

Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Station
601 East Madison Street
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3284

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
15-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

SOUTHERN PACIFIC R. R. PASSENGER STATION

TEX,
31-BROWN,
15-

Location: 601 East Madison Street, Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas.

USGS East Brownsville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14/650340/2866100.

Present Owner: Southern Pacific Transportation Company
P. O. Box 1319, Houston, Texas 77001

Present Occupant: Gulf Pacific Cotton Agency.

Present Use: Offices and warehouse.

Significance: The Southern Pacific R. R. Passenger Station, built ca. 1929, is a particularly fine example of Spanish Mission Revival architecture. Its sharply defined form and open site make it one of Brownsville's most visually impressive landmarks. (National Register, November 17, 1978, as Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Depot.) Inoperative, 1955. Adaptive re-use sought by city.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. The station was erected ca. 1929. The plans for the station are dated February 24, 1928, and were revised in April of that year.
2. Architect: Chief Engineer's Office, Southern Pacific Railroad.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Station is located on the western portion of Block 126 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. The San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway (subsidiary of Southern Pacific) acquired title to this property in a series of transactions recorded during July and August of 1927. References to the title of this property can be found in the Cameron County Clerk's Office, in Brownsville, Texas.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: No information found.
5. Original plans and construction of the building: The Southern Pacific Transportation Company retains the original plans of the building, identified as "Southern Pacific Lines in Texas and Louisiana [S. A. & A. P. Ry] Tile and Stucco Passenger Station, Brownsville, Texas." Copies of the plans are on file at the HABS office in Washington, D. C. It is not unusual for stock station plans to be adapted for particular locations. Such seems to have been the case here for some sheets seem to show, as though relettered, the names of Brownsville and the streets.

Although the station on one of these sheets resembles the Brownsville station, it is clearly not the station as built. The seven other sheets, drawings of elevations, floor plans, site plans, and roof, are plainly drawings for this particular station. It is interesting to note that the parterres (formal flower beds or planters) and asphalt paving in front of the station appear in the original drawings.

The cost of the station can be estimated from figures in the annual report of the Southern Pacific Lines. In the year ending in 1928, the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway spent \$47,797.86 on a station and office building. In 1929 the S. A. & A.P. Ry spent \$60,653.08 and in 1930 it spent \$106,734.43. (Southern Pacific Report, 1928, 1929, and 1930.) These figures refer to all the stations constructed by the railway in each of these years.

6. Alterations and additions:

The Southern Pacific Railroad Passenger Station retains much of its original appearance. The major alterations have been the removal of the four-hundred-foot concrete train shed which ran back of the station to the northeast and the enclosure of the open waiting room area, which wrapped around the northeastern and southeastern sides of the building. There was also probably a platform on the northwest facade of the building which was attached to the baggage area.

B. Historic Events and Persons Associated with the Structure:

The coming of the Southern Pacific Railroad to Brownsville on November 14, 1927, before the station was built, was perhaps the most significant event associated with the site. The Rio Grande Valley had enjoyed a spectacular growth from 1900 to 1930. This growth can be attributed to two factors--the introduction of irrigation in 1898, and the coming of the railroad in 1905. (Webb, pages 476-477.) The Missouri Pacific Railroad had entered this area in 1905, and on May 11, 1925, the Interstate Commerce Commission granted permission for the Southern Pacific to acquire the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway, which held a charter into the Valley. (Reed, p. 251.) The completion of the Southern Pacific to its southernmost point in Brownsville was a major event. The driving of the golden spike was scheduled to coincide with the first annual South Texas Chamber of Commerce Convention. The City of Brownsville staged a celebration when November 14 was declared Southern Pacific Day.

In an issue of the Brownsville Herald carrying notices dated Nov. 1 (from Ankora, Turkey, on the Mustapha Kamal Pasha; from Belgrade, Jugoslavia, concerning suspension of telegraph and telephone censorship which had been instigated as the result of a Carolist plot; and a possible visit to Brownsville of Ruth Elder, American aviatrix), there

appears Mayor A. B. Cole's "PROCLAMATION" which stated:

On November 14th and 15th, the City of Brownsville will stage in connection with the South Texas Chamber of Commerce Convention a large celebration on the coming of the Southern Pacific Railroad to this city. We expect to have with us thousands of visitors, many of whom will be here for the first time.

We are particularly anxious that Brownsville present a neat and attractive appearance and I, as Mayor of Brownsville, urge that property owners make special effort to clean up his or her premises, cutting all weeds, mowing lawns, etc.

The general good appearance of our city will leave a lasting impression on our visitors.

A. B. Cole
Mayor of Brownsville
(Nov. 1, 1925)

The crowd assembled in Washington Park, near the station, was the largest the town had ever seen. The Southern Pacific sent a duplicate of the Sunset Limited from Houston carrying H. M. Lull, Vice President, C. S. Waide, General Manager, and W. C. McCormick, General Passenger Agent. They also sent the special track-laying machine which made possible the rapid extension of the line from Harlingen to Brownsville. Although the station was not completed until later, the first scheduled passenger train entered Brownsville on November 10, 1927. (Brownsville Herald, November 1-15, 1927.)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Southern Pacific Railway Company retains the original plans, in Houston, Texas.
2. Copies of plans of the Brownsville Southern Pacific "Tile and Stucco Passenger Station" (received from Mr. Aleman, Southern Pacific Public Relations, Houston, Texas) are on file at the Historic American Buildings Survey office, Washington, D. C.
3. Bibliography--secondary and published sources:

Brownsville Herald, November 1 to November 15, 1927, articles, available on microfilm at the City-College Library, Brownsville, Texas.

Reed, S. G. A History of the Texas Railroads. Houston: St. Clair Publishing Company, 1941.

Southern Pacific Report (Annual report of the Southern Pacific Lines) 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931. Available at the Collections Deposit Library, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Webb, Walter Prescott, Editor-in-Chief. The Handbook of Texas.
Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952.

Prepared by: Betty Bird
University of Virginia
Project Historian
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The station is a good example of Spanish Colonial Revival public architecture, displaying some fine examples of cast stone ornament.
2. Condition of fabric: Good. Being considered for adaptive re-use by the City of Brownsville. Purchase by city under negotiation.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The twelve-bay front, one-story, rectangular building is approximately forty-eight feet by one hundred twenty eight feet. (Dimensions from the plans show 47'-16" x 128'-15".)
2. Foundation: Concrete, forming a water table around the perimeter of the building, with cement finish.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Clay tile walls, stuccoed and painted pale ivory. Cast cement stone cornice work, some with arches, at eaves and parapet lines. On the southwest principal elevation and on the end elevations the copings of the gables have stepped ogee curves.
4. Structural system, framing: Clay tile load-bearing walls and wood trusses. Floor is concrete slab on earth fill.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: At the two principal entrances of the southwest facade are two concrete steps. The entrance to the baggage room on the southwest facade has a small concrete porch with two steps up from grade to a landing and one step up to the top landing. There is a stuccoed rail around the porch with a cast cement grille inset on the southwest side of the rail. The open arcaded waiting room extending across the southeast end and around the northeast has had the arched openings filled in with plaster walls and a window installed in the center of the infilling. The roof is gabled and covered with red clay tile. At the base of each column, each side of the arch, is an art stone double-torus base.

The central portal on the southeast end of the open waiting room has an elaborate cast cement-stone ornamentation and double spiral engaged columns each side. Above each column on the top of the architrave are cast cement-stone urns. The art glass center of the ornament has been removed. There is a portion of a concrete train shed with butterfly roof remaining next to the building.

6. There is a tall stuccoed brick chimney near the northwest end, rising from a point between the waiting room and baggage room. The chimney has a red clay tile gable hood above a decorative clay grille smoke vent on three sides. There is a short parapet with red clay tile coping beginning just below the bottom line of the grille, and extending from the chimney toward the central rear bay of the building. Here it connects with a round-headed gable containing two arched openings or bell ports on either side of a central cast-stone relief ornament, with another, smaller arched opening above it. The ends of the fractable extend out laterally to support on each side a cast-stone urn. The entire assemblage has been made to resemble the espadaña or bell screen of a Spanish Mission Church.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are two main entrances on the southwest facade of the station--one on each side of a central blind bay with blind-arched window beneath a round gable. These double openings have wood framed doors with glass panels and iron bars or grilles over the glass. The surround is cast stone, with an engaged column on each side, and a cast-stone urn above the entablature directly over each column. The slightly Gibbs-like surround extends up to and around a double window above the doorway. The top of the surround rises into a small central blind arch filled with a cartouche-like ornamental emblem. At each window-frame corner is a cast-stone patera. There is a decorative iron railing above the door, at the base of the window, forming a small balconet.

Toward the west, but still on the southwest facade, there is the main doorway of the baggage room. It has a Gibbs-like cast-stone surround with an ornamental plaque above it and "BAGGAGE ROOM" in cast-bronze letters. The wooden door is round-arched too, and is grooved into a vertical wood pattern with large bolt heads on metal escutcheons exposed on the face.

On the opposite, or northeast facade of the baggage room, there is a double doorway with heavy sliding wooden panel doors simulating paired doors leading from the exterior. The rectangular doorway is recessed slightly in an arched opening with plaster infilling between the door and the arch.

On the west or end facade of the baggage room are two double openings. The sliding doors are wood paneled with wood surrounds simulating double doors. There is a steel angle side guard on each side of the jamb.

There are other doorways and infilled arches leading to the waiting room on the east end of the building. They have flush wooden panel doors with wood surrounds.

On the east end bay of the "open" waiting room (now enclosed) the treatment is more elaborate than on any of the other facades, and higher as well. The pedimented gable end with two-course brick ogee-curve coping, is carried completely across the facade, which features three blind arches, and rises well above the roof line. The two outer of the blind arches are undecorated, but they are marked with a cast-iron lantern bracket above each. The central arch, although blind, is flanked by a somewhat Churrigueresque arrangement of paired twisted columns with Roman Composite capitals, heavy pedestals, keystone and spandrel marked by elaborate cartouche and relief--an entablature supporting paired urns at each end. Higher in the gable end is a central ornament with Churrigueresque "rose window" surround, enclosing a small rectangular opening with a circular frame which once held light sockets for an illuminated glass window with the words "SOUTHERN PACIFIC LINES."

- b. Windows and shutters: In the center of the southwest facade a large opening (now boarded) once held a central pair of wood casement windows, each with fourteen lights, a round-arched transom above, and a casement of 12 lights at each side. Above the sidelight there is a shaped, three-light transom that conforms to the contour of the cast-stone trim. The window opening rises from an ornamental cast-stone balcony base, in the form of a sarcophagus-like bas-relief parapet. Above this opening, in the pedimented gable wall, is a small fixed six-light sash with round-arched head and stone surround. There is an ornate cast-stone decoration at the apron of the sill and a semi-circular corbeled balconet with an iron railing. Other casements on the southwest facade have twelve lights, with stone surrounds.

Casement windows in the baggage room have iron grilles on the exterior. Other wooden casement windows have five lights in each sash. All windows have wood trim.

There are copper louvres set in quatrefoil openings with splayed stone surrounds in each gable end.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gable roof has a red-clay mission tile covering.

- b. Cornices and eaves: The boxed cornice has a copper gutter along the sloping edges of the roof. The gable ends have parapets above the roof line.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plan:

- a. First floor: The building layout consists of a central east-west block (holding ticket office, inner east and west waiting rooms, rest rooms, utility and furnace rooms); and two smaller and lower blocks extending from each end (holding a baggage room on the west end and a once-open, now enclosed waiting room on the east end).

The waiting rooms which occupied most of the central block were themselves divided into two east and west waiting areas. Each of these areas had doors into the once open waiting room at the east end.

The two, paired, main station entrances on the southwest, front, or Madison Street facade of the main building opened into the waiting rooms from opposite sides of the blind central bay whose walls concealed the ticket office directly behind it.

The open waiting room extending across the east end of the main building block composes approximately three-fourths of its northeast facade. Doors opening from the northeast end of the open waiting room led to the train-shed area.

The baggage room occupied the west-end addition of the station. It had as its main entrance a Madison Street entrance just beyond the main station entrances to the waiting rooms on the southwest or Madison Street facade. There are two double openings on the northwest or end facade, and a double opening on the northeast facade opening into the train-shed area.

The plans, as originally designed, had a "Colored" waiting room --the west half of the main block, next to the baggage room, and a "Colored" men's toilet behind the furnace room reached by six steps down from the north corner of the west waiting room. A "Colored" women's toilet was connected to the utility room. "White" women's toilets and rest rooms opened off the north wall of the east waiting room.

In the space once occupied by both east and west waiting rooms some half-partitions have been added to create small office cubicles. The women's toilets and rest rooms on the north side of the inner east waiting-room wall have been removed and house an office now.

2. Flooring: Flooring in the waiting rooms and toilets is of clay tile. The baggage room, furnace room and open waiting room have concrete floors.
3. Walls and ceiling finish: Walls are painted plaster, with four and one-half foot tile wainscot in waiting rooms and toilets. Walls in the baggage room and open waiting room are painted plaster. Ceilings in the waiting rooms are painted plaster, with built-up exposed beams. The beams have stenciled designs on them. Other ceilings are simple painted plaster.
4. Doorways and doors: An arched plaster doorway connects the waiting rooms. Toilet doors are wood with an amber-glass light. Double wood frame French doors with ten lights each are in the waiting room leading to the east end or once-open waiting room. Other doors are of wood paneling, and all have wood surrounds.
5. Special decorative features, trim, and cabinet work: In addition to the polychrome tile wainscoting throughout, and the painted exposed ceiling beams, there is a special decorative stone drinking fountain with bas-relief splash panels in each waiting room: one represents children playing pan-pipes in a flowering garden or orchard, the other has a peacock and grapevine motif.
6. Mechanical equipment: There are modern mechanical and lighting fixtures throughout. Some light fixtures are made of decorative wrought iron.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The station faces southwest on Madison Street, at the east corner of the intersection of E. Madison Street with E. Sixth Street. Across Madison Street is commercial and residential property, with residential property also on the northwest, toward Sixth Street. To the southeast (Seventh Street), there is a service station. The railroad tracks lie at a right angle from the northeast or rear facade of the building. The concrete paving remains from a former train shed, now torn down. The planting beds or parterres, along the front still remain with their concrete curbs around them. Several large palm trees remain on the site.

Approximately two hundred feet behind the station is a stucco Railway Express building. It has red mission tile gable roof and is in fair condition.

Prepared by: John P. White
Texas Technological
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Project Supervisor
1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.