

# 11593

## HABS AIDS A CITY IN TRANSITION

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Among the ten HABS teams in the field this summer, one provides a particularly strong example of the vital role that HABS, the oldest federal preservation program, continues to play in historic preservation. The team was in Brownsville, Texas, the southernmost town in the US and sister-city to Matamoros, the Mexican town directly across the Rio Grande. While conducting a survey, a HABS team is potentially in a position to assist planning officials, serve as a liaison between the local government and residents of the survey area, and stimulate local interest in historic preservation. In Brownsville, a combination of historical, architectural, and demographic factors renders particular significance to the HABS experience.

Originally no more than a remote trading post, Brownsville was founded soon after the outbreak of the Mexican-American War when Zachary Taylor arrived there in 1846 to erect a fort. As soon as the fort was completed, a small settlement sprang up under its protection. The town was incorporated after the war and took its name from Fort Brown, named after Major Jacob Brown who lost his life there in battle against the Mexicans. Located 15 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico, the city served as a principal port for the Confederacy during the Civil War and is today the most important industrial and shipping center in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Its population is 75,000 of which more than three-quarters is Mexican-American.

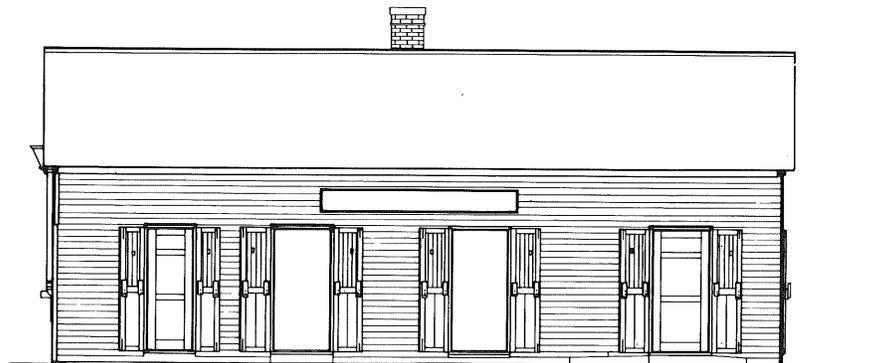
A modern profile of the city is paradoxical. In spite of its remarkable growth over the last 40 years, Brownsville has managed to maintain much of the flavor of a southwestern frontier town. It is a sprawling city of 23 square miles, with a skyline dominated by palm trees and 2- and 3-story masonry and frame buildings, and punctuated here and there by larger ecclesiastical or public buildings such as the Cameron County Courthouse. Much of the old city remains residential and the central business district is still low-scale and lively. The town's most distinctive feature is its numerous lagoons or

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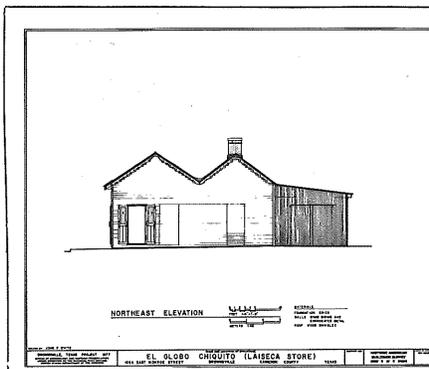
Photo: Mary Farrell, HABS

Alan Willig, an architectural student at the City University of the City of New York, measuring the Laiseca Store.



**EL GLOBO CHICITA (THE LAISECA STORE).** When it was built in 1887 by the Brownsville real estate entrepreneur, James G. Brown, this graceful little commercial building was ideally situated only two blocks from the Rio Grande Railroad Station, a stop on one of the earliest railroads in the valley. The building was first occupied by the Garza brothers, Mexican nationals who operated a general store called "El Globo Chicita," The Little Globe. When the brothers moved to another location, the building was occupied briefly by a series of tenants and finally purchased in 1921 by Domingo Laiseca, a well established local merchant who was a native of Spain's Basque Country. For the next 25 years, Laiseca continued to operate a general store there, but after World War II he limited his stock to hardware and became a wholesale supplier to Mexican hardware stores. The inventory of the business comprised over 1,500 items at one time and included saddles, harnesses, wagons and wagon wheels, buggies, wood stoves, ploughshares, and sod irons. The Laiseca Wholesale Hardware Company was one of the last companies to sell horse-drawn vehicles and implements for non-mechanized farming. Domingo Laiseca died in 1954 and his four children carry on the business in the same location.

Captions based on information compiled and written by Betty Bird, HABS Brownsville team historian.



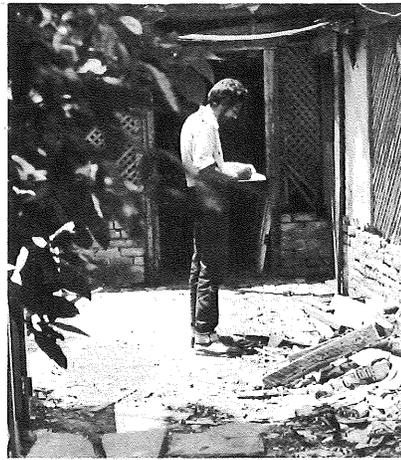
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resacas, which are remnants of the meandering Rio Grande. Its human scale, bicultural flavor, sparking lagoons, and tropical climate cooled by Gulf breezes give the town considerable appeal and development potential. Although it has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the country, its pleasant climate and large unorganized labor force are attracting major new industries and rapid population growth.

The commercial pressures on the historic areas of Brownsville are considerable. Once a small, primarily agricultural community, Brownsville has tripled in size since the completion of its new port in 1936. In the last 10 years alone, over 50 new industries have moved to the city. Because in the 1930s Brownsville built its port 17 miles to the east, much of its future industrial and warehouse development will be confined to the salt flats along the canal leading to the harbor. This will leave the city free to renew its historic center without disturbing port activities.

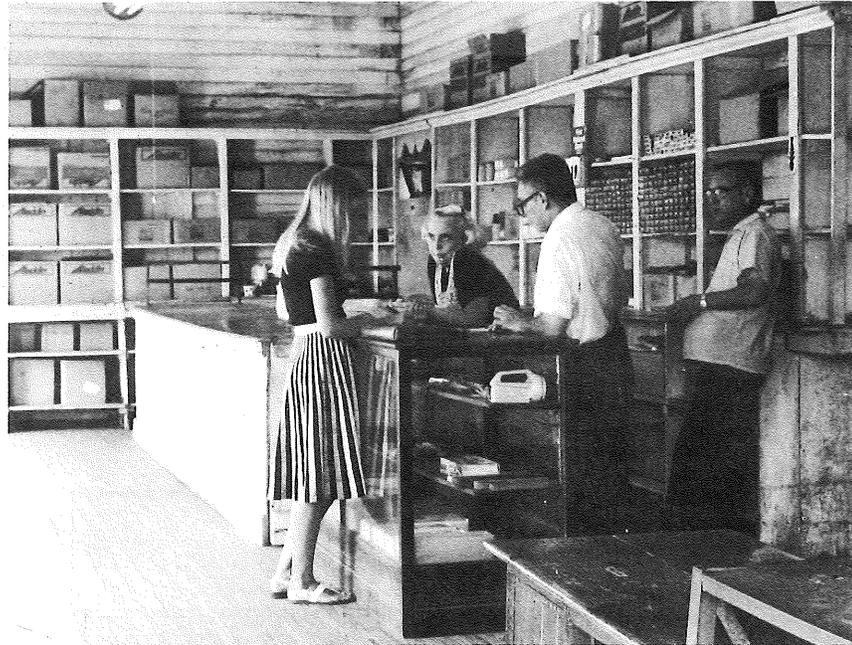
Only in the last few years has Brownsville become more conscious of its architectural

Photo: Mary Farrell, HABS



Architectural student, Eduardo Luaces, from the University of Florida, taking measurements in the courtyard behind El Globo Nuevo.

Photo: Mary Farrell, HABS



Team historian, Betty Bird, from the University of Virginia, interviews members of the Laiseca family at their wholesale hardware store.

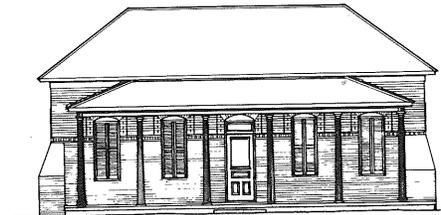
heritage, developing a sense of self-discovery prompted partly by the influx of newcomers who look at the city with new perspective. In the late 1960s, under the auspices of the federal government, one of the town's most significant landmarks, the century-old convent, was destroyed to build high-rise housing for the elderly. At that time, the local historical society was still focusing on geneology and the traditional house-museum aspects of preservation. The society had not yet taken on the larger issues of urban conservation and was shocked that this could happen. The 14-story high-rise remains an incongruity in this sprawling, low-scale border town, and a reminder of the darker days of federal "urban renewal" programs.

The high-rise incident and others like it acted as a catalyst in the formation of a local preservation committee. In 1974 this group of activists joined the local historical association and convinced its members of the

need to seek professional advice about the direction their preservation efforts should take. Soon thereafter they contacted Ellen Beasley, a preservation consultant who was working in Galveston.

In the same year, as a reflection of the changing emphasis of federal programs, the new federally funded city planning office hired a preservation officer. With the encouragement of leading members of the historical association, they also allocated matching funds to contract a preservation study from Ellen Beasley. A great portion of this study consisted of simply identifying the town's historic resources. Under Beasley's direction, volunteer researchers conducted a preliminary survey that listed almost 335 historic structures.

In her final "Architectural Historical Survey and Preservation Plan," Beasley sounded an alarm: "So much is in jeopardy, both in the neighborhoods and in the business



**TIJERINA HOUSE.** Designed and built by Tomas Tijerina, a gentleman farmer, distinguished political figure, and descendent of an original Spanish land grantee, this house is notable for its fine brick detailing, characteristic of Rio Grande Valley architecture. The unusual buttresses were added to help the house withstand hurricanes. The present sitting room was originally a patio surrounded on three sides by porches. Tomas Tijerina had the patio enclosed when his daughters grew old enough to entertain gentleman callers. Since it was built the Tijerina House has been the scene of many events connected with the tumultuous history of the valley—a constant succession of revolutions, wars, bandit raids, and border skirmishes. In 1913 for example more than 50 refugees of the Mexican Civil War camped at the house for several weeks. The Tijerina daughters, who still live in the house, remember their father bringing in barrels and sacks of food staples and slaughtering some of their livestock to feed their unexpected guests.

district, that a step-by-step program is not feasible. Efforts should be initiated in [several] areas as quickly as possible." Two of the things she stressed were the need for more documentation by HABS and for a strong historic zoning ordinance.

To assist in evaluating city resources, preparing the material necessary to nominate structures to the National Register, and conducting adaptive reuse studies for deteriorating and unused buildings, the planning department followed up on Beasley's suggestion and requested HABS assistance. Because of its interest in further documentation in that part of the country and its desire to assist with Brownville's problems, HABS was anxious to cooperate. Several organizations aided in preliminary planning, and OAHF agreed to fund a large part of the project. The City Planning Department offered to provide office space, and the Pan American Bank of Brownsville agreed to contrib-

ute to the team's housing costs. On May 31 HABS began documenting 20 of the town's most important residential, commercial, and ecclesiastical structures. For eight of the structures, architectural measured drawings are being made and National Register forms completed. One of the buildings being recorded is a former grocery store that has been deserted for several years and is presently nothing more than a finely detailed masonry shell. Known as the Ortiz Store, the building presents exciting possibilities for adaptive reuse, and during the summer the HABS team will prepare several design alternatives for using the store as professional offices or a restaurant. Similarly, HABS doc-

umentation on Brownsville's handsome Spanish Revival railroad station will be useful in doing adaptive reuse studies. The city is presently planning to use the station as the new police headquarters.

Brownsville's preservation officer, Richard Waldman, feels that one of the most important services the survey team could perform this summer would be to heighten the architectural awareness of the city's occupants, because the interest in the town's architectural heritage is minimal outside the historical association. After the initial survey done under Ellen Beasley's direction had been completed, the City Planning Department drafted a strong historic zoning ordi-

nance, but getting it passed has been an uphill struggle. In most cities such an ordinance is supported primarily by the property owners who have the most to gain from it, with opposition to historic zoning usually coming from business interests fearful that their development potential will be curtailed. In Brownsville, business is so far either supportive or disinterested, and it is the property owners in the historic areas of the city who are in opposition. Many of the owners are wary of the interest expressed in their property by people outside their neighborhoods, and even more suspicious of the city and federal interest, which they believe could result in limitations being imposed on the use of their property or ultimately cause them to lose it through government expropriation. To those who have had this experience in Mexico, this seems like a very real possibility.

The extent of this fear was demonstrated at a public meeting held by the City Planning Department last year to explain the proposed "Historic Neighborhood and Landmark Conservation Ordinance." Many Mexican families expressed vehement opposition to the proposed ordinance at that meeting. One family who had lost their property before coming to the United States felt so threatened by the whole proceeding that they insisted the dot indicating their house be taken off the map showing the city's historic resources. It was Waldman's hope that the HABS team would help to bridge the gap between the predominantly upper middle-class "anglo" preservationists and the primarily working-class Mexicans who reside in the older residential sections of the city—

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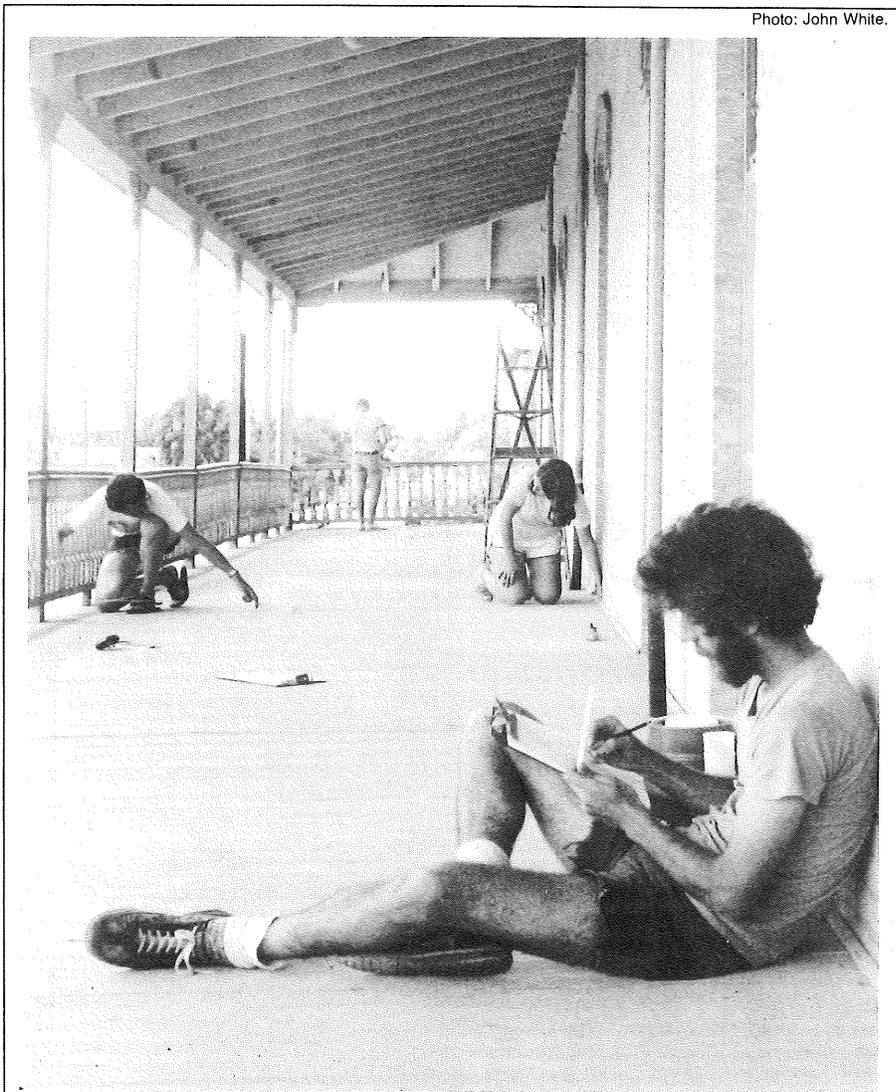
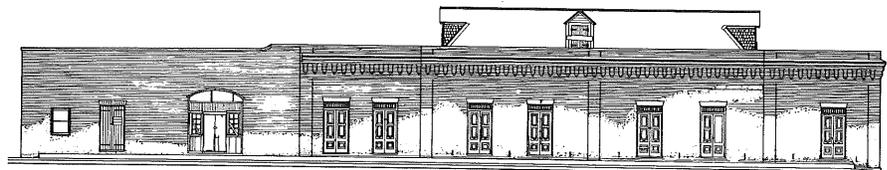


Photo: John White.

HABS team members recording the Field-Pacheco Complex, (from left to right) John White, Project Supervisor and architect on the faculty of Texas Tech University, Matthew Lowry from the University of Pennsylvania, Susan Dornbusch from the University of Virginia, and Scott Deneroff from the University of Maryland.



NORTHEAST ELEVATION

MATERIALS  
 FOUNDATION: BRICK  
 EXTERIOR WALLS: BRICK  
 ROOF: ASBESTOS/FLAT  
 INTERIOR WALLS: PLASTER  
 FLOORING: WOOD

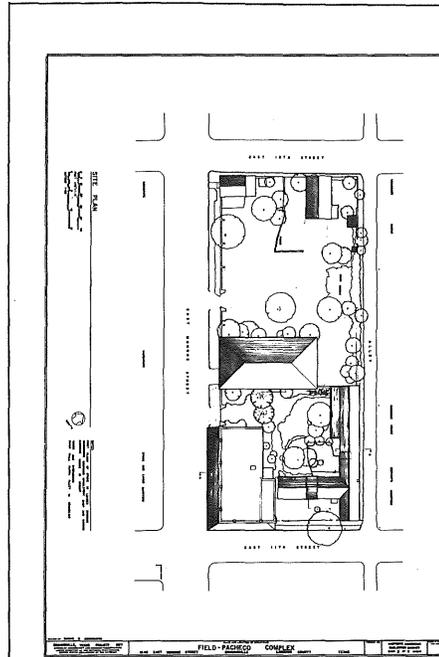
**EL GLOBO NUEVO.** Like many Mexican businessmen, Adolpho Garza, the founder of the El Globo store and vice-president of a Brownsville lumber company, retained his Mexican citizenship, and took advantage of the more stable living and business conditions north of the border. Adolpho and his brother Manuel operated the El Globo store in three successive locations in Brownsville between 1887 and 1923. The enterprise specialized in goods imported from Europe and drew most of its customers from Matamoros. El Globo Nuevo at 15th and Madison streets is the second location of the Garza brother's store. The building grew in three stages between 1897 and 1914 until it occupied the entire block along Madison. An antecedent of the American department store, El Globo sold dry goods in the original portion of the building near 15th Street and had separate shoe and grocery departments in the later portions along Madison. The far end of the building was allocated to warehouse space, and in a separate building, goods were stored that were to be smuggled in the saddlebags of mules to customers across the border. In the early 19th century most of El Globo's plain brick façade was covered by a wooden canopy that was later removed. After 1920 the Garza brothers moved their store to a third location and soon thereafter dissolved the business. They sold a large part of their inventory to Domingo Laiseca, who ran a general store five blocks away at the location of their first store El Globo Chicita. El Globo Nuevo has since been used as a warehouse; it has remained in the same family and is presently owned by a nephew of Mrs. Adolpho Garza.

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sections that are quickly being eroded by zoning variances that allow incompatible intrusions, such as gas stations. In some cases this hope is being realized. The same family that was so outspoken in their protest at the public meeting last year agreed reluctantly to let HABS record their property. They were impressed by the genuine interest of the team members, and enthusiastically consulted with the HABS architects and team historian about their buildings and the history of the family business.

To help publicize the presence of the team in the city, a small display of HABS' recent work has been on exhibit July 18-August 19 at the Pan American Bank and in the Library of Texas Southmost College in Brownsville, and will be followed by another exhibit of the team's Brownsville drawings. Both HABS and OAHP leaflets have been made available to visitors at the local Chamber of Commerce, and the team's work has been covered by local newspapers and radio and television stations.

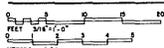
At this point much of Brownsville's colorful mix of frontier and Mexican-American architecture remains. The soul of the town can still be saved and enhanced. HABS has contributed much to preservation efforts in Brownsville this summer, but the forces of boom town economics, prejudice, and suspicion remain. The answer is education, and the documentary materials and adaptive reuse studies being created there now are tools that will continue to contribute to the learning process long after the HABS team has left Brownsville.



**FIELD-PACHECO COMPLEX.** Located across the street from the Laiseca Store and built at least 7 years later (sometime after 1894), the Field-Pacheco building is all that remains of a residential and commercial complex which in the late 19th and early 20th century comprised an entire square block. The enterprise was founded by Henry M. Field who came to Brownsville from Massachusetts as a Union soldier after the Civil War and who decided, as many do today, to stay and establish a business. As a dealer in "hides, wool, cotton, fur, and other skins; lumber, shingles, and all kinds of building materials," Field prospered and became one of the town's leading citizens. The first floor of the Field building was used as a general store and the second floor as living quarters for the family. The rest of the block was occupied by an office, a brick warehouse, a "lumber, bone and hide yard," stables, and other outbuildings. Since the H. M. Field Company was dissolved in 1919, what remains of the complex has served the community as a garment factory, electrical shop, and federal offices. It is still owned and occupied by the children of Andres Pacheco, a prominent Mexican businessman who was president of the H. M. Field Company when it was dissolved.



SOUTHEAST ELEVATION



**MATERIALS STORE AND LIVING QUARTERS**  
 FOUNDATION BRICK  
 EXTERIOR WALLS BRICK  
 ROOF BALT OF ASPHALT  
 BALCONY FLOOR WOOD  
 BALCONY ROOF ASPHALT SHINGLES

**MATERIALS RESIDENTIAL QUARTERS**  
 FOUNDATION BRICK  
 EXTERIOR WALLS BRICK AND PLASTER  
 ROOF WOOD SHINGLES AND ASPHALT  
 ROLLS

**NOTES**  
 SOME DOORS ARE BOARDED  
 WITH PLYWOOD

HISTORIC AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE  
 NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS  
 TEXAS  
 FIELD-PACHECO COMPLEX  
 1018 EAST MONROE STREET  
 BROWNVILLE, TEXAS 77801  
 1977