
LA LOMITA MISSION HIDALGO COUNTY, TEXAS

SUMMARY OF ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

BY
I. WAYNNE COX AND STEVE A. TOMKA



Prepared for:
Kell Muñoz Architects
800 NW Loop 410, Suite 700 N
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Center for Archaeological Research
The University of Texas at San Antonio
Special Report, No. 30

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Abstract:

La Lomita Mission, near the Rio Grande and just south of Mission, Hidalgo County, Texas, is the former mission and ranch headquarters of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. A small stone chapel constructed in 1899 may have been the first documented structure at La Lomita. This structure was later expanded into the still-standing chapel present on the site today. Kell Muñoz Architects of San Antonio will be conducting architectural preservation work on this chapel. This work will involve below-grade work within the chapel and on the grounds immediately surrounding the structure. This archival review summarizes the available architectural information related to the types and locations of previous structures and facilities within the mission complex. It is clear that several adjoining structures enclosed a plaza adjacent to the chapel and ancillary facilities were found nearby. In addition, several residential structures may have existed in the vicinity of this plaza. It is recommended that exploratory archaeological investigations be conducted to identify the exact locations and types of remains that may be encountered in the areas of subsurface disturbance prior to the planned impacts. The artifacts, features, and facilities identified through this work can contribute rich detail to the interpretive fabric of the mission.

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Acknowledgments:

Archival research such as that described in this report is the painstaking product of one or a small number of individuals working in libraries, archives, and more recently on the Internet consulting dozens and in some cases hundreds of documents. The primary author of this report would like to acknowledge the help of Brother Ed and Sister Satillan at the Oblate Archives in San Antonio for their dedication to preserving and caring for the thousands of documents that represent our modern windows to history. The authors would also like to thank Steven Tillotson, of Kell Muñoz Architects, for his assistance in setting up the project and his love of architectural preservation and history. Finally, thanks go to Bruce Moses for adapting the project area map, Antonia Figueroa for scanning the images from the Southern Oblate Historical Archives, and Johanna Hunziker for her patience and perseverance through countless historical narratives and numerous footnotes to make this document read as well as it should.

INTRODUCTION

Funded by a Texas Preservation Trust Fund Grant received from the Texas Historical Commission, Kell Muñoz Architects of San Antonio plans to carry out architectural preservation work at La Lomita Mission, part of La Lomita Historic District in the city of Mission, Hidalgo County, Texas. The planned work will involve subsurface impacts inside and outside along the foundations of the standing church structure and grade modifications to the surface immediately surrounding the church.

Given that little of the original mission complex and structures remain, Kell Muñoz Architects contracted with the Center for Archaeological Research at The University of Texas at San Antonio to conduct comprehensive archival investigations to identify the potential for, and types of, buried deposits that may be impacted by the planned construction. Specifically, the archival investigations had two principal goals:

- 1) compile a comprehensive history of La Lomita Mission with specific focus on the use of the area immediately adjacent to the existing church structure; and
- 2) identify and compile site plans, maps, and historic photographs that exist of the project area to aid in the identification of historic structures and features that may have once been present in the area to be impacted by the planned grade work.

This report summarizes the results of the archival research and makes recommendations regarding the archaeological investigations that may be desirable prior to the architectural preservation activities. The report has four main sections. The first section provides a brief early historic background to the founding of the mission. The second section discusses the role of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the establishment of the mission. Relying primarily on historic photographs, section three summarizes the types and approximate locations of selected structures that may have stood within the mission complex. Finally, the fourth section proposes a series of subsurface archaeological investigations that may be necessary to better characterize and more precisely define the types of foundation remnants and

features that may be buried within the area impacted by the proposed preservation work.

La Lomita Mission, named for the “little hill” it occupies, is the remains of a former mission and ranch headquarters of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The mission is located near Farm Road 1016 near the Río Grande, five miles south of Mission, Texas, in southwestern Hidalgo County. The site occupies a portion of two Spanish land grants awarded by the King of Spain in 1767. It is from this site that the nearby town of Mission derived its name. In 1976 the city of Mission leased a portion of the property and added landscaping and visitor amenities to create a municipal historical park. The Oblates also leased a nearby section of the river frontage where Anzalduas Park was established. The complex has become a primary recreational site for Hidalgo County. In 1975 La Lomita was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places¹ (Figure 1).

EARLY HISTORIC BACKGROUND

The mid-eighteenth century was a period of great expansion for the northern portion of New Spain. Spain moved into northern Mexico and Texas to fortify its claim of the vast lands from California to the eastern boundaries of Texas from French intrusion. These incursions progressed smoothly in the beginning as the establishment of presidios and missions among the generally peaceful tribes of central and east Texas; however, they soon encountered the hostile attitude of the coastal Indians and the tribes east of Nuevo León and north of Querétaro. In 1738 José de Escandón and the Franciscan missionaries began the successful reduction of the Sierra Gorda.² Because of his successful effort, in 1740, the Viceroy commissioned Escandón to inspect the country between Tampico and the San Antonio River, later known as Nuevo Santander. He began by dispatching seven divisions into the area and in October presented a colonization plan. In 1748 he was named governor and captain general of Nuevo Santander and the following year he began establishing settlements along the Río Grande. The first two settlements were Camargo and Reynosa, followed by Dolores and Revilla. In 1755 Escandón granted permission to Tomás Sánchez de la Barrera y Garza to found Laredo, the largest and most successful permanent Spanish settlement in southwest

¹ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “La Lomita Mission,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

² Bolton, H. E., *Texas in the Middle Eighteenth Century*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1917, reprinted 1970, pp. 55–58.

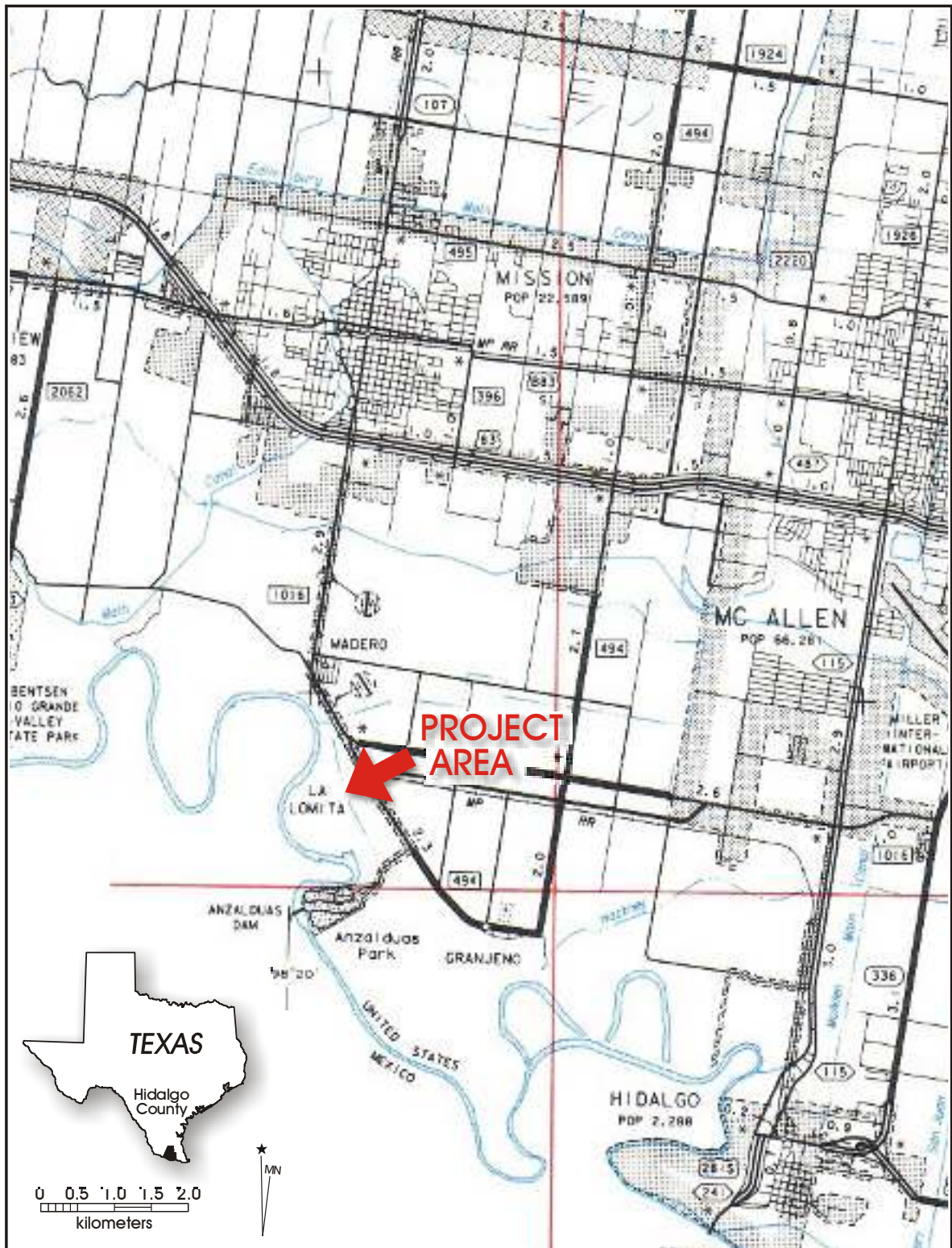


Figure 1. Location of project area (La Lomita) in Hidalgo County.
Source: Adapted from *County Maps of Texas*, Texas Department of Transportation, 1992.

Texas.³ In 1749 Escandón ordered Captain José Antonio Cantu to establish the town of Reynosa at its present site, which at that time was under the jurisdiction of Anzalduas. Written records substantiate that the site known as La Lomita was granted to Captain Cantu of Reynosa by a Spanish grant in 1767.⁴ These grants, or *porciones*, were established to insure an equal division of the water of the Río Grande, so each had a frontage of nine-thirteenths of a mile along the river and extended back from 11 to 16 miles into the interior.⁵

The site of La Lomita is comprised of two grants, Porción 57 which contains the small hill from which the tract derived its name, and the adjacent Porción 56 upriver. After the death of Cantu, the property passed through a series of owners until it was purchased by John (Juan) Davis Bradburn in 1842. Born in Virginia in 1787, Bradburn's filibustering adventures brought him to the state of Coahuila-Texas and he eventually obtained Mexican citizenship and a commission in the Mexican Army. Commanding the small port of Anahuac, where while enforcing the unpopular Anglo-American immigration laws and customs duties, he arrested and imprisoned several Texans for treason—including William Barret Travis. This resulted in the battle of Velasco and the capture of Anahuac by the rebels. Bradburn fled to New Orleans and later rejoined the Centralist army until its defeat in December of 1832. He retired to his home in Matamoros until 1836, when he was forced to join General José de Urrea's command against the Texan rebellion. After the defeat of the Mexican army at San Jacinto, he returned to his home in Matamoros. He was recalled in 1842 during the Federalist Wars, but his ill health prevented him from participating in the invasion of San

Antonio. Bradburn died in Matamoros on April 20, 1842, and was buried on the Hidalgo ranch, then called *Puertas Verdes*. Although he had formally purchased the 4,606-acre ranch only three months prior to his death, he may have lived there for some time and legalized his occupancy for the benefit of his heirs. The site of the ranch house and his unmarked grave have been lost but are probably in the vicinity of the mission. His widow and minor son, Andrés, left for Mexico City shortly after his death. She sold the property following his death but retained title to the burial site, probably intending to be interred beside her husband, but no record of the site has been found.⁶

The land was purchased by René Guyard, a French merchant, in 1845.⁷ Guyard, also recorded as Guillard, departed his native France in 1800 and settled in Texas. He constructed his house across the river in Reynosa, Mexico where he operated a general store and became quite prosperous. Six years later he purchased Porción 55.⁸ Upon his death in 1861, he left the property to Fathers Pierre Parisot and Pierre Kéralum, priest of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, "for the propagation of the faith among the barbarians."⁹

THE OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE

The oblates were founded in France in 1816 for the purpose of "reviving the faith among the people less touched by the Church." The order was concerned with those in the rural countryside, the urban poor, the youth, and prisoners. In 1840 the first missionaries were dispatched from France to engage in foreign missionary work. The first Missionary

³ García, C. P., "Escandón, José de," *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 2, p. 889.

⁴ Bolton, H. E., *Texas in the Middle Eighteenth Century*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1917, reprinted 1970, p. 295; Mission Chamber of Commerce, "Brief History of Mission," accessed at <http://www.missionchamber.com/history.html>

⁵ Heller, D. F., Jr., "Mission, Texas," *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 771–772.

⁶ Henson, M. S., "Bradburn, John Davis," *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 1, p. 692–693; Henson, M. S., *Juan Davis Bradburn: A Reappraisal of the Mexican Commander of Anahuac*, Texas A&M Press, College Station, 1982, pp. 122–124.

⁷ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., "La Lomita Mission," *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

⁸ Anonymous, *Along the Oblate Trail: A Tourist Guide of La Lomita and Other Oblate Shrines in the Rio Grande Valley*, n.d., in the Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Box 5.

⁹ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., "La Lomita Mission," *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

Oblates arrived in the Lower Río Grande Valley of Texas in 1849.¹⁰ The priests were withdrawn from Texas in 1851, but in March of the following year a group of young priests sailed from France to begin work again in Texas. Among the group arriving in Galveston on May 14 was 36-year-old Father Pierre Yves Kéralum.¹¹ He was transferred to the Oblate mission center of Brownsville in March 1853. A fellow priest, Father Pierre Fourrie Parisot, who would join him on his endeavor in southern Texas, accompanied him on this voyage. These priests worked diligently through an epidemic of yellow fever, border conflicts, conflicts in Mexico, and the Civil War to provide for their scattered parishioners. The priests used a small chapel on the ranch as the mid-point and meeting place between their circuit

between Brownsville and Roma.¹² They, and those who followed in their path, covered a vast frontier on horseback and gained the title of “Cavalry of Christ”¹³ (Figure 2). Father Kéralum’s architectural and carpentry skills contributed to the building of many Catholic edifices in Brownsville but it was for his work among his far-flung parishioners that he became known as *el Santo Padre Pedrito*. Despite ill health and failing eyesight, he began his final tour of his parish in November 1872. He never arrived at his destination, but disappeared after being seen north of Mercedes. He then became known as “The Lost Missionary.” A decade later his remains were recovered by cowhands near where he was last seen.¹⁴



Figure 2. 1911 photograph of the “Cavalry of Christ.”

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

¹⁰ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “The Oblates in Texas, The Cavalry of Christ,” *Newsletter of the Southern U.S. Province*, June, 1998.

¹¹ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “Kéralum, Pierre Yves,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 3, pp. 1074–1075.

¹² González, A. A., “Parisot, Pierre Fourrier,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 5, pp. 54–55; Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “La Lomita Mission,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

¹³ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “The Oblates in Texas, The Cavalry of Christ,” *Newsletter of the Southern U.S. Province*, June, 1998.

¹⁴ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “Kéralum, Pierre Yves,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 3, pp. 1074–1075.

In 1884 the Oblates acquired Porción 56, the grant that separated the two tracts bequeathed by Guyard, giving them a large tract of land fronting two miles on the river and extending some 15 miles inland. They then began to attempt a ranching and farming operation from the two *jacales* that they had been using. These served to house an overseer and the priests when they visited, for there was no formal chapel on the ranch. Management of the expanse from Brownsville proved ineffective and the operation proved ineffective. In 1890 a large area was fenced in barbed wire and production of grapes and potatoes was attempted; this also proved to be unprofitable. It became obvious that closer supervision was required. In 1899 the ranch center became the residential headquarters of a new Oblate mission district comprising the entire county and its 65 ranches. At this time, a small chapel was built beside the two *jacales*. A brick rectory was constructed later. Nearby were the dwellings of the Mexican families that worked on the ranch.¹⁵

In December of 1907, the Oblates sold 17,000 acres of the land to James W. Conway and John J. Holt, which they combined with 10,000 acres they had purchased from John Closner and James B. Wells, to establish the Rancho La Lomita Land Company. The Missouri Pacific Railroad extended their line and established a station near the center of the development, four miles north of the old mission. In 1908 the post office was moved to the site and named Mission, because the name Lomita was already in use by another post office in Texas.¹⁶ The Oblates retained 100 acres in the new town, in addition to 300 acres along the river including the old mission complex. With the transfer of their mission center to Mission, the old facilities began to deteriorate from neglect. In 1912 they constructed a large three-story brick building to house their novitiate program. The unused chapel was restored by Father Chateau, director of the novitiate, as a “Shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe.” In 1933 the complex was heavily damaged by a hurricane, and repaired again in 1939 for use by the residents of the nearby small community of Madero. In 1975 the site was entered in the National Register of Historic Places and leased to the city of Mission as a municipal historic park.¹⁷

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

The historic record clearly indicates that there have been structures present on the ranch complex since at least the time of ownership by Bradburn in 1842, and probably earlier. However, there is no information on the nature of their construction or even their location. It is likely that they were situated on, or in the vicinity of, the small elevation that gave the complex its traditional name, La Lomita. They were in all likelihood the traditional structures of south Texas, upright small poles covered with a mud plaster and thatched roof—*jacales*. These structures are expedient, inexpensive, and in the semi-arid climate of this region, quite durable. It is possible that the structures associated with the first permanent chapel may have been a portion of these buildings. The first documented structure is the small chapel constructed in 1899 (Figure 3). The photograph, dated in the year of its construction, shows a small building with a shingled roof and enclosed belfry. This church was reported to be 12 by 25 feet, constructed of native stone approximately two feet thick, whitewashed, with a brick floor.¹⁸ A later photograph shows the chapel after it has been expanded (Figure 4). At this time the chapel measured 12 by 40 feet, its present size. The adjacent *jacal* structures are also shown. In this view, the enclosure around the belfry is missing but the bell is still present. The front view of the complex, from a later time, shows the bell absent but the side building still in good repair (Figure 5). Figure 6 is a view of the interior of the “plaza.” A description of the function of the structures states:

To the right of the chapel and at right angles to it was a rather large building, thatched, which with three rooms served three purposes. The first room to your left was a guest room used to shelter visitors to the Fathers. On weekends the Sisters who taught catechism stayed here. In the center room lived the Lay Brother who helped the Fathers as a general handy man, though most of the time he lived in the rectory actually. The room at the right was a store where supplies were kept and various items sold for the convenience of the

¹⁵ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “La Lomita Mission,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

¹⁶ Heller, D. F. Jr., “Mission, Texas,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 771–772.

¹⁷ Wright, R. E. O.M.I., “La Lomita Mission,” *The New Handbook of Texas*, The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1996, Volume 4, p. 37.

¹⁸ Anonymous, *Along the Oblate Trail: A Tourist Guide of La Lomita and Other Oblate Shrines in the Rio Grande Valley*, n.d., in the Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Box 5, p. 2.



Figure 3. 1899 photograph of *La Lomita Mission*.

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.



Figure 4. Postcard view of rear of chapel at *La Lomita Mission*, 1910.

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.



Figure 5. *Postcard view of La Lomita Mission, 1912.*

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

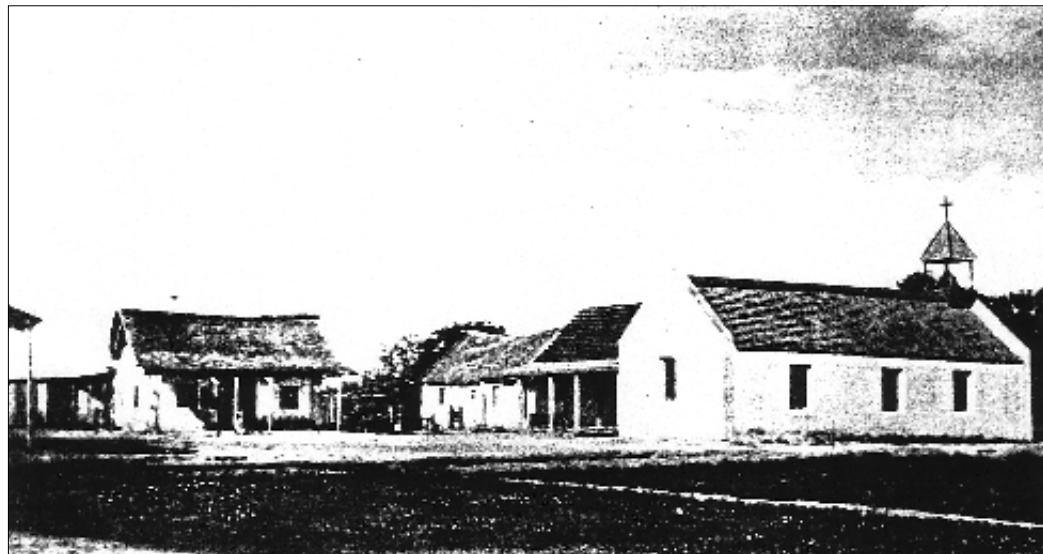


Figure 6. *View of chapel from rear showing plaza structures, no date.*

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

people. This would save them a trip to the nearest large store which was ten miles away at Hidalgo, while the nearest small store was three miles away at Granjeno.¹⁹

Figures 7 and 8 show the brick rectory that was constructed at a date sometime after the initial construction of the chapel in 1899, possibly when it was expanded. Its function is described thusly:

At the rear of the plaza was the rectory, the home of the priest. You can still see the elevated square of land on which it stood. This building faced the plaza, giving it the distinctly square shape. There were five rooms which opened on the plaza, a porch shading the front. Each Father had a room to himself, but as there were seldom five Fathers here at any one time,

the Lay Brother often lived here. The room at the far right was used mostly as a community recreation room where the Fathers might enjoy a chat or a game of chess. The roof was nearly flat, sloping only slightly toward the rear. For many years it was only black building paper, and the Fathers recall that whenever it rained, the water came through at many points into their rooms below. Behind this building and continuing from the roof was a shed which sheltered the horse and buggy. The furnishings were of course most meager, a cot, desk, chair, stove, some nails to hang clothes on, a crucifix, a religious picture. The outside rooms had windows two feet square. Severe as it seems to us, it was home to the missionaries and a welcome port after an arduous tour of the ranches.²⁰



Figure 7. *Chapel and rectory, no date.*

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

¹⁹ Anonymous, *Along the Oblate Trail: A Tourist Guide of La Lomita and Other Oblate Shrines in the Rio Grande Valley*, n.d., in the Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Box 5, p. 3.

²⁰ *ibid*, pp. 3–4.



Figure 8. *Full view of rectory, no date.*

Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

Figure 9 shows the chapel and the large thatched building in 1920 when it has fallen into disuse and before the damage inflicted by the 1933 hurricane.

In addition to these structures, there are other traces of the complex that still exist; one of which, the old stone oven, is shown in Figure 10.

To the right of the statue [at the former site of the rectory] and somewhat to the rear you will see the village oven used to bake bread and other foods for the community. It is in good repair and could be used this very day as a bakery. From the bake oven to the right is a path which leads to the well. The well, now protected with a screen, still holds water. There used to be a windmill here, and water was pumped from the well up to the village. The pipe fittings are plainly visible. Of human interest is the fact that as long ago as the days of this mission the Fathers enjoyed the convenience of a flush toilet. It was set in an outhouse some distance beyond the rectory, and no doubt represented a plumbing triumph of no small importance.²¹

A final passage in the description of the complex as it once existed completes our picture of the old mission grounds at the height of its activity:

We are still standing in front of the chapel, and have seen the buildings to the right of it. As we turn to the left, we see the homes of the people who live near the chapel. From six to a dozen huts (jacales) filled this space, the left side of the plaza. They always left room however for a wide wagon entrance into the village. These were thatched-roof homes of simple construction, large for large families, small for the unmarried cowboys. It is interesting to note how many cities in Texas began this same way—San Antonio, Seguin, Castroville—with a church rising first of all, then either buildings, homes and stores forming a square or plaza around it. So La Lomita took shape and lived fifty, a hundred years ago, a little piece of Texas.²²

This summary indicates that several buildings and facilities stood in the vicinity of the chapel, some forming a partially enclosed plaza and others representing the homes of people

²¹ Anonymous, *Along the Oblate Trail: A Tourist Guide of La Lomita and Other Oblate Shrines in the Rio Grande Valley*, n.d., in the Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Box 5, p. 4.

²² *ibid*, p. 5.



Figure 9. 1922 photograph of La Lomita Mission.
Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

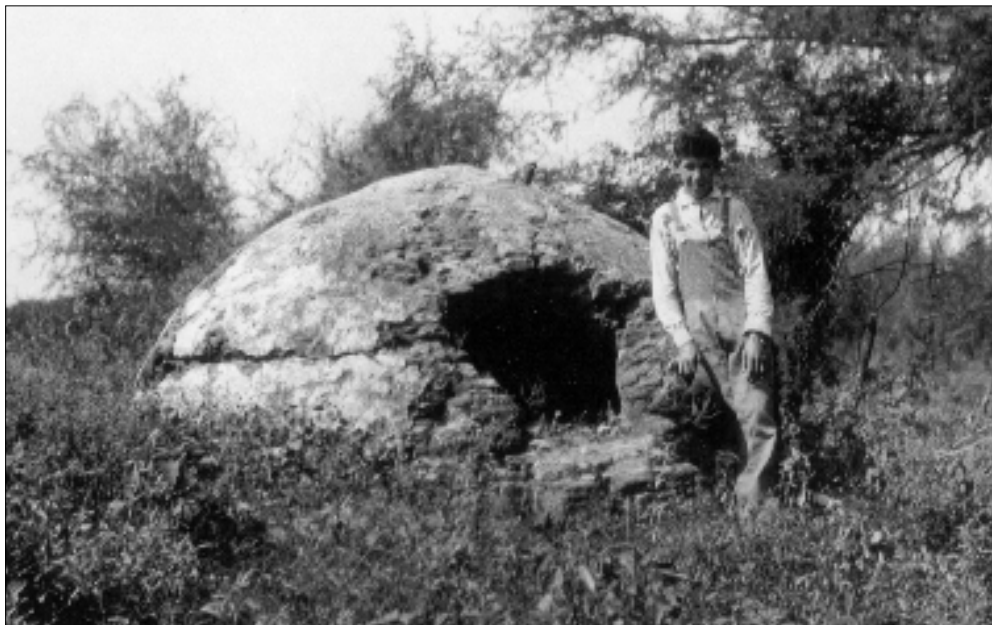


Figure 10. Stone baking oven, no date.
Source: Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas, Box 2.

who lived near the chapel. In addition to the chapel, the consulted documents mention a brick rectory, a three-room building used for guests, as living quarters, and as a store; a shed or barn for the animals; an old oven; and a well. In addition, from 6 to 12 *jacales* may have also been standing at one time near the plaza. Furthermore, even prior to 1899, the construction date of the chapel, temporary structures may have stood on or in the vicinity of La Lomita.

While these general descriptions do not allow the precise placement of these structures, they provide a hint about the construction materials employed and the potential archaeological signatures of these structures. Brick buildings and their foundations would be highly recognizable as would the remains of the oven and well. While *jacales* have a less permanent archaeological signature, the trenches dug for the placement of upright timber poles should be highly diagnostic and recognizable within an archaeological context.

PROPOSED ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

Given the likelihood that the grade modifications in the vicinity of the chapel will impact buried structural remains, it is proposed that either an archaeologist monitor the excavations associated with the grade modifications or systematic shovel testing and limited test excavations be conducted to investigate the horizontal and vertical distributions of materials and potential features. Archaeological investigations in the immediate areas to be impacted may reveal features such as foundations and structure outlines that would enrich the interpretive potential of the site. Similarly, archaeological investigations in areas of suspected structures and facilities may also help identify the locations of suspected buildings as well as the use of these buildings. Long-term preservation and the development of this site should incorporate the systematic archaeological investigation of the site to define the location, size, and layout of the mission complex.

Finally, it is possible that preservation activities along the interior and exterior of the chapel walls and foundations may identify remnants (i.e., foundation trenches) of original structures and/or living surfaces. Therefore, it is suggested that archaeological test excavations be carried out along the interior and exterior of the chapel foundation to identify

and document any surviving architectural features and indicators of earlier structures (if any) and living areas. Artifacts that are obtained as part of these and other archaeological investigative efforts can help provide details of the everyday life at the site and can also be effectively incorporated into interpretive exhibits.