

There's nothing like 300-year-old maps and letters to bring history to life.

With that in mind, a new exhibit opened at the Bexar County Courthouse this week to showcase some of the Spanish documents foretelling the formation of San Antonio in the early 1700s.

The collection includes artifacts that haven't been publicly displayed since the city's missions were secularized in the 1800s. Other items are digital replicas of closely guarded originals from local and foreign collections, though some of the originals will be part of the exhibit next year.

Together, the archival items tell a fascinating story about the era when Spain was competing with France to get a foothold in this part of the world.

Now that the city's five Spanish colonial missions collectively have been enshrined as a World Heritage Site, and with San Antonio gearing up for its tricentennial in 2018, Bexar County's historical experts put together the temporary exhibit with 20 maps and other items.

"It will enrich your idea about how we started, and it's an appropriate time to do that," County Judge Nelson Wolff said, citing the heritage-site designation and upcoming tricentennial.

Items were assembled from diverse sources including Spain's General Archives of the Indies based in Seville; Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library in San Antonio; Dolph Briscoe

Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin; and Center for Mexican-American Studies and Research at Our Lady of the Lake University, which provided church archives from Mexico.

Among the treasures are a wistful 1717 map and colorful dispatch from New Spain that informed Spanish leaders that “in this region where the spring of San Antonio is found, it is advisable to establish a mission.”

The following year, the mission that would become known as the Alamo was founded, and in 1731 a group of settlers from the Canary Island arrived to boost the population.

Spaniards in Mexico were hoping that establishing missions and civilian settlements between the Rio Grande and the Mississippi River would deter spread of French colonies, but Spaniards also were concerned about native tribes in the region.

The items will be displayed through February in the old courthouse’s Double-height Courtroom on the second floor. The free exhibit, called “Nuestra Historia (Our Story): Spain in Bexar County,” is open for public viewing Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except on county holidays.

Original items to be loaned to the county in spring 2016 will be here only about six months, said Betty Bueche, head of the county’s fledgling Heritage Department who traveled to Spain to develop the collection.

Curator Sarah Zenaida Gould of the Institute of Texan Cultures said the collection “tells the story of the confluence of cultures that created San

Antonio. It's a story of conflict and wonder, of faith and loyalty, of conflicting personalities and an obsessive drive to document" by the church and Spanish government.

To complement the maps and documents, the collection includes artifacts including church-related items, pottery and weaponry. The items are on loan from the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Marianist Archives, National Park Service, San Antonio Museum of Art and UTSA Center for Archaeological Research.

Next year, the collection will move to a larger space in the county-owned former Federal Reserve Building at 126 E. Nueva St., just south of the courthouse.

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