



Japanese Tea Garden at Brackenridge Park

The Japanese Tea Garden has a glorious history of over 90 years, from the time it was an operating rock quarry to today, as one of the most loved, educational and cultural resources in San Antonio.



In 1899, the San Antonio Water Works Company, through its president, George W. Brackenridge, donated 199 acres to the City of San Antonio for a public park. This tract comprises the largest portion of the park that today bears Brackenridge's name. After some improvements were made, Brackenridge Park officially opened to the public in 1901. West of the park on City-owned property, was an operating rock quarry which had been leased by the City to stone cutters since the mid-1800s. In 1880 Alamo Portland and Roman Cement Company (later called Alamo Cement Company) began to use the quarry. When the company needed rail lines to expand production, it purchased a new site and closed the Brackenridge Park operation in 1908. Between the quarry and San Antonio River to the east was an 11-acre tract of land owned by Mrs. Emma Koehler, widow of Pearl Brewery owner Otto Koehler. Mrs. Koehler donated this land to the City in 1915 for a public park and its location immediately adjacent to the abandoned quarry posed a challenge for City Parks Commissioner, Ray Lambert.

Lambert ultimately came up with the idea of a lily pond that eventually became the Japanese Tea Garden. With plans from his park engineer and no resources, Lambert was able to construct the Garden. Between July 1917 and May 1918, Lambert used prison labor to shape the quarry into a complex that included walkways, stone arch bridges, an island and a Japanese pagoda. The garden was termed the lily pond, and local residents donated bulbs to beautify the area. The City nursery provided exotic plants and City Public Service donated the lighting system. The pagoda was roofed with palm leaves from trees in City parks. When completed, Lambert had spent only \$7,000. In 1919, The American City magazine reported that "the city of San Antonio has recently completed a municipal lily pond and a Japanese garden which we believe is unique."



Lambert continued to improve the garden, and in 1920, at the base of the old cement kilns, a small village of houses was constructed, termed by the San Antonio Express as "another dream of the artist of the Lily Pool, Ray Lambert, Commissioner of Parks." The village was designed to be a tourist attraction for the manufacturing and sale of Mexican arts and crafts and an outdoor restaurant. It is not known how long the village operated.

In 1926, at the City's invitation, Kimi Eizo Jingu, a local Japanese-American tea importer, moved to the garden and opened the Bamboo Room, where light lunches and tea were served. After Mr. Jingu's death in the late 1930s, his family continued to operate the tea garden until 1942, when they were evicted due to anti-Japanese sentiment during World War II. A Chinese-American family operated the facility until the early 1960s, and it was known as the Chinese Sunken Garden. At the entrance to the gardens, artist Dionicio Rodriguez replicated a Japanese torii gate in his unique style of concrete construction that imitated wood. In 1984, the area was rededicated as the Japanese Tea Garden in a ceremony attended by the Jingu's children and representatives of the Japanese government.



Unfortunately through recent years, the ravages of time and insufficient maintenance funds have taken a toll on this beloved facility. In 2004, the City of San Antonio, Department of Parks and Recreation issued a Request for Proposals for the repair and restoration, and an ongoing management plan for the operation of the Sunken Garden Theater, the Japanese Tea Garden and the adjacent Mexican Village. This

offered the possibility that the entire facility might be privately managed and there was a strong adverse reaction from the public. No proposals were received. At that point, the San Antonio Parks Foundation and its affiliate membership organization, Friends of the Parks, offered to engage in developing a Master Plan, first for the Japanese Tea Garden, and then for the Sunken Garden Theater, and attempt to raise the necessary funds to complete the restoration. The offer was accepted, and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed granting the San Antonio Parks Foundation and Friends of the Parks the authorization to proceed.

The Master Plan process was initiated with Bender Wells Clark of San Antonio as lead consultant assisted by SWA of Houston. In 2006, SWA moved into the lead role of completing the Master Plan, which was completed in fall of 2007.

The restoration of the Japanese Tea Garden is being accomplished as a public-private partnership between the Parks and Recreation Department of the City of San Antonio and the San Antonio Parks Foundation and its affiliated organization Friends of the Parks. The estimated cost of the completed project is \$6,000,000. The project has been divided into phases so that construction can proceed as funding becomes available. The San Antonio Parks Foundation initiated a capital campaign to raise the required matching funds from the private sector, and foundations, corporations and individuals responded with generous grants, indicative of the broad community support for the restoration project.

Phase one in the restoration process was completed as a City of San Antonio project and included the restoration of the pavilion and the stabilization of the Jingu House.

The completion of the second phase of the Japanese Tea Garden renovation encompassed the repair and restoration of the ponds and the waterfall, along with the installation of a recirculation system to provide a safe habitat for the Koi and aquatic plants. The restored gardens feature a lush year-round garden and floral display with shaded walkways, stone bridges, a 60-foot waterfall, and ponds filled with Koi. Thanks to



the generous donation of resources and time from Pape-Dawson Engineering, the completion of the waterfall and ponds were completed by spring of 2008.

After the restoration of the Lily Pond, the San Antonio Parks Foundation, Friends of the Parks, and the City of San Antonio celebrated on Saturday, March 8 with a public re-opening. The event was well attended

and the surviving family members of the Lambert family and Jingu family were also present. Ever since the newly renovated Japanese Tea Garden has been open to the public it has been filled once again with visitors, including local citizens and visitors from many other states and countries.

The Parks Foundation is now initiating fundraising for the next phase of the restoration process: the restoration and adaptive reuse of the Jingu House. This two story structure was the home of the Japanese Tea Importer and his family, who ran the Bamboo Room, a tea room serving lunches and light refreshments to visitors to the garden. A contract with Alamo Architects has been initiated to prepare the architectural drawings for bidding documents for the restoration.

The Japanese Tea Garden Committee, under the leadership of Bonnie Conner, is continuing their valued role in serving as an oversight and planning group to interface with the architects. The committee is composed of a highly skilled group of architects, planners and other professionals who serve on a voluntary basis as a contribution to the project.

While the final architectural renderings and contractor bidding documents will take several months to complete, fundraising for this important phase of the restoration project will continue.



San Antonio Parks Foundation role with the Japanese Tea Garden

- Developed and paid for the Master Plan - \$100,000+
- Raised \$800,000+ towards the \$1.6 million restoration of ponds and waterfall. Completed in March 2008; now fund raising for \$1 million restoration of the historic Jingu House – home of the Japanese family who lived in the Gardens.

