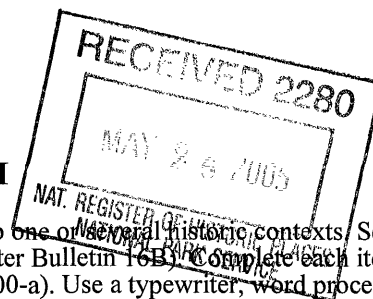


645-924

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
MULTIPLE PROPERTY DOCUMENTATION FORM**



This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or more historic contexts. See instructions in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

☒ New Submission ☐ Amended Submission

**A. Name of Multiple Property Listing**

Historic and Architectural Resources of Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas

**B. Associated Historic Contexts**

Planning and Community Development in Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas: 1848-1955

Ethnic Heritage: Spanish Colonial, 1747-1810; Mexican/Mexican American 1810-1953; French, ca. 1860-ca. 1910; German, ca. 1860-1900, Jewish, ca. 1865-1940.

Architecture: 1848-1955

Economic Development: 1848-1955

**C. Form Prepared by**

Name/Title: Terri Myers, Historian  
Street & Number: 823 Harris Avenue  
City or Town: Austin

Date: July 2004  
Telephone: (512) 478-0898  
State: TX Zip Code: 78705

**D. Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature and title of certifying official

4/2/05  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

7/8/05  
Date

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USDI/NPS NRHP Multiple Property Documentation Form  
Historic and Architectural Resources of Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas

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**E. Statement of Historic Contexts** (Document historic contexts on one or more continuation sheets. If more than one historic context is documented, present them in sequential order.)

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INTRODUCTION

Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas, lies on the U.S./Mexico border on the lower Rio Grande about halfway between Laredo and Brownsville. Two *porciones* – Spanish land grants – contribute to the town of Rio Grande City. The land was part of the 18th century Carnestolendes ranch, owned by descendants of the original Spanish colonists of the area who lived in the villa of Camargo, across the river. In the early 19th century, the region weathered a period of political upheaval as it passed from the hands of Spain to Mexico, to Texas, and finally to the United States as a result of the Mexican War. Many Americans, both soldiers and civilians, accompanied General Zachary Taylor to the South Texas frontier and a number of them stayed in the region to carve out new lives for themselves. One American, Henry Clay Davis, reportedly arrived in the region a decade before the war but with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which gave the land north of the Rio Grande to the United States, he staked his claim to the land encompassing present Rio Grande City. Davis obtained his *porcion* by virtue of his marriage to Hilaria de la Garza, a descendant of the original grantee. After the end of the Mexican War in 1848, Davis and his partner Britton Forbes laid out a city destined to be the seat of newly established Starr County. Unlike the Spanish colonial villas on the south side of the river, which centered on a town square, Rio Grande City was platted in a grid pattern. It was laid out with wide streets and a central esplanade leading from the Rio Grande to a courthouse block at the top of a hill overlooking the town and facing the river. Rio Grande City is one of the oldest permanent communities on the U.S side of the river, pre-dating such railroad-inspired towns of the lower Rio Grande as Mission, McAllen, and Harlingen, by more than half a century. Despite its founders' hopes, Rio Grande City grew only slowly, but nearby Fort Ringgold provided a source of local employment and services. In fact, the town attracted a fairly cosmopolitan populace in the early years. Nineteenth century settlers included descendants of the original Spanish colonists as well as Mexican, German, French, Jewish, Swiss and Irish immigrants. The city's architecture reflects the different cultures that contributed to the city's growth. Today, Rio Grande City has spread out along Highway 83 to the east and west and has the same type of new construction seen throughout South Texas, but within the boundaries of the original city lies an extraordinary collection of historic resources dating from the 1860s through the early 20th century.

NATURAL SETTING

The topography of the site of Rio Grande City is generally flat; a slight rise marks the site where the courthouse square is located today. Although the region is known as the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the land actually forms a delta rather than a valley, and inclination leading from the town to the river is very slight. When Henry Clay Davis originally platted the town in 1848, the north bank of the Rio Grande closely approached Water Street. More recently the river has been re-channeled, and a swampy stretch of floodplain now separates the town from the river. The climate is hot and occasionally humid through most of the spring, summer and fall. The land supports limited vegetation including low bushes, prickly pears, and mesquite trees. The floodplain along the river hosts black willow, giant cane, common reed, and rush. Some non-native trees have been introduced in the town and much of the indigenous vegetation on the surrounding land has been cleared for agricultural use (Kibler, 6).

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SPANISH EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION: 1519-1810

The Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas was first explored and settled by Spain as part of Mexico, or New Spain, as the region was called. Settlement in the *frontera* was intended as a kind of buffer zone to protect the northern boundary of New Spain. Typically, the Spanish *frontera* in New Spain – and manifest in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in the present United States – consisted of municipalities, presidios or forts, missions, and ranches. A defensive band of unoccupied lands – usually a hostile or uninhabitable environment – lay ahead of the *frontera* as a protective shield against intruders to the settlements or the interior.

*Native American Heritage and Decline*

The lower Rio Grande Valley region was inhabited by nomadic bands of Coahuiltecan Indians prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The Carrizo were the most prominent of the various subgroups of the Coahuiltecan peoples in the Lower Rio Grande at the time of Spanish contact. They traveled in autonomous bands of as many as two hundred persons but are thought to have had little social, economic or political organization. The Coahuiltecan depended largely on deer, antelope and javelina (pecaries) for meat. They also ate rabbits, rodents, birds and insects, but most of their diet consisted of vegetarian fare including prickly pear fruit and mesquite beans. Coahuiltecan also engaged in intense warfare primarily to settle disputes between tribal leaders and to secure hunting grounds. Slaves were often stolen from other bands and received cruel treatment at the hands of their captors. According to lost sixteenth century explorer Cabeza de Vaca, the Coahuiltecan apparently engaged in female infanticide and left their elderly and sick to die in the harsh environment (Thompson 1994: 19).

With the arrival of the Spanish in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, the Coahuiltecan way of life was lost forever. Disease, particularly smallpox, decimated the bands. In addition, missionary efforts to convert the natives led to their assimilation. A number of families from the Carrizo band joined the Spanish colonists at Dolores (Nuestra Senora de los Dolores), the first Spanish settlement on the north side of the Rio Grande, upriver from present Rio Grande City. There they farmed and converted to Christianity, although later reports indicated they were treated as veritable slaves by the Spanish grantee of Dolores, Jose Vasquez Borrego (Thompson 1994: 20).

Most of the Coahuiltecan, however, rejected settlement and conversion and attempted to retain their traditional lifeways in the face of increasing odds. They were eventually eradicated by warfare, disease, or both. By 1850, only a few small bands of the once dominant Carrizo remained along the banks of the Rio Grande (Thompson 1994: 20).

*Jose Escandon and the Advent of Spanish Colonization*

Alonso Alvarez de Pineda may have been the first European to see South Texas when he was commissioned by the governor of Jamaica, Francisco Garay, to explore and map the coast of Florida in 1519. Garay's desire to find an all-water route to the Orient sent Pineda with four ships and 270 men on a journey that discover such a route. Although Pineda was unsuccessful in his efforts, he did manage to map the entire coast from Florida to Veracruz, Mexico, including the Gulf Coast and South Texas. Pineda's explorations along the way helped establish Spanish claim to the land, a claim it would exercise for the next three centuries. Pineda's expedition also indicated that the most advantageous site for Spanish settlement was at the mouth of the Rio de los Palmas, a river apparently mistaken for the Rio Grande.

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Several subsequent expeditions brought Spanish adventurers to the Lower Rio Grande in the two centuries that followed but no permanent settlements were undertaken in that region until the mid-eighteenth century. The Spanish had become concerned about the potential for French and English encroachment into their northern territory known as *Seno Mexicano*. The vast frontier of New Spain includes present Tamaulipas, part of Nuevo Leon, and much of South Texas – including the site of Rio Grande City. To discourage foreign incursions into the region, Spain decided to extend its *frontera* to include the Lower Rio Grande Valley by establishing a network of settlements colonized by families and supported by soldiers in the region.

In 1746, Lieutenant General Jose de Escandon was commissioned to lead the colonization effort of what became known as Nuevo Santander. On February 24, 1747, Escandon set out from Queretaro on a reconnaissance expedition of the area with 1,700 soldiers. He located tributaries of the Rio Grande and noted potential irrigation and habitation sites and returned to Queretaro with his findings. Escandon recommended that 14 *villas* or towns be located in the new colony and requested 58,000 pesos to finance the endeavor (Thompson 1994: 26). News of the undertaking and the prospect of free land for colonists spread throughout the northeastern region of New Spain in the months following Escandon's return. Escandon recruited more than 6,000 colonists from northern Nuevo Leon and Coahuila and organized four expeditions to be led by himself, Blas Maria de la Garza Falcon, Miguel de la Garza Falcon and Joaquin de Oroobio Bazterra (Tijerina and Kibler 1994: 12).

The first caravan of pioneers left Queretaro in December 1748. Prospective settlers from Coahuila and Nuevo Leon joined the small band, swelling its numbers, as it traveled northward toward the site of the proposed villa on the Rio Grande. The first group to reach the Rio Grande was led by Jose Maria de la Garza Falcon who had been given permission to found a villa on the south bank of the river where it joined its tributary, the San Juan. De la Garza was an influential stock raiser from Nuevo Leon who persuaded his brother Miguel, his father-in-law Don Nicolas de los Santos Coy, and other relatives to join him in founding the settlement. The family of stock raisers drove some 1,300 sheep with them to their new home (Thompson 1994: 27). The de la Garzas and Coys were typical of the type of settlers who joined the settlement expedition. Although Escandon's colonists included farmers, laborers and craftsmen, a large number were well-to-do gentlemen who would find it most difficult to live and work on the frontier.

On March 5, 1749, the first of the Rio Grande colonies, La Villa de Santa Ana de Camargo, was founded. Within six months, Escandon succeeded in establishing 13 *villas* and missions in the region; Camargo and Reynosa on the south bank of the Rio Grande were at the northernmost edge of the settlement. Two other *villas* were established on the south bank of the river, Revilla (later renamed Guerrero) and Mier in 1750 and 1752. In 1750, Jose Vasquez Borrego with twelve other families established the first settlement on the north side of the river in what is now the United States, Nuestra Senora de los Dolores (Thompson 1994: 28). Escandon sanctioned Borrego's villa as part of his colonial effort.

Although they were promised free land by Escandon in his recruitment efforts, colonists were required to petition the Spanish government for official recognition of their ownership. As early as 1753, colonial settlers began petitioning the government for property allocations, but it was not until 1767 that a Royal Commission --the *Visita* of 1767 -- arrived in Escandon's colonies to survey the land and determine ownership of individual parcels. Private settlers were apportioned parcels of land based on their seniority in the colonies and on merit. The Spanish government instructed the Royal Commissioners to record their transactions in order to establish clear title from the Crown of Spain (Scott). The Royal Commission established five jurisdictions along the Rio Grande. These were named for the Spanish towns of Camargo, Mier, Reynosa, Revilla (Guerrero) and Laredo. Each jurisdiction was then subdivided into *porciones* that would be allocated to settlers. *Porciones* were elongated, narrow strips of land that spanned both sides of the river. The major municipalities were established on the south bank of the river and the *porciones* that extended across the river to the north were used

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primarily for grazing livestock— *ganado mayor* (cattle and horses) and *ganado menor* (goats and sheep). The intent of the narrow land divisions was to give water rights – via river frontage on the Rio Grande – to the greatest number of settlers possible. However, the *porciones* typically stretched several miles to afford the landowner sufficient grazing land.

Escandon's settlements along the Rio Grande were primarily secular in nature: although Escandon established 15 missions, his colonies were largely organized around the municipality and the ranch rather than the church or the presidio. On the Lower Rio Grande, the municipalities or *villas* were dispersed along the river and surrounded by ranches. North of the *porciones* lay a band of larger ranches stretching about 100 miles to provide a buffer zone against intruders over unoccupied lands. Escandon's systematic efforts succeeded in establishing the foundation for a long term settlement in a hostile environment far from the center of commerce or military support. A census conducted in the 1750s counted a total of 6,385 colonists in 2,837 families residing in Escandon's municipalities (Tijerina and Kibler 1994: 11).

*The Origins of Carnestolendes Ranch*

The spatial configuration inaugurated by Escandon – with municipalities or *villas* on the south bank of the Rio Grande and ranch lands on the north – persisted until the end of the Mexican War in 1848. Regular Indian raids on ranches discouraged permanent development or investment. Because Escandon's *porciones* distributed land in narrow strips spanning both sides of the river, ranch owners generally lived in fortified towns like Camargo, Reynosa, Mier, and Revilla (later renamed Guerrero), on the south side of the river. However, a few small ranch outposts did exist on the north side of the river before 1848. They included San Ygnacio (established ca. 1830), about 90 miles upriver from Rio Grande City, Ramireño (1810) about five miles southeast of San Ygnacio, Uribeño (1822) about 10 miles southeast of San Ygnacio, Capitaneño (ca. 1780), about 13 miles southeast of San Ygnacio and Lopeño (1821), about seven miles north of Falcon dam (George 1975: 59). Typically, construction on these outposts consisted of one or more locally-quarried stone buildings for shelter and defense along with a handful of pole-supported, thatch-roofed *jacales* for ranch hands and animal shelters. Carnestolendes, the ranch on which Rio Grande City was founded, was reportedly established in 1819 and likely resembled the other ranch outposts in the area (Starr County Scrapbook).

Although most of the permanent settlements that arose directly from Escandon's efforts lay on the south bank of the Rio Grande, a few of the ranches on the north bank eventually developed into Texas towns or ranching communities. Among them were El Sauz, San Ygnacio, Los Saenz, Los Olmos and Carnestolendes, a ranch associated with de la Garza family of Escandon's *Villa de Camargo*. Typical of the Rio Grande valley settlement pattern, the Carnestolendes ranch occupied the north bank of the river while the municipality of Camargo was located just opposite on the south bank. Carnestolendes would be the future site of Rio Grande City (Barrera et. al.). The exact origins of Carnestolendes are unknown but the property fell under the jurisdiction of Escandon's villa of Camargo. Blas Maria de la Garza Falcon, one of Escandon's expedition leaders and a resident of Camargo, was given permission to establish herds on the north bank of the river and was instructed to settle 15 families on the ranch. He named the ranch Carnestolendes for the carnival that precedes Lent. His father-in-law, Don Nicolas de los Santos Coy established a ranch called Guardado (now Garceno) about nine miles to the west. Falcon and Coy were among the earliest of Escandon's colonists to establish a presence on the north side of the river in present Starr County (Barrera et. al.).

The establishment of these vast ranches also laid the foundation for the great Texas and American beef and wool industries (Tijerina and Kibler 1994: 11). Except for the villas of Laredo and Dolores, which themselves were merely a handful of houses and outbuildings in the 18th and early 19th centuries, these ranches remained small one- or two-dwelling complexes operated by a patriarch, his extended family, and servants, until

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the mid-nineteenth century. Most commerce was conducted with the merchants of Escandon's villas on the south side of the river.

**POLITICAL UPHEAVAL: 1810-1848**

In a span of only 25 years, between 1821 and 1846, government of the border communities changed hands from Spain to Mexico to Texas and, finally, to the United States. Spanish jurisdiction over the border communities was challenged when Mexico revolted against its sovereign in 1810. By 1821, the revolution was concluded, giving Mexico authority over present Texas. Within a few years, however, a consortium of American settlers and Tejanos threw off the Mexican government and organized an independent Republic of Texas in 1836. Until 1845, when Texas sought admission to the United States, these political turnovers prompted little significant change in the day-to-day lives of the border communities. Texas' annexation by the United States in 1846, however, precipitated the Mexican War and ultimately brought both political order and cultural upheaval to the region. At the end of the war in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo granted the United States all territory in Texas north of the Rio Grande and the citizens of the border communities on the north bank of the river became American citizens.

The evolution of ranches on Escandon's *villas* into Texas towns like Rio Grande City took place within this volatile political context. Toward the end of the 18th century, many Spanish subjects in the New World began to chafe at monarchical rule and embraced the idea of liberation. Events in Spain in the early 19th century, such as the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, weakened the king's grip on Mexico. A movement for Mexican Independence was begun in earnest in 1810. Soldiers guarding the northern frontier were called to the interior to protect the government and the colonists suffered from continual Indian attack as a result. In 1821, the Spanish were overthrown and Mexico became a republic two years later. In 1824 Nuevo Santander – which included the lands north of the Rio Grande to the Nueces River – became part of the new state of Tamaulipas.

*The Republic of Texas: 1835-1846*

At the same time, Mexican federalists called for renewed efforts to colonize lands north of the Rio Grande for economic development. Few Mexican settlers ventured beyond the Rio Grande into northern Tamaulipas because of its poor soil, lack of water, and hostile Indians. Anglo-Americans, however, were attracted to Texas – north of the Nueces and west of the Medina rivers – in the new Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas. Americans came to Texas in great numbers and flexed their political muscle, incurring the suspicions and eventually the wrath of a new anti-federalist government in Mexico City led by Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana. In 1835, Texans declared their independence from Mexico and defeated Santa Ana in a war that established the Republic of Texas the following year.

Yet the political status of the Tamaulipas region – including Carnestolendes – remained in question. Encouraged by their success, entrepreneurial Anglo-Americans immediately identified the Rio Grande as the boundary between Texas and Mexico. However, claim to the territory between the Rio Grande and the Nueces River remained unresolved for another fifteen years following Texas' independence. During that time, the Texas Republic sent several military expeditions to the Rio Grande to prove its claim but the ill-prepared bands were repulsed by the Mexican Army. In a state of perpetual uncertainty, many Tejano ranchers sought safety across the Rio Grande in Mexico. Intending to return once hostilities ceased, they temporarily deserted their ranches and livestock (Tijerina and Kibler, 1994: 14). The region was in chaos and a movement arose to declare a new Republic that would be independent of both Mexico and Texas. Headed by rancher Antonio Canales and supported by other ranchers of the region, the Independent Republic of the Rio Grande claimed the land between the Nueces and Ciudad Victoria, in Tamaulipas, Mexico. The insurgents pressed their claim in 1839

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and 1840 but were put down by the Mexican Army. Still, the attempt indicated the absence of stable leadership and government along the Rio Grande during the short-lived Texas Republic (Tijerina and Kibler, 1994: 15).

*The Mexican War: 1846-1848*

When the United States formally annexed Texas on February 19, 1846, it assumed its border with Mexico was defined by the Rio Grande River. For Mexicans and South Texans, however, the international boundary was less clear. Many felt that the region between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers should be part of Mexico or an independent state. The United States' determined effort toward Manifest Destiny and President Polk's desire to acquire even more Mexican land ignited tensions, and war broke out on April 25, 1846. For the duration of the two-year war, Zachary Taylor transported troops and supplies by steamboat upriver to Rancho Davis (formerly Carnestolendes) on the north bank of the Rio Grande and Camargo on the south side. From there, Taylor's troops traveled overland to the Mexican interior. American troops reportedly spent some leisure time at the Davis place, known to them as Rancho Davis or Davis Ranch, before heading into Mexico. Henry Clay Davis recognized the commercial potential of a river port on the Rio Grande in an age when steamboat was the most expedient means to travel through the arid and hostile area. Steamboats had proved invaluable to the United States army during the Mexican War when captains Mifflin Kennedy and Richard King transported troops and supplies up and down the Rio Grande. When the army established an encampment (Ringgold Barracks, later Camp Ringgold) and steamboat landing on the north side of the river on the Garza land, it encouraged Davis to develop a townsite near the military outpost. The encampment was later renamed Fort Ringgold after the first American officer killed on Texas soil during the Mexican War.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo brought the war to a close on February 8, 1848 and established the Rio Grande as the southern boundary of both Texas and the United States. Perhaps the greatest consequence of the treaty on the day-to-day lives of the region's people stemmed from the wholesale transfer of land from the Tejano ranchers to the American opportunists who flocked to the "new" territory by the hundreds during and after the Mexican War.

*Border Disputes: Carbajal, Cortina, and the Republic of the Rio Grande*

In the minds of the United States' Federal government, the Mexican War firmly established the Rio Grande as the nation's border with Mexico. For the occupants of the region of South Texas between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers, however, the border seemed much less fixed, and rebellions of various sorts continued to erupt. In 1851, the idea emerged that the region should align with northern Mexico to secede and form an independent republic. The rebellion was led by Jose Jesus Maria Carbajal, a former resident of Hidalgo County, and supported by many on both sides of the Rio Grande – including Rio Grande City founders Henry Clay Davis and Captain Forbes Britton. Carbajal's intent became known as the Plan de la Loba or the Republic of Sierra Madre. Under his command, the "republic army" captured the Mexican cities of Camargo and Reynosa, and attacked Matamoros. Ultimately the rebellion was squelched and the United States Army arrested Carbajal in Rio Grande City.

Yet the region remained volatile. In 1859, displaced landowner Juan Nepomuceno Cortina began to raid south Texas and northern Mexico. Some denounced Cortina a mere bandit, while others considered him a patriot. Rio Grande City again played an important role in quelling the uprising. Federal forces defeated Cortina in Rio Grande City and forced him to retreat into northern Mexico on December 27, 1859. Cortina and his followers were not deterred and they continued to raid the border region. In March 1860, Colonel Robert E. Lee left his post in San Antonio to pursue Cortina along the border, but Cortina remained elusive. Lee spent a



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short period of time at Fort Ringgold (then known as Ringgold Barracks) and the frame building that he reputedly occupied is the oldest known building at the fort.

CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC ASSIMILATION

Despite the various border raids, the combined presence of the U.S. Army and a Texas Ranger police force during the Mexican War established a semblance of order and the American county system replaced the Spanish municipality as the basis of government. Along with General Zachary Taylor's army came American merchants, steamboat operators (such as Richard King of the famed King Ranch and Mifflin Kenedy, for whom Kenedy County is named) and others who laid the foundation for a civilian market system in the Rio Grande region. The merchants supplied food, clothing and other goods to the army while the steamboat operators transported troops up and down the Rio Grande. Their experience during the war led to the establishment of a postwar trading network on the river.

The Americans introduced infrastructural changes to the border region, as well. The army improved existing roads and constructed new ones during the war. The "Old Military Highway" that paralleled the Rio Grande approximates present U.S. Highway 281. It facilitated troop movement during the war but was soon adopted as the principal road between the upriver town of Laredo and Brownsville near the Gulf.

*Transfer of Land Rights*

At the war's conclusion, Tejano property owners were compelled to prove that their land grants could be traced to the Spanish Crown, and Anglo entrepreneurs eagerly laid claim to any unsubstantiated Tejano land grants. However, much of the Spanish/Mexican land, though granted to individuals, was generally used communally with registered brands used to identify ownership of the stock. Landowners could sell land but assume – correctly, in their culture – that they would continue to have grazing rights after the sale (Tijerina in Kibler 1994: 13). This apparent disregard for private property rights and boundaries led Anglo-Americans to conclude that the Spanish/Mexican owners had little interest or claim to the land. On the contrary, Tejanos enjoyed the prestige afforded to large landowners but granted liberal grazing rights to the ranchers who formed the foundation of the settlement's economy. Land was granted to the heads of households in "each established family of colonists" but not every citizen of received such grants. They usually went to "citizens of wealth and status". As a result, land owners were recognized as "the sons of nobility" by others in the colony. The advantages of "landed nobility" faded in the late 18th century as trade with other countries such as England and the United States increased in importance and began to supplant livestock as the economic foundation of New Spain (Tijerina in Kibler 1994: 13). Nevertheless, stock raising remained a mainstay of the South Texas economy and the concept of communal grazing rights across vast stretches of land was key to the continuation of that tradition.

*Transfer of Carnestolendes to Henry Clay Davis and Hilaria de la Garza: 1846*

The disposition of Carnestolendes exemplifies how Spanish and Mexican land grants fared under Anglo-American control. For the duration of the Texas Republic, Carnestolendes remained in the Camargo-based de la Garza family. By that time, it was better known as Rancho Garza. About 1839, Henry Clay Davis, a young American from Kentucky, arrived in Texas and for a time lived in the San Antonio area. Like a number of other Anglo men who traveled to the area during the mid-19th century, Davis gained access to Spanish land grants by virtue of marriage. According to a local resident, Davis traveled to the lower Rio Grande area with a friend, Antonio Resendez, son of a wealthy Mexican family in Camargo, Mexico. Resendez reportedly introduced Davis to Hilaria de la Garza and her grandfather, Don Francisco de la Garza (Kelsey) who owned *porciones* 79 and 80 which included Carnestolendes. In 1846, on the eve of the Mexican War, Davis married Hilaria de la

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Garza and purchased the sections of porciones 79 and 80 that lay north of the Rio Grande. Reportedly, Davis and his bride made their home at Carnestolendes. According to local tradition, they pitched a tent under an old ebony tree near the river bank and dubbed it Rancho Davis (Starr County Scrapbook). The couple built a 2-story house on the site (demolished 1995). It became a gathering place for army officers stationed at Ringgold Barracks and other renowned visitors including naturalist John Woodhouse Audubon, son of the famous naturalist John James Audubon. Less than three months after their marriage, the Mexican War broke out.

According to historian David Montejano, "Many of the soldiers discharged at Camargo, (directly across the river from present Rio Grande City), remained in the area following the declaration of peace". These entrepreneurs would become the merchants and land developers who would found Texas border towns like Rio Grande City (Montejano, 1987: 41-43). Montejano also regards Henry Clay Davis' marriage to Hilaria de la Garza as a calculating intent to acquire title to lands on the north side of the border. Other, more romantic, sources report that Clay was already married when the war broke out and that his union was one of love, not greed. Whatever their motives, many of General Taylor's men married the daughters of Rio Grande landowners and thereby assumed title to Spanish and Mexican land grants. For instance, army steamboat pilot Mifflin Kenedy married the wealthy Petra Vela de Vidal. Merchant James Young married Salome Balli and acquired the site of Hidalgo, the original county seat of Hidalgo County. After James Young died, his widow married his business partner, James McAllen, who would go on to plat the town of McAllen on land acquired from his new wife's family.

*Establishment of Mercantilism North of the Rio Grande: circa 1848*

As a result of the safety afforded by the presence of the American army during and after the Mexican War, Anglo-Americans began to settle the north bank of the Rio Grand and establish trade with Mexico. Where most of the towns in the lower Rio Grande were established on the south side of the river before the war, municipalities began to emerge on what was now the U.S. side of the border in its aftermath. A system of mercantilism had begun during the war when General Zachary Taylor positioned quartermasters on the north bank to relay supplies to his troops in northern Mexico. After the war, both soldiers and civilian employees of Taylor's quartermaster corps settled along the Rio Grande with hopes establishing lucrative mercantile businesses.

**PLATTING AND DEVELOPMENT OF RIO GRANDE CITY: 1848**

*Henry Clay Davis' and Captain Forbes Brittons' Speculative Venture*

Henry Clay Davis was one of many Anglo-American soldiers who emerged from the Mexican War with a speculative eye. Davis determined to settle in the vicinity of Camp Ringgold and formed a partnership with Captain Forbes Britton. Davis and Britton surveyed the property that Davis had acquired from his marriage to Hilaria de la Garza and surmised that the river frontage would be an advantageous site for a new town. They platted a portion of riverfront land and dubbed their venture "Rio Grande City," but most of the local people called the town Davis Ranch or Rancho Davis throughout the 19th century. Davis and Britton then advertised their new town by distributing maps to outside markets in an attempt to convince prospective settlers and merchants to buy lots and invest in the venture. They also advertised heavily in the *American Flag*, a newspaper published in the Mexican city of Matamoros.

Davis and Britton drew from several Texas precedents in designing the plan of Rio Grande City. Davis and Britton followed merchant Charles Stillman's plan for Brownsville, in which he sited the city directly across the river from an established Mexican *villa* (Matamoros) and adjacent to an American army post (Fort Brown) on the north bank. Likewise, Davis and Britton positioned their new city adjacent to Camp Ringgold

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and across from *Villa Camargo* across the river in Mexico. Proximity to the army post and the established town would ensure clientele for trade and services. When Starr County was formed in 1848 and Rio Grande City was named county seat with Davis elected county clerk, the town's future seemed boundless.

Austin, the capital of Texas, also served as a model for the plan of Rio Grande City. As in Austin, streets were platted in a grid aligned with the river. The grid included 100 city blocks which were subdivided into 115-foot long lots ranging in width from 35 to 50 feet. The main cross-axes of the town were to be Water Street, which paralleled the river, and Britton Avenue. Water Street was to be the main commercial street and Britton Avenue was to lead up to a small hill designated to be the site of a courthouse square. This street pattern also was drawn from Austin, where Congress Avenue led from the Colorado River to the site of the state capitol (Starr County Scrapbook, n.d.: 4). According to Davis' plan, the intersection of the main axial streets, Water and Britton, was marked by a steamboat landing.

Although Davis planned for Water Street to be a principal street and even built his own house (razed 1995) near the intersection of Britton and Water, the first parallel street inward from Water became the town's Main Street instead. Originally named Laredo Street, today this street is better known as Main or First Street. For most of the city's history Laredo Street has been depicted as the principal street in maps.

A few extant buildings and structures document the early ranching period that predated American governance, although *jacales* – which historically were the most prominent building type – disappeared sometime after 1940. Several stone courtyard and building walls similar to those found in Roma and San Ygnacio have been discovered in the oldest part of Rio Grande City and may be associated with the area's ranching heritage. The oldest extant structure in Rio Grande City may be the stone wall that partially surrounds the Lopez-Tijerina complex between Main Street and Mirasoles. Clear evidence of a doorway – now filled in with stone – outlined in ashlar and topped with a mesquite lintel, indicates that at least part of the wall was once a building. The wall ties into a stone building on the Mirasoles Street side of the complex. Together with this and other adjacent buildings, the wall encloses a large central courtyard. This plan is similar to those found at the Trevino Fort in San Ygnacio, on nearby late-18th and early 19th century ranches, and across the river at Guerrero Viejo. These examples also exhibit similar construction materials and methods. According to local accounts, the Lopez-Tijerina wall pre-dates the founding of the city by Henry Clay Davis in 1848, and its construction materials and building type appear to support that claim. After 1848 wood and brick largely supplanted stone as prevalent construction materials.

Extant properties that date from the period immediately following the town's founding include mercantile warehouses (Mifflin Kenedy Warehouse, 1848) and dwellings such as Judge Samuel Julian Stewart's house (ca. 1850). Unfortunately, the Henry Clay Davis House, built about 1850 and the Davis Landing Apartments (a.k.a. Decker House), were demolished in recent years. Several additional buildings date to the 1860s, including the Lopez House (ca. 1860), a one-story stone building built as part of the Lopez-Tijerina complex. Most surviving historic buildings in the city, however, were not built until the period after the Civil War.

### *Elusive Prosperity*

Despite the town's proximity to Camp Ringgold and Camargo, and its established role as a steamboat port during the Mexican War, Rio Grande City grew but slowly. The upriver town of Roma, which similarly emerged as a trading post at the end of the Mexican War, competed with Rio Grande for business and residents. Ambitious businessmen like Mifflin Kenedy purchased the army steamboats for use in private shipping operations, but Rio Grande City failed to become the rich river port Davis and Britton had envisioned. Roma, opposite the Mexican city of Mier, continued to dominate river trade. Charles Stillman, the entrepreneurial

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businessman who also founded Brownsville, had a vested interest in Roma's prosperity and ensured that it monopolized shipping from mines in northern Mexican. Roma's prosperity was even noted by William Emory during his 1850 survey of the Rio Grande for the International Boundary commission.

Prosperity eluded Rio Grande City, however. A frustrated Britton left the area, but Davis continued to strive for success in the town he created and remained active in the community. Several early American travelers who passed through Rio Grande City at this time recorded their observations of the fledgling town and its founder. Although steamboat trading was not as successful as Davis and Britton envisioned, it did leave a number legacies to Rio Grande City. The warehouse built by Kennedy on Water Street, for instance, served as Starr County's first "courthouse" and is considered by some to be Texas' oldest extant county courthouse. It is still used by county.

*Fort Ringgold*

On October 26, 1848 Captain J.H. LaMotte of the First United States Infantry established a post situated at Davis' landing on the left bank of the Rio Grande, one-half mile from the nascent Rio Grande City. Located opposite the heavily garrisoned Mexican town of Camargo, the site was selected because of its observation advantages. During the Mexican War the site also proved a convenient point as the head of steam navigation on the Rio Grande, where supplies could be distributed to points further up the river. LaMotte's companies C and G settled at the camp and the name "Camp Ringgold" was given in honor of Brevet Major David Ringgold, Fourth United States Artillery, who was killed during the campaign of General Taylor at Palo Alto near Brownsville. The name was changed to Ringgold Barracks according to General Orders No. 8, Headquarters of the Army dated July 16, 1849. The name Ringgold Barracks remained until the post was designated an official fort upon receiving permanent status and renamed Fort Ringgold. The barracks were occupied on and off during the nineteenth century. Fort Ringgold provided support in the battle with Juan Cortina in 1859 and was a staging ground for Confederate troops during the American Civil War. In 1868, after the Civil War, it was designated a permanent fort. Much of the brick fabric of the 1868 fort, including the cavalry and infantry barracks, the hospital and bakery, remains intact today and is listed as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places. Prior to 1868 the encampment was located very close to the river landing and consisted of log and board buildings; of these only the frame building known as the Lee House and possibly one other are extant today. It is still used by county.

The Post-Civil War period saw great improvements to Fort Ringgold. The report of an inventory and assessment of army properties after the Civil War recommended that a new fort be built situated back from the river on a level plain. A permanent fort was warranted for several reasons. Indian attacks in the lower Rio Grande had increased with the withdrawal of Federal troops during the war and settlers in the region required protection. Political unrest in Mexico troubled the government and there was some concern that ex-Confederates might attempt a comeback through an ungarded border. Indeed, a line of recommissioned forts along the Mexican border and on the "frontier" was authorized. Barracks and quarters for four companies were begun in 1869 but the appropriation ran short and Congress did not make up the deficiency for a number of years leaving the construction unfinished as late as 1874. The property consisted of about 150 acres of land which was purchased outright from Henry Clay Davis by the army about 1853, its value assessed at \$10,000. By 1893, the fort consisted of four sets of barracks; six buildings for officers' quarters, making ten sets and a sufficient number of buildings for administrative purposes, supply storage, a hospital, bakery, and housing for laundresses. All the modern buildings are brick and built in a style adapted to the climate. The barracks are two stories high, with deep, nine-foot wide porches supported by Moorish arches. The hospital is a large brick building with a central two-story administration section and two flanking wards containing twelve beds each.

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A parade ground lies between the barracks and line officers' quarters and is flanked on one side by the hospital and on the other side by the adjutant's office, guard house and bakery. Behind each of the officers quarters were kitchens and sheds. About 1893 a new brick officer's "cottage" was built as the quarters of the post commander in the officers row. Another new building is the subsistence storehouse which was built to replace one that burned in 1892.

**EARLY IMPRESSIONS OF RIO GRANDE CITY: 1849-1855**

*John Woodhouse Audubon*

One of the earliest and most illustrative resources describing Rio Grande City in the years immediately following its founding is the journal of naturalist John Woodhouse Audubon, son of the renowned John James Audubon. Audubon came across Rio Grande City in 1849 while leading an expedition of nearly 100 men to explore the California gold fields. The men traveled up the Rio Grande on the steamboat *Corvette*, beginning in Brownsville and passing a number of settlements or ranchos before reaching Camp Ringgold and Rio Grande City. Throughout his expedition, Audubon recorded observations in his journal of the lands and peoples he came across. The journal chronicles the nearly six harrowing weeks that Audubon remained in and around Rio Grande City, from March 10, 1849 until April 28, 1849. His writings capture not only the natural environment surrounding the tiny desert community, but also the struggle of a community developing from the ground up. During Audubon's stay in 1849, sustaining a town in such a remote desert location must have seemed like a pipe dream: at that time Audubon described only a few buildings at Davis' rancho; the Armstrong Hotel, with a long room containing 20 beds, a "gambling house", and a few individual dwellings. The town had no jail so they had to chain a thief to a tree stump, and even at Camp Ringgold, most of the men and officers lived in tents. Similarly, his sociological commentary noted pity for "the miserable Mexicans, who live far apart, at distances of ten or even twenty miles from each other, do not plant their patches of corn with any certainty that it will mature, the rain failing to come . . . [with any regularity]," as well as distress over the inhabitants' living conditions in "forlorn 'Jacals' (a sort of openwork shed covered with skins and rushes and plastered with mud)" (Audubon, 1906: 54).

Audubon's initial impressions of Rio Grande City grew bleaker as his stay was prolonged, and his journal referred to "the never-to-be-forgotten Rio Grande". When his expedition departed from Brownsville to embark upon exploration of the Mexican side of the river, a member of the company fell ill with cholera and died within the first three days. Several more men contracted the disease and died in the days that followed. Audubon stayed in Rio Grande City long enough to allow the cholera to run its course, and in the interim more than a dozen men died, many others fell ill, many men deserted the expedition, and the expedition's funds were stolen. Audubon's stolen money returned only because city founder Henry Clay Davis and his father-in-law, Don Francisco de la Garza, intervened (Audubon, 1906: 77). Although Audubon's last impression of Rio Grande City was overwhelmingly negative – his journal concludes by saying that, "To tell of the dull monotony of this place would be most tedious, nearly as hard to think of as to endure," – Henry Clay Davis did leave a strong impression upon him (Audubon, 1906: 77). So strong, in fact, that Audubon included the following depiction in his journal:

At a circular table covered with books and papers, lighted by a single candle, sat Clay Davis, his fine half-Roman, half-Grecian head resting on his small, well shaped hand, his position that which gave us the full beauty first of his profile, then of full face; his long black hair with a soft wave in it gave wildness and his black moustache added to a slight sneer as he looked at a Mexican thief standing before him; he was altogether one of the most striking men I have ever seen " (Audubon, 1906: 78).

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*Teresa Viele*

A later and rosier picture of Rio Grande City comes from the journal of Teresa Viele. Viele came to Rio Grande City when her husband was stationed at Camp Ringgold during the mid-1850s. Viele's longer stay allowed her a broader view of life in the town. She described it as a "prosperous village containing about one thousand inhabitants, consisting of Americans, Mexicans, and a few Spaniards" (Viele, 1858: 147). Although the material appearance of the town was much the same during Viele's stay as it was during Audubon's, some improvements had been completed and lent the town a more settled feel. In Viele's words, buildings consisted of "Mexican hackals [sic - jacales], the brick stores of the Americans, and the storehouses and dwelling of Mr. Davis, which front a plaza, where the market is daily held in the open air" (Viele, 1858: 148). The town also boasted a bakery, billiard room, an "eating saloon", and a pharmacy complete with a soda fountain (Viele, 1858: 149). An additional focal point was the "fandango court-yard," which Viele described as an open-air enclosure with benches around three sides and booths on the fourth. There, inhabitants could drink, dance and gamble into the night. Rio Grande City had realized the necessity of a jail by the time Viele arrived. The structure was a "long low adobe hut" which lay "at the rear of Davis's ranche, backed by a high sandy ridge . . . . It had a door in the centre, and two small grated windows placed near the roof. . . . the central apartment, a kind of square hall, lighted from a window in the rear, . . . two other apartments opened from it on either side, which formed the cells for the prisoners. Both were occupied" (Viele, 1958: 166). The land surrounding the town supported crops, particularly corn, and the barren landscape sometimes even yielded domesticated gardens. Compared with other places of the Texas frontier, Viele found Rio Grande City quite comfortable (Viele, 1858: 149).

Viele's impressions of the town's occupants were more generous than Audubon's as well. In fact, she described area residents, Hispanic and Anglo alike, in rather romantic terms. Yet, although Viele was attracted to the rugged character of the people that she met in Rio Grande City, she never completely identified with them. She continued to see the South Texas frontier as incompatible with the "nature of civilized man" and intended instead "as a home for desperate men, escaped refugees from the law" (Viele, 1858: 151). She wrote that "Americans on the Rio Grande may be considered as the most daring, adventurous set of men in the world. . . [with] "a reckless spirit of adventure and restless love for the new and exciting". Her feelings toward the area's Hispanic residents were more compassionate, though patronizing. She regarded their "lovely trait of sympathy . . . ." Her romantic infatuation with the Anglo-American frontiersman and her respect for the gentle manner of the Hispanic families seem to culminate in her descriptions of Henry Clay Davis. Like Audubon, Viele described Davis with reverence, as "a true specimen of the Texan, tall and athletic, yet his delicately cut features, carefully trimmed moustache, and *air distingue*, bespoke rather the modern carpet knight than the hero and pioneer of the wilderness. Association with the Mexicans had given him a peculiar style of manner, a mixture of Western frankness and the stateliness of the Spaniard; a low-toned voice, and a deference mixed with assurance" (Viele, 1858: 146).

## COTTON TIMES: THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The role of Rio Grande City in the American Civil War, though unique, was economic rather than military. When Texas seceded from the Union, the Federal troops stationed at the Ringgold Barracks evacuated. Although John Salmon "Rip" Ford and his men periodically used the post to launch raids on Union positions near the mouth of the Rio Grande at Fort Brown, the location was isolated from the bulk of the fighting. However, Rio Grande City's became a port of exit for cotton after the Union blockaded most Confederate seacoast cities. To circumvent the Union troops at Fort Brown, the cotton road led to Rio Grande City, Roma and even as far upriver as Laredo and Eagle Pass. There it passed to the Mexican towns across the Rio Grande for transport to awaiting English and French ships anchored in the Gulf of Mexico. Flying under Mexican flag, the cotton was ferried to the ships unmolested by federal troops who could not risk starting an incident with Mexico over the ownership of the cotton.

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Rio Grande City first tasted real economic prosperity as a result of the contraband cotton trade but the American Civil War did not benefit all. Men like Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy parlayed their cotton profits into enormous ranch holdings after the war. On the other hand, John Peter Kelsey, a Union sympathizer, was forced to leave his home in Rio Grande City and spend the duration of the war in Camargo, where he established a mercantile operation. After the war ended, however, Kelsey returned to Rio Grande City and resumed his mercantile and ranching endeavors.

**GROWTH AND PROSPERITY: THE LATE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

The influx of wealth from the cotton trade, along with other factors, led Rio Grande City to experience its greatest period of growth and prosperity during the Post-Civil War era. A construction boom accompanied this prosperity, and many commercial and domestic properties survive from that era. A wave of immigration from France and Germany further buoyed this period of economic and cultural vitality. Some immigrants arrived in Rio Grande City after Mexico expelled the French and executed the Emperor Maximilian in 1865, and their presence can be seen particularly in the brickwork and grand houses of the mid- to late-19th century.

*Economic Prosperity and Building Boom*

The 1880s and 1890s secured Rio Grande City's position as a hub for trade and at last brought a period of sustained economic prosperity. The backbone of the town's economy was its steamboat port, located at the head of year-round steam navigation. Rio Grande City continued to compete with Roma for Mexican trade, but during this period Rio Grande City gained dominance. When the river was high, steamboats could travel upriver as far as Roma, about twenty-two miles beyond Rio Grande City. More often, though, steamboats would dock at Rio Grande City and transfer freight to wagons that traveled to Roma by land using a good road that paralleled the river. As the seat of Starr County, Rio Grande City also benefited from the county courthouse and county jail. The elevation of Camp Ringgold to a permanent status and its building expansion also stimulated the economy.

By the 1870s the town's population had grown to about 2,200 residents, and the residential and commercial buildings filling its lots stretched about half a mile in length, running east to west. The town had grown largely according to Davis' grid plan and by the 1880s a county courthouse and jail occupied the rise at the apex of Britton Avenue, creating the dramatic axial view from the river that Davis had imagined. Optimistic about continued success, Rio Grande City's business leaders began replacing or augmenting the city's original buildings with new brick commercial and domestic buildings. Their endeavors launched the city's period of greatest architectural achievement in terms of both craftsmanship and original design. Rio Grande City's most outstanding historic architecture was designed in the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the confluence of an optimistic economic outlook, the influence of French taste, and the arrival of a master brick mason and prolific builder, German immigrant Heinrich Portscher. Notable buildings would include Saint Mary's Catholic Church (St. Mary of the Refuge) near courthouse square built in 1868 and altered in 1872 (demolished), the Silverio de la Pena Building (1886), the La Borde House built in stages from the 1890s to 1915, the Emilio Block buildings built between 1890 and 1901, and many additional commercial and combined commercial/domestic buildings along Main and Second streets and on Britton Avenue. A number of gracious residential/commercial complexes with courtyard plans housed the city's elite.

Many modest houses of this period reinterpret the traditional *jacale* building type using the methods and materials of masonry construction that French and German immigrants had introduced. Wood shingles sometimes were used along with brick. The architectural history of the Post Civil War period in Rio Grande City is alive with a multicultural blending of vernacular architecture. Several extant one- to three-room linear buildings with hipped roofs exemplify this architectural character today.



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At the same time, many elite families of both Anglo and Hispanic descent applied the new masonry construction techniques to the courtyard plan building type that commonly was used for large domestic/commercial complexes in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Most of these buildings were configured in an L-shape with virtually no setback from the street. The wing fronting onto the primary street tended to serve as commercial space, while the perpendicular wing extending to the rear served as residential space and often defined a residential street. In the interior courtyard, arched arcades formed shaded transitional spaces leading from the domestic areas into tropical gardens or patios. Some of Rio Grande City's best-preserved landmarks such as the Kelsey-Bass House (City Hall) and the Solis House, reflect this regional vernacular plan type. Popular American building styles that began to appear in Rio Grande City, particularly along Second Street, in the late 19th century included Queen Anne and Classical Revival. Often these examples were smaller in scale than their high-style counterparts and had more modest detailing. Businesses also began to adopt the commercial styles common in other western towns of that era, and many of the surviving Main Street commercial buildings look very similar to those found throughout South and West Texas. However, many exhibit the elaborate brickwork that had become a hallmark of the city's own building traditions.

Remnants of an earlier, less prosperous history were preserved alongside new buildings throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. *jacales* and shanties remained interspersed with newer buildings, in both commercial and residential areas of town. Chroniclers described the building style as "predominantly Mexican" in character, with many buildings constructed of brick made on the bank of the river near Davis' Tree. The 1894 Sanborn supports this description.

Sanborn maps also provide a glimpse into the social history of the era, indicating a substantial cock fighting arena on the site of the present Garmon Theatre, numerous saloons and billiard parlors along Main Street, many general stores and drug stores, several blacksmith shops, a cobbler, and a silversmith. Other social institutions included St. Mary's Catholic Church, the Convent of St. Joseph, the public schools, the courts, and the post office. Civic leaders of the day included Fathers Gaye, Keralam, Petrove, and Alexis Desaulles of St. Mary's; Professor Thomas Hart, superintendent of public schools; Silverio de la Pena, postmaster and Deputy Collector of Customs; Judges James Clarke and John P. Kelsey; Texas Ranger William Richards; and former military hero John Henderson.

*French and German Immigrants: 1870s and 1880s*

French refugees from Mexico formed a new entrepreneurial class in Rio Grande City. A coalition French/Austrians and upper-class Mexicans had controlled Mexico during the time of the American Civil War, but in 1865 their authority crumbled. When the French Imperialists were defeated and Maximilian was executed, many of the French who accompanied him to Mexico fled across the United States border. During this period a number of French-born immigrants arrived in Rio Grande City and established a prosperous merchant class. The French population exerted considerable influence on economic development and architectural tastes in Rio Grande City in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

German Immigrants like Heinrich Portscheller and Silvario de la Pena complemented the cultural vitality brought by French immigrants. Heinrich Portscheller was the son of a German military architect who moved to Mexico only to be conscripted into Austrian Emperor Maximilian's Imperial army. With the Imperial army in chaos during Maximilian's overthrow, Portscheller deserted and fled to the border. He crossed the Rio Grande from Camargo into Starr County. After briefly returning to Mexico to fight against Maximilian's forces at Santa Gertrudis, Portscheller moved back to Rio Grande City where he established a business as a brick mason. He lived and worked throughout the lower Rio Grande Valley, from Fort Ringgold to Roma to Laredo. His skill remains extant in a number of buildings, and his signature style is one of the character-defining features of the architecture of Rio Grande City.



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Portscheller's finest and most influential designs in Starr County date from about 1870 to 1895. He is attributed with the establishment of the brick kiln near Rio Grande City about 1868. Brick became a prominent building material used in Rio Grande City, even after Portscheller moved his kiln to Roma. When Fort Ringgold was granted permanent status, Portscheller received the commission to design and construct new, permanent brick barracks. This was one of Portscheller's earliest commissions, but it already exhibited a signature characteristic: side gables with intricately corbelled brick parapets. Detailed brickwork at window openings marked his work as well. Although building records seldom document Portscheller's contribution, many buildings in Rio Grande City can be attributed to him based on style and craftsmanship. These include the Immaculate Conception convent and school, the 1868-1874 buildings at Fort Ringgold (N.R. 1993), possibly the Solis Building, and his last and possibly finest commission, the Silverio de la Pena Drugstore and Post Office (1886, N.R. 1980).

Silverio de la Pena was the son of a German immigrant whose surname was Furstein. An affluent merchant and county official, de la Pena sought to build the finest building in Starr County as his legacy, and he placed the commission in Portscheller's hands. Although De la Pena died in 1894 before construction was complete, the buildings was retained as the residence of his widow Eliza and her second husband, Juan H. Hinojosa, a farmer, tax assessor and U.S. customs officer. The building remained a customs office for some years and a post office until 1950.

*Political Unrest*

As prosperity and civic stability rose, political agitation continued to plague the border. One writer who advocated for the irrigation and homesteading of the lower Rio Grande valley, W. H. Chatfield, found it necessary to try to assuage potential settlers' fears about political upheavals involving the notorious Catarina Garza. Garza entered American consciousness about 1891 after leading a faction in an attempt to overthrow the government of Porfirio Diaz in Mexico. According to Chatfield, Garza began his career as a clerk in Brownsville before marrying into a family "of some distinction" in 1888 and moving to Corpus Christi to establish a newspaper "for the purpose of political agitation". In the paper, he "in the course of his tirade [he] made a vicious attack on some of the citizens of Rio Grande City". Garza and his followers appeared in Rio Grande City during the general election of 1888 and were confronted on Laredo Street by two lone men, Messrs. Sebree and Norris. Sebree was a United States marshal and had been warned that Garza was capable of shooting him on sight. In the ensuing conflict Garza was wounded but managed to escape. Outraged by Sebree's affront, Mexicans who sympathized with Garza took up arms and mobbed the town threatening revenge, but Sebree and Norris retreated to Fort Ringgold. A number of the rioters were apprehended and faced indictment in the District Court in Brownsville.

Yet Garza was undeterred. In the years that followed he ambitiously plotted to organize a band of revolutionaries in Starr County, to cross the Rio Grande and surround the garrison in Camargo. He planned to capture men in Camargo to augment his own army, and to raid his way through Mexico capturing recruits along the way until he finally took Mexico City. adding recruits as he went along Garza's scheme was thwarted, though, when he was intercepted at Fort Ringgold. His followers were captured or abandoned the cause, and a number of men were tried for violation of neutrality laws. Throughout the uprising proponents of the Rio Grande region like Chatfield insisted that the county at no time was unsafe for travelers and was "as peaceful as any place in the United States" (Chatfield, 1893: 48). The economic prosperity and building boom of the era seems to argue that Chatfield's readers took him at his word and the region remained optimistic.

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**TURMOIL AND ISOLATION: THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

At the turn of the century, Rio Grande City's prosperity declined. When steamboat travel grew obsolete around 1899, the town's economic foundation collapsed. Steamboats were impractical for a number of reasons. Always shallow and treacherous waterway, the river became so silted that it was navigable only a short distance up from the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico. Overland trade, especially to Monterrey, Mexico, sustained the economy until about 1910. Thereafter, the political agitation that Chatfield had so hoped to minimize could not be ignored. Internal turmoil in Mexico ignited revolution in the border region of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Trade across the border became too dangerous to pursue.

Competition from neighboring Hidalgo and Cameron counties deepened the wound to Rio Grande City's economy. Entrepreneurial coalitions in those counties brought the railroad to South Texas in 1904 and secured funding for extensive irrigation projects. This triggered land investment schemes that resulted in the development of more than a dozen new towns in Hidalgo and Cameron counties and put thousands of acres of barren land under cultivation. Midwestern and Northeastern farmers flocked to the valley in response to extensive promotional campaigns. Newcomers chose not to settle in and around Rio Grande City, however, because of fear of revolution and strained ethnic relations. They wished to forge Anglo enclaves removed from the tides of Mexican refugees fleeing to South Texas. The heterogeneous fusion of cultures and mercantile openness that had created Rio Grande City's prosperity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became a liability in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The "American" towns of McAllen, Mission, San Benito prospered instead, as did newly developing irrigated farms of Hidalgo and Cameron counties.

Divisive Starr County politics hindered Rio Grande City from forming a united coalition to challenge Hidalgo and Cameron counties. Political clubs known as the Reds (Republicans) and the Blues (Democrats) exploded into violence over county elections. The violence discouraged new immigration, development and investment in the area and even caused many longtime residents to leave in fear and frustration. When tempers finally cooled, Rio Grande City had been eclipsed by the burgeoning new cities downriver.

The stagnation that occurred in Rio Grande City during this era typified the trend toward serialization and mass-production throughout the United States. This can be attributed both to the migration of Anglos and to the arrival of the railroad in 1925. Milled lumber and other standard building materials became available and were substituted for locally manufactured brick and earth. This facilitated the construction of Popular plan houses such as bungalows in the 1920s, which sprung up alongside the hipped-roof brick vernacular dwellings. The bungalow signified a move away from regional, vernacular, eclectic, and craftsman-designed construction toward a popular national style. Period Revival styles were also dispersed throughout Rio Grande City, and the Spanish Colonial Revival became the style of choice among the elite and professional class. Large new stucco houses with tile roofs, ceramic canals or drains, arched entries and wrought iron grilles appeared primarily along W. Second and Third streets.

Ranching remained a principal occupation for many residents of Starr County through the 1920s and 1930s, and Rio Grande City retained some trade revenues as the center for ranch supplies for a large surrounding territory. During the 1930s, as the country experienced the harsh economic realities of the Depression, Rio Grande City acquired several noteworthy institutional and governmental buildings; North Grammar School built in 1931 and the new Starr County Courthouse, built in 1936 under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, are the predominant architectural resources of the era. The Water Filtration Plant and Ice Plant, in particular, reflect the fashionable designs of their time in their Art Moderne styling.

With its Hispanic roots, it is not surprising that during the 1920s and 1930s when Revival styles gained popularity throughout the country, Spanish Colonial Revival dwellings predominated in the city's new

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construction. Tudor Revival dwellings, however, so popular everywhere else, are not seen in Rio Grande City. During the 1930s, institutional and governmental buildings adopted the look of Depression-era trends in the Spanish Colonial Revival North Grammar School, the Works Progress Administration appearance of the courthouse and the Art Moderne style in the Water Filtration and Ice Plant buildings.

World War II left its impact on Starr County, as it did the rest of the country, with many families sending sons and daughters to serve in the armed forces. Some veterans returned to Rio Grande City to build new homes and raise their families. Following World War II and the advent of the GI bill, Ranch houses became the country's most popular housing style. Returning veterans brought with them a preference for national trends in domestic building styles. Rio Grande City has some good examples of such early Ranch Style and Minimal Traditional dwellings. A handful of commercial buildings date from the early postwar period, as well. By the 1950s, most of the original townsite of Rio Grande City had been developed and although the older part of the city has many new properties as infill and others that have been remodeled within the past 50 years, the original townsite retains a substantial amount of historic building fabric.

Economic constraints preserved a number of Rio Grande City's historic commercial buildings, though, and many business owners remodeled existing buildings instead of demolishing them to build International Style or Post-War Modern replacements. Although some of the city's historic buildings have been replaced with new ones, notably the Catholic Church in 1967, much of the city's historic period building stock remains in place. Few buildings have escaped changes to their exterior appearance but in many cases the alterations are reversible. The national trend toward auto-oriented suburbanization did come to Rio Grande City, and commercial and industrial development spread beyond the original townsite boundaries. The highways linking Rio Grande City with Roma to the west and Mission to the east generated strip development. Still, the center city retains the integrity of Davis' axial grid design.

**CONCLUSION**

Today, outstanding examples of Rio Grande City's vernacular architecture are scattered throughout Henry Clay Davis's townsite. All aspects of the city's development are represented in extant domestic and commercial resources, but the period extending from about 1880 to about 1910 appears to reflect the city's richest and most culturally varied architectural expressions. Surviving architecture spans economic divisions, as well. The city contains good examples of buildings associated with the most elite families as well as the most humble. Unfortunately, all are equally endangered by neglect, abandonment and deterioration. The present challenge for the people of Rio Grande City is to stabilize, maintain, protect and reuse their significant architectural resources so that the city's unique history will continue to be told through its built environment.

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F. Associated Property Types (Provide description, significance, and registration requirements on one or more continuation sheets.)

INTRODUCTION

Rio Grande City's historic built environment reflects the region's hot climate, river location, and the mixture of cultures that converged in a relatively isolated part of the world to form a border town on the newly drawn boundary between the United States and Mexico at the conclusion of the Mexican War (1846-0. 1848). Only a portion of a stone wall (Figure 1) and remnants of a few stone buildings that may have been incorporated into later edifices remain from the Spanish ranching complex that predates the town's founding in 1848. Except for these possible instances, Rio Grande City is decidedly urban in character. It is a city of furniture stores, banks, gas stations, retail shops, restaurants, photography studios, schools, municipal buildings, churches and homes. Although it has experienced the type of fast food and convenience store development along its major arterials leading into and out of the city that is usually associated with urban sprawl, the historic core of the city is set apart by its dense development, shallow front and side set-backs, brick or stucco construction, flat roofed commercial buildings, and exceptional decorative brick detailing in commercial, domestic and institutional properties (Figure 2).

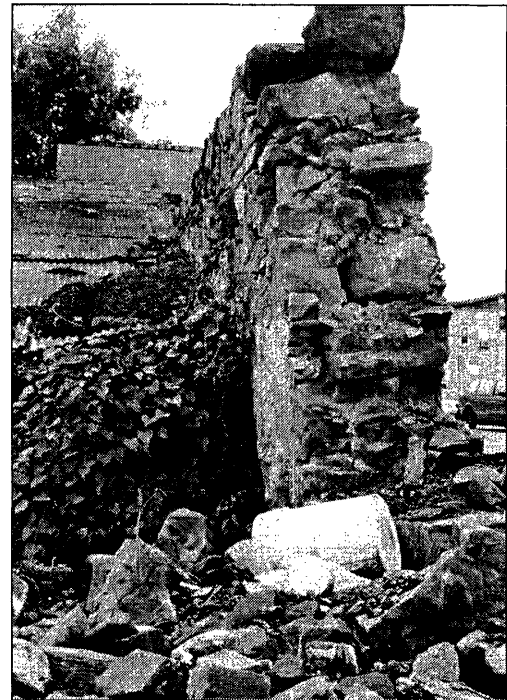


Figure 1

Much of the original Townsite of nineteenth and early twentieth century Rio Grande City remains remarkably intact in the face of rapid change in the borderlands region in the last half of the 20th century and especially in recent NAFTA-related (North American Free Trade Agreement) development. One reason may be attributed to its relative isolation from outside influences well into the 20th century. Buildings along the Mexican border, including Rio Grande City, display a melding of Anglo and Spanish/Mexican traditions. Indeed, the city was founded by a Kentuckian who married into a landed Mexican family descended from the original Spanish colonists in Camargo, Mexico. But later arrivals, principally German and French immigrants who came to Rio Grande City after the American Civil War and the overthrow of Maximilian in Mexico, left their own indelible imprints in the architectural fabric of the city. The result is a blend of many different building and design traditions in a small, relatively isolated border community.

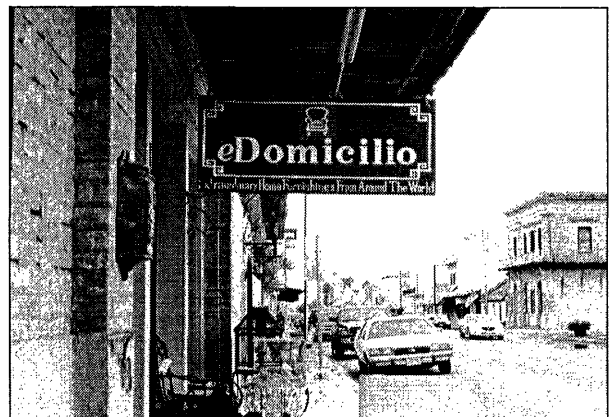


Figure 2

The buildings of Rio Grande City are almost entirely urban in character – most are dwellings and commercial buildings. In keeping with the urban setting, there are also historic religious, educational and governmental properties within the 1925 city limits. Additionally, the

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cemeteries display unique architectural features in their interesting and elaborate corbelled brick headstones, many of which are stuccoed and whitewashed.

The 1925 city limits formed the boundaries of the 1995-1996 comprehensive cultural resources survey of historic and architectural resources on which this Associated Property Types discussion is based. Some properties have been demolished since that time and a few others have been discovered since alleyways were cleared of brush, etc. However, recent windshield surveys in the fall of 2002 and spring of 2003 indicate that the original 1996 survey remains serviceable to a great extent. Therefore those results will be used in this record unless otherwise noted.

The comprehensive cultural resources survey conducted in Rio Grande City in 1996 identified 628 properties built before 1950. The project area included all of the original Townsite of Rio Grande City and a few scattered historic resources along Highway 83 both to the east and to the west of the city. Of the total number of documented properties, 74 were considered HIGH preservation priorities (Figure 3) while another 44 were rated as MEDIUM/HIGH priorities (Figure 4). These properties were considered to be the best candidates for individual listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

There were 160 MEDIUM preservation priorities, properties that would be likely considered contributing elements of a potential historic district (Figure 5). Finally, 350 of the historic properties were considered to be LOW priorities, i.e., they are historic properties that have been severely altered or have otherwise lost their integrity and would be considered Noncontributing elements of a potential historic district along with nonhistoric properties (Figure 6).

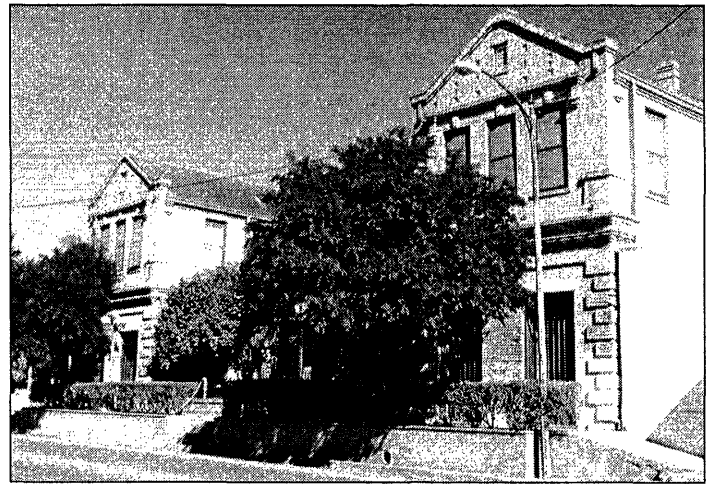


Figure 3



Figure 4

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR HISTORIC  
RESOURCES OF RIO GRANDE CITY

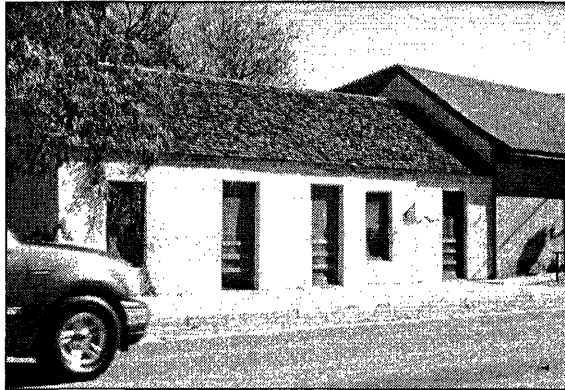
The historic resources survey of Rio Grande City conducted in 1995-1996, and selectively reviewed in 2003, identified a wide variety of building styles, types and forms that reflect the city's rich architectural heritage. A classification system was devised to categorize the many kinds of historic resources including buildings, structures, objects and sites, into more meaningful and manageable groupings, thereby facilitating their evaluation and assessment. This system was based on the *National Register Bulletin 16A* which classifies historic buildings by Property Types. Categories of buildings within each major Property Type are further

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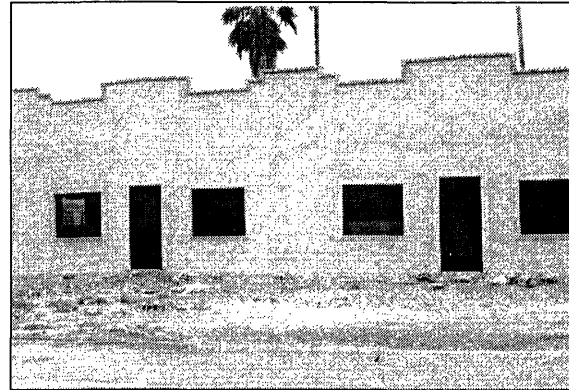
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**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**

defined by Subtypes. A resource was generally defined according to its original or intended use and definitions were intentionally broad to include as many kinds of related buildings or other resources under a single Property Type. For example, retail, service establishments and office buildings were grouped under the Property Type Commercial Buildings because of their associative qualities and because they share many physical attributes (Figure 7). Subtypes were also defined to further aid in the review and analysis of these structures. Subtypes of Domestic Buildings, for instance, were based on plan types and include two-room, center-passage, L-plan, modified L-plan and other widely used forms.

In Rio Grande City and other places with Spanish colonial or Mexican influences, linear and courtyard plan types are common and these are discussed, as well (Figure 8). Some properties that appear to be commercial properties in fact served both domestic and commercial uses and are described as combination Domestic/Commercial Building types under the broader category of Domestic Buildings (Figure 9).

The classification method used to define Commercial Buildings, Domestic Buildings, and other Property



**Figure 7**

Types in this discussion is indicative of changes in the perception, understanding and appreciation of historic resources. Although past preservation studies tended to examine only the most prominent and obvious landmarks within a survey area, the investigations carried out in Rio Grande City reflected a more democratic philosophy toward the built landscape. Modest structures that might once be excluded from such efforts were included in these surveys. Consequently, the inventory recorded cotton gins and ice houses, workers' housing, one-room cottages and major outbuildings, as well as the Rio Grande City's larger and more elaborate Victorian-era



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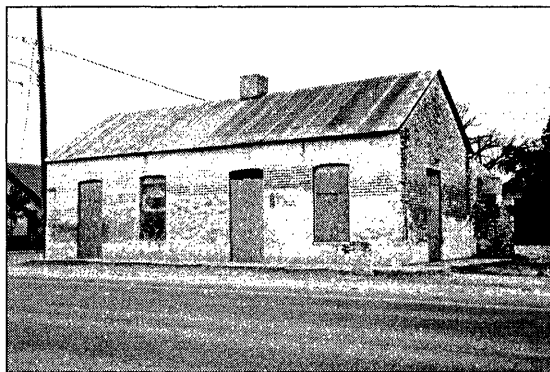


Figure 8



Figure 9

houses, commercial buildings and civic structures. As a result, a more complete picture of the past is obtained, and the contributions of all classes of people, not just the affluent, are acknowledged and recognized.

The following outline illustrates the Property Type and Subtype system and how it is used to organize Rio Grande City's historic sites. A one hundred year span of Rio Grande City's history – from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries – is reflected in the 628 surveyed resources. Six major types of historic properties are found within the city: Domestic Properties (491), including single-family, multi-family, auxiliary buildings and combination domestic and commercial buildings; Commercial Properties (106), such as retail businesses, service stations, office buildings, and a movie theater; Institutional Properties (17) including governmental buildings such as the Starr County Courthouse, religious properties including churches and the convent, one school, two hospitals and recreation facilities; Landscape Properties (6) including plazas, the Grotto of Lourdes and two historic cemeteries, and Industrial Properties (6) such as a gin and manufacturing warehouses. In addition, two infrastructural properties were identified: a cistern and a railroad bridge.

These Property Type designations are based upon the original or intended use of the resource and the physical attributes and associative qualities that distinguish them from other kinds of historic properties. The Texas Historical Commission has adopted this typology<sup>1</sup> in its statewide historic context of *Community and Regional Development in Texas (1690-1945)*<sup>2</sup>, which serves as an umbrella topic for the Rio Grande City and other Multiple-Property nominations in the state. Subtypes within each of the six major Property Types further distinguish the historic resources to better understand the properties.

<sup>1</sup> Except for the combined domestic/commercial building which appears to be unique to the borderlands region of the Rio Grande.

<sup>2</sup> Although the statewide context ends in 1945, time has passed since it was written and the logical closing date should be extended to 1955 for this nomination, the recommended 50-year end of the historic period.

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Table 1 – Property Types in Rio Grande City

Property Type	Total
<b>Domestic</b>	<b>491</b>
Domestic Single	453
Domestic Multi	13
Domestic Auxiliary	15
Domestic/Commercial	10
<b>Commercial</b>	<b>106</b>
[Domestic/Commercial]	counted above
<b>Institutional</b>	<b>17</b>
Governmental	7
Religious	5
Educational	1
Recreation	2
Hospital	2
<b>Landscape</b>	<b>6</b>
Funerary	2
Landscape	4
<b>Industrial</b>	<b>6</b>
Gin	1
Warehouse	2
Tank Supply	1
Storage	1
Shed	1
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<b>2</b>
Cistern	1
Railroad Bridge	1



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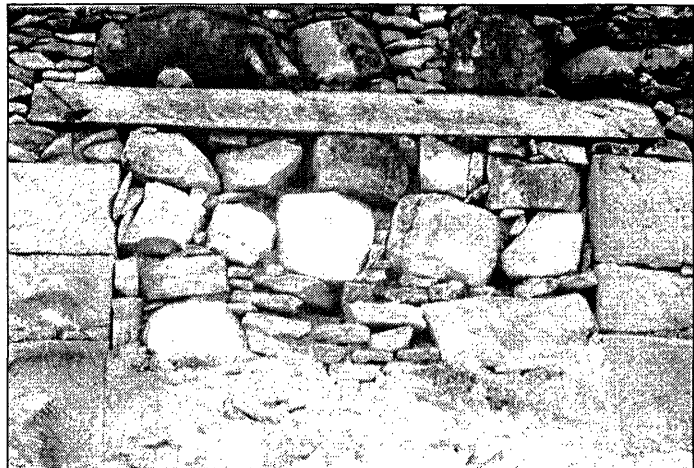
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**Property Types in Rio Grande City**

**Potential Historic Archeological Sites in Rio Grande City**

No archeological properties were identified in the 1995-1996 or 2002-2003 surveys of Rio Grande City. However, the potential for archeological discovery is great and future investigations may yield significant sites that should be included in an amended Multiple Property nomination. Historic cultural resources associated with Native Americans and early Spanish explorers may have existed near the river but none have been identified in Rio Grande City. Native Americans are known to have traveled and camped along the Rio Grande. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Comanches and Lipan Apaches raided small ranching settlements in the area including present Rio Grande City. Archeological sites associated with Native Americans in Rio Grande City may include trails and campsites. Historic archeological sites dating from the period of early Spanish settlement may also exist in Rio Grande City.

They would likely be associated with Carnestolendes, a Spanish Colonial era ranch established on part of the city in the mid-18th century. Archeological resources tied to the ranch may include remnants of shelters, corrals, outbuildings, barns, and defenses. The only known site that may potentially date to the Spanish Colonial ranching effort is an old stone wall in the 400 block of Main Street (Figure 10). It is constructed of quarried sandstone with chiseled door surrounds and a mesquite lintel above a door which has now been filled in with rubble. This resource was identified as a structure and not an archeological site. Prehistoric archeological investigations may be conducted and sites discovered in Rio Grande City in the future. Such identification and classification was beyond the scope of the cultural resources surveys conducted in the city.



**Figure 10**

**General Architectural Trends of Rio Grande City**

Although permanent, non-native settlement in Texas occurred as early as the late seventeenth century in the E Paso area and the eighteenth century elsewhere in the state, little physical evidence remains to document this early phase in the state's development. Several historic and historical archeological sites in and around the city of Rio Grande City attest to the presence of Spanish Colonial settlement along the Rio Grande in this region of South Texas but no extant buildings or structures in the project area are known to date from that effort with the possible exception of "th old wall" – a stone wall that once served as the side of a building or courtyard. While it was the massive migration from the Upland and Deep South that dominated most of the state's architectural development from the antebellum period through the last decades of the 19th century, it was the melding of Spanish, Mexican, German and French building and design traditions that gave Rio Grande City its special architectural character (Figure 11).

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The earliest and most basic building traditions arrived with the Spanish settlers who began ranching on the north side of the Rio Grande in the late 18th century. Far from centers of culture and commerce, the communities established along the Spanish frontier developed a distinctive vernacular (folk) architecture in both materials and plan types. Timber was scarce in South Texas and the Spanish and later Mexican settlers used local building materials such as mud bricks (adobe), stone and caliche blocks to build homes, barns and storage buildings, as well as defensive towers and walls. Among the oldest and most enduring housing forms is the *jacal de lena*, essentially a one- or two-room hut built of stacked sticks chinked with mud and topped with a steeply pitched thatched roof (Figure 12).

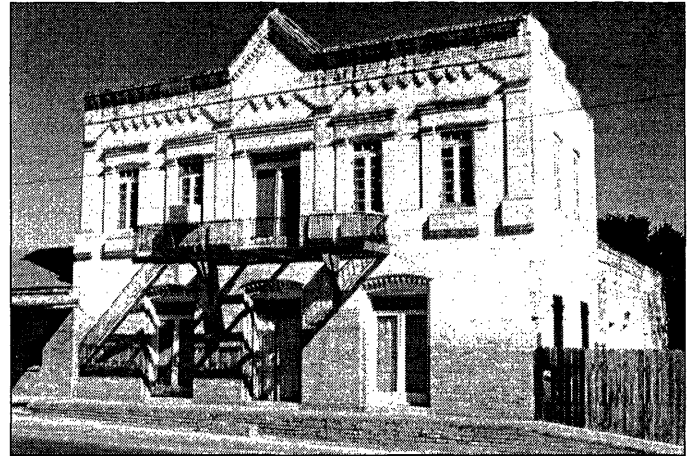


Figure 11

Poorer families lived in *jacales* while wealthy ranchers and merchants lived in *casas grandes* built of quarried *sillares* (blocks of caliche). With few formal plans to draw upon, early Hispanic settlers in South Texas often built dwellings in a linear form with two adjacent rooms of equal size fronting the street or public space. Each room had its own exterior door and perhaps a window. An interior door provided access between the two rooms. Often the rooms were built with stones extending from one or both of the outside walls to serve as anchors for future rooms or wings that might eventually form an L-shape or a courtyard. Such dwellings are found with both flat or pitched roofs rendered in stone and later in brick throughout South Texas.

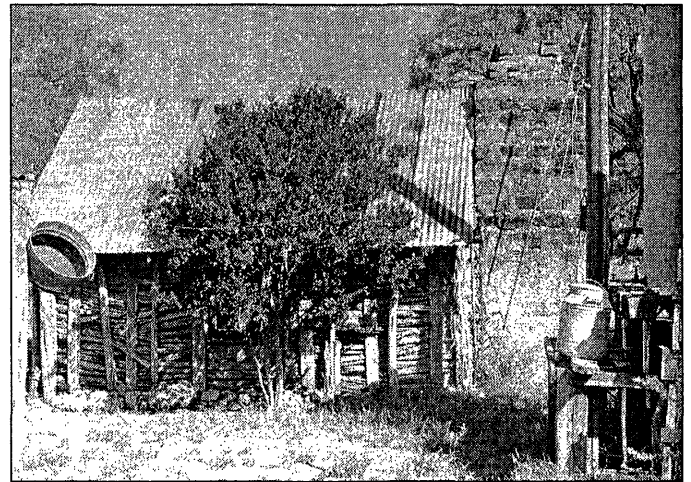


Figure 12

When Rio Grande City was founded in 1848, both the *jacal* and the caliche *casa grande* found their place in the city but the new American and European settlers who flocked to the region after the Mexican War introduced milled wood and brick construction to the region. In fact, by the 1870s, brick had surpassed all other building materials in Rio Grande City and became the defining element of the city's architectural identity. Numerous vernacular commercial, domestic and civic buildings, many attributed to the influence of German brick mason Heinrich Portschiller and dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fill Rio Grande City's streets. Many are richly ornamented with decorative cornices, pilasters, dentil work and parapets (Figure 13) but few follow the American stylistic conventions of the period, preferring instead to follow folk traditions.

It was not until the early 20th century – the 1910s and 1920s and especially after the railroad arrived in the city – that outside architectural influences began to wholly replace the local building traditions and design preferences in Rio Grande City. From that time forward, construction the town has largely followed the styles and trends of the larger society.

Domestic Properties in Rio Grande City

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The Property Type Domestic Buildings, which includes single-family houses, duplexes, and other structures originally used for residential purposes, is the most common building form found in Rio Grande City. Nearly 80 percent (78.18%) – 491 properties – of Rio Grande City's 628 historic resources are categorized as *Domestic Properties*. Examples are plentiful throughout the city. Some of the oldest dwellings dating to the 19th century are found on Main (a.k.a. Laredo), Second and Mirasoles streets, the city's principal thoroughfares and commercial arterials. Historically, merchants often lived above their businesses or in wings attached as ells to their brick stores that fronted onto the busy main streets. Some of the earliest houses are linear plan brick or stone – and in a few cases, adobe – buildings that follow Spanish Colonial traditions rather than American.

Several surviving examples in Rio Grande City appear to have used one room as a dwelling and the adjacent room for commercial purposes, usually groceries or other retail sales (Figure 14). The combination domestic/commercial building subtype is listed under *Domestic Properties* because their primary use appears to have been as the family home.

Houses dating from the turn of the 20th century tended to be detached single-family dwellings that appeared more "American" in their plan and design. Although some were built as late as 1920, they often displayed Queen Anne or Classical Revival detailing that had been popular in other parts of the country decades earlier (Pena interview, 2003). Neighborhoods to the north of Second Street generally contain detached, single-family houses following late Victorian and bungalow plan types typical of American traditions in the late 19th and early 20th century. Stylistic embellishments run the gamut from Folk Victorian (Figure 15) and Classical Revival for the late Victorian era plan types, to Craftsman, Tudor, and Spanish Colonial Revival styles in bungalow plan houses (Figure 16). Again, these popular styles arrived a little bit later and persisted longer in Rio Grande City than elsewhere in the country.

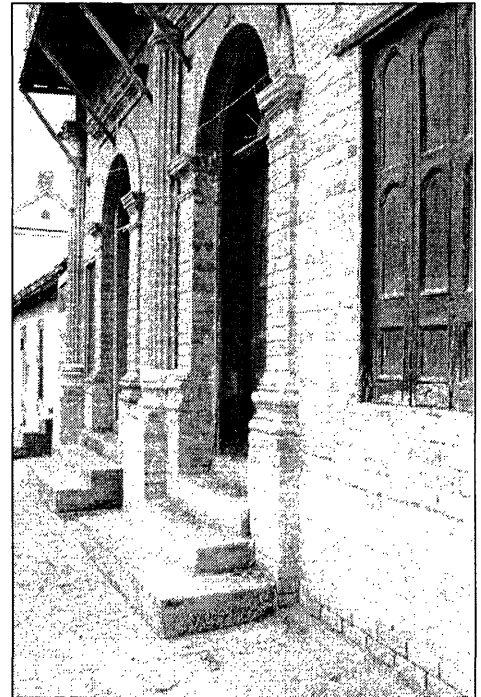


Figure 13



Figure 14

Following World War II, the ubiquitous Ranch house made its appearance in Rio Grande City although most lie at the periphery of the original Townsite. Since then, new development has kept apace with popular trends throughout the country and large subdivisions ring the old city of Rio Grande City. The plan types and stylistic trends in these communities conform with those seen in thousands of similar subdivisions nationwide. They make little or no architectural references to Rio Grande City's historic fabric and could, in fact, have been built most anywhere.

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Figure 15

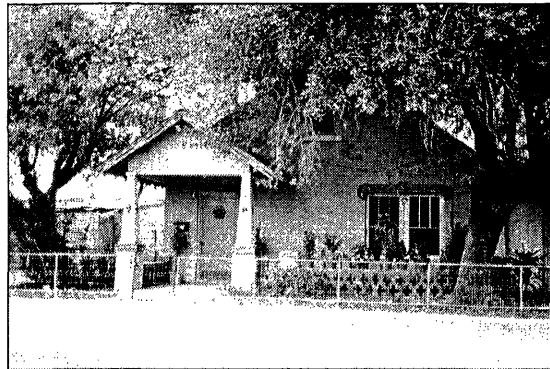


Figure 16

Rio Grande City's historic domestic properties fall into several distinct categories: single-family, multi-family including duplexes and apartments, auxiliary buildings, including garages, sheds, and barns, and combination domestic/commercial buildings. Combination domestic/commercial buildings are common throughout the border region in Texas, ranging from El Paso to Brownsville, and are most typically found in a linear or courtyard plan associated with Spanish Colonial vernacular building traditions in the region.

According to architectural historian Joe Graham, culture, not environment, usually accounts for the house type in a given region. The early settlers in South Texas came from areas of Mexico had few flat-roofed adobes. Adobe dwellings in South Texas apparently were built for the wealthier class and these houses often had facades of handmade brick. Flat-roofed, rectangular or L-shaped houses of brick or a combination of adobe and brick constitute another type of vernacular architecture in South Texas. These are far more common in Starr County than Zapata County. Most of the brick came from the Mexican side of the border, according to Graham. Brick construction became more common in towns from Brownsville to Laredo during the second half of the nineteenth century.

### *Vernacular and Popular Plan Types*

Domestic Buildings, more than any other Property Type, display the greatest range of forms, plan types, and stylistic influences. Consequently, Subtypes such as Vernacular and Popular Plan Types are defined to better understand architectural trends and to identify noteworthy examples in the city.

### **Vernacular Plan Types**

Use of common building types, usually described as vernacular structures and modest construction materials, account for the simple forms of a settler's buildings, which typically consisted of only a few rooms. With few exceptions these vernacular structures are the ordinary shelters constructed by common people, and encompass the vast majority of all the structures within a community's stock of built resources. Most were built by the resident-owner or a local carpenter or mason who essentially replicated a known and accepted building form. Decorative trim secured from a local sawmill or lumber yard reflected the owner's level of affluence and stylistic tastes. Even large, impressive buildings and structures with elaborate detailing often prove to be

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vernacular structures embellished by Victorian period porch trim or made grander by the addition of a classically inspired portico.

Vernacular structures are complex solutions to the organization of daily life and their particular forms evolved slowly. Resistant to quick, fashionable modifications, vernacular structures retain their characteristic forms over long periods of time. For this reason, they are defined by their floor plan and overall shape, which remain stable despite stylistic changes and technological advances. Vernacular building types endured through the 1920s, adopting the prevailing stylistic details to mask their conservative forms. During the early 20th century, however, modern, more fashionable dwellings eclipsed the vernacular forms. Victorian-era houses with their turned porch posts were replaced by bungalows with squat posts set atop square piers; asymmetrical dwellings lost their columns and irregular form and adopted the blocky shapes of their bungalow and four-square neighbors. An interest in revival-style architecture surfaced after World War I, possibly due to American soldiers returning from European campaigns. Romantic interpretations of the "English Cottage," "Spanish Hacienda" and other exotic stylistic extractions began to decorate popular forms of domestic and other architecture. By the eve of the Great Depression, standardized machine-cut houses dominated domestic architecture and the vernacular, master-carpenter built house became something of a historic artifact.

Historians and architectural historians have found that changes in the use and name of rooms in vernacular houses are good sources of information and often reflect transformations in gender roles, familial relationships, economic situations, and in concepts of public and private realms. Usually no written documents exist to reveal the precise room use of vernacular dwellings, but function can be inferred from size and spatial arrangement. The degree of finish, dimensions, quality of detail, and hardware provide further evidence of function (Glassie 1972; Upton 1979, 1982).

The diversity of Texas' 19th- and 20th-century domestic architecture reflects the many ethnic groups who settled in the state, the introduction of new building technologies and materials, as well as the altered social relations and stylistic associations that shaped American architectural practices during different periods. Although the state's domestic vernacular buildings appear to exhibit an infinite variety of plans and styles, most can be assigned to one of the following plan types: the Two-room, Center-passage, L-plan, Modified L-plan, and Shotgun houses. However, in Rio Grande City, as well as most of South Texas, the Jacal, One-room and Two-room Stone, Linear Plan, Courtyard Plan and the I-House are more prevalent, particularly in the earliest period of development when vernacular forms are most common. The physical characteristics of each are described in the following summaries along with the other vernacular forms that apply to Rio Grande City.

According to architectural historian Joe Graham, culture, not environment, usually accounts for the house type in a given region. The early settlers in South Texas came from areas of Mexico had few flat-roofed adobes. Adobe dwellings in South Texas apparently were built for the wealthier class and these houses often had facades of handmade brick. Flat-roofed, rectangular or L-shaped houses of brick or a combination of adobe and brick constitute another type of vernacular architecture in South Texas. These are far more common in Starr County than Zapata County. Most of the brick came from the Mexican side of the border, according to Graham. Brick construction became more common in towns from Brownsville to Laredo during the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Spanish Colonial/Mexican Influenced Vernacular Forms

*Jacal*

Although the word *jacal* literally means "hut" in the Nauatl (Native American) language, it conveys a very distinctive type of small house form (Figure 17). In South Texas, *jacals* typically were rectangular in shape rather than circular, as they were in many other places in Mexico and Central America. Four corner poles partially buried in the ground supported the structure. The poles were notched or forked at the top to support *vigas* or roof beams. Smaller uprights were placed between the main poles. Horizontal sticks were fastened at intervals to the inside and outside of the uprights, forming the shell of a wall.

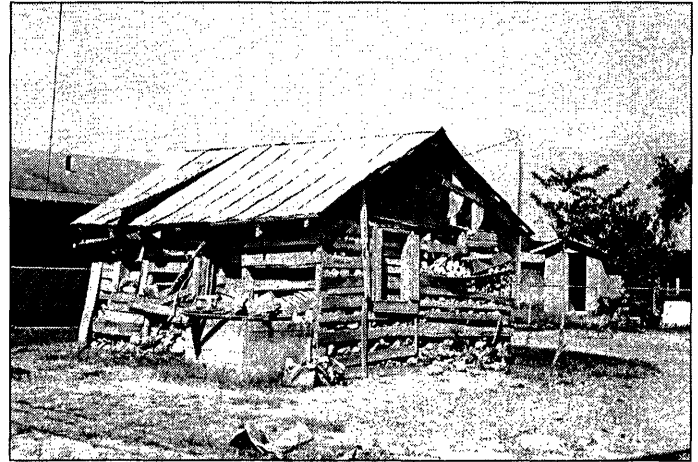


Figure 17

Available materials such as brush, stones or rubble, or, most commonly in South Texas, split mesquite wood, was used to fill in the spaces in the wall. *Jacals* that used stacked mesquite were known as *jacals de lena* (*jacals* of firewood). Some *jacals* were of palisade – vertical pole – construction. Both types of *jacals* were coated inside and out with mud or lime plaster. Upon completion, the *jacal* was well-insulated at between six and ten inches in thickness (Graham 1992: 63).

South Texas occasionally experiences torrential rains and *jacals* in this area typically had steeply pitched gabled roofs to shed large amounts of water. Roofs are supported by a stout ridgepole and covered with local grasses tied in bundles, palmetto leaves, animal skins, tule rushes, or similar materials tied to the poles and *vigas*. Generally *jacals* in South Texas consisted of a single room or one room divided by a curtain. The space was usually between ten and twelve feet wide and eighteen to twenty-four feet long. At center, the interior height rose between ten and fifteen feet. Typically the floor consisted of packed dirt but some were of chipichil – a mixture of lime, sand and gravel. There was usually a single door in one gable end perhaps some small windows on the sides. When regularly maintained and whitewashed, the *jacal* was a comfortable, well-insulated home (Graham 1992: 63).

The *jacal* began to disappear from Rio Grande City as Anglicized house forms – particularly the board-and-batten house- became cheaper and more available to people of modest means. Ada L. Newton wrote about the phenomenon in Rio Grande City for her master's thesis in 1964, commenting that residents considered a cheap wooden structure preferable to a *jacal* that was only slightly smaller in size and that a brick structure "in any state of repair" was considered better than a "well kept *jacal*" (Graham 1992: 67). Joe Graham surmised from her work that the *jacal* did not disappear because it was not functional but because it did not fit the changing aesthetic and social demands or needs of its occupants (Graham 1992: 67).

Despite the demise of the once-ubiquitous *jacal* in Rio Grande City, none were identified in the survey. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that some *jacals* still exist in back yards and under metal sheathing within the city. Because they are a significant early property in Rio Grande City and examples may yet be discovered in the project area, the property type is justified in this discussion.



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Courtyard Plan Houses

The courtyard house is an expandable, modular typology that can begin as a linear plan house and then evolve into an ell-shaped plan or a full courtyard. At each stage in its evolution the plan type exhibits several essential characteristics. Firstly, the buildings are pushed to the edge of the lot and set very close to the street on all sides. Secondly, the plan is only one room deep. Thirdly, rooms are modules with similar dimensions and no differentiation for a specified function. Lastly, rooms lead directly from one into the next with no hallway, and each room has doors providing exterior access to both the street and the courtyard for additional circulation. Together these characteristics give the building a long, low appearance and a very regular fenestration pattern. The different stages of construction are evidenced only by slight differences in floor height or cornice level, or by subtle seams in the brick masonry.



Figure 18

The linear plan houses is the simplest and most prevalent form of the courtyard house, typically consisting of two or more rooms organized in a single file (Figure 18: Site 67, 500 block N. Flores jpg 004). The two-room plan could be expanded by adding two more rooms perpendicular to the original, forming an ell (Figure 19). Although no architectural characteristics differentiated the rooms, commercial functions typically took place in rooms along the main street and especially in the corner room at the intersection of two streets. A wooden fence or brick wall often would enclose a courtyard. Finally, the courtyard would be completed with the construction of second ell parallel to the first. The entire periphery of the lot would be lined with rooms, and a covered passage or *zaguan* would lead from the street and a door for each room opening onto the courtyard. Exterior walls of neighboring buildings sometimes formed part of the courtyard enclosure as well. All of these plan types are found throughout South Texas and in Rio Grande City.



Figure 19

*Origins of the Courtyard Typology*

Along with one-room houses, the two-Room linear plan dwelling became prevalent on both sides of the lower Rio Grande valley during the early ranching era. During the Spanish Colonial and Mexican periods, property owners and their workers lived in small groupings of houses and auxiliary buildings. Ranch settlers sought a form of housing that would require a minimal initial investment but could be expanded upon as the settlement became more permanent. Security was essential, as was space to perform the

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domestic chores that sustained rural life, such as tending animals and planting vegetables. The expandable courtyard plan offered a solution to the needs of the settlers of the lower Rio Grande valley, just as it had for rural settlers the world over throughout history.

In his article "Courtyard House Form: response to the traditional and modern needs of Man," Yurdanur Aksoylu studies the form in Turkey and draws parallels with its use in Asia, India, and Latin America. Aksoylu explains that the courtyard form is ideal for squatters or settlers transitioning from rural to urban lifestyles because it initially provides space for rural tasks such as outdoor cooking, but it can be expanded and adapted to provide space for more urban functions like commerce or social gatherings. This trend toward permanency is documented by Sanborn maps, which show the demolition of haphazard wooden outbuildings within the courtyard to accommodate the construction of additional brick modules. The instinct to mark one's territory often is cited as a determinant of the courtyard form also. Spanish tradition certainly influenced the building of courtyard houses as well, especially considering that in many places in Latin America the courtyard plan replaced other indigenous plan types that would seem better suited to climactic, cultural, and social needs (Rapoport, 30). Henry Clay Davis' platting of the city in a grid pattern with large lots likely reinforced the tendency for linear houses to evolve toward courtyard forms.

*Construction Materials and Methods*

Although brick masonry was used to construct most linear plan dwellings within Rio Grande City, the earliest linear plan dwellings on the ranches in the lower Rio Grande valley were constructed using *caliche*, a form of calcified or hardened soil found near the ground surface. Because of its ready availability, caliche was cut into the *sillares*, or blocks, used for construction. The regular, orthogonal shape of the sillares was well-suited for the modular, orthogonal shape of two-room linear dwellings. Except for the jacal, the linear caliche dwelling probably was the most common type of early rural vernacular residence in South Texas. Workers' houses, as well as the casas mayores of the landowners, were built of these caliche blocks. Some linear-plan houses were flat-roofed with a low parapet wall, while others had steeply gabled roofs. Roof structures – whether flat or pitched – generally also used caliche in the form of *chipichil* – caliche fragments bonded with lime plaster – supported by wooden *vigas*, or beams. Chipichil was especially useful in roof construction because of its fire retardant qualities, but it also was used for floors. Lime used in the chipichil was produced in kilns built near the ranches and towns.

While the main house of the landowner was usually built of sillares, houses of hewn sandstone also were common in the areas of earliest settlements on both sides of the Rio Grande. The stone was usually quarried from locations near the building site. Adobe was also used in rare cases.



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Early ranch houses were often fortress-like, with walls two feet thick and twelve to fifteen feet high with a low parapet wall along the rooftop designed for protection against the Indian raids.

Windows had no glass but were covered with double shutters over wooden bars (later, metal) called *rajas*. Lintels over the doors and windows often were of hewn mesquite or cypress. Before the about 1880 when U.S. military presence on the border ended the necessity, these fortified dwellings and walls were outfitted with small holes or gunports called *troneras* so that the inhabitants could shoot at the intruders from inside the walls.

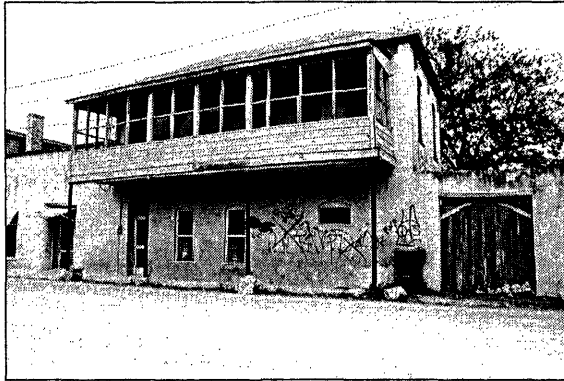


Figure 21

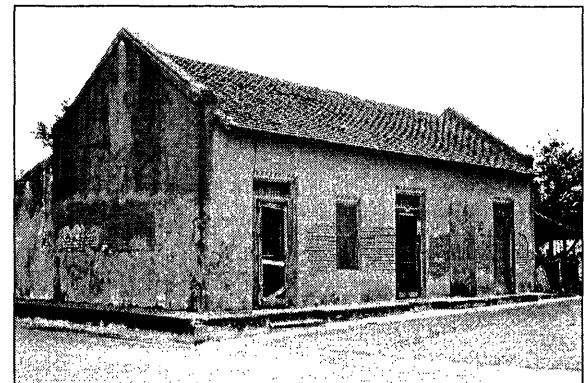
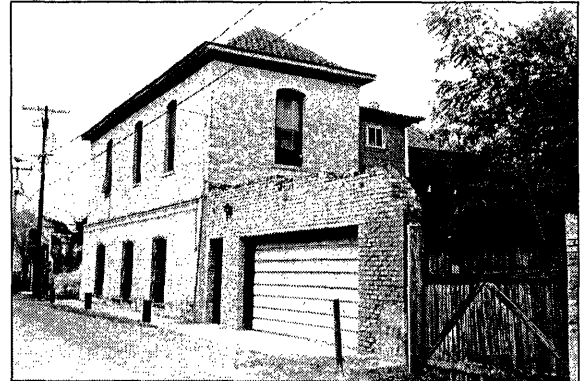


Figure 22

Figure 23

Although a few caliche block houses associated with Carnestolendes remain in Rio Grande City (Figure 20), most have been lost to time. Two-room linear plan dwellings extant in Rio Grande City are virtually all constructed of brick and date to the 1870s, when brick became the predominant construction material in the city (Figure 21). However, some stone two-room dwellings predating that period are extant. One important specimen, the Florence Scott Johnson House, recently has been discovered to have some adobe walls and holds additional significance as the home of the Valley's well-known historian. The scarcity of caliche, stone, and especially adobe example in Rio Grande City may be attributed to relative scarcity of compared to areas upriver, as well as to the presence of rich clay deposits on the riverbed.

Like sillares, bricks are a modular and orthogonal building block and lend themselves to the construction of modular and orthogonal building plans. However, the use of bricks encouraged the addition of a number of unique architectural features to the design of the linear-plan prototype. Brick corbelling ornaments some cornices, and segmental arches form window openings. The gable-end walls of some of the pitched-roof examples exhibit parapet walls that extend upward beyond the plane of the roof (Figure 23: Site 104, 400 block N. Garza, jpg 006). This design feature also is found on barracks buildings at nearby Fort Ringgold and in the Convent of the Immaculate Heart (Site 173).

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### "American" Influenced Vernacular Forms

#### *Two-Room Houses*

The Two-room plan type (also known as a hall-chamber plan) consists of two rooms -- a hall and a chamber -- of unequal size and differing function (Figure 25). Immigrants from the Upland and Lowland South

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introduced the form into East Texas in the mid-19th century, and it persisted into the early years of the 20th century. The larger room, or hall, was the public space, used for entertaining, family gatherings and meals, whereas the smaller room was the family's private space. Both rooms were simply decorated; however, the hall usually displayed some enhancement such as pictures or family heirlooms, denoting its important social role as the family's "face" to the outside world (Upton 1982).

Most examples of the Two-room house are one story in height and of frame construction with weatherboard or board-and-batten siding. In areas like the Texas Hill Country and South Texas where milled lumber was scarce, Two-room houses were built of local stone, usually limestone.

Newly arrived immigrants from Western and Central Europe in Central Texas, for instance, employed the plan type's simple lateral configuration but used stone or *fachwerk* construction to achieve the same effect. In South Texas, many quarried limestone or caliche houses are Two-room houses with flat or side-gabled roofs, but these local examples are sufficiently atypical to warrant their own section (See Linear Houses above).

Nearly all Two-room houses had side-gabled roofs. If chimneys were built, they are constructed of brick and stone and typically extended from one or both gable ends. The front has either a three- or four-bay configuration with a single door in one of the middle bays. Wood-sash double-hung windows are typical and have 1/1, 2/2, or 4/4 light sashes. The type and amount of ornamentation on these structures varied but few displayed but simple detailing. Common architectural elements included the use of chamfered- or squared-wood supports on a full- or nearly full-façade front porch. Occasionally, windows and doors featured simply detailed surrounds (Figure 24).

Two-room houses were built in Rio Grande City from the mid 19th century to the first decade of the 20th century, and examples are found throughout Starr County, in both urban and rural settings. Because of its simple and straightforward method of construction and its efficient use of interior space, the Two-room house was extremely popular for use as rental property. Many such structures in rural areas housed large numbers of tenant or migrant farmers who worked in the areas's emerging agricultural industry during the first decades of the 20th century. Two-room houses in urban areas typically exist in less-affluent neighborhoods, next to railroad tracks, and/or industrial structures, and like their counterparts in the countryside, are generally in fair-to-poor condition. In Rio Grande City, Sanborn maps show that they existed throughout the town in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but as newer homes and commercial buildings replaced them in the downtown core, they disappeared from the most prominent streets. Most of the surviving Two-room houses lie at the periphery of the central city, on secondary streets, or in the outlying areas that have not

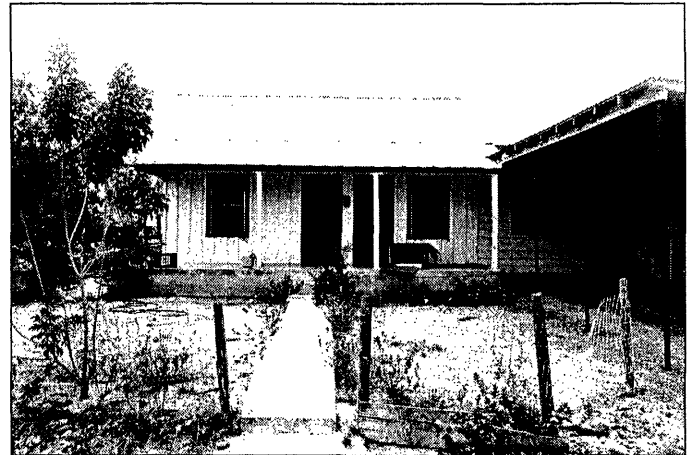


Figure 24

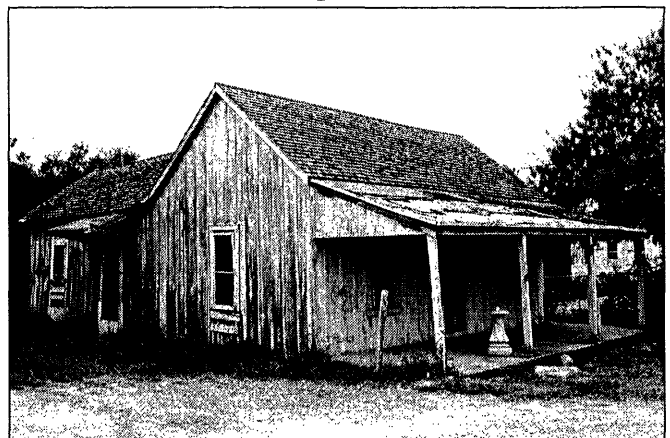


Figure 25

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yet been redeveloped with new subdivisions.

Most Two-room houses identified in the survey had wood exterior sheathing. Both single-wall and double-wall construction were found and both horizontal and vertical siding covered the exteriors. Board and batten siding was also common with vertical boards anchored directly to the foundation and roof plates and the joints covered with thin strips of wood called battens. The use of battens provided better insulation to what was generally a single-wall house.

*Center-Passage Houses*

Center-passage houses, like Two-room houses, were built locally from the mid-19th to the early 20th centuries and Rio Grande City has a number of outstanding and unique examples. This plan type appeared in Texas during the mid-19th century when emigrants from the Upland and Lowland South introduced the familiar form to new settings. Center-passage dwellings are organized and used much as Two-room houses. Insertion of a passage between the rooms of a Two-room plan creates a Center-passage dwelling. Entry into the house is gained through the center passage which affords the residents greater privacy and control over their domain. Thus, the Center-Passage house is generally associated with more affluent or prominent residents by virtue of the added, formal space. Unlike Two-room houses, they appear in both one- and two-story versions, often with gable-end chimneys. The two-story Center-passage dwelling is also known as an I-house, because they are prevalent in states beginning with the letter "I" such as Illinois, Indiana and Iowa (Upton 1982).

Because they were built over a long period of time, Center-passage houses appear in numerous variations and a broad range of stylistic influences and ornamentation. Typical Center-passage houses in Texas were 1-story, frame dwellings with weatherboard siding. Most featured a side-gabled roof, central entry and a symmetrically arranged façade. Transoms and sidelights reinforced the central entry. Chimneys, if they existed, extended from one or both gable ends. Windows were double hung wood sash with 1/1, 2/2, or 4/4 light sashes.

The oldest Center-passage houses dating from the mid-19th century in Texas sometimes displayed simple Greek Revival ornamentation around the front entrance. They typically featured symmetrical facades with a central door flanked by equally spaced windows. Simple squared, chamfered or Doric order columns often supported an entry porch leading to the door (Figure 26). Late-19th-century versions sometimes included Victorian-era influences such as Gothic Revival dormers or jigsawn porch detailing, whereas those built after 1900 displayed little stylistic ornamentation.

Center-Passage houses constitute some of the oldest and most significant structures in Rio Grande City. Most extant examples in Rio Grande City date to the last quarter of the 19th century and the



Figure 26



Figure 27

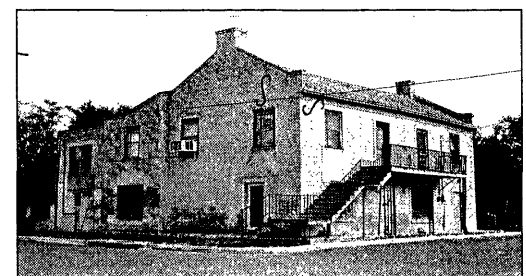


Figure 28

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first decades of the 20th century. Although they all feature the hallmark central door and center passage, several unique patterns were revealed from the results of the field investigations. Although wood-frame construction is most typical elsewhere, examples of masonry Center-passage houses is common in Rio Grande City.

Availability dictated materials used in construction and in South Texas lumber was scarce until the advent of the railroad to the region in the early 20th century. As a result, most of the city's Center-passage houses are rendered in brick (Figure 27). Also, although the majority of Center-Passage houses throughout Texas are 1-story buildings, Rio Grande City has many large, 2-story brick examples built for the town's prominent late 19th and early 20th century families. Unlike the more common side-gabled examples, many of Rio Grande City's 2-story, Center-Passage "I-houses" have flat roofs with parapet walls. Finally, brick Center-Passage houses of the late-19th and very early 20th centuries feature stylistic details that are unique to the borderlands and include intricate brick detailing, brick corbels, and decorative cornices made from brick or cast stone. Surveyors identified a number of Center-passage houses in Rio Grande City. Among the distinctive 2-story versions are the Crisoforo Solis House (Figure 28) and the Renaga-Hedley-Edgerton House (see Figure 11).

*L-Plan Houses*

The L-plan dwelling, Texas' most common late 19th century house form, is probably an elaboration of the Center-passage house. The transformation from a symmetrical to an asymmetrical dwelling form was a response to the late 19th-century preference for irregular, picturesque forms (Lewis 1975). The most common examples of L-plan houses are 1- or 1 1/2 stories in height, although 2-story versions exist, especially in urban areas (Figure 29).

L-plan houses characteristically have cross-gable or intersecting roofs with an off-center gabled wing extending forward and another one to the rear. Wood-frame construction with weatherboard siding is most typical in Texas but masonry dwellings of this type are not uncommon and in Rio Grande City, they are more typical than not. Because most were built during the late 19th century, L-plan dwellings often display the elaborate detailing and ornamentation, particularly on porches and in gable ends, that was widely popular at that time. Like the Center-passage house, entry is made into the central hallway which is flanked by two main rooms. The projecting wing extends from one of the main rooms forming two connecting public spaces in most cases. The room on the opposite side of the hallway serves as a private chamber or bedroom.



**Figure 29**

L-plan houses are the most common non-Spanish derivative vernacular plan type found in Rio Grande City. Surveys identified many variations on the L-plan house in Rio Grande City. Although they were built from the late 1870s until as late as 1924, most local examples date to early 20th century. L-plan houses appeared later in Rio Grande City than in most other Texas communities, probably due to the late arrival of American building and stylistic influences in the relatively isolated area. Surviving examples of the type range from 1- to 2-stories in height. Brick construction prevails, although some have weatherboard siding. The majority display modest detailing characteristic of the Queen Anne style.

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These stylistic features most commonly appear on the porch and in the gable ends. Porch supports, for example, frequently have turned-wood supports, jigsawn brackets, and spindled friezes. The gable ends typically display patterned wood shingles and occasionally jigsawn bargeboards (Figure 30). Doors are commonly topped with single-light transoms but sidelights are rarely seen. In most cases, older L-plan houses have double-hung windows with 2/2-lights divided with vertical muntins. Later versions built in the early 20th century more commonly feature 1/1 light sashes.

Several local L-plan houses exhibit a projecting front wing with angled "bay window" corners. Jigsawn bargeboards and turned-wood pendants add to the decorative effect. L-plan houses built in the early 20th century usually display less exuberant detailing but still retain the asymmetrical and picturesque massing that distinguishes this plan type from others.

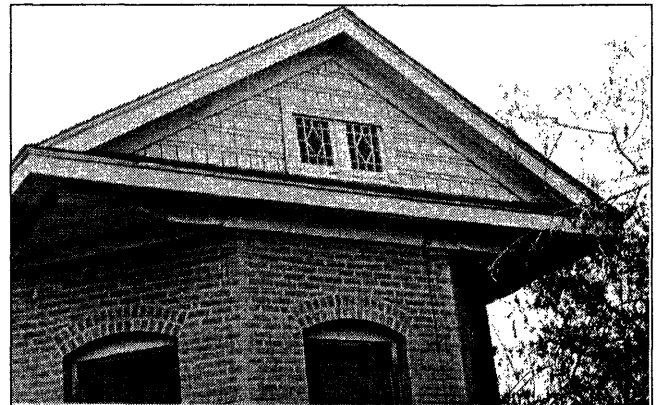


Figure 30

*Modified L-Plan Houses*

Modified L-plan houses are a turn-of-the-century variant of the L-plan house. Seen as early as 1890 but more typically dating to the early 1900s, Modified L-plan houses are found in both urban and rural settings but are more prevalent in cities and towns. They were built in considerable numbers and nearly every historic community throughout the state boasts at least some good examples of the type. The Modified L-plan house is distinguished from the simple L-plan by its size, roof form and massing. It is characterized by a large central section covered by a steeply pitched hipped roof with small, secondary gables extending to the front and side. Late-19th-century versions typically have Queen Anne-style ornamentation, such as elaborately cut wood trim in gable ends and on porches. Those erected in the early 20th century, however, often have classically inspired detailing with Doric or Tuscan columns supporting a wraparound porch. Transoms and sidelights are common features framing the front door. Several good examples, rendered in brick, exist in Rio Grande City (Figure 31).



Figure 31

Most Modified L-plan houses utilize wood-frame construction with weatherboard siding and have double-hung windows with wood sashes and 1/1 lights. They are often associated with middle-class families who applied fashionable architectural trim as a way to demonstrate their social and financial standing as well as their aspirations. Earlier versions are likely to have Queen Anne-style ornamentation such as turned-wood columns with jigsawn brackets and spindle friezes. Elaborate bargeboards and patterned shingles, details associated with the Queen Anne style, decorate the gable ends. Later versions, especially those built after about 1905, typically feature classically inspired detailing such as Doric, Tuscan or, in more ostentatious houses, Ionic

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or Corinthian columns. Such houses may also display Palladian windows, oval windows in the entry doors and dentil molding along the cornices.

*T-Plan Houses*

T-plan houses are most often found in urban areas as an alternative to the more common L-plan type dwelling although they are much less common than either the L-plan or Modified L-plan. Possibly evolved from the Center-Passage plan type, T-plan houses were built from the 1880s to the first decade of this century. They are almost always of wood frame construction with weatherboard siding. The T-shaped configuration is achieved by the intersection of two gabled wings. The house type is distinguished by its front-projecting center wing; the primary entrance is often found in the front-facing end (Figure 32). Other T-plan houses have two front doors that open on the setback portions flanking the projecting wing. Like L-plan and Modified L-plan houses, T-plan dwellings often displays stylistic features associated with the Queen Anne style. Architectural elements commonly seen on T-plan houses include porches with turned-wood supports, jigsawn brackets, and spindle friezes that extend around the front wing. Double-hung windows with either 1/1- or 2/2-light sashes are typical although the latter is more common. Only a single example of a T-plan house was identified in the combined surveys. The house at 205 W. Third Street exhibits both Queen Anne and Classical Revival detailing.



**Figure 32**

*U-Plan Houses*

In the latter half of the 19th century, builders altered the familiar Center-passage dwelling by placing symmetrical, front-projecting wings at each end of the house. The additions may have been in response to the popularity of picturesque forms during the period. Most examples are of frame construction and exhibit some Victorian trim across the porch or around window and door openings. The primary entrance is through the center passage, between the two projecting wings. In some instances, the passage may divide the house into private and public quarters following the Center-passage model. Like the T-plan form, U-plan houses are found less frequently than other traditional domestic building types. Only one true example, a board-and-batten house at 302 E. Wimpy Street, was identified in the Rio Grande City surveys.

*Shotgun Houses*

Shotgun houses are one of the most easily recognized house forms throughout the South. Although often associated with African American urban settlements, the shotgun house is also a common feature of rural Texas landscapes. Closely associated with African American communities from the Reconstruction period through the first half of the 20th century, they provided affordable housing for thousands of emancipated slaves who flooded Southern cities in search of jobs and protection after the Civil War. Because of their narrow width and diminutive size, two or more shotgun dwellings could be squeezed on a lot, reducing costs and providing more housing opportunities than standard-sized homes.



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The origin of the plan type's name has been the subject of debate among architectural historians but it undoubtedly emerged from the in-tandem configuration of the house; the shotgun house has an elongated plan that is only one-room wide and two- to four-rooms deep. It has been said that a shotgun blast through the front door would pass through all rooms in the house since they are arranged in a straight line from front to back.

Virtually all Shotgun houses are wood frame construction and most are front-gabled (Figure 33) although hipped roof varieties are not uncommon. They typically feature full-width front porches supported by simple posts. Those erected in the late 19th century sometimes have modest Queen Anne-style detailing including jigsawn bargeboards and patterned wood shingles in the gable ends. Shotgun houses of this period often feature turned porch posts, matching pilasters and decorative brackets, as well. Some of the most elaborate examples of Victorian era Shotgun houses are found in Creole neighborhoods in New Orleans. More often, however, Shotgun houses display little, if any, stylistic detailing.

Shotgun houses are often found in historically African American neighborhoods and are commonly used for rental purposes. Although shotgun houses date to the late 19th century, the form, due to its inexpensive construction and small size persisted in low-income neighborhoods throughout the South well into the 20th century. This particular domestic building type, perhaps because of its identification with poverty, is among the least likely to survive in both cities and rural areas.

In Rio Grande City, the Shotgun house was not a prevalent form even for low-income groups. This may be due, in part, to the dominance of the traditional *jacal* form which served the same purpose: providing small, inexpensive, easily constructed shelter for low-income families. Dwellings the size of Shotgun houses but identified as *jacals* on Sanborn maps persisted in Rio Grande City through the first third of the 20th century. Possibly for these reasons, only six identifiable Shotgun houses were recorded in the city surveys. A rare example of a 2-story Shotgun house stands at 510 E. Water Street and a good, typical example lies at 512 W. Mirasoles Street (Figure 33).

### Popular Plan Types

While traditional building types continued to be built well into the second quarter of the 20th century, by the early 1900s new domestic forms were promoted in the popular reading material of middle-class Americans. Architects, designers, doctors, social reformers, and religious leaders expounded on their beliefs that tasteful and appropriately functional architecture could exert a very powerful, positive social impact upon American culture (Handlin 1979; Wright 1980; Clark 1986). Consequently, local building traditions (identified in the *Vernacular Plan Types* section) yielded to new architectural building types known as "popular plan types". These popular plan buildings – as the name implies – were tremendously successful and appeared simultaneously throughout the country. Most popular forms are dwellings such as bungalow-plan and four-square plan houses, but the stylistic detail associated with such popular domestic architecture often appears on commercial and institutional buildings of the period.

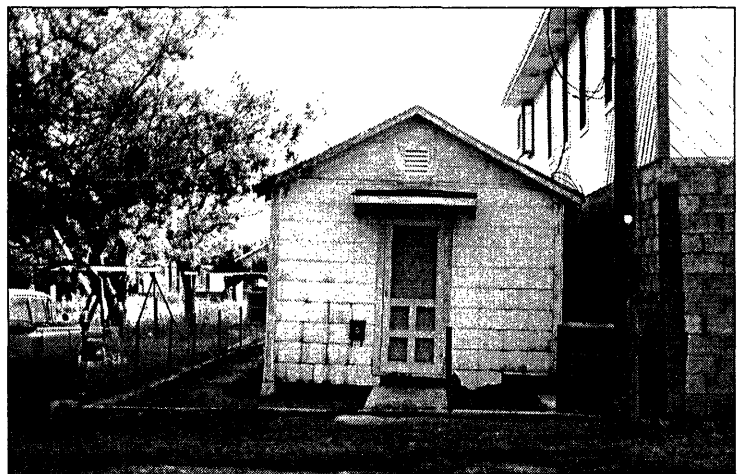


Figure 33

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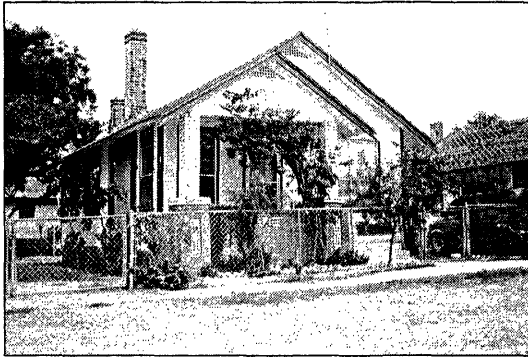


Figure 34



Figure 35

Although lumberyards and speculators marketed lots and houses to homebuilders as early as the 1880s, most Americans continued to contract directly with local builders for their homes until the first decade of the twentieth century. Then, local lumber dealers and developers competed with well-known mail order companies like Sears and Montgomery Ward and specialty companies like Aladdin and Redi-Cut, who supplied plans and pre-cut building materials for thousands of homes throughout the country. In some instances, entire communities were composed of mail-order houses. These mass-produced houses exhibited a range of stylistic references from expensive, fully rendered Classical Revival styles to Craftsman influenced bungalows and modest cottages and workers' housing with little stylistic embellishment.

Throughout the country, familiar two-story Queen Anne-style dwellings were replaced by one- and one-and-a-half-story asymmetrical frame houses in the early 20th century. Reduced in scale, stripped of towers and turrets, and their turned posts replaced by classically inspired columns, the new form was offered in countless catalogs and lumberyard publications. But it was the modest frame house enhanced by a bungalow-style porch or Craftsman-inspired trim, that dominated the streetscape. Following the First World War, real estate developers, lumberyards and mail-order companies launched massive advertising campaigns to promote the notion that all Americans deserved a home of their own. Their strategy was wildly successful and resulted in a flurry of new home construction along long suburban blocks in every part of the country during the prosperous 1920s (Gowans 1986; Stevenson and Jandl 1986).

### *Bungalows*

Bungalows are undoubtedly the most common historic subtype of Domestic Buildings in Rio Grande City, as they are in most Texas cities. Bungalows are found throughout the city in varying stages of integrity and condition. They were built locally from the 1920s through the 1940s. Their dominance reflects the bungalow's popularity and the city's access to outside architectural forms and materials via the railroad. The large number of bungalows suggests a general prosperity in the region during the 1920s and into the 1930s. Hundreds of bungalows were identified in the survey.

McAlester and McAlester (1986) have identified four subgroups of bungalows, and examples of each are found in Rio Grande City. These subgroups are based on roof types and include side-gabled, cross-gabled, front-gabled, and hipped-roof bungalows. The most common bungalow subtype in Rio Grande City is the front-gabled bungalow that, as its name suggests, has a front-facing gable roof that extends over the entire house. A smaller, secondary front gable often covers a partially inset porch (Figure 34). Side-gabled



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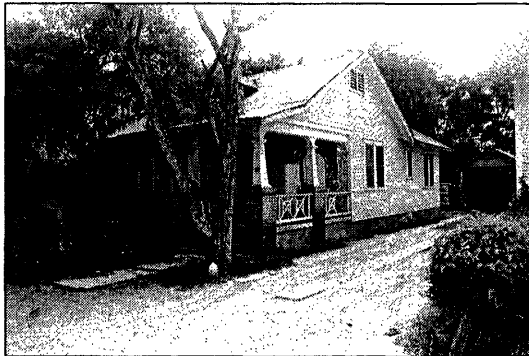


Figure 36

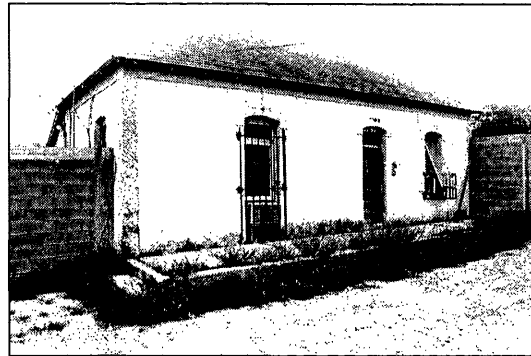


Figure 37

bungalows, likewise, have a single-gabled roof with slopes on the front and rear elevations and gable ends on the side. Porches on earlier versions of this subgroup are completely inset, but more recent ones have small porches that only cover the main entrance (Figure 35). Cross-gabled bungalows have a front-facing gable and another gable that intersects at a right angle. Often, this second gable is located on the front and incorporates the porch, giving the structure a more horizontal emphasis (Figure 36). Hipped-roof dwellings, the fourth subtype of bungalow, are less common in urban settings and, in sharp contrast to other subcategories, have steeply pitched hipped roofs and symmetrical facades. They usually have inset front porches that extend across the front and have squared or Doric columns, which suggest a Classical Revival influence. Hipped-roof bungalows, especially those with pyramidal roofs and Classical influences, often feature hipped, centrally placed dormers extending from front, and sometimes side roof slopes. They are sometimes referred to as "doghouse" dormers. This bungalow variant made for a very popular farmhouse type from about 1910 through the mid-1920s. The high-pitched roof and dormers allowed for additional rooms to accommodate large farm families. Smaller versions were more common in cities from about 1910 to 1920, and Rio Grande City has few examples. Most of the small hipped roof dwellings in Rio Grande City follow a more traditional linear form rather than a massed, bungalow floorplan. There are numerous examples of one story, brick hipped roof houses throughout the city that somewhat resemble the hipped roof bungalow (Figure 37).

Although some bungalows in Rio Grande City could have been designed by architects, most were undoubtedly built from plans that appeared in catalogs or pattern books such as the one published by Ye Planry, a Dallas-based architectural design firm that mass-produced domestic plans. Common features of these early bungalows include a strong horizontal emphasis with low-pitched roofs, extended eaves, and broadly proportioned openings. The porch is a critical design element and a visually dominant feature. It is often partially inset and typically has tapered or "battered" porch posts with broad bases that suggest weight and mass to both the porch and the structure. The upper sashes of the double-hung windows or screens often have rails in a geometric design that add visual interest to the structure; conversely, the lower sashes are almost

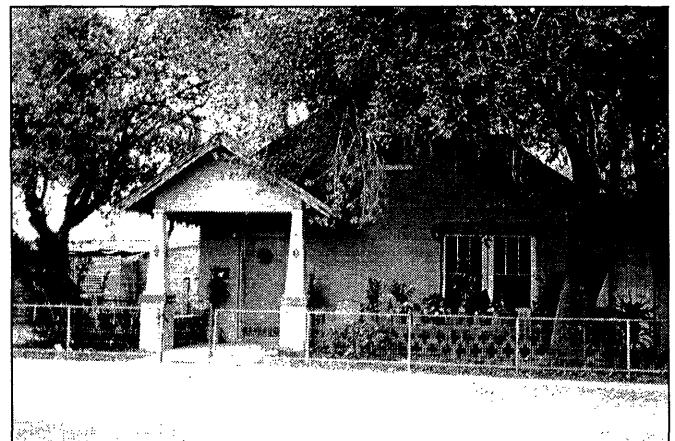


Figure 38

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always single paned. The doors are wide and often have Craftsman-inspired detailing, such as multi-light windows, in the upper section.

Although they display many of the essential components seen on earlier versions, bungalows built after 1920 often are generally less grand in scale, detailing, and level of craftsmanship. These factors made them more affordable to the growing numbers of middle-income families throughout the country. Porches became smaller and a less dominant physical feature. Ornate woodwork was seen less often and windows typically were grouped in pairs and had 1/1-light sashes without the geometric designs frequently seen on pre-1920 bungalows. Tapered box columns, triangular "knee" braces supporting the eaves and gable ends, and extended eaves with exposed rafter ends are common features of post-1920 bungalows (Figure 38).



Figure 39

Of the popular plan types built throughout the nation in the early 20th century, the bungalow was the most significant and common. They appeared in the first decade of the 20th century and reached a peak of popularity from 1910 to 1930, when they were featured in songs, literature and magazines devoted exclusively to the house type. Some contemporaneous writers referred to the passion for bungalows as "the bungalow craze". Early 20th-century writers were apt to call any small, intimate dwelling a bungalow, making the term vague, confusing, and somewhat useless. It is important to consider the bungalow as a building type, not a style, since the squat, cozy dwellings were offered with Craftsman, Spanish Colonial, Classical, Mission, Shingle, and Prairie stylistic ornamentation and features. Typical bungalow features include a low-slung profile of only 1 or 1-1/2 stories and a broad roofline that incorporates the porch. Bungalow designs typically feature geometrical brackets supporting wide eaves. The roof form most often identified with bungalows is a multiple-gabled roof, although hipped roofs and even flat roofs fronted by parapets – associated with Mission or Spanish Colonial Revival styles – are common. Rio Grande City has several good examples of Spanish Colonial Revival bungalows (Figure 39). Bungalows display a wide variety of porch treatments; however, the most common porch elements are tapered box columns supported by brick or stone pedestals.

Once the basic bungalow model was established, it was rendered in every stylistic variant, constructed of log and frame, faced with brick, stucco and cobblestone, and sheathed with shingles stained a dark, earthy color. Offered as a middle-class dwelling, the bungalow attained considerable popularity because of its modern appearance and efficient layout. The interior of a bungalow was small, its spaces compressed. Typical bungalow plans have two rows of side-by-side rooms, staggered front to back. One row of rooms served as the public space with a living room, dining room and kitchen while the second row housed the private space comprised of bed and bath rooms. Dining and living spaces were opened to each other or folded compactly into a single room. Compared with their great Victorian kitchens, bungalow kitchens were efficient workplaces filled with modern appliances. Many featured built-in ironing boards and all had outlets for toasters, radios and other electrical devices. Parlors and music rooms -- by then considered superfluous -- were generally eliminated in this move toward informality (King 1984; Gowans 1986). However, nearly all bungalows featured substantial front porches which served as a transition space from the outdoors to the interior.

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Bungalow enthusiasts possessed an almost religious zeal, touting its "healthful benefits" and unpretentious, "American" design as morally superior to the more ostentatious Queen Anne and European influenced styles. Bungalows often exhibited exposed structural elements and featured natural, unpainted wood throughout the house emphasizing craftsmanship and the beauty of the natural world. In accordance with health philosophies of the early twentieth century, bungalows were designed to "bring the outside in" allowing its residents to enjoy and benefit from fresh air and sunlight. Many bungalows featured screened sleeping porches in the belief that it was more healthful to sleep outside. Large, paired windows were spaced to allow free movement of air throughout the house, as well.

Rio Grande City has very few early bungalows, possibly because it lacked rail access until 1925. Pre-cut lumber and kit houses could not be easily transported to the city until that time. Once such materials were readily available, however, the bungalow craze captivated Rio Grande City as it had the rest of the country. Literally hundreds of bungalows dating from the 1920s through the 1940s were identified in the Rio Grande City surveys. Excellent examples rendered in a variety of styles exist throughout the city.

*Four-Square Houses*

Another popular house form of this period was the Four-square or American Four-square. This house type developed in the first decade of the 20th century as a reaction to the picturesque, asymmetrical and sometimes fussy Victorian dwellings that dominated domestic designs of the previous era. Supplied in several styles by mail-order catalogs and lumberyards, four-square forms were popular through the 1920s. Their simple cubed shape presented a fresh, modern appearance in contrast to Victorian era houses, and they were often built in the same neighborhoods as the period's other new house type, the bungalow.

Four-square houses display a near-uniform character. The house type takes its name from its interior configuration, which is divided into four similarly dimensioned rooms on both floors. Four-square houses are always two stories in height. Their cube-like massing, medium- to high-pitched hipped roofs, and extended eaves are also distinctive characteristics. A central dormer often pierces the front roof façade and, occasionally, matching dormers appear on the roof's side planes. Although the form presents a symmetrical box-like appearance, the entry is often offset to one side of the primary façade. A one-story porch extends across the entire facade, creating a sense of horizontality that contrasts with the basic form.

Four-square houses typically feature wood-frame construction with weatherboard siding, although brick versions are not unknown, especially in areas where timber was scarce. Stylistic details are often characteristic of Prairie School or Classical Revival designs. Doric or Tuscan columns and molded trim on the one-story porch are common features. The off-center front entrance often has a multi-paned transom and sidelights. The windows are wood double hung sashes with 1/1-lights.

Like its contemporary, the bungalow, the Four-square plan type first reached Rio Grande City in the early years of the 20th century but no pure examples exist in the city. The closest example to a Four-square plan in Rio Grande City is the hospital at 404 E. Fourth Street (Figure 40).



**Figure 40**

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***Stylistic Classification***

Architectural styles are defined by the presence or combination of architectural details that are in use during a specific period of time. In modern architecture, they may be defined by a lack of details or streamlined embellishment. They are a useful way of categorizing buildings when combined with a discussion of plan type. A community's most elaborate or impressive buildings may be best understood in terms of style but most domestic and commercial buildings exhibit only minimal stylistic references, if any. Some vernacular buildings mix stylistic palettes and cannot be classified under a single category. Industrial and infrastructural properties and Strip buildings -- gas stations, motels, fast food restaurants and shopping centers -- likewise display little or no architectural embellishment and cannot be classified by style. Style, then, serves primarily as an accompaniment to vernacular and popular building type discussions to describe a community's cultural resources (Longstreth 1984).

At the middle of the 19th century, American popular literature helped transform the concept of the family home from mere shelter to a reflection of status and taste. Architects, builders, and social theorists wrote books, journals, and pamphlets to illustrate how a few turned posts, carved brackets, and a steeply pointed gable could easily and cheaply transform a simple dwelling into a cozy, protective cottage (Wright 1980; Clark 1986). The simple, restrained early 19th-century Greek and Roman Revival styles yielded to more picturesque designs including Gothic, Romanesque, and Eastlake palettes. Mass production of milled lumber and intricately wrought details allowed working- and middle-class families the opportunity to festoon their cottages with all manner of decoration because it was readily available and relatively inexpensive. Small houses began sporting bay windows, turned porch posts, patterned shingles, and decorative brackets and spindles. Larger dwellings added towers, turrets or elaborate two-story and wrap-around porches as well as projecting bays and wings.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing well into the 20th century, architectural trends returned to the classics for inspiration. Builder's magazines, professional journals, and the popular press promoted more academically correct historic fashions and created a demand for houses in the Classical, Spanish Colonial, Tudor (English), and other revival styles. The 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition significantly influenced the return to classicism, a trend that continues to find expression in modern architecture. Classical styles appeared in both architect-designed and mail-order catalog houses throughout the country.

Stylistic enhancement was not limited to domestic architecture in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Commercial buildings frequently added decorative Italianate cornices and while public buildings incorporated Romanesque and Beaux Arts elements into their designs. Business districts were transformed by rich palettes of fanciful Victorian-era ornamentation, and grand institutional buildings incorporated historic stylistic details in their designs, often imitating the forms of Greek or Roman landmark buildings.

***Stylistic Influences***

In the last decades of the 20th century houses came to be seen more as artistic expressions rather than mere shelter. Both exteriors and interiors reflected the new taste for the complex and ornate, which in many ways celebrated the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution. Nationally and locally, these trends were promulgated by wealthy Anglos but they were soon copied by other socio-economic and ethnic groups. The latter groups were seen as emulating High Style trends in deference to the wealthy but the adoption of these stylistic features by the lower-income classes perhaps said more about their own aspirations than about their homage. As a result of the adoption of High Style paired with vernacular and popular plan types, architectural assimilation quickly transcended wealth, race, or position, and High Style influences can be seen from the most modest vernacular buildings to grand, consciously "styled" homes.

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The Queen Anne style personified the late 19th-century picturesque movement. The Queen Anne style referenced an elaborate arrangement of ornamental details drawn from English architecture. The variety, whimsy, charm and abundance of decorative detail gave the Queen Anne its appeal. Queen Anne dwellings eschewed the Classical constraints of symmetry and form. Two story asymmetrical frame buildings characterized the form of the Queen Anne (Figure 41). The asymmetry was often achieved with a collection of rounded towers, fanciful domes, turrets, and steeply pitched roofs with conical, pyramidal, and hipped shapes. No other style exhibited such a rich variety of textures, as smooth clapboard, imbricated shingles, polychromatic roof tiles, carved brackets, turned balusters and porch supports, and sawn bargeboards were used to create a lively configuration that worked in harmony with the basic form of the house (Clark 1986; Gowans 1986) (Figure 42).



Figure 41



Figure 42

By the turn of the century, new technologies, transformations in family life, the expansion of the middle and upper classes, and changing aesthetic tastes led to a diminished interest in the picturesque house from previous decades,

represented by the elaborate Queen Anne Style. The clutter of detail and curved, ornate lines fell out of favor before the simple horizontality and spare ornament of the early 20th-century family dwelling. Likewise, changes in outbuildings occurred although necessity rather than fashion dictated the replacement of carriage houses and barns with the auto garage. Newly introduced bungalows and Four-square houses, praised for their practicality and simplicity, led the trend away from the old aesthetic. This preference for the natural and well-crafted over the ornate and intricate informed interior as well as exterior details. Domestic interiors were reorganized for efficiency and touted for their functional use of space. Living and dining rooms of modest homes and, to a lesser degree, highly crafted "Popular" houses, were opened up into a single space and furnished with Mission or Craftsman style furniture and ornament whose design and detail mirrored the clean lines of the house.

Prairie School-influenced dwellings based on the turn-of-the-century domestic designs of Frank Lloyd Wright were considered the epitome of style during the period. The strong horizontal emphasis that dominates Prairie School-influenced houses is underscored by long bands of ribbon windows; long, low, or flat rooflines; elongated terraces projecting from side elevations; contrasting coping materials; wide, low chimneys; and horizontally placed decorative materials. Architect-designed versions often feature stained glass and Sullivanesque ornament at window and door openings. Few pure Prairie Style houses were built by or for middle-class homeowners; however, homebuilders, style-book authors and mail-order catalogs adapted Prairie School details to enhance their bungalow and Four-square designs (Clark 1986; Gowans 1986).

A renewed enthusiasm for Colonial-era-inspired forms first emerged during the late 19th century but took hold during the early 20th century. Impetus for this movement is traced to the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial, which spurred interest in the country's pre-Revolutionary past and its architectural history. A national despondency in the post-Civil War era, the negative social consequences of industrialization, and a

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backlash against the influx of immigrants at the century's end strengthened the movement, and the Colonial Revival style became a mainstay of the builder's repertoire, surviving even to the present. With a mixture of patriotism and nostalgia, Americans sought to identify a particularly national style in the decades after the Southern surrender at Appomattox. The result was a romantic interpretation of Colonial architecture based on surviving pre-Revolutionary structures, which had in many instances, been altered by Federal- and Victorian-period remodeling.

The balanced facades of Colonial-style dwellings are relatively undecorated except for the entry bay, where single-story porticoes or molded door surrounds embellish the opening. Dormers enhance the side-gabled roof, as do exaggerated end chimney stacks. Many Colonial Revival houses, especially in New England, feature hipped roofs. Especially ambitious examples of the style employ Palladian windows to mark stair placement. With few exceptions, frame versions are painted a stark white with shutters, foundation and door trim providing the only relief. Brick variants often use jack arches, plastered and unplastered, or plastered keystones (Axelrod 1985; Gowans 1986).

A popular architectural expression of the late 19th and early 20th century was the Classical Revival style. The slippery, imprecise term is often used synonymously with Edwardian and Neoclassical Revival. The style is chiefly characterized by its use of the classical orders, pediments, temple front motifs and symmetrical organization. A two-story portico, which was found on both private and public architecture, is the style's signature detail. Doric, Tuscan, Ionic and Corinthian columns abound (Figure 43).

During the 1920s and 1930s, large courthouses, movie theaters, fashionable resort hotels, and even small cottages were capped with low-pitched tile roofs, smoothly stuccoed to imitate adobe, and entered via an arched opening in a nation-wide revival of Spanish Colonial stylistic motifs. Architect-designed buildings of this style exhibit the full range of ornamental possibilities, including wrought-iron grillwork, tiles set into exterior walls, exposed wood, Plateresque-, and Churrigueresque-inspired-door and window surrounds, tile paving, and interior courtyards. Suburban developers and plan books reduced this Spanish Colonial vocabulary to its barest elements -- thin stucco coating, arched openings, and tile roofing -- to suggest the style on the countless number

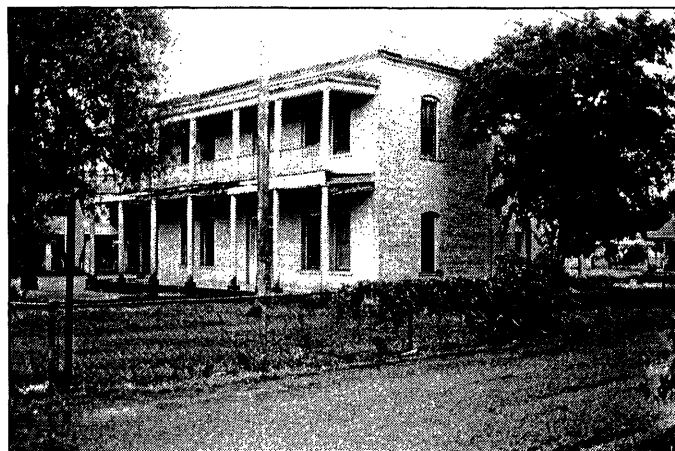


Figure 43



Figure 44



Figure 45



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of bungalows and cottages they offered. Rio Grande City is replete with good examples of early 20th century Spanish Colonial Revival houses. Among them are the H.P. Guerra Jr. House (Figure 44) and the Dr. M. J. Rodriguez House (Figure 45).

The Mission Revival style is closely related to and often confused with the Spanish Colonial Revival style. Adapted from the distinguishing features of a Spanish mission, the Mission Revival style is differentiated by its more sparsely detailed exterior which often includes a scrolled "Alamo-esque" gable, parapet and dormers, arched entries and, on occasion, a tower capped with red clay tile. Although the style was applied to domestic buildings, it is more often found in civic, institutional and religious buildings. The 1937 International Store displays elements of Mission Revival stylistic characteristics in a one-part commercial building (Figure 46). One of the most impressive Mission inspired houses in the city, the two story Y. Guerra House, stands at 504 E. Second (Figure 47).

The Tudor Revival was a popular architectural expression of the 1920s and 1930s. Mail-order catalogs and style books of the period made no distinction between Tudor, Elizabethan, and Jacobean styles, instead distilling the various shapes and details under the name Tudor or English style. Architect-designed interpretations appeared in new upper class suburban developments, whereas the steeply pitched gable roofs, half-timbered detail, decorative chimney, and arched porch opening marked the modest cottages built in the 1920s and 1930s (Gowans, 1986). Modest examples generally follow a bungalow plan but most lack deep porches. Instead, they have shallow stoops sheltered by high-pitched entries over round-arched doorways. Very few Tudor Revival dwellings appear in Rio Grande City, possibly because of the popularity of the Spanish Colonial Revival derivatives. One example of a modest Tudor house lies at 101 S. Corpus (Site 163).

Although the Great Depression stifled overall economic growth in the state, modest amounts of residential construction took place during the 1930s, much of it related to oil and agricultural activity. Some new forms -- Moderne and Art Deco -- were utilized but they were few in numbers and were limited primarily to institutional buildings in larger cities. Residential construction of the 1930s tended to rely on revival styles (Tudor, Colonial, etc.), which were perhaps reminders of simpler times during a period of extreme economic and social uncertainty.

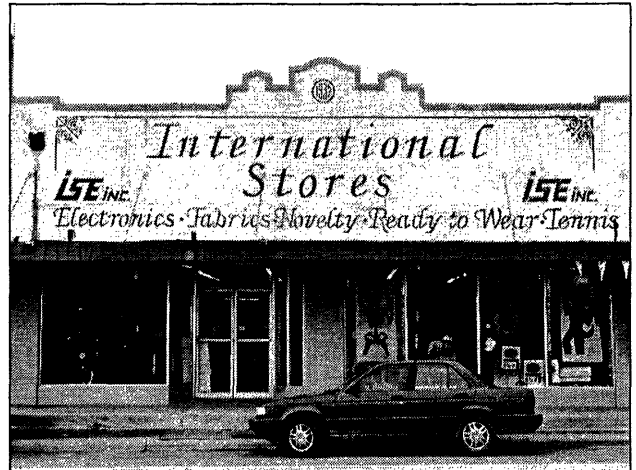


Figure 46

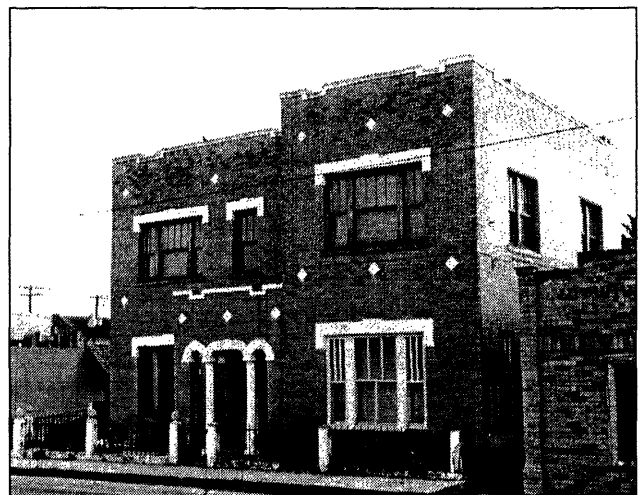


Figure 47



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World War II marked a turning point in the architectural history of the state and nation. Little residential construction occurred in the early 1940s, as the country's resources and energies were directed to the war effort. Following the war's conclusion, however, an unprecedented residential construction boom ensued. Post-World War II houses largely abandoned historical precedents and instead turned to new and modern forms that de-emphasized stylistic detailing. Ranch and Minimal Traditional "styles" are most often associated with the phenomenal building boom of the postwar era.

*Architectural Style Influenced Dwellings*

Stylistic influences vary considerably depending on the structure's date of construction and/or alteration; however, they reflect patterns documented throughout Texas in previous surveys. Rio Grande City's oldest extant domestic buildings from the 1840s and 1850s retain little of their original form or stylistic ornamentation. Greek Revival form and symmetry is evident in some of the buildings, but detail typically includes only pedimented architraves on window and door surrounds. The Gothic Revival style, which reached Starr County in the third quarter of the 19th century found its expression only in religious architecture in Rio Grande City and even then it had to compete with local vernacular materials. The ca. 1888 First Methodist Church and the now demolished historic Catholic Church displayed some Gothic Revival characteristics (Figure 48).

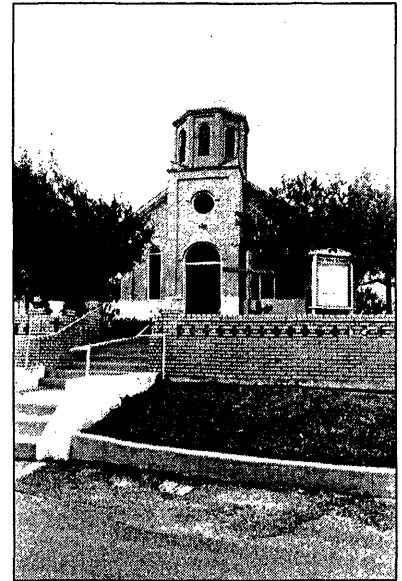


Figure 48

The most prevalent late-19th-century domestic architectural style of the county is the Queen Anne style with its asymmetrical massing, picturesque form, Victorian or Classical detailing, and variety of textures and exterior finishes. Most were pattern-book houses that were built by local contractors, carpenters, and/or lumberyards. Others were designed by architects. The Queen Anne style was quite popular when the county's economy expanded during the late 19th century with more extensive agricultural development. In Rio Grande City, the Victorian era styles were late arrivals. Several outstanding examples of Queen Anne styled dwellings are found in Rio Grande City. Among the best examples are the two story L-plan house at 704 N. Lopez (See Figure 28) and the later version at 603 W. Main (Site 341). By the mid 1900s, the style lost favor (as it did elsewhere in Texas) and was replaced by simpler and less eclectic architectural forms such as the Classical Revival style. Several houses in Rio Grande City, including Site 424 in the 300 block of E. Second (See Figure 30) and Site 428 at 204 E. Second, employ both Queen Anne and Classical Revival embellishment.

The Classical Revival style enjoyed considerable popularity in Starr County during the first and second decades of the 20th century. Classical Revival houses often were the residences of prominent citizens and stood as symbols of their owner's role and stature in the county and/or community. Only a handful were actually designed by architects; most were built from catalogs, pattern books, or other publications. The Classical Revival style also made its way to vernacular structures, and numerous modified L-plan houses, which earlier were built with Queen Anne-style ornamentation, were now fitted with Classical Revival details. An excellent Classical Revival house in the 400 block of E. Second Street, the Eduardo Matilde Isaguirre House (Site 422), has fallen into disrepair as the result of a fire. However, its salient feature, a two-story portico supported by classical columns remains evident. An excellent Center-Passage house with Classical Revival features is found at 305 E. Second (Site 426).

No architect-designed Prairie School houses were documented in the Rio Grande City surveys, in keeping with the statewide pattern. However, although few High Style Prairie houses were built in Texas, the

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style influenced domestic architecture throughout the state including Hays County. Prairie School attributes are seen most often on two-story Four-square houses built in the first and second decades of the 20th century. Most are in the county's urban areas. Local examples of houses with Prairie School influences are recognized by low-slung porches with broadly proportioned columns, doors, and windows. The roofs are low pitched with wide overhangs.

The other major architectural expression found in local houses was the Tudor Revival style, which was popular from the late 1920s until about 1940. A few were designed by architects and feature stone, stucco, and decorative half-timbering on their exteriors. More typically, however, the style merely influenced the manner in which houses were detailed and usually consisted of round-arched openings, brick-veneer walls, and multiple-gable roofs that are pitched steeply. The chimney, though still a prominent feature, is less detailed and ornamented than architect-designed Tudor Revival houses. Only a handful of Tudor Revival houses exist in Rio Grande City. One noteworthy dwelling, the Mrs. Adan Garza House in the 400 block of N. Lopez (Site 116) is an eclectic building that uses stone and petrified wood in its construction but it has the steeply pitched gables reminiscent of the Tudor Revival style.

Good examples of Spanish Colonial Revival houses in both one- and two story versions exist in Rio Grande City. Most are modest bungalows with Spanish Colonial or Mission Revival style detailing but several are more fully realized examples of style which attained popularity in California as early as the 1910s and from there spread throughout the country, especially in the Southwest, during the 1920s and early 1930s. The popularity of Spanish and Mexican derivative revival styles may be attributed to the area's Hispanic roots. In fact, there has been a resurgence of interest in the traditional Southwest styles in recent times and entire subdivisions in California, Arizona, New Mexico and the El Paso region are comprised of Spanish or Pueblo-influenced dwellings featuring flat or clay tile roofs and stucco sheathing. New adobes are being built throughout the Southwest, as well.

A few examples of Georgian and Colonial Revival styles were found in Rio Grande City. Possibly because they have no antecedents in the region, they were not as popular as in the New England and other states where Anglo history is paramount. A good example of a Georgian Revival cottage is found at 100 S. Garza (Site 101) behind the La Borde Hotel.

### **Commercial Buildings**

Commercial development shapes the evolution of any community, and a town's history is often expressed in the remains of its old commercial core. There are always some buildings that survive decades, even centuries, with little or no changes to the original structure or design; however, most receive at least some unsympathetic or deleterious alterations over the course of history. After a few decades, building owners tend to dress their commercial in newer, more stylish garb to appear modern or fashionable, in step with the times. Rather than tear down an entire building, they alter the facades to present a new face to prospective customers. Many are remodeled only on the first story where the customer comes into contact with the building. Many 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings received Art Deco or Moderne style makeovers to their first floors in the 1930s. Popular 1930s publications such as *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass* transformed entire



**Figure 49**

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streetscapes. Some buildings disappeared entirely under an aluminum wrap. In most cities, the final major architectural change occurred during the 1950s when easy and inexpensive modernization could be achieved via the aluminum façade. At that time, the shopping center began to siphon activity from Main Street and there have been few wholesale attempts to revise downtown buildings to achieve yet another new look. In fact, the opposite is true. Nationwide, communities have resolved to undo unsympathetic façade treatments and return historic buildings to their original or historic period appearance.

Commercial buildings were among the first structures erected in the state, although remarkably few extant examples predate the 1870s. The earliest commercial buildings were relatively simple and straightforward in design and construction. They typically were built in towns, villages, and other locations where enough activity could support a business operation, often around a public square or at intersections of important roads. Milled lumber was the preferred building material in places where there was an abundance of affordable wood. In the earliest settlement period, however, pioneer entrepreneurs used available materials to erect their mercantile establishments. In 1848, Mifflin Kenedy built what is possibly the earliest extant commercial building store in Rio Grande City. The large, two-story wood structure stood on the banks of the Rio Grande where Kenedy's steamboats could unload goods into the building. It also served for many years as the county courthouse and, as such, is the oldest surviving courthouse building in Texas. At this time, the city's founder, Henry Clay Davis, had just laid out the town grid and there were only a few buildings in the community. Undoubtedly, they included a general mercantile store which probably also served as a combination post office and general gathering place.



**Figure 50**



**Figure 51**

As the state's population grew and rail lines were extended, trade increased throughout Texas. A wave of construction created the 1913 P. Hinojosa Building (Site 377) in the 300 block of E. Main (Figure 49).

Concentrations of one- and two-story commercial buildings in every municipality in Texas. The face of these commercial buildings were as detailed as possible because they functioned as signs to advertise the company or business names, dates of construction, or company founding. Business owners often used their rear elevations facing a broad rail frontage as a billboard for additional advertisements. At the time of their construction, these buildings were approached and seen from a walking gait at the street level, and were detailed and ornamented to catch the eye of the passerby. Taken together, the dense collection of facades comprised the commercial district, the pride of a community.

Although Rio Grande City was one of the state's last to receive rail service – the railroad didn't come to the city until 1925 – steamboat activity on the Rio Grande and use of the Military Highway (U.S. Highway 81) between Laredo and Brownsville encouraged the town to grow. After the Civil War, Fort Ringgold was rebuilt as a permanent fort with brick cavalry and infantry barracks, an officer's row and dozens of support buildings.

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Figure 52



Figure 53

The fort enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with Rio Grande City and much of the town's trade stemmed from the soldiers' appetites. In the postwar period, French, German, Mexican, Swiss, and Irish immigrants flocked to the border, expanding the populations of towns like Rio Grande City. By the late 19th century, such growth prompted the city's commercial expansion which resulted in dense rows of one- and two-story brick buildings in the city (Figure 50).

Although wood-frame and stone structural systems prevailed in the pre-railroad era, store owners turned increasingly to masonry which symbolized stability and permanence for both their own businesses and their communities. Masonry construction was preferred because it was less susceptible to fire and thus helped protect investments. A tradition of finely crafted masonry work developed, and many commercial buildings of the late 19th century displayed ornate parapets and other decorative features. In Rio Grande City, the arrival of German immigrant and master brick mason, Enrique Portschiller, heralded a tradition of particularly fine brick making in the entire region from Rio Grande City to Laredo. Portschiller is thought to have been architect of the brick buildings at Fort Ringgold as well as the convent.

Perhaps his best works are in the upriver town of Roma but his legacy in Rio Grande City is evident in the many fine buildings constructed by those who followed his lead. Among the best examples are the Silverio de la Pena Building (Figure 51), the Renaga Headley Edgerton Building, the Crisoforo Solis House and the La Borde Hotel. All were commercial buildings that also housed the owners (Figure 52). A lesser known example is the ca. 1900 Pol Muniz Building, a two story hipped roof commercial building at 605 E. Second (Figure 53).

Commercial building activity continued in the early 20th century but became increasingly diversified in form, detailing, and use. Professionally trained architects played an increasingly prominent role in the design and construction of commercial architecture, which brought a higher level of sophistication to downtowns throughout the state. An important development during this time was the introduction of the office building, a new building form that was erected in the state's largest and most prosperous communities. These structures often were two stories or higher and typically displayed High-Styled

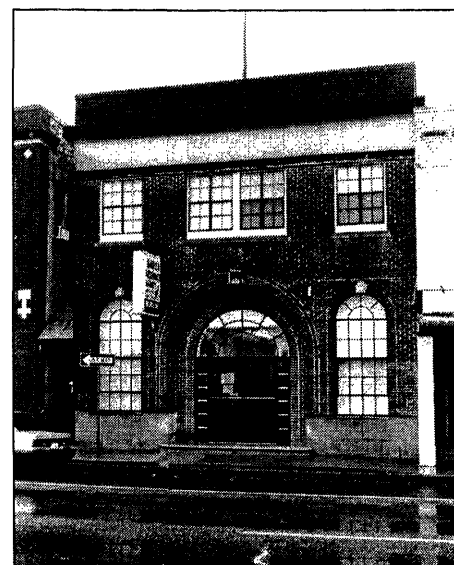


Figure 54

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ornamentation and features. Other new building forms included service stations and theaters, which incorporated specialized designs for their unique functions.

Because of its small size, Rio Grande City could support few buildings dedicated entirely to office use but a number of commercial buildings that housed offices at the rear or on the upper floors were built in the early 20th century. Good examples, including the First National Bank and Trust (Figure 54) which display some of the city's most refined commercial features and stylistic ornamentation, lie in the 400 block of E. Main Street. An early example of a commercial building with retail activity on the first floor and office or living space on the second is the ca. 1895 Emil Block Building (Site 395) in the 600 block of E. Main (Figure 55). At the same time, several movie theaters and service stations sprang up in the city to accommodate the era's new innovations: the motion picture and the automobile.



Figure 55

The city's only surviving movie theater, the Garmon Theater at 207 E. Main Street (Site 369), is a good example of a modestly detailed Art Deco theater of the period (Figure 56).



Figure 56

The Mission Revival styled service station (Figure 57) in the 800 block of E. Second Street is an unusually intact example of a pre-World War II gas station in Rio Grande City.



Figure 57

As with domestic buildings, it is difficult to analyze and assess commercial buildings solely on the basis of style. It is probably more useful and accurate to consider commercial buildings by building type in conjunction with stylistic treatment. This Property Types analysis follows architectural historian Richard Longstreth's typology of commercial buildings which is based on facade organization. Published in 1987, Longstreth's system of analysis in *The Buildings of Main Street* identified 11 possible building types defined by their physical attributes. Two of these building types, One-Part Commercial Block and Two-Part Commercial Block, form the majority of structures found in Rio Grande City's commercial districts.

The One-Part Commercial Block is an independently distinguished one-story structure that may be found free standing or part of a group of similarly designed buildings. The facade typically consists of plate glass display windows topped by a transom band. A good example of an early 20th century one-part commercial block is found at 307 E. Main. The C. Vale Building, now occupied by the Triple L Carpet Center

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(Site 371), is sectioned into three separate storefronts each with a pedimented parapet and a recessed entry. The concrete capped brick parapet

wall evokes a sense of the Mission Revival Style (Figure 58). Corbelled brick, ornamental panels, pressed-metal cornices, and cast-stone coping often define and enhance the parapet.

The Two-Part Commercial Block is so-called for its division into two distinct horizontal sections. The first story, or lower section, is both visually and functionally separate from the upper section of one to three additional stories. Two-Part Commercial Blocks typically house commercial storefronts at the street level and residential apartments or offices in the upper stories. Like the one-Part Commercial Block, the first floor is usually defined by plate glass windows and glass entries to draw attention to the products for sale. In contrast, upper story windows are smaller and found in varying patterns. Their purpose is to provide light and air to residents and office workers. Every type of commercial activity utilizes this building type. The 1913 P. Hinojosa Building (Site 377) in the 300 block of E. Main (See Figure 49) is a good example of an early 20th century two-part commercial block in Rio Grande City. Less common commercial building subtypes found in limited numbers locally include the Enframed Block, Two-Part Vertical Block, Enframed Window Wall, Temple Front, Vault, and Arcaded Block. All are defined by their façade treatment.

Post-World War II alterations made to commercial structures reflect the urge to modernize and improve older buildings. This philosophy governed construction through the 1970s and lingers today. Turn-of-the-century facades, which appeared outmoded after 50 years of use, were often hidden behind aluminum sheathing that was bolted into place. Large single-paned windows replaced multi-paned store-front glazing and transoms were removed and filled in or covered with wood or paint. Decorative cornices and parapets that identified buildings with an earlier period were removed or boxed to leave a clean-lined, modern appearance. Likewise, store owners stripped away ornamentation that referenced older, historic forms, particularly of the Victorian era which was, by then, viewed as fussy and old-fashioned.

**Commercial Buildings in Rio Grande City**

Most of the city's commercial buildings are concentrated along Main and Second streets and a few along Britton Avenue en route to the county courthouse. The majority are one- or two-part commercial blocks of load-bearing brick construction. They date from the mid- to late-19th and early 20th centuries and display decorative features both particular to the Lower Rio Grande Valley and typical of American downtowns throughout the country. Nineteenth century commercial buildings tend to follow the border traditions of the Lower Rio Grande in both form and ornamentation. The simplest of these are one-story, flat-roofed or side-gabled brick buildings that are one-room deep. Others are one-story ell-shaped or courtyard plan buildings, also one-room deep. Historically, families lived in one wing of the building and business concerns occupied the wing or wings that fronted onto the busiest streets. Finally, Rio Grande City has a number of two-story brick buildings that housed businesses on the first floor and families on the second. Virtually all possess brick detailing from simple corbelling along the cornices to elaborate brick columns and pilasters. Commercial buildings dating from the early 20th century follow forms and designs



**Figure 58**



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common throughout the state. They include one-story, three-bay buildings with central doors and flanking display windows and two-story two-part commercial buildings with storefronts and display windows on the first floor and bands of double-hung 1/1 light windows on the second. Cast-iron work and prefabricated storefronts which were common throughout the state, are nonexistent in Rio Grande City.

The following are subcategories of Commercial Buildings in Rio Grande City. They are distinguished by their intended function.

*Retail and Service Establishments*

Among the first commercial buildings in Rio Grande were general mercantile and dry goods stores that provided non-perishable groceries, clothing, household furnishings, and agricultural implements. Typically they encompassed a large, rectangular room with shelves of goods and bins of bulk items filling the space and a proprietor's station with a counter positioned near the door. Windows were few -- probably for security reasons -- and the stores were often quite dark. Ceilings were tall and transoms were placed above the doors to circulate air and reduce the heat. Surviving general stores of this type in Rio Grande City are brick with flat roofs. They are decorated with elaborate brick corbelling along the cornices, brick pilasters and brick hood molds on the windows. Good examples are the ca. 1890 Café Mexico (Figure 59), the 1887 former Starr Café and Victory Outreach Building (Figure 60) at 510 E. Main and the Kelsey Building (City Hall), Site 137 at 100 S. Washington.

Most commercial buildings in downtowns across the country consisted of only one or two stories -- rarely rising above three stories -- until well into the 20th century. Typically they presented a narrow face to the street because street frontage was highly prized and therefore expensive. Spacious interiors often extended the length of the lot, giving the business a long, rectangular appearance. Most featured large, plate-glass display windows and central, sometimes recessed, entries on the first floor level. Upper stories, when they occurred, presented a closed appearance with walls punctuated by smaller, domestic-type windows. The upper stories contrasted sharply with the inviting, open first floor retail spaces. Minimal ornamentation often signaled the first level openings while more pronounced decoration graced the cornice line or parapet. Owners of such retail establishments periodically altered the appearance of their buildings to keep abreast of fashion.

By the early 20th century, more specialized retail businesses replaced the all-purpose general mercantile store. As pre-packaged food became more available and the widespread use of ice-boxes for storage spread, a demand was created for the grocery store which specialized in foodstuffs. Colorful displays of cans, boxes, and



**Figure 59**



**Figure 60**



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advertisements in the large glass storefront windows drew shoppers into these stores where the open-plan interiors held coolers and shelves for inventory. Additional shelves, often reaching to the ceiling, encircled the store's interior walls.

Banks almost always are found in prominent locations, often at major intersections, in the commercial district. Seeking to impart a sense of wealth and security, banks frequently were the city's most imposing buildings. In most cities, banks paid higher rents for the land values of such advantageous corner locations and their owners built taller structures to recoup the costs from their many tenants. Bank lobbies with their tellers' cages occupied only the lower floor. The vault was usually located on this floor, as well. Upper floors typically housed office space rented to other businesses. Banks favored the Classical Revival styles suggested by grand arches and Corinthian columns or simple entries bracketed by pilasters. Branch banking and drive-in windows diminished the importance of Main Street banks, which were among the earliest buildings abandoned in the suburbanization of a community. Rio Grande City boasts a superb small bank in the 400 block of E. Main Street (See Figure 54).



**Figure 61**



**Figure 62**

Restaurants developed out of the tavern or saloon tradition as an appropriate venue for serving families and providing meals for merchants, travelers and shoppers in the downtown district. They range from small, unpretentious cafes with their name painted across the front windows to elegant establishment with elaborate facades sheathed in Vitrolite and Carrara Glass. Like the grocery store, the open-plan interior of a restaurant permits a flexible layout for placing tables or booths. Kitchens are relegated to the rear of the building behind walls and swinging doors. Rio Grande City has few buildings known to have served exclusively as restaurants, taverns or saloons during the historic period. Research indicates that restaurants and cafes were housed in standard commercial buildings following the layout described above. Café Mexico ( See Figure 59) in the 100 block of N. Flores (at the northeast corner with E. Main Street) is one such restaurant.

*Warehouses*

Warehouses are essential to many commercial enterprises but, because they do not attract customers, they are rarely located on the main shopping streets of most downtown areas. Rather, they exist on the peripheries of commercial zones where more land is available at less expense. Warehouses are frequently found along railroad sidings where goods can be moved easily from the freight car to the storage room. Warehouses are typically low, cavernous buildings constructed of simple, sturdy materials such as brick, concrete block, or hollow tile. Masonry construction was preferred in the cities due to its fireproofing qualities. Historic timber-framed, metal-clad examples are more likely to survive in agricultural areas, farming communities and on the

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outskirts of cities. Roof configurations are generally flat, low-pitched hipped roofs although some are sawtooth forms with clerestories. Because of their utilitarian function, they display little or no architectural embellishment. Warehouses are altered primarily to enlarge or change their functions, rather than for aesthetic enhancement.

The Rio Grande City surveys identified several warehouses, the most historically significant of which is the Mifflin Kenedy Warehouse (Figure 61) in the 200 block of W. Water Street. The warehouse is unusual for its age – ca. 1848 – and two-story, timber construction. One of the city's oldest buildings, it originally housed goods brought upriver by steamboat but it also served as Starr County's first courthouse. A more typical, wood-frame, metal-clad warehouse (Site 22B) in the survey area is associated with a cottonseed gin near the railroad siding on Industrial Road.

*Hotels*

Hotels developed from the roadside tavern or inn of pioneer days. Early hotels were frame boarding houses usually run by an owner-proprietor. From the late 19th century to the present, hotels evolved from a domestic model to the office building type in both form and appearance. As the country became more mobile and transient, substantial structures built exclusively as hotels from the late 19th on were typically of masonry construction and stood 4 to 6 stories in height. Later structures rose from 10 to 20 or 30 stories. Every type of stylistic treatment has been used to adorn the hotel as an attraction to potential guests, depending on the price-range of the clientele.

Rio Grande City has had only a few designated hotels in its history but the city has followed the general pattern stated above. Early travelers noted inns and research has shown several boarding houses in the city. The Norris Hotel (demolished), located near the water's edge on the west side of Brittan Avenue, was a two story wood hotel. The city's most outstanding example of a historic hotel is the La Borde House (See Figure 3) at the entrance to the city. City resident Francois La Borde built a family home on the site by 1899 but about 1917, possibly in response to the number of traveling military personnel then monitoring the border, he enlarged the building to its present courtyard configuration. The two-story masonry hotel is elaborately decorated with brick end parapets, corbelled cornices and hold molds, Victorian turned porch posts and brackets on the two-story galleries and a central courtyard with fountains. Despite its history as the city's principal hostelry, the La Borde House appears more like a large residence than the multi-storied hotels of larger cities. There are no examples of such hotels in Rio Grande City. Several business buildings in the city probably rented rooms in the upper sections but that has not been substantiated by research. Like nearly every city in the country, the motel made its appearance in Rio Grande City and the Bertha Motel is probably the best example of the type although it has not yet reached the recommended age for listing in the National Register.

*Theaters*

The advent of motion pictures in the 1910s engendered a spate of movie theaters across the country. Even small towns that were incapable of supporting opera houses or stages for the occasional traveling production company, welcomed movie theaters to Main Street. These entertainment houses were fashioned in



**Figure 63**

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every conceivable architectural style; many embraced exotic designs such as Egyptian Revival or featured highly stylized Art Deco motifs. Their elaborate marquees, festooned with lights and neon signs, brightened downtown streets throughout the country. Typical small-town theaters were composed of a lobby and auditorium, usually with a sloping floor to the stage and screen and a balcony overhead. Downtown theaters reached their peak audiences from the 1920s through the 1940s but retained their popularity until multi-screen suburban movie houses drew customers away in the 1960s. Rio Grande City boasted several movie theaters built in the 1930s but only one survives; the ca. 1933 Garmon Theater (Figure 62) is a good example of a modestly styled theater with distinctive Art Deco features.

*Service Stations*

Another building subtype developed in the early 20th century is the service station, whose entire purpose is to serve the automobile. Its 19th century antecedents might be considered the blacksmith shop and livery stable. The earliest urban examples were small structures, scaled and detailed much like domestic buildings, sometimes adopting the predominant style of nearby residential areas. Colonial and Tudor Revival styles – which were popular residential designs in the 1920s and 1930s – are represented in service stations of the period. Art Deco and Streamline Moderne details are also seen. Most of these early service stations had a small office and garage, and a drive-through service bay. They were most often located at the edge of the commercial district or on the highway.

Rio Grande City has a variety of service stations on the main thoroughfares – Main and Second streets – several of which date to the historic period. One of the most noteworthy examples is the stucco-covered Mission Revival style gas station (Figure 63) in the 800 block of E. Second Street. Much more common, however, are stations of more modern vintage, some of which are part of a convenience store operation.

**Institutional Buildings**

Institutional buildings house public, educational and religious activities, and, to a lesser degree, private functions such as fraternal meetings. People gather for social events, observe religious services, obtain educations, conduct official business and engage in other group activities in Institutional Buildings. Institutional buildings represent the efforts of the community – whether they be citizens, congregants, students or fraternal members – to promote itself. Such buildings embody community pride, success and aspirations. For these reasons, Institutional buildings are often a community's most memorable structures, even though they are relatively few in number. They are important as much for their symbolic attributes as for their physical characteristics. A rural, one-room frame school is as illustrative in this regard as a monumental cast-stone Art Deco courthouse building in town.

During the frontier period, which occurred at different times in different places throughout Texas, few specially designated institutional buildings were constructed as the populace concentrated their efforts on building shelter for themselves and their livestock citizens. Commercial buildings usually preceded institutional buildings in settlements since citizens in small or rural communities often held church services and school in private homes. Early civic and governmental functions frequently took place in commercial buildings; for instance, general mercantile stores typically handled mail delivery and sometimes served as polling stations in early communities. As communities and settlements prospered, the need for separate institutional buildings became apparent as congregations and student populations outgrew their homes and the civic business of postal services, city or county clerk's offices, and voting required specialized edifices.

The earliest institutional buildings were not unlike domestic and commercial buildings of the day. They were simple structures built of logs, stone or rough-hewn timber, although they were generally larger than their

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domestic and commercial counterparts. Many an early church in Texas held their first services under a brush covered arbor. More substantial construction occurred with the increased availability of milled lumber. Vernacular forms predominated throughout Texas until after the Civil War. When stability and growth returned to the state, institutional buildings reflected the general optimism and prosperity of the times in their High Style appearance. This was particularly true in cities, and especially so in cities with access to rail service where large quantities of building materials were readily available to the citizenry.

Vernacular churches, schools and meeting halls prevailed in the countryside and small towns into the 1920s. When the automobile allowed rural families to travel to town for religious services, many of the old country churches were abandoned. Likewise, rural school systems became unified districts with new, larger, and centrally located school buildings. Children could take the bus or be driven to the new schools. New churches and schools built in small communities and even in rural areas after the 1920s, imitated their city cousins by building substantial structures in appropriately stately styles. Whether urban, small town or rural community, rival congregations often tried to out do one another and show their devotion by building the largest, tallest or most elaborate church. Consequently, churches are among the most imposing and highly ornamented buildings in a community.

Schools and civic buildings compete with churches in this regard, although their size and ornamentation more commonly reflects the pride and aspirations of an entire community rather than a subgroup. During the 1930s, a flurry of building activity prompted by federal public works projects (primarily the WPA – Works Progress Administration) occurred across the country. Many of these Depression era projects impart a sense of stability and resolve in response to the climate of uncertainty and hopelessness that gripped the nation. These projects gave jobs to countless architects and builders and put thousands of people to work, but they also provided new, modern facilities in which to learn and plan a better future. Although most of these projects were completed in cities, WPA schools and public buildings, including parks, city halls and courthouses appeared in rural areas, as well. The one-room schoolhouse became a thing of the past. Few examples of these vernacular churches and school buildings survive since many were abandoned or broken up for building parts when replaced with newer, more inspiring edifices.

Institutional Buildings encompass several Subtypes, including Meeting Halls, Schools and Government Buildings. Use and stylistic influences have traditionally been the primary factors in assessing and cataloging institutional architecture. In some cases, it may be useful to evaluate Rio Grande City's institutional buildings by plan type, as well, since there are a number of vernacular structures in this category.

**Meeting Halls**

Structures designed for gatherings such as churches, tabernacles, and auditoriums are defined as Meeting Halls. Meeting Halls are the most common Subtype of Institutional Buildings and are distributed throughout the city. Churches constitute the vast majority of Meeting Halls and are divided into groups defined by form and stylistic influences. Less common meeting hall types are auditoriums, fraternal halls, and public pavilions.

*Churches*

Vernacular frame sanctuaries constitute the largest type of churches in most parts of Texas; however, in Rio Grande City, brick has prevailed as the favored material for substantial buildings since the Civil War era. Vernacular brick churches are typically rectangular in form and covered by a gable roof that encloses one large space. This basic form is slightly expanded by the addition of an entry vestibule and one or two bell towers on the primary elevation. Offices and classrooms are often attached to the rear of the sanctuary. Regularly spaced windows punctuate the sides of the sanctuary. The popularity of the Gothic Revival style for ecclesiastical

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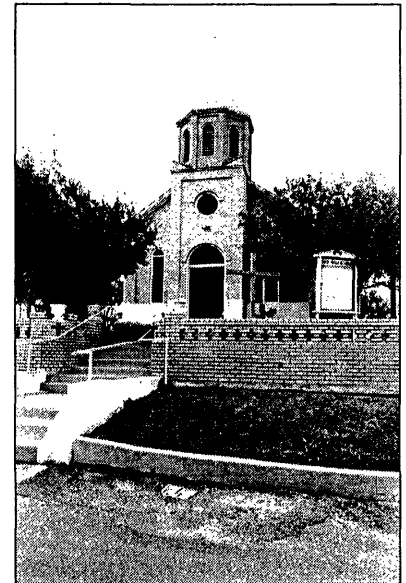
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buildings is often suggested in the use of lancet-arched windows. By their large scale and majestic towers, even the most modest vernacular churches dominate the communities in which they are found.

The 1888 First United Methodist Church at 300 E. Third Street (Figure 64) in Rio Grande City follows vernacular traditions in form and materials but bears faintly Gothic Revival influences as did the historic Catholic Church, (demolished). The light-colored brick church has arched windows, a steeply pitched roof and a central tower with articulated brick details. Classical Revival ornamentation is common in ecclesiastical architecture – both vernacular and High Style – but there are no historic examples of this type in Rio Grande City.



**Figure 64**

*Social Properties*

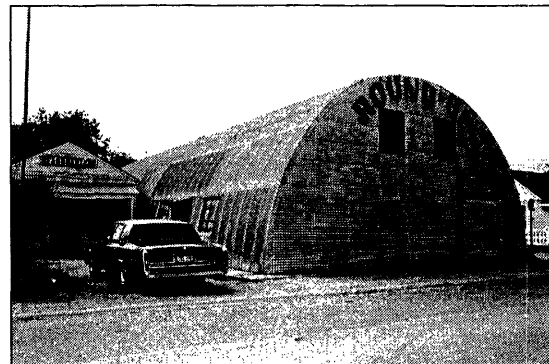
Churches and schools also functioned as gathering places for social events such as weddings, dances and box dinners, but some properties were constructed solely for social or civic use. It is difficult to separate social properties from religious or educational property types since such buildings often served multiple uses in times when labor and materials were in short supply. Spaces that function secondarily as meeting halls such as the upper stories of Two-Part Commercial blocks, are not included in the Subtype Institutional Buildings. In these cases, the commercial space below contains the primary activity and the forms of the structures are clearly identifiable as commercial buildings. This is true of the Masonic Lodge (Figure 65). Among the city's most noteworthy historic social properties is the Round-Up Club (Figure 66) a Quonset Hut that has been used as a gathering place for the area's military veterans and their families since World War II.

**School Buildings**

School building types, though they vary widely in form and ornamentation, are unified by their common function. Their forms may vary from small, one-room vernacular structures to sprawling masonry complexes incorporating High Style embellishment. The subtype School Buildings is defined foremost by use and, as with Meeting Halls, the plan, form, and stylistic influences (or lack thereof) provide a framework for discussion within this subtype. Schools can be further distinguished into vernacular or stylistically influenced "modern"



**Figure 65**



**Figure 66**

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historic school buildings. The sub-categories share few physical characteristics. Vernacular schools are generally small, one- or two-room buildings in a domestic setting. Schools built in Rio Grande City since about 1920 were sprawling complexes with multiple classrooms accessed by wide hallways and set on a multi-acre campus. Throughout Texas, rural or small-town vernacular schools built before the 1920s were largely frame buildings but the earliest known schools in Rio Grande City were constructed of brick, like many of the town's post-Civil War buildings. Auxiliary educational structures form a third, less significant group of school buildings. Such ancillary structures as gymnasiums, cafeterias and athletic facilities are classified in this category.



Figure 67

*Vernacular Schools*

Few, if any, vernacular educational buildings survive in Rio Grande City. One well-known example was the building known as Tia Merita's kindergarten (demolished 1995), a small, brick building in the 400 block of W. Main Street. Like all vernacular structures, the building assumed a familiar, traditional form in the region. Like the city's many small 19th century dwellings, it was a one-story, hipped roof brick building with a central door flanked by double-hung sash windows. The windows and door were capped by shallow segmental arches.



Figure 68

Like many largely Catholic communities throughout Texas, Rio Grande City also supported a parochial school. Although much larger and more finely detailed, the 1885 Immaculate Conception School and Convent follows the form and tradition of other vernacular buildings in Rio Grande City (Figure 67). Attributed to the locally famed brick mason, Heinrich Portschiller, the two-story building exhibits superb masonry craftsmanship and intricately corbelled detailing.

*Modern Schools*

In 1915, Rio Grande City built a two-story elementary school called simply Central Primary School. Located in the block bounded by 4th and 5th streets on the south and north, and by Corpus and East streets on the west and east, the school was built in an almost square plan, the building has long since been demolished. By the 1920s, Rio Grande City began to reap the benefits of an agricultural revolution that began in the downriver counties just after the turn of the century. Anglo farmers and merchants moved into the area and in 1925 the railroad finally connected the city to outside markets. A spate of modern school building programs developed throughout the Lower Rio Grande region, beginning in the 1920s, and Rio Grande City joined the



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ranks of other agricultural communities in this endeavor in 1931 when two new schools – Rio Grande City High School and North Grammar School (Figure 68) – were built on the outskirts of town.

Following in paths of other regional school districts, the schools were sprawling, one-story facilities with a central entry bay and long, projecting wings extending from either side. A center hall from front to back intersected a lateral hall, along which classrooms and offices were arranged in a linear fashion. Both were designed in the popular Spanish Colonial Revival style – with stucco walls and clay tile roofs – that was sweeping the Lower Rio Grande region at that time. Unfortunately, both schools are now gone. The high school was demolished and North Grammar School burned about 1998.

*Ancillary Buildings*

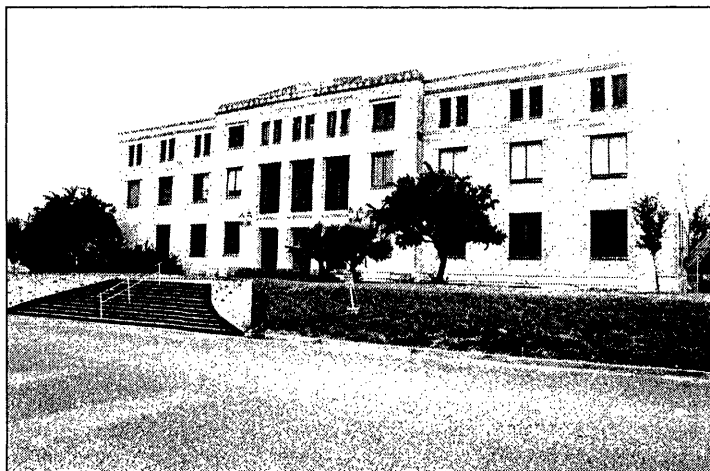
Ancillary buildings are also classified under the subtype of schools. They include gymnasiums, cafeterias, utility buildings, and other associated structures. They are usually surveyed along with the primary buildings and are not listed separately as sites unless they stand along (i.e. the primary building is gone) or are particularly noteworthy. Their construction and ornamentation ranges from small frame vernacular buildings to substantial masonry structures that mimic the ornamentation of their primary buildings. Historic auxiliary buildings built after the school's initial construction may have a significance of their own.

**Government Buildings**

Buildings constructed for use as government offices, power plants, courtrooms, fire stations, and libraries are organized as the Subtype, Government Buildings. The common denominator of this group is the use of the structure as a public, non-educational city, county, state, or federal office. Government buildings built before 1940 tend to be substantial, masonry edifices that display some degree of stylistic ornamentation. They are almost always located near the center of a community's business district. Because of their importance to the community's welfare and safety, such buildings are often landmarks to the public.

Rio Grande City's focal point is the county courthouse which stands at the top of a rise above the rest of the city. It was intended to be viewed from the foot of a long esplanade connecting it to the steamboat platform on the Rio Grande. Although Rio Grande City enjoyed the services of master brick mason Heinrich Portschiller and his protégés in the late 19th century, few early 20th century buildings in Rio Grande City were architect-designed. The Starr County Courthouse is an exception and an excellent example of a government building in the region (Figure 69). Finished in 1935, the building was designed by architect Stanley W. Bliss and built by contractor H. H. Moeller. It stands three stories above a basement and may be the tallest building within the original city limits.

Other important government buildings include post offices. Early postal stations in Texas were often located in mercantile businesses and the local store owner served as postal clerk. As communities grew and postal service expanded, the need for separate post offices in larger communities became apparent. The post office in Rio Grande City,



**Figure 69**



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however, remained in a commercial building which eventually became known at least as much as a post office as a drug store. Built in 1886 and attributed to Heinrich Portschiller, the Silverio de la Pena Drug Store and Post Office is arguably the most significant landmark in Rio Grande City. De la Pena opened the building as a drug store in 1886 but it served as the city's main post office from 1890 until 1957 and for that reason it is discussed under government buildings, although its form is that of a two-part commercial building. The de la Pena family continues to live in the upper floor as they always have.

The two-story masonry building features superbly crafted brickwork and exceptional architectural embellishment including molded brick tiles along the cornice and brick pilasters framing the entrances. Portschiller rendered the building in a vernacular design characteristic of the Lower Rio Grande border region and found in upriver Roma and, to a lesser extent, the larger cities of Brownsville and Laredo.

Another Government building subtype in Rio Grande City is the customs house and its accompanying tollbooth. Rio Grande City, on the banks of a river that defines the international boundary, has long collected customs fees from business travelers entering from Mexico. The customs house, bridge and toll booth lie off Highway 83 to the east of the city, on the banks of the Rio Grande. The bridge will be discussed under Engineering/Structures. The customs house and toll booth appear to date from about 1955 with subsequent changes made as technology improved. A rectangular brick building with a band of windows spaced at even intervals, the building is dwarfed by an oversized pole-supported awning that allows drive-through traffic to pass by the front of the building. Cars crossing from Mexico are channeled through the drive-through and stopped by border inspectors under the awning. Similar stations dating from the same period are positioned at bridges along the river from El Paso to Brownsville, although they too have endured numerous alterations since their mid-century construction. In fact, the customs station in Rio Grande City recently underwent a major renovation that included the construction of concrete columns and awnings that employ decorative details copied from the Silverio de la Pena House.

Utilities buildings comprise still another subtype of Government properties. In Rio Grande City, the 1930s water plant and ice house buildings were originally owned by private parties but their operations were subsequently assumed by the city. They are located adjacent to one another in the 200 block of Santo Nino. Both served industrial purposes at the behest of the citizenry of Rio Grande City. The ca. 1935 ice plant (Figure 70) displays modest Art Deco features.



**Figure 70**

**Engineering/Structures**

Engineering structures are grouped primarily by their construction, which usually includes metal- or concrete-exposed structural systems. Rather than providing shelter or enclosed space for people, engineering structures are support systems or containers for materials such as water or grain. The most common subtype of engineering structures includes bridges which are identified under the Transportation category. Other subtypes

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in Rio Grande City are water towers. Many other examples are ancillary structures and, therefore, are incorporated with other sites recorded in the surveys. The major subtypes are described below.

*Transportation Related Properties*

Transportation related properties of Rio Grande City may include roads, trails, bridges, ferries and other crossings, and stage/postal stations, blacksmith's shops, and inns. The Rio Grande is the only river in the area and, while once navigable, it is no longer a reliable source of all-weather transportation. The earliest Native American travelers developed footpaths and doubtless, many Indian trails passed through present Rio Grande City. After the arrival of the Spanish, some tribes, particularly the Comanche and Apache, became excellent horsemen and footpaths probably were adapted to horse trails. Spanish Colonial explorers, missionaries and settlers from Northern Mexico forded the river and traveled by horse and wagon. Because of frequent Indian attacks, the earliest residents of *Carnestolendes*, the ranch that preceded Rio Grande City, probably traveled very little along the north bank of the river but rather crossed over to reach the villa of Camargo on the other side. From there, they could travel on roads that linked Camargo to other Spanish Colonial villas along the south bank, or go deeper into the interior of Mexico.

The earliest known Anglo settlers in the area traveled by steamboat up the Rio Grande during the Mexican War. They also began developing roads along the north bank of the Rio Grande to access the old ranchos and new settlements that dotted the river. Zachary Scott's engineers reportedly built the "Old Military Road" linking Fort Brown, at present Brownsville, to Laredo. It passed by a number of established ranchos, including San Ygnacio, and became the main thoroughfare through the new towns of Roma and Rio Grande City. The road approximates current U.S. Highway 83 and Main and Second streets in downtown Rio Grande City. At first, travel was by horse and wagon but later, stage coaches carrying passengers and mail ran along the route. Another significant transportation route is the actual city grid laid out by founder Henry Clay Davis and his partner Forbes Britton. Davis reportedly based his plan on the city of Austin which also has a public square – the state Capitol block – linked to a river – the Colorado – by a broad, principal boulevard – Congress Davis platted his blocks on a nearly north-south axis with 60' streets throughout. Britton Avenue, the main north-south street running between the river and the courthouse block, was 160' wide Britton Avenue effectively divided the town into eastern and western sections (Figure 71: Britton Avenue). Houses and commercial buildings lined the street leading to the courthouse square although no courthouse would be built until the 1880s.

As steamboat traffic died, the Military Highway grew in importance and commercial buildings and residences alike began to string out along Main Street, the principal east-west thoroughfare. Water and Second

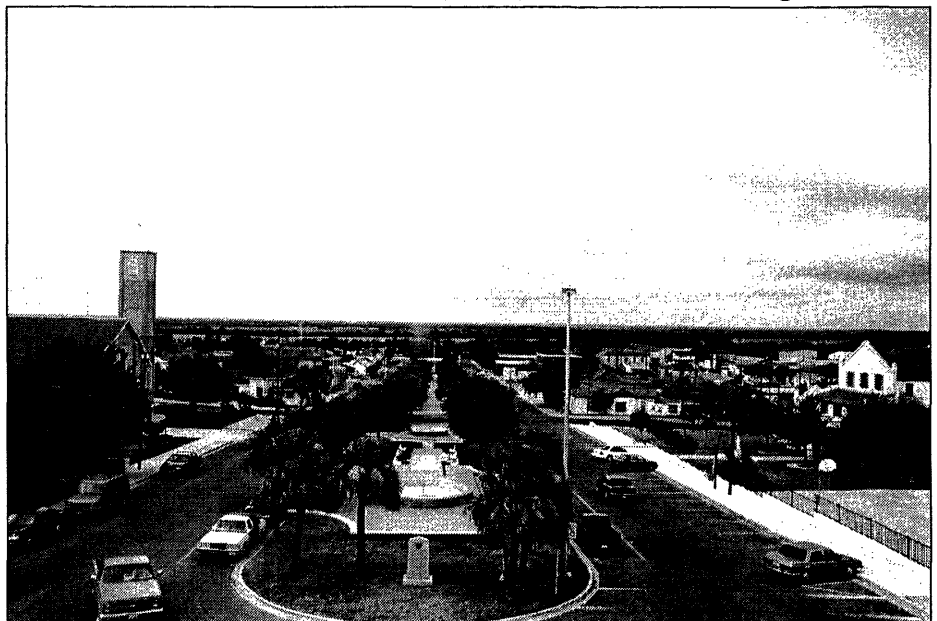


Figure 71

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streets also became busy commercial and residential by-ways. Water Street and Second Street. Except for the waterfront area where most of the city's business activity began, Britton Avenue was primarily lined with dwellings and religious buildings. As time passed, Main Street gained dominance as the city's main commercial node. The remainder of the city was developed primarily for residential use with a few neighborhood schools, churches and open spaces including a plaza and two cemeteries. Except for the one-way traffic on Main and Second streets, Rio Grande City's original grid remains remarkably intact.

Steamboat travel remained important and Rio Grande City was founded on the premise that it would be a major stop on the river route. A landing was established at the foot a long esplanade linking the river to a courthouse square at the top of a hill. Passengers and goods alighted at the landing; cargo was transported to the nearby Mifflin Kenedy warehouse and passengers went to their homes or boarding houses near the wharf. A second steamboat landing was established at Camp Ringgold (later Fort Ringgold) to receive military personnel and supplies.

Early railroads in Texas and Starr County incorporated trestles and bridges to traverse arroyos and flood-prone lowlands. As with road bridges, the earliest railroad structures in Starr County were of heavy timber construction. The tremendous forces placed on rail crossings mandated stronger, metal construction early in the expansion of state rail systems but the Rio Grande City railroad trestle retains its wood timber structure. Rio Grande City was one of the last communities in the Lower Rio Grande to receive rail service. When the Missouri Pacific Railroad – now known as the Border Pacific – arrived in 1925, it lined the city to outside markets and became the major transporter of agriculture produce from Starr County. The wood railroad trestle is a rare example of its type.

*Bridges*

Bridges, a Subtype of Engineering Structures and associated with Transportation related properties, were vital in Rio Grande City's history and development and contributed to the growth of international traffic in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A single, yet significant, bridge was recorded in the Rio Grande City surveys: the ca. 1955 international bridge to Mexico.

Other historic bridges may have been built along the Military Highway and other county roads to traverse arroyos but they were not identified in the surveys. Road and bridge activity was encouraged by the state Legislature which authorized counties to create and maintain public passageways. Early local bridge construction probably incorporated milled or crudely hewn lumber fitted together by local carpenters, a system documented in other parts of central Texas. These structures spanned creeks and waterways on the few main roads of the mid-19th century. Early road bridges in and around Rio Grande City were probably built of hewn lumber fitted together by local carpenters. Limited technology and the lack of durable building materials hindered efforts to erect stable and large-scale bridges. As a result, they would have required almost constant repair and replacement of those that were washed away in floods. Metal-bridge construction became popular in other parts of the state in the late 19th century, but it may not have been required or put into use in Rio Grande City. When reinforced concrete came into widespread use in the 1930s, it became the preferred material for bridge construction. Despite greater initial costs, they were more durable and required significantly less maintenance. In the early postwar years of the 1950s, massive efforts to build an interstate highway engendered the construction of thousands of new bridges across the country. New technologies and expertise were applied to bridge construction and the Rio Grande City international bridge was built during this time. The relatively modest ca. 1955 bridge is an example of mid-20th century engineering and reflects national trends at the time of its construction (Figure 72). It rests on a pier and beam foundation of reinforced concrete piers and a steel plate beam. The international bridge is a vital link

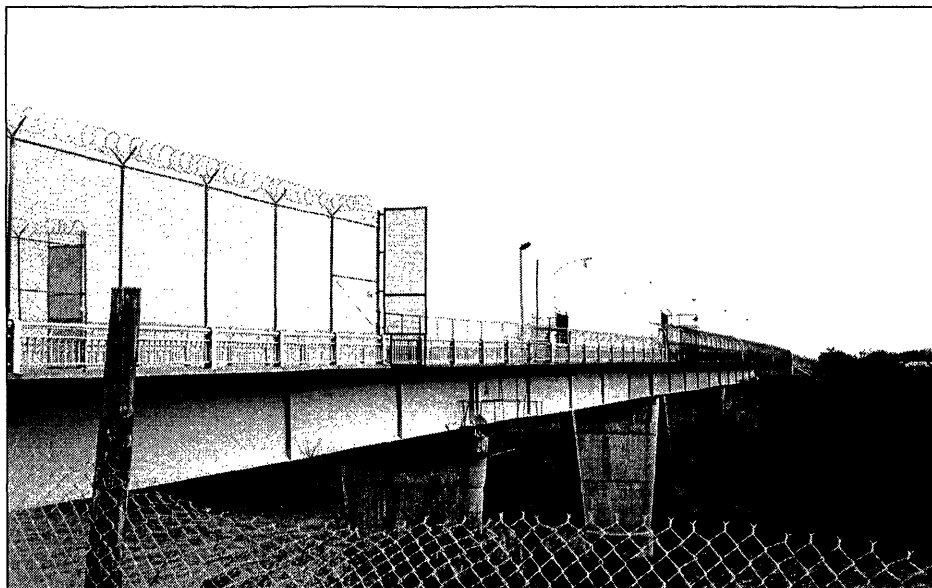
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between Rio Grande City and its counterpart, Camargo, Mexico, with whom it shares common cultural and historic traditions.



**Figure 72**

*Roads*

Although the Military Highway and the Rio Grande City street grid have historic roots, they have been altered by widening, curbing, and paving to the extent that the existing roads can no longer be considered historic properties in and of themselves.

*Train Depot/Loading Platform*

Rio Grande City has no passenger train depot but a loading platform and other railroad facilities may still be extant. The rail yard lies outside the city boundaries and was not surveyed. A Missouri Pacific railroad trestle (Site 17, east of the city on the Border Pacific Railroad line) was identified in the survey. The wood trestle is thought to date to 1925 when the first railroad arrived in Rio Grande City.

*Other*

Culverts, water towers, windmills and other infrastructural features are found among the historic resources of Rio Grande City but were not identified in the surveys. Some may exist on farms or in manufacturing plants where they may be associated with agricultural or industrial resources.

**Industrial Buildings**

Industrial buildings are those structures erected for the processing, refining, and/or manufacture of raw goods, and because of their utilitarian function, rarely display noteworthy stylistic features or architectural ornament. This property type includes a diverse collection of structures, including cotton gins, factories, and

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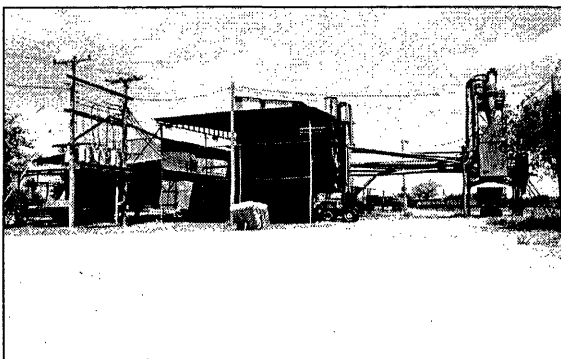
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mills. Despite the obvious differences in scale, materials, and function, these structures share many common physical characteristics and associative qualities. Only a small percentage of any community's historic resources are industrial structures. Nevertheless, they played a critical role in the history and economic development of that community and region and are a significant (if often overlooked) tangible link to the past.

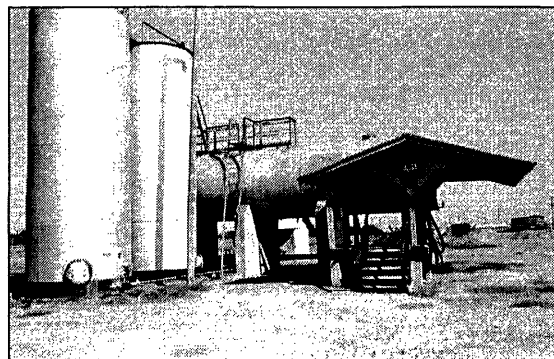
Industrial structures were built early in Texas' history but generally were small in scale and short on productivity. Virtually all relied on water- or animal-generated power. As a consequence, industrial capacity in Texas remained limited until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when improved power sources such as steam, electricity, and combustible fuels provided seemingly unlimited energy. Texas' agricultural-based economy became diversified with the advent of significant industry.

Because of the symbiotic relationship of industry and transportation, industrial buildings typically are found near railroad tracks or at intersections of important roads or streets. Some are found on river or creek banks to make use of water power. The forms of industrial buildings are generally low, asymmetrical masses enclosing large spaces to accommodate machinery and production crews. Cotton compresses, grain elevators, and water towers that rise above the expansive buildings often are integral parts of these complexes and serve as physical landmarks. The threat of fire resulted in widespread use of non-combustible materials; consequently, masonry construction is most often used. Metal sheathing over heavy timber framing is also a typical construction material for industrial buildings and commonly associated with early cotton gins and their associated structures.

Gins are the most common Subtype of Industrial Buildings found in Rio Grande City. They usually consist of a gin stand, lint room, and press. Cotton or grain gins are easily distinguished by their appearance: a grouping of metal-clad buildings with a slender square tower that rises above the complex. The gin is located in the largest of the structures, which typically is an elongated building with a rectangular plan. It is easily identified by an open bay at one end of the structure where farmers bring their cotton to be ginned. The narrow tower in this structure houses the cotton compress (Figure 73). Storage buildings are also a common feature of the complex and are used to store the cotton and the seeds that have been extracted from the fiber during the ginning process. These storage buildings are wood-frame structures with metal or wood siding. A company office building, often of wood construction, is found nearby with a drive-through scale to weigh the load of cotton on the vehicle.



**Figure 73**



**Figure 74**

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Among Rio Grande City's most significant historic industrial buildings are those associated with the important oil and gas discoveries in the area in the mid- 20th century. Located near the railroad line at the eastern edge of town is a complex of oil-related structures including an office/warehouse that is included in the commercial properties category, a metal-clad industrial warehouse and an above-ground tank supply station (Figure 74).

**Landscape Features**

Any contrived land features that are the result of human efforts such as grading, planting (except for agricultural purposes), memorials, or recreational structures or bodies of water are classified as Landscape Features. Although the Rio Grande is undoubtedly the city's most prominent landscape feature in terms of physical appearance and impact and historic significance, it is an entirely natural feature that has no built elements and therefore is not counted among landscape properties in the city surveys.

Rio Grande City has several noteworthy built landscapes. Predominant among them is the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, a replica of the French grotto where the young Saint Bernadette and two other children saw a vision of the Virgin Mary (Figure 75). Arguably, the grotto is a religious site and might fall under the category of churches; however, because it is meant to be viewed out of doors and features natural items such as rocks, petrified wood and geodes, and has prepared beds of desert plants throughout the monument, it is treated as a landscape element.



**Figure 75**

Rio Grande City's tribute was completed in 1928 and is rendered in concrete with rocks, petrified wood, shells and geodes imbedded in the substance throughout the monument. Desert plants protrude from prepared beds. Rose bushes and decorative cactus are planted around the grotto. Painted features including a stream that encircles the grotto and groupings of artificial flowers lend a folk art appearance to the property. Central to the grotto is the cave-like niche that holds a large statue of the virgin. A statue of a recumbent Jesus lies in a glass case off to the side of the main viewing arena. The Britton Avenue entrance passes through a tree-shaded park area with the Stations of the Cross positioned along the path to the grotto. In a region replete with roadside and yard alters, the impressive grotto is remarkable for its size, materials, and outstanding folk art expression. It is a local landmark and major tourist attraction and is marked with a State Historical Marker.

*Funerary*

The town's two historic cemeteries, one of which is noteworthy for its white-washed brick monuments, are counted among the city's landscape features (Figure 76). The cemeteries, by and large, are traditional frontier Christian configurations of low-density, above-ground stone markers. They each occupy an entire city block and are enclosed with metal fences. Many multiple plots are bordered with stone, concrete or fencing materials.

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**Figure 76**

*Trees, parks, campsites*

The central esplanade along Britton Avenue that links the former waterfront to the county courthouse is counted as a landscape feature. San Juan Plaza, was a significant landscape element of the historic town plat but it has recently been covered with new construction.

**Recreational Properties**

Recreational properties can be categorized by use into commercial properties such as youth or tourist camps and private and public parks. San Juan Plaza, while a landscape feature of the town plat, would qualify as a public park under recreational properties. Perhaps its most significant historic use was as a rallying place for farm workers during the strikes of the 1960s. Its recent redevelopment, however, eliminated the plaza's open space and thus, the property no longer retains its historic integrity.

The Rio Grande has dominated the city's natural and cultural and features prominently in its historic development. However, it is not well-known as a recreation destination although people undoubtedly swam in the river and possibly picnicked on its banks in summer. It has remained undeveloped although there are plans to create hiking trails and improve access to birders as part of an overall recreation program. There is no known evidence that sites along the Rio Grande were historically developed as public parks or for commercial potential. Therefore, it is not listed as a recreational property in the surveys.



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## REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

### *Domestic Properties*

Since they represent such a large percentage of the city's historic built environment, *Domestic Buildings* are an important part of Rio Grande City's legacy of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and they are tangible links to the city's physical development. A domestic building can have both historical and architectural significance and may be eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A, B or C, either individually or as part of a historic district. A domestic building with historical significance is one that is representative of important events or trends of the past (Criterion A) or is associated with an individual(s) that made noteworthy contributions to the city's historical development (Criterion B). A domestic building with architectural significance is a property that displays notable physical features, craftsmanship or design, or is an exemplary illustration of a style or an architect's or builder's work.

An individual domestic building considered eligible under Criterion A most likely will be a residence that was erected during the city's mid- to late-19th and early 20th century development and is associated with a period of widespread growth and prosperity in the community. An example might be a house linked closely with the city's early ranching history or with its expanding mercantile business in the post-Civil War era. To be nominated under Criterion A in such a scenario, however, the property must be the building most closely associated with that historical event or trend.

Most domestic buildings that are eligible under Criterion A will be nominated as part of a historic district that is symbolic of the city's mid- to late-19th- and early 20th-century development. A neighborhood whose development reflects community-wide trends is an example of how a historic district can be eligible under Criterion A. Another example might be a historic Hispanic neighborhood that has survived with only a limited amount of new residential construction since the early 20th century. This neighborhood can be nominated if an argument can be made to demonstrate how the area and the houses within it are representative of broad trends in local Hispanic history. The dwellings need not be particularly noteworthy examples of an architectural style or type but should retain enough integrity to be recognizable to the period when the neighborhood attained its importance.

Historical significance can also involve associations with individuals who were important in the city's past (Criterion B). Typically, it involves a dwelling that was the home of a person who achieved importance while living in that property. If nominated under Criterion B, the house must be the residence of an individual who played a pivotal role in the city's 19th and early 20th century development and be of transcendent importance at a local level; thus, the house is directly related to the associated historic context. The property typically is nominated if the house is the primary building where that person achieved significance or when no better examples survive. An example might be the house of an individual who owned and operated a business that employed many local residents and that played a pivotal role in the city's economic development.

A domestic building may also be nominated to the National Register under Criterion C as a noteworthy example of an architectural style, type or form, which are identified and discussed in the property type *Domestic Buildings*. If nominated for this reason, the property would be considered under Criterion C in the Area of Significance for architectural merit. The house could also exhibit exceptional craftsmanship and detailing which might distinguish the property from others in the community. More often, however, a dwelling is significant for its architectural worth and will be nominated because it best illustrates a specific type or method of construction.

Domestic buildings can also be nominated to the National Register under Criterion C as members of a historic district, including a concentration of similarly intact historic properties within a well-defined area. The

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historic district may include buildings that are not necessarily significant on an individual basis but are noteworthy because the area has few post-1955 properties and/or physical changes. The area should convey cohesiveness and invoke a strong sense of the past, which can be further reinforced by various historic landscaping and infrastructural features. When nominated within a historic district, domestic buildings can provide a more complete cross-section of the local history and can help reflect broad themes and influences that contributed to Rio Grande City's growth and development during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Moreover, groupings of domestic buildings typically enable a better understanding of how the area functioned as a whole and often, but not necessarily, are associated with more significant individuals in local history. An analysis of architectural styles within a district can show developmental patterns and can also reveal to what degree designers, builders and contractors conformed to or diverged from prevailing tastes in architecture. If a historic district is nominated under Criterion C, it likely will be listed under the Architecture Area of Significance.

*Commercial Properties*

A commercial building being nominated individually must be at least 50 years old and retain sufficient integrity to evoke the property's date of construction or period of significance. A commercial building should maintain its original facade and/or fenestration, as well as its exterior finish. Superficial and easily reversible changes, such as the covering of transoms or the removal of signs, are less important than major remodeling or additions that can detract from a building's overall historic character. Alterations completed before 1955 sometimes are important in their own right and can represent the architectural evolution of a building over time. For example, a commercial building constructed in the 1910s but substantially remodeled in the 1930s can still be architecturally noteworthy. If essentially unchanged since the 1930s, such an alteration may not necessarily be intrusive to the property's integrity. Indeed, the changes could be regarded as architecturally significant.

A commercial building with strong historical associations should retain enough of its integrity to be recognizable to its period of significance. For example, a commercial building that formerly housed a locally important bakery need not be unaltered but must appear much as it did when the business achieved its significance. Most, but not all, of the building's architectural fabric should survive in a relatively intact state. In addition, the building must be the one most closely associated with the historically significant enterprise.

An individual commercial building being considered under Criterion C must retain a greater degree of its integrity than those being listed merely for their historical associations. The building can be a noteworthy example of a particular style or type, or display outstanding craftsmanship or detailing. If important or distinguishing architectural elements such as parapets, cornices, original surface materials or fenestration patterns are changed, modified or removed, the building may not be considered eligible for National Register designation under Criterion C.

*Institutional and Governmental Properties*

To be eligible for the National Register, an institutional building must be at least 50 years and meet at least one of the National Register Criteria for Evaluation. They may be nominated on an individual basis or as part of a historic district, although they may not necessarily be representative of the kinds of properties that predominant in the district.

An institutional building can be considered for the National Register under Criterion A if a strong argument can be made to demonstrate how it is representative of a broad trend or pattern in the city's development of the early 20th century. The property does not necessarily have to be a particularly noteworthy example of an architectural style or form, but should retain sufficient integrity to be recognizable to the period

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when the building achieved significance. Distinguishing architectural features must be intact, as the removal of such elements can compromise the building's historic character.

Institutional buildings can also be considered for listing in the National Register under Criterion C as noteworthy examples of an architectural style or type. To be eligible for the National Register in this manner, a building must retain its integrity to a very high degree. The removal of important architectural features such as a classically inspired cornice, for example, or the replacement of historic fabric with incompatible modern materials can detract from the building's overall historic character and can keep a building from being listed under Criterion C. Common alterations that can detract from a building's integrity include the removal of original doors and windows and the installation of metal-frame replacements. Alterations including the removal of any distinguishing historic features, boarding over windows and doors and the application of cement stucco over the facades to achieve a smooth, uninterrupted surface greatly diminish a buildings' architectural significance.

In Rio Grande City, the ca. 1868 Immaculate Heart Convent and 1936 Starr County Courthouse are among the most noteworthy institutional and governmental properties in the city. They have undergone minor renovations from the late 1950s to the present but such changes detract little from their historic appearances. Although the North Grammar School was surveyed and given a High preservation priority as an outstanding example of a Spanish Colonial Revival school building, it has since burned. Other historic institutional properties in Rio Grande City include two hospitals.

*Industrial and Transportation-related Properties*

An industrial building must be at least 50 years old and retain sufficient integrity to be listed to the National Register. Most industrial buildings will be considered on an individual basis for their contributions to the city's historical and economic development (Criterion A) and/or for their physical and architectural qualities (Criterion C). If nominated under Criterion A, an industrial building does not necessarily need to be unaltered, but it should be recognizable to its original date of construction or to the period when it achieved significance. Indeed, by their very nature, historic industrial buildings still in use are likely to have been altered, modernized or upgraded to allow for more efficient and productive, or in some cases, different operations. Most of these changes involved equipment replacements, but some new additions or ancillary buildings may have been built. If significant for its historical associations, an industrial building will be nominated under the Areas of Significance of Commerce/Trade or Industry.

If, on the other hand, an industrial building is nominated under Criterion C, the exterior must be virtually unaltered and its overall architectural character must be intact. The property would be listed under the Area of Significance of Architecture. For all industrial buildings, whether nominated for their historical associations or for their architectural merits, ancillary buildings that contributed to the success of the industrial concerns should also be examined and catalogued, and their status as contributing or noncontributing elements determined.

Industrial buildings nominated as part of a historic district in most Texas cities are likely to be the centerpiece of that district. However, in Rio Grande City such properties account for a very small amount of the historic fabric and are apt to be included in a larger district comprised primarily of commercial resources. They would likely be secondary elements of such a district but may be Contributing elements. Industrial and Transportation related properties often occupy space along railroad tracks and this is true in Rio Grande City where cotton gins and petroleum tanks were built along the railroad frontage.

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*Infrastructure*

Infrastructural elements in Rio Grande City may be nominated to the National Register on both an individual basis and as contributing properties in a historic district. Because these properties may have changed significantly with new technology, they are most likely to be nominated for their historical associations under National Register Criterion A. Their architectural significance may not be obvious, but they often played important supportive roles in the history and development of an area, and they should be acknowledged. Infrastructural elements should be at least 50 years and should be recognizable to the district's or property's period of significance. The most important concern for assessing the significance of infrastructural elements is integrity. Alterations, if any have occurred, should be documented and the extent to which these changes affect the resource's historic character should be determined. If unaltered or if the changes fall within the applicable period of significance, the Infrastructural element may either be individually eligible for listing in the National Register or, as is more likely to be the case, may be a contributing property in a historic district.

*Historic Districts*

To be eligible for listing in the National Register, a historic district must be a well-defined area that contains a significant concentration of historic (pre-1955) properties that retain their architectural integrity to a noteworthy degree. At least 50 percent of *all* properties in the district should be classified as Contributing, a designation which requires that a building still possess enough of its original fabric to be recognizable to the district's period of significance. A property does not necessarily have to be unaltered but should retain its most important historic architectural details and materials. A Contributing property can also be a resource that does not necessarily relate to the architectural character of the district but may be eligible for the National Register on an individual basis.

Domestic buildings classified as Contributing typically should still have their original exterior sheathing, porch trim and materials. The application of asbestos, vinyl, aluminum or any other synthetic siding over the original exterior walls is often regarded as insensitive to a dwelling's historic character and proper maintenance, and can preclude listing as a Contributing property. However, if the replacement siding does not significantly alter the building's appearance and most of its architectural details remain intact, it may still qualify as a Contributing property. The replacement of wooden porch floors and supports, likewise, can compromise a property's historic integrity, as the porch usually displays some of the most significant and distinguishing architectural detailing on a residence. One of the more common alterations is the installation of wrought-iron porch columns. For example, the tapered box columns of bungalows are an extremely important visual element of this house form, and the removal of these features can represent a severe modification to the property's historic appearance, thereby justifying its exclusion from the Contributing category. More superficial alterations, such as the application of non-historic colors or paint schemes or the installation of a metal roof, are less severe compromises of the resource's historic integrity and do not, by themselves, warrant rejection of the building as a Contributing element.

If, however, the district is nominated for its historical associations, architectural integrity of the dwellings is not as critical as it would be for a district nominated merely for its architectural significance. The integrity problems discussed in the preceding paragraph are not necessarily applicable. However, such a district must be extremely intact with very few non-historic properties within its confines.

Associated historic outbuildings can also be considered as Contributing elements if they display architectural detailing that is in keeping with the overall district and if they are substantial enough in size and scale to be perceived as separate properties, independent of the main house. Such outbuildings may include 2-

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story garage/apartments that have an address which is separate from the primary dwelling, or they may be 1-story garages which incorporate stylistic elements similar to those exhibited on the main house.

Noncontributing properties are those that detract from a district's historic character and should comprise less than 50 percent of all buildings in a district. This category includes historic resources that have lost their integrity through severe exterior alterations, as previously discussed, or have been relocated to a new site within the last 50 years. They may have little in common with the prevailing historic character in the area.

Finally, all historic districts must have boundaries that are logically determined and can be defended on aesthetic and/or historical grounds. Gerrymandering to bypass Noncontributing properties cannot be allowed. Instead, the boundaries must be regularly shaped and, whenever possible, follow block lines.

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**G. Geographical Data**

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**Acreage of Property** Multiple Acres

**UTM References** (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	_____	_____	3	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	4	_____	_____
____ See continuation sheet.					

**Verbal Boundary Description**

The boundaries of the Multiple Property Nomination coincide with the city limits of Rio Grande City and its Extraterritorial Jurisdiction.

**Boundary Justification**

The comprehensive survey of Rio Grande City's historic and architectural resources conducted in 1995-1996 coincide roughly with the original Townsite boundaries defined by Avasolo Street on the east, an unnamed street west of Garcia Street on the west, the old Rio Grande channel on the south and an irregular line drawn along Sixth and San Benito streets on the north. A limited number of properties that lay outside these boundaries but in the city's Extraterritorial Jurisdiction were also surveyed; a few lie on Highway 83, west of the convergence of W. Main and W. Second streets but the majority lie on or near Highway 83 to the east of the city. This survey area contained the largest concentration of historic properties in Rio Grande City. However, other properties which are similar in architectural design and historic associations are known to lie outside the survey boundaries but within the current corporate limits or Extraterritorial Jurisdiction. Because they share a common heritage and building traditions with resources in the survey area, such properties should be considered within the same historic and architectural context. Thus, the boundaries of the Multiple Property Nomination include the corporate limits of the City of Rio Grande City and its Extraterritorial Jurisdiction.

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**H. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods** (Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing on one or more continuation sheets.)

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## INTRODUCTION

This Multiple Property listing is based upon the results of a comprehensive historic and architectural survey commissioned by Rio Grande City and conducted during the late summer and fall of 1995 and finalized in 1996 by Hardy-Heck-Moore & Associates (HHM) of Austin, Texas. In 1996 the findings of that survey were submitted to Rio Grande City with the recommendation that a multiple property nomination be completed. In 2002-2003, parts of the survey were reviewed by Preservation Central, Inc., also of Austin, as part of the Multiple Property Nomination process. In the initial 1995 effort, HHM Principal and Project Director Terri Myers coordinated the initial field documentation that was conducted by HHM Architectural Historian Diane Williams and joint venture participant Frank Briscoe, Jr., then working with the Roma Restoration Project.

The majority of Rio Grande City's historic properties lie within the ca. 1925 city limits which are roughly bounded by the Rio Grande on the south, an irregular line along Sixth Street/San Benito on the north, an unnamed street to the west of Garcia on the west, and Avasolo/Santo Nino on the east. Field documentation by HHM consisted of identifying and minimally documenting and assigning a preliminary preservation priority to all pre-1950 properties within the project area boundaries. The survey initially identified 579 properties built before 1950. Of that number, 74 were given preliminary designations as HIGH preservation priorities, while 184 were determined to be MEDIUM preservation priorities. Those numbers were revised after final field and historical assessments were made in 1996. Additional properties were identified and some multi-resource sites were divided into their separate components for individual documentation so that the final number of surveyed properties rose to a total of 628.

No previous comprehensive surveys had been undertaken in the project area although partial surveys and selected inventories, notably those by the South Texas Development Council (1973) and the Los Caminos del Rio Heritage Project (1990) had been completed. Past investigation of selected historic properties has resulted in the designation of five sites in the Rio Grande City area (Fort Ringgold Hospital, Juan Gonzales Home, Robert E. Lee House, John Peter Kelsey Home, Howard L. Bass Home) as Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks (RTHL), and the placement of two buildings (Silverio de la Pena Drugstore and Post Office, 1980; La Borde Residence, Store and Hotel, 1980) on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1992, HHM nominated Fort Ringgold, to the east of the city and now occupied by the Rio Grande City Independent School District, to the National Register of Historic Places. The fort was listed in the register in 1993.

Following the initial fieldwork, Frank Briscoe, Jr. and Terri Myers took 35mm black and white photographs of all sites determined to be of MEDIUM, MEDIUM/HIGH and HIGH preservation priority. Briscoe and Myers also took color slides of all HIGH and most MEDIUM/HIGH and MEDIUM properties. Frank Briscoe and David Moore completed THC approved survey forms for all sites of HIGH, MEDIUM/HIGH or MEDIUM preservation priority. HHM submitted a master inventory list of all properties surveyed, black and white contact prints and negatives, color slides, and THC approved survey forms to the City of Rio Grande in support of the survey report. A detailed survey map showing all documented sites and their preservation priorities was included with the report.

In addition to the field documentation, Terri Myers and Research Assistant Angela Lighty undertook site-specific research on HIGH, MEDIUM/HIGH and MEDIUM properties as well as on LOW priority properties with known historic significance. The research team also documented the history of Rio Grande City



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to provide a brief historic context of the city's architectural development for the survey report. Research activities included interviews with residents of Rio Grande City, meetings with the Starr County Historical Association, archival and literature searches and site visits. The researchers obtained both primary and secondary information from state and regional repositories including The Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, the State Archives and Library in Austin, and the Rio Grande Collection at Pan American University in Edinburg, Hidalgo County. Local information was found at the Starr County Courthouse, the Starr County Surveyor's office, the Rio Grande City High School library and the Rio Grande City Library, all in Rio Grande City.

In August, 1996, Terri Myers, accompanied by HHM Survey Associate Tina Roach, returned to Rio Grande City to conduct final site checks and make priority assessments. Additional photographs were taken and corrections were made to field forms, survey forms and the preliminary survey maps. Several additional sites, all on alleyways, were identified and documented. Ms. Myers met with City Manager Jose Escamilla to discuss the progress of the survey. Upon completion of the field investigations, the data was compiled and a survey report was prepared.

Finally, Ms. Myers, on behalf of Preservation Central, Inc., reviewed the survey documents and identified a potential NRHP historic district within the boundaries of the original survey area. During 2002-2003, she conducted a survey update to confirm the status of resources within the proposed historic district.

**FIELD INVESTIGATIONS**

*INTRODUCTION*

HHM principal and Project Director, Terri Myers, undertook several reconnaissance surveys of Rio Grande City between 1991 and 1995. Architectural Historian Diane E. Williams conducted the initial field investigations for the comprehensive survey. Terri Myers, Survey Associate Tina Roach, and Research Assistant Angela Lighty conducted follow-up investigations for HHM. Frank Briscoe Jr., Materials Conservator with the Roma Restoration Project and a joint venture participant with HHM, assisted Ms. Williams in the initial identification and documentation phase of the survey. Field investigations consisted primarily of identifying, documenting, assessing, mapping and photographing historic period (pre-1950) resources within the defined project area boundaries.

*INITIAL SURVEY*

Initial field investigations began in August 1995 when Diane Williams and Frank Briscoe began the documentation of 579 resources in Rio Grande City built prior to 1950. Using copies of the 1940 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps of Rio Grande City and a current plat map provided by the city, the field crew first conducted a windshield survey of the project area to confirm the boundaries of the survey area based on concentrations of historic properties within the city and its Extraterritorial Jurisdiction (ETJ). All surveyed resources are plotted on the map according to their site numbers. An accompanying inventory of properties correlates site numbers with street addresses in Rio Grande City. Survey boundaries were determined by concentrations of historic period resources. The majority of the properties surveyed were within the area depicted on the 1940 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps. These boundaries roughly coincide with those of the original townsite as defined in an early 20th century plat map and approximately follow the 1925 city limits. Roughly bounded by Avasolo Street on the east, an unidentified street one block west of Garcia Street on the west, the old Rio Grande channel on the south, and an irregular line drawn along Sixth and San Benito streets on the north, this area constituted the most intensely developed portions of Rio Grande City near the end of the historic period. Some significant historic properties were located outside those boundaries, principally along Highway 83 which lies east of

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Avasolo Street and the city's eastern corporate limits. A few others lie to the north and west of the region covered by the Sanborn maps. Budget constraints limited the fieldwork to three days, and this factor precluded the documentation of all pre-1950s buildings within the current city limits which extend beyond the historic boundaries. More than 600 historic period sites were identified within the project area boundaries.

Following the windshield survey, the field crew then systematically identified and minimally recorded information for every extant historic resource in the delineated project boundaries that was visible from the public right of way. The crew obtained the address of each property. A unique site number was assigned to each site, and those sites with more than one building such as a gin or canning complex, received a numeral and letter designation such as 1a, 1b, etc. When appropriate, the main or primary resource received the "a" designation, while major outbuildings such as a garage apartment received the "b", "c", etc. designation. Tool sheds, simple garages and other minor resources associated with surveyed properties were not individually documented. Site numbers are keyed to the factual or estimated addresses to help identify the properties on the survey map. Each resource was plotted on the field maps and noted in the field forms. A total of 579 historic sites were identified and minimally documented during the initial field investigation.

Physical and descriptive information was gathered on site and recorded on field forms. Factual or approximate dates of construction, approximate date of alterations, historic function, architectural plan type, stylistic influence (when present), exterior materials, and condition of each identified historic resource were noted on field forms. The property type and subtype classifications (e.g. domestic: single family or L-plan, respectively) are used to identify the historic resource by its original or intended use.

An initial preservation priority classification of HIGH, MEDIUM, or LOW was assigned to each documented building based on several criteria: the surveyor's "first impression" of the property, how well the property maintains its original design and materials, how the property contributes to or detracts from the historic character of the area, and its condition. In the course of field investigations, the surveyors assigned a fourth preservation priority, MEDIUM/HIGH, to certain historic properties. In general, these properties exhibited unusual or intriguing characteristics that warrant further research before final designations can be made.

*ADDITIONAL FIELD DOCUMENTATION*

On a subsequent trip to Rio Grande City in November 1995, Principal Investigator Terri Myers took additional photographs of selected properties to produce better quality images for property identification and reference. Additional slides were taken of selected properties. During this visit, Myers and Research Assistant Angela Lighty conducted site-specific research on some of the properties and also checked the locations and conditions of various properties, several of which had been demolished since the initial survey was conducted. All photographic and field data was input into the HHM database software.

In August 1996, Ms. Myers and Survey Associate Tina Roach returned to Rio Grande City for a final inventory and map check. During this trip Ms. Myers photographed a number of sites that were either upgraded from their original designations or that required new photographs. A number of previously unidentified properties were added to the inventory, bringing the total number of surveyed resources to 628. Several additional properties not identified earlier and several substantial outbuildings associated with previously surveyed properties were documented. Subsequent properties front onto secondary routes – primarily alleys – that were obscured during the initial survey. Some of those properties are secondary or auxiliary resources associated with a primary resource, and others were located along Wimpy Street, a small street wedged between two primary streets that was difficult to navigate due to overgrown vegetation and physical barriers.

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Ms. Myers photographed newly identified properties that she determined to be MEDIUM, MEDIUM/HIGH or HIGH preservation priorities with both black and white and color slide film. In addition, she re-photographed some previously identified properties as well as some properties that were either upgraded or overlooked in earlier photographic efforts.

In 2002-2003, Ms. Myers returned to Rio Grande City to confirm the findings of the 1995-1996 surveys with the intent to nominate a National Register historic district.

### HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Following the initial identification of Rio Grande City's extant historical and architecturally significant properties, research crew members began both general and site-specific research on HIGH and MEDIUM/HIGH priority resources. In the course of the research historical information was gathered and included on the survey forms for many MEDIUM priority properties, as well. Research efforts attempted to (1) Determine the exact or approximate dates of construction; (2) Document physical changes through an examination of Sanborn maps and historic photographs; and. (3) Obtain names of previous owners, occupants or uses from research materials and interviews.

During the initial survey visit to Rio Grande City, Diane Williams and Frank Briscoe, Jr. met with the Starr County Historical Association and the City Manager, Jose Escamilla. Ms. Williams presented information on the survey and solicited suggestions and information from Historical Association members to identify properties of local interest and significance. In November 1995, Principal Investigator Terri Myers and Research Assistant Angela Lighty participated in a similar meeting with the Starr County Historical Association to discuss preliminary survey findings and to ask the members more detailed questions pertaining to individual properties.

Individual interviews and/or site visits were conducted with Rio Grande City residents Miriam Vale, Mona Trigo, Lalo Carerra, Sam Ramos and R.C. Salinas; all members of the historical association. A formal oral history interview was conducted with Mrs. Vale, and informal sessions were taped with Mr. Carerra, Mr. Ramos and Mr. Salinas, who accompanied the team on field investigations. These meetings were extremely valuable for identifying and assessing historic properties in Rio Grande City, as the city was not incorporated until January 1995 and no city directories exist to provide information about earlier residents.

One of the most important secondary sources obtained for historical research in Rio Grande City was a report titled *When Rio Grande City was Young* by Rio Grande City native and historian Shirley Brooks Greene. Published in 1987 by Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas, Greene's report gives detailed information about several of the oldest buildings in the area, as well as information on the earliest owners and occupants. A second important resource with specific architectural information was a 1973 report of the South Texas Development Council entitled *Regional Historic Sites Survey and Development Plan*. Authored principally by Al Barrera, the report identified about 40 historically or architecturally significant properties in Rio Grande City. HHM staff used both documents to conduct field checks on the status of historic resources. Sadly, a number of important sites listed by Greene and more listed by Barrera have been demolished or altered beyond recognition since 1987 and 1973 respectively.

In Austin, staff members obtained important information from the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. The Center for American History holds a Starr County Scrapbook, which includes several papers on the history of Rio Grande City. Also available at the Center for American History were microfilm copies of old issues of *El Fronterizo*, an early Spanish-English newspaper in Rio Grande City, and the *Rio Grande Herald*, which provided some useful information about early residents and businesses.

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HHM staff also conducted primary research at the State Archives in Austin. United States Census records for 1870, 1880, 1900, and 1910 were reviewed to gather demographic information about Rio Grande City during its period of greatest construction. Some early photographs of Rio Grande City contained in this report were copied from the photographic collections at the State Archives.

Researchers also examined and compared three series of fire insurance maps published by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company of New York. The map collection at the Center for American History contains original, unrevised maps created in 1894, 1925 and 1940 for Rio Grande City. The later maps presented a broader coverage of the project area, however the 1894 map depicted some of the earliest resources in the city. These maps show building "footprints" which indicate the exterior shapes, construction materials, number of stories and functions of the structures, including ancillary buildings and site features.

While in Rio Grande City, researchers uncovered an early 20th century plat map of Rio Grande City, with owner names written on the corresponding lots. Commissioned by Starr County Judge Monroe, the undated map appears to represent property ownership dating from the 1910s or 1920s, according to other sources. The Surveyor's Office loaned the map to Ms. Myers who used it to determine property ownership of specific lots and blocks during the historic period.

In addition to the site specific investigations, the survey team conducted general research on Rio Grande City and the Rio Grande Valley. Principal Investigator Terri Myers, compiled the research materials gathered from a variety of local and regional sources and archives. The research design was geared to provide the background for Rio Grande City's built environment and its role in the historic development of the lower Rio Grande valley. This information was used to write the historic background section of the survey report.

Texas Historical Commission files were reviewed for any state landmark or subject markers and for any previously nominated historic properties or districts. Marker sites include those commemorating Fort Ringgold (SM 1964), Jose de Escandon (TCM 1936), the Cortina Battle site (SM 1970), and Rio Grande City C.S.A. (SM 1963). Others, including the Fort Ringgold Hospital (RTHL 1965), Juan Gonzales Home (RTHL (1964), John Peter Kelsey Home (RTHL 1966), and the Howard L. Bass Home (RTHL 1966), are designated Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks. In addition to these individual sites, Fort Ringgold, a frontier fort established in 1846 and developed primarily from 1868-1875, has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP 1993).

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

Following each of three field trips to Rio Grande City in August and November 1995, and August 1996, HHM Principal David Moore and Principal Investigator Terri Myers coordinated the encoding and analysis of field data collected in the overview historic resources survey of the city. The 1995-1996 surveys identified a total of 628 properties considered to have been built before 1950 were identified within the project area boundaries. Of that number, 74 were determined to be HIGH preservation priorities because they contribute significantly to local history or broader historical patterns. They are considered to be outstanding, unique, or good representative example of architecture, engineering, or crafted design. These buildings remain on their original sites and have undergone only minimal or compatible alterations. Some are significant because of their association with individuals important in the development and history of Rio Grande City and Starr County. Such properties may be individually eligible for listing in the NRHP. HIGH priority properties in Rio Grande City include the La Borde House (Site 394), the Silverio de la Pena Drugstore and Post Office (Site 383), the Kelsey-Bass House (City Hall, Site 137), the Grotto of Lourdes (Site 188), the Crisoforo and Marie Lacaze Solis House (378), the Villareal-Scott House (Site 51) and a number of other outstanding commercial and

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residential resources throughout the city. These properties may also qualify for local, state or federal historic designations either individually or as part of a historic district.

In addition, the HHM survey team identified 44 MEDIUM/HIGH, 160 MEDIUM and 350 LOW preservation priority properties. MEDIUM/HIGH properties would be considered HIGH priority except for nonhistoric or reversible alterations. Among them is the city's only identified *jacal* (Site 12). MEDIUM properties contribute at least moderately to local history or broader historical patterns, are good examples of building type but display fewer character-defining architectural elements than HIGH priority buildings, and/or display minor alterations. While the majority of these properties are not individually eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the MEDIUM/HIGH and MEDIUM priority properties are considered to be Contributing elements within local or National Register historic districts and should be evaluated in that context. LOW priority buildings generally do not have significant historical associations, are examples of building types or architectural styles that hold little historical significance, and/or have been moderately-to-severely altered. However, little historical information was gathered on these properties, and their preservation priority may be upgraded if research reveals important historical associations.

The largest concentration of historic-period resources comprising a potential historic district was identified in the heart of Rio Grande City, in the area roughly bounded by the old channel of the Rio Grande on the south, Fifth/Ringgold streets on the north, Garcia Street on the west and Avasolo Street on the east. This area contains approximately 500 historic period resources including a diverse collection of residential and commercial buildings, some historically serving both functions simultaneously. With a few notable exceptions, the HIGH and MEDIUM/HIGH properties within these boundaries constitute the city's oldest and most architecturally significant resources. The 1995-1996 survey report concluded that one or more local and/or NRHP districts may exist within those boundaries and recommended that the district boundaries be drawn to include as many historic properties as possible without compromising the integrity of the proposed district/s. The district proposed by the 1995-1996 survey report was to include the area roughly bounded by the old channel of the Rio Grande/Water Street/Saenz Alley on the south, Second Street on the north, Corpus on the west and Avasolo Street on the east. While the district included both commercial and domestic buildings, as well as combined use properties, it was identified primarily as a commercial zone.

The survey report further concluded that the larger survey area contained a large number of low priority sites – severely altered historic properties – and nonhistoric sites that outnumber the Contributing elements. Although numerous historic properties lie on the streets west of Corpus, many lost significant architectural integrity through alterations. In addition, newer construction pock-marks the western half of the city. The larger number of Noncontributing properties may render such a district invalid due to the lack of cohesiveness and integrity as a whole. However, a number of the HIGH priority sites within these areas may be individually eligible for listing in the National Register.

Materials compiled as a result of this survey included a computerized database; a map plotting historic properties with unique site numbers; black-and-white contact sheets, negatives, and color slides; and Texas Historic Sites Inventory forms. In 1996 these materials were submitted to Rio Grande City in two binders: Volume I – Black and White Contacts and Color Slides, and Volume II- Survey Forms and Research Materials. In 2004 the negatives will be submitted to the Texas Historical Commission.

**NATIONAL REGISTER MULTIPLE PROPERTY NOMINATION**

In June of 2002, the City of Rio Grande City contracted with Preservation Central, Inc. to undertake a Multiple Property nomination for historic resources covered in the 1995-1996 survey. As part of the Multiple

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Property nomination, the contractor agreed to nominate one historic district and three individual properties to the National Register of Historic Places.

Principal Investigator Terri Myers reviewed the research and survey documents and conducted a windshield survey to identify the best concentration of historic properties in the project area. She consulted with the City Administrator, Leo Olivares, and the Main Street Director, Mauro Villareal, regarding the results of her review. It was determined that the largest collection of historic commercial and residential properties lay between Wimpy/the rear property line of E. Second Street on the north, the rear property line of Mirasoles on the south, Corpus on the west and Avasolo on the east. Although many HIGH, MEDIUM/HIGH, and MEDIUM properties are scattered throughout the city, they are often surrounded by nonhistoric properties or severely altered historic ones. These properties may, however, be eligible for individual listing in the NRHP.

Properties within the selected boundaries were reevaluated for integrity and their ability to convey a sense of the city's historic period. Contributing and noncontributing properties were mapped and an inventory prepared for the proposed district. Further historic research was conducted to add to the historic context. The Rio Grande City Downtown Historic District has a total of 155 cultural resources, 88 of which contribute to the historic district and 67 of which do not. Of the 88 Contributing properties, 84 are buildings, two are sites and two are structures. The district contains the largest cohesive grouping of mid- to late-19th and early 20th century properties in the city and includes most of the city's historic commercial zone and much of its significant commercial/domestic architecture including the La Borde House, the Silverio de la Pena Building, the Crisoforo Solis Building and the Renaga-Headley-Edgerton House. Individual properties and other districts may also be eligible for listing in the NRHP as part of this Multiple Property Nomination.

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**I. Major Bibliographical References** (List major written works and primary location of additional documentation: State Historic Preservation Office, other State agency, Federal agency, local government, university, or other, specifying repository.)

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**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
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☒ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository: \_\_\_\_\_