Evoking the early Spanish conquistadors, explorers, and missionaries who came to Texas and other southern states centuries ago, the historic named highway known as the Old Spanish Trail includes segments of some of the oldest roads and trails in Texas. Impetus for the creation of a highway known as the Old Spanish Trail stems from the efforts of a group of individuals, primarily from Florida and Alabama, who met in Mobile, Alabama, in 1915 to create the Old Spanish Trail Association. It was one of many such auto trails groups established around the country as part of the Good Roads movement that promoted improvements to and expansion of the nation’s highways. Like many of its contemporaries, the Old Spanish Trail Association had a grand vision and advocated the development of a transcontinental highway that stretched from coast to coast. While the Bankhead Highway stretched the full width of Texas, it was not truly transcontinental – it ended in San Diego but began in Washington, D.C. rather than at the east coast. Moreover, the Old Spanish Trail took a more southerly route and was touted as the shortest transcontinental highway in the United States, especially as compared to the Lincoln Highway, which extended from coast to coast across the nation’s mid-section. Although the Old Spanish Trail Association initially maintained its headquarters in Mobile, Alabama, the group relocated its offices to San Antonio, Texas by 1919, under the able leadership of Harral Ayres. (Refer to previous Section I.4 for additional background regarding Ayres and the Old Spanish Trail Association.)

The Old Spanish Trail largely overlapped with the “Southern National Highway,” as the route was named by the Texas Highway Commission in 1917. At that time, the agency formally incorporated the roadway as SH 3 in the new state highway system. (See Figure 183.) However, the route marked by the Old Spanish Trail Association included a wide-ranging variety of alignments other than SH 3; the most notable was the SH 27 alignments travelling through Kerrville, Sonora, and Junction en route to Fort Stockton. (Refer to Figure 188.) Regardless of the name or designation used, the route quickly assumed a leading role in the state’s emerging highway system, in part, because it travelled to not only some of the state’s most important nodes of military installations (San Antonio) and industrial centers (the oil refineries in Houston and the Gold Triangle areas of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange), but also some of the state’s best known tourist destinations, parks, and recreational centers, such as the Alamo and Balmorhea State Park.
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Evolution of Named Highways | Old Spanish Trail
The historic highway has largely been subsumed into IH 10, which often follows historic alignments associated with the road. Segments of the historic roadway still exist on segments of varying lengths that parallel the interstate highway. Nonetheless, of all the named highways in Texas, the Old Spanish Trail arguably has retained its historic identity to a highest degree because of its direct link to the state’s rich history. The sense of pride that Texans have enjoyed and appreciated through the state’s history contributed to the enduring quality of the name Old Spanish Trail, and the term is still used in Houston and other cities along its route.

EARLY ROADS AND TRAILS: 1680–1800 HISTORIC CONTEXT

The Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway includes segments east of San Antonio that were traveled by Spanish explorers, troops and officials, and later by cattle drives and immigrants to Austin’s Colony. Portions west of Del Rio follow paths along, or near, those surveyed during early statehood by Texas Ranger John C. (Jack) Hays and the U.S. Army. The name “Old Spanish Trail” was deliberately selected during the early automobile age to reflect the heritage of Spanish Colonial routes through the inner coastal plain and to conjure romantic notions of a past era in the service of highway tourism. For example, Alonso de León’s 1689 entrada crossed the Rio Grande near present-day Eagle Pass at Paso de Francia, one of several fords north of Monclova, Mexico, and continued northeast across the inner coastal plain to Matagorda Bay. In early 1690, de León led a missionary group into East Texas following his 1689 route as far as the Guadalupe River. Then turning northeast toward the Neches River, his route created El Camino Real. In 1722, when the Marqués de San Miguel de Aguayo traveled de León’s route to the Guadalupe River and established a mission and presidio at La Bahía, de Leon’s route became known as La Bahía Road. A section of de León’s route came within a few miles of, or followed along a short segment of, the Old Spanish Trail east of Hallettsville. Spanish troops under Luís Cazorla moved east from San Antonio and Goliad in 1756 to a place called Atascosito, in the vicinity of present-day Liberty, and founded a mission and presidio at the mouth of the Trinity River. By the 1780s, this route, called the Atascosito Road, served cattle drives and linked with a trail heading east to Opelousas, Louisiana, through present-day Liberty, Beaumont, and Orange. The section from Liberty to the Louisiana state line became part of, or along the path of, the Old Spanish Trail. As early as 1772, a westward extension from the present-day Columbus area connected the Atascosito Road to San Antonio, and before 1810, the entire road was known as the Atascosito Road. By 1821, this route also was known as the Opelousas Road, and was used by settlers coming to Austin’s Colony. The 1849 survey conducted by Lieutenants William F. Smith and William H. C. Whiting west of San Antonio, created the Lower Military Road, which connected San Antonio
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Development Patterns

Portions of the route of the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway were depicted on maps as early as 1833, linking the settlements of San Felipe de Austin, Gonzales, and Bexar. 916 (Refer to Figure 2 in previous Section I.2.) During the 1830s, New Orleans was the main market for Texas’ agricultural products, and the Old Spanish Trail provided the most accessible route to this market. 917 Similarly, from ca. 1835 onward, construction along Texas’ expanding western frontier increased demands for East Texas milled lumber, which was transported westward along the route. 918 Settlements along the route depicted on an 1841 map include Beaumont, Liberty, Houston, San Felipe de Austin, Columbus, Gonzales, Seguin, and San Antonio. 919 The trail reached all the way west to El Paso by 1858, and planning for the development of railroads along the alignment had already begun. The War Department opened a post in El Paso in 1858, and the continuing development of the road and railroad alignments following the route offered significant military advantages to the location. By the 1870s, railroad development along the path of the Old Spanish Trail confirmed its importance as a major transportation route in Texas. Examples include the Texas and New Orleans Railroad, which extended between Orange and Houston, and the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway, which connected Houston to San Antonio. In 1878, Fort Bliss was established as a permanent post in El Paso, furthering the military significance of the Old Spanish Trail. (See Figure 184.)

COUNTY ROADS AND THE GOOD ROADS MOVEMENT: 1880–1916

Historic Context

Between 1880 and 1916, the areas that eventually lay along the Old Spanish Trail route developed rapidly with extension of rail lines. Agriculture generally boomed in the eastern half of the state between Orange and San Antonio, and ranching expanded along the two
alignments that traveled west from San Antonio and southwest toward Del Rio. The Old Spanish Trail Association that charted the route had its origins outside of Texas, in Alabama. Mobile, Alabama, home of the Association, recognized a need for an east–west highway to reduce its isolation and bring in the tourist trade from the North. When the Old Spanish Trail organization formed in 1915, it pinned its hopes on the idea that tourists would want to see towns and cities along the Gulf Coast, many of which had roots in French and Spanish history. The route from Florida through Louisiana to the Texas border could be said to have aligned with expeditions charted by Hernando de Soto, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and Pánfilo Narváez. (See Figure 185.) The connections with colonial history and historical figures were just close enough to create an identity for the road on which its promoters could build after 1915.

At its organizational meeting in Mobile, Alabama, the Old Spanish Trail Association elected Palmer Pillans of Mobile to be president of the group, which included a total of 419 representatives, hailing from Alabama (274), Arizona (1), Florida (138), Louisiana (5), and Mississippi (1). Like other similar associations of the period, members envisioned a multi-state highway that, in this case, would stretch from St. Augustine, Florida, to San Diego, California, and celebrate the region’s Spanish colonial heritage. Minutes of the meeting document widespread support among attendees of typical issues of the Good Roads movement, including advocating the use of federal monies to fund and improve highways and supporting efforts of municipal and county governments to issue good roads bonds. The Minutes also document how the group immediately sought to expand its reach and resolved to ask Texas, New Mexico and California to join the association. Such efforts proved successful, and Texas, in particular, came to play a leading role and later became the site of organization’s headquarters in San Antonio. 920
Physical Evolution

This route was likely constructed of shell roads near the Gulf Coast, and sand-clay roads and gravel roads probably became more common inland towards San Antonio. Within a city, such as Houston and San Antonio, routes may have been constructed of moderate-quality materials or possibly high-quality materials, such as concrete or bituminous concrete. West of San Antonio, it is likely that the roadways were earthen, gravel, or a combination of both.

Development Patterns

In East and Central Texas, the period from ca. 1870 through ca. 1890 saw the construction of the MK&T Railroad, closely aligned with the future route of the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway. The railroad spurred the development of farming and industries to process agricultural goods along this route, much as it did along the future route of the Meridian Highway. West of San Antonio, the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway reached all the way to El Paso by 1893, following the historic route of the Old Spanish Trail via Uvalde. Railroad lines remained incomplete along the alternate route of the trail via Kerrville. Historic maps show new towns along the rail line including Junction, Sonora, Ozona, and Fort Stockton. However, due to the lack of water, the area between San Antonio and El Paso remained sparsely populated, with an economy based on raising cattle, sheep, and goats.

INITIATION OF THE HIGHWAY SYSTEM: 1917–1932

Historic Context

By 1917, when the Texas Highway Commission met in Mineral Wells to establish the state highway system, a route for the Old Spanish Trail still had not been identified, despite suggestions by pathfinder Harry Locke for a route from Houston to Los Angeles that went by way of Dallas. That proposal may explain why the Commission assigned the name Southern National to the highway rather than Old Spanish Trail when it met in June to identify the 25 roads comprising the state’s highway system. The general route most closely identified with the Old Spanish Trail at that date was designated as SH 3. While the State Highway Commission Minutes described the tentative route as a point 20 miles east of Orange on the Sabine River, thence to Orange, Beaumont, Houston, San Antonio, and Del Rio, the name assigned was Southern National Highway, not the Old Spanish Trail. The use of the name Southern National Highway created some confusion as other sources describe it to be a transcontinental route that passed through Dallas and more nearly followed the route described as SH 1, also known as the Bankhead Highway. (Refer to Figure 35 in previous Section I.4.)
Despite the name, the route of the Old Spanish Trail was not necessarily always dictated by the historical precedents. For instance, the map to the right shows that the Texas segment, at least in this particular map, did not extend to San Antonio. Rather, it moved northwest, along a route that was also promoted at the same time as the Gulf Division of the Meridian Highway, to Waco and continued north to Dallas, along what was also known as the King of Trails. In Dallas, the map shows the route connecting to a northern route that roughly follows what came to be known as the Bankhead Highway. The map shows how the promotion of the highway sometimes took precedence over the historical authenticity that the highway was intended to represent.

Source: Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.
The Old Spanish Trail Association struggled in 1919, in part because its southerly route was environmentally challenging, and also because of the slowing of federal support that affected all federal aid projects during World War I. On July 2, 1919, however, the Association held its conference in Houston, and delegates vowed to revive work on promoting the highway. Prior to 1919, the Association had considered Dallas as part of the Texas route, but a decision was made in Houston to link through San Antonio. (Refer to aforementioned Figure 186.) Delegates then requested that San Antonio assume responsibility as the national headquarters.924

Harral Ayres was chosen to organize the work (Figure 187). A native of New Jersey, Ayres had enjoyed a highly successful career in banking and other financial services on the East Coast. He came to Texas, hoping to recover his health, and stayed briefly in San Antonio. He was recruited by the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and agreed to manage development of the Old Spanish Trail. A formal Old Spanish Trail Association was incorporated soon after and identified its place of business as San Antonio. The eight directors were from San Antonio, Beaumont, and Houston, Texas; Tallahassee, Florida; Lake Charles, Louisiana; Tombstone, Arizona; and Los Angeles, California. The purpose of the corporation was “the support of an educational undertaking, to-wit, the re-establishment and identification of the Old Spanish Trail.”

Ayres was an East Coast transplant, but he quickly grasped the history and imagery of the Southwest that were necessary to promote the Old Spanish Trail beyond simply educating the public. Echoing nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century philosophies of landscaping that valued wild places and protection of natural elements, Ayres identified elements of a mystical Spanish Southwest to create “The Creed of the Trail.” The Creed, which was distributed to all members of the Association, encouraged travelers to love and respect nature, which lured the traveler onto the highway. Travelers also were urged to build and beautify, not to cut trees or shrubs or gather wild flowers carelessly, to help foster “wayside beautification,” practice safe campsite etiquette, and enjoy “the riches of history, legend, sentiment and natural beauty” that travelers could find along the Old Spanish Trail.926

Ayres also had to make headway with the Texas Highway Commission, which was funding numerous projects along state highways it had designated in 1917. Unfortunately for the Old Spanish Trail, the Commission was busy recognizing entirely new named highways that crossed the state. Soon, named highways were linked with one another in a confusing patchwork. In August 1919, for example, the Commission took action that affected numerous named highways when it recognized the Texas part of segments of SH 1 (Bankhead), SH 3 (Southern National/Old Spanish Trail), SH 5 (North Texas), SH 7 (Central...
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Texas), SH 9 (Puget Sound to Gulf), SH 30, and SH 36.\textsuperscript{927} For his part, Ayres was still working to define an Old Spanish Trail route west of San Antonio, which the 1919 convention in that city identified only as going through Kerrville and Fort Stockton to El Paso.\textsuperscript{928} (Refer to Figure 39 in previous Section I.4.)

The Texas Highway Commission affirmed the importance of the Old Spanish Trail in 1921, when it identified most of SH 3 as part of the Federal Aid Highway System. (Refer to Figure 46 previous Section I.4.) The Commission also reiterated the 1917 identity of SH 3 as beginning near Orange and ending in Del Rio. Elements of the highway in the System between those two points included stretches between Orange, Beaumont, Nome, Devers, Liberty, Crosby, Houston, Sugarland, Richmond, East Bernard, Eagle Lake, Columbus, Weimar, Flatonia, and Waelder. The route of SH 3 within the Federal Aid Highway System resumed in Gonzales and went to Seguin, Schertz, San Antonio, Castroville, Hondo, Sabinal, Uvalde, Brackettville, and Del Rio.\textsuperscript{929} In 1921, the Old Spanish Trail Association explored the possibility of extending the Trail from San Antonio to Brownsville and across the border into Mexico.\textsuperscript{930}

As a highway association with a dedicated director and a permanent presence in a major Texas city, the Old Spanish Trail appears to have flourished in the early to mid-1920s. Managing Director Ayres, anxious to cement the place of the Old Spanish Trail as a vital transcontinental route, traveled to the states along the trail east of Texas, where activity had become moribund during World War I and for some time after that. He held divisional conferences at which he urged people along the route to be prepared for increased traffic. In June and July of 1922, he traveled to Washington, D.C., for the purpose of convincing congressmen to issue a declaration supporting the importance of the Old Spanish Trail and addressing its roles as a trunk line, primary highway, important military asset, and national and international tourist-way. He was successful in his quest, obtaining a “Declaration Respecting the Highway from Florida to California and Mexico” that specified the value of the Old Spanish Trail. That statement was followed in short order by individual statements from the War Department, Congress, and the United States Bureau of Education, which had adopted the Old Spanish Trail in its recommended public school study of the national highway movement. He was quick to use the endorsements in regular publications of the Old Spanish Trail organization.\textsuperscript{931}

Ayres returned to the headquarters in San Antonio to find the organization in arrears. In his absence, David E. Colp had taken charge of the Association’s activities and had begun doing work for the Meridian Highway as well, marking part of that route in Texas, collecting information for a Meridian directory, and using Old Spanish Trail
Association assets. Colp had lost control of the field men, whose job it was to mark the Old Spanish Trail, get out section maps, and solicit advertising to pay for the maps as well as guides. Ayres assumed control once again, firing Colp, and working to establish a national administration. He continued to publish the Old Spanish Trail brochure, which regularly updated progress on the road. He also prepared for the annual convention in New Orleans in 1923. Planning also proceeded for the dedication of the Zero Milestone in March 1924 at Military Plaza in San Antonio (Figure 188). That event was held in conjunction with the conventions of the Federated Clubs, Pioneer Freighters Association, and South Texas Road Conference. An address by Governor Neff described the Old Spanish Trail as “the oldest, most historic, enchanting romantic highway that crosses the American continent.”

Organized as he was about the operations of the organization, Ayres appears to have been expansive and less restrictive about the Old Spanish Trail and its routes. As mapped by the Old Spanish Trail Association, the route that had traveled from Orange and Beaumont to Houston and San Antonio remained relatively constant, but from San Antonio it rapidly became a veritable network. As SH 3 or Southern National Highway, designated by the Texas Highway Commission in 1917, the route went from San Antonio to Del Rio, but the 1919 San Antonio Old Spanish Road Association conference defined the route as being from San Antonio through Kerrville and Fort Stockton to El Paso through “uncharted range country.” (See Figure 189.) This alternate alignment through Kerrville would not appear on official maps of the state highway system until 1926, when it was designated as SH 27. By late 1921, there were plans formulated at a meeting in Alice to
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Figure 188. Updated route of the Old Spanish Trail ca. 1921, showing alternate branches west of San Antonio. The southern branch through Del Rio followed the path of SH 6. The northern branch through Boerne was undeveloped at the time but later became part of SH 27. Source: “Highways – Related, Joining” Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.
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Figure 190. Old Spanish Trail Shields and Signs. This graphic presents the kinds of signage that the Old Spanish Trail Association developed to mark the route. Such branding efforts created a distinct identity that would enable motorists to recognize the route and know that they were following the correct path. Source: “Emblems, Flags, Markers” Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.

Within a few months, Ayres wrote that 1,600 miles of “trunklines, tributaries and tourist loops” were marked on the Old Spanish Trail (Figure 190). He expressed some concern about extensions that had been discussed because there was a danger that the work would “degenerate into conditions where individuals decide what shall constitute the OST system.” But by early 1923, promotional materials enumerated a main line going northwest from San Antonio and then west to the Davis Mountains, an Old Spanish Trail trunk line going west to Del Rio and then northward to connect with the main line in the Davis Mountains, another trunk line building along the Rio Grande, and tourist loops. Yet another trunk line to Tampico and Mexico City by way of Brownsville would connect with both San Antonio and Houston. As far as the Texas Highway Commission was concerned, however, SH 3...
was confined to the line running from Orange to Beaumont, Devers, Liberty, Houston, Rosenberg, Columbus, Waelder, Gonzales, Seguin, and San Antonio. At that point, the designated highway went to Hondo, Uvalde, Del Rio, Comstock, Sanderson, and Alpine.  

Ayres’ work was particularly forward-looking in the areas of highway beautification and providing travelers with amenities to make their trips more enjoyable. These aspects were important for the Old Spanish Trail because of its identity as a national and international tourist-way that connected winter playground sections throughout the south and embraced “the land of Old Mexico.” In fact, its purpose came to be defined as connecting “the playgrounds of Florida with the playgrounds of California” and linking the playgrounds in between. It would bring a continuous tide of tourist and auto travel to cities and towns on the route and would “revive and keep alive the remarkable history of old Spanish days, a history that reaches from Florida to California and [offers] historical associations more romantic than anything in the land.” Its winter sunshine, Gulf pleasures, and “background of ancient and romantic history” made it the natural resort destination in the United States.

That identity was reinforced by Ayres’ exhaustive research that resulted in publications about “the old Spanish story of these 300 years from San Augustine and Tampa to San Diego and Los Angeles and to Mexico City.” It was expressed in the route, publications, highway markers, and landscaping that the Association sponsored and that its membership enthusiastically embraced. Ayres had developed signage, for example, by 1921. This consisted of boulevard light signing, route markers, outdoor sign emblems, distance and landmark markers, and membership markers, all executed in the distinctive chrome yellow and red. (Refer to Figure 190 above and see Figure 191.) Official hotels on the route were indicated by more ornate plaques that heavily emphasized the historic figures supposedly associated with the trail, or at least the romance of the southern United States. (Refer to Figure 185 earlier in this section.)

Ayres also involved a willing group of women and put them in charge of roadside beautification. Their activities centered on two efforts: roadside planting and removal of commercial roadside signage. By February 1922, a women’s club in the Rio Grande Valley was promoting installation of an Avenue of Palms that would border the highway. By March 1923, the Association had aligned with the Federation of Women’s Clubs of the Rio Grande Valley to plant Royal Palms 100 feet apart for 90 miles on the Mexican extension. That year, the Headquarters Section in San Antonio focused its attention on the San Antonio to Boerne segment of the highway.
The ladies became particularly impassioned about removal of billboards, which they considered to be a blight on the scenic landscape. Ayres urged the clubs in the Valley to lobby their county commissioners, demanding “removal of the horrible signs that are put on trees and fences.” He and Mrs. J. T. Smith, Chairman of the Committee on Advertising, Department of Beautification, also corresponded with official road organizations in other states about their laws governing billboards and advertising along the highways. Ayres created a matrix to analyze the state of laws concerning advertising signs in 29 states. Based on the responses and information received from the National Committee For Restriction of Outdoor Advertising in New York, Ayres and his Department of Beautification began to get the word out to the general Old Spanish Trail area around San Antonio through the newspapers and the Boy Scouts. Particularly in the San Antonio–Boerne corridor, they worked with property owners to remove billboards, get

Figure 191. Old Spanish Trail Marking Plans. Harral Ayres developed plans for markers on the Trail in Texas. Source: Emblems, Flags, Markers Files, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, Louis J. Blume Library, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.
their permissions to widen the roadway to 100 feet, acquire auto

camps, erect county line markers, and discourage damage to trees,

shrubs, and flowers along the roadway.940

By 1925, the Department of Beautification at the Old Spanish Trail

Association had a full-blown beautification program that included

signing of all interesting, scenic, and historic places; architect-prepared

county line markers made of stone; state line markers; improved city

town entrances; removal of advertising signs; planting of trees and

shrubs; preservation of scenery generally; establishing cooperation with

state highway departments to improve conditions along roadways; and

acquisition and development of wayside parks.941

Ayres also focused on tourist camps, listing the amenities that should be

available in each: water, cooking facilities, toilet and bathing facilities,

incinerators, tables and benches, lights, a telephone, brush- or vine-

covered arbor, and pavilion or lodge. Woodwork should be painted

white. Along the Old Spanish Trail, there already were camps that could

accommodate 200 to 300 visitors nightly. Vacation camps that included

cabins and a central lodge proved to be popular, as did combination

camps such as the one on the Meridian Highway at Landa Park in New

Braunfels.942 The Old Spanish Trail remained a viable name for a well-

established route despite incursions by other associations in the mid-

1920s. The Association declared the highway complete in 1929 and

dedicated a monument in St. Augustine, Florida, to mark the beginning

of the Trail. Ayres resigned as director and the original Old Spanish Trail

organization effectively ceased operations.943

The efforts of Harral Ayres and fellow Association members to create a

unique identity for the Old Spanish Trail were largely successful;

however, the Texas Highway Commission and Highway Department

continued to refer to the roadway as SH 3 and SH 27 as part of the state

highway system. In 1926, the state’s adoption of the AASHO’s highway

numbering plan imposed yet another designation onto the route: US 90.

The highway largely followed SH 3 and extended through such urban

areas as Beaumont, Houston, Gonzales, San Antonio, Del Rio, Alpine,

Van Horn, and El Paso. This new designation enabled the state

highway department to continue using federal funds to expand and improve the

route.

Physical Evolution

Like the Bankhead National Highway Association, the Old Spanish Trail

Association had its own set of design guidelines that it wanted for the

roadway. Its design recommendations included an all-weather roadway

that was “paved and graveled or [had] other improved surfacing.”944 In

1923, the Old Spanish Trail was largely a gravel road with only a few

sections of the roadway paved near Beaumont, Port Arthur, Houston,
By the end of 1926, the paving of the Old Spanish Trail from the Louisiana–Texas border to approximately 80 miles west of San Antonio was underway. At the same time, graveling and paving from San Antonio to San Diego, California, also was under construction (Figure 192). The August 1926 “Old Spanish Trail Report to Members” noted that the Texas Highway Department paved some portions of the roadway and constructed numerous bridges east of San Antonio. However, flooding in East Texas caused rivers to swell to “miles wide” and resulted in difficult and tedious construction work. From San Antonio to El Paso, the Old Spanish Trail consisted of improved earthen roads, gravel roads, and over 100 miles of bituminous concrete (asphalt) and concrete roads. Beautification efforts along the Old Spanish Trail also gained popularity during this period. A local women’s club near Del Rio lobbied its county commissioner’s court to build an “Avenue of Palms” with flowers and shrubs lining the roadway. Additionally, at a national level, the Old Spanish Trail Association was lobbying for inclusion of more trees and shrubs, promoting the value of shade trees, and urging state highway officials to construct roadside parks.

**Development Patterns**

The initial 1917 Texas Highway Department plans for the proposed highway system included the “Southern National Highway” traveling west only as far as Del Rio. By 1928, the highway was paved as far as Uvalde, but portions further west remained largely unpaved until the route merged with the Bankhead Highway at Van Horn. In East Texas and Central Texas, the economy continued to rely on truck and fruit crops, rice, corn, and cotton in the early 1920s. The paved highway began to supplant the MK&T Railroad as the main mode of transportation for crops. Oil production in East Texas also accelerated in the early 1920s, and the newly paved highway provided access from the oilfields to the refineries and ports in Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Houston.
Although the highway did not yet provide a cross-country route, tourist-related amenities had developed along the route by 1928, especially in Houston and San Antonio (Figure 193). Within towns along the highway, development patterns along the Old Spanish Trail resembled those along the Bankhead and other named highways that included gas stations, tourist courts and other tourist- and auto-related businesses arranged linearly at the edges of towns. For example, a tourist guide published by the Humble Oil Company in 1928 included a detailed map of Houston showing the route of the Old Spanish Trail/US 90 along Main Street with a Tourist Free Camp located between Hermann Park and Rice Institute.954, 955

DEPRESSION, MOBILIZATION, AND WAR: 1933–1944

Historic Context

During the 1930s and early 1940s, the Old Spanish Trail was highlighted as a tourist route and scenic trail. Emphasizing the route’s uniformity, the Texas Highway Department identified and uniformly marked sections of the Old Spanish Trail as part of preparations for the Texas Centennial and for the benefit of tourists.956 The accessibility and location of the trail facilitated the construction of Balmorhea State Park by the CCC between 1936 and 1941.957 (See Figure 194.)

The Old Spanish Trail was improved in various ways in the late 1930s. In 1937 and 1938, numerous federal-aid projects were conducted on the highway. Among them were grading and drainage from the Louisiana state line to SH 3’s connection with SH 1 at Van Horn, providing for an additional east–west hard-surfaced road across the state.958 The highway’s condition and popularity were such that, at the April 1938 annual convention of the Old Spanish Trail Association, delegates discussed the historic highway’s inclusion in a four-lane, hard-surfaced “super highway” stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast.959

As noted in Minute Order no. 16701, the Texas Highway Commission described US 90 as being routed from the Texas–Louisiana state line near Orange via Beaumont, Devers, Liberty, Houston, Rosenberg, Columbus, Waelder, Luling, Seguin, San Antonio, Hondo, Uvalde, Del Rio, Comstock, Sanderson, Alpine, Marfa, Valentine, and Van Horn to a point on US 62 near Signal Peak.960 A southern loop extended from a point on US 90 at Waelder and traveled via Gonzales to a point on US 90 near Seguin. Interestingly, maps from 1934 and 1936 depict the southern loop as U.S. Highway 90 and the main route as U.S. Alternate 90. The same order reduced SH 3 from Seguin to Waelder via Gonzales. In 1940, the section from Van Horn to Signal Peak was removed from US 90 and transferred to SH 54.

Figure 193. Cover of the Old Spanish Trail Travelog from 1928. The Old Spanish Trail Association prepared and disseminated maps, brochures and other publications to promote tourism along the named highway. Source: Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.
In 1941, the route of US 90 out of Houston was altered. The Texas Highway Commission approved a more easterly alignment change from Houston to Columbus via Sealy on former SH 73. The route of the highway now ran from the Texas–Louisiana state line near Orange to Beaumont, Devers, Liberty, Houston, Sealy, Columbus, Waelder, Luling, Seguin, San Antonio, Hondo, Uvalde, Del Rio, Comstock, Sanderson, Alpine, Marfa and Valentine to Van Horn. The former southwesterly route of US 90 from Houston to Rosenberg via Stafford, Sugarland, and Richmond was transferred to US 59. The portion of the highway from Rosenberg to Columbus via Eagle Lake was transferred to the new SH 343. The latter replacement was short-lived in that the Rosenberg–Columbus route was re-routed to US 90-A in 1942.

Physical Evolution

As with the other named highways, the Old Spanish Trail was also upgraded during this time period. Widening of the roadway to have consistent two-way travel lanes and shoulders was likely undertaken along much of the roadway, and several sections were bypassed by other roads. For example, the construction of US 90 between Houston and Columbus in 1939 bypassed the existing alignment of the Old Spanish Trail. Between 1929 and 1937, nearly all of the SH 3 alignment was paved, although some sections between Del Rio and El Paso were earthen roads, and were not upgraded by 1937.

Development Patterns

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway became a major cross-country transportation route. In 1936, the Texas Highway Commission projected that traffic along the Old Spanish Trail soon would be equal to that along the Bankhead Highway because it would provide the shortest route between Florida and...
As the petrochemical and ship-building industries around Orange, Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Houston expanded in the early 1940s, the highway became a major transportation link for some of Texas’ most essential exports (Figure 195). Additional industries that operated along the highway in East Texas included oil well machinery, rice milling, and iron foundries. The route also was a principal military highway, connecting Fort Bliss in El Paso with Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, as well as with points beyond, from California to Florida.

The highway also provided access to the wide array of tourist destinations near Houston, in San Antonio, and in the Big Bend region. East of Houston and several miles from the Old Spanish Trail, the San Jacinto Battleground State Historical Park was landscaped by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1936, and the 570-foot obelisk-shaped monument was completed by the Texas Freemasons in 1939. A tourist guide to Houston published by the WPA writers’ project in 1942 emphasized the San Jacinto Battleground as the prime tourist attraction in the Houston area. In San Antonio in the 1930s, civic organizations recognized the highway as an important corridor for incoming tourists and landscaped the route coming into town along Commerce Street. By the early 1940s, the Alamo and the other Spanish missions were popular tourist destinations, and lodgings and gas stations had been constructed along the roadway to accommodate them. Many exhibited architectural ornamentation that reflected this heritage. Other tourist attractions near, but not necessarily along the route included Garner State Park near Sabinal, Davis Mountains State Park near Fort Davis, and numerous private campsites and dude ranches in the scenic regions of the Texas Hill Country west of San Antonio and...
Figure 196. Map of tourist route off US 90 through the Big Bend region. This map shows how US 90 was an important route to get to Big Bend National Park. Source: Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Texas, Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State (Austin: Texas State Highway Commission, 1940): 620.

Big Bend east of El Paso (Figure 196).\textsuperscript{969} Both Garner State Park and Davis Mountains State Park included CCC-constructed infrastructure and buildings, including the monumental Indian Lodge at Davis Mountains State Park. (See Figure 197.) Balmorhea State Park was completed in 1936 as a cooperative project between the state and the National Park Service. (Refer to Figure 194.) It was built just four-and-a-half miles off
the Old Spanish Trail and featured a pool, bath house, and administration building, as well as walkways, pergolas, and picnic shelters.  

POSTWAR ROAD EXPANSION: 1945–1956

Historic Context

Much of the Old Spanish Trail was among the principal roadways targeted for inclusion in the Interstate Highway System when the idea was initially proposed because it was a major route for east–west traffic into and out of Texas. In 1945, during early planning stages for the development of US 90 into an interstate highway, the states of Texas and Louisiana proposed that the interstate highway traverse the state line slightly north of the existing crossing on US 90, so that it would be close to, but not bypass, the city of Orange. The Texas Highway Department had plans for four-lane development on the stretch of highway between Beaumont and Orange as well as new bridges across the Neches and Sabine rivers in the late 1940s. The department also hoped that, with the new SH 73 connecting Houston and Beaumont via Chambers County, congestion on US 90 between the two cities would be relieved.

In 1952, the Texas Highway Commission authorized cancellation of the only remaining section of the original SH 3. The route between Seguin and Gonzales was cancelled and transferred to a new alignment of US 90-A. The section of old SH 3/US 90-A between Columbus and Eagle Lake was re-designated as SH 102. The alignment between Gonzales and Waelder was cancelled and transferred to SH 97.

In addition to overseeing various transfers of the original route, the Texas Highway Department continued making improvements in the
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Physical Evolution

Portions of the former Old Spanish Trail were upgraded from a two-lane roadway to a four-lane divided road, particularly west of San Antonio. Due to the number of crashes and high traffic counts, the section of US 90 between Houston and Beaumont was noted by one author in 1952 as "Texas' Most Dangerous Highway," however, this perception largely stemmed from the bottleneck between Houston and Orange and the amount of traffic congestion and accidents along this segment (Figure 198). The Department remained optimistic that the traffic issues on US 90 would be solved with the completion of SH 73 from Houston to Port Arthur. Highway officials also suggested that the new state highway would be designated as US 90, and the present highway through Liberty County would become an alternate route between Houston and Beaumont. Residents of the affected counties, as well as travelers, voiced opposition to the potential re-routing of US 90. The Highway 90 Improvement Association began lobbying for widening and improvement of the original 26-year-old road, which, at the time, was only 18 feet wide. This conflict would continue to play out until the height of interstate construction in the next decade. In spite of increasing pressure to either integrate US 90 with, or supplant it by, the impending interstate system, in 1956 the seven divisions of the existing Old Spanish Trail Association formed a single national organization—Old Spanish Trail, Inc.—to be headquartered in Houston. The new group's mission was to "double traffic on Highway 90," which they dubbed "America's Highway of Romance!"
a “horrible example” of a two-lane road. It is likely that some of the US 90 alignments were upgraded to controlled-access thoroughfares in rural areas, and to controlled-access freeways in San Antonio and Houston. West of San Antonio, US 90 probably was a two-lane, asphalt-paved facility. It is doubtful that the traffic volumes on the roadway warranted an upgrade of the road to a four-lane facility during this time period.

Development Patterns

Despite the hiatus in tourism and park development caused by World War II, Big Bend National Park opened to the public in 1944, close to the route of the Old Spanish Trail. Although the park was located near US 90, no U.S. highway provided direct access because federal policy only allowed for funding of roads to access national parks if the right-of-way was on federal land. As a consequence, state roads were built to link US 90 with the new park. Along US 90, the town of Fort Stockton provided the last cluster of tourist amenities before exiting the highway to access the park. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Fort Stockton from 1946 show that numerous tourist courts, tourist camps, gas stations, and auto repair shops quickly emerged to service the many travelers who passed through the city. Tourist traffic along the highway was encouraged also by the campaign publicizing tourism in Mexico, with access via El Paso. Commercial traffic also increased, boosted by increased trade with Mexico as well as the growing oil industry in the Houston area.


Physical Evolution

Most of the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway was known as US 90 when the interstate highway construction program began in the mid- to late 1950s. At that time, it generally was two- or four-lane asphalt-surfaced roadway from Beaumont to Houston. Its original alignment through small towns, such as Liberty and Dayton, remained intact. When IH 10 was officially designated in 1959, some of the former Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway alignment from Houston to San Antonio was incorporated into the IH 10 corridor. At several points, however, the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway remained on its original alignment (designated as US 90) and paralleled the IH 10 corridor through cities such as Sealy, Columbus, and Kingsbury. In its original location, the roadway was likely a two-lane, undivided road with narrow shoulders, as it is today. West of San Antonio and on to Del Rio, the highway was likely a two-lane asphalt-paved roadway; from Del Rio to Van Horn, the Old Spanish Trail was subsumed by IH 10 to El Paso. Thus, in the vast stretch of land between
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San Antonio to El Paso, the entire roadway was subsumed into or paralleled IH 10.

Development Patterns

As the route of the Old Spanish Trail was subsumed by IH 10, the metropolitan areas along the route prospered. In Houston, the population skyrocketed from 596,163 in 1950 to 968,219 in 1960, and then to 1,232,802 in 1980. The rise in population was stimulated, in part, by the continued growth and expansion of the energy section in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, the proliferation of the petrochemical industry along the Houston Ship Channel relied heavily on trucking that made use of improved driving conditions on IH 10. In the rural areas along the highway outside Houston and San Antonio, the number of cattle raised grew considerably in the 1960s and 1970s, as commercial feed yards replaced cattle grazing, allowing more head of cattle to be raised on less land.

Once the construction of IH 10 was complete, tourist automobile travel west of San Antonio became much easier, enabling tourists to reach the remote but dramatic scenic attractions of the Hill Country and the Big Bend regions. Visitor numbers at Big Bend National Park rose during the 1960s. Yet visitor facilities within the park remained largely undeveloped until after 1966, when the National Park Service constructed roads, campsites, visitor centers, and a lodge under their Mission 66 program, all designed using contemporary architecture styled to echo the surrounding landscape. Most visitors to the park probably used the new alignment of IH 10 to approach connecting highways to reach the park. However, the US 90 route passed closer to the park and afforded tourists an alternative for east–west highway access.

The highway also served as an important transcontinental route to bring tourists to HemisFair in San Antonio in 1968. Located on a site along Commerce Street—the historic route of the Old Spanish Trail—the fairgrounds and re-developed tourist amenities along the River Walk drew tourists off IH 10 and into downtown for a tourist experience that combined the technology-loving, futuristic ambitions of the interstate era and the romantic, nostalgic past that had lured the earliest automobile tourists along the named highways.

As with the other named highways absorbed into the Interstate Highway System, developmental patterns along the historic route of the Old Spanish Trail/Southern National Highway were subject to greater amounts of change than the other named highways. This trend was especially true in fast-growing metropolitan areas such as Houston, San Antonio, and El Paso. In remote areas of West Texas, in contrast, the
CONCLUSION

The Old Spanish Trail was among the earliest named highways to be developed in Texas. Initially conceived by the Old Spanish Trail Association, which was organized in Mobile, Alabama, the route sought to celebrate the Spanish heritage of a southern transcontinental highway that extended from St. Augustine, Florida to San Diego, California. By 1919, the group moved its headquarters to San Antonio and continued to promote its tourist and financial opportunities under the Good Roads movement of the early twentieth century. The Texas Highway Commission understood the importance of the roadway and designated the route to be SH 3, although the state referred to it as the Southern National Highway. The Texas segment of the Old Spanish Trail entered Texas from the east at Orange and continued through Houston to San Antonio, with alternate routes to the west travelling to El Paso via Del Rio, Alpine, Van Horn or via Kerrville and Junction. Various branches and alignments have shifted over time but the general path of this major east–west route through Texas has continued to be among the most significant in the state and nation. Many sections of the Old Spanish Trail are now part of IH 10 but vestiges still remain along its approximately 900-mile route through Texas.
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923 Minutes of the State Highway Department, Volume 1, p. 19.

924 H. B. Ayres, Memoranda to Texas Editors, May 5, 1925 [Highways folder], Old Spanish Trail Association Archives, Louis J. Blume Library, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas; hereafter cited as Old Spanish Trail Association Archives. Year Book Old Spanish Trail ([San Antonio]: n.p., 1926), p. 11, Blue Folder: 1918 folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

925 The California director was Henry Locke of Los Angeles, famous for his guides and maps of named highways. Texas, Department of State, Charter No. 33882, The Old Spanish Trail Association.


927 Minutes of the Texas Highway Commission, Volume 1, p. 391.


929 Minutes of the State Highway Department, Volume 2, p. 75.

930 The Old Spanish Trail Association, Old Spanish Trail Travelog, p. 43, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives; The Old Spanish Trail Association, Bulletin to Members, February 20th, 1922, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

931 United States Senate, “Declaration Respecting the Highway from Florida to California and Mexico,” National Recognition Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.


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935 The Old Spanish Trail Association, Bulletin to Members, February 20, 1922, Bulletin to Members Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives; [Harral Ayres], Suggested Topics for the Annual Convention, Old Spanish Trail, September 19, 1922, Conventions Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives; Ayres, The Progress of the Old Spanish Trail, pp. 11–12.

936 Minutes of the State Highway Department, Volume 2, p. 290.

937 The Old Spanish Trail Association, The Highway of the Southern Borderlands; U.S. Senate, Declaration Respecting the Highway from Florida to California and Mexico.

938 The Old Spanish Trail Association, The Highway of the Southern Borderlands; Emblems, Flags, Markers Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

939 The Old Spanish Trail Association, Bulletin to Members, February 20, 1922; The Old Spanish Trail Association, The Highway of the Southern Borderlands, p. 5.

940 The Old Spanish Trail Association, Bulletin to Members, February 20, 1922; Billboards Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives. As the manager of the Chamber of Commerce in San Antonio expressed it, after praising the “beautiful and extraordinary” scenery near the city, “it is difficult to see beyond the paved trail in many places because of the brilliantly lettered signs of praise to underwear, furniture, moving and storage, and building sites.” “Scenic Beauty of Texas Lost Behind Signs,” San Antonio Express, n.d., Billboards Folder. At the end of 1924, the Department of Beautification was working to submit a bill to the Legislature “for the control or abolishment of roadside advertising and roadside desecration. The Department was assisted in its efforts by the State Federation of Women’s Clubs. H. B. Ayres to Tom W. Holman, December 4, 1924, Billboards Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

941 Department of Beautification, Old Spanish Trail, n.d., Three-Ring Binder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

942 “Tourist Camp Conveniences,” Military Significance Folder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

943 Executive Board, The Old Spanish Trail, Final Report by the Executive Board (San Antonio, Texas: n.p., 1929), 3-ring binder, Old Spanish Trail Association Archives.

944 Resolution Presented by W. B. Gill, n.p, n.d., Old Spanish Trail Collection, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.

945 Ayres, “Progress of the Old Spanish Trail,” 11.

946 “Report of the Managing Director to Old Spanish Trail Members.”

947 Ibid.

948 “Roadside Beautifying,” Old Spanish Trail Bulletin (February 20, 1922), Old Spanish Trail Collection, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas.


954 In San Antonio, the route of the Southern National Highway followed Commerce Street through downtown. Unfortunately, Sanborn Fire Insurance maps along the route were not updated between 1912 and 1951, so it is difficult to determine the types of businesses that developed adjacent to the highway between 1916 and 1932.

955 “Historic Trails to Receive Attention.”
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960 Minute Order no. 16701, September 26, 1936.
961 Minute Order 18793, November 24, 1941.
962 Minute Order 19295, May 25, 1942; Minute Order 19500, June 23, 1942.
963 Progress Maps, Texas Highways (April–July 1937), Texas Department of Transportation, Travel Division, Austin, TX.
964 Van Demark, Harry, “One of Nature’s Loveliest Settings,” Texas Parade vol. 1 no. 7 (December 1936): 16, from the Texas Department of Transportation Travel Division Library, Austin, Texas.
965 Box 2994 - Corresp. FAS (Federal Aid) Tex., 1942–43 & 1944, Record Group 30, Office of Public Roads.
National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
967 Wofford, Mrs. Henry, “Beauty Pioneers,” Texas Parade vol. 2 no. 3 (August 1937): 3–4, from the Texas Department of Transportation Travel Division Library, Austin, Texas.
968 Box 2994 - Corresp. FAS (Federal Aid) Tex., 1942–43 & 1944, Record Group 30, Office of Public Roads.
National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
969 Writers’ Program of the WPA, pp. 593–620.
970 Van Demark, p. 16.
971 Letter from J. A. Elliott to Dewitt C. Greer, March 6, 1945, Box No. 2990-91, Bureau of Public Roads Classified Central File, 1912–50, Record Group 30, Bureau of Public Roads, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
973 Ibid.
974 Minute Order Nos. 31877 and 31878, March 28, 1952.
976 Gardner, p. 9.
977 Ibid.
978 Gardner, p. 10.
982 Box 2990-91 - Corresp. FAS (Federal Aid) TX, 1945, Record Group 30, Office of Public Roads. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
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