

## What Sets the Woolworth Building Apart?

Martin Luther King, Jr. March,  
January 21, 2019

### Alamo Plaza Location:

- This building, which opened in 1921, occupies what the *San Antonio Light* considered “San Antonio’s most prominent corner,” where all races increasingly converged and mingled. It contributes to the Alamo Plaza National Register Historic District.
- The Woolworth Building provides a visible link to the plaza’s little-known Black history, which includes the siege of the Alamo in 1836.
- The building fits with the plaza’s historic use as a site for public statements and represents San Antonio’s positive role in one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest struggles for freedom: civil rights.

### Importance in the Civil Rights Movement

- The lunch counter sit-ins that helped bring about the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act started at the Woolworth’s national chain of stores.
- Of the seven San Antonio stores that integrated, Woolworth’s is the oldest and most prominently located. It provided the backdrop for the only published photograph showing the March 16<sup>th</sup> integration of San Antonio’s lunch counters. This photo appeared in the *San Antonio News*.

**Who We Are** - The Coalition for the Woolworth Building is a grass-roots advocacy group. We support the preservation of the Woolworth Building and want to build on its presence in Alamo Plaza to share an integrated history that includes African-Americans. Members include: San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum; Esperanza Peace and Justice Center; Westside Preservation Alliance; concerned historians, civic leaders, and community members; and the San Antonio Conservation Society.

# The Woolworth Building



## A Civil Rights Site Worth Saving

# What Happened at Woolworth's?

518 E. Houston St. (Alamo Plaza and Houston St.)

The Woolworth Building represents a unique site in the civil rights movement in San Antonio, and across the United States, for its role in lunch counter integration.

## Backstory: The National Struggle

- Four African-American college students challenged racial segregation by sitting down at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960. They inspired a student-led movement to integrate lunch counters across the South. Students endured police scrutiny, arrests, and bystander violence in some cities.

## San Antonio: "A Shining Example"

- Mary Andrews, a college freshman at Our Lady of the Lake, served as president of the San Antonio Youth Group of the NAACP. In March 1960, she sent letters to the managers of local downtown stores requesting equal lunch counter service. The NAACP followed up with an ultimatum: desegregate by Thursday, March 21<sup>st</sup>, or face sit-ins.
- San Antonio's religious and civic leaders met with store managers, who reached an agreement to desegregate most lunch counters. **On Wednesday, March 16, 1960**, seven downtown stores –**F.W. Woolworth**, S.H. Kress, Neisner's, W.T. Grant, H.L. Green, McCrory-McClellan, and Sommer's Drug Stores – **voluntarily served black and white customers at their lunch counters without incident.**
- Although kept low key, the event received positive local news coverage, which reached other cities nationwide. The *New York Times* printed comments made by baseball great Jackie Robinson on March 19<sup>th</sup>. Robinson called the voluntary integration, "a story that should be told around the world," and compared local efforts to his own integration of major league baseball.

## The Cause for Concern

- The 2017 Alamo Master Plan supported the reuse of the Woolworth Building as part of a planned Alamo Museum. **BUT** the State-owned Woolworth Building **does not appear in any of the 2018 conceptual drawings for the new museum and demolition appears to be an option.**
- The City of San Antonio has **no control** over what the State of Texas does with the Woolworth Building.

## Why You Should Care

- San Antonio's peaceful lunch counter integration, associated with the Woolworth Building, initiated positive social change for all races and paved the way for civil rights progress for Hispanics.
- The Alamo Plaza experience should be **relevant to everyone**. The site should lead in heritage tourism. The Woolworth Building is necessary for an authentic experience that embraces the growing public interest in historic race relations.
- "Relevant history is inclusive history . . . [Museums] are all working on emphasizing the history of civil rights . . . It's a priority for everyone." - John Dichtl, president, American Association for State and Local History.

## What You Can Do Today

- **Contact: Commissioner George P. Bush, Texas General Land Office**  
E:mail: <http://www.glo.texas.gov/contact/email-us/index.html>  
Phone: 1-800-998-4GLO (4456)
- **Contact: State Senator José Menéndez (District 26)**  
Online: <https://fyi.capitol.texas.gov/Name.aspx>  
Phone: (512) 463-0126 (Capitol) or (210) 733-6604 (District Office)
- **Contact: State Representative Diego Bernal (District 123)**  
Online: <https://fyi.capitol.texas.gov/Name.aspx>  
Phone: (512) 463-0532 (Capitol) or (210) 308-9700 (District Office)