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LOCATING THE EYES OF FATHER MARGIL

by *F.E. Abernethy, Chairman*
LaNana Creek Trail Committee

One of the Nacogdoches' projects for the 1986 Texas Sesquicentennial celebration was the construction of the LaNana Creek Trail, a walking-jogging-cycling path extending from East Austin in the north to the Pillar street soccer field in the south. The purpose of the project was to preserve, beautify, and utilize the flood banks of the LaNana Creek for the people of Nacogdoches and to leave the LaNana Creek Trail as a lasting remembrance of Nacogdoches' celebration of Texas' 150th birthday.

Volunteers worked fifteen years, clearing brush and briar vines and hauling off fifty years of commodes and car bodies and junk that had been dumped in the woods along the banks of LaNana Creek. By 1995 the LaNana Creek Trail extended two-and-one-half miles, from Camino Real Park on Main Street north to Jimmy Hinds Park on Raguet Street. Since then, the Trail has been extended a mile south through the soccer fields to Banita Creek Park. In its meanderings the Trail has wandered through some of the most historic parts of old Nacogdoches.

The LaNana Creek Trail was once the pathway for the Caddo Indians that lived between the creeks, and the Spanish colonials who started coming to Nacogdoches in the eighteenth century, and the Anglos who staked their claims to East Texas in the nineteenth century. The Trail ran through the city lots of Adolphus Sterne and Haden Edwards and Sam Houston. And it passed close by the Eyes of Father Margil, the legendary place of Nacogdoches' own miracle, the Holy Springs.

Franciscan Father Antonio Margil de Jesus was already a man of legendary proportions when he came to Nacogdoches in the summer of 1716 and founded Mission Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe de Nacogdoches. The stories about Father Margil grew during his East Texas stay. The most enduring Nacogdoches legend about Father Margil had its beginning during the terrible drought of 1717-1718, when the Indians' crops failed and LaNana and Banita creeks dried up. Stephen F. Austin, in his "Prison Journal" entry from Queretero for December 16, 1833, furnishes one of the earliest recorded versions of the legend of the Holy Spring of Father Margil:

This monk [Father Margil] is very famous for he has been a second Moses. At Nacogdoches all the springs went dry, and he went out with images of the saints & necessary apparatus to perform miracles. He struck a blow with a rod of iron on a rock, which stands on the bank of the creek La Nana, in Nacogdoches, & immediately a stream of water gushed out, sufficient to supply the inhabitants with water to drink. This miracle was canonized in Rome, and a print or engraving of the fact was made in order to perpetuate it ... All this is true, because several old women told it to me in Nacogdoches and Bexar, and we ought not to suppose that Rome would

order an engraving to be made of a miracle of the water, only to deceive credulous people.¹

The legend of the Holy Springs of Father Margil persists today with many additions and emendations. It is told, for instance, that the padre prayed all night on his knees with his arms outstretched in the form of Christ's Cross and with a skull hung around his neck to remind him of man's mortality. Stephen F. Austin, however, gives us the basic outline of this long-lived story.

Recognizing Stephen F. Austin's neoclassical-Anglo-humorous skepticism, one is impressed that the legend of Nacogdoches' Holy Springs was still widely circulated 115 years after the happening. By 1833, as Austin tells us, the story of Father Margil was well known in San Antonio ("Bexar"). The miracle was recognized and remembered in Queretero, where Austin was writing his "Prison Journal." The story had been investigated by the Spanish religious authorities in Mexico City and Madrid before it was sent to the final arbiters in Rome. At the Vatican, the center of the Catholic world, the Pope himself ordered an engraving to be made in honor of the miracle of Father Margil and the Holy Springs of Nacogdoches.

We can safely deduce from Stephen F. Austin's comments that in 1833 the miracle of the Springs of Father Margil in Nacogdoches was well known in the western Catholic world.

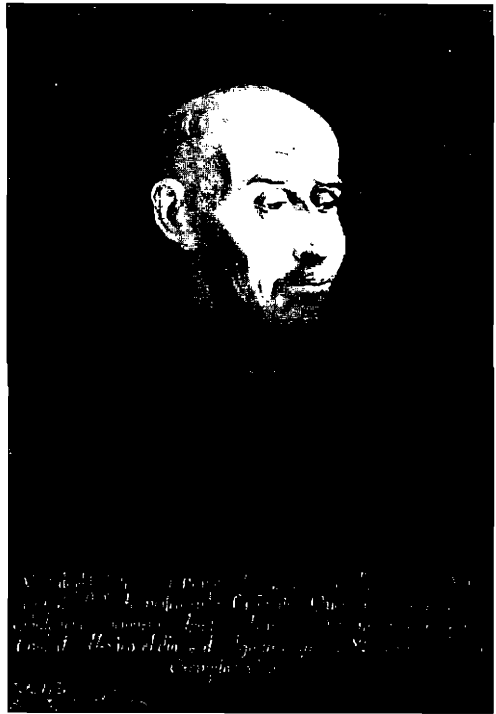
Earlier, in 1828, Jose Maria Sanchez visited Nacogdoches as a member of the Manuel de Mier y Teran inspection team. Sanchez described few details about Nacogdoches, but he was emphatic about the Springs. He wrote:

On the west bank of *La Nana* there are a few boulders from which two springs of cold and clear water flow and keep two circular basins about a half a vara [a vara is 33 inches] in diameter and a little less in depth always full. These two springs are known as *los ojos del Padre Margil*.²

Teran in his diary also remarked on the two creeks in Nacogdoches and mentioned the Spring: "The first [creek] is called *La Nana*, and on its bank is the little spring ("un pequeno venero") called *Father Marfil* [Margil], with lovely water."³

Nor had the people of Nacogdoches forgotten Father Margil and his Holy Springs. In the early 1800s they knew where the Springs were located and used the Springs in their land descriptions.

The city lot on which the Springs arose bordered the Camino Real on its south boundary, with *LaNana* Creek as its east boundary. The lot passed from the Spanish crown to Julian Grande on July 23, 1803. On April 25, 1810, Grande sold the land to Christian Hesser. On May 30, 1827, Hesser sold 230 varas of Camino Real frontage to Pierre Robleau, referring to the lot as that once owned by "Citizen Julian Grande of the Spring of Water of Our Father Margil."⁴ Hesser kept the north portion of the lot, the southern boundary of which was 185 yards north of Main Street and the Camino Real. On April 4, 1834, Charles Taylor wrote Hesser, saying that Adolphus Sterne was interested in purchasing the north half- lot, "on which is a spring, known by



Father Antonio Margil de Jesús



Etching "Father Margil at the Holy Springs" by James Snyder, Nacogdoches, Texas

the name of the Holy Springs.”⁵ We know, therefore that the Holy Springs are more than 185 yards from Main Street-Camino Real (and closer than 370 yards).

The Springs as located by the LaNana Creek Trail Committee are approximately 200 yards north of Main Street on a high rock bank at what was a sharp bend in the west bank of LaNana Creek.

We can now locate the spring system from which the Holy Springs flowed. It is in a partially buried rock wall, about fifty feet long. There is no way, however, that we can now locate the exact spot of the Margil Springs themselves, because springs are continually probing for new routes and over even a few years change their locations. Another reason is that history is frequently buried by progress and bulldozers, as were the Springs.

But for most of three hundred years since Padre Margil struck his staff against the stone, some Nacogdocheans believed that they knew the location of the Holy Springs—or Eyes—of Father Margil.

In a 1901 issue of *The Galveston News*, H.C. Fuller, a Nacogdoches historian, wrote: “The Holy Springs of Father Margil is situated just back of the City [Oak Grove] Cemetery, overlooking LaNana Creek, *and so far as the memory of man goes* [my italics] it has never gone dry or ceased to give out its abundant supply of pure water.” Mr. Fuller goes on to say:

The waters of the spring are believed by many devout people to possess healing qualities for those who have faith in its virtues. It will be marked by a tablet and pointed out to the visitor as one of the many quaint and traditional treasures of this historic town. Whether this legend is founded on fact or not, no man knows. It is handed down from father to son as the years go by, and is believed in as implicitly by many today as it was a century ago.⁶

Thus, according to Mr. Fuller, in 1901 the springs and their location were well known and had been well known for many years. The springs’ location was “just back” of the cemetery, “overlooking the LaNana Creek.”

In 1901, Oak Grove Cemetery was about half the size it is now. It occupied the southern part of its present space, with the Hospital Street extension extending eastward through its center. The location proposed by the LaNana Creek Trail Committee for the location of the springs is “just back” of the cemetery on a high bank “overlooking” what was LaNana Creek before it was straightened out by the Corps of Engineers in the 1970s.

Another early twentieth century reference to the location of the springs is contained in a 1922 (no exact date cited) *Daily Sentinel* story of Nacogdoches place names by Dr. J.E. Mayfield: “There are many traditional church stories related as occurring here [Nacogdoches]. The one about ‘Ojo Santissimo,’ or holy spring, located on the bank of the La Nana Creek in the eastern part of the town, just back of the present city cemetery, has been told.” Dr. Mayfield concludes his entry with a version of the legend of the holy springs.⁷

Dr. Mayfield was seventy-nine years old when he wrote the "Ojo Santissimo" entry for the *Daily Sentinel* in 1922, and he had known Nacogdoches since 1850. Dr. Mayfield was born in Tennessee in 1843 and moved to Nacogdoches in 1850, when he was seven years old. Except for the years he spent in the Confederate Army, and his final few years in San Antonio, he lived and practiced medicine in Nacogdoches all of his life. To Dr. Mayfield the story of the "most holy springs" and their location behind Oak Grove Cemetery were common knowledge. And his knowledge of it went back to his youth growing up in Nacogdoches in the 1850s.

Moving forward to the present day: Luther Swift III, now (2004 A.D.) in his seventies, was born and reared within a hundred yards of the present location of the springs and now lives within two hundred feet of them. Luther Swift Sr., his grandfather, bought the land next to the springs in 1900 and bought the land from which the springs flow in 1940. Luther III has known the springs all of his life, and he identifies this paper's proposed location as the site of the Eyes of Father Margil. He recalled that visitors crossed a stile on the path coming from the cemetery to the springs and that the springs filled a depression in the rock bank from which it flowed.⁸

F.I. Tucker, a Nacogdoches lawyer and historian now deceased, also remembered the stile and springs as being behind the cemetery. Before WWII and later, people came to the springs to picnic, according to Luther Swift and according to Hazel Shelton Abernethy, who was born and reared in Nacogdoches.⁹

When R.B. Blake discussed the Eyes of Father Margil in the 1936 Centennial pamphlet, "Historic Nacogdoches," he speculated that the Springs were *above* the Park Street crossing of LaNana Creek. When "Historic Nacogdoches" was republished in 1960 by the Altrusa Club with F.I. Tucker as the historical advisor, the title of the entry was changed from "Eyes" to "Springs of Father Margil," and the location was its present proposed location: "Located on the west bank of LaNana Creek, the springs are east of Oak Grove Cemetery."¹⁰ One can deduce that F.I. Tucker made the change from Blake's 1936 edition because he believed the Holy Springs to be in their traditional site behind Oak Grove Cemetery.

Interestingly, R.B. Blake contradicted himself in one reference and located the Springs as flowing from red rock on a sharp bend in LaNana Creek at "a point north of the old Spanish crossing of El Camino Real. . . ." The "old Spanish crossing" was 150 feet north of present Main Street and the later route of the Camino Real. This description would have placed the Springs in the general location behind Oak Grove Cemetery.¹¹

In 1965, Luther Swift, Jr. extended Swift Street for real estate purposes. The Swift Street extension was cut out of the short slope that led down from the back of the cemetery to the Springs. Much dirt was moved in the process. Most of the dirt and debris was pushed over the long rock shelf from which the Springs flowed. What had once been a picnic ground was now a street.

This 1965 building project was the beginning of the Springs' brief

disappearing act. For several years the location of the Springs was one of the historical mysteries of Nacogdoches. Then they were found again.

As volunteers worked during the 1980s clearing the LaNana Creek bottom for the trail site, they were conscious of the Springs being somewhere in the Main Street area, but made little effort to locate them. Then one day in the fall of 1989, I was talking to Jack Clevenger, who had worked for the City of Nacogdoches from 1932 to 1973, most of the time as the Director of Public Works. I asked Jack where the Eyes of Father Margil were, and without any hesitation he said that if one followed Hospital Street through the cemetery and over the east fence he would strike the Springs on a high bank of old LaNana Creek. During his time with the City, one of his responsibilities was to keep the Springs cleaned out and the surrounding picnic area free of trash.

Soon after the talk with Jack Clevenger, John Anderson and I were working on the Trail near Main Street and looking for the Spring site. We saw a wet spot on the high bank above the old creek bed. We climbed the bank and found a moss-covered clay wall with a seep at its base. I stuck a sharpshooter shovel in at the wettest spot, and when I pulled it out, water began to flow. As I cleared the base around the clay wall, I started a second spring to flowing. We believed at that moment that we had found The Eyes of Father Margil.

Based on Jack Clevenger's location, early nineteenth century maps and lot references, and other written opinions and interviews, we have now decided that we have located the spring system from which flows Father Margil's Springs. We have continued to clear and clean around the site of the Springs. In 1995 with the help of Robert Rogers we cleaned the Springs back to the rock. Since then we have terraced, and landscaped and have built a walkway to what our evidence has shown to be site of the Holy Springs of Father Margil.

Under normal conditions three of the springs flow out of this system. During some periods of wet weather as many as six springs flow. If one uncovered this section of the rock bank he could probably locate a whole series of springs.

As to whether *ojos* means "springs" or "eyes," it means both. All of the early references that I have found translate *ojos* as "springs." The earliest use of *ojos* as "eyes" that I have found was in the 1936 Centennial pamphlet called "Historic Nacogdoches," written by East Texas historians R.B. Blake and George Crocket. In the pamphlet Blake calls Los Ojos de Padre Margil, "The Eyes of Father Margil." Whether he was the first, I know not. Blake certainly knew enough Spanish to know that *ojos* also meant "springs." One might assume that Blake or Crocket or whoever made the change from *springs* to *eyes* did so for poetic or metaphorical purposes-unless, of course, the name was already in common usage.

Folklorist J. Frank Dobie referred to the Springs as *The Eyes of Father Margil* in a 1937 publication. Dobie quotes the 1828 traveler Jose Maria Sanchez, who described the Springs, and concludes with Sanchez' sentence:

“These two springs are known as los ojos del Padre Margil [the eyes (springs) of Father Margil]”. The brackets enclose Dobie’s translation of ojos, which he recognizes as both “eyes” and “springs.”¹²

Whatever the reason, for at least sixty-five years Nacogdocheans, Frank Dobie, and others have called Margil Springs “The Eyes of Father Margil.” As a Nacogdochean, I sometimes do the same—just as the people of Hogeye, Texas, now call their town Elgin and the folks of New Amsterdam call their city New York. Language is forever growing.

Luther Swift III and his sisters, Sylvia Besing and Patricia Robert, donated to the City of Nacogdoches on March 26, 1988, the land below the springs and behind Liberty Hall that is now called Margil Park. On October 18, 1995, Barrion Johnson donated to the City the hillside strip of land that contained the Springs themselves.¹³

Too much time has passed, too many veins of water have shifted their courses under the earth for anybody to be absolutely certain where the Eyes of Father Margil are today. But one long-standing and verifiable tradition has placed the springs on a high-rock creek bank north of the Camino Real crossing and behind the cemetery. The LaNana Creek Trail Committee has followed that tradition in landscaping and making accessible Margil Springs and Margil Park. Now we need to follow H.C. Fuller’s one-hundred-year-old suggestion and mark the Eyes of Father Margil with a tablet as “one of the many quaint and traditional treasures of this historic town.”

NOTES

¹“Stephen F. Austin’s ‘Prison Journal,’” George P. Garrison, ed. *Texas Historical Association Quarterly (Southwestern Historical Quarterly)*, II, No. 3 (January, 1899), p. 185.

²Jose M. Sanchez, “A Trip to Texas in 1828,” Carlos Casteneda, trans., *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXIX (April 1926), pp. 282-283.

³Jack Jackson, ed., *Texas by Teran: The Diary Kept by General Manuel de Mier y Teran on His 1828 Inspection of Texas*, John Wheat, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). p. 75.

⁴Robert Bruce Blake Collection, East Texas Research Center, Ralph W. Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas XXXVIII, p. 258.

⁵Blake Collection, LXIV, p. 220.

⁶E.G. Littlejohn Scrapbook of the *Galveston Daily News* 1901 in the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas.

⁷Blake Collection, XLV, pp. 286-287.

⁸Manuscript written by Luther Swift III, September 27, 1998; in the Texas Folklore Society files, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas.

⁹Interviews with F.I. Tucker and Hazel S. Abernethy by Francis E. Abernethy, 1987.

¹⁰*Historic Nacogdoches*, (Nacogdoches, 1960).

¹¹R.B. Blake, “Early-Day Springs Played Vital Role in Shaping Texas History,” *The Daily Sentinel*, Nacogdoches, Texas, April 22, 1953.

¹²J. Frank Dobie, “Stories in Texas Place Names,” *Straight Texas*, Publication of the Texas Folklore Society No. XIII (Austin, 1937), p. 69.

¹³In *Nacogdoches Real Property Records*: Swift, special warranty deed, Vol. 695, p. 768; Johnson, warranty deed, Vol. 941, p. 131.