

HERRERA RUIZ HOUSE
(Blas Herrera)
Garza's Crossing at Medina River
Somerset
Bexar County
Texas

HABS TX-400
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS
FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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HABS No. TX-400

Location: Garza's Crossing at Medina River, Somerset, Bexar County, Texas

UTM Coordinates: Zone 14 Easting 537624 Northing 3239470

Present Owner: Hortense Garza Herrera

Significance: The Blas Herrera House has a dual significance. First, the structure itself is a rare surviving example of a nineteenth-century building type called a *jacal*, a type of vernacular construction found in the American southwest and northern Mexico. *Jacales* such as this one were constructed of local materials by persons of Spanish and Mexican heritage to serve as homes in towns and on ranches from the early eighteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. Only five such *jacales* remain in Bexar County, Texas. Secondly, the home and surrounding site are associated with members of the Ruiz and Herrera families, both important in the region's history and development. Not only did they play an important part in the political leadership of the region (e.g., they were municipal office holders and took part in two wars of independence), but also they were part of the Tejano ranching communities that settled and populated areas of Texas in the nineteenth century. Blas Herrera, one of the most notable residents of the house, is attributed with alerting the defenders of the Alamo of the approaching Mexican army, earning him the nickname "the Paul Revere of the Texas Revolution."

Description: The Blas Herrera House is a *jacal* dwelling that comprises vertical cedar posts at its corners, window and door openings, and at regular intervals along the perimeter. Square nails hold in place cypress lath which is fixed horizontally between the upright cedar posts.¹ The lath forms a crib which is filled with small stones and adobe made from local river clay, straw, and hair. Applied by hand, the adobe still bears the finger impressions of the persons who applied it, especially at the corners. The interior and exterior wall surfaces would have been covered with a lime plaster, maintained and reapplied annually; only remnants of the plaster remain on

¹ There are four general types of *jacal* construction. This particular style is known as a *jacal de leña* or *raja*-style *jacal* for its use of horizontal lath. It comes to Texas via Spain and Mexico, not from Native American *jacales*. See Joe S. Graham, "The *Jacal* in South Texas: The Origins and Forms of a Folk House," in *Hecho en Tejas: Texas-Mexican Folk Arts and Crafts*, ed. Joe S. Graham (Denton, Texas, 1997), pages 293 and 297.

the interior. A chimney made of river stones has collapsed, though the stones remain nearby, and the hearth was level with the floor.

Whereas modifications and additions have transformed the outward appearance of the building, its original construction remains largely unaltered. Based on tax records that indicate expanded farming operations, the structure was probably built between 1845 and 1865 to accommodate longer periods of residence away from San Antonio's town center.²

The center, gable-roof cell of the three-cell structure is the oldest portion of the building; its long axis is roughly oriented north to south. A shed was added onto the west side soon after the original construction was completed, given that it, too, is built as a *jacal*. However, two of its three exterior walls incorporate far more rock and stone than the exterior walls of the original structure, thus they are easy to differentiate from the earliest walls.

Many years later (i.e., during the twentieth century) a porch was added to the building's east side using milled lumber and having a concrete floor. Over an undetermined period, the structure served as a concession stand for dances that were held at the nearby pavilion, and beverages were served through the porch windows. A metal, corrugated roof now covers all three cells, but historic wood shakes are still evident underneath. Clad in Portland cement-based stucco over a metal mesh lath, the exterior is neither historic nor aesthetically appealing. Nonetheless, this contemporary finish has likely mitigated weathering and natural mechanisms of decay.

The Blas Herrera House in 2011 reflects more than a century and a half of adaptive reuse. Importantly, though modifications and additions have transformed the overall size and appearance of the building, the original structure from the mid-nineteenth century remains intact and largely unaltered.

History

Site and building history of ownership

1. **Francisco Ruiz.**³ The site associated with the Blas Herrera House was part of a much larger parcel of land on the north bank of the Medina River that was granted to Francisco Antonio Ruiz on 25

² Assets, including livestock, were taxed, thus the higher tax rates reflect activity that would have demanded more of a regular presence at the site.

³ Francisco Antonio Ruiz (b. 1804/11, d. 1876) was the *alcalde* (mayor) of San Antonio during the first few months of 1836. Just before the Battle of the Alamo he was placed under house arrest by the Mexican general Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. After the battle, Santa Anna obliged him to identify the bodies of James Bowie, W. Barrett Travis, and David Crockett. During the years of the Republic of Texas, Francisco Antonio served as an alderman in San Antonio's municipal government. See Francisco Antonio's eyewitness report reprinted as "The Story of the Fall of the Alamo," *San Antonio Light*, 6 March 1886.

January 1838 as a first-class headright.⁴ He paid fees based on the land's arability and intended use for pasturage and farming. The headright comprised one league and one *labor* of land (equivalent to 4,605 acres). Francisco Antonio had the land formally surveyed later that year, establishing its size and boundaries relative to other, neighboring parcels.⁵

2. **John Twohig.**⁶ In two separate transactions of 1844, Francisco Antonio sold his entire headright to John Twohig. The first sale was a parcel of 3,805 acres for \$50., the second, 800 acres, for \$1000.⁷ John Twohig owned the land for just under a year.
3. **Maria Antonia Ruiz.** On 26 March 1845, John Twohig sold to Maria Antonia Ruiz eight hundred acres of her brother's original headright for \$1,000.⁸ Though Maria Antonia was married at the time, the land was sold and conveyed to her alone; her husband's name does not appear on the deed. In December of 1883, Maria Antonia had the land surveyed and divided into portions.⁹ Starting early in 1884, she began to deed the land to her children with Blas Herrera.¹⁰ The *jacal* structure would have been built and expanded during the early part of this period.

⁴ Bexar County Clerk's Office, Spanish Archives (hereafter BC-Spanish Archives), Headright Record 1 (25 January 1838), pages 1 and 10. Such a land grant was based upon a number of conditions which were affirmed by acquaintances and witnesses. Recipients of headrights were required to have been resident citizens of the former Mexican state of Coahuila and Texas and could not be of "African blood." The land itself was granted by the Republic of Texas through a Board of Land Commissioners constituted by each county. The headrights were known by their certificate number (i.e., by the order in which the headrights were recorded in a book by commissioners).

⁵ BC-Spanish Archives, Book A1, page 38 (11 September 1838). Once the land was surveyed, it became known by its survey number (in this case, 47, Section 2). Subsequent official county maps (i.e., those of 1868, 1871, and 1868) refer to the property by its number (47) and owner (F.A. Ruiz or Fran. A Ruiz). See B-C Spanish Archives, Historical Maps, Texas General Land Office, Maps of Bexar County of 1868, July 1871, and 1878.

⁶ John Twohig (1806-1891) was an Irish merchant and, later, banker who settled in San Antonio around 1830. By the time of the War of Texas Independence he supported other Americans, Texans, and Mexicans who rebelled against the authority of the Mexican government. He participated in the siege of Bexar in 1835 and was captured in 1842 when Mexico tried to seize portions of the Republic of Texas.

⁷ See BC-Spanish Archives, Book B2, pages 247-249 (13 April 1844).

⁸ Just over a month after Francisco Antonio sold the 800-acre parcel of land to John Twohig, Blas Herrera and Maria Antonia sold a portion of her inheritance from her father that was located south of San Antonio. See BC-Spanish Archives, Book B2, pages 271-272 (22 May 1844). The two transactions, whereby Maria Antonia and John Twohig each sold to one another a piece of land with the same value, allowed each to swap land that he or she desired for a parcel that he or she did not.

⁹ The complete field notes of the survey of 1883 are not extant. A sketch of the survey, however, was included in some of the deeds in which Maria Antonia conveyed the land to her children.

¹⁰ Although the house is most strongly associated with Blas Herrera, there is no evidence that Blas ever owned the land on which it sits. The property records only point to his wife Maria Antonia Ruiz as the owner, which is consistent with a strong tradition of female land ownership in Texas under both Spanish and Mexican control.

4. **Jose Maria Herrera.** In February of 1884, Maria Antonia deeded to her son Jose Maria portion number four, the land on which sits the Herrera Ruiz House.¹¹
5. **Sophia Herrera Langevin and Adolph (Adolfo) Casias Herrera.** Adolph Herrera, son of Jose Maria and his wife Josefa Perez, was killed in 1914. Their children, Sophia and Adolph Casias Herrera, grew up on the family land with their mother and grandfather. In the 1930s, a family dispute over land ownership resulted in a lawsuit. Its settlement in 1937 resulted in the court setting aside for Sophia and Adolph Casias a tract of thirty acres which included the Herrera Ruiz House.¹² In 1964, their uncle Tomás (against whom the lawsuit had been brought in 1937) quitclaimed an additional thirty acres. Sophia took possession of the acreage recently given up by their uncle, whereas Adolph Casias inherited the land he former shared with his sister and on which the family home still stood.
6. **Hortense Garza Herrera.** Upon the death of her husband in 1999, Hortense Garza Herrera inherited Adolph Casias's inheritance from his great-grandparents, which included both the family home and some of the acreage first granted to Francisco Antonio Ruiz in 1838.

Historian: Jennifer Speed, Ph.D., 2011

Project

Information:

This historical report, along with the photographs and measured drawings that accompany it, were prepared as part of a graduate architectural course at the University of Texas at San Antonio under the direction of Sue Ann Pemberton, FAIA. Participants included: John James, Courtney Widacki, Adriana Muñoz, Jaime Jiménez, Robert Gonzalez, and Jennifer Speed. This documentation project was undertaken in response to ever-expanding development around the city of San Antonio that threatens farm and ranch properties and historic structures. It was submitted to the 2011 Peterson Prize competition.

¹¹ BC-Spanish Archives, Book 346, pages 140-141 (2 February 1884). A sketch of the survey of Maria Antonia's land that indicates Jose Maria's portion and those of his siblings may be found in another deed, that which grants land to his brother Francisco. See BC-Spanish Archives, Book 32, pages 611-613 (2 February 1884).

¹² Bexar County Deed Records, Vol. 2504, pages 537-542 (10 September 1837).