

Spirit of Sacrifice

(Alamo Cenotaph)

Location: Alamo Plaza

Commissioned in 1936 by the Texas Centennial Commission

Completed in 1939; Dedicated in 1940

Sculptor: Pompeo Coppini

Structural Designer: Adams and Adams Architects with Frank T. Drought, consulting engineer

Materials: Georgia marble, slab base of pink Texas Granite

Height: Shaft 60 feet from base, 40 feet long and 12 feet wide

Design:

- Spirit of Sacrifice represented on main (south) face of the shaft by an idealistic figure rising 23 feet from the long sloping capstone.
- Monolithic slab 20 feet long bears ornamental tracery
- East and West ledges decorated with background panels of eight figures in low relief depicting the men who died in the battle
- East panel portraits include James Bowie and James B. Bonham
- West panel portraits include William B. Travis and David Crockett
- North side: female figure symbolizing the State of Texas
- Inscription lists 182 men who died at the battle of the Alamo, compiled by Dr. Amelia W. Williams. Today, there are 189 known Defenders and some errors have been identified in the names listed.

While Carleton Adams (Adams and Adams) likely always envisioned a monolith, modernist obelisk, Coppini and Adams likely worked together to design the pedestal with sloping form to resemble a pyre.

Coppini objected to the use of marble in the design in favor of bronze and granite. This design direction came from Adams.

A Cenotaph is an empty tomb or a monument erected in honor of a person or group of people whose remains are elsewhere. Following the siege and battle in 1836, the defenders' bodies were burned on three funeral pyres to the south. Exact locations remain unknown, but are believed to be in the vicinity of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, the Samuel Gompers Statue, and the convention center, and perhaps east of the Alamo grounds.

Ownership

The Cenotaph cost \$100,000 and was paid for by the U.S. Centennial Commission and commissioned by the Texas State Board of Control. Upon completion, ownership passed to the City of San Antonio. The State Board of Control was abolished in 1979.

Designations

- Contributing structure in the Alamo Plaza National Register Historic District (1977)

Cenotaph Development

- 1936 - U.S. Centennial Commission allocates \$100,000 for Alamo memorial.
- May, 1936 - City and business leaders endorse Alamo Plaza bandstand location as Cenotaph location, urge straightening of intersection of Alamo Plaza, Avenue E, and Houston Street.
- November 1936 – Adams and Adams selected as design architect.
- March 1937 - Texas State Board of Control chooses Cenotaph design.
- June 1937 - Pompeo Coppini chosen as sculptor.
- July 1937 - City authorizes State Board of Control to change location from south end of Alamo Plaza (bandstand location) to north end of Plaza.
- March 1939 - official groundbreaking.
- November 11, 1940 - Cenotaph dedicated.

There was dissension in connection with both the construction and dedication of the Cenotaph, which caused delays.

Coppini began to conceptualize an Alamo Heroes Memorial as early as 1902. One early proposal consisted of a bronze and granite monument located in the plaza in front of Municipal Auditorium. Alfred Giles also conceptualized several iterations as early as 1887.

Carleton Adams (Adams & Adams) was selected as design architect for the Cenotaph in November 1936. It was then that the design likely shifted to a more modern design with limit relief sculptures. Adams fielded proposals from multiple other sculptors which were all rejected by the State Board of Control. Ultimately, Coppini was selected directly by the Board to work with Adams with whom he had a strained relationship.

Coppini's formal contract came late; it was not awarded until early 1938. This led to a lack in oversight even as construction of the Cenotaph began. In Coppini's autobiography, he notes that the inside of the marble should have been water proofed to prevent it from being affected by the inside dampness of the cement core.

Cenotaph Location

Most documentation through the end of 1936 refers to placement of the memorial to the south of the Alamo at the location of the bandstand. It is documented that the Daughters of the Republic of Texas were opposed to a monument placed in front of the chapel, and they likely were amenable to the bandstand location. That location was endorsed by City and business leaders in 1936.

A decision by the State Board of Control to place the memorial at its current location appears to have been made in early 1937 but was not public knowledge until July 1937 at the time of contract approval by City Council. There is little to no evidence of what prompted this change.

Although Coppini had proposed a monument at other locations, he likely advocated for its current location. In his autobiography, Coppini expressed concern that “people should be made to believe that the Alamo consisted of what was (the chapel).” Coppini envisioned the Cenotaph as a new location for ceremonial wreath laying instead of in front of the chapel.

Cenotaph Condition

The city of San Antonio studied the condition of the Cenotaph in 2014. This was an exterior only, visual assessment and recommends further study of the interior conditions. It found cracks, shifting stone, missing mortar and other damage. The Alamo master plan incorporated information from this study. It’s clear that the Cenotaph needs repair, and possibly a new internal structure to replace the current concrete structure. In order to repair it, it may need to be dismantled – whether it is relocated or not.

Cenotaph Relocation

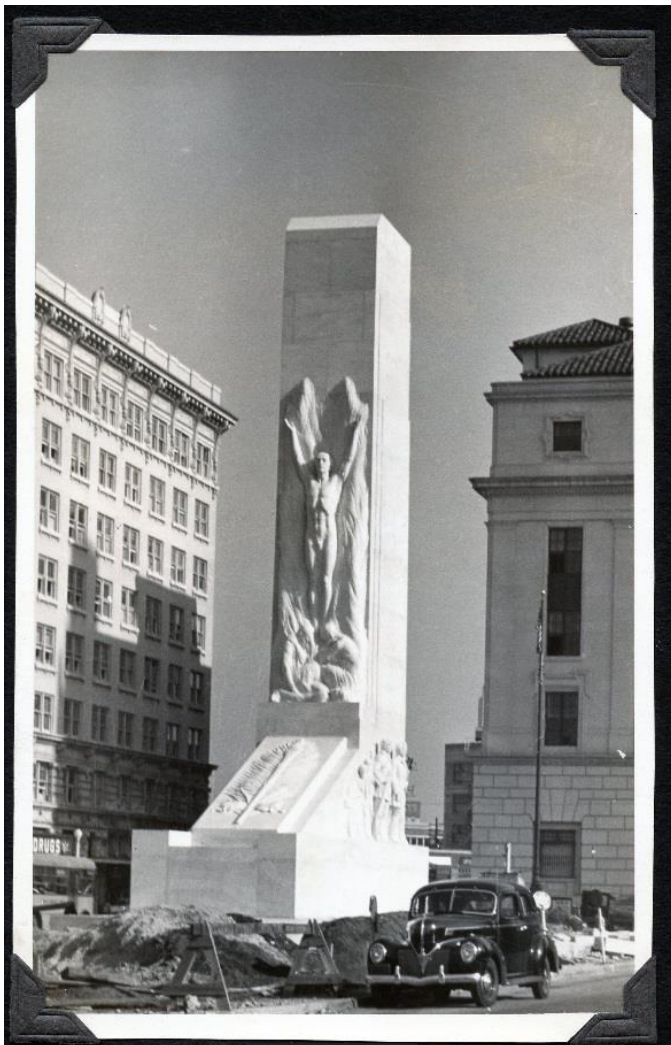
Recommendations to move Cenotaph were included in plans and reports in 1976, 1987, 1994, 2012, and 2017.

The Cenotaph’s relocation will provide a line of sight to the Church. It will set the tone of reverence for the entire Alamo area. It will also stand in a more prominent place, to the south of the Alamo’s traditional south gate. And by clearing the place where it stands on the battlefield, the Alamo gains an outdoor museum that will honor the Defenders and bring their era to life every day. The Cenotaph will always stand, and it will be in a place of honor and prominence. The relocation place is just about 500 feet from its current location, and roughly the same distance as it currently stands from the Alamo Church.

Over the last two years, City staff, working with the City Attorney’s Office and outside consultants, have reviewed the history of Alamo Plaza, the Cenotaph and the surrounding streets and properties. This has included review of legislative history, statutes, ordinances and deed records for this area. Based upon that review, the City clearly has the ability to relocate the Cenotaph. If there are any conditions on moving the Cenotaph it is that the Cenotaph continue to honor the defenders of the Alamo. The Alamo Master Plan complies with that condition.

Before any work starting, a repair plan that includes laser scanning will be developed by structural engineers and conservation experts. The plan will be reviewed and approved by the Office of Historic Preservation. The Cenotaph will be relocated and repaired on site.

Spirit of Sacrifice under construction:



Alamo Grounds c. 1940

