

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



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1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House
Other name/site number:
Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

2. Location

Street & number: 704 N. 15th Street
City or town: McAllen State: Texas County: Hidalgo
Not for publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility. meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:
 national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C D

Mark Wolfe State Historic Preservation Officer 4/24/14
Signature of certifying official / Title Date
Texas Historical Commission
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register
- other, explain: _____

Dev Edson H. Beall
Signature of the Keeper

6.13.14
Date of Action

Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

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

Category of Property

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

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	1	buildings
0	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: DOMESTIC / single dwelling = house

Current Functions: DOMESTIC / single dwelling = house

7. Description

Architectural Classification: Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals: Spanish Colonial Revival

Principal Exterior Materials: Brick, Clay Tile

Narrative Description (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-9)

Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

<input type="checkbox"/>	A	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input checked="" 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: N/A

Areas of Significance: Architecture, Politics/Government

Period of Significance: 1926-1939

Significant Dates: 1926, 1928

Significant Person (only if criterion b is marked): Gordon Griffin

Cultural Affiliation (only if criterion d is marked):

Architect/Builder: M. R. Nelson, Independent Builders of Hidalgo County

Narrative Statement of Significance (see continuation sheets 8-10 through 8-24)

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography (see continuation sheet 9-25)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- 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): 704 N. 15th Street, McAllen Texas, 2005 Survey of McAllen Townsite by Preservation Central, Inc.

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10. Geographical Data

Acreege of Property: Approximately 0.25 acres

Coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

1. Latitude: 26.210662 Longitude: -98.234125

Verbal Boundary Description: Lots 10-12, Block 5, North McAllen Town, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Boundary Justification: Boundary includes all property historically associated with the Griffin House.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Terri Myers
Organization: Preservation Central, Inc.
Address: 823 Harris Avenue
City or Town: Austin State: Texas Zip Code: 78705
Email: terrimyers@preservationcentral.com
Telephone: (512) 478-0898
Date: November 4, 2013, 2012

Additional Documentation

Maps (see continuation sheet Map-26 through Map-30)

Additional items (see continuation sheets Figure-31 through Figure-32)

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Photographs

Name of Property: Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House
City or Vicinity: McAllen
County, State: Hidalgo County, Texas
Photographer: Terri Myers
Date Photographed: November 2012

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0001.tif
Northwest oblique of the primary elevation (west). Camera facing approximately southeast.

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0002.tif
View of the building's primary entry and chimney, west elevation. Camera facing approximately southeast.

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0003.tif
Detail view of primary entry, west elevation. Camera facing approximately south-southeast.

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0004.tif
South elevation. Camera facing north.

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0005.tif
East (rear) elevation. Camera facing approximately west-northwest.

TX_Hidalgo County_Mary and Gordon Griffin House_0006.tif
West elevation of the noncontributing garage. Camera facing east.

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.

Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Narrative Description

The Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House is an early and distinctive example of Spanish Colonial Revival residential architecture built in McAllen, Texas, in 1926. Built of yellow-buff brick, the house features hallmarks of the Spanish Colonial Revival style such as a red half-barrel clay tile roof, an arched entry, “bell” tower, wrought iron hardware, and solid wood door. Its long, linear placement across three lots of N. 15th Street is relieved by its projecting entrance and extended front chimney. Except for a square-shaped yellow brick room added inconspicuously to the rear of the house about 1970, the house maintains extraordinary architectural integrity from its construction date. The original two-car, load-bearing brick garage has been converted to a studio about 1961; alterations to its primary façade render it noncontributing to the site, but it is set back from the street and does not detract significantly from the house. About 2012, a free-standing carport was erected to the north of the house. It is a temporary structure. The Griffin House occupies a corner lot and maintains its historic appearance from all vantage points.

The Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House at 704 N. 15th Street in central McAllen, Texas, is a Spanish Colonial Revival house built in 1926. The house is notable for its restrained Spanish Colonial style, its yellow-buff brick wall cladding, and its outstanding integrity. A brick garage built in the same style is also on the site.

The house was documented by Preservation Central, Inc. in a comprehensive historic resources survey of central McAllen in 2005. It was found to be an excellent and intact example of its type and therefore ranked a “High” Preservation Priority. It was one of only two High priority properties in the 700 block of N. 15th Street, the other being an outstanding Tudor Revival House across the street at 707 N. 15th Street. And, although N. 15th Street was considered one of the most prestigious addresses in McAllen in the 1920s, the Griffin House was one of only five High priorities in the 100- to 800 blocks of the street, the others being less noteworthy or having significant alterations.

The Griffin House is located on the northeast corner of the intersection of 15th Street and Gumwood Avenue, one block north of McAllen’s De Palmas Local Historic District. The house sits near the center of a spacious corner lot that measures approximately 160 by 140 feet. (Today, as when constructed, the house occupies lots 10, 11, and 12 in Block 5 of the North McAllen Townsite.) The house faces North 15th Street, a wide boulevard-style street with a park-like central median and rows of stately palm trees. Behind the house is an alley. The lot is flat, with a grass lawn along 15th Street in front of the house. A narrow concrete walkway runs from the sidewalk to the house’s front door, and a concrete driveway runs past the house’s north elevation to the garage located in the northeast corner of the lot. The side and rear yards are enclosed—with a low, stuccoed concrete block wall on the 15th Street and Gumwood Avenue sides, and a wood privacy fence along the back alley and northern lot boundary. A wood and metal gate provides rear yard access at the driveway.

The house has a roughly rectangular footprint, with dimensions of approximately 55 by 40 feet. A 15 by 15 foot addition built about 1970 intersects the main house volume as a rear ell. The overall rectangular shape is made irregular by several shallow projecting bays and setbacks that break up the wall planes. The house is of frame construction and has multicolored buff brick wall cladding laid in a running bond. The side-gabled roof is clad in Mission-style barrel tiles in buff and peach hues. Flat wood boards provide trimwork at cornice level, and there is no eave overhang. Windows are wood 1/1 double hung and wood fixed sash, along with a few wood

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casement windows. The front and kitchen doors are solid wood, while a pair of multi-light bi-fold French doors lead from the sunroom on the south side of the house to the side yard. Around door and window openings is simple trimwork comprised of brick headers and rowlocks. One decorative brick chimney is located on the front elevation, and one short brick chimney is located at the ridgeline. The front chimney has the appearance of a Missionesque bell tower.

The front elevation faces 15th Street and contains the main entry. This elevation has an asymmetrical arrangement with wall planes set back varying distances from the street. The main entry door is in the approximate center of the front elevation, and is set within a projecting entry foyer. The entry volume has a single arched plank-style door with vertical boards stained a dark brown and no visible hinges. The door is surrounded by several bands of arched wood trim pieces. Flanking the door are two arched double hung windows with arched wood trim. These two windows have decorative wrought iron window bars, each featuring simple scrolls and a small shield design. On the north side of the projecting entry volume is a small rectangular double hung window. On the south side of the entry volume is a tall arched panel filled with highly textured stucco. This decorative feature is highly visible since it faces Gumwood Avenue to the south. Historic photographs of the house from 1926 show that the stucco infill is original.

The remainder of the front elevation contains a decorative chimney, varying wall planes, and windows that correspond to the kitchen, dining room, living room, and sunroom. North of the entry volume is a section of façade with two distinct planes. The dining room, immediately north of the entry, is set back only a few feet from the entry. It has one large, wood, fixed pane window on its front-facing side and two double hung windows on its north-facing side. Set further back still is the kitchen volume, which is approximately 15 feet past the entry. It has two front-facing double hung windows. On the south side of the front entry, the living room and sunroom volumes are also set back several feet from the entry door. Immediately south of the entry is a tall brick chimney, which is connected to the living room wall plane like a pilaster then continues upward, extending far past the roof line. The chimney has a decorative top that features a miniature front gabled roof and arched opening reminiscent of a Mission Style bell tower. Just south of the chimney is a large, fixed pane window that corresponds to the living room inside. At the southernmost end of the front elevation is the house's sunroom, which projects very slightly in front of the living room. It has one set of paired double-hung windows on its front-facing elevation.

The house's south elevation faces Gumwood Avenue, but is somewhat obscured from the street by the stuccoed wall that surrounds the side and rear yards at this location. At the southwestern corner of the house is the sunroom. It projects several feet beyond the remainder of the south elevation and contains a pair of multi-paned bi-fold French doors that open onto the side yard. Above the doors is a pediment-like decorative detail consisting of a shallow brick arch filled with highly textured stucco. Flanking the French doors are two rectangular six-light wood casement windows. A matching casement window is found on the east-facing wall of the projecting sunroom. East of the sunroom volume is the wall plane that corresponds to a bedroom inside; it has two 1/1 double hung windows. In the gable end, near the top of the south elevation, is a small round decorative element that appears to be a metal disc. It is unclear whether it was part of the original design or replaced a gable vent or relief carving that was previously present. A similar disc is found in the gable end of the north elevation.

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The house's north elevation faces the driveway located north of the house. Under the main roof gable is a set of paired double hung windows, a single entry door, and a single 1/1 double hung window. These window and door openings, which are set very close together, correspond to the kitchen inside. Above them are two rectangular gable vents and the aforementioned round decorative feature just under the roof peak. To the west of this kitchen volume, the north-facing wall of the dining room can be seen; as explained, it contains two double hung windows and it projects further west than the kitchen. To the rear, or east end, of the north elevation is the windowless side wall of the house's northwest (Master) bedroom. The ca. 1970 addition consists of a hip-roofed ell extending east from the house. When it was constructed, the master bedroom and central bedroom were reconfigured slightly to provide room for expanded bathroom and closet space (see floor plan). A non-historic flat-roofed carport erected about 2012 extends from the north elevation over the kitchen windows, just above header level. The carport is supported by lally poles and minimally attached to the house's brick façade.

The rear elevation faces east toward the back yard and alley. The design of the rear elevation is original at the southern end, where a tripled 1/1 window grouping is located near the corner. These windows correspond to the bedroom inside. Next to the three windows is a smaller 1/1 window that is located in the house's narrow bathroom. North of the bathroom window is the addition ell, a hip-roofed volume with one rectangular window in its south-facing wall. Its east-facing wall contains two tall rectangular wood windows, each with ten lights. At the northern end of the rear elevation is another tripled 1/1 window grouping, this one corresponding to the Master bedroom located in the house's northwest corner. The Master bedroom volume historically extended further east than the bedrooms and bathroom to its south. This is still the case, but today the rear ell addition is the building volume that extends furthest to the east.

The interior of the house has a gracious, restrained style that continues the Spanish Colonial Revival theme. Wood trim is stained a dark brown, and walls and ceilings are finished with smooth plaster. Floors are primarily hardwood. The public rooms are located in the front half of the house, and the bedrooms and bathrooms are to the rear. The front entry door opens into the projecting entry alcove. Inside, the alcove has Spanish tile floors, wide wood trim that curves around the arched door and windows, and a narrow strip of trim at ceiling level. The alcove opens into the living room, a rectangular room oriented north-south. The living room features a shallow barrel-vaulted ceiling that runs the length of the room. It is finished in smooth plaster, and a band of wood trim circles the room at the vault's spring point. On the west wall of the living room is the fireplace that corresponds to the ornamental chimney outside. The fireplace is built from rusticated stone, and sits on an elevated stone base. The fireplace has been altered by the addition of a wood mantle and the painting of its stonework. To the left of the fireplace is a built-in recessed bookshelf with an arched opening and curved wood trim. At the southern end of the living room, a pair of multi-light French doors opens into the house's sunroom. At the northern end, a wide open doorway passes into the dining room. In the dining room, the north-facing window has interior wood shutters. Two sets of French doors are located at the rear, or east end, of the living room. The southern doors lead into the southeast bedroom, and the northern door leads into the narrow hallway that serves the bedrooms, kitchen, and bathroom. Interior alterations are limited to the rear of the house. When the rear ell addition was constructed about 1970, the master bedroom was reconfigured to allow for an additional bathroom and closet, the middle bedroom was truncated, and the kitchen was altered slightly to allow for modern appliances (see floor plan).

The Griffin house is in excellent condition and retains all seven aspects of integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

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A historic-age, hip-roofed garage is located in the northwest corner of the lot near the alley. It was constructed contemporaneously with the house in the same architectural style and with the same multicolored buff bricks and Mission style barrel roof tiles. Unlike the house, the garage has load-bearing brick construction. The garage's fenestration has been altered in order to turn the building into a studio; specifically on the west elevation, where the garage doors have been partially enclosed with textured stucco. A rectangular window has been installed in place of the northern garage door, and an entry door with sidelights is now found in place of the southern garage door. A shallow shed-roofed porch roof has been constructed to shelter the entry. The porch roof is clad in barrel tiles and supported by 4x4 posts. The garage's south, yard-facing elevation has two tall multi-light wood windows and a multi-light single entry door. Despite the changes, the garage's original form and design is evident. Although the garage retains its integrity of location, setting, and association, and the use of textured stucco in place of the garage doors demarcates the doors' original location, the alterations to the primary façade render the garage noncontributing to the site. It is original to the site and maintains its original footprint.

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Statement of Significance

The Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House in North McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas, is an outstanding example of a custom-designed Spanish Colonial Revival house built during a period of phenomenal growth in South Texas in the mid-1920s. It is nominated under Criterion C as a distinguished and unique example of the type of romantic designs that were beginning to replace the more humble bungalow in the region. It is also significant under Criterion B, in the area of Politics/government, for the pivotal role Gordon Griffin played in the notorious “Hidalgo County Rebellion,” which pitted the “Good Government League” – a cadre of newly arrived, forward-thinking civic leaders – against longstanding “Boss Rule” in Hidalgo County. Griffin and his wife built this, their first and only home in Hidalgo County, after the young attorney launched his career in McAllen. The family occupied it as Griffin’s political star rose and they remained in the home throughout the campaign that ultimately broke “Boss Rule.” The Griffins sold their home in 1939 and moved to Brownwood, Texas, where they lived the rest of their lives. The house is nominated at the local level of significance in both categories with a period of significance that corresponds to their occupation of the house, 1926-1939.

Geographic Setting

The City of McAllen is located in Hidalgo County, Texas, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. U.S. Highways 83 and 281 intersect just east of McAllen’s historic core, bringing a high volume of Pan-American traffic through the area. The topography is generally flat, with a gentle slope toward the Rio Grande. The climate is sub-tropical and sub-humid, with an exceptionally long growing season. Native vegetation includes grasses and sparse mesquite trees. With the aid of irrigation, the soils support cultivation of crops including sorghum, cotton, and fruits – especially citrus. Mineral resources include oil and natural gas.

Historic Background

Spanish Colonization and the Ranching Era

Like neighboring settlements along the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the City of McAllen was laid out on ranch land that spread across several *porciones*, strips of land that spanned the Rio Grande and was associated with one of the villas established by Spanish colonizer José de Escandón in the mid-1700s. The original townsite of McAllen occupied *porciones* 63 and 64. The Spanish crown granted *porción* 63 to Antonio Gutiérrez in 1767 and *porción* 64 to Juan Antonio Villarreal in 1767 (Garza). In 1800, Spain granted *porción* 63 to José Manuel Gomez, solidifying his 1797 claim to the Santa Anita Ranch. Gomez’s great-granddaughter, Salomé Ballí, inherited the ranch which may have made her exceptionally attractive to numerous Anglo suitors who moved to the area after the Mexican War. Salomé Ballí first married Brownsville businessman John Young, and around 1850 Young applied for the grants for *porciones* 64 and 65. When Young died in 1859, his enormous land holdings passed to his widow and their son, John J. Young. Salomé Ballí de Young then wed John McAllen, who had been Young’s assistant. Together they renamed the Santa Anita Ranch the McAllen Ranch. During the 1860s they enlarged the boundaries of the ranch whenever possible. They, too, had a son, James Ballí McAllen. Because ranching dominated the economy and land use of the Lower Rio Grande Valley throughout the nineteenth century, the McAllen family became very influential in the development of the region in the years to

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come. Although South Texas experienced an influx of Anglo settlers following Texas' statehood, descendants of Spanish ranchers held political sway in the area for most of the 19th century.

Railroad, Irrigation, and Town Building

Ranching gave way to crop farming in the early days of the 20th century when irrigation, railroad, and land interests combined to produce irrigated farms along the Rio Grande. The arrival of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railroad to South Texas in 1904 launched an era of land speculation, agricultural development, and demographic change as an influx of Eastern and Midwestern Anglo farm families flocked to the region for the widely-advertised mild climate and ideal soil conditions. At the same time, irrigation companies acquired many of the old *porciones* to develop as townsites, most along the railroad tracks, as well as irrigated farms and orchards. As a result, South Texas experienced an amazing land rush in which speculators bought up unimproved acreage, established irrigation companies, and platted new townsites about every five miles along the east-west extension of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway across Cameron and Hidalgo counties. John McAllen followed the trend and donated land to the railroad company. He and other entrepreneurs platted the town of McAllen. Unfortunately, McAllen's town had competition from upstart East McAllen, platted in 1907 by John Closner and William Briggs. East McAllen had benefit of the Rio Bravo Irrigation Company's construction of a canal to its environs and ultimately prevailed against the original town of McAllen; East McAllen became known simply as McAllen and "West" McAllen, although platted by the original McAllen family, faded into obscurity. Ironically, Closner and Briggs purchased the land for their Johnny-come-lately townsite from John McAllen, himself.

Briggs and Closner formed the Rio Bravo Irrigation Company to include their town of McAllen. Unlike some of the more recent land developers in the Valley, the two had long experience with irrigation in the Valley and were among the first to successfully experiment with irrigation on the Rio Grande. As a result, many believed in their abilities to turn the desert into farmland and invested in their land sales. As soon as their irrigation canal was completed in 1908, businessmen began preparing for the coming building boom. Within the year, seven stores, including a hardware store and a furniture store, were completed. The fledgling town also boasted two lumberyards, two taverns, and a population of about 300 souls. The following year saw the town's first bank, the First State Bank, and its first newspaper, the *McAllen Monitor*. Boosters went to great lengths to attract Midwestern farmers to the McAllen area and in 1911, only three years after the Rio Bravo canal was finished, 5,000 acres of land in the system were under cultivation. Farmers produced a variety of crops including cotton, alfalfa, broom corn, citrus fruits, grapes, and figs.

The path of development in McAllen was determined to a large degree by the east-west axis of the railroad tracks which pre-dated the town plat. The completion of the Rio Bravo Canal, along present 18th (Bicentennial) and 19th streets, added a definite north-south edge to the west side of town. Its intersection with the east-west railroad line came to define the boundaries of the fledgling townsite. William Briggs, who was heavily invested in the land and canal companies, demonstrated his faith in the town's future by hiring a professional to survey and plat the townsite in accordance with the major physical boundaries. Surveyor Rowland E. Horn (*McAllen, The Early History*) platted the McAllen Town Company's 50,000 acres of land into a roughly square townsite grid measuring about 7.5 miles from east to west and about 10.3 miles from north to south. The railroad tracks cut the town into two halves of approximately equal size, one half to the north and the other to the south. The

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western boundary of the town was determined by an old horse trail leading to the train depot in West McAllen, which has since become 23rd Street, sometimes delineated as Depot Road on old survey maps.

R. E. Horn platted the area east of the canal according to a regular grid pattern. Numbered Avenues ran east to west and numbered streets ran north to south. Thus the street pattern was laid out on a strict north-south, east-west grid, deviating only to accommodate the slight angle of the railroad tracks as they passed through the middle of the townsite. City blocks typically measured 200 feet by 200 feet, with north-south alleys bisecting them. Lots along the main commercial streets, South 14th (Main) Street and South 13th (Broadway) Street, were platted at half the width of residential lots (Sanborn maps, 1929). Horn foresaw industrial complexes at the edge of commercial and residential areas and set aside undivided sections along the railroad tracks and irrigation canal for such uses. He also anticipated institutional sites for McAllen and reserved large blocks interspersed throughout the townsite for schools and hospitals.

The city provided “paved” roads – hard-packed surfaces topped with gravel – across the grid. By 1920, the Rio Grande Public Service Corporation supplied McAllen residents with ice, light, water, and power (*Monty’s Monthly*, 1920: 143). By that time, however, the city was bulging at the seams and services were poised to extend beyond the densely packed center core to accommodate new growth in all directions.

Additions to the City of McAllen

Early in McAllen’s history, residential and commercial development competed for space in the original townsite blocks lying south of the railroad tracks. Within a decade, however, McAllen’s commercial success spread to adjoining streets in the downtown core, pushing residential uses to the outskirts of town. By 1919, new residential additions were platted north of the railroad tracks, in an area known as North McAllen. Development in this area was possible largely due to the advent of the automobile, which allowed businessmen to live in the “suburbs” and commute to their downtown offices.

Early additions in North McAllen lay close to the original townsite. Palm Heights, platted just north of the railroad tracks, was among the first. It lay between Ash Street (19th Avenue) and Cedar Street (21st Avenue) and bounded by N. 10th Street on the west and N. 6th Street on the east. Veering from the strict grid pattern that characterized the original townsite, Palm Heights Addition followed a popular trend for subdivisions that featured curvilinear, tree-lined streets with esplanades and pocket parks for beautification. Palm Heights terminated in a semi-circular street named Palm Drive with equidistant palms planted along its route. The addition was intended to be an upscale residential compound but its proximity to the railroad tracks made it attractive to more diverse and commercial uses, including tourist courts. By 1927, a section close to the railroad and N. 10th Street was replatted as Palm Heights Business District, indicating its divergence from residential use. Still, some of early bungalows survive in the addition as testimony to its original residential intent.

Palm Heights’ mixed use notwithstanding, developers still envisioned large residential nodes north of McAllen. In 1921, the Louise Addition was platted immediately north of Palm Heights. The addition ran from 9th to 6th streets, on the west and east, and included both sides of Cedar Avenue and lots facing N. 6th, N. 7th, N. 8th, and N. 9th streets between Cedar and Date Palm. The developer created a tree-lined esplanade along N. 8th Street, which was advertised as the premier street of the addition. E. M. Card surveyed both Palm Heights and the Louise Addition which were subdivided out of the Hidalgo Canal Company lands in *porciones* 64, 65, and 66.

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The following year, Card surveyed another nearby tract, Renken's Addition, which lay north of Date Palm and extended northward to Hackberry Street. In the three years between 1919 and 1922, surveyors platted a tight cluster of residential lots for development between N. 6th and N. 10th streets, bounded by Ash on the south and Hackberry on the north. Clearly, McAllen developers expected substantial growth north of the original townsite and there was a veritable land rush to subdivide the remaining Hidalgo Canal Company *porciones* into individual additions.

These early additions featured many of the standard plan types and design elements popular across the country in the early 20th century. Drawings and pictures of frame bungalows and cottages were advertised in plan books, magazines and newspapers, and promoted by developers who worked with local lumber companies and the occasional architect to build the houses. The wildly popular bungalow could also be ordered in "kits" from Sears and Woolworths department stores. These national companies took orders for chosen house plans and then shipped pre-cut lumber, plumbing, wiring, and roofing to the nearest railroad stop. Typically, the buyer hired local lumber companies to deliver and assemble the parts on the customer's site. Many such houses found their way to early additions in North McAllen.

As shown in *Monty's Monthly*, a promotional magazine published from 1919 to 1933, most of the homes built in the Lower Rio Grande Valley in the 1910s and early 1920s were Craftsman-influenced bungalows. They were among the thousands of similar popular-plan houses built nationwide at that time. Most of those built in the Valley were frame houses with front-gabled roofs and front-gabled porches, featuring exposed rafter ends and triangle knee-braces. A typical bungalow plan features two rows of in-tandem rooms often divided by a front-to-back central hallway. One row contains private spaces and the other, public spaces. The private section generally contained a front and rear bedroom with a single bathroom in between them. The public section opened into a living room, followed by a dining room, and finally a kitchen. Bungalows exhibited different stylistic traits but most of the early ones featured exposed structural members such as pointed rafters, triangle knee braces under the eaves, and a commodious full or partial front porch. In Hidalgo County, bungalows were popular in both the cities and towns as well as throughout the rural areas. A few early bungalows had matching garages to house the increasingly popular family automobile. The national romance with the bungalow was dubbed "the bungalow craze" in national publications and was featured in magazines and newspapers as the ideal home type.

In the later 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Tudor Revival styles with high-pitched roofs, arched entries, and brick or stucco siding appeared within the northern additions. By the late-1920s, builders in the lower Rio Grande region began to experiment with Spanish-influenced houses, called Spanish Colonial Revival or Southwest style houses with elements with flat, clay tile roofs and accents, stucco siding, shaped parapets and arched entries. These more exotic houses were particularly favored in California and the Southwest where Eastern and Midwestern newcomers embraced the romanticism of the areas' Spanish history.

Due, in part, to the success of these early additions, as well as the overall speculative zeal that engulfed Hidalgo County in the early 20th century, land developers reached further beyond the town limits to plat new subdivisions. In 1920, Card mapped a huge addition that consumed most of the land between N. 10th to N. 18th streets, north of Hackberry Avenue nearly to Pecan Blvd. The 1920 Ewing's Addition was an ambitious endeavor that extended the residential landscape far beyond the original McAllen limits. Unfortunately, McAllen had neither the population nor the prospects to fill the lots at that time. Over the next several years,

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developers were obliged to build out the existing lots in North McAllen before platting new additions. During this speculative hiatus, many lots in North McAllen lay vacant, waiting for the next boom cycle. It was during this period that Gordon Griffin purchased many vacant tracts in the northern expanse of the city.

The Next Building Boom: 1926-1929

By 1926, a renewed sense of purpose ignited development interests in McAllen. Much of the attention focused on additions in the townsite of North McAllen where vacant lots platted years earlier already had access to water, gas, and electricity. The area was clearly one of the most prestigious of McAllen's new neighborhoods. Deed restrictions attracted upwardly mobile couples with subdivision rules establishing standard setbacks, the number of houses that could be built on one or several lots, and the quality of materials to be used in construction within the additions.

New construction in McAllen during the 1920s also offered utilities and amenities. By 1929, Central Power and Light provided electric light and power throughout the Valley (*Monty's Monthly*, March 1929). At the same time, W. L. Pearson offered his services to build good roads and streets, replacing gravel roads with macadam pavement (*Monty's Monthly*, January 1929: 33). Taking advantage of the newest fad in vacation travel by automobile, the city of McAllen advertised its exceptional tourist camps, several of which appeared along Ash Avenue, parallel with the railroad tracks, and the Hammerly Courts in Palm Heights Addition (*Monty's Monthly*, October 1929). The first, and one of the most prestigious tourist courts in the area, was Gordon Griffin's Grande Courts, with stucco cottages and red tile roofs, reminiscent of Spanish Colonial design. Boosters believed his Grande Courts contributed greatly to the prosperity of McAllen in attracting permanent settlers. In fact, one affirmed, the endeavor has been considered by many to be the finest tourist camp in the U.S. (Wharton 200).

Of all the attractive northside addresses, none were as prestigious as those on N. 15th Street. It was intended as the most exclusive street in the many North McAllen additions, such as the Doss, Garden Villas, and Louise additions, and its lot prices and building restrictions guaranteed that the neighborhood would remain attractive. The street was palm-lined with an esplanade separating traffic lanes. Deep setbacks were ordained by deed restrictions and prospective home owners were required to build on more than one lot to reduce density. These mandates helped establish a sense of wealth and exclusivity. In the mid- to late-1920s, McAllen's rising stars in medical, legal, and building professions chose to build on N. 15th Street. Among them was Gordon Griffin, attorney, candidate for elective office, and land developer.

Gordon and Mary S. Griffin

Gordon Griffin was born on December 25, 1888, in Ripley, Tennessee, a descendant of John and Edwina Bentley Griffin. He attended local schools and then attended Laneview College in Trenton, Tennessee. Griffin went on to Cumberland University Law School in Lebanon, Tennessee. Griffin graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Law, as part of the class of 1915. Soon after graduation, Griffin opened a law practice in Ridgely, Tennessee. At the age of 22, Griffin was elected mayor of the town, an event that would presage his later political ambitions. On July 17, 1916, Griffin married Mary S. Prichard of Halls (Spence 18) and the couple made their home in Tiftonville. In 1919 they moved to Memphis. The following year, Griffin brought his wife and two-year old daughter Ruth, to Texas where the Bentsen brothers, two of the most successful land

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promoters in Hidalgo and Cameron counties, convinced him to seek his fortune in the thriving little city of McAllen (Spence 18; Wharton, 1930, v. 4 page 200). In 1920, Griffin passed the state bar and started a 22-year law career in McAllen (Spence, 36).

How or why the Griffins left Tennessee for McAllen is unknown, but newly-formed towns in the so-called Lower Rio Grande Valley launched major advertising campaigns to bring Easterners and Mid-western farmers to South Texas in the 1910s. The young couple undoubtedly saw a number of magazine and newspaper advertisements for the area and likely received pamphlets and flyers sent through the mail. The Bentsen brothers apparently helped make their decision. By 1920, the McAllen Chamber of Commerce touted the town as a “community of beautiful homes, splendid schools, magnificent hotels, banks, parks, churches (in the course of construction) and well-parceled streets” on the inside cover of *Monty’s Monthly*, a Valley “booster” magazine full of charming photographs and promising articles. Furthermore, the Chamber claimed that McAllen was “the center of everything worthwhile in the most productive section of the Lower Rio Grande Valley” (*Monty’s Monthly*, November-December 1920, Vol. 11, No. 10-11: page 2). Whatever the reason, Gordon Griffin intended to capitalize on the new frontier.

Griffin soon joined J. E. Leslie in a law practice and the two attorneys platted the Griffin and Leslie Subdivision of the La Lomita Irrigation and Construction Company of Hidalgo County. Although Griffin and Leslie shared a law office, they differed on many issues and in 1925, the partnership ended. In 1926, Griffin bought a large portion of the Hidalgo County Canal Company, which was one of the first large subdivisions in McAllen and held most of the surrounding undeveloped land, at a sheriff’s auction (Hidalgo County Deed Records Vol. T: 626-628). At the same time, Griffin partnered with B. D. Kimbrough, another attorney and a man who shared Griffin’s political beliefs. Kimbrough and Griffin also teamed on development endeavors.

It wasn’t long before Gordon and Mary Griffin became fixtures in the social pages of the newspapers. During the 1920s, one could see their names in almost every edition of the *McAllen Monitor* newspaper. Griffin was active in the Masons and Rotary organizations and by 1926, he had become so knowledgeable about local business conditions that he lectured such organizations on the prospects of land development in the Valley. Boosters considered him to be one of the leading lawyers of Hidalgo County, a member of the Hidalgo County, Texas State, and American Bar associations and a man of great property and business acumen (Wharton 200)

In McAllen, he joined the law firm of Griffin and Kimbrough “where he [was] considered a careful, painstaking, conscientious and profound lawyer” (Wharton 200). His religious affiliation was with the Methodist Episcopal, South. When he could break away from business ventures, he enjoyed extended hunting trips. He was praised by his peers as “no less valued in the community as a liberal-minded and enterprising citizen” (Wharton 200).

Development

Builders, contractors, and lumberyards stayed busy in North McAllen. During the 1920s, builders staked out their business in the many small towns that sprang up along the railroad tracks. Ready-Cut Houses of Houston built bungalows in McAllen and surrounding towns. Morris Nelson established his business in McAllen and became a major contractor and builder by 1922 (*Monty’s Monthly* November-December, 1922: 29). Harry L. Stebbins was one of the few architects in the Valley in 1923. He advertised that he was a “Designer of Homes

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Beautiful and Sound Construction.” The McAllen Improvement Company offered capital for potential home buyers (*Monty’s Monthly*, September 1923: 33). The McAllen Lumber Company specialized in designing and building “Ideal Homes.” The company teamed with architect Harry L. Stebbins (*Monty’s Monthly*, October 1923: 14) under the umbrella firm of Valley Homes (*Monty’s Monthly*, November 1923: 76). Most of the houses built by these firms in the late 1910s and early 1920s were frame bungalows.

Unfortunately, however, McAllen experienced a lull in building during World War I that continued into the early 1920s. In some respects, sales simply lagged a little behind the early building boom. After stalling for several years, development picked up with a fervor by the mid-1920s, especially in McAllen. Deed records for that period show a profound growth in development companies and partnerships and the daily newspaper, the *McAllen Monitor* and the regional magazine, *Monty’s Monthly*, kept readers abreast of new housing starts, schools and churches, and commercial buildings. Typically, lumber companies from San Antonio and Houston set up satellite companies in the Valley. Few architects practiced in the Valley at that time and most of the lumber companies built bungalows and small commercial buildings from standard plans.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, however, more exotic styles came into fashion in the Valley. Spanish derivatives were particularly attractive among well-to-do families, possibly because of the area’s Hispanic heritage. Among the first to adopt these romantic styles were R. E. Horn and L. U. Bartliff who staked out 25 lots on N. 15th Street in the newly formed Horn-Bartliff Addition (in North McAllen). The homes promised to attract sophisticated tastes with their Spanish, Italian, and Mediterranean architectural styles. Each home was to include a spacious loggia. These exclusive houses were to be sold with generous setbacks, deed restrictions and costs ranging between \$7,000 and \$10,000 apiece when small bungalows could be had for under \$3,000. Horn and Bartliff convinced architect Charles N. Smith of Florida and his brother, A. T. Smith, a contractor from Buffalo, to move to McAllen and join them in their endeavor. They used builders from San Antonio, possibly B. F. Dittmar. The first house was planned for the corner of 15th Street and 23rd Avenue (*McAllen Monitor*, April 25, 1925, Page 5). Early the following year, Horn & Bartliff advertised the city’s first “Dream House.” Of “Spanish” architecture, it was one of 20 houses they had completed on N. 15th Street. Its builders promised that “no expense had been spared” in the endeavor (*McAllen Monitor*, Feb. 19, 1926: 4). Horn and Bartliff’s styles likely influenced the Griffins to choose a romantic design for their house, which they constructed in 1926 just two blocks away from the Horn & Bartliff “Dream House.”

At the same time, Gordon Griffin began buying large tracts of land in the Ewing Addition in the northwest corner of the Town of North McAllen. The subdivision had languished due to the general development decline in the early 1920s, its lack of city amenities, and its distance from downtown. By the time Griffin was ready to invest, though, McAllen stood on the brink of a new development phase. Griffin proposed extending 16th Street northward where he platted twelve lots between Hackberry (26th Street) and Ivy (27th Street). New housing starts were already filling in the gaps in the original townsite and prospective buyers began looking at close-in lots in North McAllen where Griffin planned to build. L. L. Ethridge of San Antonio served as contractor. In just over a year, Griffin built and sold six four-room houses on the west side of 16th Street 901, 905, 909, 913, 917, and 921. He advertised their style as “Colonial,” which generally meant they had few decorative details. In fact, they were modest frame bungalows with no porches or other distinguishing features (Preservation Central, 2012). Even so, the Valley had a burgeoning market for simple shelter and their cost – just \$2,800 compared with the \$7,000 to \$10,000 luxurious designs of Horn & Bartliff – was very attractive to many Valley newcomers (*McAllen Monitor*, Jan 22, 1926, page 1).

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Mary and Gordon Griffin's House at 704 N. 15th Street

Even as he was buying building and selling modest homes for working-class families further north, Gordon Griffin and his wife Mary were planning to build a new home for themselves in a prestigious area at the northeast corner of Gumwood and on N. 15th Street. On April 26, 1926, the McAllen Improvement Company conveyed lots 10, 11, and 12 in Block 5 of the North McAllen Townsite to Mary S. and Gordon Griffin (Hidalgo County Deed Record 214: 489-491; Hidalgo County Deed of Trust 447: 11522, April 28, 1926). At the time, no houses had been built in the 700 block of N. 15th Street, between Gumwood and Hackberry. It was intended to be an exclusive residential section but apparently had no takers until the Griffins took the plunge. In the 700 block of N. 15th Street, development was restricted so that a maximum of two houses could be built on three lots. Also, houses were to be setback 45' from the public right-of-way on N. 15th Street (Hidalgo County Deed Record 214: 489-491). The purpose of these restrictions was to maintain a streetscape of large, estate-like grounds with setbacks intended to give a sense of exclusivity.

The couple had been looking at the site for some time before the *McAllen Monitor* announced their intention to build on the lots. On March 5, 1926, the *McAllen Monitor* made a front-page announcement: "Griffin Will Build Home on 15th." Horn & Bartliff had already indicated their intention to build Spanish style houses in North McAllen so it was no surprise that the Griffins, who had numerous dealings with Horn & Bartliff, had selected the corner of 25th Avenue (Gumwood) and 15th Street for the site of a modern "Spanish Design House". Griffin obtained three adjoining lots by trading Horn and Bartliff of the McAllen Improvement Company, for several lots that he owned in the Griffin-Leslie Addition in the southeast corner of the city. The article described the Griffins' new house as "a modern seven-room dwelling on Spanish architectural lines" and further announced that it would be one of the "classy" homes of McAllen. Unlike many of his other development endeavors, this house was more than a "spec" house for Griffin – he intended it as his family's residence (*McAllen Monitor*, March 5, 1926, page 1). As the personal home of one of McAllen's rising stars in law, government, and land development, the house was to be attractive in design and built of superior materials as a showcase for his status and, presumably, to spur future sales in the area. In the same edition of the newspaper, it was disclosed that Griffin had already sold his home on S. 12th Street (*McAllen Monitor*, March 5, 1926, p. 5).

On April 2, 1926, an article on the front page of the *McAllen Monitor* announced that Gordon Griffin would be building a new Spanish style house in North McAllen. Only a week later, the newspaper noted that Gordon Griffin had already begun building his new, \$10,000 Spanish style residence at the corner of 15th Street and 25th Avenue (Gumwood) in the Horn-Bartliff Addition in North McAllen. Horn and Bartliff intended the North McAllen subdivision to be an upscale residential enclave of fine homes (*McAllen Monitor*, April 9, 1926). Deed records indicated that Griffin hired M. R. Nelson, a prominent contractor and owner of the Independent Lumber Company in Hidalgo County, to build the house (*McAllen Monitor*, April 9, 1926). Nelson and his partner F. E. Osborn were among the area's most prolific builders and held 197 building contracts in the Valley between 1925 and 1929 (Hidalgo County Deed Records, index). Griffin paid \$6,000 to Mr. Nelson, to build the house and complete the project. Nelson supplied all materials and furnished all funds for payment of lumber and labor to build the house and their arrangement was secured by a promissory note to Nelson and a deed of trust dated August 4, 1926 (Hidalgo Deed Records Vol. 225: 475). Nelson advertised his construction company regularly in the *McAllen Monitor* and *Monty's Monthly* where he promised to "Build for the Future" with "service, economy, and efficiency" (*Monty's Monthly*, December 1925, 37). Nelson's ads always noted his Valley residence.

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No plans or precise descriptions have been found for the house, but the *McAllen Monitor* stated that the house would contain seven rooms and include a loggia, “in the Spanish tradition.” In fact, *Monty’s Monthly* noted that the “Spanish-Moorish-Italian” styles were the prevailing designs, though “pretty English types” could be had in both small and large models (*Monty’s Monthly*, May 1926: 25). Though following a historical style, readers were assured that the house would “be modern in every way” (*McAllen Monitor*, April 9, 1926). As it sometimes happens, the newspaper erred somewhat in its description of the Griffin home. It described the house as a two-story stucco residence when, in fact, it was a one-story brick veneer dwelling – a relatively unusual choice of materials for a Spanish house of that era. Photographs published in *Monty’s Monthly* within a few months of its completion, however, clearly show (and describe) the house as a one-story brick house with a stucco archway and front chimney reminiscent of a Mission bell tower. This is exactly the way the house appears today. The Griffin family occupied their new house by August 1926. The family apparently liked to show it off and Society Pages in the *Monitor* mentioned their guests and soirees. Most notices told of their vacations, visitors and guests, and little Ruth’s musical talent with a piano solo of Humoresque (Jan 20, 1928: 2) (*McAllen Monitor*, July 15, 1927).

Griffin continued to hone his skills in real estate. He bought and sold land throughout McAllen and the surrounding irrigation properties. He must have been pleased with M. R. Nelson’s construction talents because he and Nelson entered into a contract with B. F. Dittmar, a builder from San Antonio, to build four houses in the original McAllen townsite the following year (Hidalgo County Deed of Trust, May 3, 1927). The three would work together on other projects in the 1920s and 1930s.

Architectural Significance of the Griffin House

Griffin’s house was the first built on N. 15th Street in the block between Gumwood (25th Street) and Hackberry (26th Street) and, in fact, it was the only house on the block as late as 1929 (Sanborn fire insurance map, 1929). While single lots filled in all around North McAllen, this block of N. 15th remained exclusive, containing only three houses on the west side of the street and three on the east side. Each occupied multiple or extra-large lots. Several were Spanish Colonial or Mission style houses like the Griffin house. One of the more noteworthy houses on the block was the large, two-story Tudor Revival house across the street.

The Griffin House was somewhat different than other “Spanish” style houses in the area in that it did not have a stucco finish. Instead, it was sheathed in brick veneer. The one-story, rectangular plan house featured two linear rows of rooms. The public spaces – the living room, dining room, and loggia – lined the front of the house while the private spaces – bedrooms and bathrooms – lay to the rear. A large kitchen was tucked behind the dining room and separated from the private spaces by a pantry and hallway.

The Griffins entertained frequently and their guests were treated to the many romantic Revival Style features of the house. They entered through the off-center, arched vestibule which immediately dropped to an almost sunken living area dominated by a large hearth. The living room was the principal gathering place followed by a raised, formal dining room. In fact, the public rooms were open to one another contributing to convivial entertainment. “Spanish” attributes of the house include the long, low-slung form, dark-stained multi-light windows, wrought iron hinges and light fixtures, possibly from Alamo Iron Works which advertised widely in the Valley at that time, round-arched, stucco false window in the entry way, the petite loggia, and the red clay tile roof over the entire house. Both interior and exterior light fixtures were made of wrought iron intended to

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exude a Spanish flavor. The house featured a concrete tiled loggia and had French doors with wrought iron hardware throughout the house. The brick sheathing could be considered a local variant of Spanish architectural practice since brick had been popular in the Valley since the 19th century, especially in Brownsville, Rio Grande City, Roma and Laredo. By 1923, machine-made brick was regionally produced in the Valley and it is likely that the Griffin's house was this type of brick due to its consistent density, weight, and appearance, its wire-struck finish, sharp corners, and coloration (Cook 24-25).

Griffin Continues Development in McAllen

Griffin, Horn & Bartliff, and other speculative builders flooded the Valley in the 1920s and were an integral part of McAllen's building boom at that time. Griffin's ventures extended from the Leslie & Griffin Addition in the southeast section of town, to his development on N. 16th Street, his own house on N. 15th Street, and many other individual properties. Over his tenure in McAllen, Griffin held more than 400 deeds for property throughout the town ranging from individual houses to irrigation companies.

Even while the Griffins were completing their own house, they embarked on a large commercial enterprise building the first tourist camp in McAllen. By the 1920s, McAllen businesses and entrepreneurs depended on tourists and visitors who might become residents and thus contribute to the Valley's economic base. Earlier, large "club houses" held the potential buyers, but by about 1930, they were found to be difficult to maintain on a permanent basis. Motor courts sprang up along the main highway through town with the hope that tourists would come for a visit, like what they saw, and come back to invest in the area. By building a motor court, Griffin was potentially attracting future home buyers which would increase his development interests.

Griffin based his design for a tourist camp on one he had seen in Houston. He designed the Grande Courts in the "Spanish" style with arches and white stucco finish. It was located on the eastern side of Palm Heights bordering on the canal. The tourist court opened in November 1926 (*Monty's Monthly*, November 1926: 49). Griffin expected the camp to attract thousands of tourists to McAllen and aid in the city's development by housing prospective home buyers (*McAllen Monitor* August 27, 1926, 1). The courts were opened on Monday October 22, 1926. Griffin hoped to "give the tourists a dollar's worth of real service for every \$1 they paid." The rate was \$2 per day and \$40 per month (*McAllen Monitor* October 22, 1926: 1). A photograph of the tourist court was featured in *Monty's Monthly* as one of Griffin's permanent contributions to his adopted home.

The Nickel-Plated Highway to Hell Controversy and the Hidalgo County Rebellion

More than a family man, real estate developer, and lawyer, Gordon became one of Hidalgo County's leading political activists in the 1920s. In fact, he is most famous for his role as a reformer and fiery orator during one of the most divisive and dangerous periods in Valley politics known as the Hidalgo County Rebellion, an event which marked the end of Boss Rule in Hidalgo County politics.

The political machine system in the Rio Grande Valley was "a network in which bosses in specific counties formed alliances and coalitions with their counterparts in surrounding counties" (Quezada 1). The system, which was firmly entrenched by the 1880s, operated much like it did in other American cities. Bosses assumed a paternalistic-like role and through personal interrelationships, they provided social and economic welfare for their constituents. Corruption, graft, and violence were common. In the Valley, the political machines relied on

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the manipulation and control of the Tejano vote and illegal Mexican votes to remain in power (Quezada 6). At the turn of the century, when large-scale irrigation took hold in the Valley, thousands of white settlers poured into the area and challenged the old-timers way of life. The newly arrived settlers brought with them both a commitment to honest government and a racist contempt for Mexican American involvement in politics, which was intensified during the violent years of the Mexican Revolution. In the early 1900s, the situation led to widespread rebellion against boss rule in South Texas (Anders, Boss Rule, Handbook of Texas Online). Some counties, such as neighboring Cameron County, rid themselves of the old boss system by 1920. The system didn't fall in Hidalgo County until 1930, and was a direct result of the Hidalgo County Rebellion, which started with the 1928 elections.

The history of Hidalgo County from the late 1870s through the late 1920s is riddled with stories of the political "bosses" who had armed gunmen on their payrolls and took numerous opportunities to engage in land swindling, stagecoach robberies, election fraud, and out-and-out murder. One notorious act of early Hidalgo County bosses D. B. Chapin, W. B. Sprague, and John Closner, soon after the turn of the century, was the underhanded theft of the traditional county seat at Hidalgo, on the Rio Grande, through intimidation and election fraud. The bosses rigged the election to move the county seat by holding it during a holiday when only their followers were told to vote. The architects of this plan wanted the county seat to be located on their own undeveloped land so that subsequent development there would be profitable to them. When the questionable votes came in, Closner and his cronies staged a nighttime robbery of the county archives, including the Commissioner's Court minutes. Several ox-carts hauled the valuable records from Hidalgo to an undeveloped stretch of brushland they originally dubbed Chapin, after one of their minions. There the records were held captive in a specially made safe under constant guard until a new courthouse could be built. Even the bosses knew when to draw the line, however. When D. B. Chapin had the bad luck to commit a murder in front of unshakeable witnesses, the other bosses changed the name of the new county seat to Edinburg (the name it still holds today) as it was unseemly to have the new county seat named for a killer.

Hidalgo County Sheriff, A.Y. Baker, was among the most infamous of the 20th century bosses and his influence was felt throughout the entire lower Rio Grande. Baker was a notorious thug whose hands tightly gripped the Hidalgo County purse strings. Baker had arrived in the Rio Grande Valley in 1896 as a Texas Ranger. Frequently accused of brutal tactics, he was tried in neighboring Cameron County in 1903 for the murder of Tejano rancher Ramon de la Cerda, who was accused of cattle theft on the King Ranch, and for the subsequent murder of de la Cerda's brother (a witness to the crime) in the streets of Brownsville (Quezada 18-19). Attorney James B. Wells, Jr. (the powerful political boss of Cameron County), defended Baker. The jury not only acquitted him of the crime, they praised him and the other Rangers for having performed a service which the local officers were unable to do. For the next several years, Baker worked as a mounted U.S. customs agent and began building his real estate fortune. With Wells' backing, Baker became firmly entrenched in the Hidalgo County political machine in 1908 when he was elected to the office of County Treasurer and worked closely with the county boss, Sherriff John Closner, for the next four years. In 1912, Baker and Closner, who desired the treasurer position, switched jobs. Several years later, Closner was found guilty of an egregious misappropriation of funds and forced to resign. Baker assumed the role of Hidalgo County's political boss. (Caldwell, Handbook of Texas Online).

As Hidalgo County boss, A.Y. Baker acquired large amounts of real estate and cash and was soon disparaged by his enemies as the "multimillionaire sheriff of Hidalgo County." He founded a Chrysler dealership. He was

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made president of the Edinburg State Bank and Trust, the Edinburg Improvement Company, the Edinburg Building Company, and the Edinburg Hotel Company. He also owned several large irrigation districts and controlled two of the county's newspapers, the *McAllen Daily Press* and the *Edinburg Valley Review* (Quezada 18-19). He was a large presence in local elections, often standing with his arms crossed in a conspicuous spot in the voting room as if to say, "You had better vote my way." Elections in Hidalgo County were said to be "over and under" – bosses recruited voters from "over" the Rio Grande, and put those who opposed them "under" the ground (Spence 15). Indeed, his ring resorted to all sorts of illegal election tactics, including paying poll taxes, transporting illegal Mexicans to the polls, stuffing ballot boxes, and tampering with election returns. Like all of the bosses in the Rio Grande Valley, he assumed a paternalistic attitude towards Tejano laboring class to win their vote, and used sheriff deputies to intimidate voters when needed (Quezada 18-19).

Most early Hidalgo County residents built their homes and ran their businesses according to the Boss system largely out of fear of retribution. But when thousands of "homeseekers" poured into the Valley in the 1910s and 1920s, they had the numbers to stand up and challenge the old order. The newcomers, many of whom had invested their life's savings into new homes in Hidalgo County, found a political system rife with corruption and cronyism led by the longtime "bosses." By that time, bosses controlled the irrigation districts, as well as construction activity, where some portion of the payment for land or houses was kicked back to the boss. The political machine influenced elections and skimmed public monies, threatening the well-being of schools and other civic institutions. Newcomers more accustomed to fair elections and fiscal responsibility, were appalled and angry at the seemingly unbreakable system.

The groups of reformers were composed mainly of recently arrived middle-class Republican businessmen and farmers, who banded together to take control of the situation. The reformers coalesced into the Citizen's Republican League (which later became the Good Government League), led by four influential men: Ed Couch, Dave Kirgan, mayor of Weslaco, Frank Freeland, mayor of McAllen, B. D. Kimbrough, and Gordon Griffin. Attorney Griffin was widely considered to be an effective orator and he became the voice of the Good Government League, urging county citizens to reject "politics as usual" in Hidalgo County.

In 1928, the league organized an open meeting at the McAllen High School to launch a campaign to wrest power from the boss-run county administration and vest it in their new Citizens Republican ticket. In September that year, leaders of the new party chose Griffin as their spokesman, and over 1,000 people jammed the school auditorium and corridors to listen to his message. By all accounts, Griffin's presentation electrified the audience, giving them hope for better government and urging them to action in the upcoming county elections. Griffin's parting message was that "The redemption of the past, the salvation of the present, and the hope of the future lie in the removal of that gang from Edinburg" – the very men who had earlier stolen the county seat. The crowd roared its approval and promised to vote in a new party with Griffin at the head of the ticket as candidate for district judge against the incumbent, Democrat J. E. Leslie.

Griffin reminded the taxpayers that Baker and his cohorts were the architects of what he so famously termed, "the nickel-plated highway to hell". Baker had apparently spearheaded a road project at public cost to his illegal saloon and gambling parlor on the Rio Grande. It didn't go anywhere else. The eight-mile road reportedly cost taxpayers \$100,000 per mile. In addition, travelers had to pay a toll which directly benefited Baker and his cohorts ("Hidalgo County Rebellion, Handbook of Texas Online). Griffin's oratory against Baker and Boss Rule brought the house down. Charles Fortson, who had been part of the existing administration but broke ranks

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and joined the reformers, described Griffin's galvanizing speech: "Griffin . . . so ably and fearlessly set forth his arguments . . . that his mere appearance on the platform now is the signal for round after round of deafening applause" (Spence 24).

During this period, a Women's Good Government League formed to support the reform party. About 60 women formed the initial group in Edinburg and the movement spread throughout the Lower Rio Grande. Recently granted suffrage, these women eagerly involved themselves in the nuts and bolts of local politics which they viewed as the path to better government, better schools, and a better society in South Texas. They discussed the issues, listened to speakers, and learned the proper procedure for filling out ballots (Spence 24-26). Women throughout Hidalgo County met in each other's homes to discuss strategies and goals to support the reform ticket led by Gordon Griffin. Mary Griffin, as the wife of a leading candidate and frequent society hostess (McAllen Monitor, May 13, 1927: 1; May 20: 1; January 20, 1928: 2), likely held some of these meetings in her new home on N. 15th Street.

In the weeks that led up to the election, Griffin tirelessly railed against the old administration and A. Y. Baker, in particular, traveling from town to town in Hidalgo County and making speeches at every stop. In anticipation of a fraudulent election, the reformers sent 2,000 telegrams to President Calvin Coolidge asking him to provide federal oversight to the election. They were told their appeal should be sent to the United States District Attorney, H. M. Holden, at Houston, who ultimately decided there was no need (Spence 50).

As the November election neared, the Citizens Republican ticket and Gordon Griffin appeared to be the popular favorites, almost sure to win all the seats on the ticket. Sheriff A.Y. Baker and his cronies were hard at work to make sure that didn't happen. Baker, who had managed to control county politics through bribery and intimidation for years, had more hands-on experience influencing voters than Griffin with his lofty goals and inspirational rhetoric. Still, Griffin appeared to have the upper hand in the days before the election and early returns showed him with a healthy lead.

The novice reform party celebrated their victory too soon, however. Baker, who stayed in the background through most of the campaign, blindsided the reformers by taking charge of the polling places on Election Day. First, he had his henchmen visibly present in the rooms to intimidate the voters. Then he had them collect the voting boxes at the end of the day. No one is known to have resisted their demands. By the end of the night, Baker possessed most of the county's votes and tallied them in his capacity as County Sheriff. When the votes were revealed on the Friday following the Tuesday election, the reform party and Gordon Griffin met defeat.

The Good Government League claimed that the Baker ring had stolen the election from Griffin by exercising voter intimidation and by throwing away ballots (the entire Weslaco box) cast in Baker's favor. Baker said the Weslaco ballots had been mutilated and, therefore, *had* to be thrown out. Furthermore, Baker countered the Good Government League's accusations by saying the GGL's own intimidation tactics had prevented hundreds of Tejanos from voting in favor of Democratic candidates (Quezada 22).

The scandal brought state and national attention to the corruption entrenched in Hidalgo County politics. A caravan of 400 automobiles traveled from Edinburg to the state capitol in Austin to protest the election results and expose the fraud. Baker filed suit against the secretary of state to get the Weslaco box counted, but lost, causing the Citizens Republican Committee of Hidalgo County to ask a U.S. congressional committee to review

Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

the situation (Montejano, 147-148). Meanwhile, the June 22, 1929 issue of *Collier's*, a national magazine with a reputation as a proponent for social reform, ran an article by Owen P. White titled "High-handed and Hell-bent" which focused on exposing the corrupt practices of Baker and his ring and focused on the Nickel Plated Highway to Hell (Quezada 22-23). In February 1930, a U. S. Congressional Committee found that the evidence against Baker was overwhelming and a Federal grand jury indicted Baker and other county officials "conspiracy to injure persons in their exercise of civil rights in violation of the United States civil code." Baker died before he was convicted.

In what became known later as the "Hidalgo County Rebellion," reformers sought to throw off the existing mantle of Boss Rule and corrupt government. After the 1930 federal indictments, some loyal Democrats switched to the Good Government League Party, who ran on a platform to rid the county of the last vestiges of bossism. Baker died on November 1, 1930, and the Good Government League's candidates swept the November 6 elections, winning every county office by a landslide and effectively signaling the end of boss-controlled politics in Hidalgo County (Montejano 148; Quezada 23).

The Hidalgo County Rebellion was a late example of the newcomer vs. old timer political rift, an event in which Mexican American voters were caught in the middle. Mexicans and Mexican Americans had been pitted against one another in the campaign, with both parties patronizing and demonizing the Valley's Hispanic citizens as it suited their needs. Though the newcomers had successfully ousted the old-timers from political office and diminished their influence, the unfortunate result was that the disenfranchisement of Mexican American voters became standard practice (Montejano 147-148). However, one noteworthy result of the Hidalgo County Rebellion was the formation in 1930 of the Hidalgo County Chapter of LULAC, the League of United Latin American Citizens.¹

Griffin remained a mainstay in the reform party and continued to work on its behalf into the 1930s. He was remembered as one of the four architects of the Hidalgo County Rebellion and was undoubtedly the most charismatic and persuasive champion for reform and the removal of Boss Rule in the region.

After the Rebellion

Griffin went on to fight for reform in Hidalgo County throughout the 1930s. He ran for public office to no avail. There is evidence that ballots were tampered with once again. Even with A. Y. Baker gone from the scene, feelings still ran high as a result of the Hidalgo County Rebellion and Baker's friends continued to spar with newcomers to the Valley. Griffin continued to buy and sell land but in the Great Depression of the 1930s, he met with less success. He relied primarily on his law practice to support his family. Possibly due to the election debacle and continued corruption in Hidalgo County politics, the Griffins decided to move from the Valley.

¹ Statewide, LULAC's formation was actually more than a decade in the making, and was created when several smaller reform organizations finally merged. The outcry produced by the Hidalgo County Rebellion was a significant factor in finally motivating the regionally-based groups to unify under a single statewide organization which could more effectively address political disfranchisement, racial segregation, and racial discrimination.

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In 1939, Mary and Gordon Griffin sold their house to J. F. and Helen Palmer for \$8,250. The Griffin family remained in McAllen at least through the 1940 census where they are shown at another address. Perhaps they stayed so that Gordon Jr. could graduate from McAllen High School as he was sixteen years old at the time. Shortly after the 1940 census, the Griffin family moved to Brownwood, Texas. Their tenure in McAllen and Hidalgo County was over.

J. F. Palmer and his wife occupied the house on N. 15th Street for about ten years. Palmer was the owner of Walgreens Drug Store in downtown McAllen. Between 1950 and 1952 several short term owners lived in the house. In 1952, members of the De Julio family purchased the house and various family members lived in it through the 1970s. Fred and Dorothy De Julio converted the two-car garage to a studio apartment for Dorothy's parents about 1961. Their son, Rick, may have added a one-room addition to the rear of the house in the 1970s. Rick became active in historic preservation, wrote the city's first Landmark nomination for a house across the street, and served on the McAllen Landmarks Commission for many years.

Conclusion

The Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House has been meticulously maintained since it was built in 1926. In addition, the house is very intact with only a few changes inside and out. The DeJulio's remodeled the two-car garage into a studio apartment but it retains its form, footprint, and materials to a large degree. At some time in the past, possibly the 1970s, a one-room addition was attached to the rear (east) of the house. Care was taken to match the brick as closely as possible. Tall, narrow windows bespeak of its 1970s construction. Otherwise, the house appears very much like it did in 1926 with its asymmetrical, linear form, 1/1 double hung sash and wood casement windows, projecting entry way with round-arched windows, and wrought iron lights and grilles. Its definitive chimney with red clay tile chimney cap resembles a Mission bell tower. Inside, multi-light French doors abound from the dining room, to the east bedroom, living room, and loggia. The floorplan is nearly identical to that designed in 1926 with the exception of a slightly larger kitchen.

The Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House is eligible for National Register listing under Criterion B in the area of politics/government for its association with Gordon Griffin, attorney, developer, and a pivotal figure in the Hidalgo County Rebellion of 1928, a highly significant local event. It is also nominated under Criterion C, for Architecture, as an outstanding example of Spanish-influenced residential design in early suburban McAllen.

Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

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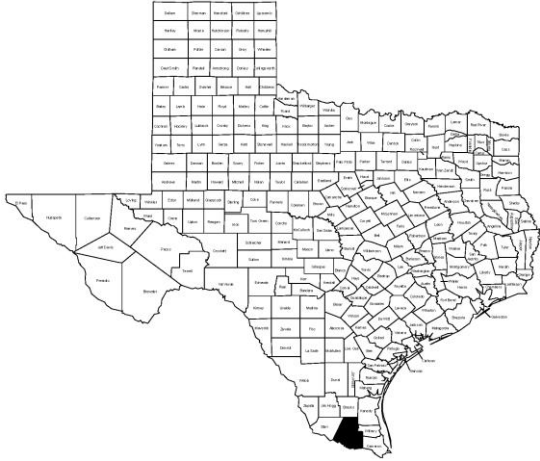
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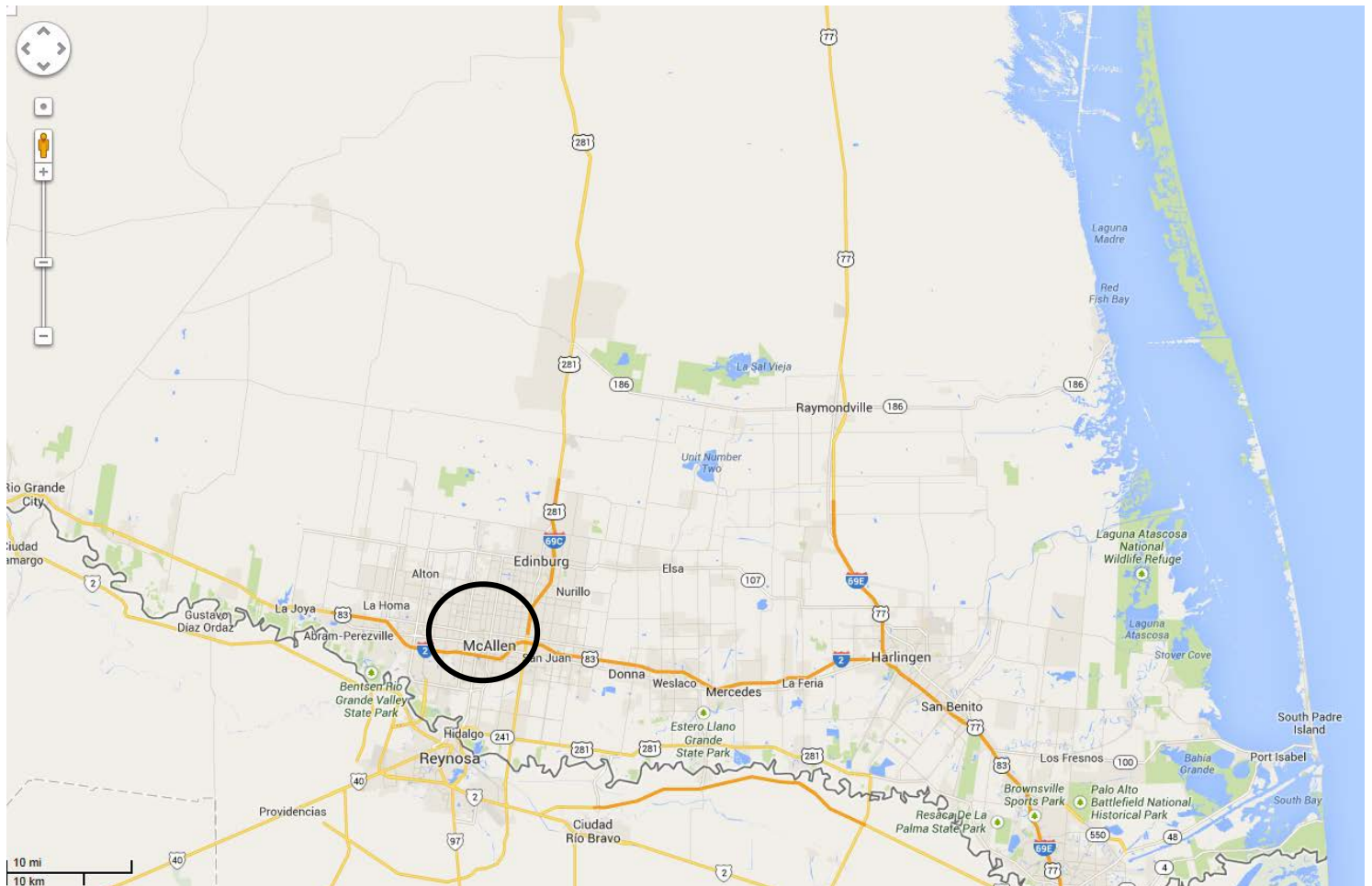
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Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Map 1: Hidalgo County (shaded) is located in extreme south Texas, along the U.S.-Mexico border.

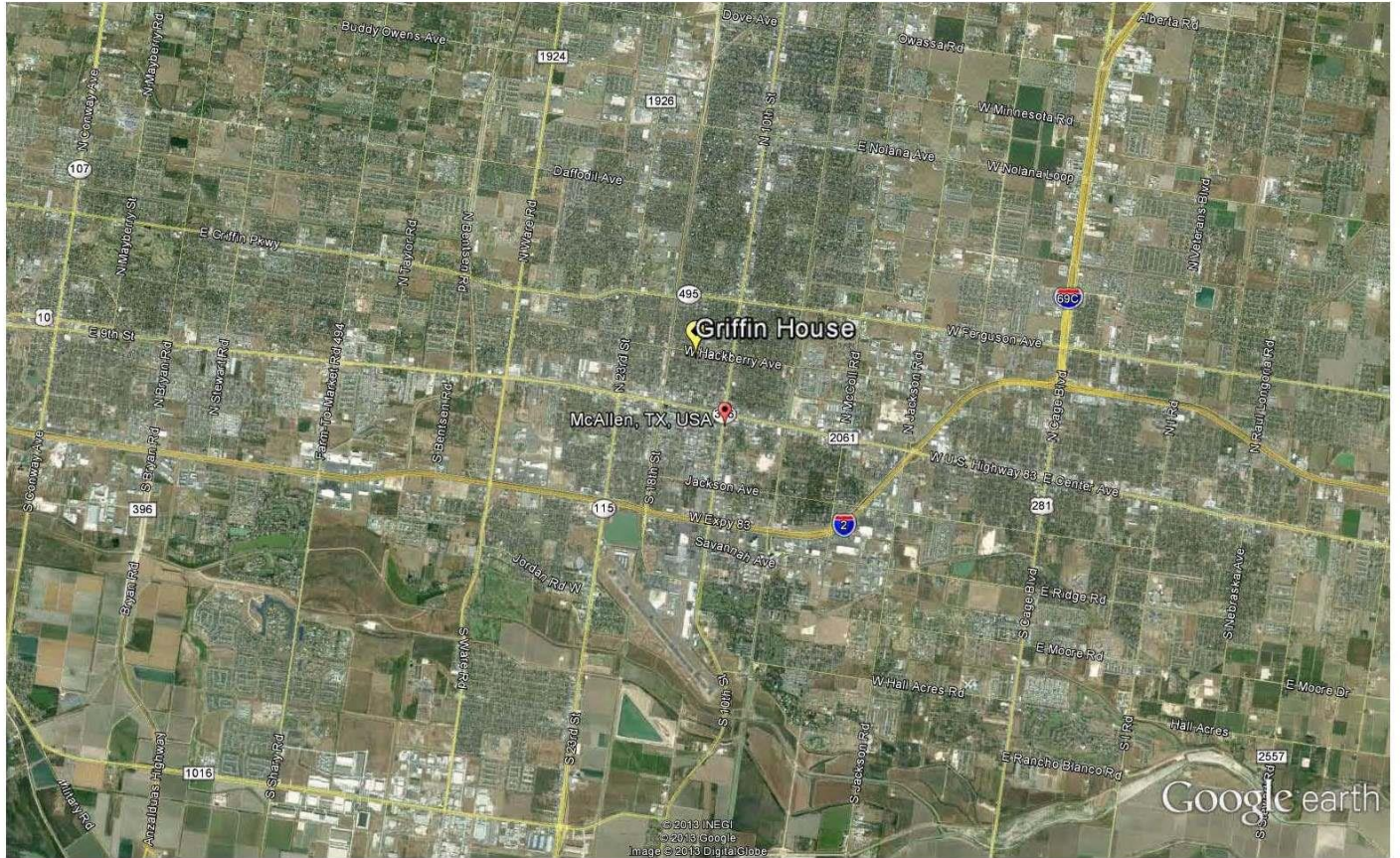


Map 2: McAllen (circled) is located in the southern portion of Hidalgo County.



Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Map 3: Google Earth map depicts Griffin House's approximate location within the city of McAllen, a short distance north of downtown.



Google earth



Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Map 4: Scaled Google Earth map provides locational data and approximate boundary for the Griffin House.



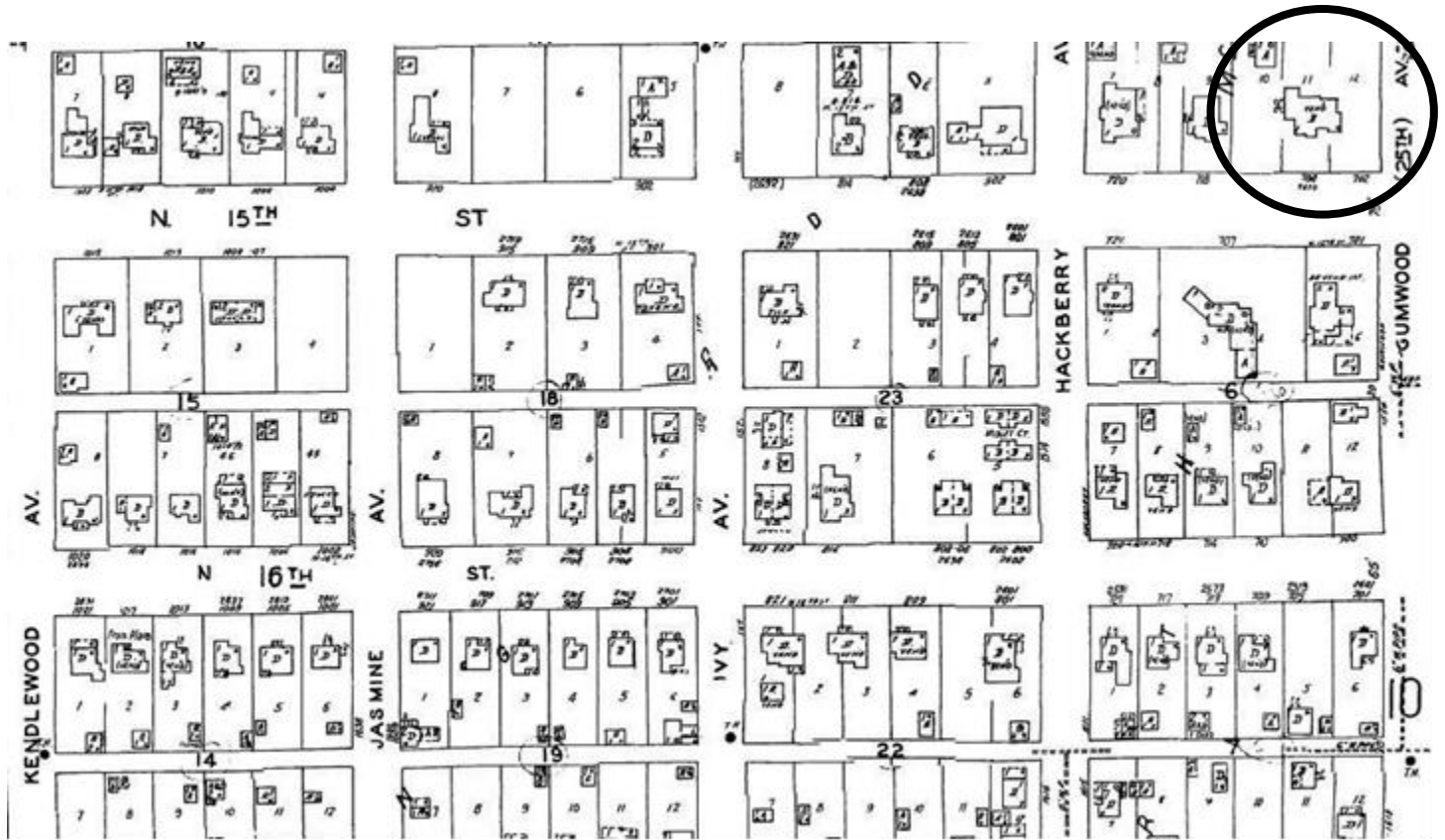
Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Map 5: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map of McAllen, 1929. Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, 704 N. 15th Street (circled). Top edge of map is east.



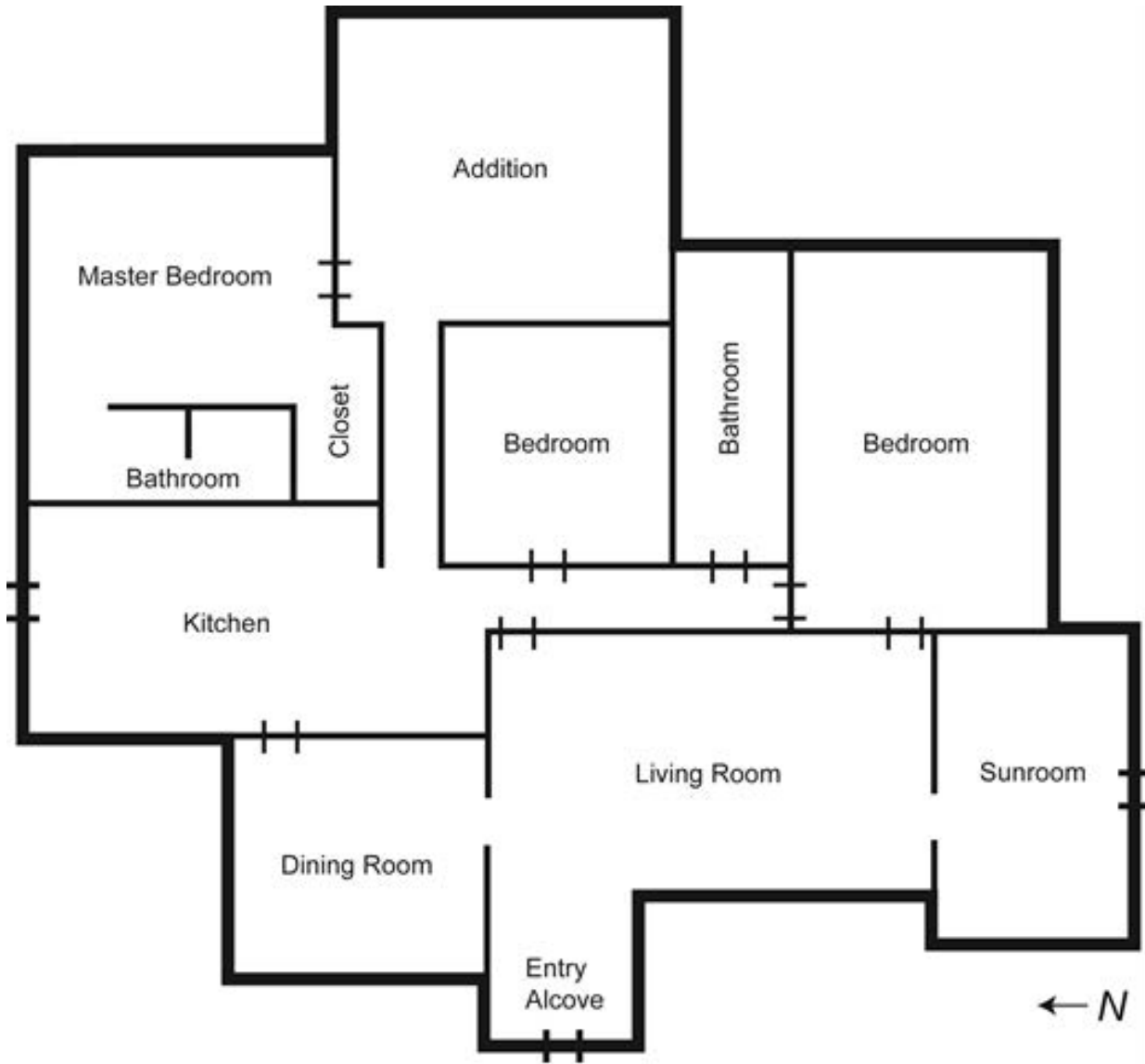
Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Map 6: Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map, 1949. Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, 704 N. 15th Street (circled). Top edge of map is east.



Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Figure 1: Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, Floor Plan



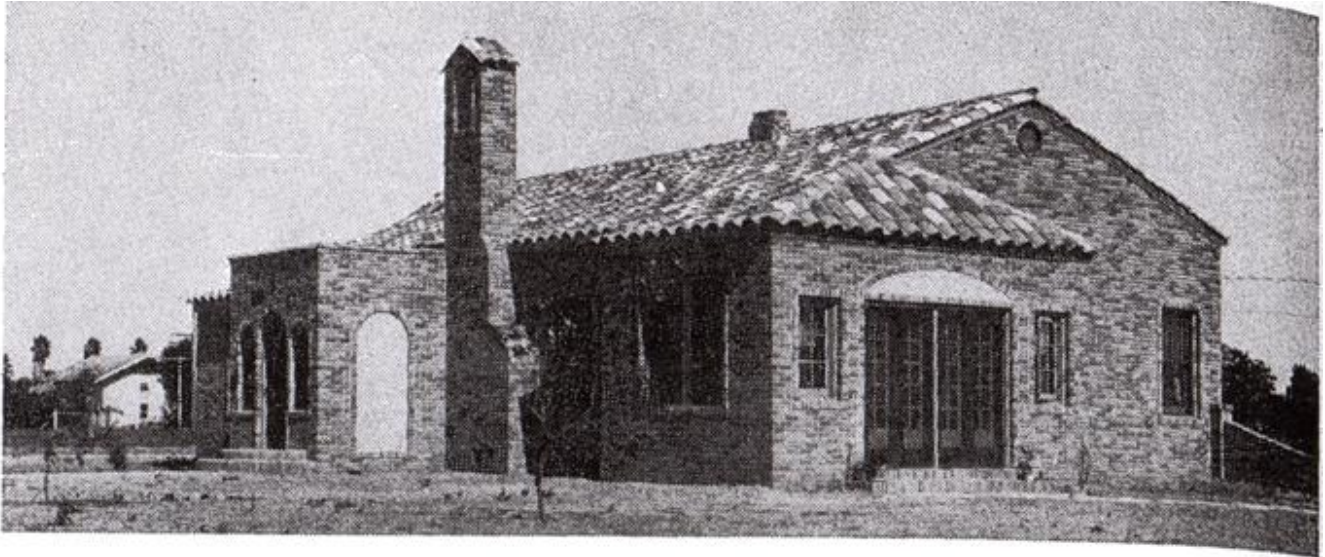
Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House

Floor Plan

Approximate Scale: 0 5' 10' 15' 20'

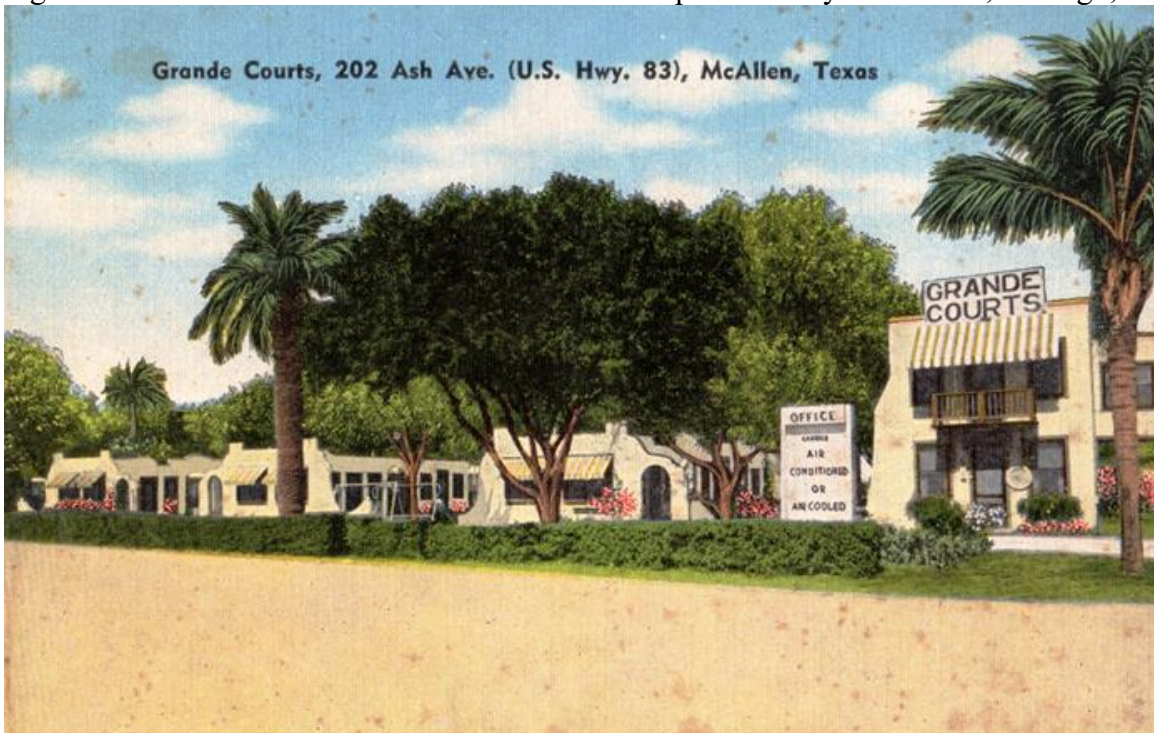
Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas

Figure 2: Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House (southwest oblique), as published in *Monty's Monthly*, November 1926, page 12.



Delightful new tile and brick home of Gordon Griffin of McAllen. The Spanish influence, which is so suited to the semi-tropical climates, is well defined in its lines.

Figure 3: Gordon Griffin's Grande Courts. Postcard published by R.C. Shaul, Chicago, no date.















UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Griffin, Mary S. and Gordon, House

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: TEXAS, Hidalgo

DATE RECEIVED: 5/06/14 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 5/29/14
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 6/13/14 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 6/22/14
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 14000341

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 6-13-14 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in
The National Register
of
Historic Places

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER _____ DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
real places telling real stories



TO: Edson Beall
 National Park Service
 National Register of Historic Places
 1201 Eye Street, NW (2280)
 Washington, DC 20005

FROM: Carlyn Hammons
 Texas Historical Commission

RE: New Submission, National Register Nomination
 Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House, Hidalgo County, TX

DATE: April 24, 2014

The following materials are submitted:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Original National Register of Historic Places form and electronic locational data (in .kmz format) on CD. The enclosed disk contains the true and correct copy of the nomination for the <u>Mary S. and Gordon Griffin House</u> to the National Register of Historic Places. <i>ckh</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Resubmitted nomination.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Original NRHP signature page signed by the Texas SHPO.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Multiple Property Documentation form on disk.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Resubmitted form.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Original MPDF signature page signed by the Texas SHPO.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	CD with six (6) TIFF photograph files.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Correspondence

COMMENTS:

- SHPO requests substantive review (cover letter from SHPO attached)
- The enclosed owner objections (do) (do not) constitute a majority of property owners
- Other:

