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Preservation of Spanish Colonial and Tejano Archeological Sites

Northwest corner of Leal Juarez House at Rancho Tepezan.

The Hispanic settlement of the lower Rio Grande area began in 1750 with Escandon's colonization efforts in what was then Nuevo Santander. Colonial Hispanic ranching and agrarian communities prospered, and the lower Rio Grande became one of the centers of Spanish Colonial cattle ranching in North America. By the mid-1830s, there were more than 350 Tejano (formerly citizens of Tamaulipas and northern Mexico, but after 1836, Texas Mexican) ranches along the lower Rio Grande.

Record low water levels in the 1990s at Falcon Reservoir along the lower Rio Grande in South Texas and Tamaulipas, Mexico, have exposed hundreds of significant prehistoric and historic archeological sites, including a dozen or more cemeteries with unmarked graves and numerous Spanish Colonial and Tejano ranches. Untold numbers of sites and burials have since been damaged and/or destroyed by looters and commercial artifact collectors.

The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), the federal agency charged with the management and protection of the archeological sites at Falcon Reservoir, has been unsuccessful in their attempts to develop any historic preservation management or site protection programs. This led to the development of a cooperative effort in the summer of 1996 to independently assess the problems of archeological site looting and erosion at Falcon Reservoir, and recommend treatment, planning, and mitigation measures that, if implemented, would lead to the development of an effective IBWC program of site protection at Falcon Reservoir. The effort was led by the Division of Antiquities Protection at the Texas Historical Commission (THC; the State Historic Preservation Office in Texas), the National Park Service (particularly the Branch of Mapping & Information Technologies), and the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory of the University of Texas at Austin (TARL), with the volunteer assistance of members of the Southern Texas Archaeological Association and the Texas Archeological Stewards Network.

The Hispanic and Tejano ranches and communities in the Falcon Reservoir area were established on porciones grants adjacent to low water crossings or fords of the Rio Grande, and on good alluvial terrace soils with available firewood and fresh water. Late-18th to mid-19th-century ranching sites that once had well-built stone-walled structures, along



with wood jacales, corrals, and stone baking ovens or hornos, have been reduced to mounds of stone rubble after 40 years or more of inundation. Found in association with the stone ruins and the hornos on the Spanish Colonial and Tejano sites are well-preserved archeological deposits with trash and bone-filled pits, along with Mexican majolica and earthenwares, British and European ceramics, liquor and medicine bottles, and other household goods and tools.

The cooperative efforts of the NPS, THC, and TARL, at Falcon Reservoir led to the identification of about 40 Spanish Colonial and Tejano sites, including two cemeteries and a number of historic ranches. Twenty-one of these sites are considered eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places because of their association with the 18th-century Hispanic colonization of Texas and the lower Rio Grande, as well as their association with the development of the cattle ranching industry in Texas and elsewhere in North America. With rising waters at Falcon Reservoir, this tangible evidence of the Hispanic heritage along the lower Rio Grande has been inundated once again.

Recommended Reading

George, Eugene

1975 *Historic Architecture of Texas: The Falcon Reservoir*. Texas Historical Commission and Texas Historical Foundation, Austin.

Perttula, T. K., S. A. Iruegas, and G. L. Ellis

1996 "An Assessment of the Threatened Prehistoric and Historic Archeological Resources at Falcon Reservoir, Zapata and Starr Counties, Texas." *Cultural Resource Management Report 9*. Division of Antiquities Protection, Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

Sanchez, M. L. (editor)

1994 *A Shared Experience: The History, Architecture, and Historic Designations of the Lower Rio Grande Heritage Corridor*. 2nd Edition. Los Caminos de Rio Heritage Project and the Texas Historical Commission, Austin.

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