

Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

<input type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

Category of Property

<input type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
0	1	buildings
1	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	1	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions: INDUSTRY/PROCESSING/EXTRACTION: waterworks, energy facility

Current Functions: RECREATION AND CULTURE: outdoor recreation

7. Description

Architectural Classification: NO STYLE. OTHER/Factory/Mill

Principal Exterior Materials: EARTH; STONE (Limestone); METAL (Iron, Steel); WOOD (Cypress);
CONCRETE.

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-11)

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input type="checkbox"/>	B	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	C	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
<input type="checkbox"/>	D	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations: NA

Areas of Significance: Industry, Engineering (*local level of significance*)

Period of Significance: 1850-1942

Significant Dates: 1850, 1867, 1914.

Significant Person (only if criterion b is marked): NA

Cultural Affiliation (only if criterion d is marked): NA

Architect/Builder: NA

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 8-12 through 8-16)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography (see continuation sheet 9-17)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved on (date)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register (*May 21, 1985*)
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): NA

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 25.72 acres

Coordinates: see continuation sheet 10-18

Verbal Boundary Description: see continuation sheet 10-18

Boundary Justification: see continuation sheet 10-18

11. Form Prepared By

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Date: May 9, 2025

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheets MAP-19 through MAP- 23)

Additional items (see continuation sheets FIGURE-24 through FIGURE-29)

Photographs (see continuation sheets PHOTO-30 through PHOTO-41)

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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Photograph Log

Thompson-Cape Dam and Engineering Millrace
San Marcos, Hays County, Texas
Photographed by Jesús Najar, March 2025

Photo 1. Dam (Resource A) facing north.

Photo 2. Dam (Resource A) facing west.

Photo 3. Dam spillway (Resource A) facing east.

Photo 4. Dam pond (Resource A) facing north.

Photo 5. Millrace north end (Resource B) facing south.

Photo 6. Millrace by wasteway (Resource B) facing north.

Photo 7. Millrace midway (Resource B) facing north.

Photo 8. Millrace south end (Resource B) facing south.

Photo 9. Headgate 1 (Resource C) facing northwest.

Photo 10. Headgate 2 (Resource D) facing south.

Photo 11. Wasteway (Resource E) facing north.

Photo 12. Wasteway (Resource E) facing west.

Photo 13. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing northwest.

Photo 14. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing west.

Photo 15. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing south.

Photo 16. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) as viewed from San Marcos River facing north.

Photo 17. Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks (Resource G) facing west.

Photo 18. Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks (Resource G) facing east.

Photo 19. Fish Cleaning Station (Resource H) facing north.

Photo 20. Barbecue Grill (Resource I) facing southeast.

Photo 21. Tree Planter (Resource J) facing southeast.

Photo 22. Concrete Fishing Platform (Resource K) facing south.

Photo 23. Park Restrooms (Resource L) facing north.

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Narrative Description

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace is a 26-acre complex hydraulic system consisting of five main components: the dam, the millrace, head gates, wasteway, and the wheel pit and machinery platform. Other contributing components are the reinforced concrete blocks that supported the gin buildings. Located on the east bank of the San Marcos River, approximately 1.3 miles downstream of the San Marcos Springs outfall, this system was engineered to harness the river's hydraulic head for mechanical power generation. Operational from 1850 to 1942, the infrastructure initially utilized a gravity-fed overshot waterwheel, later upgraded to a turbine, to transmit rotational energy via shafting and gearing to drive multiple industrial processes, including a grist mill, sawmill, shingle machine, and cotton gin. The property is nominated as one contributing site with 11 features significant to the property's history and one non-contributing building. All the extant in-stream engineering components remain despite the loss of all associated superstructures—mills, gins, outbuildings, and residences—to fire and subsequent urban redevelopment. Since its inception, the dam, millrace, and ancillary structures have undergone iterative structural reinforcement, hydraulic optimization, and maintenance to sustain operational integrity through the end of its use in 1942. Collectively, the site retains integrity to convey the property's significance.

The National Park Service previously determined Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace¹ eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places on May 21, 1985. This application corrects the boundary delineated in the original application, updates the narrative description, and provides additional information to support the property's significance.

Setting

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, located in San Marcos, Texas, approximately 1.5 miles southeast of the city center, is a historically significant hydraulic engineering complex constructed to harness water power from the San Marcos River, a tributary of the Guadalupe River. The major source for the San Marcos River is the San Marcos Springs, which issue from the riverbed on the northeast edge of the city of San Marcos, about 1.3 miles upstream from Thompson Dam. The San Marcos Springs are associated with the Balcones fault zone which marks the contact between the permeable Edwards limestone and the more impervious Austin chalk and Taylor marl. This geologic boundary is also marked by a change in vegetation and soils. West of the city of San Marcos, soils are shallow, a vegetation of Hill Country juniper and oak is present. East of San Marcos, where Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace are located, deep soils are common and a short-grass prairie is found, with woodlands limited to the river bottoms. Both of these vegetational zones provided materials for processing at Thompson-Cape mill and gin; from the western hills, juniper was logged for the sawmill and shingle machine, and from the eastern prairies, wheat, corn and cotton were harvested and processed at the mill and gin.

The nominated area, designated as the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park, straddles Cape Road and comprises two separate publicly owned parcels: the northern parcel, owned by the City of San Marcos, and the southern parcel, owned by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD). These parcels encompass the dam, millrace, headgates, wasteway, wheel pit and machinery platform, and the landforms known as "Thompson's Islands," formed during millrace excavation. The area where the gin and office stood has been deeply disturbed by bulldozing, so that no significant archeological deposits of these structures remain. The houses, outbuildings and fields of the Thompson and Cape plantations were once located at a greater distance to the east of the wheel pit. This area has been extensively disturbed by subdivision construction, and the older structures were moved or razed. Thus, the dam, millrace, and wheel pit/machinery platform are the only structures over 50 years old remaining from the Thompson and Cape eras.

¹ "Thompson-Cape Dam and Ditch Engineering Structure" on file at the Texas Historical Commission. The original boundary encompassed approximately 17 acres, whereas this application proposes a nominated boundary of nearly 26 acres.

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The site’s context has transitioned from an operational milling facility to a public recreational space. The City of San Marcos acquired the northern parcel from the Cape family in 2013, per appraisal district documentation. The TPWD obtained the southern parcel from the Stokes family in 1993. The river islands and banks are overgrown and heavily forested.

Inventory of Features within the Nominated Site

Features	Resource Name	Type	Date
A	Dam	Structure	1867
B	Millrace	Structure	1850
C	Headgate 1	Structure	1867
D	Headgate 2	Structure	1867
E	Wasteway	Structure	1867
F	Wheel Pit and Machinery Platform	Structure	1914
G	Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks	Structure	1914
H	Fish Cleaning Station	Structure	c. 1940
I	Barbecue Grill	Structure	c. 1940
J	Tree Planter	Structure	c. 1940
K	Concrete Fishing Platform	Structure	c. 1940

Dam (A)

Constructed in 1867, the Thompson-Cape Dam on the San Marcos River is a vernacular hydraulic structure designed to divert water into an adjacent millrace. Measuring approximately 130 feet in length and 9 feet in height, the dam is classified by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) as a small dam.^{2,3} It employs a timber crib design within the massive dam tradition, utilizing heavy cypress wood timbers anchored into the riverbed, bound together, and filled with earth-rock aggregate, including gravel sourced from the Blanco River.⁴ This crib structure resists hydrostatic pressure through its robust framework, supplemented by loose stones piled upstream for additional reinforcement. A concrete spillway structure on the southern side of the dam helps control overflow water.

² Austin, Stephen F., Small Dams And Historic Preservation: An Assessment Of Dam Infrastructure And Contemporary Preservation In Texas, Thesis, p. 80

³ Taylor 1904: 37

⁴ Rich and Wyatt 1978:8

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In recent years, the dam has undergone stabilization efforts, including the addition of small steel I-beams on the downstream side to bolster the timber framework and the application of chain-link mesh secured with metal pins to contain loose rocks. These modern interventions preserve the dam's structural integrity without compromising its historic fabric. The dam impounds a pond extending approximately 2,640 feet upstream, with an average width of 100 feet, covering about six acres.⁵ The pond's estimated holding capacity is 2,500,000 cubic feet of water, facilitating the millrace's hydraulic function. The dam's enduring design and adaptive reinforcements highlight its significance as a well-preserved example of 19th-century vernacular engineering tailored to the San Marcos River's hydrological conditions.

Millrace (B)

The millrace, the most extensive component of the site, is a hand-excavated earthen channel approximately 1,850 feet long, characterized by a series of pronounced bends. Designed to convey water diverted by the dam southward to the wheel pit at its southern terminus, the millrace was initially constructed between 1850 and 1867. Originally, it measured 10 feet wide and 3 feet deep with a capacity of 333.5 cubic feet per second.⁶ Subsequent hand excavation enlarged the upstream section to a width of 30 feet for 1,400 feet.⁷ By 1914, legal records detailed the millrace's dimensions as approximately 17 feet wide at the bottom, 30 feet wide at the top, and 7 feet deep for the initial 400 feet, transitioning to 20 feet wide and 6.52 feet deep for the remaining 1,487 feet, with a slope of 0.0028 and a capacity of 681.78 cubic feet per second.⁸

Concrete reinforcements were introduced to enhance structural stability, with the earliest applications at the upper end near the dam and headgates, likely dating to 1899.⁹ This concrete, composed of lime from the nearby Hill Country limestone and gravel from the Blanco River, was extended by 1914 to line the upper millrace and a 587-foot section along the western bank at the southern end, as depicted in John Cape's 1914 irrigation petition. As of 2025, the extent of the concrete lining remains consistent with the 1914 configuration. A concrete sidewalk added in 1981 along the bank of the concrete-lined channel is minimally intrusive and does not detract from the millrace's historic design. The millrace's enduring functionality and adaptive reinforcements underscore its engineering significance within the Thompson-Cape hydraulic system.

Water-Control Structures (C, D, & E)

The dam and millrace system includes critical water-control structures adjacent to the millrace: two concrete headgates and a wasteway, integral to the site's hydraulic functionality during its period of significance (1850–1942). These water-control structures exemplify the vernacular engineering ingenuity of the system, tailored to manage the San Marcos River's variable flow regimes.

The two headgates (Resources C and D), constructed of concrete, originally featured wooden gates set into their upper surfaces. The upper headgate is positioned approximately 30 feet downstream from the dam, while the lower headgate is located about 330 feet upstream of the wheel pit. These structures served dual purposes when their wooden gates were closed: impounding water to increase hydraulic head for enhanced power generation and acting as a shut-off mechanism to halt water flow to the machinery. The headgates appear largely unmodified since their original construction, though deep water levels currently prevent detailed inspection, preserving their historical integrity.

⁵ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:77-78

⁶ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:13

⁷ Rich and Wyatt 1978:7

⁸ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:99, 104

⁹ Rich and Wyatt 1978:20

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Located approximately 525 feet upstream of the wheel pit on the south side of the millrace, the wasteway (Resource E) comprises a concrete sluice gate and two earthen ditches. Likely constructed contemporaneously with the millrace in the 1850s, the wasteway ditches are shallower than the millrace, though their precise dimensions are undocumented.¹⁰ These ditches extend westward from the millrace to the San Marcos River, designed to divert excess water during high-flow periods or when the machinery was idle, thereby preventing overflow and protecting the system. The sluice gate, approximately 7 feet wide, originally incorporated a wooden gate to regulate water entry into the ditches; this gate is no longer present. During high-flow events, the sluice gate creates a low waterfall approximately 7 feet high. The gate sustained significant flood damage in 1981 but was reconstructed that same year by the landowner, who adhered closely to its original design.

Wheel Pit & Machinery Platform (F)

The wheel pit and machinery platform, located at the southern terminus of the 1,850-foot millrace, are critical components of the site's hydraulic system, constructed to harness waterpower for industrial processing. Constructed from concrete reinforced with iron, these structures likely date to the early 20th century, coinciding with the transition from an overshot waterwheel to turbine technology.

The platform, spanning from bank to bank, measures 20 feet long and 5 feet wide, forming a robust foundation for the turbine assembly. The turbine's head and spindle, mounted on the platform via an iron plate, remain extant, with an iron gear near the spindle head likely used to transmit rotational energy to ancillary machinery. The platform marks the point where water from the millrace re-enters the San Marcos River. Originally, a vent in the lower foundation likely facilitated water egress from the turbine vanes; this vent is now sealed, causing water to spill over the wheel pit's top edge, creating a 14-foot waterfall and a hydraulic head of 14.5 feet.¹¹

The wheel pit, housing the turbine, was the operational core of the system and thus subject to the most modification. Initially, the site featured a large, 75%-efficient overshot waterwheel, reinforced with metal at key points,¹² requiring a horizontal axle,¹³ which is no longer present. Around 1900, the waterwheel was replaced by two 48-inch Leffel turbines generating 78 horsepower.¹⁴ By 1914, these were succeeded by a 35-inch Samson turbine.¹⁵ ¹⁶ The current turbine's attachment to the spindle cannot be verified due to high water flow obscuring inspection.

Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks (G)

Three concrete support blocks associated with the gin and machinery platform are located both on the platform and the adjacent bank. These blocks, reinforced with metal rebar, are estimated to date to circa 1910, aligning with the construction of the concrete machinery platform and the transition to turbine technology. Their specific original functions remain undetermined, but they likely supported heavy machinery or structural components related to the gin's turbine or ancillary equipment.

During the Thompson occupation (1850–1909), the site was a hub of industrial activity, supporting equipment such as an irrigation system of hollow cypress logs, a rip saw, a shingle machine, a millhouse, a wheelhouse, a cotton gin, and

¹⁰ Rich and Wyatt 1978:6

¹¹ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:104

¹² Rich and Wyatt 1978:6

¹³ Storck and Teague 1952:94

¹⁴ Taylor 1904:37

¹⁵ Rich and Wyatt 1978:24

¹⁶ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:104

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an office.¹⁷ The Cape occupation (1909–1942) expanded the site’s infrastructure with a cotton gin building and a warehouse.¹⁸ However, all associated structures and machinery have been removed or destroyed.

The area once occupied by the gin and office has been heavily disturbed by bulldozing, eliminating significant archeological deposits. Similarly, the houses, outbuildings, and fields of the Thompson and Cape plantations, located farther east of the wheel pit, have been obliterated by modern subdivision development, with older structures either relocated or demolished. The gin site also includes areas evaluated for archeological potential, notably site 41HY164, documented in 1983 by the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at the University of Texas at Austin as the remnants of the Thompson’s Dam and Millrace. Surface inspections yielded no historic artifacts, though a single Travis dart point, indicative of prehistoric activity, was recovered from a historic bulldozer pile. The site recorders concluded that the prehistoric component was likely destroyed, but no subsurface investigations were conducted. The potential for intact buried deposits remains, suggesting the site could yield significant historical information related to its period of significance (1850–1942) and the nomination amended to include Criterion D in the area of Archeology. Future archeological studies, particularly subsurface testing, may clarify the presence or absence of historic-era materials, enhancing understanding of the site’s industrial and cultural history.

Cape’s Camp Site Amenities (H, I, J, K, and L)

Following the cessation of cotton gin operations in 1942, the Cape family used the site as a recreational venue, capitalizing on its scenic location along the San Marcos River. Known locally as Cape’s Camp, the site became a popular spot for picnics, family reunions, and community gatherings. To facilitate these activities, the Cape family constructed several park amenities, designated as Resources H through L, which remain extant within the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park.

Fish Cleaning Station (Resource H): A two-story, square-plan pavilion with screened porches once stood in a field overlooking the San Marcos River, serving as a central gathering place for picnics and social events hosted by the Capes and their guests. Aerial photographs indicate this structure was removed in the mid-1980s, likely due to deterioration or changing recreational needs. Its footprint is now marked by brick pavers forming a patio. Only a fish cleaning station located in the back of the building remains, featuring a concrete counter supported by round metal posts and equipped with a metal sink. This amenity catered to recreational fishing, a popular activity given the site’s proximity to the pond formed by the dam.

Brick BBQ Grill and Patio (Resource I): North of the pavilion site, a brick barbecue grill with two furnaces stands, designed for communal cooking during gatherings. The surrounding area was originally paved to form a patio, though this paving is now largely covered by grass.

Tree Planter (Resource J): West of the pavilion site, a large pecan tree is encircled by a round limestone masonry planter with a cement wash and served as a shaded seating and gathering area.

Concrete Bulwark and Steps (Resource K): A narrow path from the pavilion site led to the riverfront, reaching the southern edge of the pond created by the dam. At this location, a concrete bulwark was constructed to combat erosion and possibly serve as a fishing platform. Concrete steps, partially submerged and visible within the water, facilitated access to the river.

¹⁷ Rich and Wyatt 1978:5, 6, 18

¹⁸ Rich and Wyatt 1978:25

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Park Bathrooms (L) – Non-Contributing Building

In the early 1980s, a bathroom building was constructed east of the pavilion site to support park visitors. As a modern addition, it is considered non-contributing to the site's historical significance. Additionally, several metal structures of unknown function, associated with the Cape family, were located along the access road to the picnic areas. These were demolished in 2013 as part of the eastern side's redevelopment, which saw the construction of an apartment complex adjacent to the park.

After the City of San Marcos acquired the northern parcel in 2013, with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department owning the southern parcel since 1993, the site was further developed as a semi-public recreational space within the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park. A significant improvement was the construction of a concrete trail in 2013, running along the western edge of the property. This trail bounds the new apartment complex to the east and connects the northern portion of the park near Interstate Highway 35 to Cape Road in the south.

Integrity

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace retains integrity, reflecting its continuous maintenance, repair, and improvement as a well-preserved example of vernacular hydraulic engineering in Central Texas from its initial construction in the 1850s through the end of its use in 1942, and up to the present day.¹⁹ This ongoing stewardship has resulted in a composite of engineering techniques spanning 1850 to 1942, preserving the site's functionality and historical significance.

The structures remain in their original location along the San Marcos River, approximately 1.5 miles southeast of San Marcos 'city center, ensuring continuity with their historical context. The dam, reconstructed in 1867, retains its vernacular timber crib and rock-fill design, while the millrace and wheel pit, rebuilt by 1914, preserve their functional hydraulic configuration. Original materials, such as cypress timbers, Blanco River gravel, and Hill Country limestone-based concrete, persist in the dam, millrace, and water-control structures. Modern reinforcements (e.g., steel I-beams, chain-link mesh on the dam, and concrete linings) are minimally invasive and do not compromise historic fabric. The vernacular craftsmanship, evident in the timber crib dam, hand-excavated millrace, and concrete reinforcements, reflects regional engineering practices of Central Texas in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The wasteway and headgates, essentially unmodified since the 1850s, and the dam, reconstructed in 1867, anchor the site's early history. The millrace and wheel pit, rebuilt during the Cape family's 1914 campaign, and the sluice gate, reconstructed in 1981 to its original 1850s design, reflect later adaptations while maintaining their original engineering intent. The concrete support blocks and machinery platform, dating to circa 1910, further illustrate technological evolution. Despite these updates, the structures 'core designs and materials remain intact.

The site's setting within the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park remains largely unchanged from its historical configuration, transitioning from an industrial hub to a recreational space as Cape's Camp after 1942. Recent residential development east of the park, situated in a flood zone at lower elevation, does not directly impact the structures 'setting or visibility. The site still evokes the industrial and recreational history of the Thompson and Cape eras, with water still flowing through the millrace, wasteway, and wheel pit, creating a tangible connection to its past. The structures remain strongly associated with San Marcos 'commercial and industrial development, embodying the Thompson and Cape families 'contributions to the region's agro-industrial economy. Currently maintained within a park-like setting at the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park, the site is informally accessible to the public. The low-elevation flood zone location of the structures minimizes the visual and physical impact of adjacent modern development.

¹⁹ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:79

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Statement of Significance

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace represent a significant artifact in Texas milling history, encapsulating the evolution of engineering methods and the economic transformations of the milling industry over time. Its design illustrates a specialized adaptation to the pronounced hydrological variability—marked by extreme fluctuations in discharge—typical of streams originating from the Edwards Plateau. The structure's hydraulic system, which integrates a composite dam, hand-excavated millrace, and ancillary control features, reflects an optimized response to these environmental conditions, ensuring operational reliability under fluctuating flow regimes. Named for property owners William Thompson and John Cape, the complex was constructed in 1850 by enslaved African Americans, who hand-excavated the millrace and wasteway and built a cypress waterwheel that powered a gristmill, sawmill, shingle machine, and cotton gin. Beginning in 1909, Cape modernized the operation by installing advanced concrete equipment, transforming his enterprise into a regionally significant industrial facility known as Cape Gin. In 1942, the complex converted to electrical power, rendering the dam, millrace, and turbines obsolete for industrial purposes. The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace are nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Industry and Criterion C in the area of Engineering, for the period 1850 to 1942, spanning the construction of the oldest resource through the end of the site's water-powered operations.

Water-Powered Mills in Central Texas

The history of water-powered milling in Central Texas reflects a dynamic interplay of technological innovation, economic priorities, and environmental adaptation, shaped by distinct historical periods and regional needs. These periods—the Indian and mission period, the colonization period, westward migration, Civil War and Reconstruction, and early automation—each feature unique actors, mill types, and economic drivers. The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, operational from 1867 to 1942, embodies the technological and economic characteristics of the latter three periods, serving as a critical case study in the evolution of water-powered industry in Texas. This trajectory is further illuminated by examining the types of commodities processed and the technological advancements that enhanced milling efficiency.

Early milling in Texas was rudimentary, primarily associated with Native American manual grinding techniques and Spanish mission efforts to establish small-scale gristmills powered by simple water diversions or animal labor. These mills processed grains for local consumption, reflecting limited technological sophistication and small community needs. With Anglo-American settlement under Mexican land grants and the Republic of Texas, water-powered mills emerged to support burgeoning communities. Sawmills predominated, driven by the urgent need for lumber to construct homes, barns, and infrastructure.²⁰ Gristmills, though present, were secondary, processing corn and wheat for local sustenance. Early mills, such as the San Marcos Mill Tract established in 1844, laid the foundation for industrial activity along the San Marcos River. As settlers pushed westward, water-powered mills proliferated along Central Texas waterways, particularly those draining the Edwards Plateau, like the San Marcos River. Mills became economic hubs, supporting agricultural expansion and regional trade. The Civil War disrupted milling operations due to labor shortages and economic instability, but Reconstruction saw a resurgence. Gristmills gained prominence as agricultural production intensified, processing grains for local and regional markets. The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a shift toward technological sophistication and economic diversification. Water-powered cotton gins became prevalent, reflecting Texas' cotton boom, while turbines replaced waterwheels, significantly boosting power efficiency. The integration of steam power in some mills supplemented waterpower to mitigate variable river flows.²¹

²⁰ Storck and Teague 1952:146

²¹ Taylor 1904:10

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The evolution of Central Texas milling mirrors economic shifts in commodity processing. During the colonization and westward migration periods, sawmills were critical for producing lumber, addressing the immediate needs of settlement. By the mid-19th century, gristmills rose in importance, grinding corn, wheat, and other grains to support growing populations and agricultural economies. Central Texas, with its abundant streams, hosted numerous water-powered mills, particularly along the San Marcos River. Notable examples include the Zedler Mill in Luling, a well-documented grist and sawmill complex, and the San Marcos Mill Tract, established in 1844, which supported a range of industrial activities, including gristmills, sawmills, and cotton gins. The turn of the century saw water-powered cotton gins dominate, driven by the expansion of cotton cultivation in Texas.

The development of water-powered milling technology in the United States, and by extension Central Texas, focused on maximizing energy efficiency relative to available hydraulic potential. Early mills relied on waterwheels, with undershot wheels transmitting power. The introduction of turbines marked a significant leap, utilizing both impulse and reaction forces to achieve higher efficiencies.

To address the variable flow regimes of Central Texas rivers, particularly those like the San Marcos River with extreme fluctuations due to the Edwards Plateau's hydrology, mill operators supplemented water power with steam engines in some cases. While the mill at the Thompson-Cape site relied primarily on its robust hydraulic system—featuring a timber crib dam, hand-excavated millrace, and water-control structures—it was designed to optimize flow consistency, ensuring operational reliability without steam supplementation.

Thompson Family Ownership and Development (1850–1909)

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace's history begins with William Thompson (1803–1879), a planter from Georgia, who after living in Mississippi and Louisiana, relocated to Texas in 1850. Prior to this move, Thompson operated a mule-powered cotton gin on his family plantation in Caldwell County along the San Marcos River.²² Recognizing the potential of waterpower, Thompson sought to establish a more efficient milling operation, marking the genesis of the site's industrial life.

In 1850, Thompson identified a strategic location along the San Marcos River adjacent to a 250-acre plot owned by Dr. Henry Ward Davis. He negotiated an agreement with Davis and another landowner, John Francis McGehee, to construct a dam at this site.²³ Construction commenced in late 1850 when enslaved African American laborers hand-excavated a millrace and wasteway. The excavation employed the saucer level method to ensure a consistent downward slope, optimizing water flow.²⁴ This process isolated two land areas, locally known as Thompson's Islands, while the millrace was officially named Thompson's Irrigating and Milling Millrace.^{25 26}

The initial infrastructure incorporated cypress wood for durability, including a large overshot waterwheel, hollow cypress log pipes for irrigation, and headgates to regulate flow. By late 1850, the waterwheel powered a gristmill, sawmill, shingle machine, and cotton gin, establishing the site as a multifaceted industrial hub. Supporting structures, such as a wheelhouse, millhouse, and several bridges, were erected near the millrace to facilitate operations.²⁷

In 1867, William Thompson solidified his ownership by purchasing a 158-acre tract from Dr. Henry Ward Davis, securing clear title to the mill site. Concurrently, his son, William Alexander Thompson (1836–1913), formed

²² Rich and Wyatt 1978:2-4

²³ Rich and Wyatt 1978:1-4

²⁴ Rich and Wyatt 1978:5

²⁵ Rich and Wyatt 1978:6

²⁶ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:13

²⁷ Rich and Wyatt 1978:5-6

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Thompson, Davis and Company, a partnership with Davis and Major S.R. McKie, an adjoining landowner. This partnership granted William Alexander the right to replace the original 1850 dam, leading to the construction of a new timber crib dam in 1867. The millrace was also widened in 1866 or 1867 to enhance its capacity.²⁸ Around this time, William Alexander built a small house near the millrace, within view of the mill, signaling his growing involvement.²⁹

William Alexander Thompson progressively consolidated control over the operation through strategic land and asset acquisitions. In 1868, he purchased 60 acres from his father's 158-acre tract adjacent to the millrace. In 1869, he acquired Dr. Henry Ward Davis's quarter interest in the partnership, including the mill, gin, shingle machine, and associated buildings.³⁰ In 1872, William Thompson conveyed the remaining 98 acres of the property to his son, further centralizing ownership.³¹ By 1875, William Alexander purchased S.R. McKie's quarter interest, gaining full control of Thompson, Davis and Company.³² In 1878, he constructed a larger family home near the mill, reinforcing the site's role as both an industrial and domestic center.³³

The passage of the 1895 Texas irrigation act, aimed at encouraging water use for agricultural and industrial purposes, prompted William Alexander Thompson and other San Marcos River property owners to file for water rights.³⁴ Around this time, his son, William Hardeman Thompson (1875–1948), began participating in the family business. In 1899, William H. Thompson oversaw the addition of concrete reinforcements to the millrace near the dam and headgates, enhancing its structural integrity and hydraulic efficiency.³⁵

Financial difficulties around 1905 forced the Thompsons to lease the mill to Malone and Rylander.³⁶ By July 1909, the entire complex was sold to J.B. Motheral, ending the Thompson family's ownership.³⁷ Four months later, in November 1909, John Matthew Cape (1861–1933) purchased the property, initiating the Cape family's stewardship of the site.³⁸

Cape Family Ownership and Development (1909–1942)

The acquisition of the property by John Matthew Cape (1861–1933) in November 1909 marked a transformative era for the site, characterized by significant technological upgrades, economic diversification, and sustained community engagement. Under Cape family stewardship, the site evolved into a modern industrial complex, known as the Cape Gin Company, with its millrace designated as the Cape Gin Company Canal.³⁹

Upon acquiring the property, John Matthew Cape initiated a comprehensive overhaul of the milling complex. The cotton gin machinery was entirely rebuilt, incorporating advanced equipment to enhance efficiency.⁴⁰ The lower 587 feet of the millrace were stabilized with concrete linings, complementing earlier reinforcements from 1899, to ensure structural integrity and optimal water flow.⁴¹ The original overshot waterwheel was dismantled, and a new concrete

²⁸ Rich and Wyatt 1978:7-8

²⁹ Rich and Wyatt 1978:9-10

³⁰ Rich and Wyatt 1978:10

³¹ Rich and Wyatt 1978:11

³² Rich and Wyatt 1978:12

³³ Rich and Wyatt 1978:14

³⁴ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:12-15

³⁵ Rich and Wyatt 1978:20

³⁶ Rich and Wyatt 1978:20

³⁷ Rich and Wyatt 1978:21

³⁸ Rich and Wyatt 1978:24

³⁹ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:98-99

⁴⁰ Rich and Wyatt 1978:24

⁴¹ Rich and Wyatt 1978:24

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wheel pit and machinery platform were constructed to house two 48-inch Leffel turbines, generating 78 horsepower.⁴² To address the San Marcos River's variable flow, Cape installed a 55-horsepower auxiliary steam plant at the gin house, located on the east bank above the wheel pit, providing supplemental power during low-water periods.⁴³

The improved mill served multiple functions, processing cotton, grinding grains, and supporting irrigation for 300 acres of adjacent cotton fields owned by Cape.⁴⁴ This multifaceted operation positioned the Cape Gin as a regional economic hub, processing agricultural yields for local farmers and facilitating trade.

In 1912, Horace Cape (1894–1964), John's son, assumed management of the Cape Gin, ushering in further modernization. A devastating fire in 1914 destroyed the gin, prompting a swift rebuild with buildings constructed by the Star Manufacturing Company of Oklahoma and new gin equipment from the Continental Gin Company of Dallas (Rich and Wyatt 1978:24). Another fire on April 12, 1936, necessitated additional reconstruction, during which a 150-horsepower water turbine, a 35-inch Samson model, was installed, reflecting the family's commitment to technological advancement (Rich and Wyatt 1978:25). Contemporary advertisements boasted that Cape's Gin was the "only modern up-to-date gin in Southwest Texas," underscoring its regional prominence.

The Cape Gin Company relied heavily on labor recruited from Mexico, a practice managed by Horace Cape. Without the need for formal documentation, as was typical at the time, Cape traveled to Mexico to hire workers who lived on the family's adjacent farms. The Cape family provided housing and groceries, and laborers worked under a sharecropping arrangement, earning a portion of the crop yield. This labor model supported the gin's operations and the cultivation of 300 acres of cotton, contributing to the site's economic viability. However, external challenges, including a severe drought in 1925 and the Great Depression, strained the local economy, impacting both the workforce and the gin's operations.

The passage of the Rural Electrification Act in 1935 introduced affordable electrical power to rural areas, prompting a shift in industrial energy sources. In 1942, the Cape Gin converted to electrical power, rendering the dam, millrace, and turbines obsolete for industrial purposes. This transition marked the end of the site's water-powered operations, concluding its period of significance (1867–1942).

Following the cessation of industrial activities, the Cape family retained ownership and repurposed the site for recreational use, capitalizing on its scenic riverside setting. Known locally as Cape's Camp, the site hosted picnics, family reunions, and community events, with park amenities (Resources H through K) constructed to support these activities (Rich and Wyatt 1978:25). These amenities, still extant, reflect the site's transition from an industrial hub to a civic space within the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park.

A notable event occurred in 1977, when Lady Bird Johnson organized a barbecue dinner at Cape's Camp to raise funds for the Friends of the Library in support of the LBJ Library in Austin. The event highlighted the site's social significance and the Cape family's prominence, as their friendship with the Johnsons brought frequent visits from the former First Lady and President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Cape family continued to use the site recreationally until 2013, when the City of San Marcos acquired the northern parcel, with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department owning the southern parcel since 1993.

Today, the Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace's waterworks—dam, millrace, headgates, wasteway, sluice gate, wheel pit, machinery platform, and former gin site—are preserved within the John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park, a semi-public park. Water continues to flow through the millrace, wasteway, and wheel pit, maintaining the hydraulic system's

⁴² Taylor 1904:37

⁴³ Taylor 1904:10, 37

⁴⁴ Hays County Irrigation Book Volume A:78

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historical functionality and visual integrity. The site's engineering features, from the 1867 timber crib dam to the 1914 turbine installation, embody the technological evolution of Central Texas milling, while its history under the Cape family underscores its commercial and social contributions to San Marcos.

Conclusion

The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Industry and Criterion C in the area of Engineering for its pivotal role in the commercial and industrial development of San Marcos, Hays County, Texas. The period of significance, 1850–1942, begins with the construction of the earliest surviving component—the dam and millrace system—and concludes with the cessation of its water-powered operations. As a concentrated hub of agricultural processing infrastructure, the site harnessed the hydraulic energy of the San Marcos River to power a gristmill, sawmill, shingle machine, and cotton gin, supporting the region's agricultural economy and advancing its industrial capacity. The Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace stand as a tangible testament to San Marcos's reliance on waterpower and the broader technological and economic evolution of Central Texas's agro-industrial landscape.

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Daily Bulletin of the Manufacturers Record, Volume 77, 1936

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Section 10: Geographical Data

Acreege of Property: 25.72 acres

Coordinates:

	<u>Latitude</u>	<u>Longitude</u>
1.	29.873843°	-97.931363°
2.	29.873084°	-97.931106°
3.	29.872730°	-97.931893°
4.	29.871585°	-97.931731°
5.	29.871577°	-97.932870°
6.	29.870875°	-97.933189°
7.	29.870732°	-97.931867°
8.	29.868913°	-97.931125°
9.	29.868234°	-97.930775°
10.	29.868393°	-97.929106°
11.	29.869542°	-97.928659°
12.	29.869305°	-97.930187°
13.	29.869354°	-97.930311°
14.	29.869592°	-97.929840°
15.	29.870891°	-97.930203°
16.	29.871776°	-97.930671°
17.	29.874619°	-97.930370°

Verbal Boundary Description: The nominated boundary consists of approximately 25.72 acres encompassing two city tracts: WOODLANDS OF SAN MARCOS, Lot 2, 20.14 ACRES (Property ID: 143802) and ABS 17-2 TR 346 72-56 J M VERAMENDI SURVEY 5.576 ACRES (Property ID: 12311), San Marcos, Hays County, Texas. The nominated boundary follows the current legal boundary as recorded in the Hays Central Appraisal District, accessed March 28, 2025 (Map 2).

Boundary Justification: The site boundary is delineated to encompass John J. Stokes San Marcos River Park, two publicly owned parcels that collectively contain the full suite of hydraulic control infrastructure associated with the Thompson and Cape occupations since their initial construction in 1850.

This boundary is defined to the east by the San Marcos River flowing southeasterly to the south, Interstate Highway 35 and its river-spanning bridge to the north, and the excluded apartment complex and private residence adjacent to the east and southeast. This includes the composite stone-and-timber dam, headgates, waste way, the 1,850-foot hand-excavated millrace, and the reinforced concrete wheel pit and machinery platform. The boundary also incorporates the terrestrial features formed as a byproduct of the millrace excavation, locally designated as “Thompson’s Islands,” which represent depositional landforms resulting from sediment displacement. Excluded from the boundary is the San Marcos River bed, as no structural remnants or features pertinent to the Thompson-Cape operations are documented within this submerged zone. Additionally, the boundary omits the land east of the millrace, where all physical evidence has been obliterated by recent construction activities.

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Maps

Map 1: Hays County, Texas



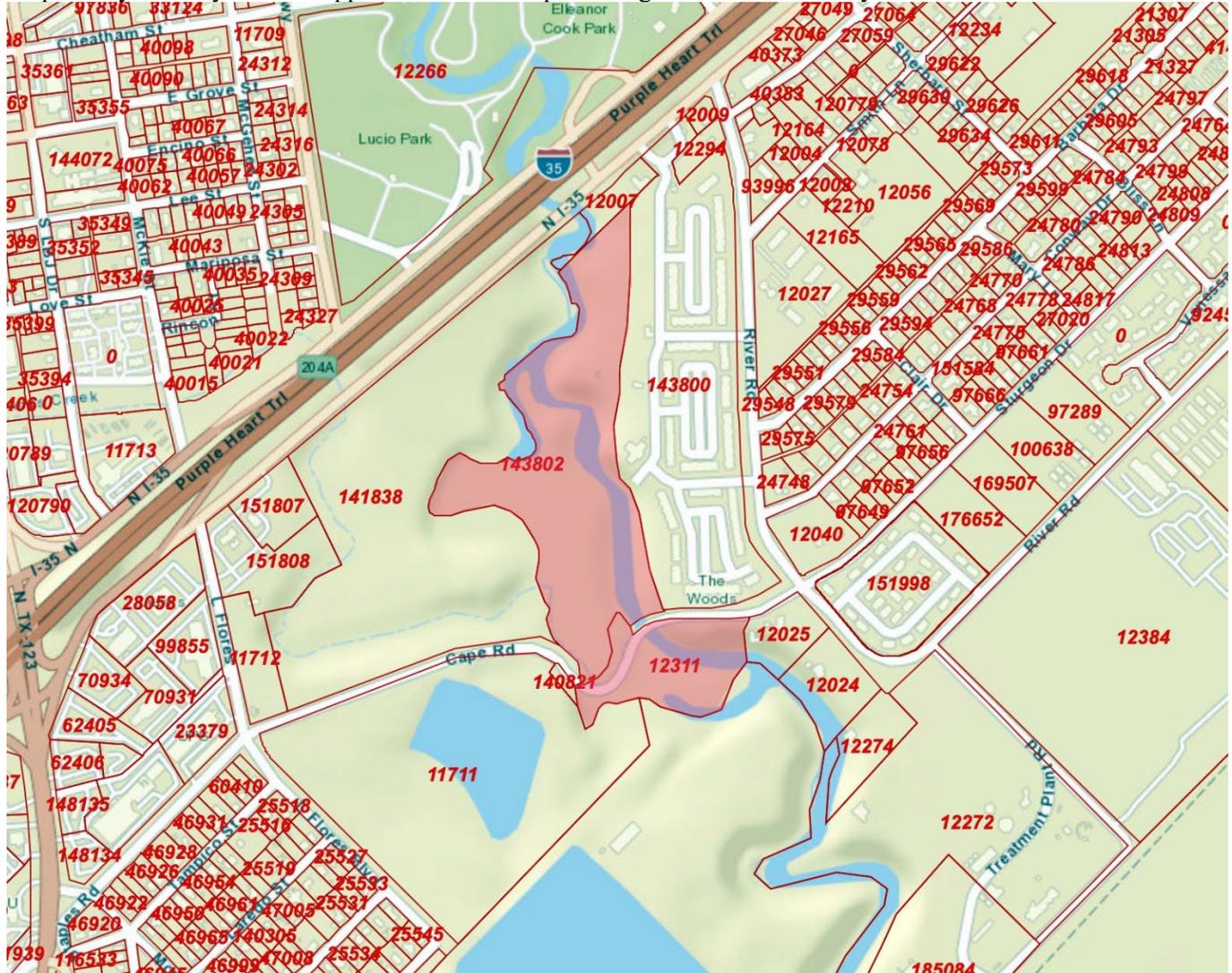
Map 2: Google Earth view (March 23, 2025), accessed, edited and annotated by Jesús Najjar, May 9, 2025.



SBR Draft

Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Map 3: Hays County Central Appraisal District Map showing nominated boundary shaded in red.



SBR Draft

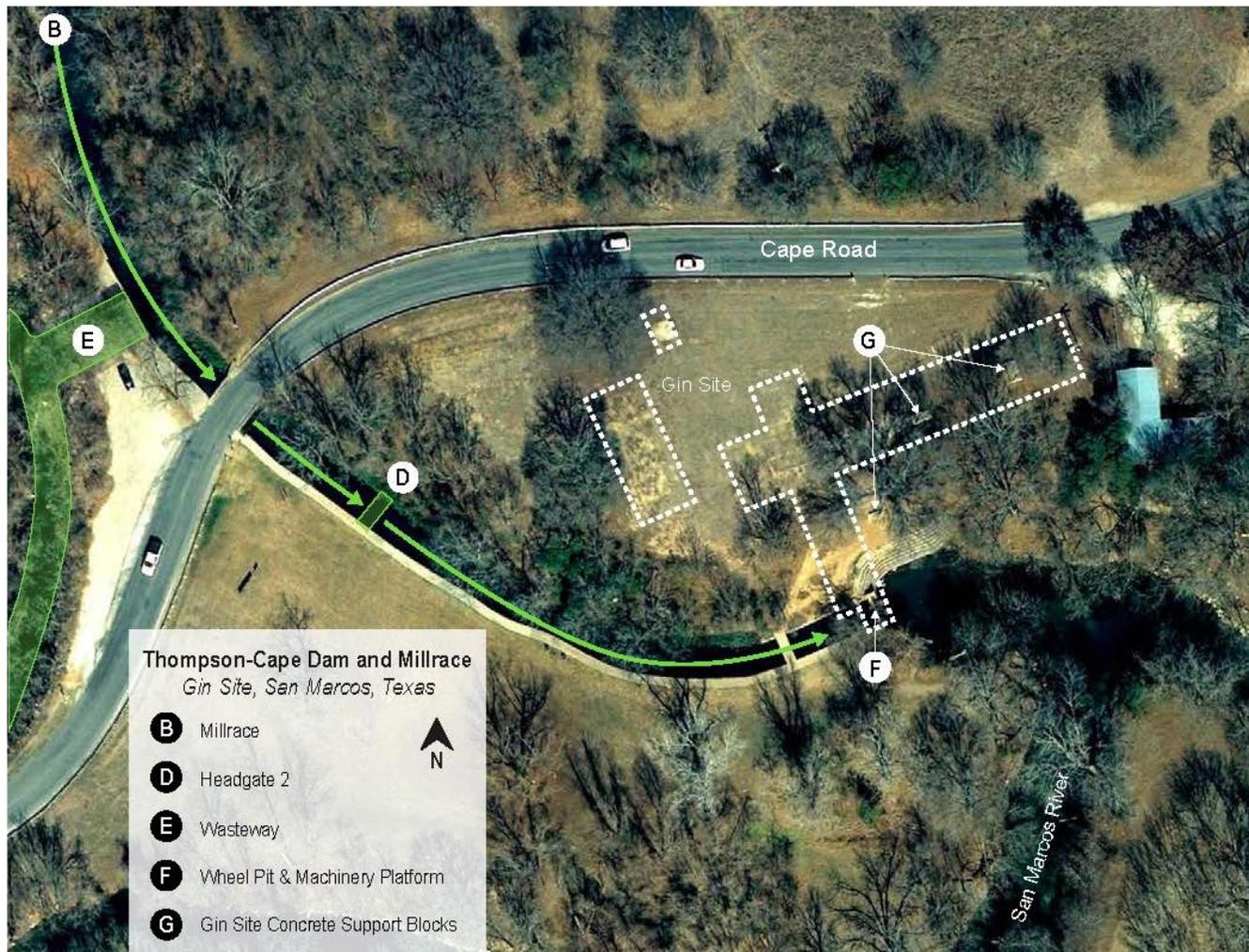
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Map 4: Schematic map of J.J. Stokes Park with resources.



Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

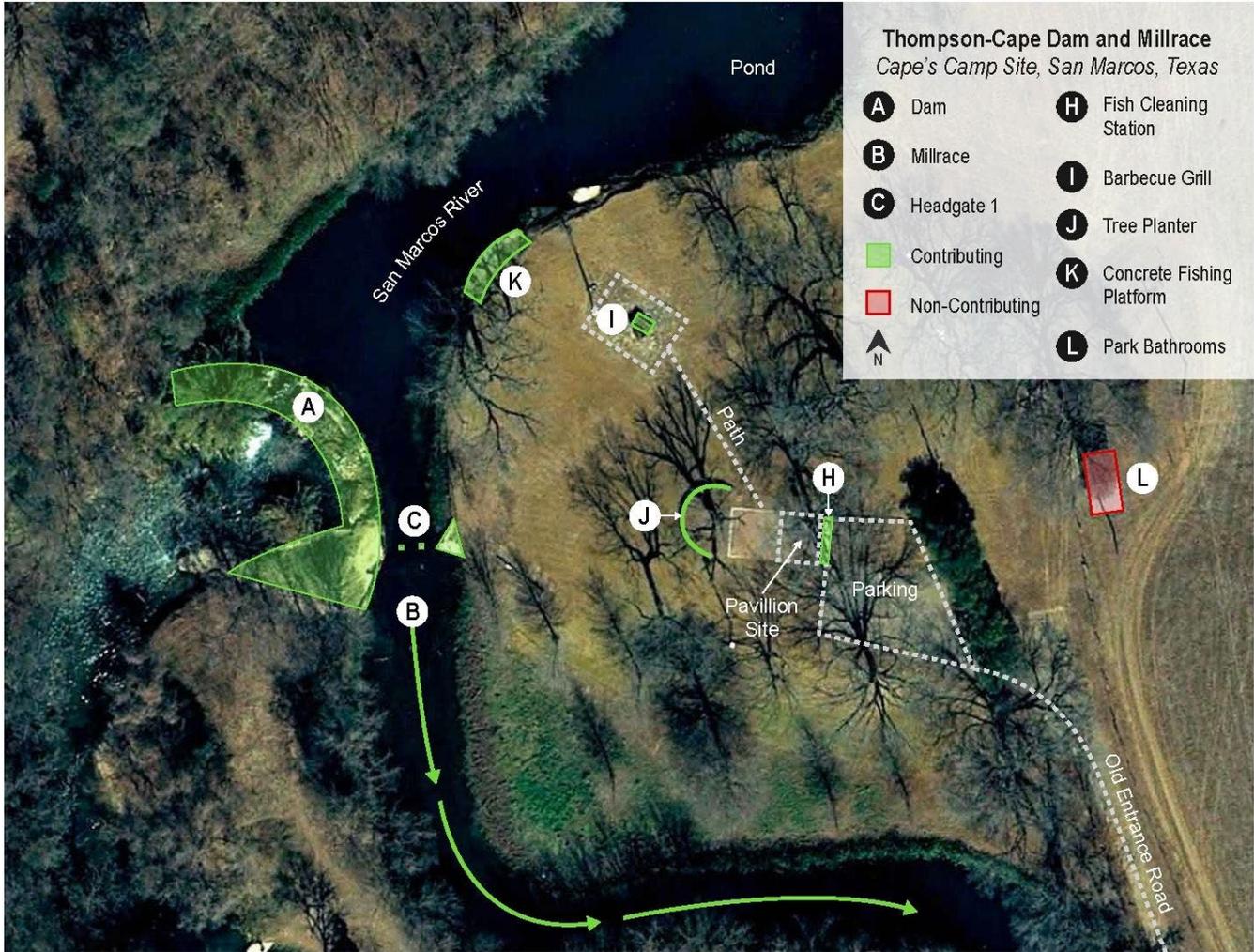
Map 5: Google Earth view (January 31, 2009), accessed, edited and annotated by Samantha Hunick, May 1, 2025.



SBR Draft

Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Map 6: Google Earth view (January 31, 2009), accessed, edited and annotated by Samantha Hunick, May 1, 2025.



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Figures

Figure 1: Aerial photo, San Marcos, Texas, 1958. USDA (1958-01-22 - 1958-05-05), <https://www.historicaerials.com/>. The Cape Gin Company buildings are still visible on the center bottom of the image.



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Figure 2. c.1890 postcard.

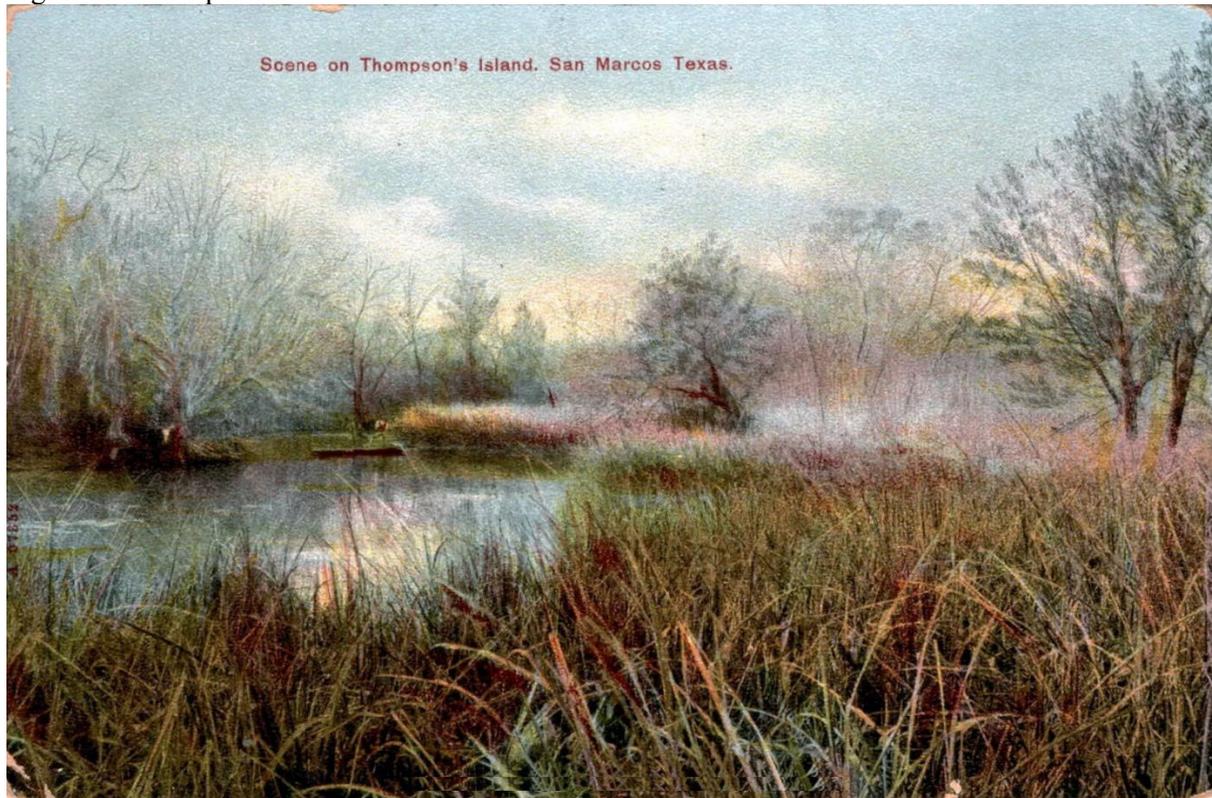


Figure 3: The Hays County Times And Farmers' Journal, Page 8, 1906-08-03

The Thompson Gin

Has been thoroughly overhauled, and the patronage
of the cotton growers of this section is solicited

Malone, Rylander & Son

Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Figure 4. "Camp Cape, Grandmother Cape at the dam." View of Wasteway (Resource E) sluiceway facing east.

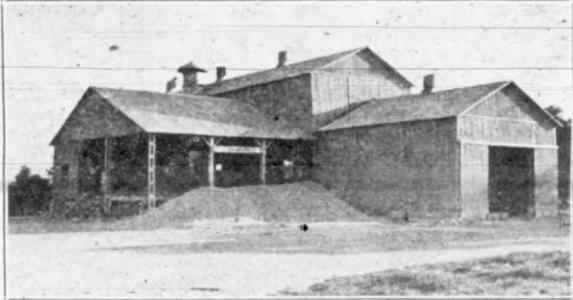


Figure 5. "Camp Cape, Horace Cape at the dam." View of Wasteway (Resource E) sluiceway facing east.



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Figure 6. Newspaper ad. San Marcos Record, September 25, 1936, p. 46.



A RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT
A Reward and A Responsibility



Our Belief . . .
in Hays County and its vast possibilities in the Cotton Industry throughout the many past seasons has been handsomely rewarded. We feel that we have received our share of the ginning over this section during the history of our business.

"Where Service Is A
Pleasure and
Ginning Is An Art"

We are most grateful for the opportunity of serving you in our line. Your patronage is appreciated.

**Only Modern Up-to-Date Gin
In Southwest Texas**

**Equipped to Gin
Any Type of Cotton**

**The J.M. Cape Estate
NEW GIN PLANT**

Situated on Waters of San Marcos River, One Mile from San Marcos, Texas, on Highway No. 80.
HORACE CAPE, Manager

Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Figure 7. Cape Gin Company buildings facing southwest.

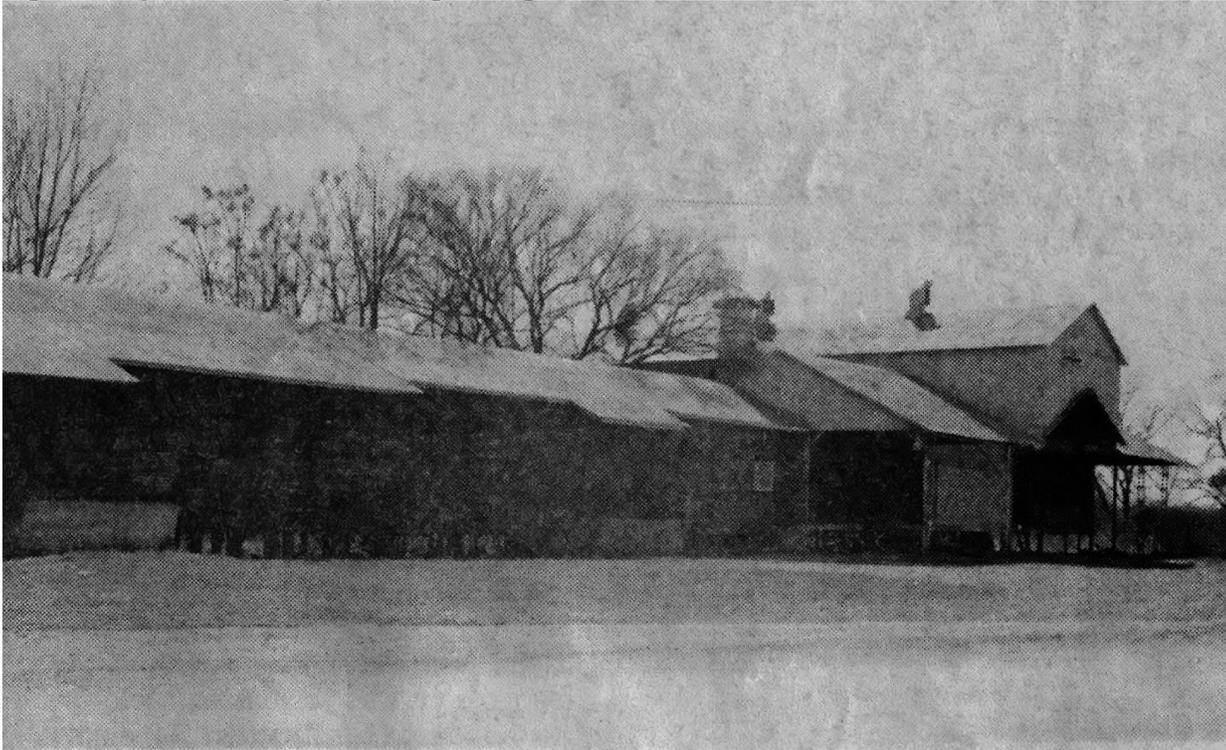


Figure 8. Cape Gin Co. building over the wheelpit and machinery platform as seen from San Marcos River.



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Figure 9. Cape Camp screened pavilion and picnic area.



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Photographs

Photo 1. Dam (Resource A) facing north.



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Photo 2. Dam (Resource A) facing west.



Photo 3. Dam spillway (Resource A) facing east.

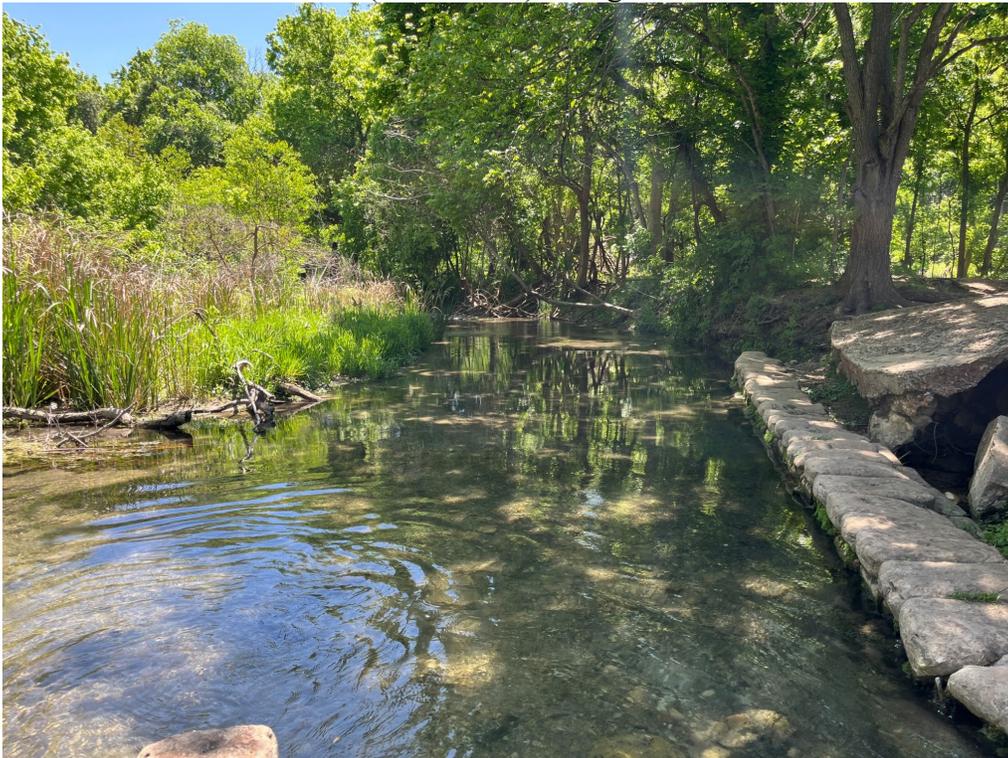


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Photo 4. Dam pond (Resource A) facing north.



Photo 5. Millrace north end (Resource B) facing south.



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Photo 6. Millrace by wasteway (Resource B) facing north.



Photo 7. Millrace midway (Resource B) facing north.



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Photo 8. Millrace south end (Resource B) facing south.



Photo 9. Headgate 1 (Resource C) facing northwest.



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Photo 10. Headgate 2 (Resource D) facing south.



Photo 11. Wasteway (Resource E) facing north.



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Photo 12. Wasteway (Resource E) facing west.



Photo 13. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing northwest.



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Photo 14. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing west.



Photo 15. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) facing south.



Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Photo 16. Wheelpit and Machinery Platform (Resource F) as viewed from San Marcos River facing north.



Photo 17. Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks (Resource G) facing west.



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Photo 18. Gin Site Concrete Support Blocks (Resource G) facing east.



Photo 19. Fish Cleaning Station (Resource H) facing north.



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Photo 20. Barbecue Grill (Resource I) facing southeast.



Photo 21. Tree Planter (Resource J) facing southeast.



Thompson-Cape Dam and Millrace, San Marcos, Hays County, Texas

Photo 22. Concrete Fishing Platform (Resource K) facing south.



Photo 23. Park Restrooms (Resource L) facing north.



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