

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

ROMA HISTORIC DISTRICT

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: ROMA HISTORIC DISTRICT

Other Name/Site Number: Rancho de Buena Vista; Buena Vista; Garcías

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: USGS Quad, Roma-Los Sáenz West Not for publication:_____

City/Town: Roma Vicinity:_____

State: TX County: Starr Code: 427 Zip Code: 78584

3. CLASSIFICATION

OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY
Private: X
Public-local: X
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

CATEGORY OF PROPERTY
Building(s):
District: X
Site:
Structure:
Object:

NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY

Table with 2 columns: Contributing and Noncontributing. Rows include counts for buildings, sites, structures, objects, and Total.

NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER: Indeterminate; NRHP Roma District Nomination (1972) highlighted 12 properties within a 15 block area with all other contributing/non-contributing structures not defined.

NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING:

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Domestic

Commerce/Trade
Government
ReligionLandscape
TransportationSub: Single Dwelling
Multiple Dwelling
Store/Warehouse
City Hall/Custom House/Post Office
Religious Structure/Church-related
Residence
Plaza/Street Furniture (walls)
Road & Pedestrian-related (bridge to
Mexico)
Wharf SiteCurrent: As Above
Vacant/Not in Use

Sub: As above

7. DESCRIPTIONARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: Mexican Vernacular
Neoclassical
Queen Anne (applied details)**MATERIALS:**

Foundation:

Walls: Stone/Brick/Wood

Roof: Brick/Wood

Other: Steel (bridge)

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**SUMMARY**

The Roma site, characterized by high sandstone bluffs and an ancient river crossing at the Arroyo de San Pedro, accented a southwest-to-northeast trade route from an area of large dried salt lakes to the near north. Roma offered first a ford, then a ferry, and finally a bridge for commercial river crossings. The northeastern banks of the Río Grande at the San Pedro Arroyo are characterized by two arroyos, the Roma Arroyo, which most directly continued the trade route fostered by the Arroyo de San Pedro, and the Arroyo de los Negros to the northwest. The town was also historically the head of east-west navigation on the Río Grande, with steamboats docking at Roma from about 1829 into the 1880s. Roma's historic wharf site and two river crossings remain today.

Roma contains outstanding examples of the ethnic building technologies of the Lower Río Grande, technologies derived directly from 18th-century traditions of Northern Mexico. Influenced by the architecture of its sister city of Mier across the river (Scott: 1970, p. 40) and by the architecture of Guerrero Viejo, Mexico, further upriver, Roma showcases buildings in river sandstone, *caliche* limestone and molded brick. Masons used both *rejoneado* and *sillar* techniques in Roma. *Rejoneado* distributes compressive loads through a strategic patterning of large and small stones, while *sillar* employs cut *caliche* in an ashlar technique. Sandstone and limestone buildings are covered with a rough textured lime plaster offset by pastel-tinted bands in smooth plaster, a treatment reminiscent of Northern Mexico.

Brick masonry also evolved into a sophisticated industry in Mier-Roma through the talents of German immigrant master-builder Enrique (Heinrich) Portscheller. Portscheller is credited with bringing the technology of flat brick roofing from Monterrey to Mier, and successively for developing a highly sophisticated decorative molded brick used in Mier, Roma, Río Grande City, and Laredo. Portscheller's buildings additionally featured wrought-iron balconies, with detailing reminiscent of not only Monterrey, but of New Orleans. Portscheller's well proportioned and intricately detailed brick architecture enhanced the complexity and sophistication of the masonry construction of Roma. Marrying into a Mexican family in Mier in the 1870s, Portscheller lived in Roma during most of his active years as a master builder, and it is only in Roma that a concentration of his unique molded brick buildings remain.

Sandstone and brick were the principal building materials used along the Lower Río Grande in the early 19th century, unlike Hispanic Southern California where *adobe* was the norm. *Jacales* and *adobes* were common throughout New Spain, with *jacales* (one-room huts constructed from a post-supported framing system of horizontal poles infilled with stone, clay and fibrous rubble) always a peasant house-type and with *adobes* found throughout the

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range of social classes. Along the Lower Río Grande, *jacales* and *adobes* were usually for a first settlement or modest use, and in Roma *adobes* continued to be used as storage rooms for several of the community's stone and brick houses. Numbers of other-use outbuildings are noted for almost every Roma lot, in a variety of stone, brick and frame construction. No *adobes* remain today in Roma, reflective of their minimal historic importance in the community.

Roma had its major civic orientation around the plaza, with its primary commercial area along Juarez Avenue to the southeast. A wharf at the foot of Juarez dominated the trade and shipping district. Another commercial area focused on a second river crossing at Zaragoza Avenue near the historic customs house. The corner of Zaragoza and Estrella, in particular, offered a major pair of walled enclosures. Commercial enterprises varied from large in scale to modest, with several stores along both Hidalgo and Estrella Streets northwest of the plaza. General stores, warehouses, groceries, meat markets, a cobbler, a confectionery, and a hide shed characterized the businesses of the thriving community.

The Sanborn Insurance Company mapped 78 major buildings in an approximately 12-block area of Roma in 1894. Representative of a long period of construction beginning in the 1820s, 43 of these buildings were of stone construction, 27 of brick and eight of wood frame. Sandstone was the main material of the 1820s-70s, with brick carrying forward the earlier tradition during the 1880s and 1890s. Wood-frame construction was minor. It was introduced by Anglo merchant-settlers during the 1850s. Many of the buildings had thatch roofs, although a substantial number of the structures were noted as having "brick" roofs. In the Sanborn context, the brick roof annotation referenced two indigenous permanent roofing systems of Northern Mexico and the Lower Río Grande: flat, square-shaped tile-bricks set in multiple layers on timber decking and *chipichil*, a lime concrete-and-pea gravel aggregate poured several inches thick also atop timber decking. Additionally, Sanborn mappers labeled a few of the frame buildings specifically as *jacales*. Six small *adobe* structures were also included in the surveyed blocks.

The built environment at the near-turn of the century was characterized by walled compounds of five to ten feet in height. Several of the compounds featured a combined domestic-commercial use, with overscaled gateways in the high walls; others were solely commercial or residential. Several of the enclosures covered two full town lots, leaving the greatest proportion of the land as open courtyards and focusing the buildings inward in the traditional Hispanic-Moorish pattern. Although most often a single structure with aggregate additions in an ell plan occupied the enclosure, in several cases as many as three separate dwellings were within the walls of one compound.

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Roma's convent grounds offset at the head of the plaza were also walled, but were the only enclosure in Roma with relatively low, five-foot screens. Facing southwest, the church functioned as an axial focus for the plaza, with residential and commercial higher-walled compounds lining the sides of the open space. The largest family compounds centered on the plaza and its immediate blocks. Wrought-iron balconies, as well as *banquetas* (discontinuous sidewalk platforms constructed of a built-up earth faced with brick), highlighted many individual buildings.

In 1925 the Sanborn Insurance Company mapped Roma a second time, with coverage of the identical 12-block area. Little had significantly changed in Roma's built landscape. Continuous unrest and agrarian revolt in northern Mexico affected the entire Río Grande border region, with little building activity during the intensely disturbed 1900-20 years. Although approximately 22 wood-frame, eight brick and two stone structures had been added to the town, only four frame, one brick and eight stone buildings had been lost, making the community of nearly equal stone and brick construction with many of the buildings pre-dating 1894. (Several of the stone structures did still remain as fire ruins.)

Modernization had occurred to an extent with the removal of all six *adobes*. Neither *jacales* nor thatch roofs were specifically called out by the Sanborn surveyors. Notably, all walled enclosures remained. Sanborn continued to annotate the balconies as present, but made no notation of the *banquetas*, although these are still present today. Finally, it should be noted that the 1925 Sanborn maps characterized Roma as replete with numerous open spaces, even outside the walled family compounds. These spaces reflect a dominant historic profile for the town.

Roma buildings post-1900 are mostly of modest, wood-frame type, today largely altered, and are concentrated in the northwestern part of the town. They were built for residential use, with most vernacular in design and construction. Only two Queen Anne wood-frame houses, an identical pair, were built in Roma at the turn of the century along the east-west military and trade route between neighboring towns on the northern shore of the Río Grande. At the edge of Roma, and of non-Hispanic derivation, these ca. 1900-20 wood-frame buildings have been excluded from the proposed historic district.

The international bridge crossing to Ciudad Miguel Alemán (San Pedro) completed the commercial and historic development of Roma, symbolizing the significance of the continuous ties between the two banks of the Río Grande. Built in 1928 at the Arroyo de San Pedro (Paso de la Mula), the bridge is at the centuries-old principal river ford and ferry point, and, as a visually and historically significant feature of the Roma site, is included in the historic district along with the adjacent ca. 1829-80s wharf site, bluffs, and customs house vicinity.

Roma remains today, within the boundaries of its historic district, much as it did in 1900, with numerous buildings, open spaces, walls and *banquetas* characteristic of the 19th-century

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period of its bi-national evolution. (Archaeological sites tied to Indian encampments and trade route activity, Hispanic frontier ranches and earlier religious-civic settlement may exist within the district boundaries. These archeological aspects, however, have not been investigated.)

INVENTORY

Of the 38 contributing properties, three are public-commercial spaces, 16 are stone buildings (ca. 1829-1870s), and 19 are brick buildings (ca. 1880s-1900). Sandstone and brick construction is chronologically sequential in Roma, generally, and the entire period of historic occupation is well represented. Contributing features are generally those intact buildings that were constructed between c. 1829 and 1900.

Individual Buildings and Blocks

Historic Roma had several distinct community areas: the plaza with its surrounding religious, commercial and familial compounds; the southeastern wharf site and related warehouses and businesses; the west/northwestern customs house commercial area adjacent to a 19th-century ferry crossing; and the northwestern residential sector.

(1) The Plaza Area

The wide, open-ended plaza facing Mexico and the Río Grande dominates the formal layout of Roma, with the tower of the Catholic church of 1853 axially at its head. The merchant-princes of Roma nearly all lived on or near the plaza, beginning at the close of the Mexican-American War and continuing until and beyond the turn of the 20th century. Walled family compounds for the Vale-García family, the Cox family, the Ramírez family, the Guerra family, and the Sáenz family define the lower plaza at the river, spreading a partial block to the southeast and northwest along Hidalgo Street [historically, 2nd Street]. The plaza-facing compounds also included the core retail businesses of Roma, dominated by the Guerra Store during the town's mature years.

Contributing properties in the plaza neighborhood include map reference #s A (the plaza), 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25.

(2) The Wharf Area

The area along Hidalgo Street and extending northeastwards up Juarez to Estrella Street [historically, 3rd Street] focused upon access and trade activities at Roma's wharf. The Arroyo Roma to the near southeast bracketed the high bluffs of Roma's townsite, with the Arroyo de San Pedro reflecting the drainage of the San Juan River to the southwest across the Río Grande. The two arroyos characterized a major ancient and historic crossing of the Río Grande, mapped as the Paso de la Mula by the mid-18th

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century. Docking facilities for river- and steamboats existed at the foot of Juarez at the Río Grande, and in the early 20th century the Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán Bridge made the crossing a permanent feature of the landscape.

Contributing properties in the wharf neighborhood, mainly warehouses and stores, include map reference #s B (the wharf site) and C (the Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán Bridge), 6, 7, 8, 9, 15, 16, and 17.

(3) Customs House Area

The Lincoln and Water Street streetscapes, extending northeastward and northwestward from the customs house at the Río Grande, as well as the block of Estrella (historically, 3rd Street) between Lincoln and Zaragoza, is a distinct area of Roma.

A mix of commercial and domestic buildings, these blocks are dominated by one-story, stone construction of the ca. 1870s, with a single 1884 two-story, brick familial compound at the corner of Zaragoza and Estrella. Roma's customs house was strategically sited at the highest point on the river bluff. As ranch lands were historically in the vicinity, the hide shed, in the customs house neighborhood, was also an important building.

Contributing properties in the customs house neighborhood include map reference #s 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, and 35.

(4)Northwestern Zone

To the northwest adjacent to Zaragosa Street is a cluster of modest dwellings that characterize another area of the community.

The arroyo at the foot of Zaragoza Street is a significant topographical feature, and is a component of the larger Arroyo de los Negros bracketing the high bluffs of Roma to the northwest. Mirroring the Arroyo Hondo south of the Río Grande (offset to the west), the Arroyo de los Negros served as the north shore of the drainage area and as a subsequent secondary ferry crossing. Most of the westernmost Roma houses have been significantly altered and most of the area, although acknowledged as related to the core of the town immediately adjacent, is not included in the Roma Historic District.

CONTRIBUTING BUILDINGS AND FEATURES

Three features contribute to the historic district as components of the larger defining landscape: the plaza, the wharf site and the bridge crossing. These are identified as map reference #s A, B and C. Following their discussion are entries for 35 individual contributing buildings, identified as map reference #s 1-35. Most buildings are identified with circa dates tied to known historic events, building technologies and building size. In cases where a date of construction is pinpointed, supportive documents exist in the Starr County courthouse.

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**A) Convento Avenue (Roma Plaza) [Contributing]
ca. 1829/40s-50s**

The ecclesiastical-civic plaza for Roma is a wide, open-ended public street with a terminus at the 1853 Catholic church on Estrella Street (originally 3rd Street). Two blocks in length and facing Mexico, generally southwest toward the Río Grande, the plaza was originally unpaved and is faced with several of the town's most elaborate walled compounds. Houses and commercial establishments along the plaza date to the ca. 1848-1885 years. Although Americans arrived in Roma immediately at the close of the Mexican-American War, these merchants, lawyers and politicians invariably married into long-established wealthy Mexican families already in residence at Mier, Camargo and on the surrounding ranchos. The Roma mission earlier established by priests from Mier in ca. 1829-40 is offset to the northwest at the head of the plaza, west of the plaza-dominating mid-19th church built by the Oblate Fathers. Today the plaza is paved, with its brick surfacing and landscaping added in the 1980s; these changes do not fundamentally alter its appearance or function.

**B) Wharf Site [Contributing]
Foot of Juarez at the Río Grande
ca. 1829-86**

The Roma wharf site tentatively dates from Henry Austin's exploration and surveying of the Río Grande in 1829-30. Austin mapped the river at the Roma location, annotating his survey with the delineation of a building on the Roma bluffs. Austin commented on the lack of a landing at Mier, and initiated trade between Camargo (just east and south of the Roma site) and Matamoros on the Gulf of Mexico. Mapped as inhabited, the Roma site controlled the long-established river crossing at the Arroyo de San Pedro, and thus a docking at Roma would have extended trade beyond Camargo by river and then by land through the Arroyo de San Pedro to the road into Mier along the southern banks of the Río Grande. Austin's pilot, Alpheus Rackliffe, stayed on the river after Austin's departure in 1830, establishing a keelboat freighting business between Laredo and the Gulf during the following decade. Steamboats became prominent on the Río Grande after 1846, and with the boundary changes determined by the Mexican-American War the Roma wharf achieved importance as the reliable head of Río Grande navigation on the American side. Steamboats regularly docked at Roma into the 1880s.

**C) Roma-Miguel Alemán Steel Suspension Bridge [Contributing]
George Elmer Cole, Engineer
J.E. Pate, Builder: Starr County Bridge Company & Compañía del
Puente de San Pedro de Roma
Bravo Street at the Río Grande
1928**

Constructed during the late 1920s, the 700-foot-long steel suspension bridge spanning the Río Grande between Roma, Texas,

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and Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas, Mexico, features twin steel vertical-member towers anchoring each end of the structure. Towers are set in concrete piers with concrete abutments. Four suspension cable anchor cellars contain six steel cables, per cellar, anchored to concrete-embedded U-bolts. A total of 62 pairs of suspender rods carry the loading from deck to cables. Roadway carried by the span is 16 feet wide, with only very light loading anticipated. A acceptable live load of 100,000 pounds, maximum, indicates intended primary historic use for pedestrians, animals and animal-pulled wagons, with only minimal vehicular use. The bridge is in good condition and can be used, although a more modern highway bridge has been constructed that permits auto and truck traffic to bypass it.

The Roma-Miguel Alemán bridge is representative of the final years of the middle period of American suspension bridge building and technology. It is also the last surviving international suspension bridge on the Río Grande. Pioneering work with metal wire suspension bridges characterized the 1830s forward, with the first long suspension bridge built in 1849. The Brooklyn Bridge, a landmark structure in the continued evolution, was completed in 1883.

The bridge at Roma was in a category constructed at relatively remote locations with minimal equipment. A local surveyor or engineer usually took responsibility for these bridges, calculating engineering needs for what were invariably anticipated to be light loads, based on the length of the main span and the suspended dead load per linear foot of bridge.

George Elmer Cole (1882-1955), the engineer who built the Roma-Miguel Alemán Bridge, began his career working as a draftsman for the Midland Bridge Company of Kansas City, Kansas, at the turn of the century. His first work included bridges in Kansas, Missouri and Arkansas. Later he operated a consulting engineer practice in Houston and was responsible for the design and construction of the Río Grande bridges erected at Mercedes, Roma and Hidalgo during the 1920s. At the close of the decade Cole designed and constructed the Royal Gorge bridge and incline at Canyon City, Colorado. During the 1930s he continued as an engineering consultant, with bridges at Orange-Port Arthur and Brazoria-East Columbia, Texas, and with a causeway connecting Galveston Island to the mainland. In semi-retirement during the 1940s, Cole built ships in Galveston during World War II and at the end of his career returned to the Lower Río Grande for repair work on his bridges of the 1920s there. His work crews were Mexican.

**1) Stone House [Contributing]
nw corner, Convent and Water Streets
(Calle del Río/1st Street)
Block 1, Lot 1
ca. 1840s (or earlier)**

The one-story, sandstone dwelling, now in ruins, faces the Río Grande. Sanborn Insurance maps of both 1894 and 1925 note a rear

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(north) wood-frame room addition. By 1894, the roof is delineated as shingle in type, with lot 1 enclosed by six- and seven-foot walls substantially open toward the river. By 1853 a second, larger house (map reference #2), oriented toward the plaza, existed on the lot within the walled compound. Significant portions of the enclosing wall facing the plaza are extant, with some river-facing wall still standing as well. Plaza-facing *banqueta* is also extant. Possibly the owner of the second house, John Vale, also built this first, smaller dwelling. Such a sequence is suggested by the single walled compound. Vale may have been part of a northern European colonization effort of the 1841-44 years on the Río Grande. (See discussion under map reference #2.)

**2) John Vale/Noah Cox House [Contributing]
101 Convent Street (Main Plaza)
Block 1, Lot 1
1853**

John Vale, an immigrant from Sweden, built the two-story, sandstone dwelling in 1853. Traditional Swedish building practices may have influenced the siting, proportions and original design, which are unusual in Roma. The date of Vale's arrival on the Río Grande is unknown, but in late 1842 Captain Victor Pirson had signed a contract for the Belgian government with Texas President Houston, intending to colonize 1000 Belgians, Hollanders and Swiss along the river. Vale's presence in Roma may date to the Republic of Texas' foreign colonization laws for the Río Grande of 1841-44, with Texas particularly interested in the land in the vicinity of the salt beds north of Roma from 1839 forward. (See discussion under map reference #1.)

In 1856, Noah Cox bought the building. Cox operated a mercantile business with the New Orleans firm of Staderker & Mecklinburger on the ground floor, living in the quarters above. The original roof is of flat *chipichil* type, today hidden. By the 1894 Sanborn mapping, the Vale-Cox house had been updated with a neoclassical Colonial Revival shingled hip roof with a plaza-facing dormer. The framing for this presumably second roof is of milled lumber with square-cut nails and is clearly visible in the attic space. A partial redesign of the front facade and the addition of a brick chimney may have taken place at the same time the roof was added. Parts of the front wall were rebuilt in brick in order to insert wood beams on which to cantilever a decorative wrought-iron balcony. The two symmetrically placed ground-floor doorways, now in traditional Mexican configuration, have also been rebuilt. It is not known whether they were changed or simply reconstructed in the original design. Addition of the balcony likely dates to the 1880s, paralleling similar additions to plaza buildings originally constructed in the 1850s and reflective of the molded brick and wrought iron popularized in Roma by Enrique Portschteller. (See map reference #s 2 and 13.)

Thus, the original structure was of simple vernacular northern

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Mexican type, stone in construction; in the late 19th century the building acquired brick and wrought-iron details characteristic of the later period but still subordinated to a Mexican aesthetic. Only the turn of the century Colonial Revival roof superimposed an element of Anglo-American style.

Today the wall around the property is partially collapsed and the earlier, smaller stone house (map reference #1) facing the river at the lot corner is in ruins. The gateway into the compound collapsed in the early 1970s and has been removed. A small, rectangular board-and-batten, gable-roofed structure of round-nail construction sits at the back (northwest) of the lot. This structure is vacant.

3) John Vale/Leocadia Leandro García House**[Contributing]****102 Convent Street (ne corner, Convent and Water Streets)****Block 7, Lots 1 and 2****ca. 1850s**

Built by John Vale, the two-story, sandstone dwelling combined commercial use on its ground floor with residential use above. The structure appears to be nearly contemporary with its neighbor across the plaza, a structure also built by Vale. Roma's wharf was to the immediate southeast.

No documentation exists supportive of exact, sequential dating for the two Vale dwellings: the Vale-García house is of more traditional Mexican type for the period and may reflect the influence of the García family into which Vale married. A lime stucco sheathes the air-hardened, locally quarried sandstone. The roof was originally *chipichil*, but is now replaced in metal.

The Vale-García house faces the plaza with symmetrical, three-bay design of extreme austerity. Three entries detailed by simple banded surrounds highlight the facade on the first floor, with a centered balcony bracketed by two windows on the second floor. Wrought-iron railing remains in place for the balcony. The river (south) facade of the dwelling is also simple in its detail, with centered lower and upper entries; the second-story double door opens out onto a second wrought-iron balcony. The rear (east) facade maintains the building's overall design with both stories featuring a window/window/door rhythm. Again the second-story doorway opens out onto a balcony.

Sanborn Insurance maps of 1894 and 1925 denote several key features of the historic property. The maps delineate a balcony in ell configuration for the plaza and river facades. This balcony were likely added in the 1880s, similar to balcony renovations for other mid-century buildings on the plaza. (See map reference #s 1 and 13.) The two centered balconies extant on the facades today are a subsequent modification. The Vale-García

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dwelling occupied a double lot with ell-wall enclosure of eight-foot height noted along the northeast and southeast. No walls are noted along the river or plaza facades.

The Vale-García structure was described as a general store; at some later point the building is known to have been converted to a dance hall. Today the property's enclosing walls are partially collapsed, but with the compound's configuration clear. The structure is vacant.

**4) Stone House/City Hall Annex [Contributing]
306 Calle del Río (Water Street)
Block 1, Lots 2 and 3
ca. 1840s-50s**

The sandstone house located at 306 Water Street is a small, rectangular structure with frame gable roof. The building is the converted first floor of a two-story stone dwelling mapped at the site by Sanborn in 1894 and 1925. The original house featured a flat *chipichil* roof, which was removed at the time of the structure's conversion from a residence to other use. By 1894, and through at least 1925, the two-lot property was fully walled on its northwest, northeast and southeast frontages, with the viewshed toward the Río Grande shown as substantially open. Walls were of six- and seven-foot height. An *adobe* outbuilding was also on the property, in the center of the nearly square compound. Mapped in 1894, the *adobe* structure possibly served as an above-ground cellar or storage room; the unit was gone by 1925.

A centered door accents the river facade, with no fenestration. Partial signage reading "City Hall" is still visible on the door. Today the building is functioning as storage space, and is in poor condition.

The stone dwelling was one of the earlier two-story structures in Roma. Neighboring stone houses to the immediate east on the plaza date to the 1840s and 1850s; this building, in particular, was of similar size and plan to that of the Vale/Cox house at 101 Convent (on the northwestern face of the plaza; map reference #2), with a property size identical to that of the second Vale house at 102 Convent (on the southeastern face of the plaza; map reference #3). The compound's walls are removed today, but the configuration of the historic enclosed space is still clear.

**5) Stone House [Contributing]
603 Hidalgo Street (historically 2nd Street)
Block 7, Lot 6
ca. 1840s-70s**

The combined stone, brick and frame house located on the south side of Hidalgo Street (2nd Street) between Convent and Juarez Avenues retains its original one-story sandstone core dwelling. Sanborn Insurance maps of 1894 and 1925, as well as current field inspection, indicate that several rooms were added before the

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turn of the century, defining an ell configuration. By the 1894 mapping a long rectangular stone dwelling faced directly onto Hidalgo Street, with stone *banqueta* in place along the building's main facade. A small rear brick room addition continued the house in an ell plan. The roof was noted as shingle.

By 1925 the dwelling underwent further wood-frame room and porch additions to the rear, with a free-standing single-car frame garage also on the property. Sometime after 1925, but likely before 1930, a partial second story was added to the residence. Built in frame, the second story is detailed in late bungalow aesthetics and features gable roof, moderate overhanging eaves, knee-brace brackets, narrow notched bargeboards, multi-bevel siding in the gable end and a partially embedded offset gable porch supported by thickly proportioned wood-frame piers. Fenestration is of bungalow type, and includes banked 1/1 double-hung units as well as 8/1 double-hung and casement units.

Although bungalow aesthetics dominate the residence today, the core stone dwelling is an early Roma structure and contributes to the historic building stock for the community. The property's *banqueta* also still exists, now covered in concrete. Originally configured steps, toward Juarez, define the east edge of the building's facade. Sited on lot 6 of block 7, the dwelling was not walled in 1894, with adjacent lots 3, 4 and 7 mapped as open space. Lots 3 and 4 fronted the Roma wharf, and were historically maintained as open space with only a small wood-frame store present in the southeastern corner of the double-lot area in 1925; this structure is now gone.

**6)Rodriguez House/Warehouse [Contributing]
ne corner, Hidalgo and Juarez Streets
Block 7, Lot 5
ca. 1830s-90s**

The one-story combined cut *caliche* (limestone) and brick building located at the southwest corner of Hidalgo and Juarez Streets is strongly evocative of Roma's early civic development and evolutionary vernacular architectural traditions. The 1894 Sanborn Insurance map delineates a modest, rectangular stone structure with single-room brick-and-frame additions toward the river (rear). The building was in use as a dwelling. By 1925, the stone structure had been enlarged to the northwest, fully covering its lot along Hidalgo.

Although not mapped by Sanborn, the actual construction of the building is of combined large limestone blocks at the base and molded brick above. The unusual paired construction suggests that the earliest structure on site was in ruins by the turn of the century. The Rodriguez Warehouse is the only extant Roma building constructed from limestone blocks using the *sillar* technique. Limestone construction is evocative of very early Mier building technology; all other Roma stone buildings are of sandstone construction. This unique situation in materials and construction technology, in conjunction with the structure's

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location very near Roma's wharf, suggests that this building may be among the earliest in the town.

Subsequent to the property's first use, a molded brick cornice was added to the simple facade and sheathed in lime plaster. Molded brick appears in Roma during the 1880s and 1890s, and is associated with the work of master builder Portscheller. The Hidalgo primary facade is of simple, symmetrical three-bay type, with three doorways detailed by shallow segmental upper arches opening into a single interior warehouse space. As photographed in 1971, doorways included transoms detailed with round metal bars. Although not noted on the Sanborns, a stone *banqueta* exists at the Juarez (east) end of the structure with steps descending the hillside street to the historic Roma wharf on the Río Grande. Remnants of advertising lettering remain on the building, including most of the name "Rodriguez." The structure is vacant today and rapidly deteriorating.

**7)Nestor Sáenz Store [Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
se corner, Hidalgo and Juarez Streets
Block 12, Lot 1
1884**

Designed and constructed by builder Enrique Portscheller, the Nestor Sáenz store is a one-story brick structure of ell configuration. Exterior primary (Juarez) and secondary (Hidalgo) facades feature a complex molded-brick cornice, corner pilasters and door surrounds of classical vocabulary. The Juarez facade is three bays with an irregular arrangement of doors, while the Hidalgo facade is four-bay with a single door per bay. Interior spaces are arranged as two large rooms, with an end-wall chimney on the east facade. The roof is of flat brick type. The wording "Nestor Sáenz" is detailed into the Juarez cornicework in molded brick. A shallow basement exists beneath the structure, with flooring largely collapsed. An ell-configured brick *banqueta* extends around the Hidalgo and Juarez facades of the building. The store is sited with direct access to the Río Grande historic wharf at the foot of Juarez Street. Immediately abutting the 1894 and 1925 blocks of Roma mapped by the Sanborn Insurance Company, the Sáenz Store was omitted from recordation for reasons unknown.

The structure is of key significance to the historic district through not only its sophisticated architectural treatment, but also through its association with one of the community's founding families, the Sáenzes. The building is at the edge of the historic district and is currently vacant.

**8)Masonry House/Warehouse [Contributing]
202 Juarez Street
Block 11, Lot 1
ca. 1860s-90s**

The complexly configured masonry structure located at the

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northeast corner of Hidalgo and Juarez Streets is today modified on its exterior, but remains valuable historic building stock for the Roma wharf neighborhood. The original core building contains three offset rooms in an asymmetrical U plan, and may be of a combined stone and brick construction. The historic function was likely commercial, tied to wharf access at the foot of Juarez. Tall, narrowly proportioned fenestration with upper segmental brick arch detailing, as well as tall, narrow transomed entries proportionally resemble the doorways of the Rodriguez Warehouse diagonally to the immediate southwest. The original roof is also partially visible under today's composite frame roof: the historic roof is flat, likely of tile brick or *chipichil* construction. The U plan suggests possible historic use as a warehouse, with the street-accessible courtyard a loading dock feature.

Sited to the immediate southeast of the Sanborn mapped blocks of Roma, the building, like the Nestor Sáenz Store directly across Hidalgo, is outside insurance delineations of 1894 and 1925. Exterior stylistic alterations, with probable conversion to domestic use, appear to date to the 1915-25 period. Stuccoing and arched gable treatment on the Juarez facade make simplified reference to both the late Mission Revival and the vernacular Deco. The structure is currently lived in and appears in good condition, with several small outbuildings on the property. A high brick-faced *banqueta* wraps the corner site.

9) Brick House/Store [Contributing]
201 Juarez Street
Block 8, Lot 4
ca. 1895-99

The one-story, nearly square brick structure located to the north of the northwest corner of Hidalgo and Juarez Streets is today slightly modified from its historic configuration and appearance. Not mapped by Sanborn in 1894, the building is likely of late 1890s construction. The Juarez facade features two centered tall narrow doors, each with transom detailed in round metal bars. The 1925 Sanborn delineated two structures on site: a simple one-story frame store (with porch) facing Hidalgo and a deep-set brick dwelling (also with frame porch) facing Hidalgo and abutting the street structure. A frame veranda was mapped for the brick house on Juarez. The Hidalgo-facing frame store is no longer extant, with both Hidalgo-facing porch and Juarez-facing veranda removed from the brick building on site. An entry porch of later date has replaced the historic veranda. Today the building features a truncated hip roof with narrow boxed eaves: this roof likely replaces or sheathes one of traditional flat type. A faded paper advertisement is mounted at the northeast corner of the Juarez facade, reading "Gonzalez Food Mart." The structure is currently vacant, but appears in good condition.

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**10) Antonia Sáenz House [Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
Hidalgo Street, north side between Convent and Juarez Avenues
Block 8, Lot 3
1884**

The one-story brick dwelling located on Hidalgo Street is finely detailed with Portscheller-signature classical motifs. Configured as an ell, the house faces southwest with a symmetrical four-bay primary facade. Molded-brick cornice, corner pilasters and door surrounds accent the building. The roof is of flat tile-brick type. The main living space has brick flooring. Both this room and the kitchen also feature fireplaces. To the rear a long ell wing functions as the west wall of the compound, divided into two rooms and a rearmost stable. The stable is elegantly detailed with three round arched openings, and is further delineated with classical piers and pilasters. The lot is entirely walled along the northeast and southeast, although Sanborn Insurance maps of 1894 and 1925 show an eight-foot wall only along the southeastern lot line. Originally an arched opening existed to the immediate southeast of the Hidalgo facade, leading to the property's courtyard. A three-to-four-foot high *banqueta* highlights the Hidalgo frontage, with steps at its northwestern and southeastern termini. Today the dwelling is vacant. The property, like the Nestor Sáenz Store near the wharf to the southeast, is of key significance to the Roma historic district through both its architectural sophistication and its association with the Sáenz family.

**11) Stone House [Contributing]
Hidalgo Street, north side between Convent and Juarez Avenues
Block 8, Lot 2
ca. 1840s**

The sandstone rectangular dwelling located on the north side of Hidalgo Street between Convent and Juarez Avenues is likely one of the earlier extant structures in Roma. Of ca. 1840s construction, the house is mapped on the 1894 Sanborns with a frame porch facing southeast (Juarez). The original plan appears to have featured a two-room rectangle, with the long side along Hidalgo. Two sets of double doors centered in each room define the Hidalgo facade, with no flanking fenestration. A narrow stone lean-to room addition parallels the main unit to the northeast. Likely a kitchen space, this room features a fireplace on its northwest wall. The roof is hidden beneath corrugated metal sheathing, but stone gable ends are a notable detail. The 1894 Sanborn map indicates shingle roof sheathing. Today the dwelling is vacant, with *banqueta* deteriorated as dirt and brick rubble.

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**12)Raphael García Ramírez House [Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder (attributed)
ne corner, Convent and Hidalgo
Block 8, Lot 1
ca. 1881**

The one-story brick building at the northeast corner of Convent and Hidalgo, on the plaza, is configured in an ell plan, and originally functioned in both domestic and commercial use. Facing the plaza, the two-bay residence is articulated with the classical detailing associated with architect Portscheller. A window/door/door/window rhythm accents the primary facade, with simple surrounds. A parapet with dentilated molded-brick cornice caps the building. Along Hidalgo Street an ell wing continues the structure. Flat tile-brick roofs cap both sections of the building. The 1894 Sanborn maps denoted the Hidalgo component as the local barbershop. A frame porch stood to the rear of the Hidalgo wing, with two free-standing brick buildings also on the property. By 1925, Sanborn surveyors annotated both units of the building as in commercial use, with the larger of the 19th-century brick outbuildings (along the plaza) in use as a drug store. Although the lot is not mapped as historically walled, the plaza and Hidalgo facades effectively shielded the interior of the property in a wall-like manner. An ell-configured awning and *banqueta* are mapped for the property in 1894, with evidence of the awning and a segment of the *banqueta* still present along Hidalgo. Today the structure is vacant.

**13)Edward R. Hord Office/Manuel Ramírez House;
later, Ramírez Hospital [Contributing]
se corner, Convent and Estrella
Block 8, Lot 8
ca. 1853, 1880s**

The two-story sandstone structure is one of the earlier major commercial buildings built in Roma, with evolved use as a dwelling and later as a hospital.

Edward R. Hord arrived in Roma shortly after the town came under American jurisdiction. By the early 1850s he served as acting attorney for the Mexican heirs of the *porciones* in their land suits with the U.S. The Hord office later functioned as a quasi-military building during the Civil War. Hord continued his legal-political career in later life as a Representative to the Texas Senate for the region, and eventually as a U.S. Congressman. Sometime in the 1880s the Hord building was converted to domestic use, with added molded-brick cornice and wrought iron second-story balconies reflective of Portscheller's design influence in Roma.

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The 1894 Sanborn Insurance map delineated a full wrap-around veranda; today single balconies are present. The original roof is of *chipichil* construction. (See map reference #2.) In 1894 the building was noted as commercial, although quite probably the structure was by that date in combined general store and residence use. The 1925 Sanborns also annotated the structure as in commercial (store) use, with a long, rectangular brick building abutting it along the plaza and continuing the designated function.

In its subsequent conversion to a hospital during the 1930s, the interior of the building was altered, with outbuildings on the lot and a component of the Raphael García Ramírez house renovated for joint use. At this same time a Moderne unit was also added to the property at the immediate east, along Estrella.

14) Brick House [Contributing]
603 Estrella Street
Block 8, Lot 6
ca. 1895-1900

The one-story brick house located at 603 Estrella Street is one of the few examples of sophisticated residential architecture in Roma from the turn of the century. Its design is strongly in the tradition of Northern Mexico. Nearly square in plan, the house sits back on its lot, also uncharacteristic of Roma residential architecture. Two long, narrow brick room additions accent the rear of the dwelling in ell configuration. Sanborn Maps indicate roofing for all units of the building is of flat tile-brick type.

The primary facade is of symmetrical, three-bay configuration, with window/door/window pattern. Detailing includes Portscheller-like classical motifs: a dentilated, molded-brick cornice, reverse crenelation beneath the cornice, dentilated cornice entry surround (now subsumed under a shed roof Colonial Revival porch of ca. 1910-15) and segmental arch drip window surrounds. Exterior chimneys bracket the dwelling on its east and west facades. The house does not appear on the 1894 Sanborn maps, but architectural details suggest ca. 1895 construction. Today the dwelling is lived in and in excellent condition.

15) Brick Commercial/Domestic Building [Contributing]
507 Estrella Street
Block 11, Lot 8
1884

The one-story, brick building located at the southeast corner of Estrella and Juarez is of unknown history. Location on Juarez, with its wharf access dominating street use in the 19th century, suggests at least a partial commercial function. Classical detailing is evocative of architect Portscheller. Design highlights include a banded box treatment of the Estrella facade, molded-brick dentilated cornice and tall, narrowly proportioned fenestration. The interior space is divided into three main rooms, with a rear brick unit addition making the structure a modified ell. A shallow basement is visible through deteriorated

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flooring. In the main room (east), near the center of the building, a ceiling beam is dated "Junio 1 1884" (June 1, 1884) in burned lettering. The roof is of flat tile-brick type. Today the structure is vacant.

16) Stone House [Contributing]
506 Estrella Street
Block 10, Lot 2
ca. 1840s

The one-story, sandstone dwelling located near the northeast corner of Estrella and Juarez is one of the earlier Roma buildings, likely of ca. 1840s construction. The Estrella facade is of two-bay configuration, with a door/door pattern likely reflective of a single interior space. An east facade stone end gable is characteristic of this period of Roma houses. Two room additions grace the original structure, a brick ell on the east side of the building and a much later parallel wing (ca. 1940s) along the north. A *banqueta* accents the Estrella facade. Today the residence is vacant.

17) Brick Store [Contributing]
301 Juarez Street
Block 9
ca. 1895

The commercial building located at the northwest corner of Juarez and Estrella is a one-story, rectangular plan, brick structure with a flat tile-brick roof. Its two principal facades are articulated as large panels with corner piers and are crowned by a diamond corbelled cornice. The nearly square corner portion was constructed ca. 1895 and subsequently extended one room to the north. Possibly built for its convenience of access to the wharf at the foot of Juarez, it was mapped by Sanborn as a store in 1925. During the 1920s, 301 Juarez functioned as part of a complex of several buildings belonging to the Gonzalez Lumber Yard. None of the other non-historic buildings, including an office, a lumber shed, a garage and a wash room, survive. The lumber yard occupied most of the south half of Block 9 owned by the Roman Catholic church; Block 9 was not subdivided into parcels. Today 301 Juarez is occupied as a residence and is in good condition with minor alterations apparent.

18) Brick Store/Sisters' House [Contributing]
606 Estrella Street
Block 9
pre-1894

The one-and-one-half-story, brick structure located at 606 Estrella Street is rectangular in plan, with gable roof and two gabled dormers. Built before 1894 as a general store, the building had been converted to a residence by 1925. Today, when the old convent is used as a parish hall, the building serves as the nuns' residence. Since its use as a store, the structure has undergone modification including the altering of window and door

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openings. (There are 6/6 double-hung windows in old doorways, and rebuilt metal clad dormers.) The building is set back from the street. Its grounds are partially enclosed by stuccoed brick or stone walls. There is a stone shrine of uncertain date in a parking lot adjacent to the structure. The building appears to be in good condition.

**19) Tower, Church of Nuestra Señora del Refugio [Contributing]
Father Pierre Yves Keralum, Architect
608 Estrella Street
Block 9
1853, with main portion of the church replaced in 1962**

Only the tower remains of the original church built by Father Keralum (1817-72). Father Keralum worked as a carpenter-architect in Paris before joining the Society of Oblates in 1852 and immigrating to the U.S. The Roma church was the first of several churches designed by Keralum along the lower Río Grande, each evocative of distinctive traditional designs found in Brittany. The church was originally a T-shaped structure. Of sandstone construction, the church featured a primary facade of brick, with tin-clad wooden spire.

Each floor of the tower is pierced by pointed arch openings, the two lower floors square in plan and buttressed at the corners, the upper floor octagonal with corner finials. Following replacement of the church nave in 1962, the spire of the tower underwent redesign and reconstruction as a smaller cone with broken pitched surface. The tower still serves as entrance to the church, which is offset from the nave. Historically, the church (tower and nave) was on axis with the plaza.

The church is located at the head of the plaza and is the focal point of Roma's only public place. A landmark in all senses, the church is built on high ground, visible from all directions, including points across the Río Grande in Ciudad Miguel Alemán. Constructed on a large undivided block, the church is augmented by other ecclesiastical buildings on the property. Priests' and sisters' houses are complementary to the property, although the priests' house to the north (rear) of the church has been excluded from the historic district due to sustained alterations and additions over time. On the adjacent block to the west/northwest, a convent and Roma's early mission church augment the religious cluster of buildings present in the community.

**20) Incarnate Word/Sisters of Mercy Convent (Parish Hall)
[Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
nw corner, Convent and Estrella
Block 3, Lots 2, 7 and 8
ca. 1880s**

The Roma Convent is centered between Roma's first mission church to the west (ca. 1829/40) and the formal second church to the east (1853), occupying lots 2, 7 and 8 of its block. Sanborn

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surveyors of 1894 annotated the three lot site as the "Convent Grounds." On the southwest and northeast sides of the site (the long edges of the rectangle), five-foot brick walls enclosed the religious compound, orienting the building toward the two churches bracketing the convent southeast and northwest. The primary facade of the convent faced the main church and, as the building spanned almost wall to wall across the grounds, its siting provided a more private area to the rear (northwest). Located at the northwest corner of Roma's plaza, the convent maintained partial seclusion. Its compound walls, however, were the only street walls in Roma (as mapped in 1894) of five-foot height; domestic family compounds were substantially more secluded with walls of seven, eight and ten feet. The convent trees would have been partially visible, accenting the plaza. Today a variety of ebony tree common to Northern Mexico lines the rear of the convent, and may be similar to the historic landscaping.

The convent is a one-story brick structure with steeply pitched shingled hip roof. Long and narrow in plan, the building features a primary facade porch supported by two rows of wooden columns. The end facades are angled as half-hexagonals. Two brick chimneys and a central square hip-roof cupola with balustraded deck accent the building. On the main facade the base and fenestration are articulated as panels in the brickwork, and the entrances are enframed by pedimented Doric pilasters. The design composition is symmetrical, with centered and end entries. Typical of architect Portscheller, classical aesthetics are restrained, but definitive.

The Sisters of Mercy replaced the Sisters of the Incarnate Word in 1913 at the convent. In 1940, the Sisters of Mercy also left, with the structure remaining vacant until its conversion recently to a parish hall for the church. The compound's walls have been demolished and only the rear ebony trees are in place today. The area in front of the convent (to the east) has been paved as a parking lot. In good condition, the convent is a vital unit in the complex of religious structures sited at the head of the plaza.

21) Mission Church/House/Library/Roma Historical Society
[Contributing]
708 Estrella Street
Block 3, Lot 1
ca. 1829/40; with later additions

The one-story, ell-plan mission church located on the northeast corner of Estrella and Lincoln is of sandstone construction with shingled gable roof. Today its larger wing along Estrella encloses a single room, but appears to have been built in two stages. The northwest end of this wing has narrower walls and, in 1894, was a separate space with brick roof, while the remainder of the wing to the southeast featured a shingle roof. Staged construction is also visible through the Estrella Street door/window patterning for the two components. The room to the

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northwest is entered through a single door, with the longer southeastern room pierced by a central door and flanking windows in a symmetrical composition. Likely the northwest room was originally the free-standing modest mission church of ca. 1829/40.

The smaller perpendicular wing along Lincoln also was built in two stages. In 1894, at the time of the Sanborn mapping, the Lincoln wing sat free-standing on the lot, with an exterior chimney at its north end. A wood-frame porch ran across the back of the expanded main structure. By 1925 an added room linked the two wings as a unified ell plan, with a portion of the frame porch left intact. Stone walls effectively shielded the entire lot: the Estrella and Lincoln building facades functioned as compound walls, with two small frame outbuildings at the north rear lot line also faced with stone. To the immediate southeast the convent (of the ca. 1880s) occupied the three remaining lots on the block, with five-foot brick walls along both Estrella and the rear lot line, thus continuing the compound over the entire block.

Secular priests from Mier periodically visited Roma and established a mission church there in ca. 1829/40. Possibly the priests used a pre-existing building for their services; possibly the original (northwest end) structure was constructed specifically for ecclesiastic purpose. As a mission, the building was owned by the heirs of the *porción*. When the Oblate fathers completed the formal church of Nuestra Señora del Refugio in 1853-56, the Bishop of Galveston became the owner of three lots on this block, inclusive of the early mission. By 1925 the ell-plan structure had been converted to a dwelling, and later still to the town library and a school. Prior to 1972 the roof was rebuilt and resingled.

Following a 1972 study, the Bishop of Brownsville leased the building as a historical museum. In the adaptation, the structure's floor was paved with sandstone from Nuestra Señora del Refugio, muslin cloth was hung for a ceiling corner as a restoration of an earlier condition, and electricity was installed. Today all lot wall remnants are gone, with the building in fair condition. The exterior wall along Lincoln Street is in need of repair.

**22) Stone and Brick House [Contributing]
703 Estrella Street
Block 2, Lot 6
ca. 1850s-60s; ca. 1880s**

The one-story, stone and brick dwelling located at 703 Estrella Street features rectangular plan, flat tile-brick roof and molded-brick cornice. Comprising the northwest half of the building, a stone square-plan house with two centered doors directly faces the street, and is likely of ca. 1850s-60s construction. A second dwelling to the immediate southeast, built of brick, square in plan and also characterized by the

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centered two-door entry on Estrella, is sequentially later, probably of ca. 1880s construction. At the time of the added residence, the entire unit was unified by the molded-brick cornice across both facades, and was stuccoed. Possibly the same family lived in both abutting dwellings, with a son or daughter's young family the stimulus for expansion. Census records of the 1870s and 1880s indicate that such dual households, although not dominant, were common in Roma. By the 1894 Sanborn mapping a small free-standing stone outbuilding sat to the southeast rear of the original stone house (about centered for the enlarged residence). The double dwelling is noted as sited immediate to the east lot line on its southeastern brick face.

By 1925 the occupants had again expanded the house, with a frame rectangular-plan (northeast/southwest) dwelling filling in the remaining open space on the lot at the street to the northwest of the original stone dwelling. To the southeast a small frame shed further elongated the vernacular building, actually built to the east of the property lot line. Today these frame components are reflected in the board-and-batten-sheathed shed at the west lot edge, and the porch attached at the southeast brick wall. The dwelling appears to be in fair condition, with *banqueta* still extant along Estrella Street.

23) Stone House/Store [Contributing]
701 Estrella Street
Block 2, Lots 7 and 8
ca. 1850s-70s

The one-story, flat tile-brick-roofed stone structure located at 701 Estrella Street occupies a corner lot facing the convent grounds to the northeast and the plaza to the southeast. Sanborn surveyors mapped the structure as an ell configuration in 1894, with two small frame additions at the rear and a *banqueta* along the Estrella Street facade. Three pairs of windows, separated by doorways, open out onto Estrella. By 1925 a stone room addition complemented the original dwelling, extending the plan as a U-configuration. The plaza wing, with Estrella Street access, was converted to commercial use, with the remainder of the building continuing its domestic function. Since 1925 the stone addition has been removed, and a modern brick unit with walled patio oriented toward the plaza has been built. Street walls have been stuccoed; aluminum windows have been installed. A small house has been added to the site, post-1925. Today the main building is vacant and in fair condition.

24) Manuel Guerra Residence and Store [Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
702 Hidalgo Street
Block 2, Lots 1 and 2
1884

The Manuel Guerra residence and store is the largest residence and the most intensively developed private property in Roma. Guerra, born in Mier in 1856 and apprenticed to an American

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merchant in Corpus Christi in 1870, settled in Roma in 1877. During the 1880s he established himself as a leading merchant and a powerful figure in the Democratic Party of Starr County, taking over management of his family's Escandón-granted ranchlands. In 1884, a contract between Enrique Portscheller, the architect, and Manuel Guerra, for the improvement of the two lots, called for a two-story house with basement and privy, to occupy the entire plaza frontage. The ground floor consisted of two rooms, one a large commercial space and the second an anteroom. The upstairs housed the family living quarters. As mapped by Sanborn surveyors in 1894, the complex included a small one-story brick office at the northeast, as well as a one-story brick warehouse ell to the northwest (fronting Hidalgo Street). A free-standing washroom (possibly an enlargement of the original privy) stood at the northeastern edge of the structure's interior courtyard. All the units of the compound were of brick construction, with flat tile-brick roofs. The double lot site was fully walled by an eight-foot structure. Public view of the complex focused on the upper story with its detailed wrought-iron balcony. An angled corner entrance at Hidalgo and Convent (the plaza) further enhanced design detailing. A *banqueta* wrapped around the plaza and Hidalgo frontages.

The structure's facades were designed in a two-part composition with restrained ornamentation derived from Renaissance sources, primarily in window and door enframements on both floors, and through the molded-brick cornice. Ground floor windows and doors are spaced irregularly, to accommodate the warehouse and commercial functions. The corner entrance is enframed by Doric pilasters, with other openings enframed by pilasters and capped by cornices. The smaller openings of the second story are regularly spaced, dignified and reminiscent of the piano nobile of an Italian palazzo. A wrought-iron balcony wraps the two-story main dwelling and store, with six iron finials accenting the parapet, offering a more playful element to the design. Three signs also add character to the primary facades, reading "M. Guerra" and "La Mexicana."

The 1894 and 1925 Sanborn maps detailed the Guerra compound, with only one change noted to the property in the 30-year period, the addition of a gas pump at about mid-point along the plaza face of the dwelling. The pump was the only such unit in Roma at the time. Today all the major elements of the property are intact, but the buildings are deteriorating rapidly. The main ground level store space retains many furnishings and fixtures of the past, including commercial shelving, display cases and family business archives. Upstairs rooms retain their spatial integrity and finishes.

**25)Tino Ramírez Residence and Store [Contributing]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
701 Hidalgo Street
Block 1, Lot 8
ca. 1880s**

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The Ramírez residence and store is similar to the Guerra compound across Hidalgo to the north, but is smaller and architecturally less ambitious. Occupying a single lot, the dwelling is also fully walled, with combined six- and seven-foot structures. The main building on the property is a two-story unit paralleling Hidalgo, with a one-story two-unit wing completing an ell-plan along the northwest edge of the lot. Like the Guerra residence, that for the Ramírez family also featured an angled corner entrance and a prominent wrought-iron balcony wrapping the Hidalgo and plaza facades. Whereas the Guerra dwelling offered its longest facade to the plaza (facing southeast), the Ramírez compound's long facade faced Hidalgo (northeast). A flat tile-brick roof capped the two-story Hidalgo wing and the first ell-room unit, with shingle roofing capping the rearmost section of the ell. Again a substantial *banqueta* wrapped the primary frontages of the dwelling. Ground floor spaces functioned as a grocery, with living quarters above.

Like the Guerra residence and store, the Ramírez compound was designed as a two-part composition with widely spaced window and door openings at the ground level and more closely spaced, smaller openings for the upper level. The ornamentation is simpler and further removed from Renaissance sources. On both floors flattened cornices accent the fenestration, with a corbelled diamond-patterned cornice repeating the thematic design treatment.

Sanborn surveyors mapped the compound in both 1894 and 1925, with little change. In the 1950s an addition along the plaza to the south of the two-story unit replaced an earlier frame room (or porch). By 1972 the wrought-iron balcony had been removed from the structure. Today the dwelling is substantially intact, with property walls still standing. Two faded signs grace the building: "Beer" and "Cantina," each inscribed for the 1953 movie "Viva Zapata" that was filmed on location in Roma. Vacant, the complex is in fair condition.

**26)U.S. Customs House/City Hall/Jail [Contributing]
101 Calle del Río (Water Street)
ca. 1883**

The Customs House is a small, rectangular, one-story brick building with flat roof and concrete block rear extension. Originally the structure was two stories in height. Sited at the foot of Lincoln Street, outside the basic grid of the town, the building occupies the highest point on the bluff above the Río Grande. The building directly overlooks what was the town's second major crossing to Mexico.

The structure faces away from the river toward Roma. No windows accent the sides or rear walls of the building. A three-bay primary facade is punctuated by a window/door/window pattern, detailed in segmental arches. A modest molded-brick cornice caps the structure. Today the building's interior is remodeled, but the structure appears to be in good condition.

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**27)Brick and Stone Houses [Contributing]
ne corner, Lincoln and Calle del Río (Water Street)
Block 1, Lot 4
ca. 1850s-70s; ca. 1880s**

By 1894, the corner lot at Lincoln and Water Streets had witnessed intense development. Four individual dwellings, one stone, two brick and one frame, occupied the site, with six- and seven-foot walls enclosing the compound at its northern and eastern edges. The houses were all constructed at the street lines, themselves forming walls for the compound at the southwest and northwest. At the corner, with its long side on Water Street, was a two-story brick residence; the other houses were one-story. Of unknown function was a second rectangular brick structure completing an ell with the two-story dwelling. One story in height, this building was annotated by Sanborn as roofless.

In 1925 the Sanborn surveyors delineated three dwellings on the lot: the two-story corner brick residence appeared as an elongated ell with interior courtyard frame porch; the second one-story brick dwelling along Lincoln Street was gone, with a new smaller brick house configured at the rear of the lot; the stone residence remained unchanged; and the frame dwelling was gone.

Today the ell-plan corner unit survives in modified form. The two-story portion of the ell plan has been reduced to one story, the two wings of the complex have been joined inside, and the entire unit has been capped with a hip roof. The exterior walls are plastered and the fenestration has been renovated. The small structure sited at 104 Lincoln is coincident in location and size with the pre-1894 stone house.

**28)Stone House [Contributing]
Calle del Río (Water Street), east of Zaragoza
Block 6, Lot 3
ca. 1830s-40s**

The one-story sandstone dwelling located at the end of Water Street near Zaragoza is an excellent example of Roma's earliest domestic architecture. The major facade faces Mexico (southwest), with its design articulated through a window/door/door/window pattern. Set back on its lot with its long facade primary, the house may have been fortified or walled along its face. In this regard the structure offers an unusual site plan and orientation. A large two-foot buttress projects from the southwest corner of the house and is of unknown function. Sanborn surveyors mapped the dwelling with a brick roof in 1894, although the roofing is likely *chipichil*. A chimney with molded-brick corbelled cap accents the southeast end of the residence, an atypically elegant detail for Roma stone houses. Exterior plastering is currently deteriorating, but door and window surrounds still retain their painted blue surfaces.

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The blue detailing references traditions of Northern Mexico. Today the building is vacant.

**29) Stone Grocery-Warehouse/Hide Shed; House [Contributing]
705 Hidalgo Street
Block 1, Lots 6 and 7
ca. 1870s**

By 1894, six- and seven-foot walls substantially enclosed lots 6 and 7 of block 1, enframing a 120-foot square property of unique mixed use in Roma. Facing Hidalgo Street, a long, rectangular one-story stone building is simply proportioned and features a flat tile-brick roof. Completing the original appearance, Sanborn Insurance surveyors of 1894 noted the presence of a *banqueta* along the Hidalgo facade. By 1972 a wood-frame awning supported by slender turned columns had been added. (The Sanborn map of 1925 did not indicate the Hidalgo awning; its date of construction is unknown and may be a relatively recent attempt at historic appearance.)

The northwest end of the structure functioned as a grocery, with the southeast end a warehouse. Alternating arrangement of four windows and three doors on the Hidalgo facade today probably reflects this early mix of uses. Behind the warehouse component of the building a wood-frame hide shed perhaps indicated the specific storage and processing facilities offered by the business in 1894. The courtyard enclosed by the walled double lot likely also functioned in conjunction with the hide shed operation. Sanborn surveyors annotated only this single hide shed enterprise for Roma; the hide shed, as a particular structural type, is little known in the region, with extant examples to date only surveyed for the Río Grande border community of Brownsville. In both 1894 and 1925 a small, one-story stone building with flat tile-brick roof stood at the southwestern corner of the property; its function is unknown. By 1925, the grocery-warehouse/hide shed had been converted to domestic use.

Today, the property is one of the few in Roma that is still occupied as a walled compound. The wainscoting of the stone structure is built out from the front wall and crowned by a molding in what appears to be an effort to sensitively shore up a crumbling base. The roof is now sheathed in metal, with a modern tile-roofed brick addition replacing the original frame hide shed *in situ*. Fragments of the small stone outbuilding remain at the property's rear.

**30) Brick House/Store [Contributing]
202 Lincoln Avenue
Block 2, Lot 4
ca. 1880s-90s**

As was the case for its immediate neighbors to the southwest and southeast, high walls enclosed the complex of structures located at the northeast corner of Lincoln Avenue and Hidalgo Street. Of

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eight-foot height, the walls enframed a double lot that featured a one-story brick dwelling. A flat tile-brick roof sheathed its main room(s) [narrow facade facing Hidalgo], with a shingle roof at the rear. To the far rear a brick wall/facade fronted onto Lincoln with a frame room extending east. A *banqueta* accented the narrow frontage on Hidalgo. By 1925, Sanborn surveyors noted that the house had been converted to commercial (store) use, with a brick addition paralleling the original unit to the southeast.

A flat tile-brick roof caps the entire enlarged building, suggestive of a ca. 1890s date of construction, with a wood-frame awning wrapping the full corner along both Hidalgo and Lincoln. Corbelled cornice detailing also accents the enlarged compound on each street face. By 1972 a large metal building had been constructed on the property to the further southeast behind the Hidalgo Street wall. A metal ridge-hip roof now additionally caps the building.

Today, the large front room of the original dwelling is intact at the corner. Inside a single space features a decorative pressed-metal ceiling covering approximately half its surface. Interior doors are wood, with a single aluminum exception. The small rear room of the original dwelling has been rebuilt in brick (replacing frame), but with the original brick wall (facade) along Lincoln intact. The wall along Hidalgo Street has been patched and an arched opening has been filled in. Extant signage is reflective of the compound's post-1925 history: "Agente Aduanal" (Customs Agent) is faded on the wall of the rear room; "Office Supply" is faded on the parapet of the corner structure; "Ropa Usada, Mayoreo y Menudeo" (Used Clothes, Wholesale and Retail) is the current business. Parts of the brick wall, especially on the northwest side, are deteriorating. The building is in fair condition.

**31) Stone House [Contributing]
806 Hidalgo Street
Block 5, Lot 2
ca. 1840s-50s**

The one-story sandstone house at 806 Hidalgo Street is an excellent example of a modest, early vernacular Roma residence. Of simple, fortified appearance, the dwelling features gabled end parapets (southeast and northwest), a shingle roof, a centered single entry on Hidalgo, a centered single entry on the east, a double horseshoe shallow relief sculptural motif in the northwest gable, modestly buttressed (molded) corners, a brick rear room addition (northeast) with frame southeast shed component, and a low wall extending along the Hidalgo facade from the southeast corner. The southeast, northwest and southwest faces of the building are windowless. A narrow *banqueta* accents the Hidalgo facade.

In 1894 Sanborn surveyors noted two wood-frame outbuildings to the near northeast and southeast of the dwelling, with that to the southeast labeled "Meat." Roma offered only two other frame

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structures of similar size and plan so annotated. That on the 806 Hidalgo property complemented the other two in town, fronting Lincoln around the corner to the northeast. Possibly a "butchers' neighborhood" existed in this part of Roma at the turn of the century. By 1925 the frame outbuildings were no longer extant on the lot, with the "Meat" frame structures additionally gone on Lincoln.

**32) Pablo Ramírez House/13th Cavalry Branch Headquarters/
Knights of Columbus Hall [Contributing: Map Ref. #51]
Enrique Portscheller, Builder
901 Estrella Street
Block 31, Lot 5
1884**

The Pablo Ramírez compound located on the southwest corner of Estrella and Zaragoza Streets appears to be one of the most intact and best maintained 19th-century properties in Roma. By 1894, eight-foot high brick walls enclosed its lot on three sides, with the main dwelling at the north property line creating an enclosed rear courtyard. An oversized gateway arch (about 12 feet high) highlights the southeast courtyard wall. The ell-plan residence features a rectangular two-story main unit (streetside along Estrella) and a rectangular one-story rear wing to the northwest. In the angle between the two wings a two-story arcaded gallery lends an unusual level of sophistication to architect Portscheller's design. Of brick construction with flat tile-brick roof, the dwelling also featured a wrought-iron balcony wrapping around the corner facades along Estrella and Zaragoza, and wrought-iron railings in the bays of the rear arcade. The original interior plan is unknown. By 1925, a wood-frame shed on the lot had been removed, replaced by a one-story brick square-plan structure inside the southeast property wall near the entry into the rear courtyard.

On the ground floor the front wing is divided (southeast/northwest) by a brick wall into two rooms, with the rear wing also divided (northeast/southwest) into two rooms by a wooden partition. Originally both units of the ell-plan opened onto the elaborate rear arcade. A central wooden stair leads to the second floor of the main wing, which is divided by wooden partitions into three rooms. Chimneys accent the northwest end of the front wing and the southwest end of the original rear wing (now interior). Interior spatial changes are likely reflective of the structure's conversion from a residence to a public hall, first as headquarters for the 13th Cavalry Branch, and then as a meeting place for the Knights of Columbus.

The ell plan of the Pablo Ramírez house is similar to that of the Tino Ramírez house on the plaza, with the orientation of both Ramírez dwellings appearing to take advantage of prevailing breezes up the Río Grande. Design for the Pablo Ramírez house is similar to both the Tino Ramírez and Manuel Guerra houses. Enrique Portscheller designed all three of these large walled compounds in the same period, with each built of local brick and

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molded brick. Like the plaza dwellings, the Pablo Ramírez house has an angled corner entrance and a concentration of design effects on the street facades of its main wing. These facades are in a two-part composition divided by a decorative wrought-iron balcony. Regularly spaced windows and doors on both floors are set in slightly recessed panels. Windows are crowned with Doric entablatures and doors are framed by Doric orders using molded brick. The proportions and details of the second floor ornamentation are taller and sharper, creating a sense of balance and hierarchy. Both street facades are capped by a cornice of molded brick, and the angled corner is topped by a pediment with the year "1884" in shallow relief. The side wall of the gallery is crowned by a diamond-corbelled cornice, with the rear gallery detailed by three arches on the ground floor and four on the floor above. The original wrought-iron stair to the gallery has been replaced by a modern iron spiral staircase. Both the Estrella and Zaragoza facades feature *banquetas* with steps to the street at their termini. With the exception of some deterioration of a stone course at the base of the building, the dwelling is in good condition.

**33) Stone Store [Contributing]
807 Estrella Street
Block 5, Lot 8
ca. 1860s-70s**

The large one-story sandstone general store located on the southeast corner of Estrella and Zaragoza occupies a full lot, with eight- and ten-foot brick walls enclosing the property on the northwest and southeast, with a stone commercial building enclosing northeast and a partially open brick outbuilding (possibly a stable) enclosing southwest. As one of three general stores in Roma constructed in stone and extant for the 1894 Sanborn mapping, the building may have been the enterprise of Pablo Ramírez. Ramírez, at age 39, had established a successful retail merchant business in Roma by the 1880 census.

Stone materials imply a pre-1880s date of construction for the 807 Estrella store, and as the Pablo Ramírez dwelling of 1884 is directly across Zaragoza to the west it seems likely that this compound was the Ramírez store. Several Ramírez families lived in Roma by the 1870 census, but all were noted as "ploughmen" (farmers) and "stockraisers" (ranchers). Possibly some of the Ramírez family lived in a part of this stone store building, before constructing the elaborate residence to the northwest.

The store features an ell-plan main unit with primary facade along Estrella Street. Although the original interior spatial divisions are not known, exterior wall opening patterns of two sets of two centered doors suggest that interior rooms may have been originally divided for dual family or split domestic/commercial use (southeast/northwest). The unit to the east is approximately square in plan (two rooms, northeast/southwest); that to the northwest rectangular. The whole was surmounted by a flat tile-brick roof by 1894. The western unit further featured

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a shed-roof rectangular room to the southwest, with shingle roof (inclusive of the kitchen, again two rooms). Possibly the shed-roof room rearwards was the kitchen of the domestic half of the original complex.

A chimney in the southeast wall of the shed-roof kitchen is now interior to the two southeast-northwest units of the ell; likely it was originally exterior, suggesting that the corner northwest unit may have been built before that to the southeast and may have been one of the Ramírez family dwellings pre-1870. By 1894 a wood-frame awning with *banqueta* wrapped the Estrella-Zaragoza facades. In the rear courtyard, there is a triumphal entry gate of about 12-foot height similar to that of the Ramírez dwelling to the northwest. A wood-frame ell-plan porch immediately abutted the southeast portion of the main unit. Today only a small section of this frame structure still stands, adjacent to the southeast property wall. Also forming the southwest wall of the lot, a large brick ell-plan structure, open to the northeast, may have functioned as a stable or wagon shed. Divided into bays, this structure is partially intact in its Zaragoza-facing component. The 1925 Sanborn surveyors noted only one change to the property: the wraparound frame awning had been removed from the Zaragoza facade, and had been split as two distinct awnings for the east and west components of the Estrella facade.

Today the complex is vacant and deteriorating. Remnants of painted signage read "Roma Surplus Store" and "U.S. Post Office."

Taken as a pair with the Pablo Ramírez brick walled compound of 1884 (described just above), this stone walled compound (also likely associated with the Ramírez family) offers excellent opportunities for interpretation of living patterns in Roma over the second half of the 19th century.

**34) Brick House [Contributing]
805 Estrella Street
Block 5, Lot 7
ca. 1880s-90s**

The one-story brick dwelling located at 805 Estrella Street directly abuts the walled stone compound at the southeastern corner of Estrella and Zaragoza to the west. Originally a modest residence featuring a flat tile-brick roof, a three-bay facade (window/door/window) evocative of a central hall plan, and diamond-corbelled cornice trim, the house was enlarged (likely in the late 1920s) with a bungalow addition to the rear. The bungalow functions almost as a second residence on the property. A shed-roof brick rear room connects the main house to its two abutting one-story rectangular outbuildings along the northwest property wall (with brick fire wall between the lots). Extending out to the east from these frame structures is the bungalow, with its side entry facing away from Estrella. A small shed-roof side-entry porch of bungalow type was also added to the southeast facade of the original brick house. Today the property maintains the town's familial compound tradition with a wooden fence along the southeast lot line and a low masonry wall at Estrella.

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A diamond-corbelled cornice in molded brick and shallow-relief simple banding around the facade windows and door may indicate the work of builder Enrique Portscheller. Today the building is occupied and in good condition.

**35)Brick House [Contributing]
203 Lincoln Avenue
Block 5, Lot 5
ca. 1880s; ca. 1895; minor additions, 1920s**

The one-story brick dwelling located at 203 Lincoln Avenue (the southwest corner of Lincoln and Estrella) is unique in Roma, although again demonstrating the vibrancy of evolved cross-cultural vernacular building traditions in the community. Featuring a rectangular-shaped plan with projecting square bay on the original primary face (on Estrella), the residence underwent superficial modification ca. 1895.

As built the house reflected the aesthetic traditions of Northern Mexico. With flat tile-brick roof, diamond-corbelled cornice wrapping the southeast, northeast and northwest facades, shallow-relief banding of windows and doors, and fully banded projecting facade with entry also highlighted by cornice and banding, the house is likely the design of Enrique Portscheller. By 1894 a small wood-frame outbuilding stood on the lot to the southwest.

About 1895 the owners renovated the dwelling. Rear brick room additions created a U-plan, and were likely executed by the building's original architect, who unified the design through a continuation of the diamond-corbelled cornice. A gable roof of moderate pitch, with moderate boxed eaves and alternating square-cut shingling in the gable ends, was also added, changing the original flat-roofed appearance. Completing the design shift, two ell-plan porches supported by moderately proportioned wooden classical columns set on stub piers wrap both the east and west sides of the dwelling. Original Hispanic, sharp, rectilinear simplicity is countered through the overlaid Queen Anne-Colonial Revival aesthetics, accented by the proportions of the columns and the rounded corners of the two ell porches. Sanborn surveyors mapped these additions and renovations in 1925, also noting the replacement or enlargement of the original frame outbuilding and the addition of a metal-sheathed frame garage to the south on the lot.

Two additional superficial renovations occurred, likely during the late 1920s. A bungalow gable-roof porch highlighted the banded primary entry off Estrella, with minor room additions to the rear. Occupied, the dwelling appears to be in excellent condition.

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NON-CONTRIBUTING STRUCTURES

Business Block:.....Block 7, Lots 7 and 8
 Community Center.....Block 8, Lot 7
 Department Store/House.....Block 8, Lot 5
 Roma Water Tower.....Block 6, Lot 1
 Bungalow, unknown date.....Block 6, Lot 2
 Brick and stucco residence, 1-story, unknown date..Block 5, Lot 6
 Ramírez Variety Store, 1-story brick, with parapet,
 unknown date.....Block 2, Lot 5

NOTES

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**SUMMARY**

The Roma Historic District, of outstanding significance in the bi-national context of the Lower Río Grande border area of the United States, and in the history of Southwestern American vernacular architectural traditions, merits consideration as a National Historic Landmark under Criteria 1, 4 and 5.

(1) As a rare surviving intact community, Roma's architectural fabric outstandingly represents the evolution of a key town in the border region along the Río Grande during the 19th century.

Remote from both Mexican and American governmental jurisdiction, Roma developed as a Hispanic community with its Euro-American evidences in a minor key. Roma is set apart from less intact border settlements by such features as the high-walled, gated family compounds found throughout the town, the predominant streetscapes of sandstone and local brick with fronting *banquetas*, architectural patterns and technologies derived from Northern Mexico, its distinctive open-ended plaza facing the Río Grande, the role of Mexican stone and brick masons, and its generation-to-generation family continuity.

Roma is the only intact U.S. settlement that derives from the mid-18th century colonization and town planning efforts of José de Escandón. As noted by scholar John Reps, the Escandón town planning, colonization, and land grant systems are of key historic significance in the development of the Spanish empire and in the unfolding of the Mexican Northeast and American Southwest, 1748-1835. The Escandón colonization of the remote frontier along the Río Grande complemented the missionary and civil settlement of New Mexico in the early 17th century; the continued missionary efforts extending up through Coahuila into Texas at El Paso during the middle and late 17th century; the central and east Texas missionary, military, and civil settlements of the early 18th century; the repeated missionary efforts in Arizona of the early and late 18th century; and the California missionary, military, and civil settlements of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sequentially, the Escandón colonization came at near midpoint in the settlement efforts concentrated on the land mass that is now the Southwestern U.S. In type, the Escandón efforts were fundamentally different from these others in their focus on civil settlement. (Reps: 1979, pp. 71-76, 117-125.)

Roma was linked to the 1753 Escandón *villa* of Mier by its formal jurisdiction as ranch lands, and has maintained continuous commercial, political, and family ties to the present day. The Roma riverfront, with its ferry and, after 1928, its suspension bridge, has been the focus of this relationship. In addition, Roma was also linked to the very first Escandón *villa* at Camargo (1749) to the near southeast.

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Of the other Escandón towns along the Río Grande, Laredo (Texas) has become a highly-trafficked border city with considerable loss of historic fabric; Dolores (Texas) is abandoned and remains only as an archaeological site; Guerrero (Tamaulipas) is under the waters of the Falcón Dam; Mier and Camargo are highly altered, and Reynosa has been historically relocated from its founding site, with little remaining of the older core of the second town.

Finally, Roma's physical characterization and its historic associations evolved over a multi-decade period of continued settlement in a region of the North American continent that was ruled sequentially by Spain, Mexico, and the U.S., with multiple issues of free trade, contraband, revolutionary politics, and legal boundary disputes. The 1884 incident at Los Morteritos, the Río Grande island eastwards between Roma and San Pedro, led directly to the founding of the International Boundary Commission.

(4) The Roma Historic District showcases what is best in the building design and craftsmanship traditions of the Lower Río Grande, offering a compendium of excellence underscored by both variety and quality.

The range of building types in the district is impressive and includes sandstone cottages constructed by early settlers as well as sophisticated townhouses built by wealthy merchants. The range of building technologies is equally impressive from the *chipichil* and tile-brick roofs to the multiple shapes in molded brick.

Roma's distinctive architecture, characterized by its Hispanic vernacular construction technologies, is not duplicated elsewhere in the United States. The town's architecture is not represented elsewhere in the region with the same impact as it sustains in the Roma Historic District with regard to density, integrity, and quality of design. Roma is the prime specimen for the study of the historic architecture of the Lower Río Grande.

(5) Roma contains the most outstanding collection of vernacular structures extant today for the Lower Río Grande region from Laredo to the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to the design quality, density, high degree of integrity, and character, which make Roma a prime location for the interpretation of unique building technologies, it also offers the opportunity to interpret traditional lifeways associated with the built environment of the Lower Río Grande. Recent historic preservation efforts have dramatized Roma's role as a focal point of pride for Hispanic Americans.

Building patterns and technologies showcased here reflect unique ethnic building traditions dating as far back as the 18th century. Due to the many modern encroachments and alterations of historic areas in Mexico (Matamoros, Reynosa, Camargo, Mier, Nuevo Laredo and the destruction of Guerrero Viejo) and in the

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U.S. (Brownsville, Río Grande City and Laredo), the architecture of Roma is today the best and most intact collection of structures of any of the communities in this border region.

As an ethnic community, Roma illustrates generational continuity of Hispanic Mexican traditions over many decades. Ethnicity is evident in the building stock, as well as in the community layout, with the walled family compounds of particular note. Living patterns, building technologies, and adaptation to climate and geography each evoke the town's strong identity with Northern Mexico, historically and today.

The community's buildings are not only prime examples of ethnic traditions in their plan, design, and materials, but they also stand as the most outstanding ensemble of structures associated with the steamboat river trade along the Río Grande, and with the inland bi-national contraband trade north-south. These structures evidence Roma's position as the main inland port on the river, as well as bespeaking its key siting on an ancient Río Grande crossing connecting to central Mexico, and are indicative of its commercial prosperity during the second half of the 19th century. Unlike other riverports of the region, the Roma Historic District neatly encapsulates the wealth, sophisticated design, and craftsmanship made possible by a river trade that linked New Orleans and other gulf ports with Brownsville-Matamoros, the Lower Río Grande, and the Mexican interior.

Roma is distinctive in its wide, open-ended plaza facing Mexico and overlooking the Río Grande. Laredo, about 100 miles to the west, may also have had an open-ended plaza facing Mexico during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Shifts in the Río Grande altered the river banks at Laredo, leaving intact only the plaza at Roma. Each of the communities also had a *Calle del Río* along the edge of the river bluff.

ARCHITECTURE AND VERNACULAR BUILDING TRADITIONS IN ROMA

Roma is characterized by a continuous building history, tied strongly to Northern Mexico. The bricklayers and masons in the community were all immigrants from Mexico, with the exception of Enrique (Heinrich) Porscheller, who had lived in Mexico for about 15 years after immigration from Prussia. (Starr County, Texas, U.S. Census: 1880)

Although he was not a Mexican native, Porscheller's role as a builder in both nations reflects the unique circumstances of the history of the border region, for he, like others, moved back and forth across the border, both to reside and build and for political reasons. He had come to Mexico and been impressed in Maximilian's army. Deserting as Maximilian's position deteriorated, he then supported the Liberals and had settled in Mier by 1879.

Porscheller established a partnership with Roma residents by 1883 to manufacture the salmon-buff, sand-struck brick of large

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size (2-3/4 by 4-1/8 by 8-3/4 inches) that was used in his buildings. He worked in Roma until 1894, when he moved to Laredo. When he died in 1915, his construction business extended 150 miles southward into Mexico at Monterrey.

As Portscheller's craft matured he designed buildings, prepared plans, and actively supervised construction. The talented builder produced full-size templates for his classically detailed cornice and frieze motifs, and personally laid some of the most intricate units himself. The brickwork, with its rounded corners and finely carved classical motifs, remains strikingly elegant today (Starr County, Texas, U.S. Census: 1880; George: 1961-62; Hoffman: 1972, p. 25; Bell: 1972). The architecture of Portscheller helped to foster a "molded brick theme" that extends from Laredo to Brownsville and into Mexico and which strongly reinforces the distinctive architectural identity of the Lower Río Grande. Roma contains the largest concentration of his work.

HISTORY

Roma's establishment as a town relates to the history of the town of Mier, directly across the Rio Grande in Mexico. In 1746, this area was formally organized as a part of the new Spanish province of Nuevo Santander. Don José de Escandón was chosen to lead the preliminary survey and exploration of the remote region, where the only settlement was a small group of ranches near a ford (*El Cantaro* or *Alcantaro*), about 10 miles upstream from the future site of Roma.

In 1747, Escandón's work parties congregated at the juncture of the San Juan and Río Grande, led to the site by an Indian chieftain. Escandón's men privately financed their participation in the survey and were particularly interested in packing salt back on their mules for trade in Monterrey. Salt beds, actually ancient dry salt lakes, existed to the near north of the Roma site and were anticipated to be a basis for lucrative enterprise and the beginnings of river traffic on the Río Grande. The Roma bluff site was bracketed by two major arroyos, Arroyo de los Negros (west) and Arroyo Roma (east). To the south across the Río Grande, a very large arroyo branched out of the San Juan River drainage toward the northwest. During the initial survey in 1747, this arroyo offered a more direct crossing to the salt beds than that at El Cántaro. The Roma site crossing was dubbed *El Paso de la Mula* (Pass of the Mules).

The majority of Escandón's first colonists were from the frontier provinces of Nuevo León and Coahuila. With León-established ranches in the vicinity of El Cántaro to the near west, the León settlers formed the core group of Río Grande home seekers. Escandón established 23 towns and 15 missions between 1747 and 1755 in what is now northern Mexico and the lands immediately to the north of the Río Grande. Mier was the only *lugar* ("place"), with the remaining 22 settlements one *ciudad* ("city"), 17 *villas* ("towns"), two *poblaciones* ("villages") and two *reales de minas* ("mining camps"). The first Escandón *villa* was that of Camargo,

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founded at the juncture of the San Juan and the Río Grande, in 1749. In its first years Camargo, and the other established places of Nuevo Santander, were protected by the presidio of León--moved from León to Llano de los Flores to the near southwest of Camargo. The relocated León presidio also sustained a small frontier squadron at San Pedro, immediately east of Llano de los Flores. León-San Pedro military support was to be active for only three to four years, and then incorporated into the founded communities themselves. The San Pedro outpost may have been the source name for the Arroyo de San Pedro leading from its vicinity to the Paso de la Mula.

South of the Roma site eastwards to the San Juan River (the Paso de la Mula leading into the Arroyo de San Pedro), a large land area was early established as a farming district for the Catholic priests assigned for Camargo. This land area is mapped in ca. 1772 with its western edge at the Paso de la Mula. The place may have been informally named San Pedro for its association with the arroyo, the temporary military outpost (1747-50) to the south, or the Camargo priests' farming district, inclusive of their pre-1750 *jacales* and *ramada*, and a *rancheria* near the San Juan. (De Lejarza: 1947, p. 22, 37-38)

The village of Roma, Texas, witnessed its first civic settlement as ranch lands formally associated with Mier. Chartered as a *lugar* and established without government funding support in 1753, Mier was founded by León home seekers--newly interested in frontier life and already settled in Camargo and at El Cántaro. Mier more closely resembled a *ranch* than a town, with its site four miles upstream from the Río Grande on the Alamo River and near to the El Cántaro ford. Mier's alternate placename was Alcántaro, with its ranch lands extending east to those of Camargo at the Paso de la Mula. (Covian Martinez: 1973; Escobar and Brown: 1953/1989; *Cartografía histórica de Tamaulipas*: 1990) Neighboring Revilla (1750) and Laredo (1755), also privately funded and maintained during their 18th-century beginnings, reflected the *ranch* settlement as well, with strong, dominant individual families directly responsible for the settlements' survival.

For the first years of Nuevo Santander, all settlers held their land in common, and it was not until a second official visit by a crown-appointed commission in 1767 that legally binding land surveys, grants, and recorded titles occurred for the province. During the summer of that year, Spanish surveyors laid out the ecclesiastical-civic plaza for Mier, with plaza lots set aside for the church, town hall, and household of the *capitán*. Spanish officials also designated land for the settlers, inclusive of a town lot and *porción*. *Porciones* were configured as long, narrow tracts laid out perpendicular to the Río Grande on both sides. Settlers granted these *porciones* north of the river used them as ranch lands, generally for cattle. Between 1767 and 1810, the government also assigned larger, unbroken ranching tracts across the Río Grande to especially powerful families. The site that would become Roma witnessed its first Spanish settlement as

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porciones 71 and 72, directly tied to the civic government and family life of Mier.

By about 1770, the next generation of the Juan Salinas and Juan Angel Sáenz families, owners of *porciones* 71 and 72, occupied their properties across the Río Grande. The Rancho de Los Sáenz existed briefly. A second settlement to the near west, the Rancho de Buena Vista, succeeded, with extensive surrounding farming efforts supplementing the range cattle. Buena Vista continued to develop as an adjunct village tied to Mier. Also during these early years, Mier families settled the island immediately east of the Roma site as the Morteritos Rancho. Los Morteritos was largely occupied by the García family and may have been associated with another Roma placename "Garcías."

During the 1820s, little is known with certainty about the evolution of Roma. With Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, the founding of civil settlements became more informal. Some sources cite 1821 as the date of Roma's founding. Colonist Stephen F. Austin traveled to Mexico in 1821 and 1822 to verify his land grant agreements with the new government, and in 1823, in a letter to one of his associates, he drew a map which labeled Roma, with attendant agricultural and ranch lands (*labores* and *sitios*).

The Mexican state of Tamaulipas came into formal existence in 1824, further complicating foreign colonization. Tamaulipas sought colonists at pre-established places to consolidate the meager resources of remote settlement. Stephen F. Austin went on to settle his colony in Texas at San Felipe de Austin in 1824, apparently abandoning the idea of the Roma site. During 1824-28 the possibility of Río Grande river traffic also stimulated settlement in the vicinity of Roma. A tentative London-based concession fell into the hands of Stephen F. Austin's cousin, Henry Austin, in 1829, and this second Austin brought the steamboat *Ariel* to the river. Henry Austin mapped the Río Grande and opened river traffic to Camargo. His map shows structures on the Roma bluffs.

Although the Río Grande offered the appearance of a navigable waterway for deep-bottomed boats, following a landmark flooding in 1828, in fact, river trade of the 1830s developed with shallow-draft keelboats, with steam delayed after Austin's visit until the middle 1840s. Attempted foreign colonization continued through the 1830s, but the frontier area was disrupted badly by political rebellion in northern Tamaulipas. Revolting against the central government, the original Escandón towns were a center of the fighting. The Arroyo de San Pedro, immediately south of Roma, was a crossing point for activities that crisscrossed the Río Grande.

With the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1835, Roma came under yet another new government. Yet land ownership remained clouded and, as late as 1839, the Texas Congress voted that the territory immediate to the salt beds north of Roma was

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still understood to be within Tamaulipas.

The 1840s presented even greater turmoil for the Roma community. Texas sought to secure the disputed Lower Río Grande region (between the Nueces and the Río Grande) through colonization. Early in the decade, Texas enticed Northern Europeans from France, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland to consider settlement. (Graf: 1947) Mexico attempted to retake the Río Grande lands in 1842-44, with a major battle occurring at Mier. At the close of the Mexican-American War in 1848, Roma officially became U.S. land, although very difficult international border issues persisted.

From the late 1840s forward, Roma grew, developing as a trade center with riverboat access up from the mouth of the Río Grande. Roma established itself as the head of steamboat travel on the river, serving as a distribution center for goods destined for the interior of Mexico. As soon as the Río Grande was established as the U.S. border, American entrepreneurs arrived on the scene. Lawyers, politicians, and merchants, they married into the Spanish frontier families of Escandón's towns, typically controlling life in new settlements like Brownsville on the river's north shore. Both countries set up military forts, with the Ringgold Barracks established to the east of Roma at the Davis Ranch on the outskirts of Río Grande City. In 1852, Major William H. Emory conducted the official American boundary survey between the two countries. Emory's survey directly affected Roma.

The Río Grande was an arbitrary border, one thoroughly inconsistent with Escandón's *villa* jurisdictions that encompassed both the north and south sides of the river for single towns. The deepest channel in the Río Grande was the legal line between the two nations--and yet this channel changed regularly over time. At Roma, the channel split in three parts at mid-century, with its deepest section nearest Mexico. The island of Morteritos, settled since about 1800 and a part of the Mier-Roma community, was adjudicated to the United States. Island residents continued their lives and Mexico, in particular Mier, understood Morteritos to be theirs. Morteritos looked like two islands in high water, another aspect of its occupation that would give rise to continued problems. (Sosa: 1913, p. 368-73; Zorrilla: 1990, v. 2, p. 15-18)

During the 1850s, Americans changed Río Grande border life. By setting up new communities, and enhancing prior ones like Roma, the Americans captured trade and created a fundamentally new border economy. Mexican towns were bound to honor Mexican customs and tariff agreements not applicable to the American side of the river. Thus, Mexican goods cost more in Mexico than those same goods offered by the Americans just to the north--driving legal trade north, ruining the northern Tamaulipas economy, and initiating a black market. Tamaulipas poignantly described the families of its border towns (the earlier Escandón towns) as a floating population. To counter the disruption, Tamaulipas

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established a free trade zone along its northern border in 1858 to equalize competition with the United States. Illegal under Federal Mexican government law, the Tamaulipas decree was nonetheless allowed to stand. To stop contraband shipments into Mexico, a specialized type of customs house, the *Contraresguardo Aduanal*, became a feature of the landscape.

During the 1850s Roma evolved as a Hispanic community molded by the lifeways of both nations. At the beginning of the decade, gold seekers en route to California traveled up the river from the Gulf of Mexico, crossing inland into Mexico at Roma, and proceeding overland to the West Coast. In 1853, French Oblate missionaries from New Orleans, in conjunction with the Catholic Diocese of Galveston, built a church in Roma. The sandstone edifice, with its brick face and wood steeple, fronted a large plaza overlooking the Río Grande. An earlier vernacular sandstone mission church remained in place. Roma would continue to maintain not only religious, but also commercial and aesthetic ties with New Orleans throughout the rest of the 19th century. The elaborate wrought-iron balconies that adorned its buildings were of New Orleans manufacture.

By the late 1850s, emotions ran high on the border, with economics reinforced by the raids of Juan Nepomuceno Cortina from the Gulf of Mexico to Roma. The conflict focused on the acquisition of land and the control of the area's economy by the newly arrived Americans. With the outbreak of the American Civil War, the border dynamics became even more unusual. Texas offered the Confederacy an opportunity to avoid the Union blockade and ship cotton via Mexico to Europe. Cotton was shipped via a land route, down the Río Grande, and by steamboat south along the Mexican coast to Matamoros/Bagdad on the Gulf of Mexico.

Towns on the Río Grande, including Roma, became centers for such shipment, and the community's merchants grew wealthy. Noah Cox, a prominent American merchant who married into the García family, organized a pro-Confederate guard at Roma to fight Octaviano Zapata, a Mexican guerrilla sponsored by the Union. The Zapata contingent crossed the river at Roma and attacked a Confederate supply train there in December of 1862. Generally speaking, chaos ensued, with Mexico both aiding Confederate cotton shipment and attacking Confederates as an extension of the anti-American sentiments fanned by Cortina and Zapata.

After the Civil War, Río Grande politics and economics remained in turmoil. Internally, Mexico consumed itself with fighting Maximilian who had been placed on the throne by Napoleon III of France. In 1867, a major hurricane slammed into Brownsville and destroyed steamboat facilities for the river corridor. Indian raids and robberies were commonplace. At the decade's end, Roma was still of modest size.

Another major flood of the river in 1874 raised land ownership questions again as the channel changed course in several significant places. By about 1875, the Tamaulipas free trade

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zone had begun to cause serious damage to the businesses of American merchants. By this date, the tables had turned and Mexican merchants were importing high-quality European goods with imposed duties directly into the trade zone and underselling the same lesser-quality, American-made goods to buyers in Texas. The situation kept heavy contraband running in both directions.

Roma grew as a contraband center during the 1870s and 1880s. Although two counter customs houses existed south of the Río Grande, Guardado Arriba and Guardado Abajo, both to the east of the San Pedro ford, contraband continued active. In 1884, contraband and land ownership issues came to a head with the invasion by the American politicians of Roma of the island of Morteritos, which Don Manuel Garza Peña of Mexico farmed as its understood owner. Americans accused Peña of using his farm animals to pack contraband into Texas.

The incident brought the Mexican and U.S. governments together over who owned the land, how land had been and would continue to be adjudicated with river channel changes, and border economics.

Morteritos was ultimately declared to be U.S. property, but formal discussions in Washington, D.C., were lengthy--leading to a treaty in 1886, and finally to the establishment of the International Boundary Commission in 1889. Morteritos, however, continued to be a problem. Again in the Mexican Revolution in 1913 under Francisco Madero, and after his assassination in 1914, Mexico sought ownership of Morteritos at Roma. By that date, heirs of Escandón's colonists had lived on the island for over a century. Their literal life in the Río Grande underscored the unity of Mier-San Pedro-Morteritos-Roma as a single place where the river had not been understood to be a boundary and where generation followed generation as if the original Escandón settlement had continued.

Roma maintained regional commercial pre-eminence for a while even after the completion of two railroads to Laredo during the late 1870s and early 1880s. The narrow-gauge Corpus Christi, San Diego and Río Grande, later known as the Texas-Mexican, redirected trade through Corpus Christi to the Texas-Mexico border at Laredo and effectively bypassed the Río Grande steamboat ports of Roma and Río Grande City in Texas and Camargo in Mexico. At the close of 1881, the International and Great Northern arrived at Laredo from San Antonio, with the narrow-gauge Mexico Oriental Interoceanic and International (the Mexican National Railway) continuing commercial transit south into Mexico.

The Río Grande had fostered steamboat trade during the 1846-86 years, pulling Roma culturally toward New Orleans and the Gulf. But, as Americans settled more heavily in the Southwest, they took irrigation waters in New Mexico and at El Paso from the river, lowering the water table steadily. By 1859, the Río Grande was 13 inches lower at Roma than it had been in 1850; by 1869, two feet lower; by 1879, nearly four feet lower, and by 1900 more than seven feet lower than at mid-century. Steamboats,

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even without the railroads, were less and less successful, and thus trade and politics reoriented on their traditional north-south axis--through the San Pedro Arroyo and, after 1928, over the Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán Bridge into Mexico.

Although the railroads had bypassed the town and signaled the close of Roma's river trade life, its position at the San Pedro ford meant continued commerce with interior Mexico. During the 1880s, particularly after mid-decade, Roma's built environment evoked prosperity and growth. American surveying engineer W.H. Chatfield described Roma, then a town of some 1000 persons, in his *The Twin Cities of the Border and the Country of the Lower Rio Grande* as:

one of the most compact and picturesque towns of its size along the Rio Grande ... compared by some persons to a hamlet on the Rhine, owing to its situation upon a high bluff, and the arrangement of the houses calling to mind the walled towns and castled heights of the Fatherland. (Chatfield: 1893, p. 44)

Roma grew little after the turn of the century and continued its own unique bi-national politics and economics, with strong generational family ties maintained to Mier. Manuel Guerra, who had such ties, achieved great regional power by the middle 1890s. The Guerra Store printed its own currency and was operated as the self-contained economic center for the community at the century's turn. Guerra ran the local Democratic Party and passed his familial power to his sons at his death in 1915.

Simultaneously, Roma aligned itself with revolt and revolution in Mexico--movements in Mexico opposing conservative power. Thus, in 1885, government officials in Monterrey notified President Díaz that contraband weapons for revolt were being stored in Roma. (Miró Flaquer: 1986) Again in 1911 and 1913, Roma was tied to revolutionary arms storage and shipment linked to northern Mexico.

CONCLUSION:

Roma, with its origins in the Escandon pioneering enterprise of the mid-1700s, recalls nearly two and a half centuries of history. Roma has sustained itself as a bicultural community for a century and a half, with dominant Hispanic lifeways. The buildings in its historic district, moreover, are a "living catalogue" of the different types of building technologies along the Lower Rio Grande that, collectively, present its unique 19th-century character to the naked eye.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #3131, 3134, 3135, 3146.
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): **Los Caminos del Río Office, Austin;**
Meadows Foundation, Dallas

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: Approximately 20

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	A	14 498150	2920200
	B	14 498050	2920480
	C	14 498180	2920740
	D	14 498300	2920580
	E	14 498380	2920390

Verbal Boundary Description:

[Lots are given as originally mapped by the Sanborn Insurance Company, and as currently mapped by the City of Roma.]

The area within an irregular rectangle described by a line

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beginning at the midpoint of the Roma-Miguel Alemán international bridge, southeast side, and extending generally northeastwards along the bridge to the entry alignment of Bravo Street,

Northeast on Bravo Street following the mid-line of block 12 to Hidalgo Street,

Northwest on Hidalgo Street to the southeastern edge of lots 1 (508) and 8 (507), block 11,

Northeast along the southeastern edge of lots 1 (508) and 8 (507), block 11, to Estrella Street,

Southeast on Estrella Street to the southeastern edge of lot 2 (506), block 10,

Northeast along the southeastern edge of lot 2 (506), block 10, to the block mid-point,

Northwest along the mid-point of blocks 10, 9, and 3, to Lincoln Street,

Southwest on Lincoln Street to Estrella Street,

Northwest on Estrella Street to the northwestern edge of lot 5 (901), block 31,

Southwest along the northwestern edge of lot 5 (901), block 31, to the block mid-point,

Southeast across Zaragosa Street, continuing along the northeastern edge of lot 1 (808), block 5,

Southwest along the southeastern edge of lot 1 (808), block 5,

Southeast on Hidalgo Street,

Northeast along the southeastern edge of lot 2 (808), block 5,

Southeast along the rear lot lines, mid-point in block 5 to Lincoln Street,

Southwest on Lincoln Street to Hidalgo Street,

Southeast on Hidalgo Street to the southeastern edge of lot 5 (707), block 1,

Southwest along the southeastern edge of lot 5 (707), block 1 to the block mid-point,

Northwest along the rear lot lines, mid-point in block 1, crossing Lincoln Street and continuing along the rear lot lines, mid-point in block 6, to the northwestern edge of lot 3 (806), block 6,

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Southwest along the northwestern edge of lot 3 (806), block 6, to Water Street,

Southeast on Water Street to the northwestern periphery of the customs house site,

Southwest along the northwestern periphery of the customs house site at the foot of Lincoln Street, continuing westerly to include the river bluffs,

Southeast along the river face of the customs house site at the foot of the river bluffs, paralleling Water Street to the northwestern edge of Roma-Ciudad Miguel Alemán international bridge,

Southwest along the northwestern edge of the bridge to the midpoint and completing the irregular rectangle to the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries for the Roma Historic District circumscribe that portion of Roma strongly evocative of the settlement and maturation period, ca. 1829 to 1900. Very few intrusions exist within the historic area, with open lots typically indicative of former walled family compounds. The plaza, wharf site, bridge and buildings within the historic district are vibrantly characteristic of the continued Hispanic aesthetic and lifeways found in Roma.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

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Date: April 29, 1993

ROMA HISTORIC DISTRICT

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
November 4, 1993