

## RIO GRANDE CITY HISTORIC OVERVIEW

### SPANISH COLONIAL HERITAGE

The history of Rio Grande City as a permanent European/American settlement dates to the Spanish colonization efforts along the Rio Grande by Jose de Escandon in the mid-18th century. In 1747, Escandon surveyed the Spanish frontier from the mouth of the Rio Grande, on the Gulf Coast, upriver to present-day Laredo. Along the river corridor he established the territory of Nuevo Santander named for his native province in Spain. Among the villages he founded are the present Mexican cities of Camargo, Mier, and Reynosa, all on the left bank of the river, in present Mexico, and Laredo, on the right bank, in the United States.

Colonial settlers began petitioning the Spanish government for property allocations as early as 1753 but it was not until 1767 that a royal commission began the process of surveying and determining ownership of individual parcels. The royal commissioners were charged with surveying towns and their jurisdictions and granting parcels of land to private settlers based on seniority and merit. They were further instructed to record their transactions to establish clear title from the Crown of Spain (Scott). Five jurisdictions, named for the towns of Camargo, Mier, Reynosa, Revilla (Guerrero) and Laredo, were defined and divided into elongated parcels of land that spanned both sides of the Rio Grande. Land was divided into narrow strips called *porciones* to give the maximum number of settlers river frontage for irrigation purposes. Most of the individual property owners resided in towns or ranches on what is now the Mexican side of the river but maintained herds of livestock on the right bank. Except for the towns of Laredo and Dolores, only a few ranching outposts and small, sometimes transitory settlements existed on the left bank of the river until after the Mexican War. Among the earliest of these isolated ranching communities was Carnestolendes, at or near the site of present Rio Grande City.

Although the present town of Rio Grande City was not officially established until after the Mexican War (1846-1848), some ranch activities took place on land that now includes the townsite, as early as 1753. That year Escandon inspected his fledgling colonies and granted requests for land assignments on the north side of the river. The land that includes present Rio Grande City fell under the jurisdiction of Escandon's village of Camargo. Camargo resident Captain Blas Maria de la Garza Falcon was given permission to establish herds on the north bank of the river in an area he named Carnestolendas, for the Carnival that precedes Lent. Falcon was instructed to settle 15 families on the ranch. His father-in-law, Don Nicolas de los Santos Coy established a ranch called Guardado (now Garceño) 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, and Carnestolendas was the precursor of what later became Rio Grande City (Barrera et. al.).

#### **THE MEXICAN WAR: 1846-1848**

By the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, the border communities had already existed under the jurisdiction of Spain, Mexico and the Republic of Texas. None of the events that figured so prominently in the creation of Mexico from Spain or Texas from Mexico at the conclusion of the Texan Revolution in 1836 mattered significantly to the people who struggled to make a living along the Rio Grande. The results of the Mexican War, in which the United States claimed all of the land north of the Rio Grande, however, had an enormous impact on the communities that lay along the international border separating Mexico from Texas. At the war's conclusion, property owners on the north side of the river were compelled to prove their land claims as Anglo entrepreneurs who had moved into the region with Zachary Taylor's army, laid claim to whatever lands could not be proven as grants from the Spanish crown.

#### **HENRY CLAY DAVIS AND HILARIA DE LA GARZA: 1848**

By the latter years of the Texas Republic, the de la Garza family, based in Camargo, still owned Carnestolendas, renamed Rancho Garza, or Garza Ranch. About 1839, Henry Clay Davis, a young American from Kentucky, arrived in Texas and for a time lived in the San Antonio area. According to a local resident, Davis traveled to the lower Rio Grande area with a friend, Antonio Resendez, son of a wealthy family of Camargo, in Mexico. Resendez reportedly introduced Davis to Hilaria de la Garza and her father, Don Francisco de la Garza (Kelsey, 1952). 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. When Davis married into the de la Garza family in 1846, he became half owner of the *porción* that included present Rio Grande City. Reportedly, Davis and his bride made their home at Carnestolendas on the north bank of the Rio Grande.

Less than three months after the Davis-de la Garza marriage, the Mexican War broke out and for the duration of the two-year war, Zachary Taylor transported troops and supplies by steamboat upriver to Rio Grande City and Camargo. From there, they 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, rather than the Garza Ranch or Carnestolendas, 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 Kenedy and Richard King transported troops and supplies up and down the Rio Grande by boat. When the army established an encampment (Ringgold Barracks, later Camp Ringgold) and steamboat landing on the north side

of the river on his land, Davis was encouraged to develop a townsite near the military outpost. The Army encampment was later renamed Fort Ringgold, after the first American officer killed on Texas soil during the Mexican War.

### **RIO GRANDE CITY: 1848**

A clear connection can be made between the Mexican War, the origins of Anglo-American settlement and the establishment of a mercantile class on the north side of the Rio Grande. General Zachary Taylor had set up a quartermaster system to supply his army of occupation in northern Mexico. Some of the men who accompanied Taylor to the region on his expedition into Mexico recognized the trade potential with northern Mexico in the aftermath of the war. Both citizen employees of Taylor's quartermaster corps and soldiers in his army decided to remain in the area after the war to exploit that potential. Historian David Montejano states that "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" (Montejano, 1987: 41). He further claims that Henry Clay Davis was one of those who, when released at Camargo, married into a landed Mexican family to acquire title to property on the northern side of the border.

Other sources, as related above, report that Clay was already in the area and married when the war broke out. It is a fact, however, that a number of other men did come to the area with Taylor and their marriages subsequently formed the basis of their extensive land holdings. Mifflin Kenedy who married the wealthy Petra Vela de Vidal, was a civilian pilot of the army's steamboats, along with Richard King. Kenedy obtained huge tracts of South Texas land through his wife's family. James Young, who married Salome Balli, acquired the site of Hidalgo, the original seat of Hidalgo County, in this manner. After his death, Young's partner James McAllen married the widow and later platted the town of McAllen from his wife's family land. The influx of these entrepreneurs lay the groundwork for the merchants and land developers in the newly acquired border region (Montejano, 1987: 41-43).

After the Mexican War, Davis formed a partnership with Captain Forbes Britton who mustered out of the army and remained in the vicinity of Camp Ringgold. The two men planned a business of land speculation starting with Davis's *porción*. As soon as the war was concluded, they surveyed the portion of Davis property that bordered on the river and platted the townsite they dubbed Rio Grande City. Like the city of Brownsville, platted by merchant Charles Stillman directly across the river/border from an established Mexican city and adjacent to an army post, Davis and Britton city's was laid out directly across the river from the Mexican city of Camargo and adjacent to Camp Ringgold. The site had obvious trade advantages with an established clientele across the border and at the army post.

In the trend of that time, Davis and Britton distributed maps of their new town throughout the country and tried to attract new residents to buy their town

lots. According to local accounts, the town was modeled after Austin, the capital of Texas. Streets in the town were platted on a grid pattern aligned with the river. The first street along the river bank was named Water Street followed by First or Laredo Street. A wide boulevard, named Britton Avenue after Captain Britton, extended five blocks from its juncture with the river at Water Street, to the courthouse square at the top of the street, just as Austin's Congress Avenue extended from the Colorado River to the state capitol building at the head of the street. Davis built a steamboat landing at the foot of Britton Avenue to receive passengers and supplies. Water Street was intended to be the principal business street and Davis built his own house (razed in 1995) near the intersection of Britton and Water streets, at the southeast corner of an alley originally known as Miraflores, now Mirasoles, and Britton Boulevard. One of the town's north-south streets on the west side of town was named Clay Street, probably for Davis, whose friends called him Clay.

Although Water Street paralleled the river, Laredo Street, now better known as Main or First Street, eventually became the town's Main Street and it is depicted as such on many maps of the city. The original town plat contained 100 city blocks with lots platted in varying dimensions ranging between 35 to 50 feet wide by a standard 115 feet length. Britton and Davis heavily promoted their town and Davis advertised the sale of his town lots in the *American Flag*, a newspaper published in the Mexican city of Matamoros. Despite its new name of Rio Grande City, most of the local people knew the town better as Davis Ranch or Rancho Davis throughout the 19th century.

The town should have fared well. Steamboat trade had been established during the war to transport Zachary Taylor's troops up the Rio Grande. When the war ended, Roma and Rio Grande City emerged as trading posts. At the same time, Starr County was formed and Rio Grande City was named county seat in 1848. Davis was elected county clerk. Possibilities looked bright and several businessmen like Mifflin Kenedy purchased the steamboats used to ferry U.S. troops and formed mercantile operations. Kenedy built a warehouse on Water Street near its intersection with Texas Avenue. The building 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.

Despite Davis and Britton's grandiose plans for their town, Rio Grande City did not develop into the rich river port they envisioned. It was eclipsed by the upriver town of Roma opposite the Mexican city of Mier. Brownsville founder and businessman Charles Stillman exercised his considerable entrepreneurial experience and capitalized on Roma's proximity to the Mexican Customs port of entry at Mier. Under Stillman's guidance, Roma developed into a prosperous river port from its trade with the mining regions of northern Mexico. William Emory, conducting a survey of the river for the International Boundary Commission in 1850, commented on Roma's relative wealth and noted that many of the local Roma merchants did a lively business in contraband goods.

Rio Grande City, however, remained little more than an isolated frontier outpost on the river in the years following its formation. Their dreams left unrealized, Britton left the area but Davis continued on in his adopted homeland, acting as a kind of unofficial authority figure in the town. Several early American travelers passed through Rio Grande City at this time and recorded their observations of the fledgling town and its founder.

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

Naturalist John Woodhouse Audubon, son of renown John James Audubon, leading an expedition of nearly 100 men, spent six harrowing weeks in and around Davis's town on his way to the California gold fields in 1849 (March 10, 1849 - April 28, 1849). Along the way, he kept a journal of his travels including descriptions of the land and people he encountered. His is one of the first descriptions of the environment surrounding the tiny desert community, as well as the community itself, at its inception. Audubon's company traveled by way of the steamboat *Corvette* from Brownsville to Camp Ringgold and Rio Grande City, passing a number of settlements or ranchos along the way. Audubon pitied "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]". He noted that most inhabitants lived in "forlorn 'Jacals' (a sort of openwork shed covered with skins and rushes and plastered with mud)" (Audubon, 1906: 54).

Audubon's experience upon disembarking on the Mexican side of the river across from Rio Grande City, was to get much worse. Within three days of their departure from Brownsville, a member of the company fell ill with cholera and died. By the following day, several other members of the party had contracted the disease and died. Audubon was compelled to wait out the illness in Rio Grande City. By the time the cholera ran its course, more than a dozen men had died, others were ill, the expedition's funds had been stolen and many of the adventurers gave up the journey and returned home. It was only through the intervention of Henry Clay Davis and his father-in-law, Don Francisco de la Garza, that any of Audubon's stolen money was returned to him (Audubon, 1906: 77).

It is no wonder Audubon had little good to tell about the place he referred to as "the never-to-be-forgotten Rio Grande". At the time of his journey in the spring of 1849, 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. At Camp Ringgold, most of the men and officers lived in tents. Audubon's final assessment of Rio Grande City was not flattering: "To tell of the dull monotony of this place would be most tedious, nearly as hard to think of as to endure" (Audubon, 1906: 77).

Audubon, apparently was more impressed with Davis himself than with Rio Grande City and he described the city's founder 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).

Teresa Viele, an army wife who accompanied her husband to Camp Ringgold a few years after Audubon's disastrous trip, ~~apparently enjoyed a more~~ comprehensive experience than her predecessor. She described Rio Grande City during her husband's duty at Fort Ringgold in the mid-1850s. She considered it a "prosperous village containing about one thousand inhabitants, consisting of Americans, Mexicans, and a few Spaniards" (Viele, 1858: 147). 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). An important feature of the town was the "fandango court-yard" which Viele described as an open-air enclosure with benches around three sides and booths on the fourth. It was the focal point of the town's social life where inhabitants could drink, dance and gamble into the night. Rio Grande City boasted a bakery, billiard room, an "eating saloon", and a pharmacy complete with a soda fountain (Viele, 1858: 149).

On the outskirts of the town, residents raised crops, particularly corn, and generally attempted to turn the barren landscape into gardens. According to Viele, the town's amenities rendered it a place of considerable importance when compared with other places of the Texas frontier (Viele, 1858: 149). Still, she thought the country was unsuited to the "nature of civilized man" and intended "as a home for desperate men, escaped refugees from the law" (Viele, 1858: 151).

By the time Viele arrived in Rio Grande City, the town's citizenry had determined they needed a jail, a "long low adobe hut" which lay

at the rear of Davis's rancho, 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).

Viele described area residents, Hispanic and Anglo alike, in rather romantic terms. She found 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". Although somewhat patronizing in her feelings toward the area's Hispanic residents, she appeared to have a genuine positive regard for them. She felt they had "lovely trait of sympathy . . . ." She described Davis as the chief magistrate of the town,

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).

### **NINETEENTH CENTURY BORDER DISPUTES: CARBAJAL, CORTINA AND THE REPUBLIC OF THE RIO GRANDE**

Although the Mexican War ostensibly settled the boundary issue between Mexico and the United States, the border region continued to experience periodic rebellions of various sorts. In 1851, during Viele's sojourn at Fort Ringgold, many people on both sides of the border, including Davis and Britton, became interested in forming an entirely separate country formed from northern Mexico and southern Texas, south of the Nueces River. Known as the Plan de la Loba or the Republic of Sierra Madre, the cause was championed by Jose Jesus Maria Carbajal, a former resident of Hidalgo County. Under his command, the "republic army" captured the Mexican cities of Camargo and Reynosa, and attacked Matamoros. Carbajal was ultimately arrested by United States Army in Rio Grande City.

In 1859, a few years after Carbajal's insurgency was quashed, a man named Juan Nepomuceno Cortina launched a series of raids throughout south Texas and northern Mexico that were variously categorized as banditry or revolutionary, depending upon the source. Rio Grande City again played an important role in quelling the uprising. On December 27, 1859, Cortina lost a battle at Rio Grande City and retreated into northern Mexico. Cortina and his followers continued to haunt the region and in March 1860, Colonel Robert E. Lee left his post in San Antonio to pursue Cortina along the border. Lee never encountered Cortina directly but he did pass some time in and around Rio Grande City during the campaign. A frame building at Fort Ringgold (then known as Ringgold Barracks) is reputed to have served as Lee's quarters during his stay. It is the oldest known building at the fort which now serves the Rio Grande Independent School District as a junior high school. Lee's journal entries and letters from Rio Grande City mention only that he struck a tent on the road above the tent and there is no written evidence of his occupation of the building. However, it is the only building known to survive from the time Lee visited Rio Grande City and is significant for its historical and architectural associations with the early post.

## **FORT RINGGOLD**

Situated on the left bank of the Rio Grande one-half mile from Rio Grande City. The post was established October 26, 1848 at Davis' Landing by Companies C and G, First United States Infantry commanded by Captain J.H. LaMotte. The post was named "Camp Ringgold" to honor Brevet Major David Ringgold, Fourth United States Artillery, who was killed during the campaign of General Taylor at Palo Alto near Brownsville. In General Orders No. 8, Headquarters of the Army dated July 16, 1849, the name was changed to Ringgold Barracks which it retained until the post was designated an official fort upon receiving permanent status. Troops were withdrawn March 3, 1859 but returned December 29 that same year two days after the defeat of Juan Cortina in its vicinity. It was again abandoned March 7, 1861, although it was used as a staging ground for Confederate troops under John "Rip" Ford during the Civil War. It was re-occupied by the United States in June 1865. Army officials decided that the frontier post should be made permanent, and in 1868 plans were laid for the completion of a brick fort, much of which remains intact today and is listed as a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places.

The site on the Rio Grande was selected because of its observation advantages. It was situated on the river opposite the ancient Mexican town of Camargo which was heavily garrisoned. The site was also at a convenient point at the head of steam navigation on the Rio Grande where supplies could be distributed to ranches and settlements further up the river.

Originally, the encampment was located very close to the river landing and consisted of log and board buildings but only a single building from the earlier period of occupation exist. Called the Lee House, the building has been identified as Robert E. Lee's headquarters when he visited the post before the Civil War. Contrary to popular belief, Lee was never stationed at Camp Ringgold but merely spent some time at the post during a court martial hearing and while pursuing Cortina in the late 1850s.

After the Civil War, an inventory and assessment of army properties was made. The report recommended that a new fort be built farther back from the river on a level plain. The property consisted of about 150 acres of land which was purchased outright by the army about 1853, its value assessed at \$10,000. 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. By 1893, the fort consisted of four sets of barracks, six buildings for officers' quarters, a hospital, a bakery and administrative offices. In addition, there were buildings for supplies, storage and to house laundresses. According to plans, all the new buildings were to be built of brick in a style adapted to the climate. The barracks were two stories in height, with deep, nine foot wide porches supported by Moorish arches. The hospital was a large brick building with a central two-story administration section and two flanking wards each containing twelve beds.



A parade ground separates the barracks from a line of officers' quarters. The hospital stood at one end of the parade grounds while the adjutants's office, guard house and bakery anchored the other end. Behind each of the officers quarters were kitchens and sheds. About 1893, a new brick officer's "cottage" was built in the row of officers' quarters to house the post commander. A subsistence storehouse was erected to replace one that burned in 1892.

### **COTTON TIMES: THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR**

Rio Grande City played an unusual economic role for southern cotton growers during the American Civil War. Federal troops evacuated the Mexican War era Ringgold Barracks after Texas seceded from the Union. Confederate troops under the leadership of John Salmon "Rip" Ford occupied the abandoned fort periodically during the war and occasionally launched raids on Union positions near the mouth of the Rio Grande at Fort Brown. Rio Grande City's role in the war was more indirect, however. Late in the war, after the Union's blockade efforts successfully halted most cotton shipments through Confederate port cities, cotton was shuttled to the Rio Grande for transport. Depending upon Union strength and range at Fort Brown the cotton road led to Rio Grande City, Roma and even as far upriver as Laredo and Eagle Pass. There it would pass to the Mexican towns across the Rio Grande for transport to awaiting English and French ships anchored in the Gulf of Mexico. Travelling under the Mexican flag, the cotton was ferried to waiting ships unmolested by federal troops who could not risk starting an incident with Mexico over the ownership of the cotton.

The contraband cotton trade was greatly rewarding to men like Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy who parlayed their profits into enormous ranch holdings after the war. Others, like early Rio Grande City settler John Peter Kelsey, did not benefit from the war. 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.

### **FRENCH AND GERMAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE POST-CIVIL WAR ERA: 1870s & 1880s**

The post-war period saw the emergence of a new class of entrepreneurial citizens in Rio Grande City in the form of French refugees from Mexico. While the United States fought its Civil War, Mexico was temporarily governed by a coalition of French/Austrian and upper class Mexican citizens. When the French Imperialists were defeated and their emperor Maximilian was executed, many of the French who accompanied him to Mexico fled across the border to the United States. During this period a number of French-born immigrants arrived in Rio Grande City. About the same time, a German immigrant, Heinrich Portscheller, deserted the Imperial army into which he had been impressed upon his arrival in Mexico. He eventually made his way to the border region, living for a while in

Camargo where he learned the brick-making trade before crossing the river to Rio Grande City. The influx of French and German refugees would have an enormous influence on the architecture and development of Rio Grande City in the second half of the 19th century.

### **LATE 19TH CENTURY**

By the late 19th century, Rio Grande City claimed about 2,200 residents. At that time, the business district extended about half a mile in length, running east to west. The building style was described as "predominantly Mexican" in character. Many of the city's buildings were constructed of brick made on the bank of the river near Davis' Tree. The unincorporated city served as the Starr County seat and county officials directed its operation.

A county courthouse and jail occupied a site on a hill that overlooked the town. The complex lay at the end of Britton Street which linked the county buildings to the river. Viewed from the river end of Britton, the courthouse presented an imposing picture.

Other prominent buildings included St. Mary's Catholic Church (St. Mary of the Refuge). Built in 1868, the church was also situated on the hill near the courthouse. It was built of brick, probably similar to that used in the construction of the new buildings at Fort Ringgold. In 1872, a spire and bells were added to the church. Father Gaye and Keralam were the first priests. In 1893 priests were father L. Petoye, Superior, and Father Alexis Desaulles. Desaulles had been serving in the vicinity since 1867 - first at Roma for thirteen years and then at Rio Grande City for another thirteen years. Nearby lay the convent of St. Joseph, which had been built in 1887. Four nuns lived at the convent in 1893. Sister St. Teresa was the Mother Superior at that time.

The nuns served the community as teachers. Two of the four women were awarded teachers' diplomas by the state Normal Schools. At one time, the school associated with the convent boasted as many as 100 pupils but by 1893 the number was reduced to a handful of young boys, probably due to the advent of the public school system. In 1893, Professor Thomas Hart was superintendent of the three public schools in Rio Grande City. Hart was assisted by four female teachers - two of whom were the nuns. Average attendance in the schools was about 200 students for the entire town.

In 1880, Silverio de la Peña began his service as the town's postmaster and by 1893 he was named the Deputy Collector of Customs. Among the oldest Americans in the city was Judge James Clarke, a Mexican War veteran who lived in Mexico for several years after he left the service. Clarke finally landed in Rio Grande City about 1868. Judge John P. Kelsey, was one of the wealthiest landowners in the area, emigrated from New York state in the 1840s. Kelsey served with General Scott in Mexico and later brought the first flat boat loaded with goods up the Rio Grande. He settled in Rio Grande City where he began conducting business in 1855. Other noteworthy residents in the late 19th century

included Texas Ranger William Richards, who came to the area in 1840, Samuel J. Stewart also lived in the area a long time and John Henderson a "daring express rider in Mexico during Scott's campaigns" who had been a resident since 1848.

In a late 19th century publication aimed at attracting potential land buyers and investment to South Texas, W. H. Chatfield wrote about the Lower Rio Grande valley, specifically Brownsville and Matamoras, and the possibilities for irrigation in the area. Chatfield tried to dispell the notion that the climate was unhealthy and that well-publicized political upheavals involving Catarina Garza were over-emphasized.

Garza had been a catalyst for what has been called the Rio Grande City Riot of 1888 and by the early 1890s, he had earned a reputation as the leader of a faction trying to overthrow the Diaz government in Mexico. According to Chatfield, Garza started his career as a clerk in Brownsville but left the city about 1888 when he married into a good family "of some distinction". He then went to Corpus Christi where he established a newspaper "for the purpose of political agitation, and in the course of his tirade made a vicious attack on some of the citizens of Rio Grande City", wrote Chatfield. The article accused Starr County sheriff W. W. Sheley and U. S. Customs Inspector Victor Sebree of murdering a Mexican American citizen of Rio Grande City. Sheley had previously been implicated in the lynchings of several other local Mexican people. While visiting Rio Grande City during the general election of 1888, Garza encountered the two of the men he had maligned, a battle ensued and Garza was slightly wounded.

Rio Grande City's Mexican and Mexican American population, already angered at Sheley's abuse of power, became excited and armed themselves. For several hours the town was given over to mob rule. Garza's attackers, threatened with vengeance, fled to Fort Ringgold to lay their case before the commanding officer, Colonel Clendennin. The mob followed, firing upon the two, and demanded their release from the fort. When ordered to disperse, the mob did so; however, news leaked out to wire services that anarchy reigned in the city. The Texas Rangers, sheriffs of surrounding counties, the San Antonio Rifles, and the Houston Light Guards were put on alert. The "riot" dissipated, however, before further confrontations occurred. Indictments were issued against a number of the rioters, with the cases to be heard before the District Court in Brownsville.

According to Chatfield, Garza next tried to organize an expedition in Starr County to invade Mexico. He planned to cross the Rio Grande above and below Rio Grande City, surround Camargo, surprise the garrison and augment his own army. He then planned to march to Mexico City, adding recruits as he went along. Some details of the scheme leaked out and troops from Fort Ringgold intercepted and scattered the party. By 1893, Garza had left the area and quiet returned to Rio Grande City (Chatfield, 1893: 48). Chatfield's account, and the official responses to Garza's activities on behalf of the area's Hispanic residents, were obviously biased and served to further divide Anglo and Mexican American residents in Starr County. These issues would re-emerge during the Mexican Revolution when men

would be labeled bandits" or "patriots" depending upon the observer's ethnic background and class.

### **TURN OF THE CENTURY**

During the 1880s and 1890s, prospects for economic growth and development looked good for Rio Grande City, at the head of year-round steam navigation on the Rio Grande. When the river was high, it was possible to carry freight by steam as far as Roma, about twenty-two miles upriver from Rio Grande City. Most of the time, however, freight was brought by boat to Rio Grande City and then taken by wagon to Roma via a good road that paralleled the river. The two Starr County cities competed for the lucrative Mexican trade and the roads linking the border communities with Monterrey, to the south, were well-traveled.

The merchants who settled in the city in the 1870s and 1880s, in the aftermath of the United State's Civil War and the overthrow of Maximilian in Mexico, prospered as a result of the good business climate. In addition to foreign trade, the post-war build-up of adjacent Fort Ringgold presented merchants with excellent business opportunities. 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.

Much of Rio Grande City's most outstanding historic architecture can be attributed to two factors: the area's good economic prospects in the last quarter of the 19th century and the arrival of a master brick mason and prolific builder, German immigrant Heinrich Portscheller. During a highly productive period from about 1870 to 1895, Portscheller designed and executed some of Starr County's finest architectural resources and he surely influenced the construction of others.

The son of a German military architect, Portscheller immigrated to Mexico in the 1860s only to be conscripted into Austrian Emperor Maximilian's Imperial army. As soon as he was able, he deserted and crossed the Rio Grande to Starr County. He returned Mexico to help defeat Maximilian's forces at Santa Gertrudis and ultimately moved back to Rio Grande City where he began taking commissions for masonry buildings in the area. He apparently established a brick kiln near Rio Grande City about 1868 and later moved his operations to Roma. Portscheller's work can be seen throughout the lower Rio Grande Valley from Fort Ringgold to Laredo where he eventually settled.

Among Portscheller's earliest commissions was the design and construction of a new, permanent fort complex at Fort Ringgold. The brick barracks buildings for infantry and cavalry divisions exhibit one of his enduring design hallmarks: side-gabled buildings with intricately corbeled brick parapet end walls. Few records specifically identify Portscheller as a contractor or architect on buildings in Rio Grande City but his influence is clear in many of the city's most prominent buildings of this period.

The Silverio de la Peña Drugstore and Post Office (N.R. 1980), built in 1886, was possibly the last and one of the finest of Portscheller's Rio Grande City buildings. Silverio de la Peña was the son of a German immigrant whose surname was Furstein. He reportedly asked Portscheller to build him the finest building in the county. De la Peña died in 1894 before he saw the completed building but his widow Eliza married Juan H. Hinojosa, a farmer, tax assessor and U.S. customs officer and they maintained their residence in the upper floor of the building. It served as customs office for some time and as a post office until 1950.

Other Rio Grande City buildings attributed to Portscheller include the Immaculate Conception convent and school, the 1868-1874 buildings at Fort Ringgold (N.R. 1993) and possibly the Solis Building. Distinctive elements of Portscheller's work include finely detailed brickwork in the parapets and around window openings. His influence is seen throughout the city in both domestic and commercial buildings dating from his residency in the Rio Grande City area and for several decades thereafter. He is reputed to have apprenticed local brick masons who may have continued his practice in the area. Although Portscheller's work is more widely associated with the upriver city of Roma, Rio Grande City boasts some of his most outstanding designs and the legacy of his influence.

Many of the commercial and combined commercial/domestic buildings along Main and Second streets and on Britton Avenue from Main Street to the courthouse square were built during this flourishing period in Rio Grande City's history. Indeed, the first courthouse built for that purpose was constructed in the 1880s. Construction began on the La Borde House in the 1890s and Emilio Block built several significant commercial buildings across the street between 1890 and 1901.

Although the city was finally beginning to develop into the busy center of commerce envisioned by its founder, *jacales* and shanties remained common in both commercial and residential areas of town. The 1894 Sanborn maps depict scores of such buildings. The maps also identify several distinctive features of the border town including a substantial cock fighting arena on the site of the present Garmon Theatre. Numerous saloons and billiard parlors lined Main Street and the most common commercial buildings were general stores and drug stores. The town also had several blacksmith shops, a cobbler, and a silversmith. The Catholic Church, convent and school, and courthouse were the most prominent architectural resources in the city. Many types of residences existed, from the *jacales* and shanties of the city's poorer families, to the gracious courtyard plan combined business and family complexes of the city's elite. At the turn of the century, Rio Grande City appeared likely to continue its successful development.

## **TURMOIL AND ISOLATION**

About 1899, steamboat travel to Rio Grande City ceased. Always a shallow and treacherous waterway, the river became even more so, to the extent that it could no longer be navigated for any substantial distance from the mouth of

the Gulf of Mexico. Although the city's hopes had originally hinged on the river and its commercial potential, overland trade, particularly to Monterrey, Mexico, continued to be a sustaining enterprise at the turn of the 20th century. The new trade was short-lived, however. Internal turmoil in Mexico, eventually spilling over and extending throughout the border region of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona and finally erupting in revolution in the 1910s, put a damper on the international trade.

At the same time, neighboring Hidalgo and Cameron counties on the coast were burgeoning with new development. Entrepreneurial coalitions in those counties were successful in bringing the railroad to South Texas in 1904. The same groups secured funding for extensive irrigation projects that brought water from the Rio Grande to what had been desert or bosque land, good only for ranching. With rail and irrigation service, they launched phenomenally successful land investment schemes that resulted in the development of more than a dozen new towns and put thousands of acres of barren land under cultivation. Their promotional campaigns brought hordes of Midwestern and Northeastern farmers to the valley but Rio Grande City did not necessarily share in this bonanza.

Most newcomers primarily chose to settle among other Anglo families. As political trouble in Mexico grew and refugees flocked across the border into South Texas after the turn of the century, ethnic relations strained. Rio Grande City always had strong associations with Mexico and endorsed its bi-cultural heritage. During this period in particular, Rio Grande City, with its large Hispanic population, was not as attractive to the Anglo immigrants as the were the towns of McAllen, Mission, San Benito and others in the newly developing irrigated farms of Hidalgo and Cameron counties.

Partisan politics complicated the picture further. After the turn of the century, adversarial politics in Starr County in the form of political clubs known as the Reds (Republicans) and the Blues (Democrats) became so divisive that violence broke out throughout county forcing armed guards at the polls on election day. Rio Grande City, as County Seat, was the focal point for much of the violence, further discouraging new immigration, development and investment in the city. In fact, many long-standing residents of Starr County, fearing the outcome of certain elections or fed up with the political machines, left the city at that time. When things finally settled down, Rio Grande City had been eclipsed by the new cities downriver.

Still, Rio Grande City experienced some growth during this period. Possibly because of the proximity of so many Anglo newcomers, many of the buildings constructed in Rio Grande City in the 1920s reflect the types and styles fashionable in the rest of the country. When the railroad finally arrived in Rio Grande City in 1925, it became easier and cheaper to ship milled lumber and other standard building materials used in the construction of popular plan houses such as bungalows. Modest wood-frame bungalows began to supplant the hipped roof brick vernacular dwellings that previously dominated the city's housing stock. A

clear departure from the area's earlier eclectic building traditions, the bungalow became the most prevalent type of dwelling built in Rio Grande City in the 1920s, reflecting the popularity of a nation-wide trend. Similarly, period revival styles, particularly Spanish Colonial Revival, became the design of choice among the elite and professional class of Rio Grande City. Large new stucco houses with tile roofs, ceramic canales or drains, arched entries and wrought iron grilles appeared primarily along West Second and Third streets.

Ranching remained a principal occupation for many residents of Starr County through the 1920s and 1930s and Rio Grande City served 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 reflect the fashionable designs of their time with their Art Moderne styling.

When World War II broke out, many Starr County families sent sons and daughters to serve in the armed forces. Some returning veterans came back to Rio Grande City to build new homes and raise their families. National trends in domestic building styles are reflected in several early Ranch and Minimal Traditional style houses within the older part of Rio Grande City. Rather than replace their historic commercial buildings with then-popular International Style design, however, Rio Grande City business owners tended to remodel existing buildings by replacing original storefronts and windows with plate glass and metal fronts.

As the city grew in the post-war era, commercial and industrial enterprises spread beyond the original townsite boundaries and along the principal highway linking it with Roma to the west and the Hidalgo County city of Mission to the east. 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.

#### **HISTORIC PROPERTIES IN RIO GRANDE CITY: CONCLUSION**

Today, Rio Grande City's historic built environment is a pastiche of many cultures, converging and blending their building traditions in this border city on the Rio Grande. At first glance, one might assume that buildings along the border with Mexico are a melding of Anglo and Spanish/Mexican traditions. Indeed, the city was founded by a Kentuckian who married into a 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 Mexican, left their own indelible imprints in the architectural fabric of the city. The result was the blending

of many complex building and design traditions in a small and fairly isolated border community.

The oldest extant structure in the city may be the wall that surrounds the Lopez-Tijerina complex on Main Street. According to local accounts, the wall pre-dates the founding of the city by Henry Clay Davis in 1848 and may have been part of the Carnestolendas Ranch. Very little permanent construction took place on the north bank of the Rio Grande in the vicinity of Rio Grande City before the end of the Mexican War. Ranchers who owned land spanning the river generally lived in towns like Camargo, Reynosa, and Guerrero, or on ranches on the south side of the river. Thus, a few stone buildings and corrals may have been all that lay in the area now encompassed by Rio Grande City and it is possible that the Lopez-Tijerina wall dates from that early ranching period. Its sandstone construction is similar to other early 19th century walls in the vicinity of Guerrero, in Mexico, and Uruapan in San Ygnacio.

The earliest Anglo influence in the vicinity of Carnestolendas may well have been the city layout instituted by its founder, Henry Clay Davis. Davis gained the property through his marriage and superimposed an Anglo-type grid plan onto the former ranch landscape. He modeled his city after Austin, the Texas capital. Both plans took advantage of river frontage and were based on a grid with their respective rivers forming the southern boundary of the city. A broad boulevard divided the town and led from a river landing site to the capitol, in the case of Austin, and to the county courthouse in Rio Grande City. Like Austin, the street nearest the river was Water Street, followed by First, Second and so on. Davis intended for his city to grow toward the courthouse but instead, its initial growth followed the course of the river. Today, the city's greatest concentration of historic resources follows the route of its early development.

Extant buildings that date from the initial period of settlement include mercantile warehouses (Mifflin Kenedy Warehouse) and dwellings such as Judge Samuel Julian Stewart's house. Unfortunately, the Henry Clay Davis House, built about 1850 and the Davis Landing Apartments or Decker House, were demolished in recent years. Overall, few institutions made their appearance in Rio Grande City before the Civil War and few antebellum properties survive in the city.

In the years following the Civil War, the city experienced a period of substantial growth and development and many commercial and domestic properties survive from that era. The influence of French and German immigrants, most of whom arrived in Rio Grande City after Mexico expelled the French and executed the Emperor Maximilian in 1865, is seen particularly in the brickwork and grand houses of the mid- to late-19th century. Residents of more modest means adopted the masonry construction and design traditions brought by those immigrants but they applied them to existing plan-types.

Mexican *jacales*, small thatched roof houses of pole construction and mud filling, were prevalent throughout Mexico and in fact, are still a common house type in poor areas of Mexico. Once found throughout Rio Grande City, they



started disappearing in the 20th century. During the post-Civil War period of relative prosperity in Rio Grande City, many residents rendered the familiar *jacal* form with brick construction and wood shingles. Today several good examples of these one- to three-room linear buildings with hipped roofs survive in the city.

At the same time, many elite families of both Anglo and Hispanic descent built combination domestic/commercial buildings on a type of courtyard plan. Most were configured in an L-shape with virtually no setback from the street. Wings fronting onto the primary streets tended to be used for commercial purposes while the wing extending to the rear or along a side street served as the family dwelling. Arched arcades formed shaded transitional spaces leading from the domestic areas into tropical gardens in the secluded patio or courtyards. Some of Rio Grande City's best-preserved landmarks such as the Kelsey-Bass House (City Hall) and the Solis House, reflect these traditions.

As the turn of the 20th century approached, buildings in Rio Grande City began to reflect the trends that were popular in the rest of the United States. Late-Victorian period houses with modest Queen Anne and Classical Revival stylistic features appeared in the city, particularly along Second Street. Businesses 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.

By the early 20th century, popular building trends common throughout the United States such as bungalows, were becoming more common in Rio Grande City. 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 construction. Tudor Revival dwellings, so popular elsewhere, are not seen in Rio Grande City. During the 1930s, institutional and governmental buildings adopted the look of Depression-era trends. Examples of these trends include 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.

Following World War II and the advent of the G.I. bill, Ranch style houses became the country's most popular housing type. Rio Grande City has good examples of early Ranch Style dwellings and a handful of commercial buildings that date from this period as well. By the 1950s, most of the original townsite of Rio Grande City had been developed. 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.

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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