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# OUR LADY OF VISITATION CATHOLIC CHURCH (SANTA MARIA CHAPEL), CAMERON COUNTY, TEXAS

## ARCHIVAL RESEARCH REPORT

*by*  
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San Antonio, Texas 78216



2005

*Prepared by:*  
Center for Archaeological Research  
The University of Texas at San Antonio  
Special Report, No. 32

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In February 2005, the Center for Archaeological Research of The University of Texas at San Antonio conducted comprehensive archival investigations on Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church (Santa Maria Chapel) for Kell Muñoz Architects of San Antonio. Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church is located on U.S. Highway 281, near Santa Maria, Cameron County, Texas.

The archival investigations were carried out in response to an architectural rehabilitation effort funded by a Texas Preservation Trust Fund grant. The general purpose of the archival research was to identify the potential for buried archaeological deposits that may be impacted by the planned rehabilitation. The tasks associated with the archival investigations included (1) compiling a comprehensive history of the Santa Maria Chapel emphasizing architectural modifications performed to the structure as well as changes in the use of the land immediately adjacent to the chapel; (2) developing a historic context for the role of this and similar chapels within ranch communities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley; and (3) identifying and compiling site plans, maps, and historic photographs of the chapel and its surroundings to identify historic structures and features that could be impacted by the proposed rehabilitation work.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of The University of Texas at San Antonio was contracted by Kell Muñoz Architects of San Antonio to conduct comprehensive archival investigations to identify the potential for buried archaeological remains that could be impacted by the proposed architectural rehabilitation of Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church (Santa Maria Chapel) in Cameron County, Texas. Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church was erected in 1882 based on plans designed by Father Pierre Yves Kéralum. It was modified in 1930s after the spire was destroyed by a hurricane. This chapel was built to serve the residents and laborers who lived in the ranch communities of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

The archival research was necessary prior to an architectural rehabilitation campaign funded by a Texas Preservation Trust Fund grant. The planned campaign will include subsurface impacts along the inside and outside of the foundation of the standing structure as well as alterations in grade of the subsurface immediately surrounding the chapel. Specific rehabilitation activities that will impact subsurface deposits will include site drainage improvements at the base of the building to insure drainage away from the structure and the installation of a new brick floor inside the chapel. Other activities will involve the repair of a number of interior and exterior architectural features of the structure and the installation of a fire and smoke detection and alarm system, a ventilation system, a lighting system, and electrical supply lines.

Given these repairs and improvements, the specific goals of the archival investigations carried out by CAR include (1) the compilation of a comprehensive history of the Santa Maria Chapel emphasizing architectural modifications performed to the structure as well as changes in the use of the land immediately adjacent to the chapel; (2) the development of a historic context for the role of this and similar chapels within ranch communities in the Rio Grande Valley; and (3) the identification and compilation of site plans, maps, and historic photographs of the chapel and its surroundings to identify historic structures and features that could be impacted by the proposed rehabilitation work. The archival research was conducted in February and March, 2005. Dr. Steve A. Tomka served as principal investigator and Karla J. Córdova as project archaeologist and report author.

## HISTORIC CONTEXT

Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church, along with other chapels in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, was part of a network of chapels kept by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate to minister to the residents and laborers of the nearby ranches. The history of the Catholic Church and Spanish settlement in the Lower Rio Grande area goes back nearly five centuries to when the Spanish flag was planted in the area and colonization of the region began. Likewise, the history of this region is very closely tied to the ranching culture that spread through the entire area and Texas in general. The following sections of this report present a more in-depth discussion of the history and development of the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

### Exploration, Colonization, and Settlement

Alonso Alvarez Piñeda was the first recorded European to see the Lower Rio Grande Valley. He was commissioned in 1519 by the Governor of Jamaica, Francisco Garay, to explore and map the coast of Florida. Piñeda mapped the coast from present-day Florida to Veracruz, Mexico (Thompson 1994:21). After encountering Hernando Cortéz and overcoming some hostilities between them, he continued along the Gulf Coast to discover the Rio Soto la Marina. The land was claimed for Spain, of which it remained part of for the subsequent three centuries. The following year, Diego de Camargo was commissioned to build a fort at the mouth of Rio Soto la Marina from where they could send missionaries to evangelize the Indians. Camargo arrived at the Rio Grande and was forced out by the inhabitants of the area. Following Camargo's failure, Garay himself went to the Rio Grande hoping to establish a settlement, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Soon thereafter, all the plans for settling the Rio Grande area were abandoned.

The Rio Grande Valley of South Texas saw another visitor in the early 1530s, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. Cabeza de Vaca had been shipwrecked and captured while he was part of the Narváez expedition and probably wandered the area between present Laredo and Brownsville (Thompson 1994:22–23), although opinions vary widely regarding the actual routes of his wanderings (Skeels 1972). Nevertheless, interest in the Lower Rio Grande area did not resume until rumors of a French presence in the area started to spread in

the late seventeenth century. It was not until 1686 that Alonso de León was sent to explore the Rio Grande to find the whereabouts of the French settlement that was supposedly located in the area. This first campaign failed to locate the French settlement and led to a second exploration campaign the following year. A third exploration took place in 1689 and found the abandoned remnants of the French Fort of St. Louis (Cruz and Cruz 1979). After the French fort was burned to the ground, Mission of San Francisco de los Tejas was established in present-day Houston County (Thompson 1994:23–24). Two additional missions and a presidio were established in the area, but all were eventually abandoned due to the hardships of life in the region.

South Texas and the surrounding area lingered unattended until both the Spanish and Mexican courts started to gain interest in the region in order to prevent French colonization and possible English intrusion. The colonization plan also provided for the important task of evangelizing the native inhabitants of the area. In 1746, orders were approved for the creation of the Colonia de Nuevo Santander that was to extend from the southern rainforest to the Sierra Madre Oriental, the Gulf of Mexico and across the Rio Grande (United States of Mexico, Secretary of the Interior 1930; Figure 1). José de Escandón was selected for the undertaking, and after initial reconnaissance of the area, he returned to request funds to locate fourteen villages in the region. The first caravans left Querétaro in December of 1748, and within six months, thirteen villages had been established. The first village located north of the Rio Grande was Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, established in 1750 (Alonzo 1998). Since agricultural activities were difficult, cattle ranching became a very important industry not only in Dolores, but throughout the entire Lower Rio Grande Valley. The country on the north side of the Rio Grande was part of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas until 1846 when it was conquered and made part of Texas by the United States Army under Zachary Taylor (Wright 1999).

## **A Brief History of Cameron County**

Cameron County was founded in 1848 and named after Ewen Cameron who lost his life during the historic Mier Expedition (in undated article titled “Historical Brownsville and Matamoros”). The area that now encompasses Cameron County, Texas, was first explored by a group commanded by Jacinto García de Sepúlveda in 1638 and subsequently in 1747 by Miguel de la Garza and José de Escandón. It was first settled by Escandón’s colonists in the mid 1750s. In 1777, the King of Spain granted the land to Capt. José

María de Ballí in a land grant known as La Feria Grant. Upon his death, it passed to his widow Rosa María Hinojosa de Ballí (Chatfield 1893; Garza 1977). The land, or *porciones*, that composed La Feria Grant became isolated stock raising settlements where ranchers, their families, and workers clustered together (Cruz and Cruz 1979). The settlements, or *ranchos*, located in present-day Cameron County were isolated and sparse even at the time of the Texas Revolution. The land was originally part of the state of Tamaulipas, but was later claimed as part of Texas. Despite the land claims from both Texas and Mexico, Mexican rancheros moved their cattle freely across the region until the 1840s.

In the mid 1840s, Gen. Zachary Taylor marched into the disputed territory and constructed the fort known today as Fort Brown. The year of 1846 and subsequent years were characterized by violent encounters between Mexicans and Americans, finally leading to the Mexican War. The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma were both fought in Cameron County. Two years later, in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed and the area that now constitutes Cameron County officially became part of the United States. The first English-speaking settlement in the area was Santa Rita, located five miles from Fort Brown. Figure 2 shows Cameron County with the location of Santa Maria, Santa Rita, Fort Brown and the locations of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.

### ***Santa Maria, Texas***

Santa Maria is located at the junction of U.S. Highway 281 and Farm Road 2556 in the southwestern part of Cameron County, Texas (Figure 3). This area was settled in the 1750s by José de Escandón’s colonists. The land also was part of La Feria Grant given by the Spanish crown to José María de Ballí and subsequently to his widow, María Hinojosa de Ballí around 1777 (Garza 1977). The first chapel established in the area was built in 1824 at the charge of the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate. Ranching was one of the main economies in the area, as was the case in most of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The transportation of goods was also important in the area with economical fluctuations through the years. The first railroad arrived in Santa Maria in 1913 allowing the population of the town to grow. Nevertheless, the population fluctuated constantly. The railroad station was closed in 1957 (Garza 1977). In the 1960s, a colonia developed around the area and the population increased significantly in the late 1980s to just over 1,000 people. The population was reported to be 210 people in 1990 (Garza 1977).

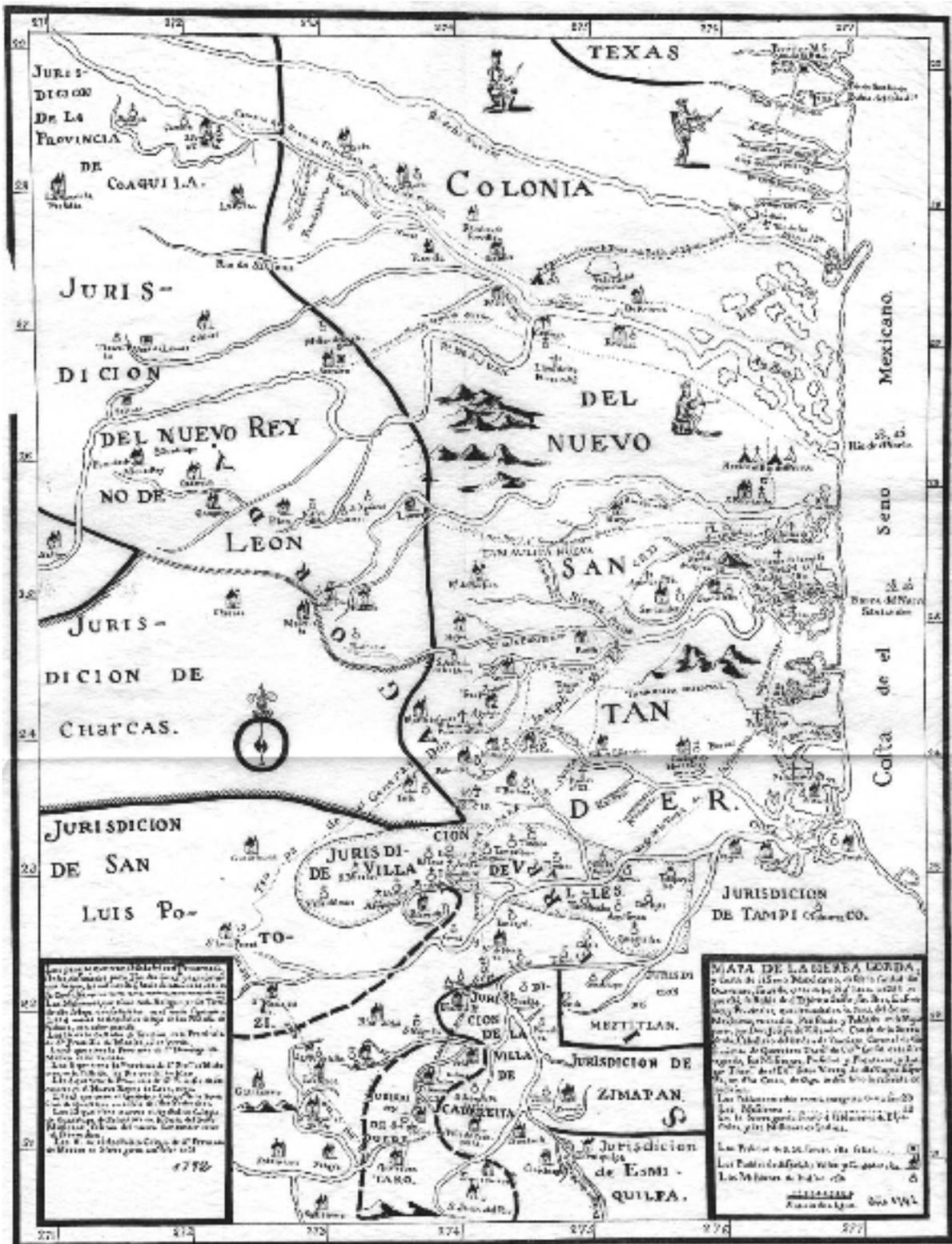


Figure 1. Map of Colonia de Nuevo Santander, 1792. From General State of the Settlements made by D. José de Escandón, United States of Mexico, Secretary of the Interior, 1930.

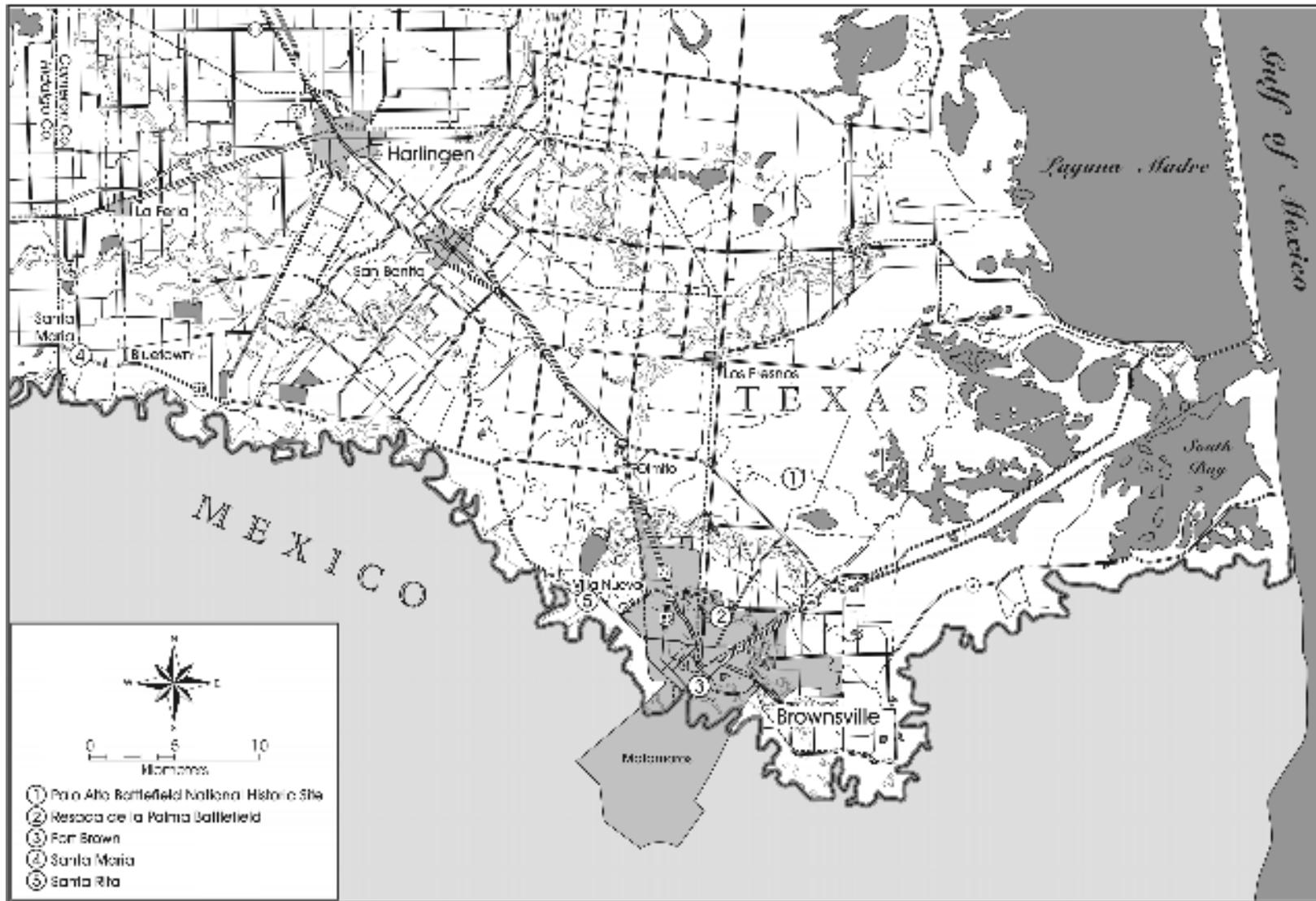


Figure 2. Map of Cameron County showing Santa Maria, Santa Rita, Fort Brown, and the locations of the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma.

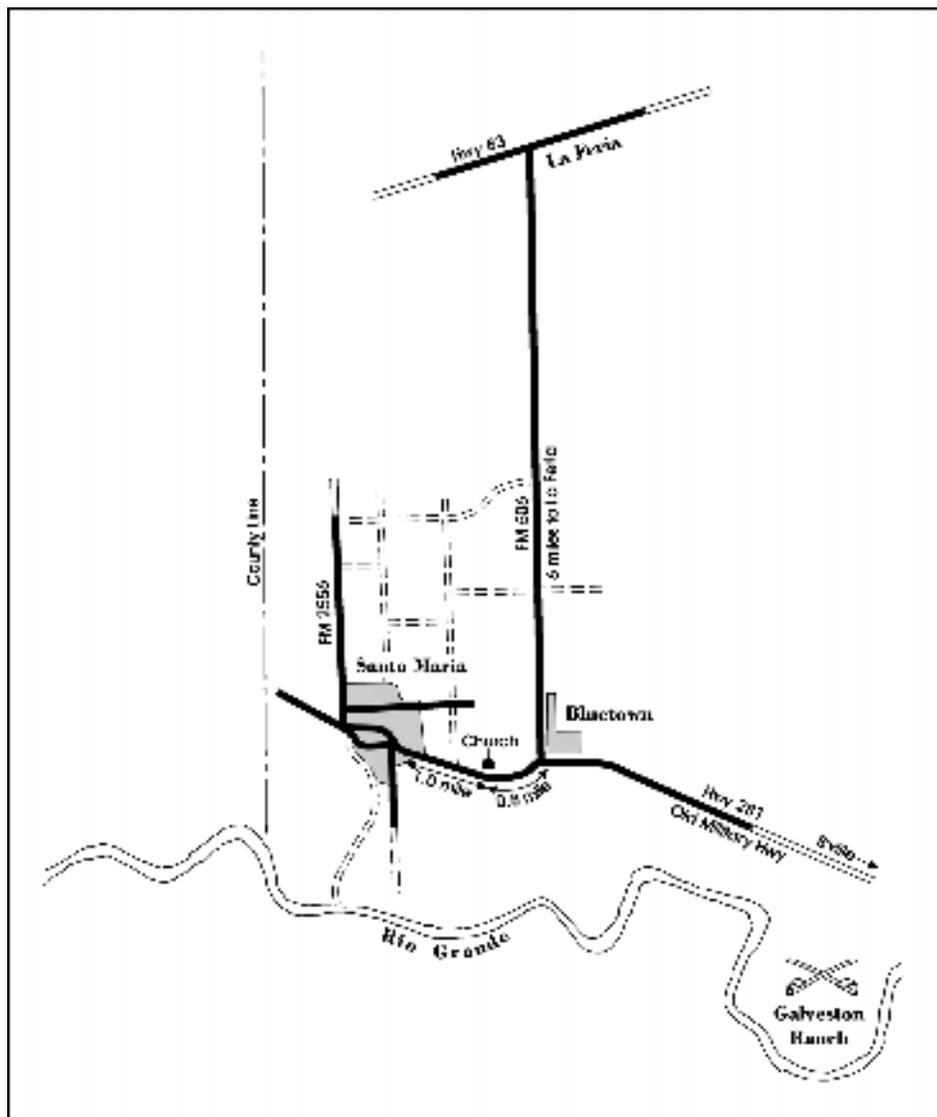


Figure 3. Location of *Our Lady of Visitation Church* between U.S. Highway 281 and FM 2556.

## RANCHING AND RELIGION IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY

When the Lower Rio Grande Valley began to be settled, Escandón prohibited the dispersal of settlers to the countryside to secure the success of the colonization project and to foster the development of towns and protection of herds and lives (Alonzo 1998). Nevertheless, it was common practice for the settlers to occupy lands outside the boundaries of towns and start ranchos outside town districts. The system of conceding land grants encouraged these

practices and discouraged the centralization of population in towns. By the late 1700s, the rancho was already the primary unit of social organization where a group of families would gather to provide a sense of community and mutual protection (Alonzo 1998). Settlements in Nuevo Santander grew isolated from the main centers of commerce and government, and having to provide their own protection led to the development of a patriarchal social and economic system (Alonzo 1998). The settlements in South Texas continued to grow rapidly as the herds continued to multiply. This growth encouraged Spain to provide more land grants

in the areas north of the Rio Grande. More ranches were established in these areas, and with these came the need to support the religious life of the inhabitants of the ranches and their laborers.

## Communities and Religious Life

Due to the fact that a great number of the settlers in the Lower Rio Grande area came from nearby Mexican towns, the inhabitants of the area were mostly Mexican and Catholic (Wright 1999). Likewise, they had ties to the south side of the Rio Grande, so the churches in which they worshiped were also on that side of the river. Visits from the priest were rare, especially because of the scattered locations of the villages and ranches. The people living in the ranches and villages north of the river had to cross the river to be married, baptized, or attend the major celebrations of the Catholic faith. There were only two documented church buildings north of the Rio Grande prior to 1848, one in La Feria Ranch dating from 1796, and one in Santa Rita dating from after the Texas Revolution (Wright 1999).

In 1848, and based on the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the Rio Grande became the international boundary between Mexico and the United States. The communities became divided and new administrative centers developed. Along the same lines, it was decided that the territories belonging to Texas should not be served by priests residing in Mexico. The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate were the group designated to attend to the religious needs of the communities located north of the Rio Grande.

## The Oblates of Mary Immaculate

Eugene de Mazenod founded the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in France in 1816. The primary goal of this missionary order was to preach the Gospel to the poor and abandoned. In 1849, five missionaries were selected to go to Texas and start a mission with the primary role of serving the scattered ranches and communities north of the Rio Grande (Watson 2004). Originally, the Oblate headquarters were located in Brownsville and they were in charge of the eight southernmost counties of Texas. As more Oblates arrived in the Texas territory, they added a second headquarters in Roma in 1855 and a halfway stopover at La Lomita Ranch in 1861.

Given that there were not many church buildings north of the Rio Grande, part of the ministry of this order was the construction of chapels. Before the Oblates started to build

churches in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, they utilized any existing building and even temporary altars prepared in family residences. A visit to a ranch by a priest was so unusual that it was considered a special event during which the best foods and beverages available were served. Wright (1999) describes how the arrival of a priest would trigger the decoration of a dwelling for use as a temporary chapel. A description of a father's visit to a rancho community appears in Doyon's book titled *The Cavalry of Christ on the Rio Grande*.

*I stopped in a hamlet of about a dozen families. They all had to decorate the room where I was saying Mass. There was only a pair of bed sheets, a black shawl and a scarf of the same color. With one of the sheets I fashioned a confessional, the other made the antependium for the altar with the scarf as a valance, and the shawl embroidered with some much faded pictures was hung upon the wall behind the altar like a tapestry, framed with branches of pomegranate flowers and sprays of wild roses (Doyon 1956:131).*

Given the lack of chapels, the Oblates tried to resolve this situation by building simple wooden structures. They were also concerned about the religious ignorance of the people they served. The only feasible solution to this problem was to remain in one place as long as necessary to instruct the parishioners and have a lasting effect on the community. To accomplish these goals, permanent houses of worship were necessary. The arrival of Father Pierre Yves Kéralum, an Oblate missionary and architect who arrived in Texas in 1852, was the boost needed to start the construction of chapels in the region. After helping to establish the first college-level Catholic seminary in Galveston, he was sent to Brownsville in 1853. From Brownsville he participated as a member of the Cavalry of Christ and designed some of the churches along the lower Rio Grande as well as other edifices in Brownsville. One of the first churches designed by Father Kéralum was the parish mission in Roma. He also modified the plans and oversaw the construction of the Immaculate Conception Church in Brownsville, dedicated in 1859. This church became a cathedral in 1874 (Wright 2005). Kéralum died tragically in 1872, but his efforts to build churches in deep South Texas were continued by others. Many other privately-owned chapels were also built during this time to serve the religious needs of the ranchers and their laborers. Some of these were houses of worship mostly for the prominent rancher's immediate family.

Contrary to those privately-owned chapels in the prominent ranches in the area, two chapels were promoted by Father Louis Pitoye, O.M.I., to serve existing or planned towns (Wright 1999). The need for houses of worship where people from the surrounding area could gather and exercise their religious beliefs and devotions was the motivation to build these churches. In some instances, like in the case of Our Lady of Visitation, churches were built before the town was officially established. One of these chapels was built in Edinburgh, Hidalgo County, in 1880 and destroyed by a flood in 1889. Another church was completed in 1892 to replace it (Wright 1999). The second chapel was a more ambitious Gothic brick structure in Santa Maria.

Our Lady of Visitation Church was built in 1882 from plans designed by Father Kéralum and was administered by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. In an area where there were not many official places to worship, a chapel of this magnitude was an important step. This is particularly true when we consider the fact that the rancho communities were scattered across the Lower Rio Grande and that people sometimes had to wait for long periods of time to receive a visit from a priest. It was because of this that the Cavalry of Christ was originally established.

### ***The Oblates and the Cavalry of Christ***

The Oblates' Cavalry of Christ was successful at extending their pastoral visits to distant rancho communities from the nearby seaport of Point Isabel up the Lower Rio Grande to Laredo (Figure 4). The history of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Cavalry of Christ is deeply tied to the importance of churches in the rancho communities in the Rio Grande Valley. Their presence in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was in response to the need for parishes on the northern side of the Rio Grande, as these communities had been formerly served by the Mexican parishes on the southern side of the river. The trail traveled by the Cavalry of Christ extended over 100 miles from Brownsville to north of the Rio Grande and along the Gulf Coast toward Corpus Christi.

The construction of chapels along the territory they served in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is one of the main accomplishments of the Oblates. They built a stone church in Roma, and after turning it over to the Roma parish, they built the neo-Gothic church that is now the Cathedral in Brownsville. This building became the pride of the town and the worship center of the Catholic community in all Cameron County and the eastern half of Hidalgo County up until the middle of the twentieth century (Wright 1999).

The Oblate missionaries were in Texas during some difficult times that included lawlessness, yellow fever, civil wars, imprisonment, and hurricanes. After a long history in South Texas, they accepted ministries in San Antonio and West Texas starting in the early 1880s. In 1904, the city of San Antonio became their Texas headquarters. The Oblates were also an important part of the movement to protect laborers. Some of their accomplishments include the organization of the first farm workers' union in Texas in 1930 and the Catholic Workers Union. Throughout the 1980s, 93 counties in Texas were served by the Oblates. Their San Antonio headquarters staffed missions in other states such as California, Colorado, and New Mexico as well as other countries such as Zambia. At present, the ranch ministry in Texas has been substituted by a ministry focusing mostly on undocumented immigrants. Some of the ministries served by the Oblates include the Oblate School of Theology, St. Anthony Seminary, and numerous parish schools and retreat centers. They also serve hospitals, nursing facilities, and act as the Catholic chaplains to the Texas Department of Corrections (Watson 2004).

### **Rancho Santa Maria**

Rancho Santa Maria is located in southwestern Cameron County, approximately one mile east of Santa Maria, Texas, on U.S. Highway 281 (Figure 5). The ranch is located close to the Rio Grande. The land on which the ranch was established was originally part of La Feria Grant. The survey of the land was completed in 1790. In 1845, William Neale bought the land from Francisco Ballí Treviño and established a very large ranch he called Buena Vista. The original Buena Vista ranch included the later Santa Maria and Baston ranches. The ranch was favorably suited for trade between both sides of the river, so Neale established a successful general store at the ranch. The ranch was destroyed in 1859 by Juan N. Cortina and his men. Cortina served under Gen. Mariano Arista as part of an irregular cavalry during the Mexican War (Thompson 2005). It is believed that the headquarters at the ranch were never rebuilt.

In 1870, L. J. Hynes purchased 7,500 acres on the west side of the present-day Santa Maria ranch where he began ranching. Mr. Hynes was a telegraph operator and also had a general store and stagecoach stop. The land where Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church, or Santa Maria Chapel, is located was donated by Mr. Hynes in 1880. Rancho Santa Maria changed owners in 1892 when the ranch and additional land was purchased by Frank Rabb. The hurricane of 1933 did considerable damage to the ranch's structures,



Figure 4. Area covered by the Cavalry of Christ. Adapted from Wright 1998.

but much of the ranch was restored by Mr. and Mrs. Kyle Tanner, who purchased it in 1942. The ranch that Mr. and Mrs. Tanner purchased was smaller than the original Rancho Santa Maria. Texas state historical markers were placed at the ranch home and on Highway 281. According to *The Handbook of Texas Online* (Glasscock 2004), Rancho Santa Maria belonged to Harry and Kenneth Shimotsu in 1990 and was used for farming activities.

According to an article by Minnie Gilbert (1977), Rancho Santa Maria included a two-story hacienda dwelling

surrounded by various brick buildings. These included the ranch kitchen, ammunition storage, a bathhouse, a horse block to assist the ladies riding sidesaddle, and a series of arches in the back of the house that served to accommodate carriages and later as a way station and storage for farm equipment. There was also a steamboat landing on the nearby Rio Grande, along with a customs house, warehouses, and two general stores. At present, it is unknown to the author what specific buildings remain of the original rancho Santa Maria. However, the information collected for the present study suggests that at least the ranch home is still standing.

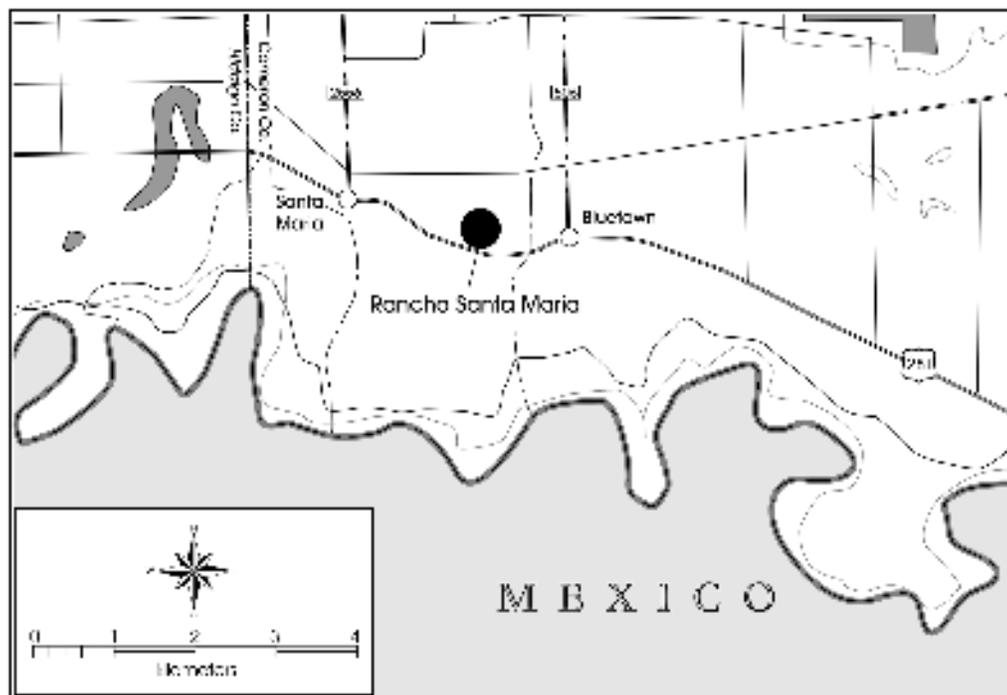


Figure 5. Location of Rancho Santa Maria.

## OUR LADY OF VISITATION CATHOLIC CHURCH (SANTA MARIA CHAPEL)

### Architectural History of Santa Maria Chapel

According to a deed record dated November 15, 1880, between L. J. Hynes and Right Reverend Dominic Manucy, Bishop of Dulmen and Vicar Apostolic of Brownsville, the land on which Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church (Santa Maria Chapel) is located was sold for one dollar to Bishop Manucy. The tract of land consisted of approximately five acres located half a mile east from present-day Santa Maria (McNail 1977). The description of the boundaries for the parcel of land on which the church was built is extracted from the deed record dated and filed November 15, 1880, in Cameron County, Texas.

*Beginning on the Northerly line of the County Road, forty feet east of the line dividing the lands of said L. T. Hynes from those of T. G. Tucker, running thence east six hundred and eight feet on the said northerly land of said County road, to an angle of*

*a space designated by said L. T. Hynes, as a public square; thence northeast on the line of said square, one hundred and forty one to another angle of the same; thence north on the line of a way known as Hynes Avenue fifty one feet; thence west parallel with the first line, to a point opposite the initial or starting point; thence one hundred and eighty feet to the place of beginning, together with all and singular, the rights members, hereditaments and appurtenances to the same belonging, or in any appertaining thereto (Cameron County Deed Records E:454).*

Originally, the land was intended for the construction of a Roman Catholic Apostolic Church as well as for schools for boys and girls. Likewise, the land was also for the establishment of a cemetery subjected to the rites, rules, and regulations of the mentioned Roman Catholic Apostolic Church. Our Lady of Visitation Church was built under the supervision of the Diocese of Brownsville to serve the people of Santa Maria, Bluetown, and the surrounding community. The Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate were designated to administer the chapel.

The corner stone of the chapel was laid on December 29, 1880, during a rare Texas snow storm (*La Feria News* 1977). Fr. Louis Pitoye, O.M.I., set the first cornerstone of the church, and the completed building was dedicated on June 29, 1882 (Pfeifer 1985). The church fell into disrepair and abandonment in the early 1900s because the population center had shifted one mile to the west. The church was repaired in 1907 as part of efforts directed by Fr. Adrian Bornes, O.M.I. The church was rededicated on December 1, 1907. Services at the church were offered until the 1970s. However, the church continued to be open sporadically for tourists and visitors. Mrs. Eddie Gathings McNail and her husband served as caretakers of the church until her death in 1991 (in undated article titled “Nineteenth Century Church in Bad State”). The church was closed permanently in 1995 by the Diocese of Brownsville for safety reasons (DaVola 1995). The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate turned over the administration of the Santa Maria Chapel to the Diocese of Brownsville on August 26, 1985 (Pfeifer 1985).

Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church is not only a gem of architectural detail, but a symbol of an important aspect of the lives of the people it served through the years. The parish, located in a small agricultural district, was mostly composed of field workers and their families who were very active in the church (Lyons 1967). According to Lyons (1967), the 7:30 am Sunday Mass was well attended by the parishioners from Santa Maria, as well as Bluetown and surrounding areas. Additional services provided at the church included Rosary devotions in May and October and a catechetical center across the street that served about 100 children every Friday afternoon. Lyons (1967) also mentions that the descendants of the families from Escandón’s time still worshiped at the church. Some of these include the Longoria, Solis, Treviño, Silva, Jimenez, Gonzales, Cantu, Reyes, Fuentes, Rodriguez, and Martinez families.

As part of the archival research, CAR was charged with compiling historic photographs and documents related to the architectural features and surroundings of Santa Maria Chapel. Nearly 40 historic photographs have been located and electronically scanned. These photographs are reproduced in Appendix A of this report. The majority are images of the outside of the church building, although a few also show images of parishioners. Finally, a small number of unidentified photographs also show images of what may well be Rancho Santa Maria. Unfortunately, while these images are a priceless record of the history of the Santa Maria Chapel, very few are dated.

### ***Architectural Description***

Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church, or Santa Maria Chapel, was built in 1882 based on plans designed by Father Pierre Yves Kéralum (Figure 6). The structure is a cruciform plan, brick masonry, religious structure built in the Gothic Revival Style and measuring 1,465 square feet (Freeman 1994). The central, front tower is parapeted and has an arched entrance with three buttresses at each corner (Gomez 1995). The following description of the chapel is based on the one prepared by Eddie Gathings McNail in 1977. Figure 7 shows an undated drawing of Santa Maria Chapel.

The church faces east and the nave runs east to west. Double doors at the entrance lead into a foyer. Another door is located on the southwest, leading into an entrance room measuring 12 by 12 feet. A sacristy and a small fireplace are located in the northwest part of the church and the altar is located against the west wall. In general, the chapel is composed of two rooms, the foyer and the sanctuary. The local people provided the labor to build the church (*Valley Morning Star* 1986). Likewise, the bricks used for the construction of both the interior and exterior were made in a kiln at Rancho Santa Maria. The roof is supported by 4-by-8-inch cypress beams from the nearby Rio Grande and covered with shingles. The adobe walls are 12 inches thick. The original floor was also made of adobe. The ceiling rises 30 feet in the nave and slopes down to the sides. There are six large stained-glass windows in the sanctuary and smaller windows located in the entrance room, over the main entrance, in the sacristy, and on each side of the altar. The doors and window frames, the altar, and the benches are made of pine. The original altar is 12 feet tall with the statue of the Virgin Mary in a niche at the top. Twelve benches that have been in the church since its dedication include nameplates for families that attended the church. There is a clip on each bench to hold hats. An old Spanish-style confessional is located in the northwest corner of the sanctuary and the Guardian Angel is in the southwest corner. The pulpit is located on the left side of the altar.

In addition to the description by McNail, Lisa Marie Gomez (1995) described the interior of the chapel (Figure 8). She stated that the inside of the chapel is composed of arched walls separated by two-tiered buttresses. The gable ends of the nave and transepts are parapeted, and all parapets have ornamental brickwork. Gomez (1995) also states that the religious furnishings and fixtures were still intact inside of the church. However, Edward Meza (Museums of Port Isabel, personal communication 2005) states that the statues

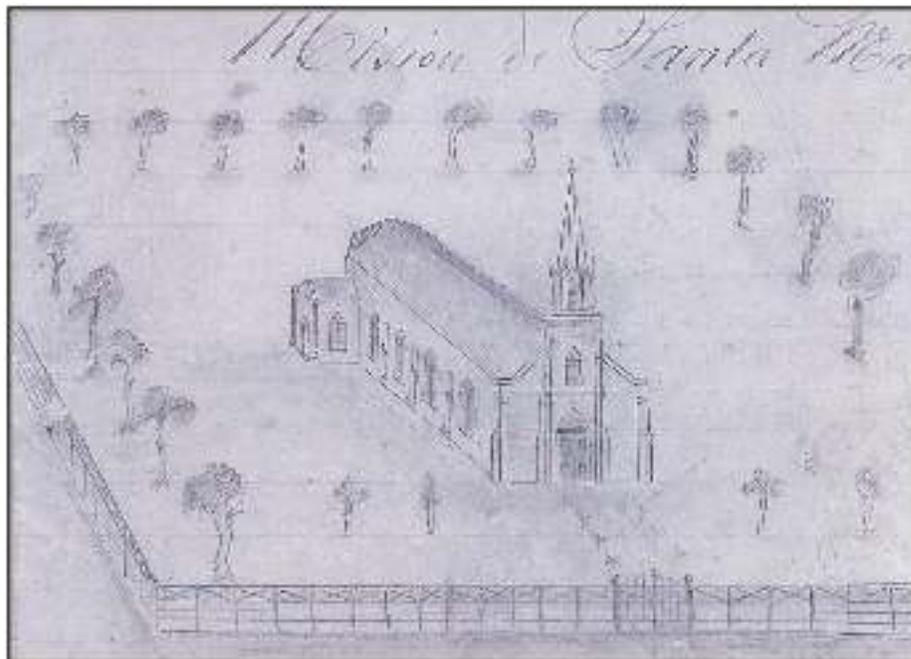


Figure 6. *Sketch of the church from the 1880 subscription list for Santa Maria Chapel.* Courtesy of Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

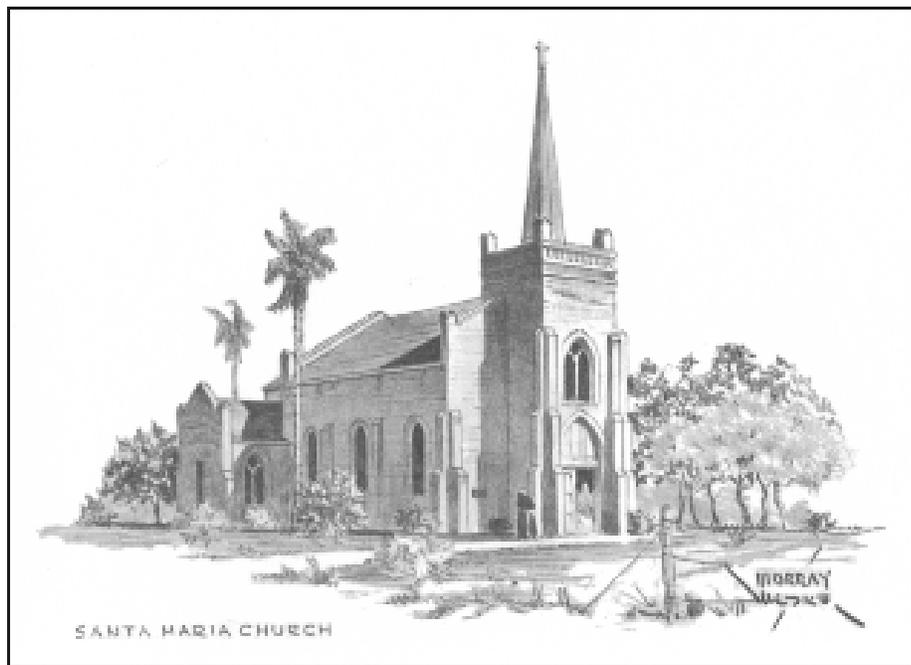


Figure 7. *Undated postcard of Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church.* Courtesy of Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.



Figure 8. *Photograph of the interior of Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church.* Courtesy of Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

and religious furnishings of the church were removed by local residents and are being kept for protection from damage due to the present decaying condition of the building.

### ***Modifications***

According to a 1985 letter sent by Rev. Michael Pfeifer, O.M.I., to the people of Santa Maria Chapel, the church was in a state of abandonment and disrepair in 1907. That same year, repairs were made to the church thanks to the efforts of Fr. Adrain Bornes, O.M.I. The chapel suffered damage in 1933 when a hurricane blew off the spire supporting a cross (Figure 9). It is not known when the spire was rebuilt, but it is present in a photograph dated 1967 (see Plate 8 in Appendix A). Also in the 1930s, concrete was added to the original adobe floor (Freeman 1994). In 1961, hurricane Carla hit Santa Maria and the bar of the cross was torn off (Lyons 1967). In 1968, a group of people attempted to restore the church and sandblasted the surface of the structure (Gomez 1995). According to McNail (1977), the church was remodeled in 1968 in an effort directed by the Archdiocese of Brownsville. At that time, six feet of brick (from the base of the walls and up) around the structure was mortared and subsequently the exterior of the church was painted. Concrete was poured over all the brick floors, the roof was reshingled, and the inside walls were stuccoed.

During the same remodeling effort, the building was wired for electricity and five chandeliers and several wall plates were installed.

According to a newspaper article published in 1981, the altar with the statue of Our Lady of Visitation, the twelve pews, the Spanish confessional, the altar stone, and the statue of the Guardian Angel in the church were all original, while the prie-dieu and the Stations of the Cross were added later (*The Valley Monitor* 1981). No dates are provided for the addition of the prie-dieu and stations.

### ***Present Condition***

Our Lady of Visitation Church has suffered damage from over a century of existence. The lack of funds to maintain the structure and land on which it stands have contributed to its present condition. At present, the church is closed to the public and in danger of collapsing. Sections of the roof have fallen in, the interior walls have suffered rain damage and two load-bearing arches are cracked and displaced. There are perforations in the roof and gaps in the brick walls. Moreover, the structure has been the home of a large white barn owl and a beehive for some time (Essex 2005). According to the architectural assessment made by Joe C. Freeman (1994), the structure requires extensive masonry repairs and restoration as well as significant structural correction due to settlement, displacement, and cracking. He noted that the interior plaster and floor as well as the tower and the arch above the altar rail are cracked. In addition, the wood shingle roof and the associated flashing require extensive repairs while doors, windows, and exterior trim require repair and painting. Also, the drainage system needs to be improved to assure drainage away from the structure.

### ***Land Use in the Immediate Vicinity of the Church***

There are various tall tales regarding Our Lady of Visitation Church. One of these assures that there is a tunnel from Rancho Santa Maria to the chapel. Others mention gems buried under the foundation of the church (*The Valley Monitor* 1981). The land around the chapel also is historically significant; *The Valley Evening Monitor* (1952) mentions an old cannon located east of the church marking the location of a former military post. Likewise, the chapel is located north of the 200-year-old Military Highway and the old Rabb Ranch, an example of Spanish Hacienda architecture. At present, and according to a progress report sent by Samuel S. Griffin, Jr. in 1995, a large part of the tract, except where the church stands, is leased for forty years by Cameron County. This lease expires in 2022 (Griffin 1995).

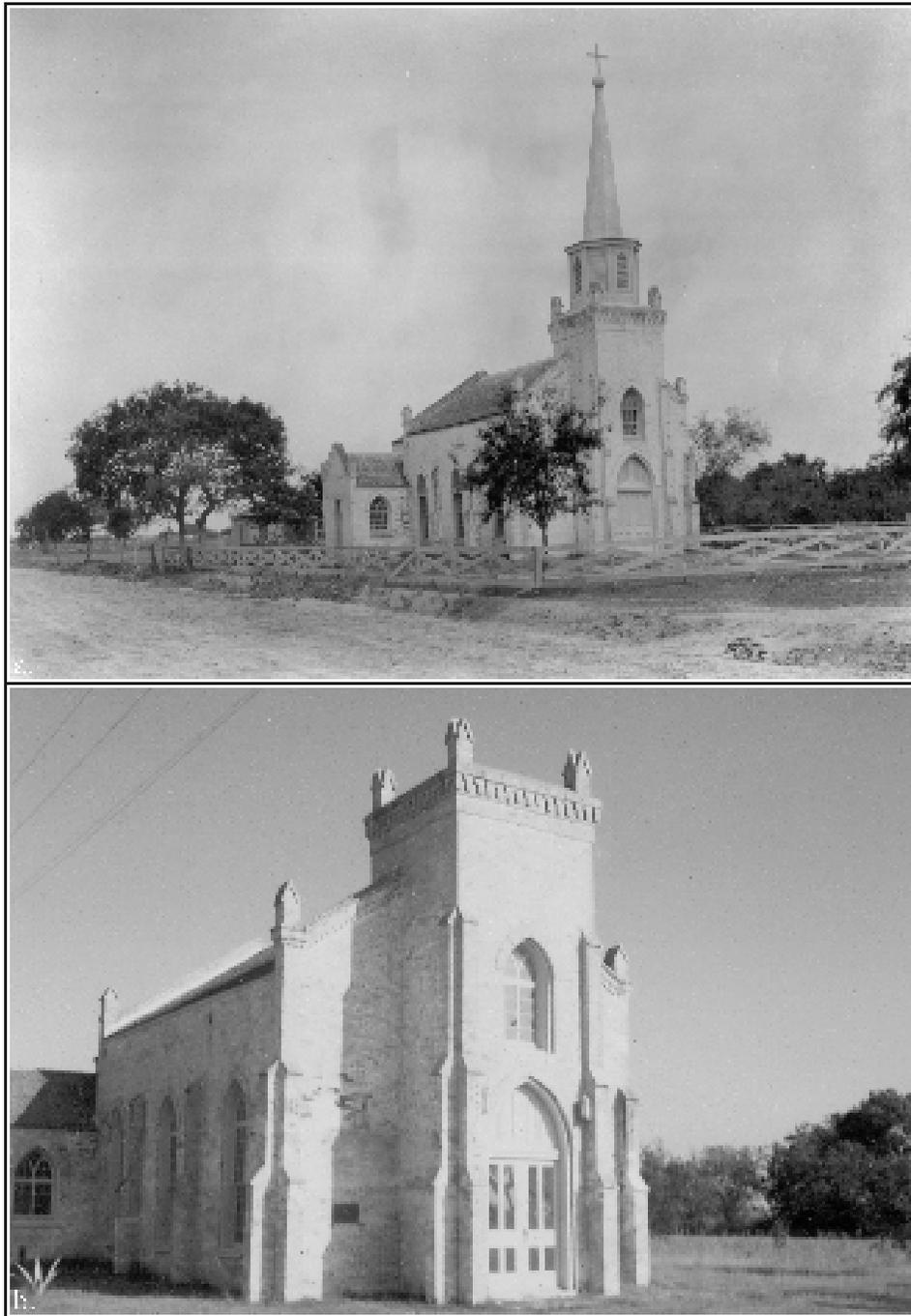


Figure 9. *Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church* before (a) and after (b) the spire was destroyed in 1933. Courtesy of Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives, Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

The use of the area immediately adjacent to the chapel is of relevance due to the planned subsurface impacts of grade adjustments in this area. To assess the types of historic resources that may have been there and/or the changes that the surroundings of the church may have undergone, we consulted in some detail the photographic record presented in Appendix A.

The drawing on the 1880 subscription list for Santa Maria Chapel is the earliest representation of the structure (see Figure 6). The structure stands alone, although a line of trees surrounds it on all sides and a well-made wooden fence with a gate encircles the compound. Since the construction of the church was not completed until 1882, this image may represent the equivalent of a conceptual plan of the compound. The earliest of the photographs (Plate 1, identified as the earliest on the back of the photo) that could be located shows the front of the church and a well-made fence with an arched gate that appears to replicate in form the arched entryway to the chapel. Interestingly, the fence is similar in style but not identical in construction to the one depicted on the front of the 1880 subscription list. Plate 2 appears to be of the same time period and shows the well-made fence, although the gate is not visible. Plate 3 is a similar image of the church, although the fence and gate it portrays are different from those noted in Plate 1. Surprisingly, the gate shown is similar in construction to the one shown on the 1880 subscription list. A dirt road is visible in the foreground passing by the side of the church. The image is not dated. Plate 4 identifies the image as taken in 1925 and notes that it shows the “Tower in repair.” Interestingly, the fence visible in the foreground is similar to that shown in Plate 1 while the gate is of a very different design. In addition, the roadway visible in Plate 3 is present in Plate 4. Plate 4 shows repair work being conducted on the spire. While we know that the church was repaired in 1907, no additional mention of repair is present in the consulted records until following the damage by the 1933 hurricane. The next dated image is Plate 5, which is identified as dating to 1928. The fence and the gate shown in this image are the same as in Plates 1–4 and Plate 6, although the spire is no longer surrounded by scaffolding. In addition, the outlines of a building are clearly visible behind and on the left side of the image and a medium-sized tree is present inside the compound near the front left corner. Finally, the road that passes to the left of the church is significantly more worn than in previous photos of the church and a deep ditch seems to run parallel to the fence line of the compound. Plate 6 seems to be of the same time period as Plate 5 and shows clearly the building behind the church and the tree near the front left corner of the fenced compound. The spire is still intact suggesting that it was taken sometime before 1933.

Plate 8 is the next dated image of the church, it was taken in 1967. By this time, the spire that had been damaged by the hurricane had been rebuilt and the fence that surrounded the church is gone. In addition, the building located behind the church is also gone, indicating that the compound has undergone some major changes. While these later photos (Plates 8–28) show no changes in the general makeup of the compound, they are instructive in that they show details around the outside of the structure itself. Importantly, for the purposes of the planned grade improvements, the images show that there were no secondary structures or features built in close proximity or adjacent to the building. Therefore, any grade improvement activities that have subsurface impacts will not effect structures or features that would have contributed to the significance of this building. Plate 20 documents the fact that at the time the photo was taken, a modern asphalt roadway was present where a dirt road used to be.

The chronological placement of Plates 9–28 is uncertain. None of these photographs are dated. Some show the church without the spire; some show the church with a spire and the presence of power/telephone wires, but the building behind the church is gone. These indicate that sometime after the 1928 photograph was taken, the building behind the church was removed and the spire that was destroyed during the 1933 hurricane was replaced prior to 1967 (when the photograph in Plate 20 was taken).

Overall, this collection of historic photographs of the church has been instrumental in showing changes in the immediate surroundings of the building and also have shown that no significant buildings or facilities were built immediately adjacent to the church itself. The single building that is constructed behind the church sometime in the mid 1920s appears to have been demolished by 1967. We do not know whether it represented the father’s residence or some other residential building.

## **Cultural Resources in the General Vicinity of Santa Maria Chapel**

Many aspects of the cultural history of the Lower Rio Grande Valley are still poorly understood. The emphasis on agriculture has been a major contributor to the lack of archaeological studies in the area. However, as the population increases and areas in the Lower Rio Grande Valley experience more commercial and industrial development, an increase in cultural resources preservation has taken place. Nonetheless, Jones and Brown (2002) affirm that the documentation of new sites has not kept pace with the

region's population growth and rapid development that is disturbing and destroying many archaeological and historical sites. Most of the work that has been done in Cameron County has been small-acreage surveys with negative results. The majority of these surveys are associated with water and wastewater facilities (Jones and Brown 2002).

According to the Texas Archeological Sites Atlas Online (Texas Historical Commission [THC] 2005), the only archaeological site in the vicinity of Our Lady of Visitation Church is site 41CF128. This possible military post, dating from the 1850s to 1900s, is located one kilometer southwest of the church. The next closest archaeological site is the Historic Galveston Ranch located more than four kilometers southeast of the chapel. The Longoria Cemetery is located about 1.4 kilometers to the northeast, in Bluetown. Various other historical markers are also located along U.S. Highway 281. The closest ones to the Santa Maria Chapel include the Alonso de Leon Expeditions, the Location of the Battle of La Bolsa, and El Horcón Tract and Rio Rico. Only one archaeological survey has been conducted in the vicinity of the chapel and it yielded negative results. The survey was done in 1995 and the project area was located less than one kilometer north of Our Lady of Visitation. No additional information regarding this survey was available in the Texas Archeological Sites Atlas (THC 2005).

## **Significance of Santa Maria Chapel**

The small Santa Maria Chapel is one of the oldest churches in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. It was situated on the Oblate Mission Trail and its history is closely tied to that of the Oblate Cavalry of Christ. The history of this church is also linked to the history of Rancho Santa Maria and speaks of the importance of religion on the large ranches (Freeman 1994). The church was designed by Father Pierre Yves Kéralum, a well-known historic figure and member of the Cavalry of Christ. The chapel was dedicated in 1882 and is an example of local masonry in the Gothic Revival Style. For the people of Santa Maria, Bluetown and the surrounding area, the significance of this church goes beyond its architectural detail and the fact that it is a recorded Texas Historical Landmark; it has been an important part of the community for more than a century—and was in constant use for over 80 years. In the words of architect Joe C. Freeman, Our Lady of Visitation Catholic Church is “a wonderful little building with a lot of character, cultural identity, and feeling—as though it absorbed the meditations and prayers of many years” (Freeman, personal communication 2005).

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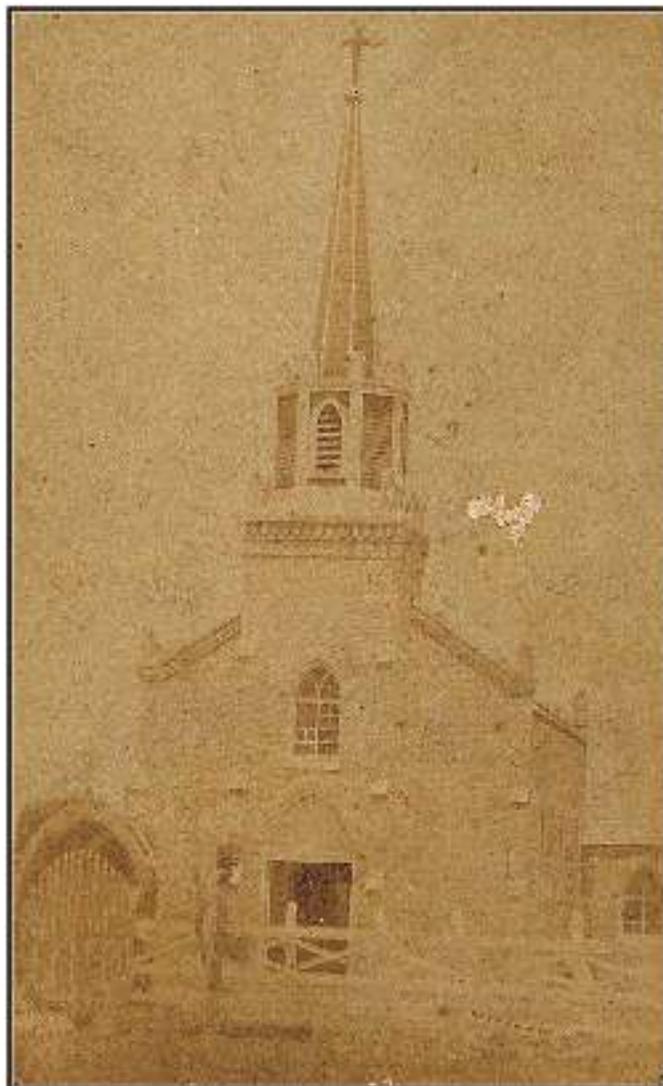
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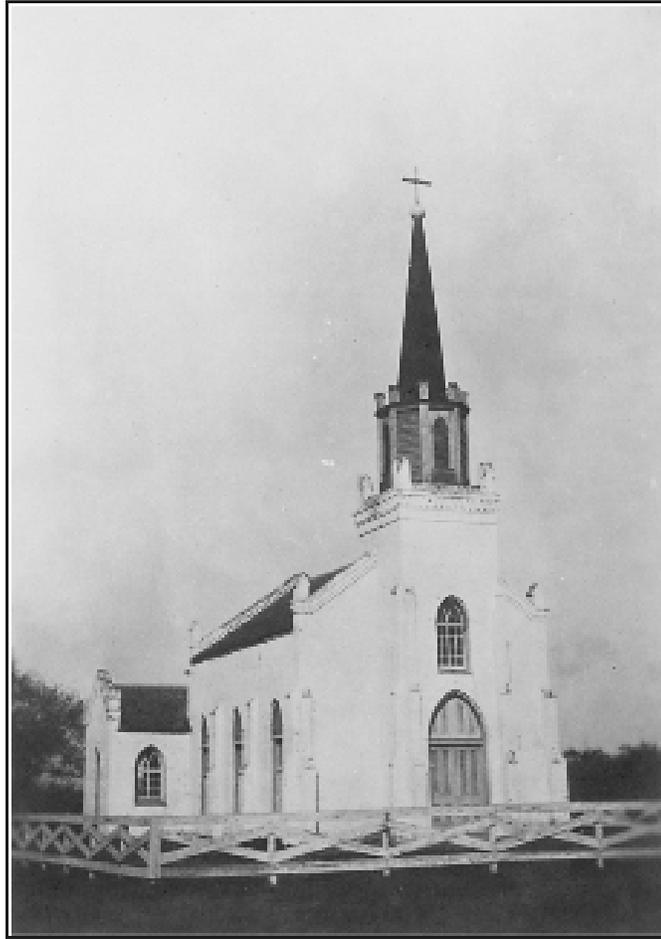
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**APPENDIX A**  
**HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS OF OUR LADY OF VISITATION CATHOLIC CHURCH**  
**(SANTA MARIA CHAPEL)**

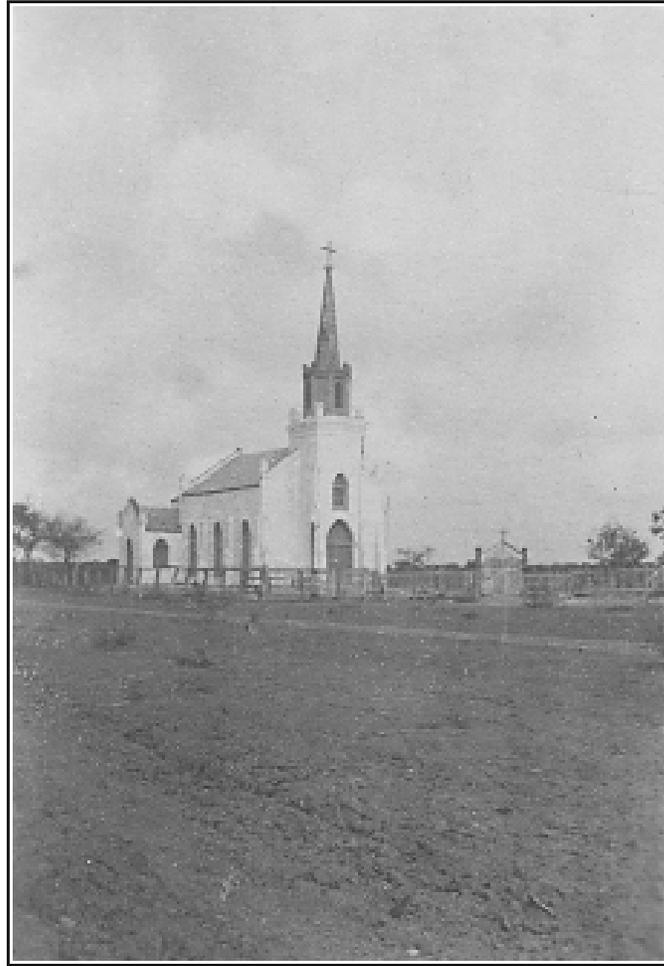
**All Photographs Courtesy of Southwestern Oblate Historical Archives,  
Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas**



**PLATE I**



**PLATE 2**



**PLATE 3**

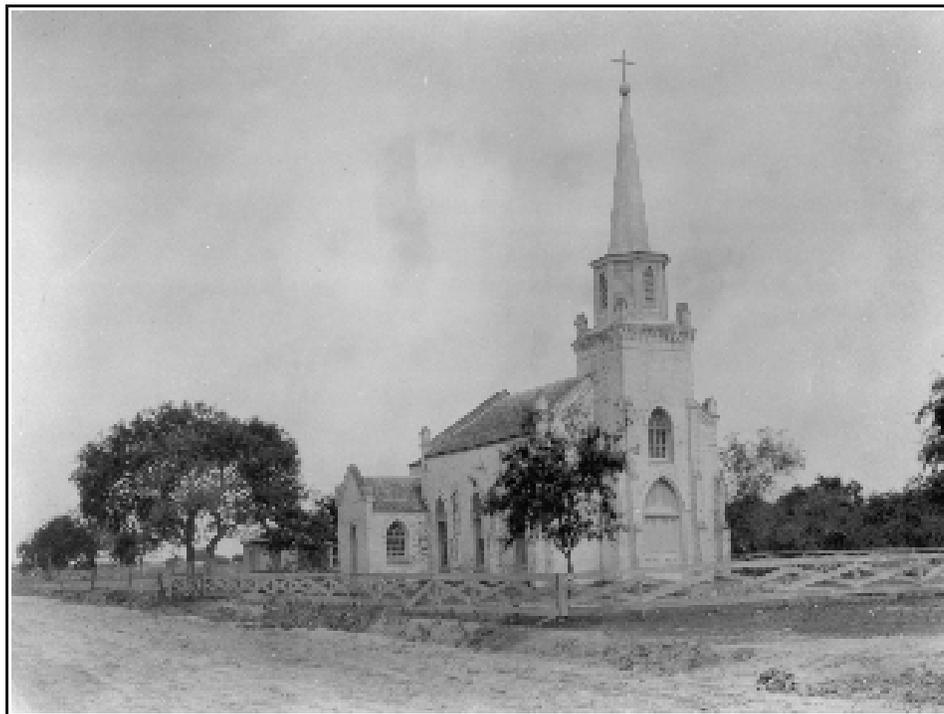


**PLATE 4**

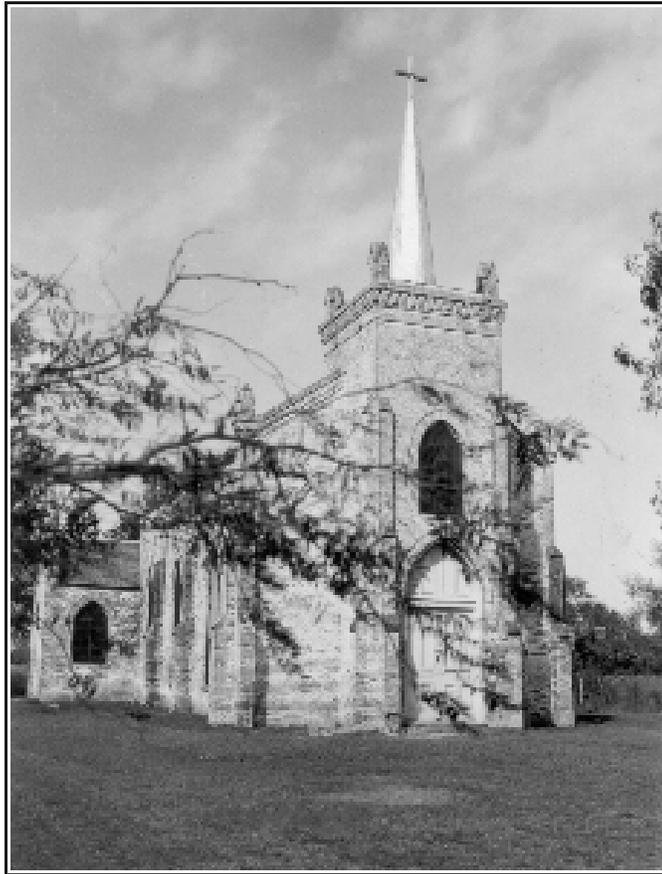
Photograph dated 1925 "Tower in Repair".



**PLATE 5**  
Photograph dated 1928.



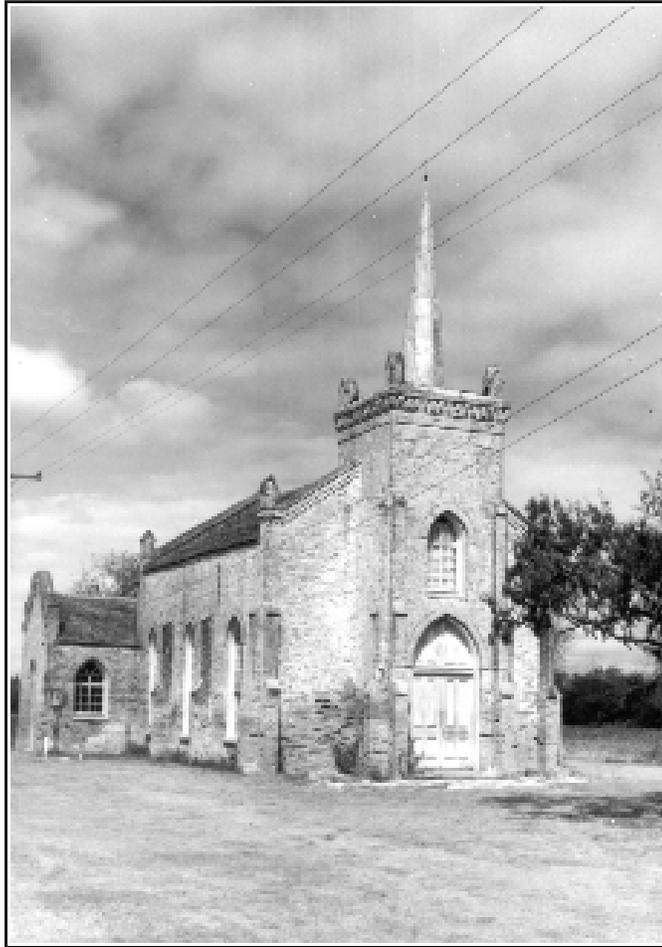
**PLATE 6**



**PLATE 7**



**PLATE 8**  
Photograph dated 1967.



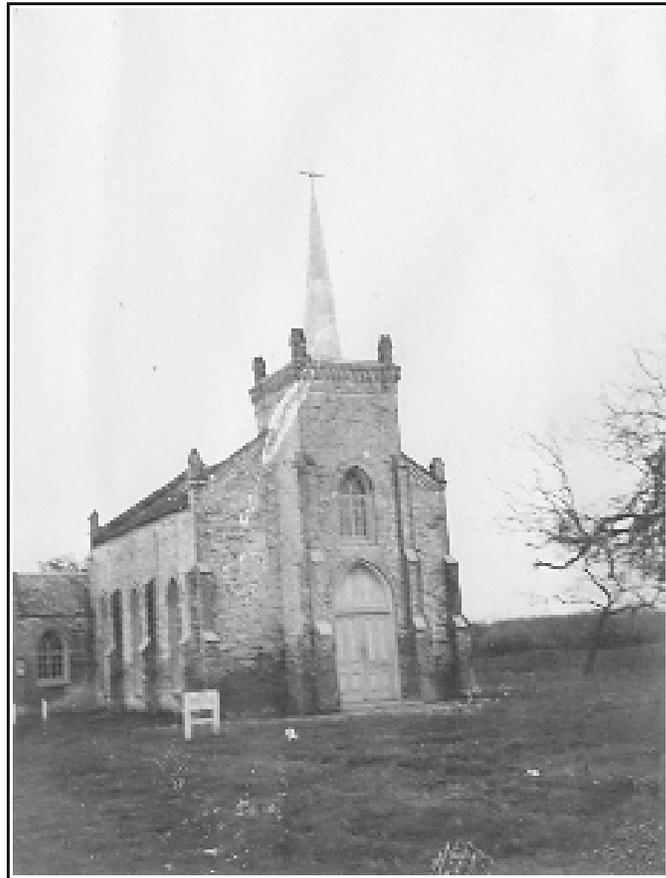
**PLATE 9**



**PLATE 10**



**PLATE 11**



**PLATE 12**



**PLATE 13**



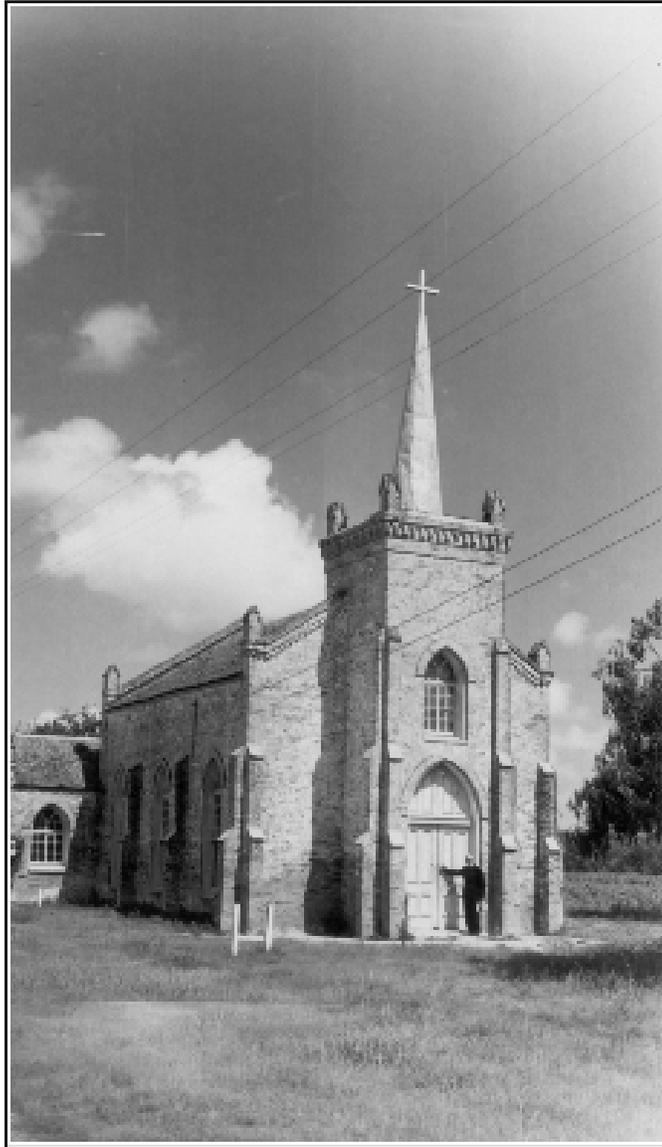
**PLATE 14**



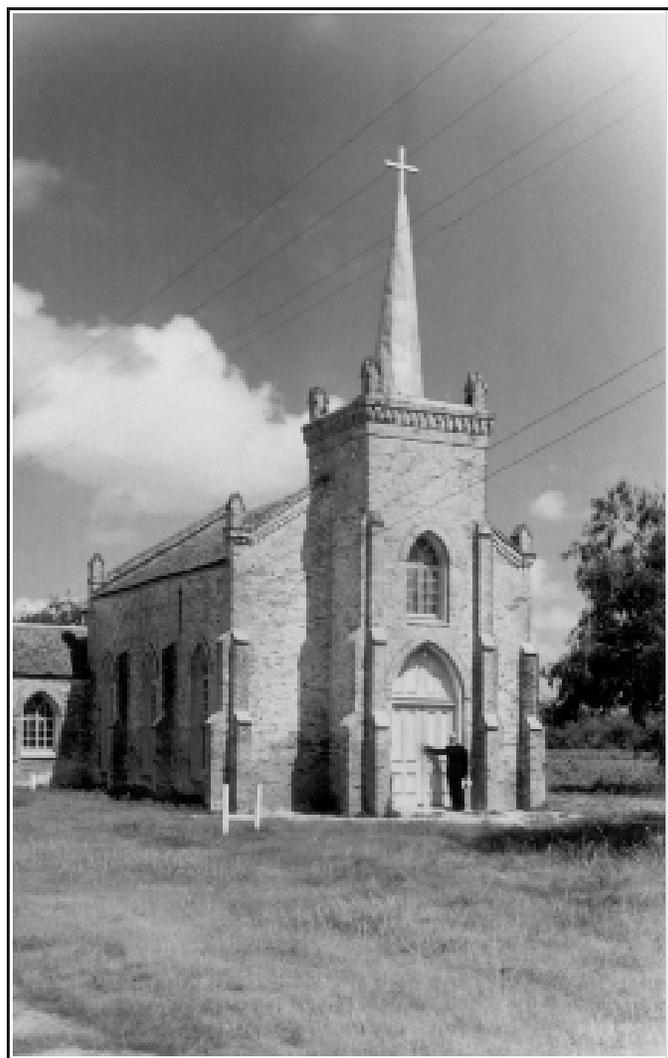
**PLATE 15**



**PLATE 16**



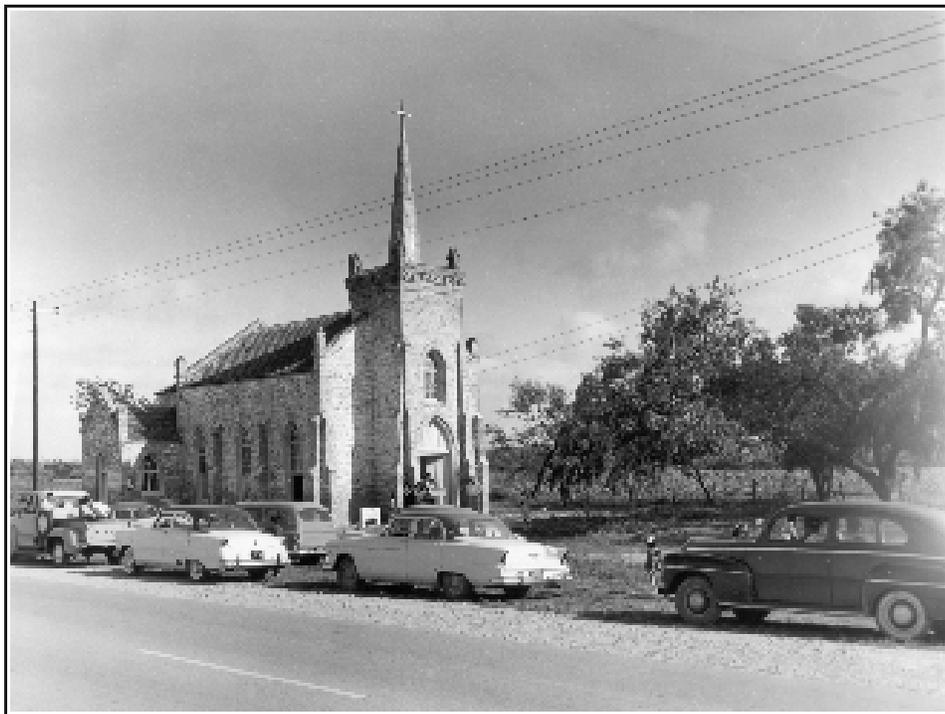
**PLATE 17**



**PLATE 18**



**PLATE 19**



**PLATE 20**



**PLATE 21**



**PLATE 22**



**PLATE 23**



**PLATE 24**



PLATE 25



**PLATE 26**



**PLATE 27**

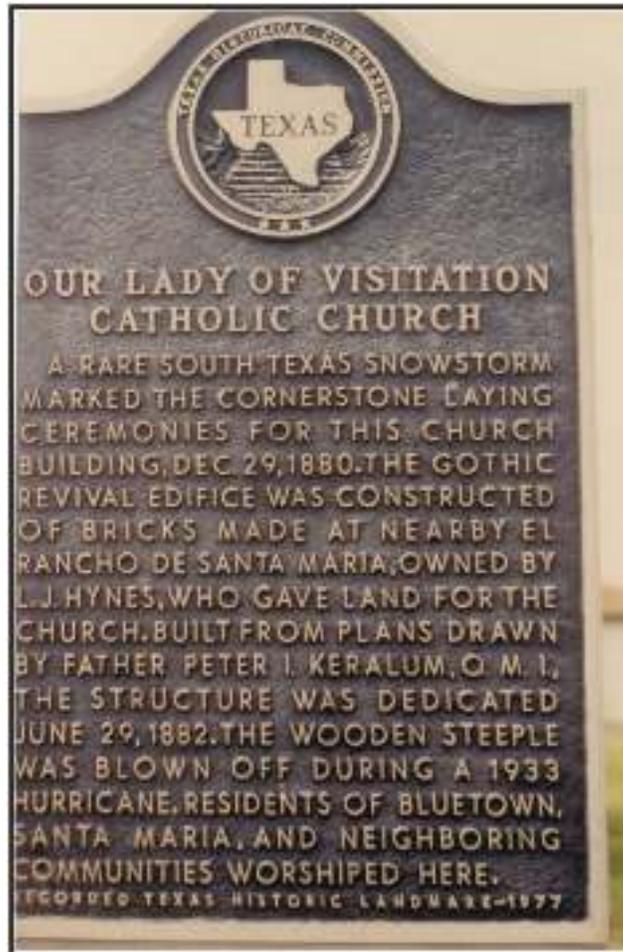


**PLATE 28**



**PLATE 29**

Front of postcard. Back reads: Our Lady of Visitation Chapel was built in 1880-1892 of bricks made at El Ranch de Santa Maria. Located on the Military Highway, U.S. 281, east of Santa Maria in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.



**PLATE 30**  
Texas Historic Marker.



**PLATE 31**  
1st Communion 1923.



**PLATE 32**  
Interior of chapel.



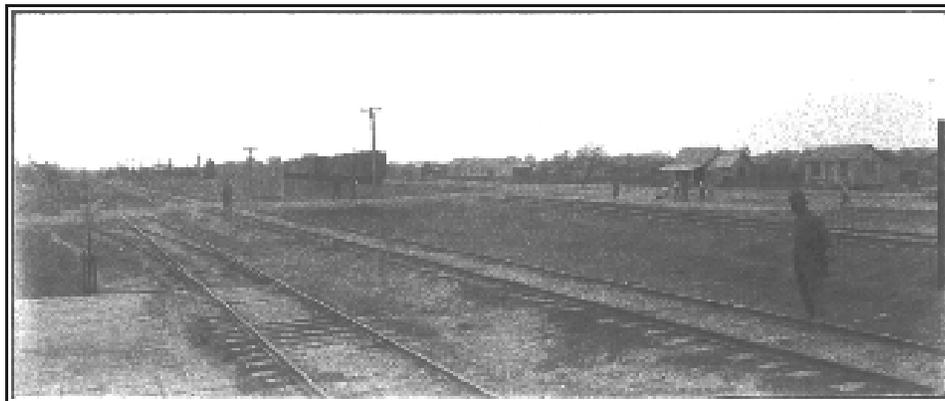
**PLATE 33**  
Interior of chapel during Mass.



**PLATE 34**  
Abandoned building once used as Catechetical Center.

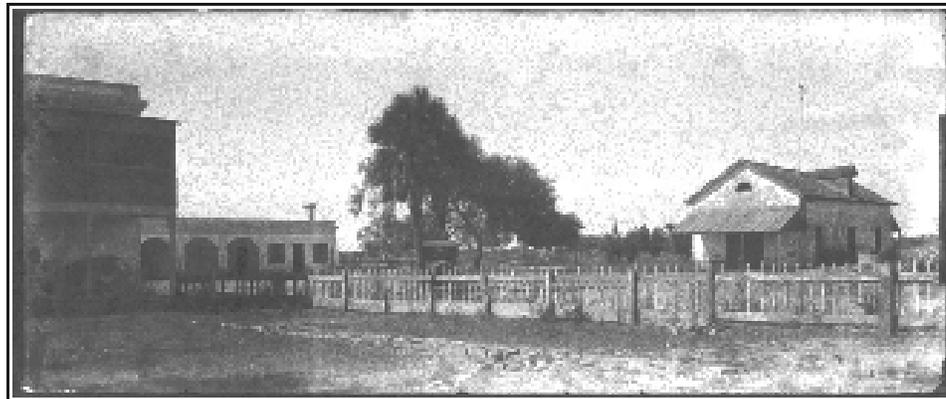


**PLATE 35**



**PLATE 36**

Railroad tracks in Santa Maria, Texas.



**PLATE 37**

Possible photograph of Rancho Santa Maria.



**PLATE 38**

Possible photograph of Rancho Santa Maria.