

**United States Department of the Interior**  
**National Park Service**  
**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

**1. Name of Property**

Historic Name: Christensen Castle  
Other name/site number: Santa Fe Castle  
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

**2. Location**

Street & number: 12902 Hwy. 6  
City or town: Santa Fe State: Texas County: Galveston  
Not for publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  
(☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National  
Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the  
property (☒ meets ☐ does not meet) the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:

☐ national ☐ statewide ☒ local

Applicable National Register Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D



Chief Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

4/11/2025  
Date

Signature of certifying official / Title

Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that the property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register  
☐ determined eligible for the National Register  
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.  
☐ removed from the National Register  
☐ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

### Category of Property

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

### Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	1	structures
0	0	objects
1	1	<b>total</b>

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** DOMESTIC/Single Dwelling

**Current Functions:** VACANT/NOT IN USE

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** MIXED (Beaux Arts; Second Gothic Revival; Art Deco)

**Principal Exterior Materials:** STONE/Limestone, CONCRETE/Cast Stone, GLASS

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7-7 through 7-10)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

	<b>A</b>	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
	<b>B</b>	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<b>X</b>	<b>C</b>	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
	<b>D</b>	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Architecture (*local level of significance*)

**Period of Significance:** Ca. 1937

**Significant Dates:** Ca. 1937

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Unknown

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 8-11 through 8-29)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheet 9-25 through 9-30)

### Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

### Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- ☐ Other state agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** 4.44 acres

### Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

Latitude/Longitude:

1. 29.376016° -95.096548°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The nominated boundary is the current legal parcel (Property ID# 747191, Galveston County CAD): Outlots 323 and 324 in the Alta Loma Outlots, within Abstract 47, the L. Crawford Survey as shown on Map 6.

**Boundary Justification:** (see continuation sheet 10-31)

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Steph McDougal (principal) and Jenn Beggs (associate), with Kristin Dennis (property owner)  
Organization: McDoux Preservation LLC  
Street & number: 18214 Upper Bay Rd. #58114  
City or Town: Houston State: TX Zip Code: 77058  
Email: steph.mcdougal@mcdoux.com  
Telephone: 833-623-7737  
Date: March 7, 2024

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets MAP-32 through MAP-35)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets FIGURE-36 through FIGURE-57)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheets PHOTO-58 through PHOTO-73)



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**Photograph Log** (*see photos at the end of this draft*)

Christensen Castle  
12902 Highway 6, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Photographed by Steph McDougal (McDoux Preservation LLC)

Exterior photos taken July 29, 2024, and interior photos taken August 12, 2024.  
All photos accurately depict the current conditions as of April 2025.

Photo 1.  
Front elevation  
View facing north

Photo 2  
Center entrance and tower  
View facing north

Photo 3.  
East (two-story) wing, oblique view  
View facing northeast

Photo 4.  
East (two-story) wing, oblique view  
View facing northwest

Photo 5.  
East (two-story) wing, rear elevation  
View facing south

Photo 6.  
Partial east (two-story) wing and west (one-story) wing,  
rear elevation oblique view  
View facing southwest

Photo 7.  
West (one-story) wing, west elevation  
View facing east with central tower in background

Photo 8.  
West (one-story) wing, west elevation oblique view  
View facing northeast

Photo 9.  
Cast stone block detail, flower in squares separated by  
square holes on point, front elevation  
View facing north

Photo 10.  
Cast stone block detail, round circles with alternating  
squares set on point, front elevation  
View facing north

Photo 11.  
Cast stone arches flanking the front entry courtyard, with  
floral trident keystones  
View facing east

Photo 12.  
Cast stone frieze detail below front entry arches  
View facing east

Photo 13.  
Cast stone capital at front entry  
View facing north

Photo 14.  
Cast stone detail, decorative pilaster, front elevation  
(west wing)  
View facing north

Photo 15.  
Swimming pool, noncontributing  
View facing southeast

Photo 16.  
Front entry gates as viewed from SH-6  
View facing north

Photo 17.  
Interior foyer with front window, with door from porch  
(left) and central entry door with stained glass (right)  
flanking arched window  
View facing southeast

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Photo 18.

View of double doors in central front entrance  
View facing south

Photo 19.

Interior foyer with elaborate staircase and balustrade  
View facing east

Photo 20.

View from foyer under central tower into west (one-story) wing  
View facing west

Photo 21.

West (one-story) wing, view from doorway to foyer  
View facing west

Photo 22.

East wing, first floor, front rooms in southeast corner of building  
View facing southeast

Photo 23.

East wing, first floor, original double doors on east wall leading to enclosed porch  
View facing southeast

Photo 24.

East wing, second floor, front room, southwest corner of this floor  
View facing southwest

Photo 25.

East wing, second floor, rear room, view of doorways to front room (left) and foyer balcony (right)  
View facing southwest

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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## Narrative Description

The ca. 1937 Christensen Castle in Santa Fe, Texas, is a two-story residential building constructed with features typically associated with medieval castles, including a stone exterior, three-story central tower, and flat roofs with crenellated parapets. Located in a formerly rural part of western mainland Galveston County, it is sited in the middle of a large lot surrounded by dozens of mature trees. The interior was divided into apartments in the 1970s but retains many original doors, windows, and floors, as well as an elaborate staircase and second-floor gallery and balustrade. The building was damaged by decades of vacancy and neglect; work to stabilize the roof, foundation, exterior crenellations/parapet, and interior floors has been completed. This included removing a noncontributing addition and interior materials in much of the first floor. Despite past and recent alterations, the building retains integrity to communicate its architectural significance.

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### *General Setting*

Christensen Castle sits on an irregularly shaped 4.44-acre parcel northwest of downtown Santa Fe, Texas, and the intersection of FM 646 with SH Highway 6 and the Burlington Northern & Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad line (Maps 2, 3). It encompasses parts of Outlots 323 and 324 in the Alta Loma Outlots (Map 4), within Abstract 47, the L. Crawford Survey, in the center of the western side of mainland Galveston County.

The parcel is bounded by the highway to the southeast, residential neighborhoods to the north, and commercial properties to the east and west. A commercial parcel previously sold out of the original property lies adjacent to Highway 6 and northwest of the castle; today it is surrounded by the subject property (Map 5). The castle is sited somewhat centrally on the property, set back about 200 feet from the highway and accessed by a single gravel driveway. Access to the property by both vehicles and pedestrians is limited by a concrete breeze-block wall across the highway frontage and a large double gate made of ornamental metal (Photo 16).

In addition to the castle, the property contains a small kidney-shaped swimming pool (Photo 15). A historic peacock aviary (Figure 40) and a nonhistoric brick outdoor kitchen with multiple ovens and stovetops were destroyed by trees that fell during Hurricane Beryl, which struck the Houston area in July 2024. Some other mature trees previously found throughout the site were also uprooted or otherwise felled during that storm. A drainage ditch extends into the property from the north, near its northwestern boundary with the residential neighborhoods.

The boundary is approximately 4.44 acres, once part of a much larger farm owned by John and Nieska Christensen.

- When Nieska Christensen sold the castle property to Frank and Helen Meier in July 1954, it consisted of Outlots 317, 322, 323, 324, 333 and 334, comprising approximately 85 acres of land.<sup>1</sup>
- Portions of Outlots 324 and 334 were transferred to the State of Texas for road widening related to the expansion of State Highway 6.
- In 1958, a portion of Outlot 362 (Grasso's Egg Farm) was sold by the Meiers, with the property divided equally between Anello and Grace Grasso and Frank and Domenica Pignataro. The Pignataros bought the castle property in 1970.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Galveston County deed records, Book 1051, page 351, Nieska Vogel Christensen to Frank and Helen Meier, June 15, 1954; Display Advertisement, *Galveston Daily News*, April 30, 1954, 69, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>2</sup> Galveston County deed records, vol. 1295, page 662, Frank and Helen Meier to Anello and Grace Grasso and Frank and Domenica Pignataro, December 16, 1958; Galveston County deed records, vol. 2115, page 430, file no. 7008488, H. Dane and Marcella Harris to Franco and Domenica Pignataro, May 26, 1970.

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- In 1986, Franco and Domenica Pignataro sold 4.1782 acres of land along Highway 6, described as “out of the residue of Outlots 317, 322, 323, 324, 333 and 334,” to the United States Postal Services for a new Santa Fe Post Office.<sup>3</sup>
- In 1992, a portion of the remaining Pignataro property was sold due to non-payment of taxes.<sup>4</sup> The parcels sold included 4.960 acres out of Outlot 324, Block 324;<sup>5</sup> 10 acres in Block 317; 10 acres in Block 322; 10 acres in Block 323; 4.96 acres in Block 324; and 3.26 acres in Block 324.<sup>6</sup>
- The Pignataro daughters sold the remaining 4.44 acres of land containing the castle to Ian and Kristin Dennis on October 10, 2022.<sup>7</sup>

*Exterior*

Constructed ca. 1937, the castle is a stone masonry building with a massed rectangular plan. The exterior is constructed with a variety of ashlar-cut natural gray limestone and color-matched cast stone blocks, some or all of which may have been salvaged from other buildings and brought to this site via railroad. The building features a three-story central tower above a recessed central entrance (Photo 1), which faces south and opens to a small entry courtyard surrounded by a low concrete balustrade (Photo 2). The tower, a one-story wing to the west, and a two-story wing to the east are topped by flat roofs surrounded by low crenellated parapets (Photos 3-8). Large arched or rectangular windows punctuate each wall and are uniformly covered with heavy metal security screens in a diamond pattern (ca. 1970s). Some window openings are currently covered or infilled with plywood during the rehabilitation project. A few windows that were previously covered have been revealed. Additional entry can be made through a screened porch (Photo 4) in the two-story wing on the east side, and on the north side via an inset porch (Photo 5). A nonhistoric concrete-and-stucco addition that previously projected from the north side of the building has been removed.

Overall, the castle might be described as neo-Gothic or Second Gothic Revival in style. It incorporates features found in other castellated buildings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, because the castle appears to be an assemblage of salvaged components from various other buildings, it might best be described as Eclectic. Rounded arches and surrounds on the east and west wings adjacent to the main entry are Chateausque, rather than the pointed arches typical of the Gothic style. Beaux Arts influences are found in the many carved stone panels featuring flowers and foliage below windowsills on the east wing (Photos 9, 10, 12), beneath arches near the entry courtyard (Photo 11), and as headers above windows of the front (south) and west elevations. The keystones of arches in the courtyard and on the west elevation also feature a stylized floral trident. Beaux Arts-inspired columns topped with Corinthian capitals (Photo 13) support the central doorway below the tower and are referenced in decorative carved “pilaster” blocks (Photos 4, 14) built into the front walls of both the east and west wings. The castle exterior includes many other cast or carved blocks of various sizes, featuring geometric and flower designs, and a wide, Art Deco-style string course in a carved “pennant” design (Photo 14) tops the front and west elevations of the west wing.

*Interior*

The volume within the castle was divided into apartments sometime in the 1970s, before once again being used as a single-family residence. That renovation (and potentially other changes created by the previous owners) created rather a

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<sup>3</sup> Galveston County deed records, file no. 8625839, Franco and Domenica Pignataro to the United States Postal Service. Citing Ref. 004-67-1269, Galveston County, Texas.

<sup>4</sup> Case Information, Case Number 92-TX-0493, Tax Delinquency, 122<sup>nd</sup> District Court, October 13, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> “Sheriff’s Sale,” *Galveston Daily News*, May 13, 1992, 7-B, newspapers.com.

<sup>6</sup> “Sheriff’s Sale,” *Galveston Daily News*, August 15, 1994, 16, newspapers.com; Galveston County deed records, Partial Release of Judgment, file no. 9448126, Santa Fe Independent School District and Galveston County Water Control Improvement District #8 vs. Frank and Domenica Pignataro, Ref. 010-07-0606.

<sup>7</sup> Galveston County deed records, file no. 2022064090, Pignataro to Dennis, October 11, 2022. CAD parcel 747191, 4.44 acres.

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jumble of rooms in odd sizes and shapes; some of these opened to narrow hallways, but others could only be accessed through other rooms. Three kitchens and several full or half-bathrooms were present within the building after that alteration. It is possible that the renovation might have combined smaller original rooms to make larger ones or vice versa.

During the preparation of this nomination, selective demolition and removal of 1970s paneling exposed original extant doors, windows, and wallpaper. A variety of nonhistoric (1970s) liberally applied plaster ornaments, tile, and painted murals decorated walls in a few parts of the west wing, while other spaces were very plain. First- and second-floor floor plans, representing the architect's best guess at the original configuration of the castle interior, indicate that many rooms may have been long and narrow. The use of most spaces is not clear, although the original owner had a large collection of large-scale teak furniture, as well as china and porcelain. It is possible that the sizes and shapes of these rooms were designed to accommodate those specific belongings. (See Floor Plans 1 and 2.)

Today, the front door opens into a foyer (Photos 17, 18), a central space which appears to be entirely intact. The most prominent interior feature is the staircase (Photo 19) in the foyer behind the central tower, which leads to a second-floor gallery and, up a few more stairs, to the second-floor living area. The staircase is believed to have been salvaged from the 1872 Tremont Hotel in Galveston, which was damaged in the 1900 hurricane that destroyed much of that island city and was demolished in 1928.<sup>8</sup> The newel post of the staircase bears the Tremont crest.

A three-sided space on the north side of the building is located partially behind the staircase. The east end of the foyer terminates in a small hallway, which leads to the two rooms (Photos 22, 23) that make up the remainder of that wing. The west end of the foyer provides access to the one-story west wing (Photos 20, 21), which previously contained a narrow hallway, first-floor restrooms, a bedroom, a living room, and a small kitchen with access to the inset carport on the north elevation. The first-floor east wing and the one-story west wing were likely used as separate apartments following the 1970s remodel.

The second-floor living space (Photos 24, 25) seems to have been used as a single apartment following the 1970s renovation. It contains three rooms and two bathrooms. The steps from the upper foyer lead into a central space was probably used as a living room, with the front room likely used as a bedroom. A large, long room on the north (rear) side of the second-story space was set up with a kitchenette on the east end. The configuration of windows on that upper elevation suggest that the long room and full bathroom were originally one continuous space.

Other than the exterior fenestration, few clues remain to signal the original configuration of spaces within the castle, and as the floor plans show, the visual indicators that are present do not shed much light on the potential uses of those spaces. Perhaps the second floor contained the owner's private suite, while first-floor spaces were used for public functions, such as entertaining guests.

In 2023-2024, the substantial deterioration of the one-story west wing due to roof leaks and other moisture infiltration over several decades of vacancy, required the replacement of the roof, structural members, and flooring in order to stabilize that wing. The original wooden roof deck had been covered (probably in the 1970s) with thick foam panels that apparently captured moisture which, over time, caused the original deck to rot. As a result, the entire first-floor roof had to be removed and replaced. The flooring, which was also damaged by also rotted due to moisture infiltration (from above and below) and termites, was removed and replaced in that wing as well. During this phase of the rehabilitation project, the interior partition walls, some original and some dating to the 1970s remodel, were removed and replaced with new load-bearing stud walls. The crenellations around the parapet, which had been destabilized by the damage to the roof, were removed, cleaned, and replaced and the surrounding masonry was repointed.

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<sup>8</sup> "A Trip Down Memory Lane," Tremont Hotel, <https://www.thetremonthouse.com/history/>.

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*Integrity*

Modeled after medieval European castles, the building's characteristic features include an asymmetrical form; stone walls; an oversized central entrance at the base of an imposing tower; and flat roofs with crenellated parapets. Christensen Castle is relatively modest in size, with an approximate 50-by-100-foot footprint and a total enclosed area of 4,340 square feet on the first floor and 2,300 square feet on the second floor. The interior third-floor tower measures approximately 12 feet by 12 feet and functions only to provide roof access. The castle's construction included an eclectic mix of decorative carved stone blocks, applied in a somewhat willy-nilly fashion to the front façade; however, the variations in these details are not visible from the street and do not detract from the overall cohesive impression of a "castle."

Despite the application to Christensen Castle's exterior of 82 concrete lion-face ornaments of varying sizes by previous owner Frank Pignataro, most of which have now been removed, the building retains a high degree of integrity of **design, materials, and workmanship**. Photographs from the 1950s and 1970s document the continuity of the castle's exterior appearance over time. The exterior design and craftsmanship remain essentially unaltered, and the slightly askew assembly of some arches and other exterior details, all still extant, convey the general do-it-yourself nature of the building's original construction.

The castle retains integrity of **location, setting, and feeling**; it sits on its original parcel, surrounded by trees that largely block the view of neighboring commercial and residential buildings. The building's environment remains relatively bucolic and evokes a sense of the rural nature of the former Alta Loma community. While some exterior changes have taken place, Christensen Castle retains excellent architectural integrity and is clearly identifiable as a castle. It maintains the appearance intended by Nieska Christensen to convey an **association** with royalty, preserving part of her unique history through its mimetic appearance.

*Summary of Resources on Property*

Resource	Constr. Date	Major Alterations	Property Type	C/NC
Castle/residence	Ca. 1937	Interior divided into apartments, ca. 1970	Building	C
Swimming Pool	Ca. 1970	NA	Structure	NC

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## Statement of Significance

Christensen Castle (ca. 1937) was built for Pearl "Nieska" Christensen (1880–1963) on a six-acre parcel of land in rural Alta Loma, Texas, part of a larger tract previously farmed by her husband. Christensen and her mother, Madeline Vogel, lived in Europe briefly during the late 1800s and claimed throughout their lives to be related to members of the Belgian aristocracy. While her intentions were not recorded, Christensen's construction of the castle likely was designed to physically signify her family's claims of royal connections. Castles were a minor trend in American programmatic architecture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in part due to the popularity of Gothic Revival, Queen Anne, and Chateausque styles and the use of medieval castle motifs as a storytelling device in Gothic literature, theatrical productions, comic books, and Hollywood movies of that era. Christensen Castle is a late example of this programmatic theme in architecture. Christensen Castle is nominated at the local level of significance under Criterion C: Architecture, as an intact example of the early twentieth-century American trend of programmatic architecture incorporating the character-defining features of medieval castles. The period of significance is 1937, when the castle was constructed.

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Christensen Castle is on parts of Outlots 323 and 324 in the L. Crawford Survey (Abstract 47) of the Alta Loma Outlots. The former community of Alta Loma, now part of Santa Fe, Texas, is located in west-central mainland Galveston County, 35 miles south of downtown Houston and 20 miles northwest of the city of Galveston.

### *Development of Santa Fe, Texas (1830–1978)*

Early Anglo-American immigrants to the area that would become Alta Loma included Asa and Ann Brigham, who received a land grant on Hall's Bayou from the Mexican government in 1830. They were followed by Oliver Speed Perry; the Heinsohn family; and brothers George, Henry, and Jacques Tacquard. Together, this group established a small settlement named Alta Loma ("high hill") and raised cattle on what was then open-range land.<sup>9</sup> In 1878, the Gulf, Colorado, & Santa Fe Railway was constructed through the community.<sup>10</sup> Originally planned to extend from the southern port city of Galveston west to Santa Fe, New Mexico, the railroad reorganized in 1879 and instead followed a route north to Fort Worth and Dallas.<sup>11</sup>

In 1893, the Alta Loma Investment and Improvement Company platted a townsite and sponsored the construction of a school, railroad depot, hotel, store, churches, and houses.<sup>12</sup> Brochures, disseminated nationwide, advertised the town's nutrient-rich soil, artisanal well water, and a location within the "Fruit Belt" of Galveston County, where families "could make more money annually from 10 acres of land, than can be made from the very best 160 in Kansas or Missouri."<sup>13</sup> People began to arrive the following year, and by 1897, the community had established a post office, more than a dozen businesses, and a population of 200. The gently sloping coastal plain historically supported a tallgrass prairie with some groves of live oak trees. Farmers who settled in the area grew pears, figs, pecans, strawberries, and other fruits and vegetables and engaged in cattle ranching and dairy operations, producing foods they could sell to markets in Galveston and Houston.<sup>14</sup> Residents began to abandon farming in the mid-1920s after an epidemic of hoof-and-mouth disease

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<sup>9</sup> "Alta Loma: 1883 to 1980," *The Galveston Daily News*, February 24, 1980, 11-H, newspapers.com.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Hurt Thomas, *Settlements on the Prairie: A History of Alta Loma, Santa Fe, Arcadia and Algoa Communities 1830-1985* (Santa Fe, Texas: Gary Thomas, 1998), 2.

<sup>11</sup> George C. Werner, "Gulf Colorado and Santa Fe Railway," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, tshaonline.org.

<sup>12</sup> Leigh Gard, "Alta Loma, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, tshaonline.org.

<sup>13</sup> Ralph W. Stenzel, Jr., *High Ground: The History of Alta Loma* (Santa Fe, Texas: self-published, undated), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gard, "Alta Loma, TX;" Galveston County deed records, "Alta Loma Investment and Improvement Company and City of Galveston, 1893000701," March 9, 1893; Glenn Griffith, et al., *Ecoregions of Texas, Report to Texas Commission on Environmental Quality*, December 2007, 73–75.

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plagued Galveston County<sup>15</sup> and large dairy corporations began to acquire smaller operations in the area. Following World War II, many people in Alta Loma left agricultural employment for better-paying work at industrial plants in nearby Texas City.<sup>16</sup> Between 1940 and 1970, the population of Alta Loma remained small but stable, increasing from 1,350 to 1,536.<sup>17</sup>

In 1975, the nearby city of Hitchcock contemplated annexing a portion of unincorporated Alta Loma. Although Hitchcock ultimately withdrew the proposal,<sup>18</sup> the threat of annexation led Alta Loma and another unincorporated community, Arcadia, to consider incorporating as a single city. The City of Santa Fe was subsequently founded on January 21, 1978,<sup>19</sup> and has grown from a population of 5,413 in 1982 to an estimated 12,781 residents in 2021.<sup>20</sup>

### Development of Christensen Castle

Christensen Castle property was originally part of a larger tract owned by John Christensen, Sr. (1871-1934), a native of Denmark who immigrated to the United States in 1891, at the age of 20.<sup>21</sup> He married Josephine Magna (1878-1912)<sup>22</sup> in 1901 and together they had six children within nine years. In 1910, Christensen was a successful bicycle dealer in Galveston;<sup>23</sup> he later became the first automobile (Ford) dealer in Galveston (Figure 34) and one of the first in the state.<sup>24</sup>

#### *The John Christensen Sr. Farm (1915–1934)*

Between 1915-1924, John Christensen purchased and combined Alta Loma Outlots 317, 322, 323, 324, 333, and 334; the land had previously been used for cattle grazing. Christensen, who continued living and working in Galveston, reportedly purchased the land lot-by-lot with the intentions of farming on the weekends, which he turned into an extensive and profitable business venture — at a time when others in Alta Loma were beginning to abandon farming. Newspaper articles in 1928 and 1929 noted that Christensen grew a widely diverse combination of crops in order to provide for the needs of people and livestock while building (rather than depleting) nutrient-rich soils (Figures 32, 33). He used then-innovative farming techniques, such as intensive interplanting, to improve “uncultivated prairie roadside land,” successfully planting non-native plants to grow enough crops to sustain his animals. He also invited other farmers to his property in order to promote his ideas and demonstrate their success. Christensen grew corn, sorghum, sudan grass, “a variety of canes,” and peanuts, all as animal feed; raised pigs, cattle, ducks, chickens, and peacocks; kept a pair of Shetland ponies; and grew fig, plum, citrus, and a wide variety of other fruit-bearing trees, as well as groves of pecan trees. In the fig orchard, “every third tree (was) a plum or pecan.”<sup>25</sup> Pecan trees planted in rows, along with a few plum and hardy fig trees, can still be

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<sup>15</sup> “Quarantine Not To Hurt Milk Supply, Local Dairyemen and Meat Dealers Point Out Regulations Effect,” *The Galveston Daily News*, September 29, 1924, 2, newspapers.com.

<sup>16</sup> Stenzel, Jr., *High Ground*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Gard, “Alta Loma, TX.”

<sup>18</sup> Dick Bryant, “Aspects of Life Along Highway 6 Interesting, Frightening,” *Galveston Daily News*, May 30, 1975, newspapers.com.

<sup>19</sup> “City of Santa Fe Is Born,” *Galveston Daily News*, January 22, 1978, 1, newspapers.com.

<sup>20</sup> Diana J. Kleiner, “Santa Fe, Texas,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, tshaonline.org; “US Census Bureau Quick Facts,” Santa Fe, Texas Population Estimates 2021, US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/santafecitytexas>.

<sup>21</sup> 1950 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, supervisor’s district 27, enumeration district 84-33, sheet 13A.

<sup>22</sup> Josephine Magna Christensen, Texas Death Certificate no. 15297, June 11, 1912.

<sup>23</sup> 1910 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor’s District 7, Enumeration District 49, sheet 7B.

<sup>24</sup> “Men of Galveston: John Christensen,” *Galveston Daily News*, January 5, 1925, 3, newspapers.com.

<sup>25</sup> “Christensen’s Results on Farm Near Alta Loma Show Possibilities of Mainland,” *Galveston Daily News*, January 12, 1929, 4, newspaperarchive.com; “Galvestonian Has ‘Ideal’ Farm,” *Galveston Daily News*, October 1, 1928, 1, newspaperarchive.com. Christensen’s intensive multi-crop farming and soil improvement efforts pre-dated early soil conservation practices in the United States, which began in the mid-1930s.



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seen today surrounding the castle property.

Christensen married Pearl Agnes “Nieska” Vogel (1880-1963) in 1929<sup>26</sup> and retired from the automobile business the following year to begin farming full-time.<sup>27</sup> In 1933, John Christensen conveyed ownership of the entire Alta Loma farm property — in addition to six tracts in Galveston, one in Clear Lake Shores, one in Galveston County, one in Houston, and 12 burial plots in Galveston Memorial Park Cemetery — to his wife.<sup>28</sup> He died in 1934.<sup>29</sup>

*Pearl Agnes “Nieska” Vogel Williams Laney Christensen (1880-1963)*

Pearl Agnes Vogel was born in Boerne, Texas, in 1880. Her father, Charles “Carl” G. Vogel (1844-1913), was a German immigrant from Gammelsbach (Hesse), and her mother Ettie Madeline Davis (1854-1936) was an Alabama native whose parents also had immigrated from Germany (possibly Baden).<sup>30</sup> Charles had lived in Galveston and worked as a salesman for H. Rosenberg in 1872.<sup>31</sup> Charles and Ettie were married in Houston on December 15, 1875.<sup>32</sup> By 1880, he was working as a journalist. In addition to Pearl, the Vogels had a daughter named Lola (aka Lolita or Leola) and a son, Clarence, who died as a baby in 1883.<sup>33</sup> Pearl and Ettie later used their middle names (or in Pearl’s case, a variation of it) becoming known as Nieska and Madeline. By at least the time Nieska was 16 years old, Madeline had begun to present her daughters as being descended from European royalty. Christensen Castle is the largest and most lasting physical representation of their family mythology.

The claims of royal ancestry most commonly made by the Vogel women involved a “Duke von Wrede” who supposedly abandoned his service to Prussia and swore allegiance to Belgium instead. Nieska Vogel’s father did have a tenuous connection of sorts to a notable (although not noble) von Wrede family. Friedrich Von Wrede Sr. (1786-1845) was a native of Oberhausen, Prussia (Germany). He traveled through Texas and North America in the 1830s and wrote a book which influenced later German immigration. He also was part of the Adelsverein, a group which attempted to encourage the migration of Germans to its colonies in Texas.<sup>34</sup> His son, Friedrich von Wrede Jr. (1820-unknown), was born in Hesse (Germany) and traveled with his father through Texas and the United States as a young man, from 1836-1843. He then returned to Texas in 1844 as the secretary to Adelsverein member Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels and Solms’ successor, John Meusebach. Von Wrede Jr. married Sophie Bonzano,<sup>35</sup> whose sister, Mary Bonzano, a native of Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria (Germany), was married to Henry Kessler (ca. 1812-1840).<sup>36</sup> Mary and Henry Kessler had one

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<sup>26</sup> “J. Christensen and Mrs. Laney Wedded Here,” *Galveston Daily News*, May 27, 1929, 2, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>27</sup> “John Christensen Claimed by Death,” *Galveston Daily News*, December 15, 1934. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Galveston County deed records, vol 503, page 186, John Christensen to Nieska Vogel Christensen, April 5, 1933.

<sup>29</sup> John Christensen, Sr., Texas death certificate no. 54124, December 15, 1934.

<sup>30</sup> Chester W. and Ethel H. Geue, *A New Land Beckoned: German Immigration to Texas, 1844-1847* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Press, 1992), 149, 155. Also, Charles G. Vogel-Ettie M. Davis Marriage Certificate No. 5071, Harris County, Texas, December 14, 1875; 1880 U.S. Federal Census, Boerne, Texas, enumerator district 88, sheet A23. The 1880 Census indicates that Ettie’s mother was born in Baden, Germany. Charles’ application for a U.S. passport in 1889 reports that he emigrated to Texas in 1859 and was naturalized in 1872 (U. S. Passport Applications, No. 2572, May 1, 1889).

<sup>31</sup> 1872 Galveston City Directory (Galveston, Texas: John H. Heller, 1872), 131.

<sup>32</sup> Harris County marriage certificate No. 5071, Charles Vogel and Ettie Davis.

<sup>33</sup> Find a Grave, Memorial page for Clarence G. Vogel (February 23, 1883-23 Apr 23, 1883), Memorial ID 108304078 citing Boerne Cemetery, Boerne, Kendall County, TX, USA, www.findagrave.com.

<sup>34</sup> Chester W. Geue, “Friedrich Wilhelm von Wrede, Sr.,” Texas State Historical Association, *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>35</sup> Chester W. Geue, “Friedrich Wilhelm von Wrede, Jr.,” Texas State Historical Association, *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

<sup>36</sup> Diana J. Kleiner, “Henry Kessler,” Texas State Historical Association, *Handbook of Texas Online*, tshaonline.org.

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daughter, Julia (1839-1930).<sup>37</sup> Although Mary remained in Houston following Henry Kessler's death and had remarried by 1850, she likely would have visited her sister in Fredericksburg, Texas, and may have visited Julia's Kessler cousins on the way. (By 1860, stagecoach lines connected Houston and San Antonio with stops in La Grange and Austin.) In 1860, 16-year-old Charles Vogel (then known as Gustav), along with his parents and siblings, were "serving" in the home of Henry Kessler's brother Charles in Columbus, Texas.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that he may have become acquainted with the von Wredes during the early 1860s before Friedrich and Sophie von Wrede and their children returned to Germany in 1865. In 1891, the von Wredes were living in Antwerp, Belgium.<sup>39</sup> While a Prince Karl Phillip von Wrede did exist, in Germany, Friedrich Jr. does not appear to have been related and is not named in the 1910 book, *The Titled Nobility of Europe: An International Peerage*.<sup>40</sup>

Peerage directories would have been ubiquitous in Europe, but it is unlikely that they were common or even present in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Texas. Madeline Vogel appears to have routinely embellished and/or fabricated the circumstances of her birth and her daughters' lineage without challenge. After all, it is only in recent years, with the easy availability of online archival sources, that researchers have been able to piece together this history.

At least some of the Vogel women's connections to Europe were based in fact. In May 1889, Nieska's father applied for an appointment to the Belgian Consulate in Antwerp, "where his family now is," indicating that his wife and daughters had journeyed to Belgium without him (Figure 7).<sup>41</sup> It is not clear when they traveled to Europe, but passenger lists show Madeline and the girls returning from Amsterdam to New York on January 14, 1890. E.M. Vogel (age 30), L. M. Vogel (age 11), and Pearl Vogel (age 9) were listed on the ship's manifest as *citizens of England*, with Texas their intended destination.<sup>42</sup> This appears to be the earliest documented instance of Madeline embellishing her family's background. On January 21, 1895, Charles and the girls traveled to Hamburg, Germany, without Madeline. The ship's manifest notes that they were living in Velasco, about 45 miles down the Texas coast from Galveston.<sup>43</sup> They returned after just a few weeks, arriving in New York on February 12.<sup>44</sup> Madeline apparently joined her daughters on the East Coast; the Vogel women briefly stayed in Norfolk, Virginia, opening a music and language studio in 1895. Newspaper articles in Norfolk, Virginia, reported that the Vogel women had lived in Antwerp and Berlin from 1887–1895 (Figure 8). Madeline claimed that the girls had studied at the Berlin Conservatory of Music, and they presented several recitals.<sup>45</sup> The trio returned to the Galveston area by May 1896.<sup>46</sup>

In September 1896, the Galveston Tribune announced the death of "Duchess von Wrede" in Antwerp (Figure 9). According to the obituary, Nieska and Lola Vogel were her grand-nieces; she was further described as the "consort of Duke von Wrede of Prince Solom's retinue."<sup>47</sup> (A consort is the spouse of a reigning monarch, which Friedrich most certainly was not.) In 1902, when Lola died (by strangulation, either murder or suicide, in a Beaumont hotel room), she and Nieska were listed as the nieces of Duke von Wrede of Rotterdam (Figure 10). Madeline Vogel also insisted that her daughter had been in possession of thousands of dollars in diamonds and other gems, which were not found in the hotel

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<sup>37</sup> Julia Johane Loeffler, Texas death certificate no. 1705, Bexar County, filed May 17, 1930.

<sup>38</sup> 1860 U.S. Federal Census, Columbus, Colorado County, Texas, sheets 41–42.

<sup>39</sup> Maximillian Bonzano, petition regarding the estate of Hubert Bonzano, Civil District Court, Parish of Orleans, Division B, no. 32047-32173, February 4, 1891.

<sup>40</sup> Marquis of Ruigny, *The Titled Nobility of Europe: An International Peerage*, London: Harrison & Sons, 1914, 1575–1576.

<sup>41</sup> "Weary with Waiting," *Galveston Daily News*, May 4, 1889, 1, newspapers.com. It was reported that Charles was in Galveston, and "on his way to Europe."

<sup>42</sup> New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger Lists, *SS P. Caland*; departed Amsterdam and arrived in New York on January 14, 1890.

<sup>43</sup> Hamburg, Germany, Arriving Passenger Lists, *SS Dania*, January 21, 1895.

<sup>44</sup> New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger Lists, *SS Dania*, February 12, 1895.

<sup>45</sup> "Music and Language," *The Norfolk Virginian*, March 1, 1895, 2, newspapers.com.

<sup>46</sup> "Personal," *Galveston Daily News*, May 24, 1896, 8, newspapers.com.

<sup>47</sup> "The Duchess Von Wrede," *Galveston Tribune*, September 27, 1896, 12, newspapers.com.

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room. In 1923, a newspaper article about Nieska's collection of rare antiques reported that the furniture and objects were once owned by her uncle, the Duke von Wrede, a native of Prussia who later swore allegiance to Belgium.<sup>48</sup>

According to Denise Dixon, Helen Meier's granddaughter, Nieska reportedly told Mrs. Meier, the subsequent owner of the castle, that it was inspired by European castles she had seen and/or visited as a child.<sup>49</sup> While overseas, the Christensen family could have toured many castles in Belgium and Germany. Although no extant castles in those countries today provide a clear model for Christensen Castle, "Het Steen," (Figure 13) a medieval fortress in Antwerp, underwent a renovation in 1889–1890 that included the addition of a Gothic Revival wing and may have been an influence.<sup>50</sup>

Whether Nieska knew the truth about her ancestry or simply believed and repeated the information that her mother presented is unknown. She apparently did not resolve her relationship with her father, who made his living as a farmer in Harris County and also served as a justice of the peace until his death in 1913.<sup>51</sup> Nieska contested his will, producing a second will that named her as the primary beneficiary and arguing that her father had been admitted to a sanatorium in San Antonio prior to his death and was therefore unfit to have executed the new will. The new will, which was upheld by the court, left \$1 each to Nieska and her mother and used much of the rest of the \$12,000 estate to provide for Charles' longtime housekeeper.<sup>52</sup>

After having reported her Alabama birthplace accurately on the 1880 U.S. Census, Madeline later claimed to census enumerators that she had been born "at sea" (1900), in France (1910), and in Belgium (1920).<sup>53</sup> Madeline also claimed on the 1900 Census that she was a widow, although Charles was still alive, and that her mother was French. In 1936, her daughter Nieska reported Madeline's birthplace as Baden-Baden, Germany on her death certificate.<sup>54</sup>

In 1898, Nieska married her first husband, William Chambers Williams, who made \$100,000 speculating in oil at Spindletop, Texas, before dying in 1901 of consumption.<sup>55</sup> She married again in 1903, to Horace Henderson Laney. By 1900, Madeline Vogel owned an apartment house and continued in that business for decades, letting furnished rooms in "Artillery Flats" at 2125 Avenue I (no longer extant) in 1901. In 1906, she added furnished rooms "over 2212 Market" (no longer extant), and by 1910, she had opened her home to lodgers.<sup>56</sup> By 1920, following Nieska's divorce from Laney,

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<sup>48</sup> "The Duchess Von Wrede," September 27, 1896; "Mother Insists That Girl Was Murdered," *The St. Louis Republic*, August 31, 1902, 14, newspapers.com; "Houston Woman has Rare Collection of Antiques: Life Work of Von Wrede," *Houston Post*, November 18, 1923, 47, newspapers.com. In 1896, Sophie was listed as the consort to "Duke von Wrede of Prince Solom's retinue."

<sup>49</sup> Personal correspondence with Denise Dixon, Helen Meier's granddaughter, relating a story that Helen shared with her.

<sup>50</sup> "Het Steen in the Past," Visit Antwerpen, <https://visitantwerpen.maglr.com/het-steen-in-the-past-en/in-the-past>. At this time, Het Steen was a museum of archaeology.

<sup>51</sup> 1910 U. S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor's District 8, Enumeration District 120, sheet 16A; Find a Grave, memorial page for Charles Gustave "Carl" Vogel (29 Jan 1844–12 Nov 1913), Find a Grave Memorial ID 55667221, citing Hempstead Cemetery, Hempstead, Waller County, Texas, USA [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com). In 1910, C. G. Vogel lived on his farm with only a female servant.

<sup>52</sup> "Two Vogel Wills Filed," *Houston Post*, November 18, 1913, 20.

<sup>53</sup> 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor's District 11, Enumeration District 119, sheet 7A; 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor's District 7, Enumeration District 55, sheet 13A.

<sup>54</sup> Ettie Madeline Vogel, Texas Death Certificate no. 20296, April 11, 1936.

<sup>55</sup> "King Wilhelm is Dead: A Peculiar Character Was William Chambers Williams," *Galveston Tribune*, Galveston, Texas, October 8, 1901, 4, [texashistory.unt.edu](http://texashistory.unt.edu). The first producing oil field in Texas was discovered at Spindle Top, near Beaumont.

<sup>56</sup> 1900 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Sheet 7A; 1901 *Galveston City Directory* (Galveston, Texas: Morris & Fourmby), 254; 1906 *Galveston City Directory* (Galveston, Texas: Morris & Fourmby), 368; 1910 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor's District 7, Enumeration District 34, sheet 3A.

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the U.S. Census indicates that she and her mother took in as lodgers John Christensen (then a 45-year-old widower) and his six children, ages 6–18.<sup>57</sup> Nieska and John married in 1929.

*Christensen Castle (ca. 1937–1954)*

Because Alta Loma was at that time unincorporated, no building permit records document the construction of the castle; however, legal proceedings brought by John Christensen's children were not settled until July 1937, and that delay in resolving his estate likely would have prevented the completion of the castle until at least 1937.<sup>58</sup> Even after the castle was built, Nieska continued to live in Galveston through at least 1940.<sup>59</sup> By 1943, she was living in Alta Loma.<sup>60</sup> In 1947, Nieska sold her Galveston home at 1628 Ave O½ (no longer extant) to Peter Douvry, who previously had developed the nearby Seawall Hotel. Douvry constructed a three-story brick apartment building on the Christensen lot.<sup>61</sup>

Nieska Christensen was a canny businesswoman in her own right. She established The Laney Oil Company of Galveston with her mother and Spindle Top geologist Patillo Higgins and maintained extensive real estate holdings across four Texas counties.<sup>62</sup> In 1946, Nieska designed and supervised the construction of 120 modern apartment units at 3314 Telephone Road in Houston (no longer extant). A news article at the time quoted her as saying, "My plan is to build something of credit to Houston. I want to build something substantial and of attractive appearance."<sup>63</sup> The following year, she sold two acres of land along the proposed route of the Highway 75 expressway for \$125,000 to Harris County Judge Roy Hofheinz, to expand a parcel he had previously purchased.<sup>64</sup>

Nieska listed the castle for sale in April 1953; an advertisement in November 1953 noted that the property included approximately 60 acres of land; a 10-room building "ideal for club house" with 3½ tiled baths and "many porches"; an attached garage and laundry room; three water wells; a separate four-car garage; "one large Grade-A milking barn and dry feed house"; a blacksmith and tractor barn; a large animal barn with hayloft; a large dipping vat; a large glassed-in chicken brooder house with concrete floor, lights, gas, and water; a greenhouse; a six-room cottage; a four-room cottage; other outbuildings; and approximately 50 grafted nut-bearing pecan trees and other fruit and shade trees.<sup>65</sup> Only the "club house" (castle) and some of the pecan and fruit trees appear to be extant in the remaining property. A 1954 advertisement noted that the property (then including 85 acres) was available at a price reduced to "one-fourth of its original cost"; it subsequently sold for \$42,200.<sup>66</sup>

When Nieska sold the castle in 1954, she was living in Bandera County, Texas.<sup>67</sup> By 1956, she had moved to San Antonio, where she resided for the remainder of her life. Nieska Christensen died in San Antonio in 1963 at the age of 82 and was buried in Boerne. She died a wealthy woman, with an estate valued at \$75,000 (\$760,600 in 2024). Nieska left money to her stepchildren, and the Franciscan Missionary Sisters in San Antonio, who helped care for her in her elder

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<sup>57</sup> 1920 U.S. Federal Census, Galveston, Texas, Supervisor's District 7, Enumeration District 55, sheet 13A.

<sup>58</sup> "John Christensen Claimed by Death," *Galveston Daily News*, December 15, 1934, 1, 4, newspaperarchive.com; Estate of John Christensen, No. 9444, Book 555, pgs. 48–53, decided July 7, 1937, District Court, Galveston County, TX, 56<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit.

<sup>59</sup> 1940 US Federal Census, Galveston County, Texas, sheet 20-B.

<sup>60</sup> "Mrs. Christensen Injured in Automobile Crash," *Galveston Tribune*, March 17, 1943, 7.

<sup>61</sup> "Island to Get 12-Story Hotel, 5 Apartments," *Galveston Tribune*, August 11, 1947, 1. No photographs of this building were located during the preparation of this nomination.

<sup>62</sup> Tracé Etienne-Gray, "Higgins, Pattillo," *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, tsonline.org; "Texas Incorporations: Galveston Oil Company Chartered for \$50,000," *Galveston Tribune*, October 10, 1914, 5, texashistory.unt.edu.

<sup>63</sup> "Apartment Project Being Built on Telephone Road," *Houston Chronicle*, August 25, 1946, B-7.

<sup>64</sup> "Hofheinz Adds 2 Acres to Newly Purchased Tract," *Houston Chronicle*, August 27, 1947, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Display advertisement, *Houston Chronicle*, November 15, 1953, 22-D.

<sup>66</sup> Display advertisement, *Galveston Daily News*, April 30, 1954, 69, newspaperarchive.com.

<sup>67</sup> Galveston County deed records, Vol. 1051, page 351, Christensen to Meier, June 15, 1954.

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years, received her antiques collection, the sale of which was intended to help the nuns build a Franciscan Motherhouse in Buffalo, New York. In 1965, the Sisters put the collection, which reportedly included items from Persia, China, Japan, Holland, and England, up for sale (Figure 12).<sup>68</sup> A news article about the sale reported that Mrs. Nieska Laney had been known as “The Diamond Lady of Galveston,” an appellation not located anywhere in the research for this nomination.

*Frank and Helen Meier (1954–1966)*

Nieska Christensen sold the castle property to Frank and Helen Meier in July 1954.<sup>69</sup> Helen Meier’s granddaughter, Denise Dixon, visited the castle from time to time and reported that her grandmother’s flock of peacocks roamed the grounds; the elevated peacock aviary that Mrs. Meier built is extant. Ms. Dixon reported that she and her grandmother accidentally broke a pink toilet in the west wing’s full bathroom while cleaning it; the toilet had matched the extant pink bathtub and pink pedestal sink. She also reported that Mrs. Meier installed the stained-glass window above the bathtub that rests on a pedestal in the center of that bathroom. The castle at that time contained a ballroom featuring walls with fine wood detailing, large mirrors, and marble on the recessed floor; Helen Meier stored and sold antiques in that room and called it the “Castle Antiques” shop.<sup>70</sup> During their tenure as owners, the Meiers transferred portions of Outlots 324 and 334 to the State of Texas for highway right-of-way and sold a portion of Outlot 334 to Anello Grasso.<sup>71</sup>

*H. Dane and Marcella Harris (1966–1970)*

In May 1966, the Meiers sold the remaining Castle property to Hubert Dane Harris and Marcella Harris of Hot Springs, Arkansas.<sup>72</sup> Dane Harris was a business partner of Vincent “Oweny” Madden, a legendarily brutal New York mobster who “retired” to Hot Springs, Arkansas.<sup>73</sup> Together, Harris and Madden operated “The Vapors,” a fine-dining theater club that attracted popular performing acts of the day, rivaling Las Vegas’ live shows. The Vapors also operated a casino in the rear of the club, complete with slot machines, craps, roulette, blackjack, and poker. The back room was literally exposed in 1963 after a bomb rocked the restaurant, revealing the casino gaming equipment and marking the end of mobsters’ rule in Hot Springs.<sup>74</sup> The perpetrator of the bombing remains unknown to this day, though a contemporaneous news article speculated that the responsible parties were out-of-state crime syndicates.<sup>75</sup> Dane Harris reportedly “ran” Hot Springs by the time he was 43 years old, building a strong coalition of powerful backers; he promoted Hot Springs as becoming bigger than Las Vegas and built The Vapors club to prove that.<sup>76</sup> Frank Meier was one of Harris’s early business partners.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “History Carved in Rare Teakwood Furniture,” *Express News*, San Antonio, Texas, March 7, 1965, 7, newspapers.com; “Mrs. Nieska Christensen,” obituary, *Express News*, San Antonio, Texas, April 21, 1963, 8A; County of Bexar, Texas, Last Will and Testament, Nieska Vogel Christensen, probate record 113700, vol. 829, page 220-Z, June 12, 1964.

<sup>69</sup> At that time, it consisted of Outlots 317, 322, 323, 324, 333 and 334 Galveston County deed records, Book 1051, page 351, Nieska Vogel Christensen to Frank and Helen Meier, June 15, 1954.

<sup>70</sup> Email messages between Denise Dixon and Kristin Dennis, February 15, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Galveston County deed records, Vol. 1295, page 662, Meier to Grasso, December 16, 1958.

<sup>72</sup> Galveston County deed records, Vol. 1783, page 281, file no. 11292, Frank and Helen Meier to H. Dane Harris, May 11, 1966.

<sup>73</sup> David Hill, *The Vapors: A Southern Family, the New York Mob, and the Rise and Fall of Hot Springs, America's Forgotten Capital of Vice* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 1–16.

<sup>74</sup> James R. Rampbell, “Vapors Club Is Plushiest Of Casinos,” *The Courier-Gazette*, McKinney, Texas, February 7, 1963, 4, newspapers.com.

<sup>75</sup> “Did Syndicate Mobsters Blast Vapors Club in Hot Springs?” *Northwest Arkansas Times*, Fayetteville, Arkansas, January 7, 1963, 8, newspapers.com.

<sup>76</sup> Hill, “*The Vapors*,” 12–13.

<sup>77</sup> Direct electronic messages between David Hill and Kristin Dennis, November 25–27, 2022.

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It appears that the Meiers and Harrises exchanged properties: a July 1968 news article details a large donation of art by Helen Meier to be auctioned off as a fundraiser for the Hot Springs Optimist Club and Jaycees, mentioning that “(t)he Meiers have acquired the former Dane Harris residence on Trivista.”<sup>78</sup> In February 1967, Helen Meier placed an advertisement in the Hot Springs newspaper, imploring people to ignore rumors that the “former home of Dane Harris was for sale or will be for sale,” and stating that she and Frank were very happy there.<sup>79</sup> The Harrises only owned the castle property for four years and sold it to Frank and Domenica Pignataro on June 1, 1970, for \$105,000.<sup>80</sup>

*The Pignataro Family (1970–2022)*

Franco and Domenica Grasso Pignataro were Sicilian immigrants from Italy. Domenica arrived in the United States in 1947 with her parents and siblings, and Franco Pignataro arrived sometime prior to 1954.<sup>81</sup> They married in the 1950s and opened Grasso’s Egg Farm in 1957, in partnership with Domenica’s brother and sister-in-law, Anello and Grace Grasso.<sup>82</sup> The Egg Farm was located on Highway 6 on Outlot 362, which the two couples purchased from Frank and Helen Meier on December 16, 1958.<sup>83</sup>

After the Pignataros purchased the castle in 1970, Franco immediately converted it into four apartment units and leased all the units, a decision that he later claimed to regret.<sup>84</sup> Around the same time, Grasso’s Egg Farm closed, and Anello and Grace Grasso moved back to Sicily. Franco Pignataro opened the first of several Italian restaurants. In 1978, the Pignataros installed a 20-foot by 40-foot in-ground swimming pool in the front yard (extant, noncontributing); Placation Pools constructed the pool for \$21,093. Franco also built a concrete bathhouse, which is no longer extant.<sup>85</sup> In 1980, the castle discontinued using well water and the Galveston County Water Control and Improvement District No. 8 installed city water and sewer lines.<sup>86</sup> Franco Pignataro built the concrete breeze-block fence that stretches across the front yard along Highway 6, with two concrete rearing stallions flanking the driveway entrance (Figures 35, 39).<sup>87</sup>

In 1986, Franco and Domenica Pignataro sold 4.1782 acres of land along Highway 6 (“out of the residue of Outlots 317, 322, 323, 324, 333 and 334”) to the United States Postal Service, to construct a new Santa Fe Post Office north of the castle property.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ed Upchurch, “Gift of Art Made to Benefit Youth Work in Hot Springs,” *The Sentinel Record*, Hot Springs, Arkansas, July 14, 1968, 1.

<sup>79</sup> Mrs. Frank Meier, “Notice!”, *The Sentinel-Record*, Hot Springs, Arkansas, February 6, 1967, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Galveston County deed records, vol. 2115, page 430, file no. 7008488, H. Dane and Marcella Harris to Franco and Domenica Pignataro, May 26, 1970.

<sup>81</sup> New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, SS *Marine Shark* from Palermo Italy, January 14, 1947; Francesco Pignataro petition for naturalization, October 12, 1972, Houston, Texas; U.S. Naturalization Records, The National Archives at Fort Worth; Fort Worth, TX, NA Number: 571499, Record Group Number: 21.

<sup>82</sup> “No Yolk Son, but Three of ‘Em,” *Galveston Daily News*, October 10, 1957, 11, newspapers.com.

<sup>83</sup> Galveston County deed records, vol. 1295, page 662, Frank and Helen Meier to Anello and Grace Grasso and Frank and Domenica Pignataro, December 16, 1958.

<sup>84</sup> “Santa Fe Castle Full of Mystery,” *Galveston Daily News*, September 20, 1981, 1B, newspapers.com.

<sup>85</sup> Galveston County deed records, mechanics lien, vol. 3048, page 266, file no. 7827742, Franco and Domenica Pignataro to Placation Pool.

<sup>86</sup> Galveston County deed records, file nos. 8213782 and 8213783, Franco Pignataro to Galveston County Water Control and Improvement District No. 8. Citing Ref. 001-68-1190 and 001-68-1192, Galveston County, Texas, “Rights to construct, alter, and maintain water and sewer lines.”

<sup>87</sup> “Santa Fe Castle Full of Mystery,” *Galveston Daily News*, September 20, 1981, 1B, newspapers.com.

<sup>88</sup> Galveston County deed records, file no. 8625839, Franco and Domenica Pignataro to the United States Postal Service, citing Ref. 004-67-1269, Galveston County, Texas.

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In 1992, Franco and Domenica Pignataro were sued by the Santa Fe Independent School District and Galveston County Water Control and Improvement District for non-payment of taxes.<sup>89</sup> Properties totaling approximately 43 acres were subsequently sold at county sheriff sales over the next two years.<sup>90</sup> By the late 1990s, Franco had divested himself of all but one restaurant: Franco's on NASA Road 1 in Webster, Texas. Around the castle, and within the restaurant, were evidence of his passion – creating statuary from bags of cement.<sup>91</sup> A mural that Franco painted on a wall in the castle, depicting scenes from Sicily, remains. He also built accessory structures at the castle property, including an extensive brick outdoor kitchen in the 1990s and a concrete-and-stucco addition to the rear of the west wing that collapsed and has been removed. Domenica Pignataro died at home on December 4, 2003.<sup>92</sup> Franco Pignataro died on September 12, 2010. He left the castle to his three daughters: Nuccia, Lina, and Franca, who continued to run the Webster restaurant as Franca's.<sup>93</sup> The Pignataro daughters sold the castle and 4.44 acres of land to Ian and Kristin Dennis on October 10, 2022.<sup>94</sup>

### Criterion C: Architecture (Castle-Inspired Buildings in the United States)

Buildings with castle-like features can be found across the United States. According to the Society of Architectural Historians' *Archipedia* database, most states contain at least one "castle," and the U.S. as a whole contains nearly 400 examples.<sup>95</sup> Some of these buildings incorporate only a few castle-like elements, while others are designed to appear as medieval as possible, albeit on a smaller scale than the original buildings after which they are modeled.<sup>96</sup> The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) contains at least 175 properties on that are, or were at one time, called castles.<sup>97</sup> These "castles," however, bear very little resemblance to Christensen Castle.

Over the centuries, the castle as a building type in America has developed into an instantly recognizable form (Figures 14-18). Popular culture — particularly Gothic literature, architectural expositions in the nineteenth century, and motion pictures in the twentieth, as well as illustrated children's books, popular magazines, postcards, advertisements, etc. — also played an important role in popularizing castles as a building type throughout both the United Kingdom and, subsequently, the United States.<sup>98</sup>

Though often built as domestic dwellings, castle-like buildings in the United States also are used for government, education, culture, and entertainment purposes. Historic buildings of this type are frequently repurposed as museums, public places of recreation, and event centers. Many "castles" anchor neighborhoods, including in locally and nationally landmarked historic districts. The majority of buildings described as "castles" on the NRHP are listed as significant works of architecture under Criterion C; many are also listed under Criterion B, for their association with wealthy individuals,

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<sup>89</sup> Case Information, Case Number 92-TX-0493, Tax Delinquency, 122<sup>nd</sup> District Court, October 13, 1992; Galveston County deed records, Partial Release of Judgment, file no. 9448126, Santa Fe Independent School District and Galveston County Water Control Improvement District #8 vs. Frank and Domenica Pignataro, Ref. 010-07-0606.

<sup>90</sup> "Sheriff's Sale," *Galveston Daily News*, August 15, 1994, 16, newspapers.com. These properties included 4.960 acres out of Outlot 324, Block 324;<sup>90</sup> 10 acres in Block 317; 10 acres in Block 322; 10 acres in Block 323; 4.96 acres in Block 324; and 3.26 acres in Block 324.

<sup>91</sup> "Castle Dweller," *Galveston Daily News*, May 9, 1999, 29, 31, newspapers.com.

<sup>92</sup> "Domenica Pignataro Obituary," *Houston Chronicle*, December 3, 2003.

<sup>93</sup> Galveston County deed records, file no. 2011020204, Estate of Franco Pignataro.

<sup>94</sup> Galveston County deed records, file no. 2022064090, Pignataro to Dennis, October 11, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> *Archipedia*, Society of Architectural Historians, <https://sah-archipedia.org/>.

<sup>96</sup> "Castle," general search, *SAH Archipedia*, eds. Gabrielle Esperdy and Karen Kingsley, <https://sah-archipedia.org>.

<sup>97</sup> Based on McDoux research of the National Register Database list.

<sup>98</sup> Kerry Dean Carso, "Diagnosing the 'Sir Walter Disease': American Architecture in the Age of Romantic Literature," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, University of Manitoba, December 2002, Vol. 35, No. 4, Special issue: LITERATURE & ARCHITECTURE (December 2002), 121-142.

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families, or their architects, or under Criterion A, because they represent significant periods in the social development of the United States.<sup>99</sup>

Castle-like buildings in the United States were typically built on properties of considerable size, which could accommodate a large, irregularly shaped building enclosed by architectural features historically designed to defend those within its walls. Modern versions of these buildings convey status, authority, and, in numerous cases, somewhat singular examples of personal taste. Designed and built for the wealthy and powerful, castle-like buildings were often constructed using the highest-quality materials available, contributing to their structural longevity. These buildings' prominent sizes and long lives may contribute to their cultural importance. As a "castle" became an informal landmark within its community, the community subsequently became invested in its survival; as the building and its landscape aged, a "castle" is likely to be recognized as a local, state, or national landmark.<sup>100</sup>

*Castles as Programmatic Architecture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Programmatic or mimetic architecture incorporates the characteristics of familiar objects into buildings or structures, placing a visual representation of an otherwise everyday item into an unusual or unexpected context. While often associated with early twentieth-century roadside attractions and buildings as advertisements, programmatic design was initially expressed through topiary and other landscaping features in first- through third-century Roman villa gardens and revived in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century gardens of the Italian aristocracy. In the early 1900s, programmatic buildings began to appear throughout the United States in small numbers, and the advent of automobile travel in the 1920s and 1930s established this as an effective marketing strategy. Log cabins and ocean liners were especially popular during those decades and received nationwide coverage in newspapers and magazines.<sup>101</sup> Such buildings were not designed simply to be spectacles which drew the eye; they also were imbued with symbolic meaning, based on their historical association with the thing that they represent.<sup>102</sup> For example, buildings with castle features along Route 66, the epicenter of roadside programmatic architecture in the United States, include the Natatorium Ballroom, Amarillo, Texas (built 1922 (Figure 30); NRHP MPS 1994, U. S. Route 66 Sixth St. Historic District, Figure 30); Pythian Castle, Springfield, Missouri (built 1913; NRHP 2009, as Pythian Home); and the humble Castle Car Wash, Chicago, Illinois (built 1925).

*Periods of Castle Building in America*

Christensen Castle is a late example of the mimetic castle-like buildings constructed in Texas and across the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The development of American castles can be traced to medieval European fortresses and royal estates, with the earliest buildings called *castles* appearing in what would become the United States during the seventeenth century.<sup>103</sup> A survey of nearly 100 "castles" in the United States, for this nomination, identified periods in American history when castle-building was especially prevalent. Residential castles especially reflected economic and cultural developments in American society, but in all of these periods, notable public and religious buildings also displayed the characteristic features of castles.

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<sup>99</sup> This project evaluated 97 American castles; of these, a total of 47 are on the National Register, while 15 others have some landmark designation at the state or local level.

<sup>100</sup> Based on research of properties called castles for this context.

<sup>101</sup> David Gebhard, "Programmatic Architecture: An Introduction," *SCA Journal*, Society for Commercial Archeology, Summer 1995, 3–7.

<sup>102</sup> Robert Venturi, "The Duck and the Decorated Shed," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Thomas Docherty, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 301.

<sup>103</sup> Castillo San Marcos, in St. Augustine, Florida, is a Spanish fort built beginning in 1672; Bacon's Castle, built in 1665 in Surry, Virginia, is a large Jacobean house.



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*Gothic Revival Castles: Signifiers of New American Wealth (1830s–1876)*

Industrial growth, coupled with the expansion of railroads in the United States after the Civil War, created a class of extraordinarily wealthy businesspeople in America during the mid-nineteenth century. Railroads provided new access to previously uncolonized areas of the country and permitted more efficient and less expensive shipment of goods. Seismic shifts in labor and commerce also transformed American society: technological developments led to an explosion of factory construction, and the resulting increase in employment opportunities across industries propelled the labor market. Populations subsequently began to shift from rural areas to cities, and waves of European immigrants further expanded the urban workforce.<sup>104</sup> Tycoons who made their fortunes during this period often built extravagant homes that idealized European castles. They displayed their wealth not only through their primary residences, but also in the construction of summer estates in coastal locations, often referred to as “cottages.”<sup>105</sup>

Andrew Jackson Downing, in his influential architectural pattern book *Cottage Residences, or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage Villas, and Their Gardens and Grounds, Adapted to North America*, wrote that he hoped to promote architecture in the style of “the cottage homes of England.” That book identified stone as “superior to any other material for building,” particularly for “heavy and massive architecture” such as a “Gothic castellated villa.” Downing mentioned castles repeatedly throughout that volume as a possible influence for domestic buildings.<sup>106</sup> His book *The Architecture of Country Houses, including Designs for Cottages, Farmhouses, and Villas* similarly noted that “There is ... something wonderfully captivating in the idea of a battlemented castle, even to an apparently modest man, who thus shows to the world his unsuspected vein of ambition by trying to make a castle of his country house.”<sup>107</sup>

Downing was also a fan of Gothic romantic literature. That genre — particularly the works of Sir Walter Raleigh, which described Gothic Revival-style castles in great detail — had such an influence on architects of the period that Mark Twain referred to it, disparagingly, as “Sir Walter’s disease.” Downing was well-acquainted with one of these architects, Alexander Jackson Davis, who helped popularize Gothic Revival style, designing a Gothic mansion in Baltimore by 1832. The two men collaborated through letters, sharing detailed building sketches and critiques, with many designs depicting Gothic influences and castellated features. Davis contributed the design of a “villa in the Gothic, or pointed style” to *Cottage Residences* and also provided revisions to some drawings in the book. The two men corresponded from at least 1839 until Downing’s death in 1852. Davis designed Glen Ellen (1833–1834, no longer extant), a castle in Baltimore for Robert Gilmore III, who had visited and greatly admired Strawberry Hill and Abbotsford, two castellated estates that influenced the emergence of the Gothic Revival style in England.<sup>108</sup> Davis went on to design Lyndhurst, a castle-type mansion in Tarrytown, New York (NRHP 1966), completing both the original design in 1838 and an expansion of the building in 1865. Other castle-like residences completed during this period include Loudoun House (1851) in Lexington, Kentucky (also designed by Davis); Beardslee Castle (1860) in Whitestown, New York; and Glen Eyrie (1871) in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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<sup>104</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, “The American Railroad,” in *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, 1st edition (University of California Press: 2014) 89–112, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt6wqbk7.12>; Peter G. Goheen, “Industrialization and the Growth of Cities in Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Studies* Vol. 14, no. 1, (Spring 1973), 49–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41969566>.

<sup>105</sup> “History of Newport and the Mansions,” The Preservation Society of Newport County, <https://www.newportmansions.org/gilded-age/history-of-newport-mansions/>.

<sup>106</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *Cottage Residences, or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage Villas, and Their Gardens and Grounds* (New York : Wiley and Putnam, 1842), viii, 9–10, 23

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1853).

<sup>108</sup> Kerry Dean Carso, “Diagnosing the ‘Sir Walter Disease’: American Architecture in the Age of Romantic Literature,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 35, no. 4, (December 2002): 121–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029969>; Edna Donnell, “A. J. Davis and the Gothic Revival,” *Metropolitan Museum Studies*, September 1936, Vol. 5, no. 2, 183–233. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1522810>;

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*Gilded Age Castles (1893–1922)*

The late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries was perhaps the most prolific era of “castle building” in the United States. During that period, Richard Morris Hunt designed many mansions and estates that survive today, particularly in Newport, Rhode Island, a wealthy enclave that experienced tremendous growth during that time. Especially affluent families across the United States employed well-known architects to create buildings that paid homage to the castles of Europe, utilizing styles across many centuries, from early Norman fortresses to French Chateaus. Some of these included Wyndham (1890, Figure 14) built for Rose Anna Grosvenor in Newport and part of the Ocean Drive Historic District there (NRHP 1976); The Breakers (built 1893–1895; NHL 1971, Figure 15) in Newport, originally the home of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, scion of one of the richest families in America during the Gilded Age; Grey Towers (built 1893–1898; NHL 1985, Figure 16) in Glendale, Pennsylvania, home of sugar magnate William Welsh Harrison; and Hempstead House (built 1912; NRHP 2006 as the Gould-Guggenheim Estate, Figures 17-18), in Sands Point, New York, designed for Howard Gould, son of railroad magnate and financier Jay Gould, and built in Long Island’s “Gold Coast,” another wealthy enclave.<sup>109</sup> West Coast tycoons of the Gilded Age included railroad magnate Mark Hopkins, a co-founder of the Central Pacific Railroad, who built a castle-like mansion (completed 1878, burned 1906) on Nob Hill in San Francisco, home to other millionaires of the period.

*Castles, California, and the Golden Age of Hollywood (1922-1937)*

The period of extensive castle building among the upper classes tapered off between 1917 and 1935, due to World War I and the Great Depression. Castles, however, found new life in America’s imagination during the same period, thanks to popular culture and the world of entertainment. Extravagant budgets allowed for the construction of several notably large “castle” film sets. In 1922, art director Wilfred Buckland oversaw set construction for the silent film *Robin Hood*, a production with a total budget of \$1,400,000; the film would gross \$2,500,000. The castle set, located in West Hollywood near the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and La Brea Avenue, encompassed ten acres (see Figure 19) and was possibly the largest film set built at that point in Hollywood history. The exterior featured eight turrets and semicircular arches with zigzag archivolt, as well as exterior spiral staircases, a then-unique feature that would appear in later adventure films. Hollywood’s influence on local architecture was unsurprising, since such large sets were highly visible to their surrounding areas and often remained in place for some time after filming was completed.<sup>110</sup>

In 1927-28, Warner Brothers Studios pioneered synchronized sound in films, enabling studios to incorporate spoken dialogue throughout movies. This led to sweeping changes—and monumental profits—for Hollywood production companies. After the advent of “talking pictures,” the limitations of early sound technology nearly eliminated outdoor (“backlot”) filming, and the number of sets per film also was reduced, in an effort to manage background noise while filming. The additional crew members required to capture synchronized sound also increased the price of traveling to non-studio locations. As a result, most exterior sets were moved onto soundstages—large soundproof structures with high, open-span ceilings. In 1938, for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the castle set built inside a soundstage was designed by

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<sup>109</sup> “History of The Breakers,” The Preservation Society of Newport County, <https://www.newportmansions.org/mansions-and-gardens/the-breakers/history/>; “Grey Towers Castle,” History, Arcadia University, <https://www.arcadia.edu/about-arcadia/our-history/grey-towers-castle/>; “Hempstead House,” Sand Point Preserve Conservancy, <http://sandspointpreserveconservancy.org/about/hempstead-house/>; Dennis Drabelle, “The Life of Jay Gould, America’s Most Cunning Wall Street Wizard,” *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/09/16/life-jay-gould-americas-most-cunning-wall-street-wizard/>.

<sup>110</sup> Juan Antonio Ramirez, *Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood’s Golden Age* (United Kingdom: McFarland, Inc., 2012), 132–134; Jim Heimann, *California Crazy and Beyond: Roadside Vernacular Architecture*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001), 29–33; Kevin Hagopian, “Robin Hood,” New York State Writer’s Institute, State University of New York, <https://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/filmnotes/filmnote.html>

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architect Carl Jules Weyl, who won an Academy Award in the category of Best Art Direction for his work on the film. Because film sets on soundstages were necessarily relatively small, set designers who needed to convey the presence of a “castle” packed multiple signifiers (a turret, crenellated parapet, drawbridge, etc.) into the frame. As a result, the movies distilled the concept of a castle into a few easily recognizable elements.<sup>111</sup>

The Walt Disney film studio, perhaps more than any other, popularized the castle in film. While originally located in Kansas City, Missouri, Disney incorporated castle imagery into *Laugh O Grams* (1921–1923): silent cartoons that often spoofed fairy tales. Castles naturally appeared in the 1922 films *Cinderella* and *Robin Hood*, both set in medieval times. In 1928, *Oh What a Knight!* parodied adventure films such as the aforementioned live-action 1922 version of *Robin Hood*. Castles also appeared in *Silly Symphonies*: musical animations produced by Disney from 1929–1939. Mickey Mouse rescued Minnie from a castle tower in *Ye Olden Days* (1933), and feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) featured the castle of the Evil Queen.

### *Castles in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Popular Culture*

In addition to the movies, castles appear in illustrated children’s books, comic books, advertising, and other media. Children’s books in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also featured castles and medieval settings. Beginning in 1902, painter and illustrator Howard Pyle wrote *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, *The Story of Sir Lancelot and His Companions*, *The Story of The Champions of the Round Table*, *The Story of The Holy Grail*, and *The Story of the Passing of Arthur*, all with dozens of color illustrations (Figure 21). Adventure stories for boys of the early 1900s often featured pirates and knights. In 1937, illustrator Harold “Hal” Foster created *Prince Valiant in the Days of King Arthur*, a syndicated comic strip still being drawn today (Figure 22). *Prince Valiant* was made into a movie in 1954 (Figure 23). The legend of King Arthur and his court at the castle called Camelot also served as the setting for a 1960 musical by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, and a 1967 film starring Richard Harris and Vanessa Redgrave. Numerous movies and television shows have been based in medieval times and featured castles that still use the same signifiers: turrets, drawbridges, towers, and crenellations.

The first fast-food restaurant in the United States, constructed in Chicago in 1921, was a White Castle hamburger stand (Figure 20). Constructed of rusticated concrete blocks, the modest building featured a flat room with concrete-block “crenellations” and a slender crenellated tower. Later White Castle restaurants included a false corner “tower” (also Figure 20). A competing hamburger chain, White Tower (founded in Milwaukee in 1926), copied White Castle’s building designs until they were sued by White Castle. In perhaps one of the clearest indicators of the ability of crenellations alone to signify the idea of a castle, the settlement of that legal dispute included White Tower’s agreement to remove all crenellations from their restaurants.<sup>112</sup>

More recently, LEGO building blocks marketed “inspirational” prebuilt models of castles to retailers in the 1950s and 1960s. The model featured corner towers and crenellations (Figure 24). LEGO “Idea Books” featured “buildings of the past” including castles, from 1959 through the 1970s.<sup>113</sup> Crenellations are the common element in these models (Figure 25).

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<sup>111</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 56; “Experimentation with Sound,” *MoMA*, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org); Ramirez, *Architecture for the Screen*, 67–68, 133.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Hishorn and Steven Izenour, *White Towers* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981).

<sup>113</sup> “Classic themes defining classic castles,” *The Rambling Brick* website, October 17, 2022. <https://ramblingbrick.com/2022/10/17/classic-themes-defining-classic-castle/>.

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*Unconventional Individuals*

Some castles have been built by a person or persons with a singular vision unrelated to wealth or power, who were unconcerned by the opinions of others. Like other historic resources described as “intuitively built environments,” “folk artworks,” or “visionary art,” these castles include Coral Castle (NRHP 1984 as Rock Gate Park), Homestead, Florida, built by Edward Leedskalnin between 1923-1951 (Figure 26); Millennium Manor Castle (NRHP 2020), Alcoa, Tennessee, built by William Nicolson and Emma Fair between 1939-1947 (Figure 27) ; and Fonthill Castle (NRHP 1972), Doylestown, PA, built by Henry Chapman Mercer between 1908-1912 (Figure 28).

*Texas Castles*

Programmatic castle architecture in Texas includes the following buildings, in addition to Christensen Castle. The inclusion of modern examples demonstrates the lasting interest in this architectural form:

- Tennant-Hanrick House, aka Cottonland Castle (1890), 3300 Austin Avenue, Waco
- Formosa, aka the Elisabet Ney Museum (1892/1902 castle section), 304 East 44<sup>th</sup> Street, Austin (Figure 29)
- The Nat (Natatorium) Ballroom (1922), 606 S. Georgia Street, Amarillo (Figure 30)
- Fisher-Gideon House (1926), 1415 Wooldridge Drive, Austin
- Greystone Castle Sporting Club (1995), 65756 Interstate 20, Mingus
- Newman’s Castle (1998), 1041 Old Highway 36 Road, Bellville
- The castle at Rockwall (2002), 2071 Clem Road Extension, Rockwall
- Parsons Castle (2017), 395 County Road 1812, Clifton
- 290 Wine Castle, aka Chateau de Chasse Winery (2018), 101 Durango, Johnson City

Texas county courthouses and jails constructed in the late 1800s and early 1900s often incorporated stone walls, crenellated parapets, and other castle-like features as a way to convey power and authority. Some examples include:

- Old Pecos County Jail (1884), 101 W. Gallagher, Fort Stockton, Texas
- Hamilton County Courthouse (1887), 101 E. Henry St., Hamilton, Texas
- Shelby County Courthouse (1886), 108 Austin Street, Center, Texas
- Old Williamson County Jail (ca. 1888), 312 S. Main Street, Georgetown, Texas (Figure 31)
- Dallas County Courthouse, aka “Old Red” (1892), 100 South Houston Street, Dallas
- Austin County Jail (1896), 36 South Bell Street, Bellville
- Old Brown County Jail (1903), 209 N Broadway St, Brownwood

**Conclusion**

Christensen Castle symbolizes Nieska Vogel Christensen’s desire to exemplify European royalty. It was a representation in stone, a signifier of the relationships she and her mother Madeline Vogel presented and promoted. The castle served — like other programmatic architecture of its time — to advertise a historic association and image that was clearly important to the Vogel women. In that way, it is not unlike other mimetic architecture of its era. Today, it can still be viewed as mimetic architecture, as castles continues to symbolize royalty, whether of European ancestry or the American rich of the Gilded Age, or modern-day princess fantasies developed by popular culture. While castle-like buildings constructed for domestic use often symbolize wealth, extravagance, and fantasy, Christensen Castle also demonstrates fortress-style features, signifying power and authority, a structure built to protect its residents from intrusions. Importantly, it utilizes a central tower and crenellated parapets to signal its status as a “castle.” It is a relatively small building and is adorned with a unique mixture of decorative elements that, despite some later additions, collectively maintain its 1937 appearance. Christensen Castle is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The period of significance is ca. 1937 when the building was completed.

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Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

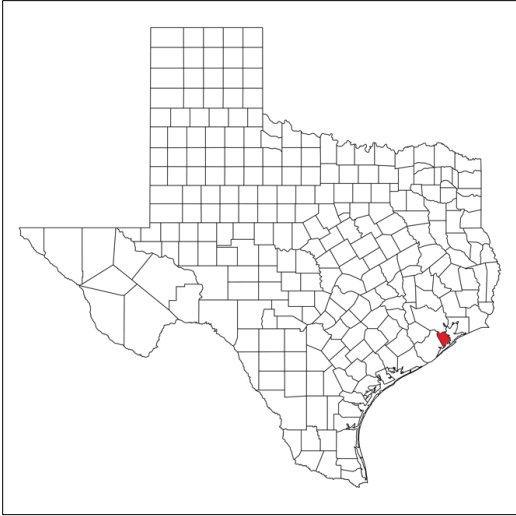
Section 10: Geographical Data

Location Map (Google Earth Pro, October 2024) 1:100 ft.



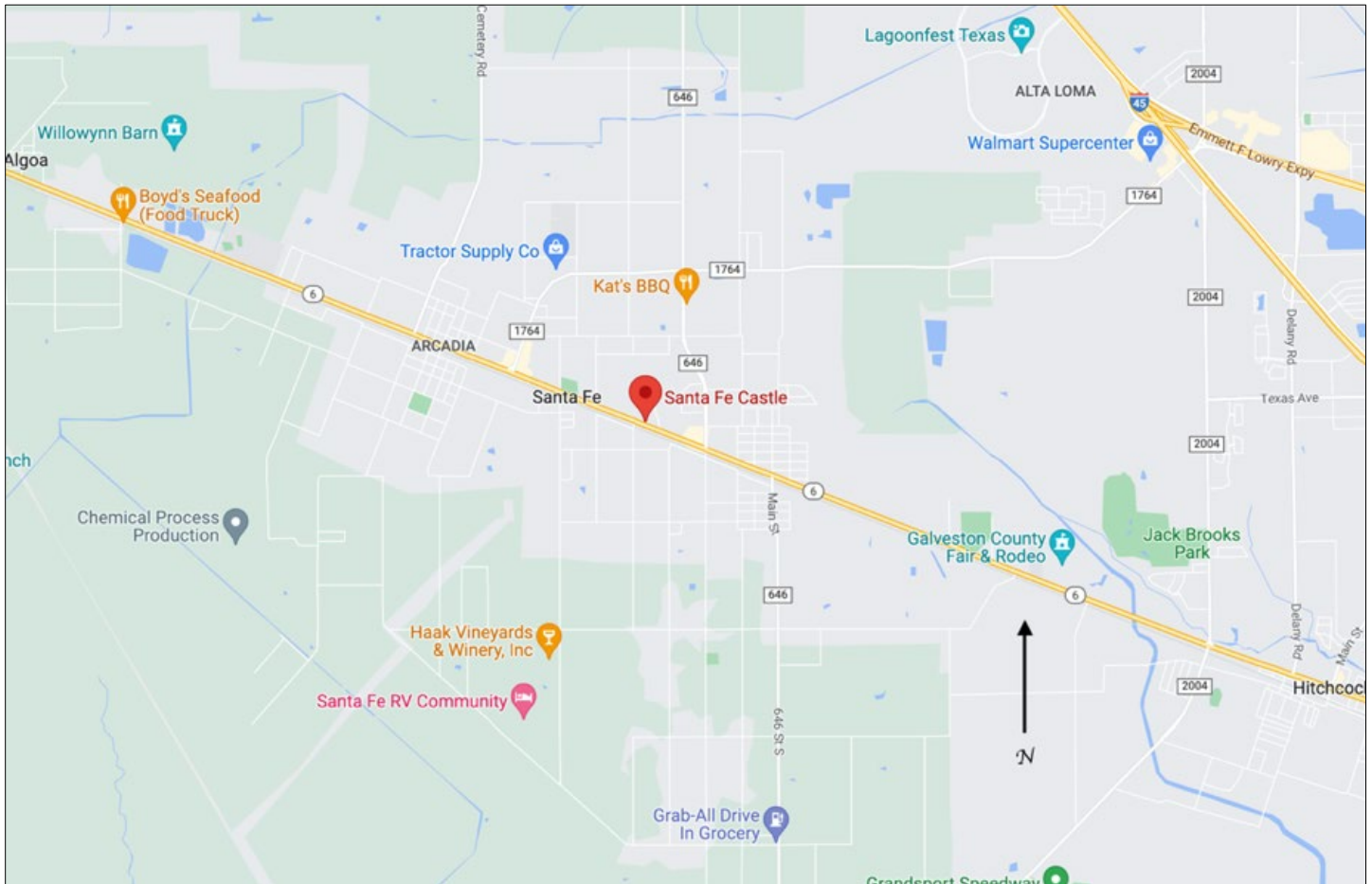


Map 1. Mainland Galveston County, Texas, highlighted in red (Filip Bjorkman/Shutterstock; annotated by authors)

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Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Map 3. The location of Christensen Castle within Santa Fe, Texas (Google Maps, 2023)

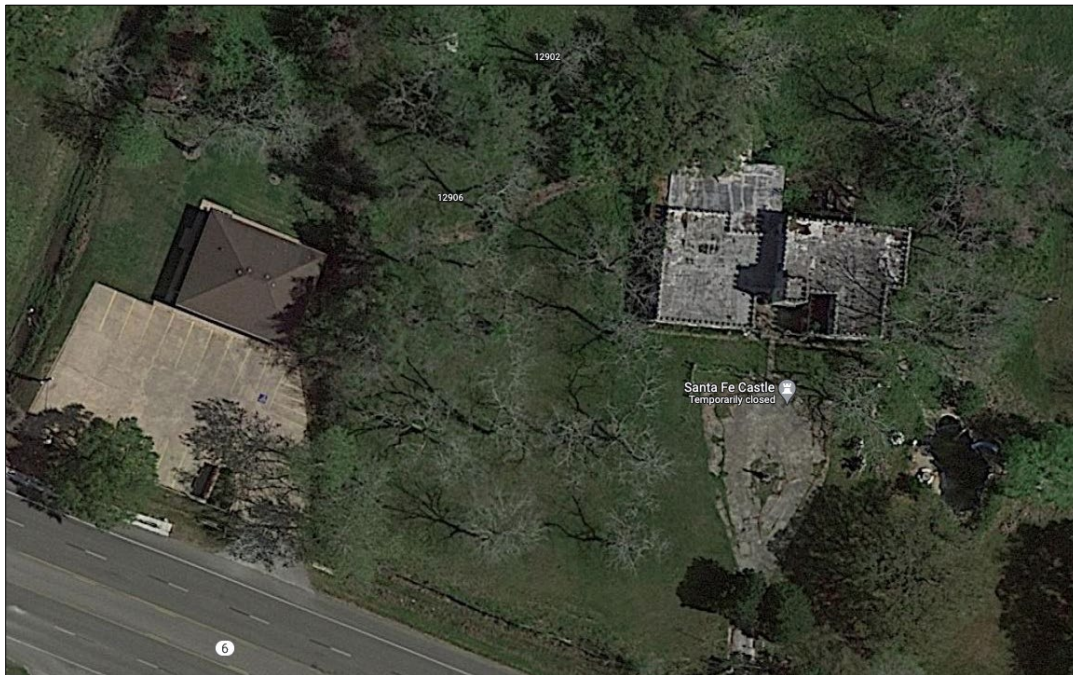


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Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Map 5. Satellite view of Christensen Castle, with adjacent property seen at left (Google Maps, 2023)



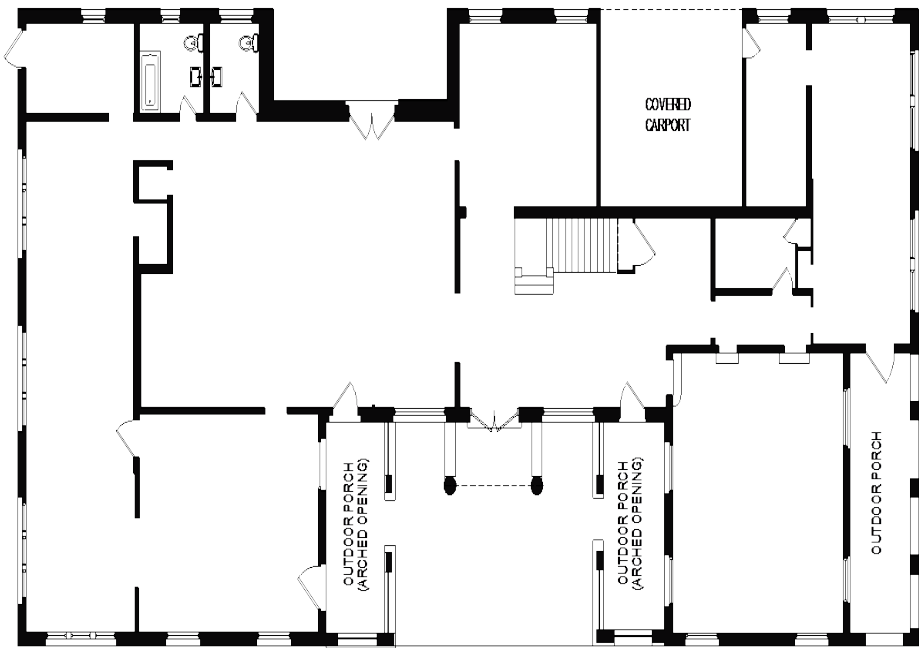
Map 6. Christensen Castle, building footprint outlined in red, is located on a single parcel along Highway 6 (Galveston County CAD, 2023, annotated by authors)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Floor Plans.

Plan 1. Possible original configuration of first-floor spaces (David Watson Architect & Associates)



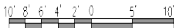
WALLS SHOWN ARE BEST ASSUMPTION OF ORIGINAL WALLS DETERMINED BY  
SELECTIVE INTERIOR DEMOLITION AND OBSERVATION OF MATERIALS USED IN  
SUBSEQUENT RENOVATIONS. USE OF INDIVIDUAL SPACES IS NOT DETERMINED.

01

FIRST FLOOR  
ORIGINAL WALLS LOCATION

SCALE: 3/32"=1'-0"

NORTH



 DAVID WATSON ARCHITECT & ASSOCIATES <small>405 TWENTY-SEVEN STREET SANTA FE, TEXAS 77061 (505) 833-2000 DWATSON@GMAIL.COM</small>		
CONSULTANT		
PROJECT / OWNER		
CHRISTENSEN CASTLE RENOVATION <small>12302 Highway 11, Santa Fe, Texas, 77510</small>		
REVISIONS		
NO.	DATE	DESCRIPTION
SHEET NUMBER		
A1.1 FEB 29, 2024		



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Plan 2. Original configuration of second-floor spaces (David Watson Architect & Associates)

DAVID WATSON,  
ARCHITECT &  
ASSOCIATES  
ALL PROJECTS ARE DESIGNED  
AND CONSTRUCTED TO MEET  
THE NATIONAL REGISTER  
OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CRITERIA

CONSULTANT

PROJECT / OWNER

CHRISTENSEN  
CASTLE  
RENOVATION  
12802 Highway 11,  
Santa Fe, Texas, 77510

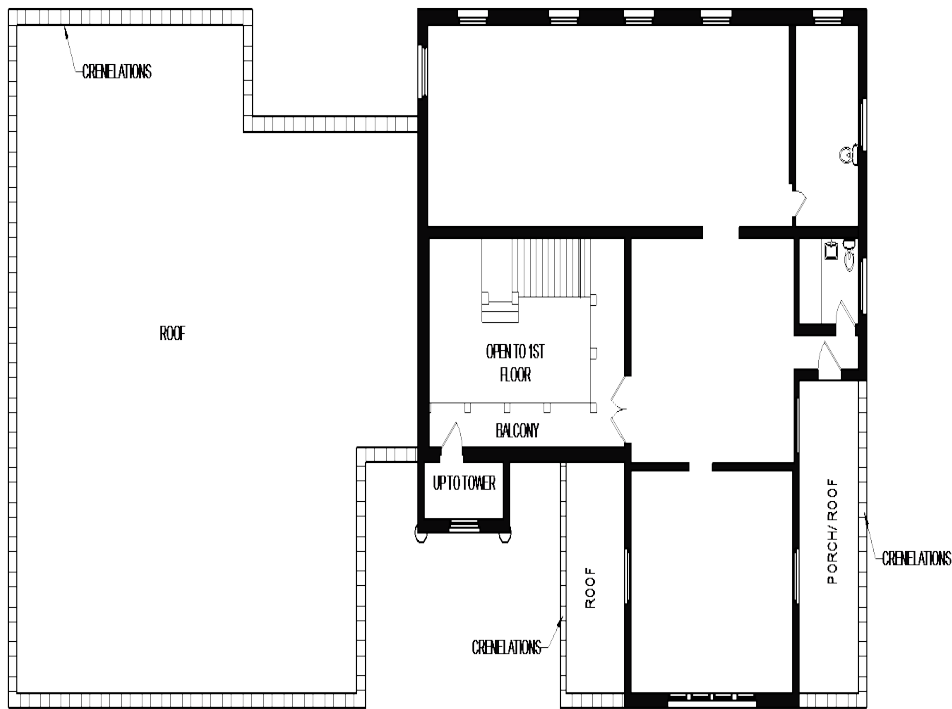
REVISIONS

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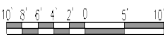


WALLS SHOWN ARE BEST ASSUMPTION OF ORIGINAL WALLS DETERMINED BY  
SELECTIVE INTERIOR DEMOLITION AND OBSERVATION OF MATERIALS USED IN  
SUBSEQUENT RENOVATIONS. USE OF INDIVIDUAL SPACES IS NOT DETERMINED.

SECOND FLOOR  
ORIGINAL WALLS LOCATION

01

SCALE: 3/32"=1'-0"



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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**Figures**

Figure 1. Christensen Castle, front façade/south elevation, ca. 1955 (courtesy of Denise Dixon)



Figure 2. Christensen Castle, front façade/south elevation, ca. 1979 (Texas Historical Commission)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 3. Christensen Castle, tower and east wing, front façade/south elevation, ca. 1979 (Texas Historical Commission)



Figure 4. Christensen Castle, tower and west wing, front façade/south elevation, ca. 1979 (Texas Historical Commission)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 5. Christensen Castle, main entry, front façade/south elevation, ca. 1979 (Texas Historical Commission)



Figure 6. Christensen Castle, first floor foyer, staircase, and second-floor balustrade, ca. 1955 (courtesy of Denise Dixon)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 7. News article, Galveston Daily News, May 1, 1889.

**C. G. Vogel of Kendall county is here on his way to Europe. He has applied for the consularship at Antwerp, where his family now is.**

Figure 8. News article, Norfolk Virginian, March 1, 1895. The Vossische Zeitung, based in Berlin, was Germany's unofficial national newspaper. Sing-akademie in Berlin, a mixed choir founded in 1791, is not and apparently has never been a music school; it brings together community members to rehearse and present choral music.

**Music and Language.**  
Madame C. G. Vogel and her daughters, the Misses Lola Mae and Pearl, who have recently arrived in our city from Berlin, have opened a studio for music and languages at Burke & Ames' music store, Main street. Mrs. Vogel and her young ladies are natives of this country, but have been abroad during the past eight years studying under such teachers as Benoit, Teide, Barth, Rubenstein and Zedliska. Alluding to their proficiency, the Berlin Vossischer Zeitung, of January 17th, remarks: "Last evening at Sing Academy the Sisters Vogel appeared for the first time, under the patronage of Profs. Teide and Rosstock. Fraulein Lola Vogel gave a piano recital of Listz's "Sixth Rhapsodie." While her playing does not show marked originality, her technique is excellent and her interpretation correct. In the Brock violin "Concerto" Miss Vogel showed talent and careful training, and we foresee for her a favorable artistic future."

**Combination Sale Horses.**  
Persons looking for bargains in trotters, saddlers, pairs and family

Figure 9. News article, Galveston Tribune, September 27, 1896.

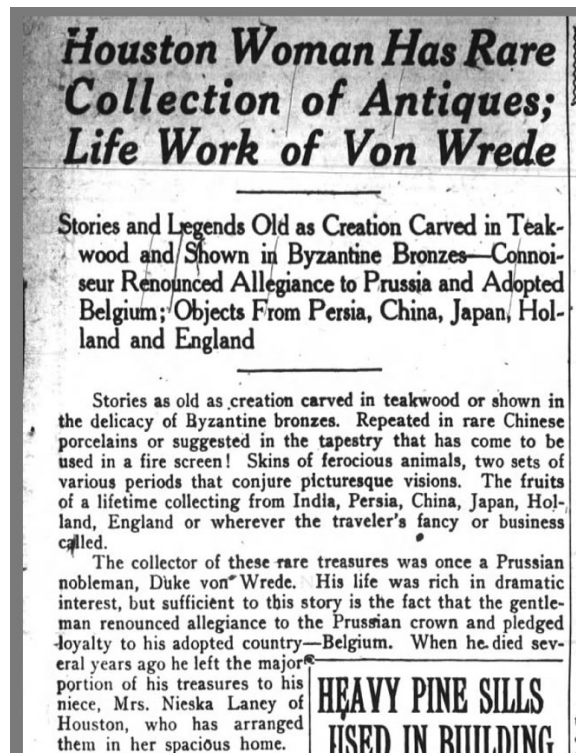
**THE DUCHESS VON WREDE.**  
Lady Sophie von Wrede, consort of the Duke von Wrede of Prince Solom's retinue, and who lived for some time in western Texas, died in Antwerp on the 18th instant. She had two grand nieces in this city, the Misses Lolita and Nieska Vogel.

Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 10. Excerpts from news article, St. Louis Republic, August 1, 1902, containing numerous bogus claims about the Vogel family.



Figure 11. News article, Houston Post, November 1923.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 12. News article, San Antonio Express and News, March 1965



Figure 13. Het Steen castle, Antwerp, Belgium, as it appeared on a postcard dated March 23, 1908.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 14. Wyndham Estate, Newport, Rhode Island (Justine Chang, Architectural Digest)



Figure 15. The Breakers mansion, Newport, Rhode Island (Preservation Society of Newport County)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 16. Grey Towers, Pennsylvania, as it appeared upon completion in 1886 (njskylands.com)



Figure 17. Hempstead House (Gould-Guggenheim Estate), 1912, front elevation.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 18. Hempstead House (Gould-Guggenheim Estate), 1912, view of rear towers.



Figure 19. Aerial view of the Robin Hood film set, 1922 (Los Angeles Public Library)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 20. White Castle hamburger restaurants: (left) the original stand, built in 1921; (right) a later version (White Castle)



Figure 21. Battle between King Arthur and the Black Knight in the presence of Merlin the Enchanting (illustration by Howard Pyle)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 22. One of the earliest panels from the Prince Valiant comic strip, 1937



Figure 23. A still photo from the Prince Valiant movie (1954)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 24. A 1959 LEGO advertisement for a prebuilt model retailers could use to inspire young builders (Brickset.com)

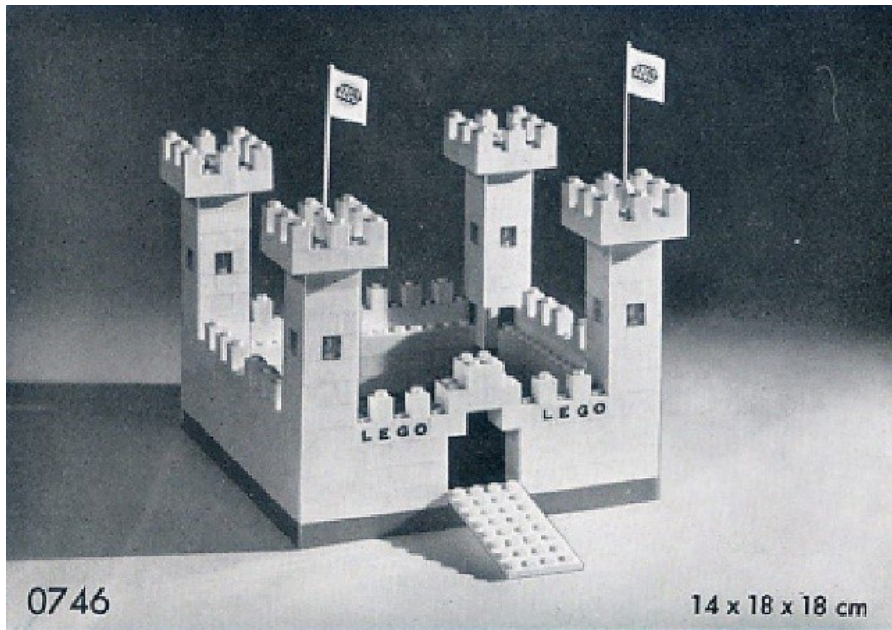


Figure 25. LEGO castle building set, 1974.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 26. Entrance to Coral Castle, Homestead, Florida (Florida Center for Instructional Technology)



Figure 27. Millennium Manor, Alcoa, Tennessee (Millennium Manor Preservation)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 28. Fonthill Castle, Doylestown, Pennsylvania (Mercer Museum and Fonthill Castle)



Figure 29. Elisabet Ney Museum, Austin, Texas (City of Austin)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 30. The Nat Ballroom, Amarillo, Texas after its conversion to a dance palace in 1926 (The Nat)



Figure 31. The Old Williamson County Jail, Georgetown, Texas, as it appeared ca. 1888 (City of Georgetown)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 32. John Christensen on his farm, ca. 1920 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)



Figure 33. John Christensen (right) in his cotton field in Santa Fe, Texas, ca. 1920 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)





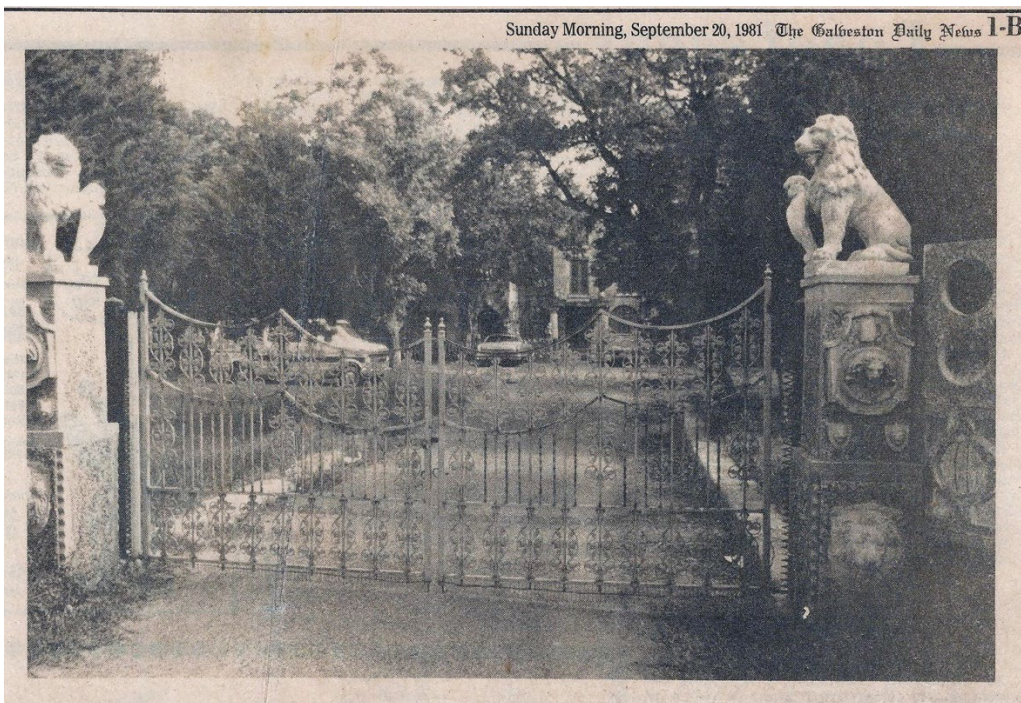
Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 34. John Christensen Ford dealership in Galveston, Texas, ca. 1920 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)



Figure 35. Christensen Castle gate, *Galveston Daily News*, September 20, 1981 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

Figure 36. Then-owner Franco Pignataro at the castle, *The Bulletin*, August 26, 1981 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)



Figure 37. Castle interior, first floor, *The Bulletin*, August 26, 1981 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 38. Staircase inside the castle, *The Bulletin*, August 26, 1981 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)



*Elaborate banister and gallery accent the foyer*

*Bulletin Aug. 26, 1981*

Figure 39. Entry gate and fence at the Santa Fe castle, 2016 (Santa Fe Area Historical Foundation)





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Figure 40. Aviary at rear of outdoor kitchen, camera facing north, August 17, 2023 (destroyed in Hurricane Beryl, July 2024)



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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## Photographs

All photos by Steph McDougal (McDoux Preservation LLC)

Exterior photos taken July 29, 2024, and interior photos taken August 12, 2024, except where noted.  
All photos accurately depict the current conditions as of April 2025.

Photo 2. Front elevation, view facing north.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 2. Center entrance and tower, view facing north.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 3. East (two-story) wing, oblique view, camera facing northeast.



Photo 4. East (two-story) wing, oblique view, camera facing northwest.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 5. East (two-story) wing, rear elevation, camera facing south.



Photo 6. Partial east (two-story) wing and west (one-story) wing, rear elevation oblique view, camera facing southwest.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 7. West (one-story) wing, west elevation, camera facing east with central tower in background.



Photo 8. West (one-story) wing, west elevation oblique view, camera facing northeast.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 9. Cast stone block detail, flower in squares separated by square holes on point, front elevation, camera facing north.



Photo 10. Cast stone block detail, round circles with alternating squares set on point, front elevation, camera facing north.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 11. Cast stone arches flanking the front entry courtyard, with floral trident keystones, camera facing east.



Photo 12. Cast stone frieze detail below front entry arches, camera facing east.





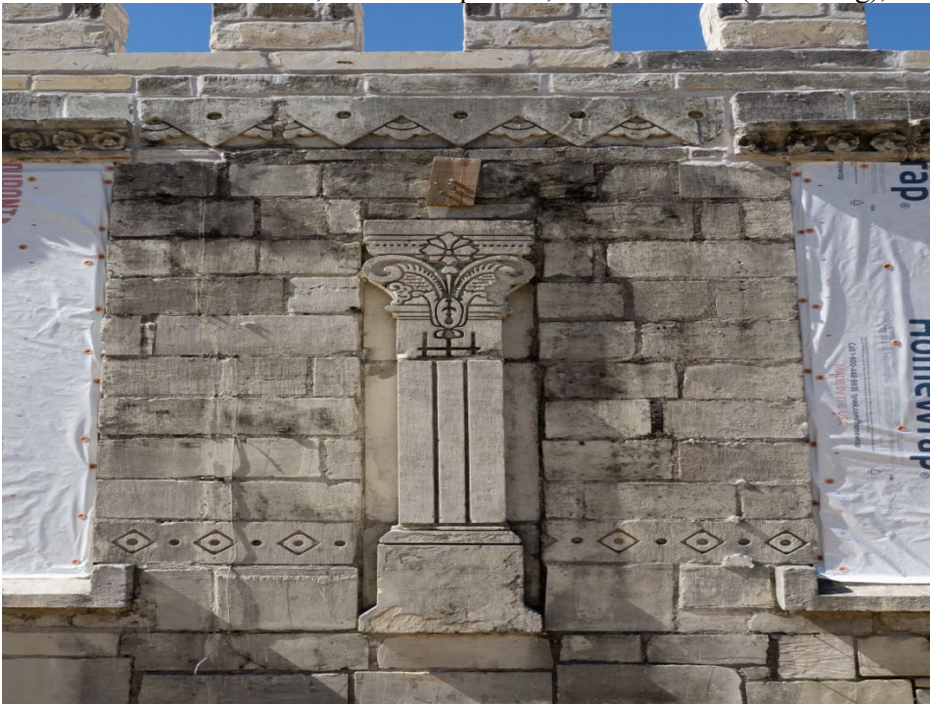
Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 13. Cast stone capital at front entry, camera facing north.



Photo 14. Cast stone detail, decorative pilaster, front elevation (west wing), camera facing north.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 15. Swimming pool, noncontributing, camera facing southeast.



Photo 16. Front entry gates as viewed from SH-6, camera facing north.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 17. Interior foyer with front window, with door from porch (left) and central entry door with stained glass (right) flanking arched window, camera facing southeast.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 18. View of double doors in central front entrance, camera facing south.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 19. Interior foyer with elaborate staircase and balustrade, camera facing east.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 20. View from foyer under central tower into west (one-story) wing, camera facing west.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 21. West (one-story) wing, view from doorway to foyer, camera facing west.



Photo 22. East wing, first floor, front rooms in southeast corner of building, camera facing southeast.





Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 23. East wing, first floor, original double doors on east wall leading to enclosed porch, camera facing southeast.



Photo 24. East wing, second floor, front room, southwest corner of this floor, camera facing southwest.



Christensen Castle, Santa Fe, Galveston County, Texas

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Photo 25. East wing, second floor, rear room, view of doorways to front room (left) and foyer balcony (right), camera facing southwest.



- end -