

Rafael Garcia Ramirez House  
Main Plaza at Hidalgo Street  
Roma, Texas

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction  
San Francisco, California

RAFAEL GARCIA RAMIREZ HOUSE

Roma, Starr County, Texas

ADDRESS: Main Plaza at Hidalgo Street  
OWNER: Jesus Ramirez  
OCCUPANT: Not occupied.  
USE: Not used.

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PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This residential building was built for Rafael Garcia Ramirez about 1880 by Heinrich Portscheller. The Ramirez family is one of the oldest in the community, having established residency on the north bank of the Rio Grande as early as 1781. The site of Roma was known as Buena Vista in the very early eighteen hundreds, but was known as the Garcia Ranch before 1840. The town was named for a soldier named Roman (when the 'n' was dropped is unknown), and its official date of founding is 1848--though the site itself was occupied much earlier. Roma began to enjoy importance as a steamboat town as early as 1847. Many merchants utilized Roma as a point of transfer between the United States and Mexico during the last half of the nineteenth century, and the prosperity of the community was thus much increased. The excellent architectural examples remaining from this period attest to this prosperity.

Rafael Garcia Ramirez's daughter, Leocadia, married a Madrigal; and the daughter and her husband acquired the property next door to the site (where the hospital now stands). The house eventually passed into the hands of Jesus Ramirez.

A biographical sketch of the architect-builder is of interest. Heinrich Portscheller was born in Germany about 1840. After spending some time with the Prussian army, he presumably deserted with a fellow soldier by the name of Frederick Ellert. Ultimately, the two soldiers found themselves in the port of Vera Cruz, Mexico, about 1865. They were immediately impressed into the Imperial army of Maximilian. It is probable that they were assigned to an extremely mobile unit labeled 'contre-guerillas,' whose duty was the very strenuous activity against Liberal guerilla units in northern Mexico.

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As relations between various European states began to disintegrate on the continent, national groups represented by these countries fighting as allies for Maximilian in Mexico began not only to question the loyalty of each other, but began to concern themselves regarding the support of Maximilian's cause. There was much pressure by agents of General Mariano Escobedo to desert; and, by mid 1866, many Germans were reported to have deserted 'contre-guerilla' units as they moved northward into Tamaulipas. The Liberal General Escobedo hoped to forge deserters into a common fighting unit, feeling that individuals fighting with the threat of a noose about their necks would prove formidable allies against the forces of Maximilian.

It is not known precisely when Ellert and Portscheller deserted, but Ellert is reported as residing in Rio Grande City by early June, 1866; and it seems reasonable that Portscheller was residing in the same neighborhood.

At any rate, both men participated on the Liberal side under General Escobedo in the Battle of Santa Gertrudis, which occurred about two miles east of the village of Camargo on the 15th of June, 1866. This battle resulted in the absolute defeat of the Imperial forces engaged--the participants defeated consisting of about 300 Austrians and 1000 Mexicans. A French garrison occupying the nearby town of Mier during this action made no attempt to succor their allies, but sacked the town of Mier and retreated southward on hearing of the outcome at the battle of Camargo.

Ellert returned to Rio Grande City following the engagement of Camargo, and it is believed that Portscheller came with him. Ellert was married about 1870; and, though he was probably on the Rio Grande, Portscheller's whereabouts are undetermined until we find record of his marriage to Leonarda Campos in Mier about 1879. It is probable that Portscheller developed confidence in others as to his abilities as a 'baumeister' during this unknown period (his age about 30 to 39). The principal brick buildings at Ringgold Barracks were begun in 1869 and completed by 1875. Portscheller was probably employed as a mason in this work.

At any rate, the Portschellers at first resided in Mier (where their first of four children was born in 1881); but by 1883 had moved across the river to Roma, Texas. This probably dates the Rafael Garcia Ramirez House as built shortly after 1881.

In Roma, Portscheller established the very necessary brickyard for the manufacture of a very attractive, salmon buff, sand struck, large (2 3/4 by 4 1/8 by 8 3/4 inches) brick. In partnership with him were a Mr. Margo and a Mr. Perez.

By October 29, 1884, Portscheller had made known his intentions of becoming an American citizen.

Local masons considered it quite an honor to work for Portscheller, and he was never without an abundance of apprentices. One mason interviewed in Rio Grande City (Don Jose Barbosa) worked for Portscheller for three years.

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Don Jose mentioned that Don Enrique (Portscheller) would prepare the plans, make templates for the mouldings, and then the other masons would rub or cut the bricks to the profiles determined. Most of the patterned work on the Rafael Garcia Ramirez House employs the standard shapes, and his intricate mouldings and friezes came later in other structures. Portscheller's handling of scale and proportion must be acknowledged as that of an inspired artist of the highest order.

Two items of interest in terms of construction are as follows. For one thing, fermented cactus juice was used as an additive in the mortar. Leaves of the Petaya (Echinocereus enneacanthus) and the Nopal (Opuntia lindheimeri) were chopped quite finely and allowed to steep for several weeks prior to use. The liquor thus fermented was then mixed into the mortar. This practice is traditional in the nearby Rio Grande City area. No one seems to know its origin or why it was done. Two suggestions are that this acid material will counteract the high saline ('salitre') content of the local soil. The other opinion is that it is a binding agent in the mortar itself. The other item of interest is that lime was burned locally using mesquite as a fuel.

Some of the masons who worked for Portscheller were Placido Palacios, Ensebio Cabazos, Pancho Lopez, Margarto Garza, Adolfo Hinojosa, and Poncio Canales.

In 1894, Portscheller moved his wife and four children to Laredo. He built many houses and cisterns there, an iron bridge in south Laredo, and the old Saint Peter's Church.

About 1900, he went to Monterrey to build buildings for the college, returning to Laredo afterwards. He died in 1915, aged 75, and is buried in the Protestant cemetery at Laredo.

REFERENCES AND SOURCES:

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Barbosa, Don Jose	Mason. Rio Grande City, Texas (personal interview through Jose Jimenez)
Barrera, Cecilio	"Architecture in Roma Between 1871-1883." (Unpublished Roma High School manuscript).
Cox, Cleotilde	Personal interview. Roma, Texas
Elton, J. F.	<u>With the French in Mexico</u> Chapman & Hall. 193 Piccadilly London. 1867.

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Gongora, Filomino	Personal interview. Roma, Texas
Lott, Virgil N., and Martinez, Mercurio	<u>The Kingdom of Zapata</u> The Naylor Company San Antonio, Texas. 1953.
Ramirez, Mario, M. D.	Personal interview. Roma, Texas
Schunior, Mrs. Rene	1907 Lincoln Street, Laredo, Texas (granddaughter of Enrique Portscheller)
Scott, Mrs. Florence Johnson	801 East Main, Rio Grande City, Texas (personal interview and correspondence)

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Architectural Interest and Merit: This structure is of interest to the architect as well as the historian--being a one story brick, Rio Grande town house. The pattern work on the brick parapet implies an excellent knowledge of the design potential of a material as related to a climate which enjoys strong sunlight. The offsets of the doors and windows, the proportions of the double doorways as related to the simple facade can only be the work of a master.

The condition of the fabric is fair, though suggested remodeling to incorporate it into adjacent structures may destroy its architectural significance.

B. Technical Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Fifty eight feet nine inches by sixty feet eleven inches.
2. Foundations. : Unknown. Probably continuous brick bearing on underlying sandstone.
3. Wall construction. Brick bearing wall.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads. None
5. Chimneys. Brick in kitchen area only.
6. Openings. Doorways and doors. Double, five paneled cypress doors in pine frame with barred, glazed transom above. Windows. Double hung with louvred shutters.

7. Roof. Pitched toward patio, and guttered to cistern to collect rain water. Chipichil concrete on wood. Cornice of patterned brick on north (plaza) facade.

C. Technical Description of the Interior.

1. Structure is one room thick adjacent to enclosed patio on south and opens to plaza on north.
2. Stairways. None.
3. Flooring. Pine, matched tongue and groove.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Plastered walls. Beaded pine ceiling with joists exposed.
5. Trim. Wood, not moulded.
6. Hardware. Not significant.
7. Lighting. Original lighting kerosene; has been wired electrically.
8. Heating (fireplaces, stoves, etc.). Excellent built in cooking apparatus of brick and plaster.

D. Site.

1. Orientation. Principal facade opens to north.
2. Enclosures. Brick wall encloses patio (walls are same height as building).
3. Outbuildings. Stables and servants quarters within patio opposite from main house.
4. Walks, driveways, etc. Brick.
5. Landscaping, gardens, etc. None extant. Cistern remains in patio.

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