

Silverio de la Pena Drugstore  
Main and Lopez Streets  
Rio Grande City, Texas

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

SILVERIO DE LA PEÑA DRUGSTORE AND POST OFFICE

Rio Grande City, Starr County, Texas

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214-11501.  
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ADDRESS: Main and Lopez Streets  
OWNER: Juan Hinojosa, Jr.  
OCCUPANT: Mr. and Mrs. Juan Hinojosa, Jr.  
USE: Residence on upper floor; former commercial area on lower floor not used.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Silverio de la Peña was the son of Augustín de la Peña (named changed from August Fürstein). Silverio de la P. became a successful druggist and had married a woman by the name of Eliza Howard. Miss Howard and her sister were orphans who were reared by a retired army officer and his wife, Major and Mrs. Joseph Burnbrook. Enrique (Heinrich) Portscheller was commissioned to execute a building for the de la Peñas, which could contain facilities for a drugstore below, with space for postal services, and a residence above. Date of erection commenced as of September 1, 1886. Shortly thereafter, Silverio de la Peña was killed near Laredo--presumably in regard to a political matter. His widow, Eliza Howard de la Peña, later married Juan Hinojosa. One son was born, Juan Hinojosa, Jr., and this individual, with his wife, now occupy the structure. Mr. Hinojosa is the county superintendent of schools of Starr County.

The structure is perhaps more significant as an architectural work than in terms of historic interest. Excellent proportions, good handling of detail in the Roman Tuscan Order, and a mastery of the techniques of rubbed brickwork all add to its success as a building.

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

As relations between various European states began to disintegrate on the continent, national groups represented by these countries fighting

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

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

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

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

At any rate, the Portschellers at first resided in Mier (where their first of four children was born in 1881); but by 1883 had moved across the river to Roma, Texas.

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

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

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

Don José mentioned that Don Enrique (Portscheller) would prepare the plans, make templates for the mouldings, and then the other masons would rub or cut the bricks to the profiles determined. Portscheller would personally lay up the work involving the intricate architectural profiles, while the other masons would do the standard fill-in work between. Portscheller's inspiration seems to have come from the standard carpenter's manuals of the mid-nineteenth century, but his interpretation of them in terms of scale and proportion must be acknowledged as the interpretation and handling of a skilled artist.

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

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

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

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

#### REFERENCES AND SOURCES:

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|------------------------------|---|
| Alvensleben, Max (Baron von) | <u>With Maximilian in Mexico</u><br>Longmans, Green, and Company<br>London: 1867.   |
| Barbosa, Don José            | Mason. Rio Grande City, Texas<br>(personal interview through José Jiménez).         |
| Calvillo, Mrs. S. P.         | 1007 Vera Cruz, San Antonio, Texas<br>(daughter of Enrique Portscheller)            |
| Elton, J. F.                 | <u>With the French in Mexico</u><br>Chapman & Hall. 193 Piccadilly<br>London. 1867. |
| Hinojosa, Mrs. Juan, Jr.     | Rio Grande City, Texas<br>(personal interview)                                      |

## REFERENCES AND SOURCES (Continued)

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|------------------------------|--|
| Scott, Mrs. Florence Johnson | 801 East Main, Rio Grande City, Texas<br>(personal interview and correspondence)             |
| Schroeder, Seaton            | <u>The Fall of Maximilian's Empire</u><br>G. P. Putnam's Sons.<br>New York and London. 1887. |
| Schunior, Mrs. Rene          | 1907 Lincoln Street, Laredo, Texas<br>(granddaughter of Enrique Portscheller).               |

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Interest and Merit: This structure is of considerable interest to the architect and the historian in the handling of classic detail utilizing the technique of rubbed brickwork. It is a superior example of Rio Grande architecture--probably Heinrich Portscheller's most advanced work.

The condition of the fabric is marginal, much of the rubbed brickwork on the lower portions being much worn and abraded.

B. Technical Description of the Exterior.

1. Overall dimensions: thirty eight feet, four inches; by eighty one feet, ten inches.
2. Foundations: Unknown, probably continuous bearing brick.
3. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: Originally arcaded (now bricked in) gallery on second floor faces north. Balcony on south and west of cast iron with ornamental iron railing.
4. Chimneys. Not significant. One chimney in rear for incinerator.
5. Openings - doorways and doors. Wood paneled, some with glass in upper portions. Windows. Double hung, screened. Lower windows originally shuttered with solid, paneled shutters. Upper windows originally shuttered, probably louvred.
6. Roof. Flat. Cornice parapet with molded brick mouldings.

C. Technical Description of the Interior

1. Floor Plans. Lower floor with separate spaces for drug store and post office. Upper floor with living quarters. Arcaded gallery upper floor open to north. Entrance to upper floor from alley court. All rooms open to galleries.
2. Stairway. Wood in northeast corner inside.
3. Flooring: Pine tongue and groove.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Lime plaster.
5. Trim. Wood.
6. Doors. Wood paneled.
7. Hardware. Not significant.
8. Lighting. Not significant. Original lighting probably kerosene.
9. Heating. By stoves (cast iron burning wood).

D. Site.

1. Orientation. Principal (short) elevation faces southwest (Main Street). Secondary elevation faces southwest (Lopez Street).
2. Enclosures. Brick wall encloses small court on alley side.
3. Walks, driveways, etc. Present sidewalks concrete; original walks probably brick.
4. Landscaping, gardens, etc. Court by alley well planted.

PREPARED BY W. Eugene George, Jr. A. I. A. 13 February 1962  
W. Eugene George, Jr. A. I. A.

APPROVED Charles S. Pope DATE 2 April 1962

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