Vernacular Architecture Forum 2022

Texas Border Field Tour

La Frontera Chica: San Ygnacio and Laredo TX

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Forty-Third Annual
Vernacular Architecture Forum Conference
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Foreword

Dear Participants:

As acting chair of the local arrangements committee for VAF San Antonio, allow me to welcome you to the Texas Border Field Tour, which will focus on La Frontera Chica, specifically the rural landscapes of San Ygnacio and Zapata County and the urban landscapes of Laredo. You are in good hands for this tour.

Stephen Fox is an architectural historian and a Fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas. The author of books, articles and reviews on many aspects of Texas architecture, Fox grew up in the border city of Brownsville. He was a contributor to the first volume of the Society of Architectural Historians' Buildings of Texas, edited by Gerald Moorhead.

Frank Briscoe is the Principal and Senior Project Manager at Briscoe Architectural Conservation. Frank has a BA from the University of Texas at Austin with graduate studies at Cornell University in historic preservation, and at ICCROM, Rome. He has been deeply involved with the restoration of many of the buildings you will see today.

Together Frank and Stephen make the ideal pair of guides for this stretch of the Texas-Mexico border.

On behalf of VAF, I want to express profound gratitude to our hosts at the sites you are visiting:

Ms. Lannie Mecom and Ms. Betsy Mecom Mullins, Rancho Corralitos
Mr. Michael Tracy, Rancho San Francisco
The Guadalupe and Lila Martinez Foundation, Rancho La Unión
The River Pierce Foundation, Mr. Christopher Rincón, executive director
The Webb County Heritage Foundation, Ms. Margarita Araiza, executive director
The Laredo Cultural District, Webb County, Ms. Telissa Lueckenotte Molano, AIA, RID, NCARB, LEED BD+C, CNU-A, president

Enjoy today’s tour, and we will see you back in San Antonio!

Ken Hafertepe

All photographs by Kenneth Hafertepe except as noted.

Texas Border Field Tour
La Frontera Chica: San Ygnacio and Laredo TX

Preface and Acknowledgments

Welcome to members of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and guests participating in the 2022 conference field tour of the Texas-Tamaulipas border: La Frontera Chica, the “little border.” The works of vernacular architecture you will visit in San Ygnacio and Laredo, Texas, materialize three centuries of Mexican cultural heritage along what has been, since 1848, the U.S. side of the border with Mexico.

Texas and the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Chihuahua share a border that is 1,254 miles long, almost two thirds of the length of the border between Mexico and the United States. Much of the border between Texas and Coahuila and Texas and Chihuahua is lightly populated. Between El Paso and Laredo, there are border crossings only in Presidio, Del Rio, and Eagle Pass, Texas. There are three crossings at Laredo and three additional crossings in the frontera chica, at Zapata, Roma, and Rio Grande City, Texas. Only in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, at the southern tip of Texas, where there are nine bridges and one ferry crossing (at Los Ebanos, Texas), are points of crossing numerous. The lack of crossings speaks to the isolation of the border territory from the rest of the state of Texas, an important factor in the conservation of the region’s Mexican culture. The lack of crossings also highlights differences between border population centers. El Paso, founded in 1859 across the Rio Grande from the Mexican city of El Paso del Norte, Chihuahua (founded in 1639 and known since 1888 as Ciudad Juárez) is, historically and culturally, part of Chihuahua and New Mexico rather than Texas. Del Rio and, especially, Eagle Pass, Texas, lay along the overland routes between Coahuila and San Antonio, Texas, established at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Laredo, the frontera chica, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley were connected geographically and culturally to Tamaulipas, which is separated from Coahuila and Nuevo León by the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain chain. From Eagle Pass upriver to El Paso, adobe was the most common building material prior to the twentieth century. In Laredo and the frontera chica it was sandstone. And in the lower river region of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where there is no stone, brick became the most common masonry material beginning in the nineteenth century. Material availability and construction practices underscore regional variations that persist in the Texan borderlands.
In his book *Tejano South Texas*, cultural geographer Daniel D. Arreola describes the *frontera chica*, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the Texas Coastal Bend as constituting one of the foremost Mexican cultural provinces in the United States. The book's title somewhat obscures the fact that this territory was not historically part of Texas but instead of the Spanish colonial province of Nuevo Santander, which, after Mexican independence from Spain, became the state of Tamaulipas. It is this *novosantanderino* legacy that is materialized in the vernacular architecture of San Ygnacio, Zapata County, and Laredo, as comparisons with the vernacular buildings examined by the American architect and historian Eugene George, and Mexican architectural historians Jesús Franco-Carrasco, Antonio Tamez-Tejeda, Armando V. Flores-Salazar, and Eduardo Alarcón-Cantú make clear. The authors of this guide are indebted to these scholars, who, beginning in the 1960s, sought to identify, document, and analyze the architectural material culture of this transnational region.

The tour leaders gratefully acknowledge scholars whose investigations into the history of specific sites in the *frontera chica* have enormously enriched this guide.

These include Dr. Mario L. Sánchez, architect and historian, who formulated the Caminos del Río binational historical corridor project; John Mason Hart, Moores Professor of History at the University of Houston; Jerry D. Thompson, Regents Professor of History at Texas A&M International University; Gilberto Manuel Hinojosa, professor of history at the University of the Incarnate Word; Daniel D. Arreola, professor of geographical sciences and planning at the University of Arizona; The Rev. Robert E. Wright, O.M.I., professor of systematic theology at the Oblate School of Theology; Armando Alonzo, associate professor of history at Texas A&M University; Michael S. Yoder, adjunct associate professor of geography at the University of Central Arkansas; Andrés Tijerina, professor of history at Austin Community College; Richard Cleary, professor of architecture at the University of Texas at Austin; Rafael Longoria, ACSA Distinguished Professor of Architecture at the University of Houston; Robert Alexander González AIA, dean of architecture at the University of New Mexico; Kathryn O'Rourke, professor of art and art history, Trinity University; Kathryn E. Holliday, professor of architecture at the University of Texas at Arlington; Paula Lupkin, associate professor of art history at the University of North Texas; Scott Cook, professor of anthropology at the University of Connecticut; Octavio Herrera Pérez, Profesor de Tiempo Completo, Facultad de Derecho y Ciencias Sociales at the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas; Eduardo Alarcón Cantú of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte; Jesús Najar at Virginia Commonwealth University; Marlene Elizabeth Heck, senior lecturer in history at Dartmouth College; Timothy K. Perttula, archeologist; Manuel Hinojosa FAIA; Sharon Fleming AIA, historic preservation consultant; Terri Myers, historic preservation consultant; Martin Salinas-Rivera, cronista and director of the Archivo Municipal de Reynosa, Tamaulipas; preservation advocate Laurie Mann Beck; Laredo historians María Eugenia Guerra; Gloria Z. Canseco; and Laredo architects Viviana Frank FAIA and Frank Rotnofsky AIA, Able City Architects.

In addition we acknowledge now deceased historians and architects whose work continues to shape our knowledge and understanding of the border: Arq. Carlos Rugiero-Cázares, Archivo del Estado de Tamaulipas; Jesús Franco-Carrasco; W. Eugene George FAIA; Willard B. Robinson FAIA, professor of architecture at Texas Tech University; architect Alfonso Varela; Joe S. Graham, Jr., professor of anthropology at Texas A&M University—Kingsville; archeologist John W. Clark, Jr.; Laredo historians Rose Treviño, Luciano Guajardo, and Sam N. Johnson; San Ygnacio historians Antonio E., José D., and Roberto D. Uribe-Sánchez; and Río Grande City historian Frances Johnson.

In addition, the tour organizers thank Michelle Weaver Jones, conference planner and website editor; VAF board member and second vice-president Catherine Lavoie of the Historic American Buildings Survey; graphic designer Jerri Anne Hopkins; and Marcia Miller of the Maryland Historical Trust. Brent Fortenberry, Kristovitch Associate Professor and director of preservation at Tulane University; Kenneth Hafertepe, professor of museum studies at Baylor University; Clifton Ellis, Sasser Professor of Architectural History at Texas Tech University; and Evan Thompson, executive director of Preservation Texas, oversaw the planning for this conference field tour. Dr. Kenneth Hafertepe was chief photographer for this guide.
The early twentieth-century architect and critic I. T. Frary (1873-1965) wrote of his "discovery" of San Ysodo, Texas, a village on the left bank of the Rio Grande/rio Bravo del Norte, thirty-five miles downriver from Laredo, Texas, in rhetorical terms mixing mythic evocation ("sleeping under the spell of ancient Spain") with proprietary claims ("our great Southwest," "within the confines of his own land"). Frary did so to communicate his fascination with a landscape that he saw as inherently distinct and exotic because of its historical architecture and urban spaces, its population, language, music, and food that are Mexican rather than Anglo-American in origin.

The little border—la frontera chica—is the portion of the U.S.-Mexico international border between the northwestern panhandle of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and the Texas counties of Webb, Zapata, and Starr. Running approximately one-hundred-and-ten miles in length, this portion of the borderlands represents a rare landscape condition in Texas: it spatially preserves townships and buildings dating from the Spanish settlement of the region in the middle of the eighteenth century. Since ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, by which Mexico was compelled to cede half its national territory to the United States, the Rio Grande (as it is called in the United States)/rio Bravo del Norte (as it is called in Mexico) has been the eastern half of the international border between the two nations. The line of political demarcation the river imposes is evident in the different tempos and trajectories of modernization that architecture, urbanization, and infrastructure make visible in the cities, towns, and countryside of la frontera chica. But as visitors quickly become aware, the river that separates half of the international, cultural region. Interposed by national authorities as a legal division, the border is a condition negotiated by residents of la frontera chica on a daily basis, from Mexican elites who live in the suburbs of Laredo, Texas, to Asian, European, and U.S. businessmen who manage maquiladora assembly plants in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, to economic migrants from the interior of Mexico, Central America, and increasingly from outside the Americas who cross the river surreptitiously because they do not have legal documents, to U.S., Mexican, and Canadian truckers transporting vast quantities of goods over economic borders opened by the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993.

Although Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, which confront each other across the Rio Grande/rio Bravo del Norte, have a combined population of approximately 700,000, the other settlements of la frontera chica remain small in size. The typical pattern for border towns is that the Tamaulipan town will contain twice the population of its Texan counterpart, compartmented into half the territory. The phenomenon of "twin cities" dates to the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexico War, when all other Texan border cities, but Laredo, were founded as trade companions to the already established Tamaulipan cities.

The historical epochs of the little border are marked by its town planning and architecture.

Colonial Nuevo Santander, 1747-1821

The little border lies in what was, during the last seventy years of Spanish rule in Mexico, the province of Nuevo Santander. Nuevo Santander included all of the future U.S. state of Texas south of the Nueces River.

Until the 1740s, this region, known as el Seno Mexicano (the Mexican Gulf), had not been settled by the Spanish. Although settlements had been established in the nearby provinces of Nuevo León and Coahuila south and west of the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain chain since the end of the sixteenth century, and in the province of Texas to the north since the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Sierra Madre Oriental, the Mexican continuation of the Rocky Mountains, separated Nuevo León from Tamaulipas. The desire to pacify indigenous people driven into el Seno Mexicano during the Spanish colonization of Nuevo León, the fear of French incursion along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and the need to establish a continuous line of settlements into Texas prompted the effort to settle colonists on the north and east side of the Sierra Madre.

Don José de Escandón y Heltgura (1700-1770), el conde de la Sierra Gorda and a native of Santander in northern Spain who immigrated to Mexico in 1715, was selected by the Viceroy of Nueva España, el conde de Revillagigedo, in 1746 to lead an entrada—an expedition to survey, pacify, and populate territory—into the Seno Mexicano. He arrived in 1747. In what twentieth-century historians have described as a model program of community planning on a regional scale, Escandón and his party explored this extensive region, selected sites for settlements, and negotiated with indigenous communities. Between 1749 and 1757 Escandón authorized the organization of twenty-two settlements in what he called Nuevo Santander. Some of these towns were named after such towns in Santander, Spain, as Camargo, Laredo, and Reynosa. Escandón hoped to found communities on the río de las Nueces and el río San Antonio in what is now Texas. But the desert-like sand plains between the Río Nueces and Nueces River made this impossible because of the lack of perennial streams and the hostility of the Apache people. The northernmost settlements of Nuevo Santander, the villas del norte (towns of the north), lay along the Río Grande and its tributaries, the Salado, Alamo, and San Juan Rivers. 4

Between 1749 and 1757 Escandón authorized the settlement of six towns and one hacienda along or near the Río Grande: Camargo (1749), Reynosa (1749), Revilla (1750), renamed Guerrero in 1827), the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (1750), Mier (1752), and Laredo (1755). Escandón did not authorize any settlements in the delta of the Río Grande downriver from Reynosa because this alluvial region was subject to flooding. In 1756 Escandón was compelled to retire as governor. His successor was authorized to survey townsites and associated porciones—long lots of tracts of 3,900 acres to 7,800 acres with frontage on a reliable stream on which townpeople could pasture livestock—and to award settlers titles to town lots and porciones. Although crop cultivation and irrigation, at which the Spanish excelled, were attempted on the drainage- and flood-prone land of la frontera chica, this was so extreme that agriculture, which could only be carried out in the river’s floodplain, proved undependable. Instead, livestock raising—cattle, horses, donkeys, mules, sheep, and goats—was the chief economic activity of the Río Grande communities. The dry chaparral—the thorny scrub vegetation of the arid upland—was acceptable for open range grazing. Animals such as cattle, anillos—wool or hides. Animals such as horses, mules, and oxen. Some, however, tallow—were transported south for sale. Escandón’s planning regimen envisioned having settlers live permanently in towns, to which their grazing lands, located on the porciones, were politically subject. In the 1770s, after Escandón was no longer in charge, town settlers from Camargo and Reynosa sought and obtained grants to much larger tracts of ground, although the largest of which was 600,000 acres, on the coastal sand plain and in the delta downriver from the little border.

The largest ranch in the frontera chica during the colonial period was the 221,400-acre Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, which Escandón authorized in 1750. Along with Laredo, Dolores was the only Escandón settlement on the left (north...
and east) bank of the river. In exchange for this substantial grant, the Coahuila rancher, don José Vázquez-Borrego (1690-1776), guaranteed that he would respect the indigenous people and seek to Christianize them, settle a community of families on the property, and not sell the property, and provide free ferry service across the Rio Grande to facilitate travel northward to La Bahía (Dollard TX) and San Fernando de Béxar (San Antonio TX). The ranch headquarters at Dolores Viejo differed from the five towns in that its inhabitants were employees of Vázquez-Borrego rather than independent stock raisers. No town site was surveyed in 1767 when property titles were awarded to residents of the villas del norte. Vázquez-Borrego obtained an additional 110,700 acres in 1763 for the Corralitos and San Ygnacio subdivisions of the Dolores hacienda. By the 1780s, the ranch at San José de los Corralitos was owned and operated by Vázquez-Borrego’s grandson, José Fernando Vidaurri, and his wife, Alejandra Sánchez, daughter of don Tomás Sánchez de la Barrera y Gutierrez (1700-1796), founder of Laredo. Historian Sharon E. Earle describes and archivist and archivist Timothy K. Pertulla found reference to the villa grande, the one-room stone house at Rancho San José de los Corralitos, in a legal document of 1786, making it the oldest datable building along the little border.10

Following the directives of the Recopilación de las Leyes de los Reinos de las Indias (1680), the townsites surveyed in 1767 were consistently organized around a central plaza, from which streets ten varas wide (approximately twenty-eight feet) emanated in a gridded network. Streets were straight in alignment but not always perfectly parallel or perpendicular. Their relative narrowness endures Laredo, Texas, with a sense of spatial intimacy that contrasts with the spatiality of later Anglo-American additions to the towns. The architectural historian of colonial Nuevo Santander, Jesús Franco-Carrasco, deduced that two plan types dominated the Encantación town plats, both based on a module of one hundred square varas. In the 1810s, a French missionary priest posted to the Rio Grande, the Abbé E. H. D. Domenech, observed the town of Camargo; Camargo resembles all the towns of these frontiers. Indeed you would say they were all built on the same plan by the same architect.” The parish church faces the town plaza, on axis with the centerline of the plaza at Mier and Guerrero, or set behind its own atrio and facing one corner of the plaza at Camargo and Laredo, usually—but not always—on the east side of the plaza. The stone churches of Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Mier, inscribed with the date 1775 and dedicated in 1796, which Franco-Carrasco describes as one of the finest churches built in Nuevo Santander, and the early nineteenth-century Santa Ana de Camargo are of colonial origin.

Locally quarried sandstone was used to build the most substantial houses in the frontona chico. The Swiss naturalist Juan Luis Berlandier (1803-1851), who participated in the Mexican border survey of 1827-29, noted the presence of flat-roofed sandstone houses (referred to in historical accounts as cal y forro—stone mortar and stone construction—with azotea—flat, roof decks) as well as jacales (a house type, most commonly built of vertical wood stakes thickly plastered, and covered by a pitched roof surface with matted grasses; the early Irish word “shack” is derived from jacal) in Guerrero, Mier, and to a lesser degree in Camargo, and Laredo. Berlandier also described settlements of indigenous people, by the early nineteenth century living on the outskirts of towns is composed of huts and cabins. Camargo and Guerrero contained Franciscan missions to the indigenous peoples; a fragment of the mission priests’ house in Camargo survives according to Franco-Carrasco. The colonial architecture of Nuevo Santander’s northern frontier was austere, an attribute that adhered to architecture along the lower border until the twentieth century. In 1805, the administration of the Provincias Internas de Oriente fixed the Rio Nueces as the boundary between Nuevo Santander to the southwest and Texas to the northeast.

The movement of stockholders into the delta of the Rio Grande in the 1770s led to the formation of a new town, two hundred miles downstream from Laredo and twenty miles upriver from the Gulf of Mexico. First called San Juan de los Esteros and then Congregación del Refugio, what is now the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas, was surveyed in 1784 by twelve ranchers from Camargo and Reynosa near the northeast corner of the enormous hacienda de La Sauteña. Matamoros was designated a port of entry by the viceroyal government in 1820, a designation confirmed in 1823 following Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821. During the 1820s, Matamoros emerged as the first real city on the lower Rio Grande and Mexico’s second most important Gulf port. It was noted for its trade connections to New Orleans and the foreign merchants who traded with Europe and the U.S. who exported silver from central Mexico and imported and distributed manufactured goods from Europe and the U.S.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Escandón towns of la frontera chica experienced stress. The florescence of Matamoros occurred at the expense of its nearest neighbors, Reynosa and Camargo. Between the time of Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla’s unsuccessful revolt against Spain in 1810-11 and achievement of Mexican independence in 1821, Spanish presidial forces were withdrawn from the Rio Grande and Texas to reinforce Spanish authority in the interior. As a result the northern frontier was left exposed to aggressive action by the Comanches and Lipiín Apaches, which continued into the 1840s.

Mexican Tamaulipas, 1821-1848

During the troubled decade of the 1810s, the little border produced two of the leaders of the Mexican independence movement, the brothers Father José Antonio Gutiérrez de Lara-Urte (1770-1843) and José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara-Urte (1774-1841) of Guerrero. An ally of Hidalgo, Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara spent the years 1811 to 1821 in the U.S. and in the province of Texas formulating rebellion against the viceroyal government. After formation of the Mexican Republic in 1821, Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara served in 1824-25 as the first governor of Tamaulipas (as Nuevo Santander was renamed in 1824 when it was separated from the Provincias Internas de Oriente and constituted as a state) and military commander of the Provincias Internas de Oriente in 1825-26. Bernardo’s elder brother, and later a priest and a surveyor, was forced into hiding between 1811 and 1814 because of his pro-independence advocacy. In 1822, he and another priest, Father Miguel Ramos Arizpe, were named representatives to Mexico’s First Constituional Congress of Tamaulipas. Durand his García de Lara retired in 1823 but was then named a deputy to and president of the Constitutional Congress of Tamaulipas. He served as confessio to the liberator of Mexico. Agustin de Iturbide, after Iturbide—expelled from Mexico for his dictatorial abuse of authority as Mexico’s first chief of state in 1823—sought to return from exile in 1824. Captured, Iturbide was executed in Padilla, Tamaulipas.

The practice of giving new Mexican identities to political subdivisions in the northeast was reflected in the renaming of Refugio as Matamoros in 1826 and of Revilla as Guerrero in 1827 (both honoring Mayan patriots of Hidalgo). The settlement of U.S. immigrants in Texas under the leadership of the American impresario, Stephen F. Austin, had been authorized by Iturbide’s regime in 1823. This was reconfirmed in 1824 after Iturbide’s expulsion and Mexico’s adoption of the republican Constitution of 1824. In 1828 additional impresario contracts were awarded to Irish immigrant merchants in Matamoros to settle Irish Catholic families in Texas. Stephen Austin’s cousin, the Connecticut-born Henry Austin, introduced steam navigation to the Rio Grande with the Ariel, which was reported to have gone from Matamoros to Guerrero in 1829 and which navigated between Matamoros and Camargo until Austin joined his cousin in Texas in 1830, taking the Ariel with him.

In what remains of the historic townsite of Guerrero (now called Guerrero Viejo, one-story sandstone houses line streets, some paved with cobblestones. The sandstone parián, the market house occupying its own plaza on Calle México, has a nine-square grided plan with arched cross walls. Today, the houses of Guerrero are roofless shells, bereft of exterior plaster. But they retain such details as ashlar jambs set on molded bases and, in some cases, paneled wood shutters and rejas, wrought iron exterior grills. Downriver in Matamoros, a distinctive building culture took shape. The delta contains no stone. Therefore, Matamoros’s nineteenth-century building culture was based on brick. Houses in Matamoros more closely resembled those of New Orleans.
than in the upriver towns of the frontera chica, an indication of the extent to which New Orleans building professionals (including the people of color, as the diary entries of the U.S. military officer Benjamin Lundy, who lived in Matamoros in 1834-35, make clear) affected Matamoros’s architectural development. Although Matamoros houses conformed typologically to Mexican tradition, the most substantial were of two-story construction and featured French doors with shallow and exterior balconies recaded with wrought iron. One-storey houses (and some two-storey houses) had wood-shingled pitched roofs, often framed by gabled brick end walls that rose into triangular parapets.

In 1828, don José de Jesús Treviño (1786-1842), a son of one of the founding settlers of Guerrero, bought the San Ygnacio subdivision of the hacienda Doloritos de José María Margil Vidaurre. In 1830, with his son-in-law, Vicente Gutiérrez de Lara, and future son-in-law, Blas Maria Uribe (both nephews of his wife), don José built el cuarto viejo, the one-room, stone cottage Treviño-Urbe Rancho in San Ygnacio. Like the Vidaurre grande at Corralitos, el cuarto viejo was intended to be used as a fortified refuge and storeroom for those working the ranch during attacks by hostile indigenous. Treviño and his family lived in Guerrero, not on the ranch.

After Antonio López de Santa Anna, president of Mexico, abandoned federalism (the liberal, anti-clerical, de-centralized and popular-in-the-north) and embraced the cause of the Conservative Constitution party in 1835, suppressing the liberal Constitution of 1824 and state legislatures, Texas was one of several regions of Mexico that rose in revolt. U.S. immigrants in Texas moved for independence in March 1836. Santa Anna led an expedition to suppress the Texan rebellion. Despite victories at the battles of the Alamo and Goliad (La Bahía), Santa Anna’s army was defeated at the Battle of San Jacinto in April 1836. Taken prisoner, Santa Anna was forced to concede the independence of Texas by the Treaties of Velasco, one of whose secret provisions designated the Rio Grande rather than the Nueces as the boundary between Texas and the rest of Mexico. The Mexican congress repudiated the Treaties of Velasco and retained political and military control of the Rio Grande. Reflecting continuing tension between Centralists and Federalists was the declaration of the Republica del Bravo by northeasteran separatists in Guadalupe Tamaulipas, in January 1840. Laredo was designated capital of this “republic,” which was to include the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila. Centralists forced President General Mariano Arista, based in Matamoros, to suppress the breakaway republic, executing the Guerrero rancher Antonio Zapata, one of the leaders of the revolt, in March 1840. In 1842, an irregular expedition mounted in the Republic of Texas, the Mier Expedition, attacked Laredo, Guerrero, and Mier en route to Matamoros. At Mier, the Anglo-Texas invaders were defeated and captured by the forces of Mexican General Pedro de Ampudia.

Texas-Tamaulipas Borderland, 1848-1880

On February 28, 1845, the U.S. Congress voted to annex the Republic of Texas. In March 1846, President James K. Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor and his army of Occupation to march from the mouth of the Nueces River at Corpus Christi Bay, where they had come ashore in August 1845, one hundred twenty-five miles south to the Rio Grande, opposite Matamoros, to assert U.S. claims to the trans-Nueces territory. Arriving at the Rio Grande on March 28, 1846, and establishing temporary fortification called Fort Texas, Taylor refused to accede to the demand of General Mariano Arista in Matamoros that U.S. forces retreat north of the Nueces. On April 24, 1846, a mounted company led by Capt. Smith B. Thornton was attacked by Mexican cavalry twenty miles upriver from Fort Texas on the left bank of the river. Declaring that “American blood has been shed on American soil,” President Polk obtained from the U.S. Congress, after intense debate, a declaration of war against Mexico on May 13, 1846. Already on May 8 and 9, 1846, the first two battles of the U.S.-Mexico War had been fought near Fort Texas: Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. General Taylor defeated Mexican General Mariano Arista at both, compelling Arista to vacate Matamoros, which the U.S. Army took on May 18, 1846.

In June 1846, Taylor’s army advanced up the Rio Grande through Reynosa to Camargo. Taylor and his staff traveled upriver on the steamboat Conventero piloted by Miilfin Kenedy; cavalry and infantry marched over the left bank to Camargo, following a route that would become known as the Military or River Highway. Turning south at Camargo, Taylor moved through Cerralvo to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, and into the Tamaulipas. In September 1846, and Saltillo, Coahuila, which he took in November 1846. In February 1847, Taylor won a victory at Buena Vista, Coahuila. From February to September 1847, General Winfield Scott’s troops moved from the Gulf port city of Veracruz to Mexico City, which they took in September 1847. Negotiation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, concluded in February 1848, ended the war and established the Rio Grande as the boundary between Texas and the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, and Chihuahua. Mexico lost its entire northern tier, with its mineral wealth, to the U.S.—California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, and Oklahoma—as well as three ocean-going trading access to Mexico: Matamoros’s port at Brazos de Santiago, Texas, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and San Francisco Bay, Alta California.

The U.S.-Mexico War was bitterly opposed by a substantial segment of U.S. public opinion, which saw it as a war for the expansion of slavery. The U.S. victory carried Zachary Taylor to election as president of the United States in 1848 as the candidate of the anti-war Whig party, succeeding Polk, although Taylor died in office in 1850. General Arista served as president of Mexico from 1851 to 1853.

War resulted in the U.S. military occupation of Laredo under the command of ex-Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar. On September 15, 1847, Laredo partitioned Laredo into two cities. On June 15, 1848, the state of Tamaulipas constituted Laredo’s crossriver southern suburb as the autonomous Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo. The other Escandon towns of the Nuevo Laredo lay on the right bank of the river and therefore remained on Mexican territory. To capitalize on the lucrative silver and wholesale trade with Mexico, U.S. merchants started new Texan border towns in 1848 as companions to existing Tamaulipas cities: Rio Grande City, Texas, near Camargo; Roma, Texas, east of Mier; and Brownsville, Texas, across from Matamoros. The Connecticut-born Matamoros merchant Charles Stillman was a co-founder of Brownsville. Stillman financially backed Miilfin Kenedy and another steamboat captain Kenedy had persuaded to come to the Rio Grande to pilot U.S. troops, Richard King, in a steamboat monopoly that dominated commercial navigation on the river between Matamoros and Roma until the mid-1870s. In compliance with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and to secure the border against local challenges to U.S. hegemony, Army forts were established at Brownsville (Fort Brown), Rio Grande City (Fort Ringgold), and Laredo (Fort McIntosh) in 1848-49. After a brief postwar boom, sustained by the hope of fortune seekers moving westward toward the gold fields of Alta California, the military installations assumed longer term local significance because of their contributions to the economies of the isolated border communities.

On the Tamaulipas side of the border, Texan town founding schemes were mirrored in the development of what was to have been the replacement of Camargo, the villanueva (new town) of Camargo, upriver on the rio San Juan on high ground south of the 1767 townsite. Only partially built-out and never replacing the historic townsite, which had suffered flooding, Villanueva de Camargo contains stone houses dating from the late 1840s and early 1850s that were more elaborate than contemporary houses in town of Roma. Business houses constructed along the river bank. City’s waterfront in the 1850s were also built of brick. General display the pitched roofs and parapeted side walls rising into chimneys visible in Matamoros.

In Cameron County, where Brownsville was located, Mexican ranchers faced the possibility of losing their property to newly arrived adventurers, even after the State of Texas confirmed the validity of most Spanish and Mexican land grants by 1852. Concern about defending property titles led the son-in-law of José de Jesús Treviño, don Blas Maria Uribe, a nephew of don Bernardo Gutiérrez de
Lara, to move his family from Guerrero to the San Ygnacio ranch in what had become Texas in 1850. Because the little border was sufficiently far from Matamoros and Brownsville, there were many newcomers and less pressure on Mexican ranch owners. Consequently, in Webb County, where Laredo is located, Zapata County, where San Ygnacio is located, and Starr County, where Rio Grande City and Roma are located, land remained concentrated in the hands of its Mexican owners, most of them descendants of the Escándalo settlers. This is especially apparent in Zapata County populated by the families of descendants from the original settlers of Mier. Such newcomers as H. Clay Davis, founder of Rio Grande City, the Roma merchant Noah Cox, the steamboat captain Mifflin Kenedy, and the English-born Henry Redmond, whose settlement Habilitación de Redmond became the county seat of Zapata County when the county was organized, in many cases married women from established families in Camargo, Mier, Matamoros, and Guerrero, constructing continuity with the pre-war elite. Nonetheless, during the armed insurrection led by the Brownsville-area ranchers, Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, from September through December 1859, following the U.S. Army's de-activation of the border forts, Rio Grande City and Fort Ringgold were briefly occupied by Cortina, occasioning military action that culminated in an inspection tour of the border from Laredo to Brownsville in spring 1860 by U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Lee.

The U.S. Civil War proved to be an economic bonanza for the lower Rio Grande border because the port of Matamoros was exempt from the U.S. blockade of Confederate ports. It was through Matamoros that Southern cotton was shipped to the U.S. and Europe and that U.S. armament makers shipped weapons to the Confederacy. Because the U.S. Army held Brownsville for much of the war, cotton was sent from as far upriver as Eagle Pass TX, filtering through Laredo, Roma, and Rio Grande City, where it could then be shipped downriver to Matamoros on Kenedy, King, and Stillman's steamboats (by terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Rio Grande was neutral territory). The Civil War, and the protracted Mexican civil war known as the Reform War, overlaid regional animosities.

Cortina declared for the Liberal cause in support of Mexican president Benito Juárez and therefore against the Confederacy, which allied with Mexican Conservatives. Laredo's Mexican elite, represented by Don Santos Benavides and his brothers, were pro-Confederate: Col. Santos Benavides was the highest ranking Mexican American in the Confederate Army. The French Intervention in Mexico on behalf of the Conservative opposition to Juárez (1862-1867) led to the French occupation of Matamoros from 1864 to 1866. The French were expelled from northeastern Mexico following defeat by the Liberals at the Battle of Santa Gertrudis, just outside Camargo in 1866. The end of cotton shipping boom led to the decline of border trade after the mid-1860s. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps rebuilt Fort Brown, Fort Ringgold, and Fort McIntosh. Although the army used standardized designs for new buildings, their construction reflected local building cultures.

In the 1870s, a rising market for beef cattle and wool stimulated formation of enormous ranches east of the little border by the steamboat captains Mifflin Kenedy and Richard King. At San Ygnacio, Blas Maria Uribe had a town plan plotted about 1874, centered on the Plaza Blas Maria, that extended from the houses that various Uribe, Gutiérrez, Benavides, and Martinez family members built around the Treviño-Uribe fortin. A stone parish church, Nuestra Señora del Refugio, was built at the eastern corner of the Plaza Blas Maria in 1875. In Laredo, Father Pierre Yves Kérual (1817-1872), a Breton immigrant who came to the lower Rio Grande in 1859 with missionary priests of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a French order recruited by the Bishop of Galveston, designed and built what is now San Agustín de Laredo Catholic Cathedral in Laredo (1872). Father Kérual had been a master joiner in France before entering seminary. On the border he also built Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Brownsville (1859), and was assigned to the parish of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Rio Grande City when its church was constructed in two stages between 1868 and 1872 (demolished). Father Kérual previously was thought to have designed and built Our Lady of Refuge Catholic Church in Roma, although research by Jose Zapata now throws this attribution into question. Kérual introduced the Gothic Revival to the border, as Richard Cleary has documented.

Juan Nepomuceno Cortina's return to the border in 1870 brought renewal of a low-intensity guerilla war, aimed especially at the major ranchers. Brownsville merchants and ranchers bankrolled the Revolution of Tuxtepec in 1876, which brought Portorio Diaz to power for thirty-five years as president of Mexico. Diaz permanently exiled Cortina from the border. Diaz's stand-in as president from 1880 to 1884, the Matamoros-born general, Manuel Gonzalez Flores, awarded important concessions to Charles Stillman's son, the New York cotton broker James Stillman, who became president of the National City Bank of New York in 1891. James Stillman and his partners financed construction of the Ferrocarril Nacional de Mexico from Nuevo Laredo to Mexico City, built between 1881 and 1890. They built the first permanent bridge to span the Rio Grande at Laredo (1882), linking with the narrow-gauge Texas-Mexican Railway, which Kenedy and King built westward from Corpus Christi Bay, in proximity to their ranches, to Laredo in 1881, and the International-Great Northern Railway from San Antonio, Texas.

Railroad Era, 1881-1919

Until the decade of the 1880s, Laredo was the smallest and least significant of the Texas border towns. A U.S. Army map of 1855 shows the Laredo townsite as consisting of twenty blocks. During the decade of the 1880s, Laredo eclipsed Brownsville and Matamoros, which would not be connected to national railroad grids until 1904. Samuel M. Jarvis, an associate of Charles Stillman's and a Unionist, was appointed Reconstruction-era mayor of Laredo. Beginning in 1868, Jarvis expanded the 1767 town plan with a sequence of plazas that perpetuated Mexican patterns of urbanization and spatially makes Laredo, along with San Ygnacio, two of the most Mexican-feeling cities in the U.S. Jarvis also renamed the streets of Laredo. East-west streets alternately commemorate Mexican (Zaragoza, Iturbide, Hidalgo, Matamoros, Victoria) and Union (Grant, Lincoln, Farragut, Houston) patriots.

Jarvis, who followed the border pattern of marrying a Mexican wife, invented Laredo's civic fiesta in the 1870s, the George Washington Birthday celebration, which has been celebrated annually since 1897.

The expanded city plan of Laredo was built-out with a combination of Mexican house types and Victorian storefronts, public institutions, and dwelling houses that, after the 1890s, began to architecturally differentiate between modern (upper income and ethnically mixed) and traditional (lower income and Mexican) segments of Laredo's population, especially visible in the west end El Cuatro and St. Peter's neighborhoods between Plaza San Agustín and Fort McIntosh. Supplanting the railroad bridge, a wagon and pedestrian bridge was built in 1889 to link Convent Avenue in Laredo and Avenida Guerrero in Nuevo Laredo. In Nuevo Laredo, Santiago Mauro Belden, the son of Irish immigrants, served several terms as mayor in the 1880s and 1890s and was responsible for initiating modernizing improvements. The English-born and trained San Antonio architect Alfred Giles (1853-1920) was the most prominent of several architects who designed modern buildings in Nuevo Laredo and Laredo, as his biographer Mary Carolyn Holgers has documented. The Italian immigrant Mateo Matei (1839-1912) became Nuevo Laredo's foremost architect and builder during this period. Both Giles and Matei worked for entrepreneurs economically connected to the Monterey builders, notably the remarried Vicente Cuellar and Belden families. Architect and historian Eduardo Alarcon-Cantú identified the civil engineer E. Roger Laroche, who came to the border from New Orleans, as architect for the modernization of Santo Niño, Nuevo Laredo's oldest parish church. Architectural historian Jesús Najar noted the contributions of newly arrived architects James Murphy and A. G. Sutherld to what Najar describes as the architectural "Americanization" of Laredo following construction of the railroads.6

The most celebrated immigrant building professional associated with this period is the German mason Heinrich Portscheller (1840-1915), whose history began to be researched in the early
1960s by Austin architect and preservationist Eugene George. On landing in Veracruz in 1865, Portscheller was impressed into the imperial army and, with a German companion, Frederick Ellert, sent to the north. Portscheller and Ellert escaped to Texas in 1866 and were recruited by the Liberal general, Mariano Escobedo, to fight in the decisive Battle of Santa Gertrudis in 1866. Portscheller worked in Rio Grande City, Mier (where he married in 1879), Roma (where he lived from 1881 to 1894), and Laredo (where he lived from 1894 until his death). In Roma, Portscheller was associated with Prudencio Pérez González and Rupertó Margo in operating a tiandilla, where bricks (tiandillas) were made, according to the anthropologist Scott Cook.

In 1911, a popular revolt drove Porfirio Diaz, president of Mexico since 1876, from power. Diaz was replaced by a Liberal rancher from Coahuila, Francisco I. Madero, whose grandfather, family patriarch Evaristo Madero, was married to a Farias from Laredo. Francisco Madero's overthrow and execution in 1913 precipitated the Mexican Revolution, a grim civil war that lasted until 1917. The Constitutionalists, the Liberal faction with the greatest following in Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, took Matamoros in June 1913, but captured Nuevo Laredo in 1914 only after a three-and-a-half-month siege. When the Federals evacuated Nuevo Laredo in April 1914, they burned the central section of the city. Resentment over the displacement of Mexican-descended landowners in the delta counties of Texas led to proclamation of the Plan of San Diego (named after the town of San Diego, TX, between Laredo and Corpus Christi) and the Sedicioso Uprising of 1915-16 by Constitutionalist sympathizers in south Texas. Most of the guerrilla actions occurred in the delta counties, although raiders struck U.S. Army troops at San Ygnacio in June 1916 in the aftermath of the U.S. Army expeditionary raid into Mexico.

Modernization, 1919-1976

A fter the twentieth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol, was enacted in 1919, the U.S.-Mexico border attained a new economic role as an entertainment destination. New Orleans restauranteurs moved to Nuevo Laredo to open restaurants and bars, the most famous of which, the Cadillac Café (subsequently Bar), was known for its Raffles gin fizzle cocktail. Laredo's tallest skyscrapers—ten-story Robert E. Lee Hotel (1926) and the twelve-story Hamilton Hotel (1928)—were built to accommodate the influx of visitors. Tourism was facilitated by the construction of paved highways, usually paralleling railroad lines. Vehicular bridges were constructed across the Rio Grande. The Pan American Highway linked San Antonio and Mexico City via Laredo and Monterrey by 1938. In the mid-1930s, U.S. Highway 83 was built along the Rio Grande to link Laredo with the delta, passing through Roma and Rio Grande City, but bypassing San Ygnacio. J. T. Frary's images of San Ygnacio of 1919 indicate that the village had changed little by 1936 when the Treviño-Urribe Ranch and surrounding houses were documented for the Historic American Buildings Survey. In the 1920s, the Dallas architect David R. Williams and his protegé, the future San Antonio architect O. R. McElroy, following Frary's advice, photographed and drew the houses of San Ygnacio in their pioneering efforts to survey what Williams called the "indigenous" architecture of Texas.

In Nuevo Laredo, the Mier-born entrepreneur and banker don Octaviano L. Longoria emerged in the 1920s as the city's foremost post-revolutionary businessman. After Longoria's death in 1931, his five sons and his American-born widow, doña Sara Theriot de Longoria, the daughter of Louisiana Creole who immigrated first to Texas then to Nuevo Laredo, comprised a business dynasty that dominated the Tamaulipas border until the 1970s. Laredo's elite moved out of the historic core of the city eastward across Zapata Creek onto the Heights beginning in the 1920s. Auto-dependent suburbanization was mirrored in the development of the San Antonio Highway strip along Bernardo Avenue after 1938, as Laredo geographer Michael S. Yoder has shown, and in comparable, though much denser, development along Avenida Guerra in Nuevo Laredo, a mixed-use urban highway.

* Construction of the Pan American Highway led the administration of Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas to commission a master plan of civic improvements for Nuevo Laredo by architect Luis Prieto Souza in 1936. Because of lack of cooperation from the U.S., a vehicular bridge proposed in the master plan was not built. But a new Palacio Federal y Municipal (now the Palacio Federal), in a streamlined neo-colonial style facing an expanded Plaza Hidalgo, was dedicated in 1940.

In 1921, the Oklahoma wildcatter O. W. Killam brought in the first oil field in Webb County, development of oil and natural gas deposits in Webb, Zapata, and Starr Counties began to have noticeable impact on the regional economy during the 1930s despite onset of the Great Depression. This enabled Laredo in the 1930s to support multiple architectural practices. Laredo-born architect Alfonso A. Leyendecker (1907-1986) was a great nephew of the Benavides brothers and a descendant of don Tomás Sánchez. Architect Lawson Libby Wagner (1891-1970) was married to the granddaughter of Henry Redmond. Lloyd Salva- dor Sanderson (1901-1961), a transplanted Californian, designed the most impressive Spanish Mediterranean style houses in Laredo in the 1930s. Laredo-born J. Fred Buenz (1904-1991) practiced in association with the San Antonio architect John M. Marriott. Their designs for the Banco Longoria and the O. L. Longoria House still stand out in the center of Nuevo Laredo. Henry Steibohmer, another San Antonio architect, designed numerous houses on the Heights and the First United Methodist Church, which, like many of Laredo's Protestant congregations, moved onto the Heights. The San Antonio architect Bartlett Cockey was responsible for the modernistic landmark of downtown Laredo, Nicolás Hachar's El Nuevo Mundo department store.

Modern architecture came to the frontera chica in the 1950s. The most dramatic event in the history of the region's modernization was the construction of the International Falcón Reservoir and Dam in Zapata County and the Municipio de Guadalupe downstream from Zapata and Guerrero. Built between 1950 and 1954, the reservoir inundated 115,000 acres. Because almost all settlement in Zapata County until the twentieth century had been along the river, the reservoir inundated its oldest communities and buildings. The county seat, Zapata, which

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Overview

Vernacular Architecture Forum
Architect and historian Eugene George produced the book *Historic Architecture of Texas: The Falcon Reservoir* (1975) to document the buildings and related aspects of material culture of the inundated settlements of Zapata County.

Nine months after formal dedication of the dam in October 1953 by presidents Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and Dwight D. Eisenhower, the worst flood of the twentieth century struck the lower Rio Grande in the aftermath of Hurricane Alice. The railroad and vehicular bridges at Laredo were swept away, water backed up six blocks into the center of Nuevo Laredo, and even San Ygnacio was flooded. Against the backdrop of the destruction of border culture for construction of the Falcon Reservoir, Elia Kazan shot the film *Viva Zapata!* (starring Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn and released in 1952) in San Ygnacio and Roma. Although the early twenty-century Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, portrayed by Brando, was associated with south-central Mexico rather than the border, the spatial and architectural backdrop provided by these Texan border towns established their Mexican-ness for the film’s audiences. The opening of the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum in the Bárto Garcia House facing Plaza San Agustín in Laredo in 1955, commemorating the short-lived República del Bravo, was a pioneering act of historic preservation and interpretation in Laredo.

The adjacent downtowns of Laredo and Nuevo Laredo displayed increasing economic reciprocity. Because Mexico’s protectionist economic policies strictly limited the importation of foreign manufactured products, downtown Laredo became a magnet for wholesale-retail outlets selling U.S. (and eventually European and Asian) goods to middle- and upper-class Mexican consumers, some from as far away as Mexico City, and cheaply-priced goods, such as second-hand clothes, to low-income Mexican consumers. As downtown Laredo gradually lost local, middle-class consumers to suburban shopping centers in the third quarter of the twentieth century (Mall del Norte, Laredo’s regional shopping mall, opened in 1977), its late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century buildings were filled with mayoresses-menudeo (wholesale-retail) and ropa usada (second-hand clothes) stores rather than abandoned and demolished.

In 1961-62, Eugene George undertook one of the earliest Historic American Buildings Survey projects performed in Texas following the reactivation of HABS by the National Park Service in 1957. George surveyed Roma and Rio Grande City. With the assistance of Rio Grande City historian Florence Johnson Scott, he documented for the first time the career of Enrique Porterschel. In 1972, University of Texas architecture student (and future Austin preservation architect) David Hoffman published a documentation of central Roma. The same year, the fifteen-block Roma Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1973, the forty-block San Ygnacio Historic District, the twelve-block San Agustín de Laredo Historic District, as well as the ranchsteads at Dolores Viejo and Dolores Nuevo, the Treviño-Uribre Fortin, and the San José de Palaflo Historic and Archeological District were listed in the National Register of Historic Places. These border sites were among the earliest National Register listings from Texas. The ranchsteads at Corralitos and San Francisco were listed in the National Register in 1976.

Even so, historic neighborhoods were considered expendable. To facilitate highway traffic through the two Laredos, a second, multi-lane bridge was completed at a cost of five blocks east of the old International Bridge, and was dedicated by the president of Mexico, Luis Echeverría. Interstate Highway 35 was built southwest from San Antonio to serve the new bridge. It entailed the demolition of blocks of intact late-nineteenth-century neighborhoods in Laredo, a cultural loss whose magnitude was made clear by an intensive historical, archeological, and ethnographic survey of just a handful of the affected blocks, *Urban Archeology: A Cultural History of Mexican-American Barrio in Laredo, Webb County, Texas*, prepared by John W. Clark, Jr., and Ana Maria Juárez and published by the Texas State Department of Highways and Urban Transportation in 1986.
and secured financial assistance from the Meadows Foundation of Dallas in 1990 to construct a model on an existing granite tour community from the mouth of the Rio Grande upriver as far as Colombia, Nuevo Leon, just northwest of Laredo. Sánchez and the Texas Historical Commission obtained the support of Mexico's Secretaria de Turismo and Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia for a binational corridor project in 1991. The publication of A Shared Experience: The History, Architecture, and Historic Designations of the Lower Rio Grande Heritage Corridor by the Texas Historical Commission in 1991 was a powerful instrument for focusing awareness on the regional historical significance of the corridor. The formation of Los Caminos del Rio, a nonprofit, member-supported advocacy group with a board of directors from both Texas and Tamaulipas, in 1991 vested direction of the project in the hands of local residents.

Sánchez identified six broad themes to link the history of the U.S. and Mexican communities of the lower Rio Grande. These are Spanish colonial exploration and settlement, the heritage of Mexican ranching culture, the river as a borderland frontier, the river as a route of international trade and a transportation threshold, the river as a source of water for mechanized irrigation sustaining intensive, cash-crop agriculture, and the river as the site of political and military action.

Within the corridor, the Roma Historic District was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1993 and the Treviño-Uribé Fortin was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1998. The River Pierce Foundation, founded by the artist Michael Tracy, who moved to San Ygnacio in 1977, has promoted preservation of the architectural and cultural patrimony of San Ygnacio as well as focusing attention on issues of environmental degradation and economic justice along the Rio Grande border. In the 1990s the River Pierce Foundation began to buy portions of the Treviño-Uribé Ranch and in 2017 completed restoration of the complex by Able City Architects of Laredo and architectural conservator Frank Briscoe. Preservation and rehabilitation of San Ygnacio’s landmarks have been undertaken by other community residents as well.

Our Lady of Refuge Catholic Church was restored in 1993 through the efforts of Victoria Uribe after being severely damaged in 1981. Diagonally across from the Treviño-Uribé Fortin is the house of don Proceso Martinez de 1873, whose grandson, Adrián Martinez, transformed into what the cultural geographer Daniel D. Arreola describes as a family shrine in the 1980s. Arreola devoted half a chapter in his book Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province (2002) to the places and personalities of San Ygnacio.

Laredo in the second half of the 1990s, when the NAFTA highway along Interstate 35 was sometimes lined with tractor-trailer trucks backed up for miles through the center of the city waiting to cross the Juárez-Lincoln Bridge, has undergone more change than once seemed likely. Until the mid-1990s, locally-oriented retail trade was still the preserve of locally-owned businesses. No out-of-state bank corporations, which came to dominate Texas banking after the collapse of the state’s banking and savings-and-loan infrastructure in the 1980s, had branches in Laredo. And the city was expanding within its 1960s boundaries because territory surrounding the city’s limits was owned in large tracts by local families seemingly uninterested in development. By the end of the twentieth century, these circumstances no longer pertained.

The construction of a third international bridge at Colombia, Nuevo Leon, and a fourth bridge in 2000, across which commercial trucking is diverted, the construction of a circumferential highway, the Bob Bullock Loop, in the mid-1990s and of the new campus of Texas A&M International University along the loop, even the construction of a new airport terminal accessible from the loop in 1998, forcibly promote sprawl and economic polarization. The spectacle of wholesale storage and distribution centers, operating on a continental scale, strung across the undulating chaparral along the Mines Road, which leads to the Laredo-Colombia Solidarity Bridge, is awesome. In 2000, the Wall Street Journal reported that Laredo had more warehouse space than Austin and San Antonio combined.

The frontera chica can seem simultaneously isolated from, yet at the confluence of, the mainstream cultures of Mexico and the United States. It is a threshold of globalization yet retains an insistent sense of cultural specificity. It combines Texas dynamism and norteño independence, American entrepreneurialism and Mexican conservatism, in ways that are unpredictable and always surprising. The intimacy and austerity of its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultural landscapes exist alongside, or even in the midst of, the more familiar suburbanized landscapes of the U. S. of the late twentieth-century. The Mexican architectural and urbanism of the fronteristas represent a cultural tradition with affinities to Spanish Florida, Creole New Orleans and the Mississippi Valley, the upper Rio Grande of far west Texas and New Mexico, southern Arizona, and Alta California, as well as Mexico. The buildings associated with this tradition demonstrate receptiveness to external influences in the context of typological persistence. In shaping space phenomenally, they create a place culturally. Architecture identifies Laredo and la frontera chica as what Dan Arreola calls a Mexican American cultural province.

References:
20. v. 96-109.
TEXAS BORDER FIELD TOUR

Rancho San José de los Corralitos
U. S. 83
Zapata County TX

Our first stop is the casa grande ("big house"), also called a casa fuerte ("strong house"), a one-story, single-room sandstone house at Rancho San José de los Corralitos on the Rio Grande. Architectural historian Sharon E. Fleming's master's thesis, "Building La Frontera: The Form and Technology of Historic Ranch Architecture in Zapata County, Texas" (Texas Tech University, 1998), is based on the archival and site research she carried out at Corralitos with the support of Ms. Lannie Mecom, whose grandparents, Louise Elam and Harvey M. Mecom, acquired Los Corralitos Ranch in 1919. Between 1753 and 1913, the ranch passed through six generations of ownership by the Vázquez-Borrego and Vidaurre families. Ms. Mecom commissioned architectural conservator Frank Briscoe to restore the Vidaurre-Borrego casa grande and an adjoining nineteenth-century stone house, called la bodega (storage building), in 2003-06. Historian Anita Rivas has detailed the genealogy of the extended Vázquez-Borrego-Vidaurre families in her blog: "Los Vidaurre de Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas y Texas," https://losvidaurre.wordpress.com/. Along the lower Rio Grande, history and genealogy are inseparable because, generation after generation, Mexican ranching families intermarried in order to cement family loyalty and cohesion and secure land ownership. The Vásquez-Borrego, Vidaurre, Uribe, Treviño, Gutiérrez de Lara, and Martínez families adhered to this pattern of inter-marriage within the Vásquez-Borrego domain.

The 110,700-acre Corralitos and San Ygnacio subdivisions of the Hacienda de Dolores were granted to don José Vásquez-Borrego (1690-1776) in 1753 by don José de Escandón, captain-general of Nuevo Santander. Vázquez-Borrego was based at the Hacienda de San Juan del Alamo near Lampazos de Naranjo, Nuevo León, about 75 miles southwest of Laredo, Texas. In 1750 Escandón had granted the 221,400-acre Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores to Vásquez-Borrego. The Hacienda de Dolores was a ranch under single ownership rather than a town; in contrast to the five other settlements on, or near, the Rio Grande, the villas del norte, settlements that Escandón authorized between 1749 and 1755. Historians conjecture that Escandón made this grant to Vásquez-Borrego because Vásquez did not ask for financial assistance and wanted to locate on the east (now Texan) side of the river, where Escandón was eager to establish settlements. Vásquez-Borrego was instrumental in supporting the establishment of the last of the villas del norte, San Augustín de Laredo, in 1755, also located on what is now the Texan side of the river. Don Tomás Sánchez de la Barrera y Garza (1709-1796), the founder of Laredo, was an associate of Vásquez. The Dolores rancho overlaps the present boundary line between Zapata County and Webb County. Portions are still owned by Vásquez-Borrego's descendants, including the original ranch headquarters upstream from the confluence of Arroyo Dolores and the Rio Grande.

Vásquez-Borrego initially sent his nephew, Bartolomé Vásquez-Borrego, to oversee livestock raising operations at Dolores. After Bartolomé Vásquez-Borrego died, José Vásquez-Borrego placed his grandson, José Fernando Vidaurre-Vásquez Borrego (1742-1806), in charge. José Fernando Vidaurre married Bartolomé's widow, María Alejandra Sánchez-Uribe (1742-1816), the daughter of don Tomás Sánchez. When José Vásquez-Borrego died, he bequeathed the Corralitos subdivision of the Dolores rancho to José Fernando Vidaurre. According to Sharon Fleming's research, the hacienda was partitioned in 1829, when José Fernando Vidaurre's eldest son, José Alejandro Vidaurre-Sánchez (1769-1847), his wife, María Leonor Canales-García (1778-1850), the third from the youngest of their fourteen children, Laureano Vidaurre-Cañales (1820-1882), and José Alejandro's brother, José Manuel Vidaurre-Sánchez, took possession of Corralitos. Sharon Fleming cites Zapata County historian Mercurio Martínez as dating the stone casa grande to 1783, based on an inscription on the underside of one of the original roof beams that Martínez recorded. This makes the Corralitos casa grande one of the oldest dated buildings on either side of the lower river corridor.

The Vidaurre casa grande is located approximately 1,000 feet east of the river bank. Its long dimensions face southeast (away from the river) and northwest (toward the river). Approximately three hundred feet south of the south corner of the casa grande is a second one-story stone house, la bodega (storage building), believed to have been constructed in the 1880s. These are now the only two buildings at the site that predate the twentieth century.

Sharon Fleming describes the external dimensions of the casa grande as 33 feet in length, by 18 feet-four inches in width, by 13 feet-six inches in height. She observes that the interior length is equivalent to ten Spanish varas. Sandstone walls vary from two feet-five inches in thickness to two feet-ten inches. Fleming described the casa grande prior to its restoration:

The masonry walls are constructed of roughly dressed sandstone blocks ( piedra de arena) with mud mortar. Sandstone blocks at the four building corners are dressed to two faces to provide a smooth corner. The...construction is typical of remojado masonry construction: small chinking stones are inserted in the bed and head joints between the sandstone blocks. Both the interior and exterior walls contain remnants of limewashed plaster finish. No physical evidence of painted surfaces remains.

The roof framing system of this building is atypical of historic buildings in the area. Instead of transverse beams, or ríos, simply spanning the short dimension of the roof and bearing directly on the walls, longitudinal beams (laid parallel to the [long] walls) served

Casa grande, Rancho San José de los Corralitos, Zapata County TX. 1763. Interior showing reconstructed roof.
as a ledger for the vigas. The structurally redundant ledger beams might have allowed replacement of vigas without disturbing the masonry.

...[Each] beam was supported by irregularly spaced projecting wooden members or brackets measuring 12 by 6 inches, some of which remain. The brackets project from the wall atop a continuous wood plate with half-lapped joints. The top surface of the bracket is located about 10 feet 2 inches above the finished floor at the east wall, and 10 feet at the west wall.

Although the original roof beams, or vigas, no longer exist, pockets in the wall above the ledger beams indicate that the roof was supported by 20 vigas spaced about 16 inches on center....

A remnant of the original terra cotta roof material remains at the northeast corner of the building interior. It reveals that the layered masonry roof was composed of 1 inch thick wood decking, small flat stones (piedra de almendra) mortared together, and a final layer of native concrete, or chipíchil. The material tapered in thickness to provide a finished roof surface sloping about 6 inches east to west to drain the rainwater.

At the base of the west parapet are five equally spaced roof drains. These scupper, similar to the construction of the terronas, are formed by a wide, spayed opening at the interior wall surface reducing to a narrow opening in the exterior wall surface. The opening is spanned by a wooden lintel at the interior side of the parapet and a single arched stone lintel at the exterior. The scupper steps down midway through the wall to create a pocket for projecting, hollowed wooden conduits [canales]. The projecting wooden conduits no longer exist.

Within the building, six guports, or terronas, regularly spaced on the walls at about 16 inches above the floor: two on the east and west elevations and one on the north and south. The terronas are lined with a single thin stone (piedra de almendra) on each of the upper and lower surfaces; the sides are splayed and lined with plaster.

The terronas are located and individually configured to allow entláide, or sweeping, fire to the surrounding terrain. The terrona openings, or embrasures, are 1 foot 1 inch to 1 foot 5 inches high. The width varied from 2 feet to 4 feet 2 inches wide at the interior surface of the wall to accommodate various angled openings in the wall. Each embrasure narrows to an average height of about 8 inches near the exterior opening. At the exterior wall surface, the opening is reduced further by stone so that the gun slit is only about 4 inches wide.

The building contains a single door opening located on the east elevation. It is consistent with the design of the earliest fortified buildings in the area, i.e., minimal number of doors and a placement on the non-river facing facía. The original door sill and framing remain inside the rough masonry opening. The joinery of the door frame is mortar and tenon. The clear dimensions of the framed opening are 3 feet wide and 6 feet 2 inches high....

Another feature of the building, unique among those studied in Zapata County, lies within the upper surface of the masonry parapet. Six battlement-style features are regularly spaced around the building perimeter. The splayed ledges are about 2 feet 2 inches to 2 feet 6 inches wide and are recessed about 5 inches into the top of the parapet. It is unclear whether the parapet, new about 1 foot six inches tall, was originally taller and afforded more protection. The recessed ledges indicate that the roof may have served as an elevated firing platform for the residents.

Additional interior features include a niche on the west wall, a wooden shelf set on projecting wood brackets set into the wall, and several wood blocks, probably former brackets, set into the masonry. The niche is almost 2-1/2 feet square in elevation, and has a stone sill and wood lintel. Scattered remnants of lime plaster also remain.

Modifications... are fairly frequent in number. As mentioned, most of the roof framing, decking, and masonry topping have been removed. Plaster on the interior and exterior surfaces has been lost, as has the original door.

No longer extant either are surrounding jácales, which during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would have been the dominant building type at river ranch headquarters. Several members of the Vidaurri family lie buried beneath the floor of the casa grande.

When restoration by Frank Briscoe began in 2003, the casa grande had lost its historic roof structure, including ledger beams, cross beams, and tablas, the wood plank deck atop the beams. A corrugated, sheet-iron-surfaced hipped roof, framed in wood and supported on exterior steel pipe columns spaced around the perimeter of the stone walls, covered the building. A shed had been attached to the building's long river elevation. These alterations were demolished (except for the floor slab). A new roof was constructed based on evidence of the earlier flat-roofed construction.

The loggia, the second stone building at the site, is also one story in height. It is 51 feet, ten inches long by 20 feet, two inches wide and 15 feet, seven inches tall. The long elevation is oriented northeast-southwest. The northeast elevation, facing the casa grande, contains one door opening. The southwest elevation contains two doors, each one opening into one of the house's two rooms. The rooms are of different dimensions: the larger is 20 feet, two inches by 16 feet; the smaller 16-and-a-half feet by 16 feet. A centered doorway set in the two-foot thick interior wall connects the two rooms. Sharon Fleming observed of this building that its exterior walls are thinner than those of the casa grande, they are set on a raised stone ledge (banquetas), and lack guports, all correlated with other area houses of later nineteenth-century construction. Sharon Fleming identifies the four curved braces on the northeast elevation as the ends of wrought iron tie rods, added to enhance structural stability. During the Mecom family's ownership, a shed-roofed attachment was added to the rear of the building. When the building was restored between 2003 and 2006, the rear addition was returned rather than demolished.

Rancho San Francisco
U.S. Highway 83
Zapata County TX
1849, 1874

Don Vicente Gutiérrez de Lara (1807-1870) and his wife, doña Maria Trinidad Treviño (a daughter of don José de Jesús Treviño-Hinojosa and a sister of María Juliana Treviño, the first wife of Blas Maria Uribe), built the earlier and larger of the two stone houses at Rancho San Francisco, three miles north of San Ygnacio. According to the family history written by the brothers Roberto D., José D., and Antonio Uribe and transcribed in 2000, the two-room house was constructed in 1849. The second house at San Francisco, on which the date "1874" is inscribed, was built by the Gutiérrez' son, Antonio Gutiérrez-Treviño (1838-1917). It contains a single room. Sharon Fleming notes that the earlier house does not appear on William H. Emory's U.S.-Mexico boundary map, surveyed in 1853, indicating that it may date from the 1850s.
The two houses are aligned side by side at a distance of thirty-five feet. Both face northwest toward the river bank 1,100 feet to the west. The older of the two houses is 45 feet, seven inches long and 16 feet, 10-1/2 inches wide. It sits on a raised stone banco, a stone paved podium. Each room contains an exterior door on the west (river) elevation. The larger of the two rooms also contains an exterior door on the east elevation. Torneras are recessed in the depths of the walls at kneeing height on all four sides of the house. Exterior walls are one-foot, four-inches thick and are 12 feet high. A wood plank ceiling carried on wood beams slopes from 10-feet, nine-inches in height on the east to 10-feet, three-inches on the west. The interior floor surface is chipchil. The raised-seam iron hipped roof is an addition over the original monopitch roof. The lintels above openings, the door frames, and the exterior double doors are of mesquite.

The 1874 house is fourteen feet long and twelve feet wide. The walls are one-foot, six-inches thick. This house was built without troneras and with a door on each face of the house. Stone scuppers, set high on the west face, drained the lower edge of the roof. The hipped roof as well as the historic monopitch roof have collapsed.

In 2005, artist Michael Tracy bought the five-acre ranch headquarters site from the daughters of Dr. Rodolfo G. Sánchez (b. 1919), a grandson of José Dionicio Uribe, and great-grandson of don Blas María Uribe.

Rancho La Unión
Farm-to-Market Road 3169
Zapata County TX

Rancho La Unión, nine miles northeast of San Ygnacio, like all other ranches in northern Zapata County, was partitioned from the Vásquez-Borrego hacienda. Rancho La Unión contains two jacales and, at an adjacent site, an earth dam, 360 feet long, faced with large blocks of limestone. The dam is thought to have been constructed in the 1870s by the brothers Manuel María Uribe-Treviño (1836-1914) and José María Uribe-Treviño (1846-1928), sons of don Blas María Uribe, the founder of San Ygnacio, José Guadalupe Martínez-Urribi (1914-2006), the last individual owner of the ranch, was the grandson of José María Uribe-Treviño. Guadalupe Martínez’s wife, Lilia Olga Gutiérrez-Ramírez de Uribe (d. 2003), was principal of Arturo L. Benavides Elementary School in San Ygnacio. In 2012 ownership of Rancho La Unión was transferred to the Guadalupe and Lilia Martínez Foundation, administered by Mr. Martínez’s niece, Shirley González, her husband Robert, and other family members. La Unión continues to be a working ranch that also serves as an educational resource for local school students and university research groups. Students of James Clusing, associate professor of civil and architectural engineering at Texas A&M University, Kingsville, compiled the Historic American Engineering Record entry on the ranch dam in 2015 and Brent Hedquist, associate professor of geography at Texas A&M, Kingsville, and his students prepared a GPS map of the ranch.

Architectural conservator Frank Briscoe, who has worked on the two jacales at La Unión, believes that the larger of the two—the bunkhouse (now used as a storage shed)—was built between 1893 and 1895, while the cook house dates from the 1940s. The bunkhouse is a rectangular-planned building with a side-gabled roof. It consists of a single interior space (the tack room is a later addition to one end of the house). What stands out are the bunkhouse’s undulating horcones, the fork-like vertical members of mesquite, their sinuous shapes and gray coloration contrasting vividly with the heavily modeled whitewashed plaster coating the house’s exterior. Inside, the wood verticals stand out even more clearly, infilled with a daub-like siding of clay and grasses that architectural historian Jesús Franco-Carrasco in his book, El Nuevo Santander y su arquitectura, calls embarto. Franco-Carrasco described this system of construction as bajareque: a framework of vertical wood uprights infilled with horizontal wood cordage (leña), then thickly coated with with embarto. The preservation of the bunkhouse’s thatched roof (which is not apparent externally, since corrugated sheet iron now covers the roof) is exceptional. Franco-Carrasco described the technique visible inside here as tying down the strands of grass to secure them to the wood frame.

The kitchen building demonstrates the conservative persistence of traditional vernacular construction practices in the frontera chica. The kitchen is a composite—part jacal construction, part vertical plank construction—with a brick cooking oven (on a concrete base) thrown into the mix. Along the lower Rio Grande, Mexican households traditionally used braziers to heat houses during cold weather. Fireplaces were associated with cooking and baking. Inside the cookhouse, the leña (vertically laid split mesquite cord) infill is visible rather than plastered over as at the bunkhouse. Next to the kitchen house are a series of corrales de leña, showing how this construction technology was adapted to shaping stock pens.
Treviño-Uribe Ranch National Historic Landmark
605 Benavides Street and Uribe Avenue
San Ygnacio TX
1830, 1851, 1854, 1871
2017 restoration, Able City Architects and Briscoe Architectural Conservation

We begin our exploration of San Ygnacio with a visit to the town’s most famous building, the Treviño-Urbe house (fortified ranch house). The River Pierce Foundation bought the property in two installments from different sets of descendants of the original builder in 1998 and 2008. Restoration of the complex was carried out in 2016-2017 by the River Pierce Foundation. Able City Architects of Laredo was the restoration architect. Briscoe Architectural Conservation of San Ygnacio was the restoration contractor and R & A Construction was the general contractor. Synergy Engineers and Sparks Engineering were engineering consultants. Terri Myers and Marlene Elizabeth Heck’s detailed historical analysis of the Treviño-Urbe Fortin, contained in Hardy Heck Moore & Associates’ National Historic Landmark nomination of 1997, guided restoration of the complex.10

The most comprehensive source on the history of the house is a memoir that Roberto D. Uribe was working on at the time of his death in September 1998. It was then taken up by his brother José D. Uribe before his death in December 1999, and completed by a third brother, Antonio E. Uribe, in 2000. The brothers begin their account with the acquisition of the 170,980-acre San Ygnacio subdivision of the Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de los Dolores by their great-great-great-grandfather, don José de Jesús Treviño-Hinojosa (1786-1842) of Guerrero, Tamaulipas, in 1827-28. The sellers were the brothers Alejandro, Fernando, and Idelfonso Vidaurre-Sánchez, great-grandsons of José Vasquez-Borrego. According to the Uribe brothers, José de Jesús Treviño and his wife’s nephews, Vicente Gutiérrez de Lara (subsequently the owner of Rancho San Francisco) and married to the Treviño’s daughter, María Trinidad Treviño) and Blas María Uribe-Gutiérrez de Lara (who would marry the Treviños’ daughter, María Juliana), bought 110,000 acres in 1827 and an additional 60,980 acres in 1828. In 1830, don Jesús, Vicente Gutiérrez de Lara, and Manuel Benavides-García (married to another of the Treviños’ three daughters, María Dioniaba) chose the spot for the ranch headquarters. This was high, flat ground, bounded on the west by the flood plain of the Río Grande and, on the north by the Arroyo Grullo. There don Jesús built a cuarto viejo (third room) a one-story, single-room casa fuerte, 18 feet by 20 feet in dimension, with sandstone walls that are 26 inches thick, into which truckers are hollowed. The floor surface is dirt and is recessed slightly below grade level. Offset single door openings face south (into what is now the rear patio) and north (onto what is now the street). The southern portal retains its original three-inch-thick mesquite door. Wood canals project through the upper part of the south wall. They would have drained the sloped wood-framed roof, surfaced originally with chichil. Inside, a high-set stone shelf projects from the west wall. Bracket-like wood mantels project from the upper interior corners of door openings. The Uribe brothers write that the south door was flanked by torreos, cylindrical tubes of stone within which a person could stand and fire outward should the fortified dwelling be attacked. The torreos were demolished in 1851 when the walls enclosing the patio were built. The brothers wrote: “The... ranch house was used mainly for protection from the Indians and for don Jesús to stay when visiting the ranch. Don Jesús and his family lived in Revilla [Guerrero, Tamaulipas] and only visited to supervise the operation of the ranch. Workers cleared land around the ranch and built their jacobos to live in. On the north side, between the ranch house and the arroyo, land was cleared and a log fence was built from the southwest corner of the ranch house about 100 feet, 90 degrees east about a hundred feet, 90 degrees north about 120 feet and then 90 degrees west to the northeast corner of the ranch house. The last part of the fence had a gate. When the fort was finished, livestock were brought into the compound for protection during Indian raids.”

According to the brothers’ account, Jesús Treviño, upon his death in 1842, left each of his seven children an equal share of the ranch. His daughter, María Juliana, received the portion containing the cuarto viejo. In 1850, she and her husband, Blas María Uribe, and their family moved from Guerrero to the ranch on what was, then, the U.S. side of the border. The Uribe homestead is recorded in the U.S. Census of 1850. Blas María Uribe-Gutiérrez (1811-1895) and the second of the couple’s six sons, Fernando Uribe-Treviño (1834-1889), built the first additions. A single room was added to the east side of the cuarto viejo in 1851. Its distinguishing features are the diagonally rotated bake oven inside and a north-facing window protected by vertical wood slats and interior wood shutters. A freestanding two-room wing, the casa larga (the “long house”), was built at the present southwest corner of the complex, as were the nine-foot-high exterior walls, with trompas inserts, that surround the patio. The
bake oven now incorporated into the rear wing was part of the 1851 expansion; it was freestanding in the patio. The larger of the two rooms in the casa larga (22 feet, five inches by 13 feet, four inches) is roofed by vigas, one inscribed with the date "octubre 2 de 1851." The vigas are supported on wood brackets embedded in the walls. Wood mantas project into the room from the upper corners of double door openings. These doors retain their hardware. The double-leaf zaguán doors are also original and are made of cypress. The sunial atop the zaguán (rooted driveway) entrance portal was part of the 1851 expansion. It was executed by the Guerrero blacksmith José Villarreal and is linked in Uribe family tradition to Villarreal's escape as a thirteen-year-old from Indians who captured him and his cousin, Cosme Domíní Martínez, in 1815 and took them into Texas. Because of his ability to navigate by the stars, Villarreal was able to make his way at night to San José de Dalapox, where he and Martinez were rescued and reunited with their families in Guerrero.

The Uribe brothers' text describes the complex as it evolved with a new addition in 1854:

The walled enclosure is 100 feet by 120 feet. A gate of cypress was on the north side of the wall. The roof beams were cypress or pine. These beams were floated from upriver somewhere around where the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers meet. An inscription is written on one of the beams of the 1854 room which reads: "En Paz y Libertad Obrenos." This part of the house is known as the casa larga, the "long house." The walls are about 18 inches thick and 12 feet high. It had troneras every 10 to 15 feet. Troneras are loop holes for firing muskets from the inside of the compound.... The roof and walls were made of cantera (quarried) stone, a sandstone that is very plentiful in the hills just east of San Ygnacio. The stone is about 2 feet under the soil and is in layers 12 to 18 inches thick. By using wedges and pry bars, the stone could be broken off and shaped to the desired size. Most of the sandstone houses in San Ygnacio were built from the same quarry. The roofs and floors were made from chipile; a mix of very fine river stones and lime, oil in Spanish. Don Blas Maria and his family moved to their new home in San Ygnacio in 1851. The fort was the first real stone house in San Ygnacio. Before that there were palapas... made of mesquite by the workers.

The extension of the casa larga consists of a single room, 38 feet, two inches by 13 feet, four inches in size. Double doors set in splayed jambs face north and west to the streets as well as east into the patio. The 1854 addition opens on axis into the large room of the 1851 casa larga through a centered interior portal but it does not connect to the cuarto viejo. Terri Myers and Marlene Heck note that the 1854 addition possesses refinements not present in the earlier rooms. They cite the carved stone canales projecting through the parapet of the west wall along Treviño Street and the rounded sandstone cylinder with a conical cap at the Treviño-Urube corner. In 1977, Kevin T. Glowacki, Andrew Billing-}

The Uribe-Urube Rancheria, San Ygnacio TX. Detail of mantas in Casa Larga.

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The Uribe-Urube Rancheria, San Ygnacio TX. Interior of the Casa Pinta looking into the zaguán.

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The Uribe-Urube Rancheria, San Ygnacio TX. Interior of the Casa Pinta looking into the zaguán.
The two-story house with the cast iron double veranda at 606 Uribe Avenue is the house of José Trinidad Urbe-Treviño (1838-1909) and his wife, Francisca Garza. Trinidad Urbe was the fourth of don Blas María's six sons. Completed in 1870, Trinidad Uribe's house was, according to the Uribe brothers, the first two-story house in San Ygnacio. It adjoins on the west the one-story, white-painted, stucco-faced stone house at 608 Uribe Avenue (also 702 Benavides Street) that Fernando Uribe and his wife Trinidad Uribe's sister, María Josefa de Jesús Uribe (1848-1886), the youngest of don Blas María and doña Juliana's children, and her husband, Proceso Martinez-González (1841-1934). This was the childhood home of don Proceso Martinez and his second wife, Rosinda Martinez-Villarreal, Adán Martinez owns, and has rehabilitated, the house across the street at 603 Uribe Avenue, built in 1873 for the third of don Blas María's sons, Manuel María Uribe (1836-1914), and his wife María del Refugio Gutiérrez (1841-1922), who was also the sister of don Blas María's second wife, doña María Tomasa Gutiérrez de Uribe. Across the street from the Treviño-Uribe homestead at the Uribe Avenue-Benavides Street intersection is the one-story house at 701 Benavides Street built by Fernando Uribe for Blas María's first wife's sister, doña María Dionisia Treviño, and her husband, don Manuel Benavides-García (1872). These three houses—608, 603, Uribe, and 701 Benavides—consist of a corner casa terrada with tall parapets to which a gable-roofed wing is attached.

At the west end of Uribe Avenue at 802 Uribe Avenue, diagonally across from the Treviño-Uribe Casa Larga and on a ridge above the Rio Grande floodplain, is the two-story stone house of Fernando Uribe and his wife, Margarita Pérez (1834-1915). According to the Uribe brothers' history, their great-uncle built his house in two stages: the first floor in 1868 and the second floor, with its cantilevered balcony, in 1872.

Facing the back end of the Casa Larga is a twostory room house with projecting canals at 603 Treviño Street. Built in 1854, it is the second oldest house in San Ygnacio. The Uribe brothers' memoir identifies this as the house that Vicente Gutiérrez de Lara of Rancho San Francisco built for his widowed mother, doña Olalla Gutiérrez de Lara de Gutiérrez de Lara of Guerrero. The brothers write that Mrs. Gutiérrez de Lara set one room aside for use as a church before Our Lady of Refuge Church was built. They also state that the first Treviño descendant born in San Ygnacio was born here, Olalla Gutiérrez de Lara-Treviño of Rancho San Francisco, the granddaughter of doña Olalla Gutiérrez de Lara on her father's side and don Jesus Treviño on her mother's side, as well as the eventual wife of José Dionicio Uribe. A photograph taken in the 1920s by the architect O'Neill Ford looking north on Treviño Street shows this house with a door but no street-facing window, its azotea roof concealed behind parapets, indicating that the present windows and gabled roof are later twentieth-century additions. (The Treviño-Uribe Casa Larga operation only on Fridays and Saturdays for those who crossed by boat between San Ygnacio, Texas, and San Ygnacio, Tamaulipas. At that time, the building had a door but no windows.)

Treviño Street runs along the east bank of the Rio Grande. At 507 Treviño Street is a side-gabled one-story stone house, plastered and painted white. It represents one of San Ygnacio's surviving vernacular house types. At 502 Treviño Street is a side-gabled-roofed sandstone house with a single street-facing door framed by an embedded mesquite lintel and faced with a stone banqueta. At the Treviño-Grant intersection, there are stone houses on both the south-side corner lots at 405 and 406 Treviño Street. Note that Grant Avenue slopes down to the flood plain of the Rio Grande on the west.

Returning north on Benavides Street, alongside the grounds of the San Ygnacio Municipal Utility District Plant, built in the early 1960s, with its distinctive cylindrical water tower, you pass a side-gabled house with two doors facing Benavides Street, although its address is 506 Treviño Street. At 601 Benavides Street and Washington Avenue is a white-painted, hipped roof house with a stone banqueta. The one- and two-story house at 602 Benavides Street contains the River Pierce Foundation Visitors Center. Adjoining it to the east is a one-story casa terrada at 608 Washington Avenue now owned by the River Pierce Foundation. In the 500 block of Houston Street to the south is another recurring San Ygnacio building type: a one-story, side-gabled-roofed cottage at 505 Houston Street with walls of vertical wood planks. Across the street at 506 Houston Street is a side-gabled stone house, plastered and painted, with two front doors protected by wrought iron bars. The one-story, side-gabled-roofed house at 405 Houston Street and Grant Avenue is another property of the River Pierce Foundation.

Turning east on Grant Avenue leads to one corner of Plaza Blas María, located in the 1874 townsite. Note that the alignment of Grant Avenue diverges from the orthogonal geometry of the 1874 town plan. At the corner of Grant and Gutiérrez Street, the one-story, side-gabled house at 407 Gutiérrez Street complements the geometry of the taller, side-gabled house at 405 Gutiérrez Street next door. The long house at 405 has a shed-roofed porch (porch).
all along the street front of the house. Across the street is another one-story vertical wood plank cottage at 406 Gutiérrez Street.

Turning back on Gutiérrez and heading north toward the plaza, the one-story, three-bay, hipped-roof house that Antonio Gutiérrez-Treviño of Ritch San Francisco built at 501 Gutiérrez Street and Grant Avenue also has a shed-roofed roof that forms its street front. This is a one-room house with a rear wing. The rear wing is angled to conform to the alignment of Grant Avenue. At the north end of the block is the Trinidad Urbina Building (1873) at 507 Gutiérrez Street and Washington Avenue. The Urbine brothers write that their great-uncle Trinidad Urbine operated a store in this building, which also served as San Ygnacio’s post office. At 601 Gutiérrez Street and Washington Avenue is a one-story stone house whose side walls rise into diagonally raked parapets to frame its pitched roofs. This vernacular type house is also in Laredo, as well as in Santa Maria. The facade of this structure is built of brick rather than stone.

Facing the north side of the Plaza Blas Maria at 602 Washington Avenue, our trip guided by the Wwashington Avenue and Gutiérrez Street is one of the most architecturally distinctive houses in San Ygnacio. It was the house of Mexican-born rancher Manuel Sánchez (1846–1892) and his wife, Doña Josefina Gutiérrez Vda. de Treviño, and their family. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the San Ygnacio House was occupied by the Admar Vela grocery store. The thin, one-story stone building is faced with plaster and has vertically stacked plaster quoins embossed with inscribed patterns framing the corners. This panel features a horizontal band in the frieze beneath the cornice. The plaza front of the house is divided by a slender central pilaster capped by an Ionic capital in profile. The cornerblocks of door frames are ornamented with incised neoclassical patterns. The delicacy of the building’s ornament and detailing sets it apart from the robust Creoleized classicism of Matamoros.

Our Lady of Refuge Catholic Church (1872–75) at Laredo Avenue and Washington Avenue is a mission of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic church in Zapata. It follows a pattern visible in Camargo, Mier, and Laredo, with the parish church sited at one corner of the plaza (rather than centered on the plaza). Slightly recessed behind its own atrio. The Urbine brothers do not attribute the design and construction of the church to its architect, Urbine, even though it seems likely that he would have built it. Architect and historian Mario L. Sánchez indicates that after the church was severely damaged by an arsonist in 1990, it was rehabilitated based on the way it appeared in 1892. San Ygnacio resident-historian Victoria Flores de Urbine led the volunteer effort to rescue and restore the church, supported by a grant from the Meadows Foundation of Dallas.

Plaza Blas Maria, San Ygnacio’s historic plaza del pueblo, was one of two public squares set aside by Blas Maria Urbine in the 1874 town plan. Director Elia Kazan’s cast the plaza as a setting in his 1952 film Viva Zapata!, which is about the city it inspired its first kiosko. The trees lining the plaza and flanking its diagonal walkways were planted by the River Pierce Foundation.

At the southeast corner of the plaza, at 407 Grant Avenue and Laredo Street, is the one-story house of Blanquita Maria Benavides-Treviño (1925–2024) and her wife, María Julia Urbina (1859–1905), built in 1881. A grandson of don Jesús Treviño, Manuel Benavides married the granddaughter of his maternal aunt (the first Mrs. Blas Maria Urbine), the eldest daughter of builder Fernando Urbine. Their block-like, one-story stone house has its openings, corners, and upper wall zone articulated with sandstone frames, pilasters, and string courses. A sandstone plaque above the front door is inscribed "MBT 1881." The curved profiles of the lintels above several openings is distinctive. Today the Benavides-Treviño House appears subdued when compared to its appearance a hundred years ago. The house fronts of the block were decorated with two layers of stucco panels shaped into Rococo-like outlines of contrasting tone and texture. Similar plaster "paneling" survives on houses in Laredo and Mier. The street-facing openings of the Benavides-Treviño House retain their wrought iron rejas.

At the south end of this block, at 408 Lincoln Avenue, is a two-story, side-gabled sandstone house with corner block-and-planked doors. The diagonal plank doors are the only San Antonio architect O'Neill Ford repeated in his Regionalist modern architecture of the mid-twentieth-century.

Returning to Grant Avenue and moving east, you pass two side-gabled, one-story stone houses at 406 and 404 Grant Avenue, with a pitched roof west wing, at 401 Grant Avenue and Hidalgo Street, a house that retains its stone balustrade on both street fronts. South on Hidalgo Street, there is another example of the side-gabled, vertical wood-planked cottage at 408 Hidalgo Street.

Turning east at Lincoln Avenue and walking past Arturo L. Benavides Elementary School at 307 Lincoln (Cazares & Associates of Laredo), one comes on a one-story, gabled-roofed sandstone building with diagonally placed double doors and this type house is built at 302 Grant Avenue, and a street front on 305 Grant Avenue.

The 500 block of Hidalgo is dominated by the Zaragoza Domínguez Store and House complex at 501 Hidalgo Street. In addition to an enterprise store, Zaragoza Domínguez (1865–1936), who was born in San Ygnacio, was a U.S. Customs inspector. The side-gabled, stone, corner store building at Hidalgo and Grant has a recessed roof, wood soportales and window frontage, and a street front on 305 Grant Avenue. The side-gabled stone cottage to the north, unusually for San Ygnacio, is set back on its site rather than built up to the front property line on Hidalgo Street. The house and facade are framed with shed-roofed porches. When Michael Tracy bought this block-front complex in 1986, the buildings were roofless ruins. He and his collaborator, artist Henry Estrada, worked with Corpus Christi architect Bibiana Bright Dykema to rehabilitate the complex, which Tracy uses for making art (the corner store) and displays art (the house)—and for entertaining (Michael

Zaragoza Domínguez Store, 501 Hidalgo St, San Ygnacio TX. Photograph by Stephen Fox.
Zapata County tax records do not clarify property ownership in San Ygnacio. The State of Texas' standard county tax forms had a specific section for declaration of ownership of "town lots." By the mid-1850s, county tax assessors used specific block-and-lot numbers to identify ownership of urban real estate. In 1856, only the case in Zapata County. County tax records begin in 1858, when the county was partitioned from Webb and Starr counties. Only in 1879 was a property owner listed as owning a single town lot in the entire county. In 1890 only six owners of town lots were enumerated for the county; in 1900 only 64 town lots were enumerated. Ten years later, in 1910 only 137 town lots were valued in the 1901 and 1910 enumerations at $10. The highest valuations were those of Isidoro Gonzales (two lots at $300), and Lucas and Ignacio Vergara, one lot each valued at $200 a piece. In 1910, Zaragoza Dominguez was listed as owning three lots valued at $30. Manuel Sánchez one lot valued at $10, and Manuel B. Treviño (presumably Manuel Benavides-Treviño) one lot at $10. Property in San Ygnacio owned by Uribe family members was not rendered using the "town lots" category.

The vernacular architecture of San Ygnacio attests to the fact that no railroad line has ever been constructed through Zapata County. San Ygnacio's conservative perpetration of nineteenth-century practices and building typologies is exceptional, even by the conservative cultural standards of the Texas-Mexico border. So is the preservation of this historic architecture. San Ygnacio is extraordinary because it is such an intact example of northeastern Mexican urban space. Although platted as a town a quarter century after the frontera chica was absorbed into Texas and the United States, San Ygnacio forcefully testifies to the persistence of Mexican cultural patterns through the nineteenth century. This led the cultural geographer Daniel D. Arreola to devote an entire chapter to San Ygnacio in his book Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province (2002).

San Agustín de Laredo
National Register Historic District, Laredo TX

The 12-block San Agustín de Laredo Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. It comprises half of the 20-block townsite depicted in the "Map of Lands Leased by the United States From the City of Laredo, Map No. 26" of 1855. What distinguishes the district is its Mexican spatiality, achieved with streets that vary in width from 33 feet to 45 feet and are framed by one- and two-story masonry buildings built to the sidewalk line in continuous rows. Within the districts there are two plazas: Plaza San Agustín, the plaza de armas of the 1767 town plan, and Market Plaza. These are joined downtown by Jarvis Plaza, Bruni Plaza, Plaza de la Noria (now framed between the north- and south-bound lanes of Interstate 35), and just west of downtown St. Peter Plaza.

Plaza San Agustín

The Villa de San Agustín de Laredo was founded in 1755 by don Tomás Sánchez de la Barron, a native of Nuevo León who raised livestock in Coahuila before migrating to the Río Grande. With three families from the Hacienda de Dolores downstream from the future site of Laredo, Sánchez received authorization in 1755 from don José Esquivel to form the community of Laredo, one of the last of the twenty-two towns established in Nuevo Santander as part of Escandón's colonization plan. Laredo was named for the northern seacoast town of Laredo in Cantabria in Spain. In 1767, the Plaza San Agustín was laid out on high ground on the left (north) bank of the river, midway between two fords, the Paso de Jacinto (also called the Paso de los Indios) upstream and the Paso de la Garza downstream, river crossings crucial for communication between Nuevo Santander and Texas. The Matamoros-based Swiss naturalist Jean-Louis Berlandier wrote of Laredo and its plaza de armas in 1827. Sixty years after the townsite was surveyed: "Its streets are quite wide and have that symmetry which the conquerors have scrupulously observed in the new world...The houses are not at all remarkable; the majority are nothing but thatch-covered huts called jactiles. They are evenly distributed in blocks of one hundred square varas. The presidio offers two plazas without verdure, for the Spanish rarely think to plant trees." Photographs from the 1880s show the plaza as a spatial void surrounded by buildings. An 1892
file of rooms is dated to the 1830s; the room facing Zaragoza Street is dated to 1861. The García House is de cal y canto con azotea, of lime mortar and stone construction with a flat roof. The house was rehabilitated in 1995 by San Antonio architects Killis Almond & Associates for the Webb County Heritage Foundation. In 1955 it became the first historic house museum in Laredo. Báltoro García-Benavides (1813-c. 1878), a great-great-grandson of don Tomás Sánchez, served three times as mayor of Laredo (1843, 1854-55, 1858), once under Mexican rule, twice under U.S. rule. The youngest daughter of García and his wife, María del Carmen Benavides, María Tira García-Benavides (1855-1910), married the French immigrant Raymond Martin (1829-1900); their descendants remained prominent in Laredo through the twentieth century.

La Posada Hotel (originally Laredo High School)
1000 Zaragoza Street
1917, C. H. Page & Brother
1961, Wallace B. Thomas

La Posada is a radical remodeling of Laredo High School, designed by the prolific Austin architect Charles H. Page, a two-story brick building set above a raised basement. Wallace Thomas, a San Antonio architect, reinvented the ex-high school with an "el convento" styling theme that is successful as place-making and very popular with visitors, as the west-wing additions to the complex (1962) attest. Taking advantage of the site's slope down to the Río Grande, the hotel sits above two levels of below-grade parking.

Augustina Villarreal and Santos Benavides House
202 Flores Avenue
C. 1853

Webb County tax records from the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s suggest that, as in San Ygnacio, family members clustered together in Laredo. Plaza San Agustín was where some of the many descendants of don Tomás Sánchez built new houses in the mid-century decades. This one-story stone house with brick parapet was home to Sánchez's great-great-grandson, the rancher, merchant, politician, and soldier, Santos Benavides-Ramón (1823-1891), and his wife, Augustina Villarreal (1822-1905). Santos Benavides was the highest ranking Mexican-American officer in the Confederate Army. He commanded a regiment of the Thirty-Third Texas Cavalry; its members comprised a who's who of elite Laredoans. In 1883, the house was sold to Santos Benavides' half-brother, Eulalia. Now a retail store, its exterior architectural detail reflects the popularity of stucco classicism as a modernizing strategy in early twentieth-century Laredo.

Báltoro García-Benavides House
(Republic of the Rio Grande/República del Bravo Museum)
1005 Zaragoza Street
C. 1834, 1861, 1955

The García House represents the standard typology of traditional Mexican vernacular houses in the frontera chicana, evident in San Ygnacio. It is a one-story, L-plan, sandstone house, configured around an interior patio opening to the southeast (the direction of the prevailing breeze). The L consists of a single file of cellular rooms, one opening into the other through deeply embossed doorways. The house was built in two stages. The rear

Juliana Benavides and John Z. Leyendecker House
204 Flores Avenue
1867

John Z. Leyendecker (1827-1902), who immigrated from German Nassau to Texas in 1846, married two of Santos Benavides' half-sisters, first Maria Andrea Benavides-Cameros and, two years after her death in 1863, Juliana Benavides-Cameros (1837-1926). Juliana and J. Z. Leyendecker's house was occupied by their descendants through the 1960s, notably their grandson, Laredo architect A. A. Leyendecker (1907-1986) and his wife Maria Estela Palacios. Juliana and J. Z. Leyendecker were also the great-grandparents of architect Martin A. Notzon and the great-great-grandparents of architect Ben Notzon. Of cal y canto con azotea construction, the house retained its terra-type roof construction—built-up layers of sand-and-clay, dirt, chipchil (a lime concrete) with a lime slurry topping on wood decking, carried by wood beams—well into the twentieth century. Note the zaguan, the covered driveway running through the house, connecting the street to the rear patio. In 1990 the house was acquired by Laredo lawyer Ricardo De Anda, who with his wife Rosi, were Laredo's foremost late twentieth-century contemporary and art collectors. Houston architect Carlos Jiménez sensitively transformed the house into the De Anda law office.
Paula Inés Leyendecker & John F. Mulally House
1016 Grant Street
1897

Paula Inés Leyendecker, daughter of Juliana and J. Z. Leyendecker, and her husband, John F. Mulally, an Illinois-born lawyer and Texas state judge, occupied this two-story house. Built of brick rather than sandstone, it is faced with a double-level veranda. After 1881, the year the railroads arrived, Laredo’s elite tended to favor Anglo-American house types, even when built in the old neighborhoods. Until the 1960s, Plaza San Agustín remained primarily residential.

Maria Feliz Benavides and José María Rodríguez House
1012 Grant Street
C. 1861

In contrast to the Mulally House next door, the Rodríguez House adhered to older conventions of domestic spatial organization and construction. The one-story stone house is associated with doña Maria Feliz Benavides, a daughter of don José Bacilio Benavides, the uncle of Santos Benavides and Juliana Leyendecker, and her husband, the San Antonio-born José María Rodríguez (1828-1912). As Laredo historian Jerry Thompson writes, J. M. Rodríguez served as county judge of Webb County for thirty-five years. Sanborn maps (1885, 1889, 1894, 1900) show the building as two dwellings; the 1905 edition shows it as a single dwelling.

San Agustín de Laredo Catholic Cathedral
201 San Agustín Avenue
1922, Leo M. J. Diethmann
1946, Julian & White
2021 restoration, Able City and Hickey Architects with Briscoe Architectural Conservation

This is the town block dedicated in the 1767 town plan as the site of the parish church. The present church replaced an earlier sandstone church building that the Oblate historian, Father Robert E. Wright, has determined from parish records was built between 1771 and 1789 under the direction of don Tomás Sánchez. The ground plan of the eighteenth-century church, with the long dimension of the nave parallel to San Agustín Avenue, rather than facing the plaza, as the 1872 church does, can be seen in the brick paving of the atrio in front of the present church. The French Oblate missionary, Father Pierre-Yves Kéralum (1817-1872) of Brownsville, designed the new church. The nave was completed shortly before Fr. Kéralum’s death; the tower was completed in 1877. Alterations occurred in 1922 and the chancel was extended in 1946 by San Antonio architects Julian & White. The church’s attenuated vertical proportions are characteristic of Kéralum’s interpretation of the Gothic revival. Built of sandstone like its predecessor, San Agustín has had a scored plaster finish since the early twentieth century. As part of the 1922 alterations, the tower was heightened to incorporate the clock stage. Architectural historian Richard L. Cleary examined Kéralum’s work as an example of French influence on the Gothic revival in Texas. Those familiar with Bretagne, where Kéralum was from, have observed similarities between his interpretation of Gothic and examples he might have known from the 1840s. In 1994 rehabilitation work was carried out. In 2000 San Agustín was designated the cathedral church of the newly erected Diocese of Laredo, and in 2021 further rehabilitation work by Able City and Hickey Architects was completed. Briscoe Architectural Conservation was conservation contractor.

Next door to the church is the ex-St. Augustine School by Laredo architect M. S. Ryan (1927).

José Reyes Ortiz-José Ortiz-Gil House
915 Zaragoza Street
C. 1830s, 1866, 1871, 1872

The Ortiz-Puig-Mann House is the grandest example of the Matamoros merchant’s house type in Laredo. A U-plan house enclosing an interior patio, it is the frontera chico’s urban counterpart to the rustic Treviño-Uribé Fortín in San Ygnacio. The patio of the Casa Ortiz is treated as a huerta, a domestic garden. The patio sits atop tall brick retaining walls that frame steps that once ramped down to the river bank. As at the García House (Republica del Bravo Museum) at 1005 Zaragoza, the oldest portion of the Ortiz House is a stone room at the back part of the site nearest the river. It is associated with the first generation of the family that occupied the house: don José Reyes Ortiz (1789-1849), a Spanish immigrant, and his wife, doña María Antonia Gil-Sánchez (1799-1886). The west wing, extending toward Zaragoza Street, is a sequence of high-ceilinged rooms built in 1866. This wing, and subsequent additions, are associated with the second generation of Ortiz family occupants, don José Ortiz-Gil and his wife, doña María de Jesús Farias-Benavides, a great-great-granddaughter of don Tomás Sánchez. Lining Zaragoza Street on the north is the front wing. The first


Maria Feliz Benavides and José María Rodríguez House, 1012 Grant Street, Laredo, 1861.

Paula Inés Leyendecker and Judge John F. Mulally House, 1016 Grant Street, Laredo, 1897.

Reyes-Ortiz-Puig House, 915 Zaragoza Street, Laredo TX, c. 1830s, 1866, 1871, 1872. Exterior.
galleries facing the patio. Sanborn map notations suggest the house has always been used as a dwelling. In the 1880 Census, José Ortiz, merchant and stockman, his wife María de Jesús Farias, their six children, other relatives, and Ortiz's clerks were enumerated as occupying the 9,436-square-foot house. Descendants of the Ortiz's daughters, María Bruna and Emilia, and their New Orleans-born husbands, brothers Valentine L. and Baldomero A. Puig, lived in the house until 1991, when it was acquired by Laredo lawyer Lawrence Mann, the father of architect Laurie Mann. Laurie Mann was instrumental in the formation of Los Amigos de Guerrero Viejo and publication in 1998 of Elena Poniatowska and Richard Payne's book, Guerrero Viejo. Since 2007 the Ortiz-Puig-Mann House has been owned by Webb County. It is now managed by the Laredo Cultural District.

Felipa Vidaurre and Cayetano de la Garza House
907 Zaragoza Street

The two-story Vidaurre’s house, a modest and functional building, was constructed in 1854. It served as a residence for the family of Felipa Vidaurre-Gil (1837-1884) and Cayetano de la Garza (1827-1890), a great-great-grandson of don Tomás Sánchez. Cayetano de la Garza is first listed as owning a house and lot in the 1854 Webb County tax roll. The house’s Craftsman detail reflects alterations that occurred between 1909 and 1925 when a building to the east was demolished, making it possible for a side gallery to be added, so that, as in a Charleston single house, the house might overlook what became a side garden (now a parking lot).

Benito García House (Lockwood Building)
819 Zaragoza Street
1856

Webb County tax records indicate that the earliest owner of this lot was stockman Benito García. García’s ownership is additionally documented by an interior beam inscription that architectural conservator Frank Briscoe discovered. The Sanborn map of 1885 shows this as a one-story block house, the José Reyes-Ortiz at 915 Zaragoza. In 2006, Able City Architects constructed a new interior in the burned-out shell of the González House to transform it into the Webb County Heritage Foundation’s Villa Antigua Border Heritage Museum.

Maria Ignacia Farias & José Atanacio Vidaurre-Gil House (now American Legion Home)
801 Zaragoza Street

The two-story Vidaurre House preserves its zaguán entrance portal. Decorated externally with early twentieth-century ornamental plaster work, classical architraves, and a Victorian cornice, the antiquity of this large house is indicated by its sandstone construction. Since 1948 it has been the American Legion Home. The least ornate component of the complex, the one-story stone and brick building to the east of the two-story center building, was built in two stages. During the middle 1920s it housed Sacred Heart Academy, conducted by the Mésdames of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic women’s order from San Luis Potosí displaced to Laredo by the Cisneros War in Mexico. The exposed side wall of the one-story wing, facing Santa Ursula Avenue,
displays the building's sandstone construction. José Atanacio Vidaurri (1840-1924) was a great-grandson of José Fernando Vidaurri of Los Corralitos, a great-great-grandson of Tomás Sánchez, and a great-great-great grandson of José Vásquez-Borrego of Dolores. Mrs. Vidaurri, the sister of Mrs. Jesús Ortiz, was also a great-great-granddaughter of don Tomás Sánchez.

Ester Benavides-Pizaña and Natividad Herrera-Gil House

802 Grant Street

1879

Natividad Herrera-Gil married Ester Benavides-Pizaña, the daughter of Santos Benavides's brother, Refugio, in 1877. Nuevo Laredo architect-historian Eduardo Alarcón Cantú observes in his book, Arquitectura histórica en un espacio de encuentro: Ciudades fronterizas del bajo río Brazo (2004), that the Herrera House constitutes a visual anthology of Laredo's changing architectural cultures in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The original house, at the street corner, is of sandstone construction, finished externally with plaster. Above the plastered wall is a brick parapet exhibiting closely-spaced plaster caps, molded bands, and dentils, all crafted with finely molded brick. Adjoining the rear of the house on Santa Ursula Avenue is an added brick wing with a paneled frieze and decorative banding. Projecting from this addition is a second brick wing, roofed with a wood-shingled pitched roof. The superiority of brick in weatherproofing parapets occasioned this material echo of a signature “territorial style” detail associated with Santa Fe, New Mexico. The prestige, modernity, and economy associated with brick construction are suggested by its substitution for sandstone in the house's rear wings. Yet the Herrera House conservatively conformed to Mexican conventions of spatial organization, especially in its spatial compactness and the way it distinguishes between the space of the street and the spaces of the interior and the patio.

Teresa Pizaña and Refugio Benavides-Ramón House

801 Grant Street and 805 Grant Street

C. 1847

According to the 1851 Webb County tax roll, José del Refugio Benavides-Ramón (1821-1899) owned the lots where what now appears to be two stone buildings—the two-story building at 801 Grant and the one-story house at 805 Grant—as early as 1847. Nineteenth-century Sanborn maps show the buildings as a single L-plan dwelling occupying two lots. The rear wing along the west property line framed the interior patio. The second story was added to 801 Grant in the second half of the 1920s.

José María Ramón-Dovalina House

908 Grant Street

1825

José María Ramón-Dovalina (1802-1849), whose sister was the mother of Santos and Refugio Benavides and whose daughter was doña Lucía Ramón de Treviño of 815 Zaragoza, built what is believed to be the oldest surviving building in Laredo soon after his marriage in 1824 to Micaela García-Martínez. The cay y canto con azotea house is rigorously simple. Gloria Zúñiga Caneco, in her research on her Ramón ancestors, wrote that don José María’s son, don Martin, a widower, eventually occupied the corner house at 902 Grant Street (mostly stone, although with a brick wing along Grant), where he lived with his two sons, so his four daughters could occupy the family homestead. Note the green-painted, one-story brick house at 306 San Bernardo Avenue, attached to the back end of the Martín Ramón House.

José María Ramón-Dovalina House, 908 Grant Street, Laredo TX, 1852.

Anita Ugarte and Luis R. Ortiz House

312 San Bernardo Avenue

pre-1885; alterations and additions between 1905 and 1909

The Ortiz House is another example of the cultural fusion that railroad-related modernization produced in Laredo. The 1885 Sanborn map shows the Ortiz House as a compact two-story brick dwelling with a one-story rear wing aligned with the rear property line. Between the 1905 and 1919 maps, the two-story front block was extended along San Bernardo to give the house its present L-plan configuration; during the same time interval a second floor was added to the rear wing. The front wall of the Ortiz House is built flush with the sidewalk and instead of a front porch, the Ortiz House had a narrow, second-floor balcony with an Anglo-American style shed roof supported on turned...

**CRISTÓBAL BENAVIDES BUILDING (O’CONOR BROTHERS BUILDING: JER BUILDING) 819 ITURRIDE STREET 1883: REFACING AND ADDITION, 1924**

**Cristóbal Benavides-Cameros (1839-1904)**, the brother of doña Juliana Leyendecker and the half-brother of Refugio and Santos Benavides, built this two-story, American-style brick business building in 1883. In 1924, the three O’Conor brothers—Dan, Tom, and their movie actor brother Bob—opened their tile sales studio in the Benavides Building. The O’Conor’s Aztec Art Tile Company redecorated the building externally to advertise its wares.**12** The O’Conor’s father, Thomas O’Connor, was an Irish immigrant who had come to Matamoros to work for his cousin, the Monterrey banker Daniel Milmo, in the 1870s. The senior O’Connor subsequently moved to Monterrey, and then to Nuevo Laredo, before settling with his family in Laredo in 1917.

**María de los Inocentes Benavides and Juan Francisco Fariñas House 409 San Bernardo Avenue c. 1840 and subsequent alterations and additions**

Extensive research that historian Dr. José Roberto Juárez and descendant Dr. Héctor Fariñas, Jr., compiled in 2008 when nominating this site for a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark designation underscores the link between genealogy and history in researching buildings in the **frontera chica**.**13** According to Fariñas family tradition, don Juan Francisco Fariñas-Sánchez (1807-1870), a great-grandson of don Tomás Sánchez, and his wife, doña María Inocencia Benavides-García (b. 1810; her given name is configured in different ways in different sources), built the core of this house in 1840. The 1885 Sanborn map shows the one-story house as two attached dwellings that shared the nearly half-block property with smaller outbuildings. By the next edition of the Sanborn map (1889) the stone house had acquired a projecting rear wing as well as a third dwelling attached to the south edge of the original house. The irregular spacing of openings along San Bernardo attests to the house’s interior spatial organization. The first generation of Fariñases people this neighborhood: don Juan and doña Inocencia’s son, Francisco Fariñas and his family succeeded his parents as residents. His sisters were Mrs. Atanacio Vidaurri of what is now 801 Zaragoza and Mrs. Juan Ortiz of 915 Zaragoza. Another sister, Manuela, married the Coahuila rancher don Evaristo Madero. Her husband’s grandson by his first marriage, Francisco I. Madero, became president of Mexico in 1911. Francisco Madero’s overthrow and execution in 1913 sparked the Mexican Revolution. The Fariñas House exhibits the application of stucco paneling of different tones and textures. Along with the south-facing side soportal with its composite capitals, these details sought to relieve the essential austerity of vernacular architecture in the **frontera chica**.

**Monte Pio El Mexicano 820 Lincoln Street c. 1900-1905**

Built between 1900 and 1905 (the interval between two editions of the Sanborn maps), this one-story brick house, incorporating an interior patio, exhibits an Ignacio Arredondo cornice of the type more often associated with buildings in Roma and Río Grande City, Texas, than in Laredo; the Alejandro Sánchez House at 120 Zaragoza Street in Laredo’s Barrio Ranchero possesses a similarly detailed cornice. A photograph in Jerry Thompson’s **Laredo: A Pictorial History** shows this building as a **monte de piedad**, a pawn shop, replete with three balls suspended above the street corner.**14** Webb County tax records and the 1910 Census confirm its ownership by pawnbroker Andrés Cárdenas (1857-1942), who both worked and lived here with his wife, Josefa González (1874-1944), and their three children. Cárdenas was from Salinas Victoria, Nuevo León. He came to Laredo in 1886.**15**

**La América Monte Pio 901 Lincoln Street 1884**

Census enumerations and newspaper reports identify this building with Manuel Dávila (1866-1928), a Mexican immigrant who, like Andrés Cárdenas, operated a **monte pio** on the premises, where Dávila, his Texan-born wife, Josefa González (1878-1936), and other family members also lived.**14** The advertising captions painted on the building attest to its continued operation by the Dávila family, literal sign of the conservative perpetuation of family property and heritage in the **frontera chica**.
What stands out about the Dávila House architecturally are the corner pilasters set on bases that support a simple entablature constructed with raised horizontal bands, attributes of the Matamoros Border Brick style, here executed in stone (although the upper zone may have been brick, as at the Natividad Herrera House). The recessed west end bay of the Lincoln Street elevation displays a dentil band beneath a flat frieze (another Matamoros characteristic) and makes the stepped profile of the street front visible.

Sixto E. Navarro House
815 Hidalgo Street
C. 1879

The assessed value of the lot on which this austere, plaster-finished, one-story stone house was constructed began to increase in value following its purchase by Sixto Eusebio Navarro de la Garza (1831-1903) of San Antonio about 1876, making it seem likely that Navarro built the house (the two-story rear wing is a later addition). Like the Ramón House at 908 Grant Street, the Navarro House is compact in size and rigorously simple architecturally. It contains a pair of front doors, an attribute of the house Navarro’s father, Texas State Senator José Antonio Navarro, built in San Antonio. The house was acquired in the later nineteenth century by Antonio M. Bruni (1856-1931), an Italian immigrant who arrived in Laredo in 1877 and became one of the city’s leading businessmen. In 1882 Bruni built his American-style family house (now demolished) next door at 817 Hidalgo, and, at the Hidalgo-San Bernardo corner, his two-story, brick, dry goods store, the bottom floor of which survives at 519 San Bernardo. For five years prior to settling in Laredo, Bruni had lived in San Antonio. There he met and married Consolación Henry-Uriñúa (1885-1936). Doña Consolación Bruni was the great-granddaughter of Patrick Henry, revolutionary patriot and governor of Virginia, and the great-great-granddaughter of don José de Urrutia, a Spanish military officer who served as captain of the presidio of San Antonio de Béxar in San Antonio from 1733 to 1741.

Robert E. Lee Hotel (now PNC Bank Tower)
600 San Bernard Avenue and Hidalgo Street
1926, John M. Marriott
1937 addition, Henry Steinbomer
1980 rehabilitation, Leyendecker & Cavaos

Turning onto Hidalgo Street, you transition from Mexican Laredo to American Laredo. Marking Laredo’s interwar cycle of modernization was construction of the city’s first skyscraper, the eight-story, concrete-framed, red-brick-faced Robert E. Lee (subsequently Plaza) Hotel, designed by San Antonio architect John M. Marriott. (While a U.S. military officer, Robert E. Lee did pass twice through Laredo.) Ratification of the eighteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, prohibiting the production and sale of alcohol, converted Mexico’s northern border cities overnight into tourist destinations for Americans. U.S. distillers and restaurant owners moved their businesses to Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Tijuana, Baja California; Piedras Negras, Coahuila; and Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas. New Orleans restaurateur Mayo Bessan opened what became Nuevo Laredo’s best-known restaurant, the Cadillac Bar, in 1924. The Plaza, and the 12-story Hamilton Hotel of 1928 on Jarvis Plaza, accommodated the Americans who arrived to drink, eat, gamble, buy souvenirs, and attend bullfights in Nuevo Laredo’s plaza de toros. In 1937 the Plaza was modernized with the addition of the two top floors and the installation of central air-conditioning. In 1976 Laredo’s oldest chartered bank, Laredo National, bought the hotel and had architects Leyendecker & Cavaos rehabilitate it as an office building. Next door, at 700 San Bernard Avenue, is the mid-century-modern Laredo National Bank Building (1958) by Dallas architects Harper & Kemp.

When the Plaza was built, most travelers to Laredo would have arrived by train. But rather than locating the hotel near the train station (which is not downtown), the hotel’s backers selected this site on San Bernard Avenue, the city street that became U.S. 81, the Pan American Highway, leading north to San Antonio. In the 1930s, San Bernardo also became Laredo’s motel corridor, a phenomenon documented by geographer Michael S. Yoder and architectural historian Jesús Nájera.

Julían García Building
511-519 San Agustín Avenue
C. 1881, 1888

This one-story stone building was constructed in stages. The corner bay at San Agustín and Hidalgo is the oldest; it existed by 1885 when it was labeled “grocery” in the Sanborn map. The other four bays were built between 1885 and 1889. A notice in the 7 July 1888 edition of the Laredo Times announced that a tertulia would be held at the “new building recently erected by Mr. Julían García on Market Plaza.” The 1889 edition of the Sanborn map labels four of the five bays facing the back of Laredo’s Market House as retail spaces; the southernmost bay at 511 San Agustín was labeled “dwellings,” buildings facing Market Plaza often contained food-related businesses. García (1841-1990), a son of Bárzolo García of 1005 Zaragoza Street, was a great-great-grandson of don Tomás Sánchez. Like his father he served as mayor of Laredo and was City Tax Assessor at the time of his death in November 1890.

Plaza Theater
1018 Hidalgo Street
1946, Harwood K. Smith

The Plaza was the last deluxe theater constructed downtown. During the second and third quarters of the twentieth century, Hidalgo Street was Laredo’s principal retail street, replacing Juárez, two blocks to the south, which had been the chief mercantile street of the late nineteenth century. Designed by Dallas architect Harwood K. Smith, the 1,568-seat Plaza was built by the Robb and Rowley United theater chain. The building expands through the block to Farragut Street on the north. Local artist Manuel Gutierrez executed the murals in the lobby and the theater. The City of Laredo acquired the Plaza in 1999 to ensure its preservation. Not until 2020 were architects Able City retained and funding appropriated to begin the process of adapting the theater as a performing arts center.

The street front of the theater, surfaced with green tile (supplied by the Aztec Art Tile Co.), is distinctive. An illuminated blade sign, anchored to a pylon, projects the Plaza name over the sidewalk. The pylon frames a big-scaled recess, walled with vertical cylinders. Speed lines rise up one side of the recess then expand across the underside of the ceiling to culminate in a projecting circular disc...
above the sidewalk. The architecture is outlined in neon, which at night glows in vivid green. The adjoining storefront with the giant Greek keys at 1018 Hidalgo is part of the Plaza complex.

Hidalgo Street-Flores Avenue intersection

Next to the Plaza, at 1018 Hidalgo and Flores, is the two-story City Drug Company Building (1933, Guy M. Trout), which appears to be transitioning from Spanish to Art Deco as it rises. The City Drug Co. coheres architecturally with the two-story John A. Valls Building at 1102 Hidalgo (1927, John M. Marrott of San Antonio), across Flores Avenue. The Valls's buff tapasoy brick facing and cast stone Spanish Renaissance ornament were a popular combination for downtown retail buildings in Texas in the 1920s. Across Hidalgo from the Valls Building, facing the Market House, is the modernistic, pink-toned Richter Building at 1101 Hidalgo Street (1933), built on the site of August C. Richter's 1896 dry goods store to contain retail lease space. Just behind the Richter Building is the two-story brick Fritz Werner Building (1898, A. G. Sutherle) at 516 Flores Avenue, a high-ceilinged Victorian retail building. 45 The cast-iron storefront bears the mark of Christopher & Simpson of St. Louis, underscoring the role of St. Louis entrepreneurs in financing and building industrial modernization in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Texas, which architectural historians Paula Lupkin and Jesús Najar have documented. 46

The Laredo National Bank Building (1916, Adams & Adams) is the second home of the Laredo National Bank alongside Market Plaza. The lordly two-and-a-half-story classical temple, with fluted Ionic pilasters marching up the Lincoln Street side elevation and fluted Ionic columns in antis framing the entrance portico on narrow Flores Avenue, is faced with brick and terra cotta. The building was constructed so that it could be expanded to five stories in height. 47 The Laredo National Bank remained here until moving to its mid-century modern building on San Bernardo Avenue.

Alexandera Building
415 Flores Avenue
1917

Designated and built concurrently with the Laredo National Bank was the Alexander Building, a two-story, concrete-framed, brick and terra cotta-clad retail and office building that wrapped around the bank in an L plan to obtain frontage on both Flores and Lincoln. The owner, retail merchant I. Alexander, leased the ground-floor space on Flores Avenue to the F. W. Woolworth Company and the space on Lincoln facing Market Plaza to a grocery store and a restaurant. 48 Isaac Alexander (1869-1921) and his brother Louis (1870-1955) were born in Victoria, Texas, to German Jewish immigrants. The Alexanders operated a men's clothing store in addition to their real estate investments.

Bridget Farrell Building
406-408 Flores Avenue
C. 1895

Bridget Walsh Farrell (1837-1897), an Irish immigrant and property investor, built this substantial, two-story, brick commercial building, which retains its ground-floor cast-iron storefront and oversailing cast-iron cornice.

One Price Department Store Building
1020 Iurbide Street
1917, L. Harrington & Company

Filling out the block front on Flores Avenue was the two-story One Price Department Store, built by merchant August C. Richter (1863-1940) to contain Laredo's largest locally owned department store. Designed by Harrington, a San Antonio architect, the One Price Store (originally called El Precio Fijo—the "fixed price" store; and eventually Richter's Department Store) represents the scale of modernization that was transforming early twentieth-century Laredo. 49 Richter was born in San Antonio to German immigrant parents. He came to Laredo in 1888 to partner with a dry goods merchant whose business he acquired in 1892. 50

Vizcaya-Sierra Building
1102 Iurbide Street
1916, M. S. Ryan

Although remodeled in 1942 (as the tile plaques above the faceted corner entrance announces) for Franklin's, the two-story La Perla dry goods store that Spanish immigrant merchant Manuel Vizcaya-Sierra (1875-1932) constructed contributed to the modernization (and Americanization) of Flores Avenue, although La Perla catered to a Mexican national clientele. 52 Note that the pinnacles studs the parapet are miniature Doric columns.
The downtown retail districts of Texan border towns have remained largely intact because they serve a transnational market: lower- and middle-income shoppers from Mexico who have access to a wider array of more affordably priced products in the U.S. than they do in Mexico. The construction of shopping malls in border cities (Laredo's Plaza del Norte opened in 1977) siphoned off corporate chain stores, the local middle class, and affluent Mexican nationals. Yet despite liberalization of Mexico's pro-tectionist economic policies following adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993, U.S. border merchants continue to attract Mexican shoppers. This is a volatile economy. Every time the Mexican peso is devalued, downtown Laredo experiences recession; COVID restrictions on daily border crossings from 2020 to 2022 had an especially adverse impact. Architecturally, the vitality of this market means there is a demand for retail space. While few downtown border merchants have much use for historic preservation, they are more than willing to continue to use the existing infrastructure so that they don't have to spend money on new construction.

Return to Plaza San Agustín

At Tsuribe Street, Flores Avenue narrows once again before it opens out into Plaza San Agustín, Laredo’s Reconstruction mayor, Samuel M. Jarvis (1822-1893), was a cultural synthesizer who preserved the Mexican spatiality of Laredo by retaining the street grid of the 1767 town plan when the town commons were subdivided in 1868 and offered for sale. Jarvis continued the Mexican practice of inserting block-square plazas at intervals within the grid (one is now named Jarvis Plaza). He also renamed Laredo’s streets, alternating the names of Mexican independence heroes with heroes of the victorious Union cause (in intensely pro-Confederate Laredo) on east-west streets. North-south avenues, such as Flores, were named for prominent families or saints. During his term, 1868 to 1872, Jarvis invented what, twenty-five years later, became Laredo’s annual civic fiesta, George Washington’s Birthday, in which Laredo’s Mexican-descended elite dress in eighteenth-century costume to impersonate U.S. Revolutionary patriots.

32. Thompson, Laredo: A Pictorial History, 43.
34. Manuel Déláñez Died Tuesday: Pioneer Pawnbroker of Laredo Succumbed Illness” (sic), Laredo Times, 7 December 1928, p. 4.
36. Thompson, Laredo: A Pictorial History, 152.
40. Laredo Times, 31 December 1946, 4-6; “Local Art in Plaza,” “Canvas Murals,” “Plaza Theater,” and “Entrance To New Laredo Times, 1 January 1947, 5.
45. “Contracts Were Awarded For Buildings Yesterday,” Laredo Times, 13 May 1917, 9. Although construction of the Alexander building was reported, no architect was ever identified.

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