

A Brief History of the San Antonio Woolworth Building

By Beth Standifird

Woolworth's, a popular national discounter, first came to San Antonio in 1912 and opened a store on E. Houston Street. The company soon prospered enough to erect a new three-story building "on San Antonio's most prominent corner."¹ In June of 1921, the F. W. Woolworth Company opened its 5, 10, and 15 cent store at the intersection of E. Houston and Alamo Streets on Alamo Plaza, where the Maverick Bank Building once stood.

The \$225,000 building had been designed by Adams and Adams.² This local architectural firm designed other noteworthy structures in Texas, including San Antonio's Jefferson High School, the Hall of State for the Texas Centennial in Dallas, and the Alamo Cenotaph, featuring Pompeo Coppini's sculptures.³ The newspaper ad announcing Woolworth's formal opening boasted that, "We have added a number of features to our service – but the one which you will appreciate most is our soda fountain and lunch counter."⁴ This lunch counter, touted by the local manager as the largest in the city,⁵ later catapulted San Antonio into civil rights history.

On March 16, 1960, Woolworth's became one of seven local stores that peacefully desegregated their lunch counters.⁶ No sit-in demonstrations were held, thanks to the cooperation of church leaders, store managers, and members of the NAACP, who orchestrated the policy change behind the scenes.⁷ The San Antonio Register, a local African-American newspaper, noted that, although Oklahoma City beat San Antonio for the distinction of becoming "the first southern, or southwestern, city to desegregate eating facilities...San Antonio [was] the first, however, to act without demonstrations, by resolving the issue in interracial conference."⁸

The San Antonio Express-News photographed history in the making at the Woolworth's cafeteria, where the store's equal service policy also helped San Antonio acquire the distinction of being "the



Citizens stand in line at Woolworth's cafeteria, integrating the restaurant without incident, March 16, 1960. Courtesy UTSA Libraries Special Collections

first city in the South to receive publicity for the desegregation of its lunch counters."⁹ The fact that this particular store participated in the peaceful desegregation took on added significance given the historical association of Alamo Plaza with freedom, public assembly, and making public statements. Woolworth's, by virtue of its size, location, and company prominence, played a key role in elevating San Antonio to the national stage of civil rights history as a positive example in race relations. Jackie Robinson, the African American baseball star who helped integrate the major leagues, declared the event a story that "should be told around the world."¹⁰

The Woolworth Building became part of the Alamo Plaza National Register Historic District in 1977. Inclusion in the city's local landmark district followed in 1978. Woolworth's lunch counter continued to operate until 1986 and the store was considered one of the oldest surviving in the Woolworth chain before it closed in 1997.¹¹ Express-News Senior Critic Mike Greenberg opined in July of 1997 that, "If Woolworth's decides to sell the building, city officials and downtown interests say it has strong potential for beefed-up retail use or as a visitor center and museum...With 45,000 square feet of space on four levels, including a basement..."¹²

Retail use won out when the Woolworth-owned Footlocker shoe store opened in the space in 1998, followed in later years by various entertainment-oriented businesses. The State of Texas purchased this building, along with the adjacent Palace Theater and Crockett Block, in December 2015. Two months later, Preservation Texas added Woolworth's to its 2016 Most Endangered Places list, reflecting the uncertainty of the building's fate during the Alamo master planning process.

The Alamo Master Plan approved by City Council in 2017 had endorsed the reuse of the Woolworth Building, along with the Crockett Block and Palace Theater, as part of a planned Alamo Museum.

During the interpretive planning of 2018, Mayor Ron Nirenberg, District 1 Councilman Roberto Treviño, City Manager Sheryl Sculley, and County Judge Nelson Wolff went on the record supporting preservation of the three historic buildings. However, the 2018 interpretive plan approved by the Alamo Citizen Advisory Committee contradicted the earlier master plan by keeping the option open for the demolition of the Palace and Woolworth Buildings. This plan became effective on October 18, 2018, when the City of San Antonio accepted the Alamo Plaza lease and management agreement with the State of Texas.

Woolworth Building as it stands today. Courtesy Vincent Michael.

Join the "Save the Woolworth Building" effort. See Page 12 for more information

