
The Woolworth Building: Integrating African American History on Alamo Plaza

By Patti Zalontz, C.P.G.



Photo Courtesy University of Texas, San Antonio Archives Special Collections

helped catapult San Antonio into Civil Rights history.

Department stores in the segregated South would not serve African Americans at their in-store eating facilities. Then, four African American college students challenged the status quo by sitting down at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in February 1960. Their actions inspired a student-led sit-in movement that spread nationwide. Some cities responded with arrests and bystander violence, but San Antonio chose a different path.

On March 7, 1960, Mary Lillian Andrews, a 17-year-old African American college freshman, took a bold

Before closing their doors forever in 1997, Woolworth stores were fixtures in American life. Originator Frank Winfield Woolworth revolutionized retail shopping when he created the first Woolworth's in 1879. From this single discount department store, he forged an international chain.

Incorporated as the F.W. Woolworth Company, these stores became a catalyst for economic and social change in thousands of communities. San Antonio, Texas was one such place. In the spring of 1960, the Woolworth on Alamo Plaza played a key role in a remarkable story; one ripe for retelling.

San Antonio's first Woolworth opened on Houston Street in 1912. This store proved so profitable that the company soon erected a three-story building "on San Antonio's most prominent corner" in Alamo Plaza. The new, \$225,000 store replaced the 1884 Maverick Bank at the intersection of East Houston and South Alamo Streets, fronting both prosperous commercial corridors.

Designed by local architects Adams and Adams, Woolworth's reflected the popular Commercial Style. A newspaper ad announcing the formal opening on June 2, 1921 boasted about many added features, but promised "the one which you will appreciate most is our soda fountain and lunch counter." This lunch counter, touted by the local manager as the largest in the city, later

stand for lunch counter integration. Serving as president of the local NAACP Youth Council while attending Our Lady of the Lake College, she sent letters to the managers of eight downtown stores. In these letters, she requested equal service so that youth of all races could "sit down and eat together." The NAACP followed up with a youth rally under Mary's leadership, and an ultimatum: desegregate by March 17th, or face sit-ins.

Just one day before the deadline, Woolworth's and six other local stores (Joske's held out) peacefully desegregated their lunch counters on March 16th. No protests occurred at the seven locations, due to the intervention of religious leaders who negotiated with store managers behind the scenes. Blacks and whites quietly accepted the change, which received national news coverage. The *New York Times* quoted baseball great Jackie Robinson calling the integration "a story that should be told around the world."

Thanks to Woolworth's, one of the sit-in movement's first victories without protests unfolded directly across from the Alamo. San Antonio also became "the first city in the South to receive publicity for the desegregation of its lunch counters." But the story faded too fast. Only decades later, when a potential threat to the Woolworth Building emerged, did this milestone in African American freedom struggles make it onto the world stage.

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Woolworth Bldg. (Cont.)

Geographer Kenneth Foote once observed that sites relating to African American heritage faced the challenge of “altering existing traditions enough to make room for new meanings.” The significance of the Civil Rights Movement had not been assessed when the Woolworth Building was included in Alamo Plaza’s National Register Historic District in 1977. After the State of Texas purchased the building as part of a plan to “reimagine” Alamo Plaza in 2015, local heritage advocates met this interpretive challenge head on.

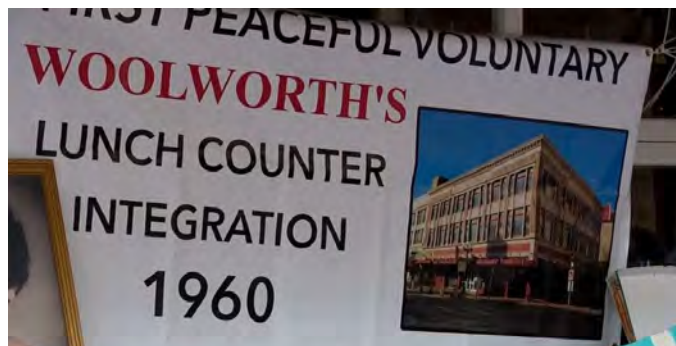


Woolworth Building and Cenotaph, circa 1966 Photo courtesy of San Antonio Conservation Society Foundation

Concerned by the State’s insistence on recapturing the Alamo’s 1836 footprint, the Conservation Society of San Antonio nominated the Woolworth Building to Preservation Texas’ 2016 list of Most Endangered Places. Two years later, state and local officials approved an interpretive plan that fell short of endorsing reuse of the former store as part of a planned a museum, excluding it from many drawings.

Conservation Society outreach to African American and Hispanic cultural organizations resulted in the mobilization of the Coalition for Woolworth Building in late 2018. Members include the Conservation Society, San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum, The San Antonio Branch of the NAACP, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, the West Side Preservation Alliance, San Antonio for Growth on the East Side, the National Mexican American Civil Rights Museum and interested individuals.

Supported by the Coalition, the Conservation Society released a compromise proposal in May 2019 illustrating how all stakeholder goals could be met by renovating



the Woolworth and Crockett Buildings for the new Alamo museum. That same month, the Texas Historical Commission recognized Woolworth’s importance as an African American heritage site through State Antiquities Landmark designation. The World Monuments Fund included the Woolworth Building on its 2020 Watch List in October. One of 25 endangered international sites, Woolworth’s historical significance and social relevance for the 21st century earned it a place alongside Notre Dame de Paris, Easter Island and Machu Pichu. Working with World Monuments Fund partners, the Coalition strives to build consensus among State officials that San Antonio’s Civil Rights story should be told as part of Alamo Plaza’s history through the preservation of the Woolworth Building. Saving this landmark will demonstrate to the world that, in the words of former National Parks director Robert Stanton, “the thirst for human freedom, dignity, and equity has no limitation.”



Photo by Ron Bauml, San Antonio Conservation Society

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