

Neale House
230 Neale Road, Old Fort Brown Area
(formerly 625 East 14th Street)
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3282

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
13-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

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

NEALE HOUSE

HABS TEX, 31-BROWN, 13-

Location: 230 Neale Road, Old Fort Brown Area, Brownsville,
Cameron County, Texas.

Present Owner and
Present Occupant: The Brownsville Art League.

Present Use: Art Center.

Significance: The Neale House was built before 1869 as the home of William Neale, one of Brownsville's best-known pioneer citizens. The house resembles the double log houses and frame houses erected by early Anglo-American settlers in Texas more than it resembles the more indigenous border tradition. In 1950 the house was moved from its original site at 625 East 14th Street, Brownsville, to its present site on Neale Road in the Old Fort Brown Area, by the Brownsville Art League.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The dating of the Neale House is controversial. 1834 has been commonly given as the date of erection since that is the date given by Mrs. Ethel Neale Fry, great-granddaughter of the builder, from her knowledge of family history and manuscripts. However, John C. Rayburn, of Texas College of Arts and Industries in Kingsville, who wrote a history of the area from the Neale papers, could find nothing to substantiate this date. Additionally, Neale himself stated that in 1838 "there was not a habitation of any kind on the present site of Brownsville, and when Gen. Taylor occupied this point in 1846, there were not more than a dozen *jacales* (huts) scattered about this vicinity, among the fields of cotton and corn." (Chatfield, page 12.) The date August 19, 1868 is etched into the lower center pane of the right front window of the northeast front room so the house was certainly built by that date. (Neale File.)
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Neale House, with its first address of 625 East 14th Street, was originally located on Lots 11 and 12 of Block 89 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. The references to the title of the house are recorded in the Cameron County Clerk's office, and were also found in the Texas Historical Commission Files on the Neale House. William Neale bought Lots 11 and 12 from Samuel Belden for \$400 on March 5, 1850. (Volume A, page 578.)

The house remained in the Neale family until 1950 when it was given to the Brownsville Art League by Mrs. Mamie del Valle, a direct descendant of the original owner. To enable the house to be moved onto city property, the Brownsville Art League deeded the house to the City of Brownsville, which then leased the house to the Brownsville Art League for a museum and art gallery. (Volume 445, pages 1-7.)

4. Builders, contractor, original suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plan and construction: The house as originally constructed probably had an open breezeway—later enclosed—between the two front rooms, a plan similar to early Texas log cabins. The earliest plan of the house is shown on the 1885 Sanborn Map of Brownsville which shows a rectangular frame structure divided into three equal parts along its length, serviced by a single front porch along 14th Street. Three outbuildings are located to the rear of this structure. The 1894 Sanborn Map shows the same structure, designated as three separate dwellings. According to Rugh McGonigle, a local architect who helped to move and to restore the house, the walls of the house were of lumber not native to the area, and were of tongue-and-groove construction. (Texas Historical Commission File.)
6. Additions and alterations: The 1906 Sanborn Map shows the Neale House as one structure with a long rectangular dogleg attached to the right rear. This attachment and the slight change in proportion of the original structure would suggest that the lean-to immediately to the west of the three front rooms as well as the dogleg portion at the northern part of the present structure were added between 1894 and 1906. An ell-shaped porch is shown at the interior of the ell created by the original structure and the dogleg.

The house was moved to its present site at 230 Neale Road by the Brownsville Art League in 1950. Ruth McGonigle played a major part in the move. Under her direction, the front porch and four fireplaces were dismantled for reconstruction according to her sketches. Mrs. McGonigle herself numbered the bricks prior to the move. During the move, the rear end of the Neale House collapsed and was entirely reconstructed using materials and money donated by every building supply company in Brownsville. (Texas Historical Commission Files.)

The following changes after the move are directly quoted from the Texas Historical Commission Files:

- (a) Four or five layers of wallpaper were removed and replaced in some rooms with palm matting and in one with a crimson, velour-type fabric. (The walls are now covered with acoustical pegboard so that pictures may be hung.)

- (b) Two or three new columns were added, and a lot of new moldings.
- (c) New paint applied and floors sanded.
- (d) The exterior was painted white, the shutters green.
- (e) A kitchen and restroom were added.
- (f) A large studio with a north light and supply closets was added to the rear center room. In this new section, flooring of worn wide board and weathered rafters were chosen to blend with the beautifully aged wood of the original building. (This is the present studio, in which the floors have been covered with linoleum and gypsum board has been applied to the ceiling.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

1. William Neale, the original owner of the house, was born on June 19, 1807, in Bexhill, Sussex, England. At the age of thirteen he ran away from home and unwillingly signed on as a cabin boy on an English ship which had been secretly sold to the Mexican government. As part of the crew of this ship, Neale participated in the shelling of the castle of San Juan de Ulloa, and the subsequent surrender of Vera Cruz in 1821. Neale then worked for a British mining company in Mexico, returning to England in 1826 where he married Una Rutland on October 1, 1827. In 1834 Neale and his wife arrived in Matamoros, Mexico, where Neale established an overland stage route between Matamoros and Bagdad, the port on the Mexican side at the mouth of the Rio Grande where passengers and freight were unloaded. These stages were commandeered by General Pedro Ampudia, leader of the Mexican forces during the Mexican-American War. Neale continued the stage line until 1856, when steamboats began going directly to Matamoros. He then established a mercantile business at Santa Maria (Nealeville) at a steamboat landing twenty-five miles upriver from what is now Brownsville. During these years Neale acted as an unofficial American consul, interceding for captured Americans, recovering runaway slaves, and assisting visiting officials. He served as mayor of Brownsville from 1858-1859, and again from 1866 to 1869. During the Civil War, Neale was captain of a company of home guards stationed at Fort Brown, a second lieutenant in the 3rd Texas Infantry Regiment, a cotton inspector, and the enrolling and passport officer for General Hamilton Bee, C. S. A. In his later years, Neale was recognized as the oldest living inhabitant of Brownsville. He delivered an address on the history of Brownsville at the centennial celebration of 1876 which was subsequently published in the July 5, 1876, Evening Ranchero, and republished in W. H. Chatfield's Twin Cities of the Border. Neale died in Brownsville on April 6, 1896, at the age of 87. (Branda, p. 641 and Chatfield, pages 12-15.)

2. When Colonel Henry L. Kinney, a boundary commissioner, was imprisoned by the Mexicans in a fortress in Matamoros, Mrs. Una Rutland Neale negotiated with General Ampudia for his release. On page 12, Chatfield states " . . . it was only [by] the womanly tact of Mrs. Neale, and the relinquishment of a large grant of land, which the general had promised to her husband, that she at last secured the release of the irascible colonel."
3. According to information in the Texas Historical Commission files, in 1859 William Peter Neale, son of William Neale, was killed in the northeastern front room of the house during a raid by Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, a Mexican who terrorized American settlers because he believed his mother had been cheated of her lands by them. The same source states that part of the house was dismantled for lumber to build barracks for Union troops occupying Brownsville during the Civil War.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

File on the Neale House at the Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Branda, Eldon S., ed. The Handbook of Texas: A Supplement, Volume III. Austin: Texas Historical Association, 1976.

Chatfield, W. H., The Twin Cities of the Border. Originally published in 1893. Reprinted in 1959 by the Harbert Davenport Memorial Fund, the Brownsville Historical Association, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Society.

Rayburn, John C. and Virginia Kemp Rayburn. Century of Conflict: 1821-1913. Waco: Texian Press, 1966. This book relates incidents in the lives of William Neale and William A. Neale and is written from Neale family papers.

Brownsville Herald, May 10, 1936, p. 7. Article on the Neale House.

Sanborn Maps of Brownsville dated 1885, 1894, 1906, and 1914 on file in the Hunter Room of the City-College Library in Brownsville, Texas, and in the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.

Prepared by: Betty Bird
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1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This small frame residence, built near the time of the late 1830s, is probably the oldest house in the town of Brownsville.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The original house is approximately fifty-four feet across the front by thirty-feet wide, with a twenty-one foot rear addition. It is rectangular, one story in height, and has an eight-bay front (three doors, five windows).
2. Foundation: Concrete piers.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: Siding is wood clapboards, painted white, with corner boards and rake boards.
4. Structural system, framing: Structure is wood frame throughout.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a porch extending across the width of the front facade, with pent roof supported by nine simple wood columns. There is a simple wood railing, with raised bottom rail, and small wood balusters, extending between each column and across each end. There is a newel at each side of the center with a hinged porch gate, and one wooden step. The wood parapet across the face and ends of the pent roof has a built-in gutter.
6. Chimneys: There is a brick chimney near each end of the house, on the back side of the gable. Each chimney has a brick, double chimney hood, with sloping top.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance door, in the center of the front facade, opens into a center room. The doorway has wooden surrounds, sill and threshold and is up a step from the porch floor. There is a four-panel wooden door and a pair of wood framed screen doors. There is another door each side of the center, opening onto the porch, that is identical to the main entrance door.

The rear entrance in the addition work room has wood surrounds and is a wood panel door. There is a wood framed screen door.

- b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows have six-over-six-light, single-hung sashes, wood surrounds, wood louvre shutters and iron bars across the openings. The shutters are painted dark green and the iron bars black. There are wooden one-light, fixed-sash windows in the work room.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The gable roof over the original house is covered with wood shingles. The gable roof over the addition at the rear is covered with asphalt roofing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There is a boxed cornice.
- c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: There is a clerestory in the studio addition on the north.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The entrance in the center opens from the south-east facade into a reception room. There is a window on the east front wall to the left of the door. A doorway, at either side of the room, directly opposite each other, leads into a room at each end. There is a doorway on the west wall leading into the studio.

The end room on the left has a door in the center of the east wall with a window on either side. There is a door on the west wall leading into a lean-to room. To the left of the doorway is a brick fireplace, projecting into the room. It has a simple wood surround and mantel shelf. There is a cast-iron surround and grille across the firebox and a brick hearth.

Stepping down about half-a-step is the lean-to room. It has a fireplace backing up to the other one. There is a built-in cupboard on the right side of the fireplace. On the west wall is a window and a door to a store room. To the north is a doorway to the studio. The large studio, with clerestory window, extends to the rear of the house. There is a door on the north to a kitchen, and to the work room. Along the north wall, beneath the clerestory windows, are storage cabinets. Through an opening on the north is the work room. The work room has a door on the north to the exterior, with four high windows extending from the door to the end of the room. An opening on the east wall of the work room leads to a small hallway, with storage on one side and a small toilet on the other. The hallway leads into the kitchen. The kitchen has a window on the north wall and a doorway on the east wall, up a step to the north end of the original house.

To the left of the doorway is a brick fireplace projecting into the room. There is a simple wood mantel and brick hearth at the fireplace. A small cupboard is built in to the left of the fireplace. A doorway on the south leads to the studio. The north end room has a doorway on the east wall leading to the front porch. There is a window each side of this door, and a window on the north wall. A doorway on the south wall leads back into the reception room. There is a fireplace, backing up to the one in the kitchen, on the west wall. This fireplace has a cast-iron surround and mantel and a cast-iron surround and grille at the firebox. There is a brick hearth.

2. Flooring: Wide wood boards in three rooms across the front of the original house. Other floors have linoleum covering.
3. Walls and ceiling finish: Walls have been covered with acoustical tile over the original wood board finish. Gypsum board, painted, has been applied to the walls in the rear addition. The kitchen is wall-papered. Ceilings in the original house are beaded wood panel with a cornice molding. There is gypsum board on the studio ceiling also.
4. Doorways and doors: Doors have wood panels, wood surrounds and wood thresholds. Some hardware is original.
5. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: There are space heaters and window air-conditioning units.
 - b. Electrical: Lighting is modern. Some rooms have four-blade ceiling fans.
 - c. Plumbing: Modern plumbing fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house, facing east, is sited in the Old Fort Brown area. There is a levee to the rear of the site. A large landscaped yard with tall trees surrounds the house. These include varieties of palm trees. There is a brick paved walk to the front entrance and around the north side. The Old Fort Brown Bandstand or gazebo is south of the house and a modern museum building is north of it. A concrete sidewalk connects the house to the museum building, which also belongs to the Art League.
2. Outbuilding: Old Fort Brown Bandstand--The wooden bandstand is octagonal, approximately twenty-four feet across. It has a hipped roof with wood shingles and wood columns at the intersections.

There is a third column in the center of each face, as well as at their intersections. A wooden railing with cross-bracing extends between columns around the perimeter at floor level. There is a small opening in the railing, forming an entrance, on the north side. There are three wooden steps leading up to the wood floor. There is a wood ceiling and wood skirting around the base. Below the wood base skirting there is a wood lattice skirting next to the ground.

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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.