One hour before noon on 9 March 1731, fifty-six travel-weary men, women and children from the Canary Islands arrived at a Spanish frontier mission fortress called Presidio San Antonio de Bexar in Texas. Comprising sixteen families, they had been underway for more than a year to arrive at a location where they would make history as the very first settlers to establish a civilian township in the State of Texas.
275th Anniversary of the Founding of the City

San Fernando, the oldest cathedral in the United States, was built by Canary Island settlers in 1748. Its original walls, which still stand, are the oldest structure in the State of Texas. San Fernando was also the first name of the town. Bexar (Bejar) is a county of which San Antonio is the capital.
The majority of the emigrants, forty-four, were from Lanzarote. This was because the leader of the party, Juan Leal Goráz, the president of the Cabildo Town Council of Teguise at the time, had been given the task of assembling a group of prospective emigrants to the New World by the Captain General of the Canary Islands on behalf of the king of Castile.

The other members of the party hailed from Tenerife, Gran Canaria, La Palma and Fuerteventura. As a major colonial power on the American continent in the 18th century, Spain encouraged its citizens to emigrate and settle there in order to strengthen the borders of their territories known as New Spain, now known as North America.

**Mission San Antonio**

The place at which the sixteen Canary Island families arrived on that March morning was just a small village on the banks of the San Antonio River. It was inhabited by thirty-eight soldiers and their families, and more than 250 Indians, mainly from the Coahuiltecan Tribe who lived at Mission San Antonio de Valero. Franciscan padres were in charge of the work and religious training of the Indians at the time at this and two other missions. The missions performed an economic function in operating the first ranches in the area, as they were the forerunners of the cattle industry, a major economic institution of 18th century Texas.

**San Antonio**

San Antonio received its name in 1691 during an expedition led by Domingo Terán de los Rios,
The first governor of the Province of Tejas (Texas). A diarist wrote, “On this day, June 13, we found at this place a village of the Indians of the Papaya Nation who called the river Yanagua meaning “the clear water.” As it was the feast day of San Antonio de Padua I named the area San Antonio. The Tejas, (Texas) were an indigenous Indian group whom early Spaniards called by the natives’ own word meaning “friends.”

The First Days
Soon after the Islanders arrived, an officer inventoried and redistributed all the equipment and supplies they had received during the trip. He lodged the families in the best homes of the soldiers and gave instructions for the care of the livestock they had brought with them including horses, cows, sheep and goats. Each person would be given four reales (about 50 cents) per day for one year and be supplied with meat, flour and corn and the necessary seed until they

Royal Dispatch of 28 November 1730 concerning the Canary Island families and signed by the Captain General of New Spain, the Marquis of Casafuerte
would be able to grow and harvest their own crops. They would also be provided with oxen to plough the fields. During the next few days they planted as much as they could to supply food. Corn, beans, barley, cotton, peppers, melons, watermelons, pumpkins, and some fruit and grape cuttings were planted during the next few days.

Layout of Town

The Spanish Law of the Indies established the layout of Spanish colonial towns. The plan of the Villa (Town) de San Fernando was determined by the specifications for the placement and size, the location of the church (now San Fernando Cathedral), and the width of the city blocks. Downtown San Antonio still bears a resemblance to this early layout.

Governing Council

The Town’s cabildo (city council) with its officers and elected mayors provided for a degree of self-government in the colony. Although the structure of the city’s government changed as new groups moved to the area, and, ultimately, the Republic of Texas was established, the early Spanish colonial cabildo was a precursor of the present-day form of San Antonio’s government.

(The term “cabildo” was first used in an ecclesiastic sense to describe a governing body of clerics, and is still used nowadays in the Canary Islands and parts of Latin America as the term for island councils).

Members Appointed

The local fort commander made the following appointments. First councilman Juan Leal Goráz, who would preside over the city council. Second councilman Juan Curbelo, responsible for the prison to be built. Third councilman Antonio Santos, in charge of weights and measures. Fourth councilman Salvador Rodriguez, supervisor of warehouses and public buildings. Manuel de Niz, fifth councilman, responsible for unclaimed property. Juan Leal Jr. sixth councilman with a vote but no specified duties. Other officials appointed were the sheriff, secretary and notary public and an administrator of public lands. All appointments were for life.

Original Archives

It is interesting to note that the archives have detailed descriptions of each of the fifty-six Canarian immigrants. Here are two examples.
Juan Leal Goráz: Son of Antonio and Maria Pérez, native of Lancerota Island, 54 years old, tall, long face, thick beard & hair, dark complexion, sharp nose, blind in the left eye, light grey eyes.  
Vicente Leal: Son of foregoing and Catharina Rodríguez deceased, native of Lancerota, 18 years old, medium height, broad-shouldered, long face, beardless, acquiline nose, eyebrows meeting, light grey eyes, chestnut eye-brows, dark complexion.

Noblemen

Eight months after the settlers arrived they were each made an hidalgo, a member of the nobility, by the Marquis de Casafuerte, Captain General of New Spain in the name of the King. The Royal Proclamation clearly states that as a reward for founding a settlement overseas every emigrant, and their descendents, would be known as land-holding nobles “with all the honours and prerogatives that all landed nobles and knights of these kingdoms of Castillo should have and enjoy, according to the laws and privileges of Spain.” The late historian John Leal, referred to in more detail elsewhere in this feature, called himself Hidalgo of Texas throughout his life.

The Laws

Laws laid down by the Spanish are also evident in the laws of the State of Texas up to the present day, according to historian Joseph W. McKnight. The most significant components include the following:

1. Early Spanish law recognised community property of husband and wife, based on the idea that both man and woman should share equally in the possessions associated with marriage. Joint income tax emerged from this view of common property.
2. Adoption of children was covered by Spanish colonial law, and the rights of adopted children to family inheritance.

3. Spanish colonial law is responsible for the provision for independent executors of wills in Texas. This allows executors to carry out their responsibilities independent of a court of law.

4. The right of a sued person to have a lawsuit heard in his home area for his convenience is a feature of Texas law that derives from early Spanish law.

5. Water rights were held by the king in Spanish Texas. Individuals were allotted water for domestic and livestock needs and for irrigation only by grant. The water source was never privately owned. This principle was inherited by the State of Texas making possible the construction of the great Falcon Dam on the Rio Grande without payment to individuals for the loss of water to their lands.

Reason for the Emigration

A decade of devastating hurricanes and violent storms beginning in 1720, completely devastated the crops throughout the Canary Islands. In addition, the eastern islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura also underwent several years of drought which brought starvation and death in its wake. In order to alleviate the suffering of his fellow islanders, the head of the Lanzarote ruling council, Juan Leal Goráz, went to Tenerife to plead for help from the Captain General of the Islands.

Philip V of Spain

His visit coincided with a request from King Philip V of Spain to provide assistance to the Canary Islands.
This millstone to grind ‘gofio’ cereal is displayed inside the Alamo with a plaque stating it was brought to San Antonio by the Canary Islanders in 1731. They were the ancestors of Dorothy Perez and Aurelia Deuvall, seen in the photo. Over the past decade, Dorothy Perez has been the source of nearly all reference works for Lancelot articles about San Antonio. We owe her a great debt of gratitude.

Spain for the Captain General to send four hundred families from the Canary Islands to settle in the Spanish colony of Texas in New Spain, “Nueva España.” They were needed in order to establish a permanent Spanish presence in the face of repeated incursions by the French from neighbouring Louisiana who sought to force Spain to withdraw from the territory. The Spanish military believed that setting up civil population centres would signal their resolute intention to remain in Texas.

The New World
The Captain General told Juan Leal Goráz about the royal request and promised him that if he would lead an expedition to populate Texas, he would supply sufficient food to alleviate the plight of the suffering population of Lanzarote. Thereupon, Leal Góraz returned to his native isle and immediately set about seeking people to join him and the other eleven members of his family on a journey to the New World. His party of 56 Canary Islanders set sail from Tenerife on a forty-four day journey to Havana in March 1730.

“Gofio” Millstones
Besides the personal items they carried with them they took a large amount of “gofio” cereal, this is maize first roasted then toasted which has been a food staple in the Islands since pre-Hispanic times and has remained so up until the present day. Several emigrants carried millstones with them as part of their baggage one of which is displayed in the Alamo heritage site with a plaque stating it was brought by the original Canary Islanders in 1731 (see photo). From Havana, the emigrants sailed to Vera Cruz, New Mexico before embarking on the final stage of their journey, a four month trek to what was to become known as San Antonio, Texas, where they arrived almost one year to the day after leaving their native isles.

Re-Enactment Play
The arrival is commemorated annually on the Sunday of the week of 9 March. This year following mass at San Fernando Cathedral, the Canary Islands Descendents Association hosted a luncheon at the SBC Community Centre during which they staged a theatrical work entitled “The Odyssey of the Canary Island Settlers” by Alicia Burger. This well-written true-life drama, based on the arrival and early days of the original Canarian emigrants in 1731, was excellently acted out by some fifty of their descendents. Wearing period costumes they introduced themselves and their families by the name of the original ancestors whose roles they were portraying.

They then made their way to the first ever Town Council seated at a table who allotted each family a plot of land measured out by lengths of chains with borders marked by imitation boulders. The spellbound audience were then treated to a fine exhibition of Spanish dancing of the colonial era.
Missions – Forerunners of the Texas Cattle Industry

The Canarian Settlers Had Knowledge of Irrigation

“Antonio Rodriguez from Gran Canaria, was appointed Administrator of Public Lands in the first San Antonio Council, because of his knowledge of irrigation methods.”

August 1731, Bexar County Archives

The Missions

The chain of missions established along the San Antonio River in the 18th century is a reminder of one of Spain’s most successful attempts to extend its dominion northward from New Spain (present-day Mexico). Collectively they form the largest concentration of Catholic missions in North America. The Spanish priests, i.e. missionaries, strove to replace traditional Indian ritual with religious festivals teaching Christian beliefs.

The Spanish missions helped form the foundation for the city of San Antonio. The modern San Antonio community early recognised their significance, and since the 1920s has worked to preserve them. Today, these missions represent an almost unbroken connection with the past. Carrying the legacy of generations of American Indians and Hispanics, they live still as active parishes.

Ranches and Farms

A mission’s goal of becoming self-sufficient depended on the success of its farm and ranch. The free-roaming livestock on the mission ranches proved very profitable. Surplus sheep, goats and cattle were sold to local “presidios” (forts) or traded to markets as far south as present-day Mexico and east to Louisiana. A century later the American cattle industry was built on the legacy of these Texas mission ranches. The regulations governing the industry, the techniques of handling herds from horseback, even longhorn cattle, had their origins in the Spanish Colonial period. The mission ranches left a rich heritage of equipment, vocabulary, and folklore.

Mission Alamo

Mission San Antonio de Valero, commonly called the Alamo, was founded in 1718, the first mission on the San Antonio River. A State Historic site, the Alamo has been under the care of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas since 1905. Lanzarote Descendent Dorothy Pérez is President of the Alamo Couriers Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

Long before it became known...
as the Alamo and “The Cradle of Texas Liberty,” San Antonio de Valero was a traditional mission with grounds, courtyards, surrounding walls, living quarters, a dining room, “acequias” (irrigation ditches) and a sanctuary. It was shut down in 1793 and in 1801 Spanish troops from San Jose del Alamo in Mexico were stationed at the abandoned mission. Locals began calling them El Alamo and eventually the name stuck both for them and the place they occupied.

‘Acequias’ – Irrigation Ditches
The success of the missions was dependent upon planting and harvesting crops. Sparse rainfall and the need for irrigation made the construction of seven gravity flow ditch systems known as “acequias;” a high priority for the missionaries and Indians.

Five dams and several aqueducts along the San Antonio River ensured a continual flow of river water into the system. So important was irrigation in Spanish Texas that cropland was measured in “suertes”, or the amount of land that could be watered in one day. The 15-mile network irrigated about 3,500 acres of land. Antonio Rodriguez of Gran Canaria was appointed to the first Town Council in 1731 because of his knowledge of irrigation.

Mission Espada has the best preserved of these “acequia” systems. Espada Dam completed by 1745, still converts water into an “acequia madre” (mother ditch). The water is carried over Piedras Creek through Espada Aqueduct - the oldest Spanish aqueduct in the United States. Floodgates controlled water sent to each field for irrigation and for auxiliary uses such as bathing, washing, and power for mill wheels. Today, nearby farms still use water from this system.
1738 San Fernando Church

The “Villa (village) de San Fernando” began with the arrival of the 56 Canary Island settlers on 9 March 1731. Seven years later in 1738 the cornerstone of the church building was laid, making it the first parish church in Texas. The two patronesses of the church were those of the settlers and soldiers in the area: Our Lady of the Candelaria (Candlemass) and Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of what would later become Mexico. The church was completed in 1755.

1874 Cathedral

A new diocese was created in 1874 with San Antonio as its see and San Fernando its cathedral. In March 2003 the cathedral underwent a $5.8 million, yearlong restoration, the most expensive change in its almost 300 year history. The original walls still stand today forming what is now the sanctuary of the present church. These walls are the oldest standing structure in the State of Texas. The dome of the original church was the geographic centre of the city and all mileage to San Antonio was calculated from this point.

2006 San Fernando

A special Mass, which is held annually at San Fernando Cathedral on a Sunday during the week of the 9th of March, was especially emotional this year due to the 275th anniversary. Members of the Canary Islands Descendants Association of San Antonio wearing the costumes and bearing the banners of the native isle of their ancestors were joined this year by many visitors who also wore traditional attire. San Fernando, built by Canary Islanders in 1738, is the oldest cathedral in continual use in the whole of the United States.
Canary Island settlers started building San Fernando Cathedral in 1738. The original walls, which still stand, are the oldest standing structure in the State of Texas and San Fernando is the oldest cathedral in continual use in the United States.
Canary Islands - Texas History Symposium

Among distinguished visitors who had come to San Antonio were Spain’s Minister of Justice Fernando López Aguilar and Ambassador to the United States Carlos Westendorp y Cabeza. The large delegation of regional and insular authorities from the Canary Islands was led by the Vice President of the Canarian Government, Maria del Mar Julios with other members of the executive as well as mayors and councillors from Town Halls in Tenerife, Gran Canaria and Lanzarote. Among academics present were the Vice Chancellor of Las Palmas University, history professors from La Laguna University, Tenerife and the Director of the Canarian Astrophysics Observatory at La Palma.

They and other invited dignitaries and academics participated in the V Annual History Symposium “Canary Islands–Texas: The Connection”. Principle sponsors were Dr Alfonso Chiscano and the organisation he presides over, the Friends of the Canary Islands and Dr Ricardo Romo, President of the University of Texas at San Antonio, UTSA. The conference took place in the Aula Canaria Hall of the downtown campus. Master of Ceremonies was Dr Félix Almaráz, Professor of History at UTSA.

Spanish Archives

Bexar County Clerks Office held a Grand Opening of the Spanish Archives on the first floor of the Courthouse. This building houses the historical collection of Spanish Archives comprising hundreds of original records dating back to the early 1700’s through to 1836. Holdings include Spanish and Mexican Land Grants, Wills
and Estates, Proclamations, Maps, Mission Records, Cattle Brands, Election records, Decrees, the Bexar Land District Field Notes, and much more.

Other documentation includes a Marriage License collection (1836-1861) of more than 2,000 original marriage records, Water Rights, Jail Records, Immigration and Naturalisation, Confederate Pension Applications, Declarations of Intent for U.S. Citizenship, and more than 500 vertical files compiled by John Ogden Leal and R. Tarin in the 1980s.

La Oratava Sand Carpets

The Government of the Canary Islands sent a very special gift to San Fernando Cathedral in celebration of the 275th anniversary of the parish. Beautifully-designed carpets of sand and flowers were laboriously and lovingly assembled by a team of artisans from the city of La Oratava, Tenerife, where they are traditionally laid in streets around churches during the celebration of Corpus Christi. These fine craftsmen intermingled the Canarian soil they had brought with them with local Texas earth symbolising the brotherly ties between the two communities.

Three Themes

Three main themes were incorporated into the intricate pattern of sand art which decorated the floor of the courtyard adjoining San Fernando Cathedral. On the left, a motif of cowboys, cacti and a snake based on the work of an early 20th century artist. The focal centrepiece was a circular tableau depicting the arrival of the 56 Canary Island settlers in 1731 plus the emblems of San Antonio and the Canary Islands. On the right was an aerial scene of the Canarian Archipelago and a 1,000-year-old drago tree, which was venerated by the pre-Hispanic Guanche inhabitants of the Islands.

As is customary, following Mass, the local congregation led by the clergy walked over the floral and sand carpets whose designs were destroyed under hundreds of pairs of feet. However, the symbolic ritual was not over yet as many people used paper cups to preserve these precious grains of soil from their ancestral homeland collect granules she feared that she would never experience such a wonderful sight again as so many from the ground to. Worshippers were full of emotion whilst gathering the earth, one woman burst to tears saying old customs are now dying out, “we must ensure that the younger generation preserves them,” she said.

‘San Fernando’s living history is its people. Over 5,000 participate at weekend Masses each week of the year. Over 900 baptisms, 100 weddings, 110 funerals and countless other services are performed each year. Symphonies, concerts and major TV features are but a few of the significant events held in the cathedral regularly. Each person is a part of the story of this magnificent place and a tribute to its enduring presence as the spiritual centre of San Antonio.’ From the 275th Anniversary prayer sheet.

1836 - Battle of the Alamo

A battle fought during the 1836 Texan War of Independence against Mexico, when less than 200 Texans and US citizens held the old mission/fort of Alamo in an epic of resistance against an overwhelming number of Mexican troops led by General Santa Ana. After twelve days of siege, including heavy cannon fire, Santa Ana’s soldiers moved on the Alamo at dawn on the sixth March.

Mounting ladders, they scaled the walls surrounding the mission. Wave after wave of attackers engaged the defenders with firearms and hand-to-hand fighting, using bayonets. The numbers of Mexicans were overwhelming. By about eight o’clock in the morning, 189 of the defenders lay dead inside and outside the Alamo. Some 600 Mexican soldiers of Santa Ana’s attacking army of 1,800 were dead or wounded.

Everyone who died at the Alamo was a volunteer and a hero realising they faced certain death. Their commanding officer William Barret Travis had given permission to anyone who so wished to leave the fort before the battle commenced. The best known among them are Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie whose names are synonymous with the Alamo. Two Canary Island descendents lost their lives in a brave attempt to cross through enemy lines to summon help for their beleaguered comrades.

Following the victory of Sam Houston against Santa Ana at San Jacinto six weeks later the independence of Texas was recognised. In 1845 Texas became the 28th State of the Union.
Youngest Survivor

Santa Ana did spare the lives of nine women and children the youngest of whom was Alejo de la Encarnación Perez, a descendant of a Lanzarote emigrant who had been a member of Teguise Council. His great-great-granddaughter is Dorothy Perez, who visited Lanzarote for the very first time in 1998 as a guest of Teguise Council. Through the efforts of Dorothy, the grave of her ancestor Alejo Perez has been declared an Historic Site by the State of Texas. Earlier this year, Dorothy was elected President of the Alamo Couriers Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas.

Major Sources

The Story of an Enchanted City by Frank Jennings, published 1998.
The Missions. Published by US Parks.
The three works were given to Lancelot by Dorothy Perez.

Historian John Leal

The late historian John Leal (1929-2004) worked at Bexar County Archives for ten years using his spare time to translate hundreds of Spanish manuscripts about the original Canary Island settlers of San Antonio into English. He also sent a wealth of historical data to Teguise Archives on Lanzarote and is the source of all engravings and documents used in this supplement and in previous issues of Lancelot. The memory of John Leal lives on through the rich legacy of San Antonio’s history he left behind.

The name of each one of the fifty-six original settlers is inscribed in paving stones in Houston Street in downtown San Antonio.

The late historian John Leal (1929-2004) is a direct descendent of the first mayor of San Antonio, Juan Leal Goraz. As archivist of Bexar County for ten years he meticulously translated hundreds of handwritten Spanish documents into English in his spare time. Without him much of the early history of San Antonio and the settlers would be lost.
The names of all who fell at the Battle of the Alamo are engraved in the Cenotaph in the centre of San Antonio.