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Comal Springs is in the National Register of Historic Places

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Comal Springs in 2012. Photo courtesy of photographer John Moler.

When next you walk or drive through Landa Park the following are some interesting things you might keep in mind.

New Braunfels' Landa Park was named an initial Legacy Park of Texas. The William and Dolores Schumann Arboretum within Landa Park is considered a world class arboretum. The ancient oak within the arboretum was approximately 150 years old when New Braunfels was founded in 1845. It's stated that Ferdinand Lindheimer — later known as the Botanist of Texas — took Prince Carl to view the majestic oak. During our local celebration of the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986 the oak was named

“Founders’ Oak” and it became the Living Memorial of the Sesquicentennial. In 2012 the ancient oak, now known as Founders’ Oak, was further honored by officially being recognized as a Famous Tree of Texas at a morning celebration of prayer, speeches, story — telling, music, dancing and singing under its outstretched branches in Landa Park.

On May 30th of this year there was further honor brought to the area when Comal Springs (Main Springs), Landa Park, New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas was listed by the National Park Service in the National Register of Historic Places.

Here are interesting facts that led to the National Park Service listing Comal Springs (Main Springs), Landa Park, New Braunfels, Comal County, Texas in the National Register of Historic Places:

Comal Springs is comprised of a series of approximately 15 major and minor springs within Landa Park on the northwestern edge of New Braunfels in southeastern Comal County, Texas. The springs are the source of the 3.25-mile-long Comal River that flows southeast into the Guadalupe River. While the springs are found along a 4,300-foot stretch of the river, the nominated portion of Comal Springs is the secluded major spring west of Landa Park Drive, which best reflects the rural setting (as opposed to parklike setting) that was experienced by travelers along El Camino Real de los Tejas between 1691 and 1821. The nominated area includes the spring source and small portion (approximately 30 feet) of a channelized creek that flows south beyond the boundary, turns east to the Landa Park Drive Bridge, then northeast to meet the Comal River.

The Comal Springs site is on the Balcones Escarpment, which runs from southwest to northeast from Del Rio to Waco and marks the transition between the rugged limestone Hill Country of the Edwards Plateau and the flat expanses of the Blackland Prairies to the east. Impervious rocks on the southeast and limestone on the northwest form an underground barrier. Beneath the escarpment is the Edwards aquifer, a major water source that supplies water that is forced up through fault fissures that form springs at the surface. Comal Springs is the largest of those springs along the escarpment, with seven major springs and dozens of smaller ones occurring

over a distance of about 4,300 feet (0.8 mile) at the base of a steep limestone bluff in Landa Park. Since Comal Springs was first recorded, the water has been noted for its clarity, a characteristic that is apparent today. The water temperature averages 73.6 to 75.0 degrees Fahrenheit. Ground water temperature increases with depth, and the water is believed to flow as much as 150 meters below the surface before reaching the springs.

Comal Springs has long been a dependable source of fresh water that has supported a unique ecological niche with a wide diversity and abundance of plants and animals. Today, the Edwards aquifer and its associated springs are vital to the provision of water for agriculture and municipal water supplies for San Antonio and other cities in the area. In New Braunfels, the Comal Springs also supports a regional recreation and tourism industry. Most importantly the Comal Springs provides critical habitat for the Fountain Darter, and other endangered species, as well as countless other flora and fauna. The Comal Springs are the principal source of water for the Comal River, which flows through Landa Park and New Braunfels before merging with the Guadalupe River. Comal Springs has been the site of prolonged and intensive use since the prehistoric period. Native American tribes camped around the springs for millennia. During the mid-nineteenth century, the springs were used to power a variety of industrial concerns, including a grist mill, saw mill, cotton gin and textile factories. The springs provided hydroelectric power from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century. All the industrial activity took place downstream of the spring outlets. The spring site also was, and remains a popular picnic and recreation spot.

Comal Springs served as a camping site for Native American tribes from the Paleoindian period (approximately 10,000 years before present) through the mid-nineteenth century. Spanish explorers discovered Comal Springs in 1691. The native tribes they found living there referred to it as Conaquestadesta, translated as "where the river has its source." A Spanish expedition, led by Domingo Ramon, reached Comal Springs in 1716. A short-lived Spanish mission, Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, was located near the springs in 1756-1758. In 1764, the springs were visited by French explorer Louis Juchereau de St. Denis. Natural landmarks such as Comal Springs served to guide travelers, as natural defensive positions, as sources for food and water and as markers of political boundaries or property ownership. The location is

also identified as a *paraje*, as Spanish *entradas* and other travelers noted stopping at the location before crossing the Guadalupe River. The springs, which emerge from faults in the Balcones Escarpment, offered Native Americans, Spanish explorers and travelers along El Camino Real de los Tejas a camp site that provided both water and food. The Spanish travelers called the springs “Las Fontanas.” During the nineteenth century, the spring flows were used to provide water power for a variety of industrial concerns. In 1898, Harry Landa opened a private park around the spring outflow sites, which the city of New Braunfels purchased in 1936 and has maintained as a municipal park. Comal Springs is nominated under Criterion A in the area of Exploration/Settlement at the state level of significance for its role in facilitating Spanish exploration during the seventeenth and eighteenth century under the Historic Resources of El Camino Real de los Tejas multiple property form. The period of significance spans from 1691 when springs were first encountered and recorded by Spanish explorers, through 1821, marking the end of Spanish Colonial Period in Texas.

The earliest historic-period Native American tribes in the vicinity were collectively referred to as Coahuiltecan. In addition to inhabiting the Comal Springs area, they lived throughout south-central Texas. During the eighteenth century, the Coahuiltecan were threatened, and eventually extinguished, by disruptions that began with the intrusions of several Native American groups, including the Jumano, Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, and Comanche tribes. The Jumano initiated extensive trading activities with the Caddo in East Texas and the Trans Pecos groups to the west. The Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, and Comanche entered the area from the Great Plains. Archeological investigations in the immediate vicinity of Comal Springs have uncovered sites associated with a variety of historic-period Native American tribes.

Comal Springs is a historically stable water source in an area where water supplies can be scarce, an asset that made it attractive for settlement by native people for millennia. These tribal groups created a network of trails for commerce, travel, cultural exchange, and raids, and they used the spring locations and major streams as campsites and as permanent settlement sites. As Spanish explorers entered the area during the seventeenth century, they used the existing trail network as a basis for their own explorations and thus created El Camino Real de los Tejas, a major travel

corridor across Texas during the Spanish colonial period. The road and its many tributaries served as a conduit of trade, a strategic military route, and a supply line for the numerous missions established by the Spanish during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the short-lived Mission Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe. A network of evolving routes, El Camino Real developed over many years, with the earliest routes emerging from the trail blazing efforts of explorers Alonso De Leon (1690), Domingo Teran de los Rios (1691), and Gregoria de Salinas Varona (1693). By the early nineteenth century, El Camino Real also was an important route for immigrants traveling into Texas from Louisiana Territory. Proximity to El Camino Real was crucial to the success of early Spanish settlements as it served as a lifeline to market centers, military protection, and religious and civic institutions.

El Camino Real remained the basis of a major transportation route through the mid-nineteenth century. Military troops used El Camino Real repeatedly as a supply line and transportation route during the Mexican and Texas revolutions and the Mexican-American War. Sections of El Camino Real also were used during the Civil War, when East Texas cotton growers began shipping their crops to San Antonio, Laredo, and Mexico. Following the end of the war, however, newer shorter roads replaced large segments of El Camino Real. New markets shifted trade patterns from an east/west line of travel to one that extended from the south to the north. Railroad construction during the late nineteenth century further altered transportation routes throughout Texas, rendering many historic road alignments obsolete. Portions of older roads remained in use for local use, but most historic corridors diminished with each passing year, leaving little more than faint vestiges of their once well-worn alignments.

In 1937, a former regular stop on El Camino Real, the principal Comal Spring and those located to the west were modified as part of a larger park development project carried out by the Works Progress Administration. WPA workers altered the spring outlets by rearranging rocks to make the springs more visible. The rock retaining walls have been repaired as needed over the years, but no major alterations to the springs have been undertaken since 1937. A gravel path parallels the rock-lined channel that leads toward Landa Lake. No non-contributing resources are associated with the Comal Springs site. In 1936, the City of New Braunfels acquired the park and has

maintained it since that time as a popular recreation and tourist destination. As such, the Comal Springs site is protected from unsympathetic development. Landa Park merits further study for historic nomination.