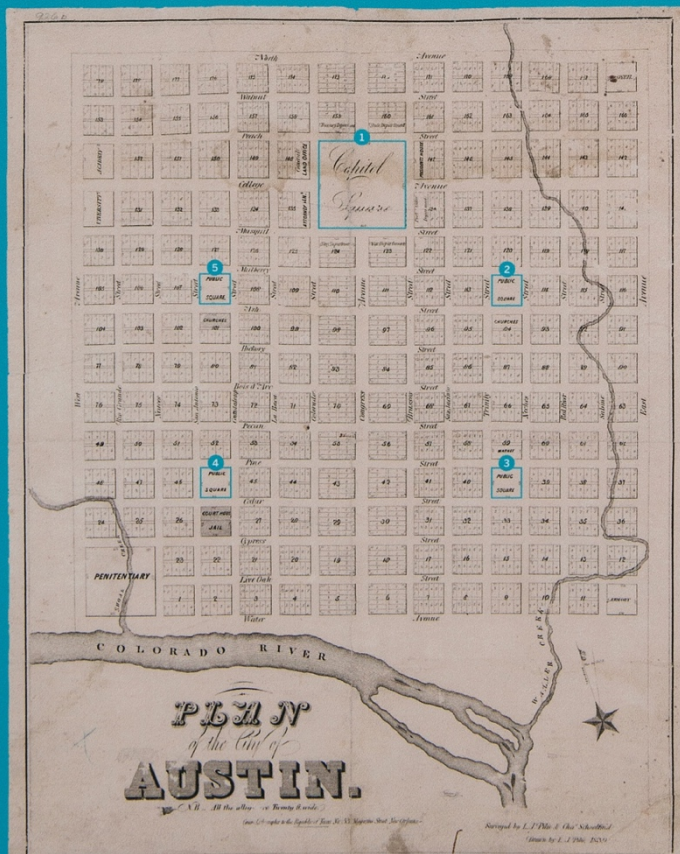
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Sign 2: Republic Square – Austin’s Birthplace and the Auction Oaks

On January 24, 1839 the Republic of Texas directed President Mirabeau Lamar to select a site for the capital. Lamar chose the small settlement of Waterloo on the north bank of the Colorado River as the site for what would become Austin.

In May 1839 Judge Edwin Waller laid out a plan for the new capital city. The “Waller Plan” encompassed a square mile, 14 city blocks by 14 city blocks, between Waller Creek on the east and Shoal Creek on the west.

On August 1, 1839 Waller (working for the Republic of Texas) held the first auction of city lots under a small grove of live oaks in what we now call Republic Square. Funds from this sale were used to begin the construction of government buildings in the new capital.



Edwin Waller’s original design of Austin consisted of a grid with a central square (Capitol Square¹) and four smaller, secondary “public squares.” In 1888, the squares were named Hamilton² (no longer a public square), Brush³, Hemphill⁴ (now Republic) and Bell⁵ (now Wooldridge).

Map 0296d, Courtesy TSLAC

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Sign 3: Republic Square – Guadalupe Park and Austin's Mexico

Austin's original Mexican and Tejano community once enveloped Republic Square. This neighborhood known as "Mexico" stretched from Congress Avenue to Shoal Creek and from West 1st Street to West 7th Street. By the 1880s, the park was so popular that nearby residents hosted concerts and dances, church fundraisers, and the annual celebration of Mexico's Independence Day (16 de septiembre) here.

In 1907, the Catholic diocese built Our Lady of Guadalupe Church as well as a parochial school at the corner of West 5th Street and Guadalupe Street facing Republic Square. Thereafter, the square was known as "Guadalupe Park" among local residents.

The City Plan of 1928 began the process of pressuring people of color to move east of East Avenue (now I-35). The plan recommended that city services (schools, roads, utilities) be denied to people of color unless they lived within the "Negro District."

By the Great Depression, the residents of "Mexico" had moved east with their stores, churches, foods, and fiestas. Today some Tejanos now residing east of I-35 can trace their lineage to Guadalupe Park and the "Mexico" neighborhood.



The original Our Lady of Guadalupe Church was located immediately north of Republic Square.

Credit: (Image AR.2009.047(12), Austin History Center, Austin Public Library *(note: not the final image, image credit subject to change)*)

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Sign 4: Republic Square – The Soul of the Square

Mexican culture is the soul of Republic Square and a critical component of that culture is food. Austin's Mexican food began in the kitchens of Mexicans and Tejanos who lived around the square. Families in the neighborhood made tamales and Mexican candies to sell along Congress Avenue. These kitchens were the beginnings of the industry that helped shape the Mexican cuisine that still thrives in Austin.

Local residents worked in spinach-packing plants and canning factories located near the square. Children played in the square as their parents worked in these factories preparing foods for the national market. Walker's Austex Chili Company provided jobs to local Mexicans and Tejanos. Austin's food tradition of various Mexican kitchens, restaurants, and markets continues today.

An assembly line of workers sealing and packing cans at Walker's Austex Chili Company, located immediately south of Republic Square.

Credit: Douglass, Neal. [Walker's Austex Chili Company], photograph, 1948;
(texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph62847/;
accessed March 22, 2017), University of North Texas
Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, texashistory.unt.edu;
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