

# DISCOVER

## *Brownsville's Historic Places*



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## *Discover Brownsville's Historic Places*

Brownsville's unique place in history and popular local attractions has made it a tourist destination for over half a century. It is situated between Mexico and South Padre Island where semi-tropical weather is ideal throughout most of the year.

### *Beginnings*

The earliest people of the area were the nomadic hunting and gathering societies of the Coahuiltecan, a few Lipan Apaches and Karankawas toward the east at South Padre Island. It was not until 1746 that the Spanish began establishing settlements along the Rio Grande. The city of Matamoros, Mexico, was founded in 1784 and was typically the location where people migrated from the east coast and Europe as they moved to the area.

### *Mexican-American War*

After winning its independence in 1836, the Republic of Texas claimed the Rio Grande as its border. Mexico long disputed this claim. After Texas' annexation into the United States in 1845, and ongoing disputes regarding the Texas boundary, General Zachary Taylor was dispatched to establish a base at Point Isabel and construct an earthen fort directly across the river from Matamoros. This earthen fort was also known as Fort Texas. Major Jacob Brown was left in charge of the fort which was fired upon by Mexican forces led by General Mariano Arista. Major Brown was killed during this bombardment. Later the fort and the city were named in memory of Major Brown.

The first two battles of the Mexican-American War were fought on land now within the Brownsville city limits. While advancing toward the fort on May 8, 1846, Taylor's and Arista's troops engaged in a battle known as Palo Alto. The following day the two forces met again at an area known as Resaca de la Palma. American forces prevailed and advanced to the fort while their Mexican counterparts retreated to the south side of the Rio Grande. The war also created the steamboat boom on the Rio Grande and saw the first amphibious assault by the U.S. military. The resulting treaty of the Mexican-American War (The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) established the Rio Grande as the border and also resulted in California, Nevada, Utah and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado all becoming part of the United States.

### *The Founding of Brownsville*



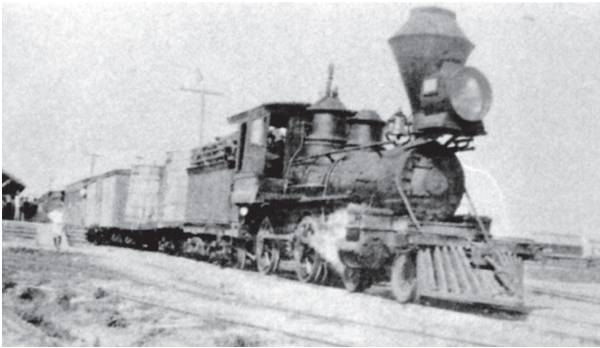
After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, local merchant and resident of Matamoros, Charles Stillman purchased several land claims next to Fort Brown that formed the basis for the City of Brownsville, Texas. The oldest structures downtown date back to 1848. This land purchase was later disputed and was eventually settled by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1879.

In 1849, Brownsville became the county seat and was later incorporated in 1850. It was a mixed cultural community with the majority of the peoples from the East Coast and peoples with Mexican, Irish, French, English and German roots. The French speaking Oblates of Mary Immaculate completed the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in 1859. In this time period, Brownsville became a booming community as the leading trade area of the region in spite of cholera, yellow fever and natural disasters. Through the private steamboat business along the Rio Grande, wealth was created for Charles Stillman, Richard King and Mifflin Kenedy. Charles Stillman's son James Stillman used the wealth to have a controlling interest in First National City Bank (Citibank), and holdings in banks, land development companies and the railroads along with lifetime close friend William Rockefeller. The King and Kenedy wealth resulted in the development of the famous King Ranch. Brownsville was also the start of the overland Gila Trail route of the Forty-niners led by such notables as John Woodhouse Audubon, son of the naturalist and artist John James Audubon. This boom was further fueled by the Civil War. During the Civil War (1861-1865), Fort Brown

had many structures made of wood which were burned down. Union and Confederate forces fought for control of this region where Confederate cotton flowed through Matamoros to avoid the Union blockade. In May of 1865, the last land battle of the Civil War was fought and won by the Confederacy at the Battle of Palmito Ranch more than a month after the General Lee's surrender at Appomattox, VA. A hurricane in 1867 destroyed many wood framed buildings in Brownsville and Fort Brown. Many brick buildings surviving the rebuilding of the fort still exist today. These structures are now part of the local college.

## *Growth and Development*

With the construction of a permanent military post (1867-1869), Brownsville grew to meet the demands of supplying trade with Mexico and servicing the fort. As commerce flourished, so did the number of downtown buildings made of brick.



The arrival of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway in 1904 and large irrigation systems that made large scale agricultural development possible, paved the way for an agricultural boom to last half a century. The farming of vegetables and cotton did well in the new century with orange and grapefruit stock becoming a major product of the region. In August of 1906, gunfire in downtown Brownsville, later known as the "Brownsville Raid," resulted in President Theodore Roosevelt discharging 167 black soldiers from Fort Brown "without honor." In 1972, the Nixon administration awarded honorable discharges.

Some disruption to the region's prosperity resulted from lawlessness spilling over from the Mexican-Revolution era of the 1910's. This led to Brownsville being the site of the first U.S. airplane to be attacked by hostile fire in 1915 as officers from the Fort used a plane to patrol the border. Fort Brown was decommissioned on February 1, 1946.

Civic leadership emerged as business developers and women's groups created organizations to promote city and civic improvement. In 1907, Brownsville got its first electric and water plants after local residents unanimously voted for the issuance of bonds to construct a utility system. The Brownsville-Matamoros bridge was completed by 1910. The downtown city market was remodeled in 1912 and was a center for social activity and commerce. The Brownsville Independent School District was formed in 1915; a year later the high school was built. In 1929, the Brownsville municipal airport was opened by the landing of a flight from Mexico City establishing the 1st international airmail service. Charles Lindberg piloted the flight, with Amelia Earhart in attendance. During the 1930's, the opening of the Port of Brownsville and the inauguration of Charro Days, the annual Mexican-themed bi-cultural festival, helped ease matters from an economic and social perspective.



By 1950, Brownsville had four points of entry from its highway, railroads, Port of Brownsville and International Airport. Mexican oil, cotton, delta fruits and vegetables were shipped north. Shrimping also emerged as a major industry. Even with Hurricane Beulah coming ashore in 1967 with winds exceeding 136 miles per hour before the gauge broke, the 1960s and 1970s were prosperous years for Brownsville. It experienced continued growth at the Port fueled by the oil and offshore drilling rig industry and the development of the twin-plant or maquiladoras system of industry along the border. The Gladys Porter Zoo was built as one of the first zoos featuring animals in habitat and South Padre Island and Matamoros became major tourist destinations. However, in the 1980s with the devaluation of the "peso" (Mexico's

currency) which was the result of a world wide collapse of oil prices, Brownsville faced difficult economic times. In the 1990s, Brownsville began to prosper once again. The Port's railway business improved, the ship building and dismantling business grew and the foreign trade zone positively impacted the cargo.

The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College partnership was also created at this time.

## *Tourism*

Amenities in Brownsville include a range of museums, visitors' centers, parks, and a wildlife sanctuary. Naturalists enjoy rare species of birds that can be observed in areas such as the Resaca de la Palma state park and the Sabal Palm Sanctuary. The lower Rio Grande is also home to "Winter Texans" from late fall to early spring.

Particularly interesting is the historic center of the city. The other side of this brochure is a selection of walking tours for you to choose from. This historic downtown tour is a glimpse into our history and an overview of influences by people and places that shaped our heritage. While taking these tours, explore our past at a leisurely pace and you will experience Brownsville as it is meant to be seen. Every stop is a preserved site with a significant past. Each tour may take up to 30 minutes.

We hope you enjoy visiting Brownsville's historic places and share an appreciation for our unique society, living on the southernmost tip of our border with Mexico and by the sea.

