

*San Agustín  
de las Cuevas  
City of Stone  
and Water*

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Upper left: Jesús Pliego's house. Lower left: Rosario Chapel. Upper right: cloister. Lower right: Count of Regla house.

The ancient village of San Agustín de las Cuevas is located 18 kilometers south of Mexico City. Its current name, Tlalpan (meaning “on solid ground”) comes from the fact that it was situated far from the lagoon, never on its banks. An ancient Tecpanec domain, it was founded as a Catholic town around 1532 by the barefoot Franciscans. Later, the Dominican friars continued the process of Christianization. Like other towns, Tlalpan has gone through a long period of being absorbed by Mexico City, particularly throughout the twentieth century, until, to the detriment of its old ways, it became one of the capital’s neighborhoods.

The old San Agustín de las Cuevas is located in the mountains. Its highest peak, the Ajusco volcano, lends its name to the southern mountain range, the main source of water and oxygen for Mexico City. There is another volcano, the Xitle, whose last eruption buried Cuicuilco, the most prosperous lake basin civilization 2,000 years ago. The resulting lava bed was dubbed “Tetlan” by the indigenous and “Malpaís” by the Spaniards. The lava formed large caverns, giving the town its other name, “de las cuevas” or “of the caves.”

Agriculture recovered from the eruption thanks to the ash that served as fertilizer and the water from the local springs. Fuentes Brotantes (Bubbling Springs) was the main source, but water was

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Photos by Gustavo Sotomayor.

abundant in other places also. Local inhabitants produced corn, beans, amaranth, crab apples and *capulines*. Later, they also grew Hispanic fruit like apricots, apples, peaches and chestnuts.

During the colonial period and after independence, many well-known figures from Mexico City acquired property in the town because of its benign climate and the beauty of its forests. Country houses and estates proliferated, giving San Agustín its characteristic look: enormous orchards; long, tall adobe or volcanic rock walls; solitary, cobbled streets, and clear, murmuring water flowing through the outlying *apaniles* or canals.

The Bubbling Springs, el Calvario, el Cedral and the caverns attracted many visitors. On market day and holidays, indigenous came to the town offering different traditional goods (fowl, torch pine, coal, flowers, fruit, tortillas and *pulque*) or crafts (receptacles, mats, mortars and pestles, braziers, tables and chairs). The economy was shored up by visits from important personages like the Viceroy of Mendoza, the Marquises of Mancera and Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Tlalpan's fair turned San Agustín into the social capital of the country for three days a year. Merchants offered different luxury goods: tobacco, liquor, wines, jewels and fine cloth. After a

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solemn mass, there were fireworks, music, banquets, bullfights and cock fights. The fair ended with a dance on the Calvario plain. After the fair, outsiders with purchasing power left town, and life went back to a subsistence economy. However, since it was a stopping-over place, the religious, medical services, public baths, inns, horseshoeing, ironworks and shops for repairing saddles remained. The government employed judges, sheriffs and night watchmen; the local farms offered the local indigenous, the majority of the population, jobs as foremen, cooks, gardeners, drivers and servants. But the Spaniards ruled town life.

The town had been a stopping-over place from pre-Hispanic times. The ancient inhabitants of the lake basin crossed the region on their way to Malinalco, Chalma, Xochicalco and Oaxtepec before the Conquest. After the Spaniards came, San Agustín was an obligatory stopping-off point on the trip from Mexico City to Cuernavaca.

After independence, the *criollos* replaced the Spaniards as dominant and political matters underwent severe changes. In 1824, the State of Mexico was founded with Mexico City as its capital. But on November 18, Mexico



Mural at the Government Palace (detail).



Left: San Pedro Apostle Church. Right: The main plaza's kiosk.

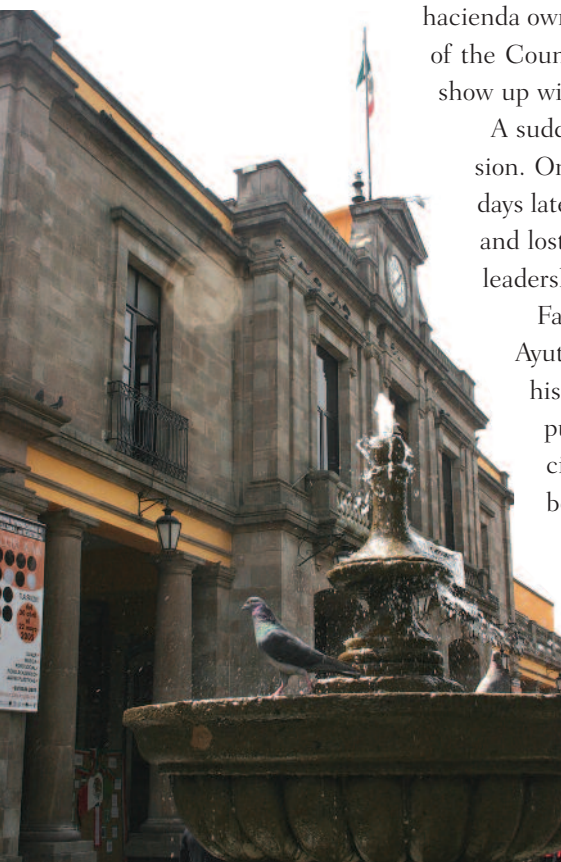
City's Federal District was created and became the country's capital. The state Congress was forced to pick another capital, and it chose San Agustín de las Cuevas, which recovered its indigenous name, Tlalpan, and was ranked as a city. It remained the capital from June 15, 1827 to July 12, 1830, founding educational and economic institutions for the development of the state. But sharp clashes with the federal government because of the cities' geographical proximity forced the change of the capital to Toluca on July 12, 1830.

This move returned Tlalpan to keeping to itself except during the Tlalpan Fair. This state of affairs lasted until the second half of the nineteenth century with the presence of hacienda owners and industrialists like the Marquis of Vivanco or the descendants of the Count of Regla. Politicians also went there: General Santa Anna used to show up with his entourage at local gambling houses.

A sudden occurrence would interrupt Tlalpan's routine: the American invasion. On August 17, 1847, General Worth's forces charged into Tlalpan. Two days later they left, headed for the Padierna Ranch, where a battle was fought and lost by Mexico on August 19 and 20, more due to Santa Anna's criminal leadership than to the invaders' superiority.

Famous figures visited the town. In 1855, Juan Álvarez culminated the Ayutla Revolution (1854) that finally expelled Santa Anna. He headed up his cabinet and governed for 11 days from Tlalpan as president of the Republic. Years later, Maximilian and Carlotta used to go to Tlalpan for social and government engagements. Manuel González and Porfirio Díaz, both Liberal presidents, also visited frequently.

Until 1830, the basis for Tlalpan's economy had been agriculture and services. In 1831, industrialization began with three factories that soon became important: Peña Pobre, La Fama Montañesa and San Fernando. La Fama Montañesa was set up in 1831 with backing from the Banco de Avío (a nineteenth-century bank that loaned money for production) in Mexico's first industrial revolution. The size of these industries led successive governments to introduce modern transportation and communications: the telegraph (1866); the steam railroad (1869), the telephone (1878), animal-drawn trolleys (1891) and electric trolleys (1900). Together, Peña Pobre and



Government Palace.

La Fama Montañesa offered the largest number of industrial jobs in the area in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and they both survived until the end of the latter.

With economic activity came construction and the erection of buildings that have come to symbolize Tlalpan: the parish church, the Rosario Chapel, the cloister and the atrium. The oldest and most splendid civic works include, among others, the Chata House (or Little House), the Moneda House (the Mint), the houses of the Marquis de Vivanco and the Count of Regla and the arched walkways in the main plaza. More recent buildings include the La Paz Market, the government palace, Don Jesús Pliego's house and the Quinta Soledad, from the time of Porfirio Díaz. In addition to its buildings, Tlalpan's greatest attribute is its layout, which dates from 1794 when the Viceroy, Count of Revillagigedo, Don Juan Vicente de Güemes Pacheco y Padilla, ordered the 52 streets of San Agustín to be straightened and paved with stones. For some reasons, among them its relative distance from downtown Mexico City, its lava-bed foundation and the existence of monasteries and seminaries, Tlalpan has not been as devastated as Mixcoac or Tacubaya, with a few exceptions. In the early 1950s, businessman Jorge Pasquel tore down several old houses on Real Street to build a *frontón* hand-ball court across from the main plaza. Another property owner caught the fever and tore down the Santa Inés Tower for a similar ignoble purpose.

The biggest danger today to the town's patrimony are the unbridled trends of the merciless laws of the market. Real estate companies are acquiring large plots of land to erect modern projects, usually condominiums. This normally leads to the destruction of estates and their orchards. Another threat stems from unemployment. Many jobless people have taken refuge in itinerant street sales with no regard for traditional areas. Their arbitrary location and the garbage they generate do violence to the town's historic patrimony.

The authorities are not free from guilt either. In the past they have permitted the devastation, but it is important that they use the tools at their command to discourage future attacks. Their task must involve more than just that, however, and with the support of civil society, they must begin to reverse the destruction, recovering plazas, parks and streets for their original use and restoring elements of the urban image like cobblestones and fountains. If they did this, it would be a sign that perhaps, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have begun to feel equally responsible and, as a result, to cooperate for the preservation of our patrimony. ■■■