

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
Registration Form



1. NAME OF PROPERTY

HISTORIC NAME: Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER: Tres Palacios Masonic Lodge

2. LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER: 619 Avenue B / FM 616
CITY OR TOWN: Blessing
STATE: Texas **CODE:** TX **COUNTY:** Matagorda
☐ **NOT FOR PUBLICATION**
☐ **VICINITY**
CODE: 321 **ZIP CODE:** 77419

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 ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Mark Wolfe
Signature of certifying official / Title

State Historic Preservation Officer

11/30/10
Date

Texas Historical Commission
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ See continuation sheet.
☐ other, explain
☐ See continuation sheet.

Edson H. Beall
Signature of the Keeper

2-4-11
Date of Action

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	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	total

NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER: 0

NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING: N/A

6. FUNCTION OR USE

HISTORIC FUNCTIONS: SOCIAL / meeting hall = hall of fraternal organization

CURRENT FUNCTIONS: SOCIAL / meeting hall = hall of fraternal organization

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: OTHER: Texas vernacular or folk

MATERIALS:	FOUNDATION	CONCRETE
	WALLS	WOOD
	ROOF	WOOD, ASPHALT
	OTHER	

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-8)

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

The Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 is located at the corner of FM 616 and 11th Street in the town of Blessing, Texas. The building was constructed near the Tres Palacios River ca. 1875 and moved to its current location in 1907. A two-story building with a 30-feet-by-50-feet rectangular footprint, its shorter façades face west and east, and its longer façades face north and south; the main entrance is on the west elevation facing 11th Street. The Blessing Lodge is a vernacular wood-framed building with a symmetrical major façade and clipped gable ends; appearing in each gable is the traditional Masonic symbol of the "Square, Compasses, and Letter G." Both floors have largely open plans, with the upper floor used for private lodge meetings, and the lower floor used as a cafeteria and general gathering place. Still in use today, the Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 is nominated to the National Register at the local level of significance under Criterion A for Social History. The period of significance begins in 1907, when the building was brought to its present site, and ends in 1960, the current 50-year date for historic resources; therefore, the nominated resource is not required to meet Criteria Consideration B for a property removed from its original location.

Setting

Matagorda County is located on the Gulf of Mexico in southeast Texas, approximately 80 miles southwest of Houston. The county is 1,612 square miles in size and is comprised of flat coastal prairie; its southern and southwestern portions contain a narrow barrier island and several large bays. Bay City in the county seat, located approximately twenty miles north of the bays in the north-central part of Matagorda County. Blessing is located about twenty miles southwest of Bay City at the intersection of State Highway 35 and Farm-to-Market Road 616 (FM 616). The land surrounding Blessing is largely agricultural, and the town of Blessing is flat, with grid-like streets and a land area of two square miles. FM 616 serves as the main artery through town, where it is called Avenue B. The Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 is located at 619 Avenue B/FM 616, on the southeast corner of its intersection with 11th Street, two blocks east of the historic Blessing Hotel. The building occupies Lot 1, Block 3 of the original Blessing town site.

Exterior

The Blessing Masonic Lodge is a stout, rectangular building without any projecting eaves. The building measures approximately 30 feet by 50 feet, with an interior square footage of 2,900 on two nearly identical floors. The cornice is approximately 24 feet high; from cornice to roof is an additional 6 feet. The lodge building is front gabled and oriented on an east-west axis with the main entrance on the west elevation. Both gable ends are clipped.

The lodge is a vernacular building of post-and-beam construction resting on concrete piers. The building has few decorative details; it is clad in white-painted horizontal weatherboard siding with flat corner boards. The roof is composition shingle. The eaves are closed, with flat soffits and fascias. Below the eaves is a frieze that consists of a narrow decorative molding atop a flat trim piece. This same frieze detail is found along the rakeboards in both gable ends, which are clipped and contain the traditional Masonic symbol of the "Compasses, Square, and Letter G."

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On the front and rear elevations, the symbol is oversized and spans the entire height of the gable end; the V-shaped square intersects with the conjoined compasses, framing the capital letter G. The symbols are painted black and serve as the lodge's only architectural detail, dominating the building elevations and immediately drawing the eye to the gables.

West elevation

The main elevation is 30 feet wide and faces west on 11th Street. It is symmetrical, with three bays in an ABA arrangement; on the first floor, two windows flank the main entrance, and the second floor features three regularly spaced windows. All windows are wood double-hung sash, in a 2/2 arrangement with two vertically-oriented panes in each sash. The entrance door features two tall five-panel doors that meet without a center jamb. Above the door is a three-light fixed transom. The door is framed in flat trimwork with a simple molding strip along the top above the transom. The double-hung windows are trimmed in the same flat casings and top moldings. Window sills are simple boards laid at a slight angle for water deflection. The two windows on the first floor are covered with historic single-door wood shutters. Each shutter is made of narrow vertical boards and attached to the building by strap hinges. The three second floor windows do not have shutters. Above the second floor is the broad clipped gable end with the Masonic symbol of the "Square, Compasses, and Letter G."

North and South elevations

Facing FM 616/Avenue B, the north elevation measures approximately 50 feet in length and has a four-bay arrangement. The four upper floor windows are intact and have the same arrangement and trim as those found on the main elevation. The first floor windows, however, have been altered: three of them have been enclosed with plywood but have their casings intact, and the easternmost window has been completely enclosed with siding.

Historically, the south elevation was identical to the north, with four windows on each floor. Here, too, the four second-floor windows are intact, matching those found on the west and north elevations. The first-floor windows on the south side have been altered: three of them have had their casings removed and are covered by nonhistoric single-door shutters that are similar to the historic shutters on the west façade. The far west first-floor window on the south elevation has been enclosed with siding.

East elevation

The rear elevation faces east and has a two-bay arrangement, historically with two windows on each floor. The upper floor is intact, with two 2/2 wood double-hung sash windows that are slightly wider than the windows found on the other three elevations. On the first floor, one window has been replaced with a door, and the other window—its casings still intact—has been enclosed with plywood. The gable contains the Masonic symbol and is identical to the gable on the major façade.

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Interior

The interior of the lodge is remarkably intact, with much of the historic fabric remaining in place. Both floors of the building have open plans and are rather similar. At the west end of the first floor is the entrance foyer, the staircase, and a storage room/restroom; the second floor mirrors this and contains the staircase, a stair landing, and another storage room. The entrance foyer is located in the center of the first floor's west end; it has wood floors, plaster walls, and wood beadboard wainscoting. The staircase, located in the southwest corner, is a return stair with a 180-degree turn at the middle landing. The stairs are wood, with solid risers and molded nosings. The balustrade is composed of square wood railings and 4x4 newel posts with pyramidal caps and partially chamfered corners. At the middle landing, the walls are wainscoted with horizontal boards topped with a wide piece of decorative molding that consists of beadboard laid horizontally and trimmed. This same wide molding detail is found along the facing of the second-floor stair opening. The balustrade also continues along this upper floor landing, creating a balcony effect. It is believed that all interior wood details are of pine.

The majority of the building's interior space is made up of these two large open rooms—the private lodge room on the second floor and the cafeteria/community room on the first floor. The rooms measure approximately 40 feet deep by 30 feet wide, thus spanning the entire width of the building and most of its length. The lower level has wood floors, whereas the second level has linoleum tile floor covering. The lodge room and cafeteria/community room are accessed by paneled wood doors from the upper floor landing and the lower floor entrance foyer, respectively. These large rooms have plaster walls and nonhistoric paneled wainscoting and dropped ceilings. Interior window and door trim is flat and unornamented. The small storage rooms are located in the northwest corners of each floor, and the first floor storage room has been converted to a restroom. The upper level storage room is accessed by two doors, one from the lodge room and one from the second floor landing. This room is used by the Masons as the anteroom during degree-conferring ceremonies. At the western end of the first floor cafeteria/community room is a small nonhistoric storage area with walls that do not reach the ceiling; this storage area is not permanently tied into the main building fabric and thus its construction is reversible.

Furnishings

The second floor lodge room contains a large number of historic furnishings and ceremonial tools, some of which are original to the building. There are a large number of 19th-century wood chairs that have been used by the Masons since the lodge was constructed. The chairs have shaped wooden seats, curved arms, and decorative turned legs, stretchers, and spindles. The top rails and mid rails are solid wood and are very wide. Positioned on three of the lodge room's walls are three large chairs (ca. 1900) used by the Worshipful Master, the Senior Warden, and the Junior Warden during ceremonies. These chairs are solid wood with tall backs and square profiles and contain gold inlaid Masonic symbols in the upper portion of the chair backs. A podium sits in front of each tall chair and a square altar sits in the center of the room. The podia and altar match the tall chairs and are blocky in shape, each with a gold inlaid Masonic symbol and a carved architectural cornice detail just below the surface.

In the lodge room's northwest corner, in front of the ceremonial anteroom, are historic twin Masonic pillars. Donated to the Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 by the Indianola Lodge No. 84 when the 1886 Indianola hurricane

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destroyed their lodge building, the pillars—Boaz and Jachin—are said to represent King Solomon's temple.¹ They are heavy bronze Corinthian columns approximately eight feet high; both are gilded and have square bases, fluted shafts, Corinthian capitals, and decorative finials topped with colorful globes. One of globes features a map of the earth depicted in multiple colors, while the other globe is black with gold Masonic symbols printed around its circumference. Other historic ceremonial tools include the Working Tools—the gauge, gavel, square, level, plum, trowel, and compass. The lodge also contains a historic ballot box said to date to the building's construction date. The wooden box has two compartments, one of which contains tiny white wooden balls and black wooden cubes. A voting member would insert his hand into the compartment, select a sphere for a positive vote and a cube for a negative vote, and drop it through a small hole into the enclosed second compartment. After the vote the Master would tally the votes by opening the second compartment and counting the spheres and cubes. All wood furnishings and ceremonial objects are thought to be made of pine.

Summary

Despite the changes to some of the building's historic fenestration, the Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 building retains a great deal of integrity. Constructed circa 1875, the building was relocated to its present site in 1907, and today it continues to function much as it did when first built by this fraternal organization. The period of significance begins in 1907, when the building was brought to Blessing and placed on its present site, and ends in 1960, the current 50-year cut-off date for National Register properties. The Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 stands as a testament to the strong social bonds of this Matagorda County community and is therefore nominated to the National Register at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Social History.

¹ Darron Ross, "The History of Blessing Lodge No. 411: A Lodge Rich in Heritage, Strong in Character." Unpublished article, c. 2008.

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA**

Property:

- ☒ **A** is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
C 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.
D has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B removed from its original location.
C a birthplace or grave.
D a cemetery.
E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F a commemorative property.
G less than 50 years of age or has achieved significance within the past 50 years.

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: SOCIAL HISTORY**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE:** 1907-1960**SIGNIFICANT DATES:** 1907**SIGNIFICANT PERSON:** N/A**CULTURAL AFFILIATION:** N/A**ARCHITECT / BUILDER:** unknown**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE** (see continuation sheets 8-9 through 8-16)**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES****BIBLIOGRAPHY** (see continuation sheets 9-17 through 9-18)**PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS):** N/A

- ☐ 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 No.
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record No.

PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:

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

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 has been in continuous use as a Masonic meeting hall since its construction in the community of Deming's Bridge, Matagorda County, Texas, circa 1875; it was moved several miles to its current location in the town of Blessing in 1907. The two-story frame building possesses outstanding architectural integrity and is an excellent example of a late 19th-century vernacular civic building. It is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Social History at the local level of significance, for its important role in the history of the local Masonic chapter, founded in 1874. The lodge's period of significance begins in 1907—when it was moved to its permanent site in Blessing—and ends in 1960; the building therefore is not required to meet Criteria Consideration B for a property removed from its original location.

Matagorda County, Texas

Matagorda County, located in southeast Texas along the Gulf of Mexico, covers 1,612 square miles of total land and water area; the county is bisected by the once flood-prone Colorado River, with many creeks and tributaries also flowing south toward Matagorda Bay or the Gulf of Mexico. The county's name—derived from the Spanish words *mata* (brush, sprig, blade) and *gorda* (fat, thick)—is locally assumed to mean “dense canebrake,” in reference to that which once was found along Caney Creek and the shores of Matagorda Bay.² The majority of the county is flat and delta-like, with fertile coastal prairies, coastal marshes, and riparian forests. Within the county are large bays that collectively have a surface area of approximately 500 square miles. They are sheltered from the gulf by the long, thin Matagorda Peninsula, which functions as a barrier island. The Colorado River channel, essentially an isthmus, divides the bays into East Matagorda Bay to the east and the larger Matagorda Bay to the west. After crossing the bay, the river channel cuts across the peninsula at approximately its midway point. Tres Palacios Bay is a small irregular-shaped bay extending north from Matagorda Bay, at the mouth of Tres Palacios Creek.

The first permanent settlements in Texas by non-native peoples were the missions founded by the Spanish in an attempt to establish centers of empire and Christianize the indigenous populations. Established with varying degrees of success between 1682 and 1793, these missions were located inland. As early as 1805, Spain had an interest in creating a port at the mouth of the Colorado River, at present-day Matagorda; however, the first permanent settlement there was established by Anglo-Americans in Stephen F. Austin's colony in 1822.

Austin was twenty-seven years old when his father made plans to travel to San Antonio to secure from the Spanish government a grant of land and permission to settle it. Austin, living in New Orleans at the time, at first hesitated to join his father in the venture, but after his father's sudden death and at the urging of his widowed mother, decided to continue with the plan. In August 1821, Austin arrived in San Antonio and obtained permission from Governor Antonio María Martínez to proceed with the colonization effort.³ The arrangement was such that Austin could first explore the coast to select a colony site between the San Antonio and Brazos rivers, and then offer large plots of

² Diana J. Kleiner, “Matagorda County,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/MM/hcm5.html>>.

³ Eugene C. Barker, “Stephen Fuller Austin,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/AA/fau14.html>>.

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land to each settler. The amount of land a settler would receive was based on size of family and number of slaves, with a base amount of 640 acres given to the male settler as head of family; from his colonists, Austin would collect 12.5 cents per acre for his efforts.⁴ Austin advertised his colony immediately, and colonists began arriving on the Texas coast in December 1821. After Mexico gained its independence from Spain, the region's new provisional government made changes to Austin's colonization agreement. Agustín de Iturbide's rump congress developed the *empresario* system, in which heads of families were given a league and a labor of land—4,605 acres—and the empresario, or land agent, received 67,000 acres of land for every 200 families settled, but collected nothing from the colonists themselves.⁵

Settlers continued to arrive. In 1822 the *Only Son*, a schooner from New Orleans carrying Austin's colonists, arrived at the mouth of the Colorado River in Matagorda Bay. It was followed shortly by another ship of settlers, and still more in 1828 when Austin was awarded another colonization contract. Land grants were distributed inland, upstream along the various rivers in the area. Caney Creek was a popular early settlement location because of the area's rich alluvial soil. Many newcomers suffered setbacks in the form of disease, poor crops, and attacks from Karankawas defending their territory, but they persevered. Elias R. Wightman, a surveyor, and several other men petitioned Austin for permission to establish a town at the mouth of the Colorado River for the purpose of better protecting settlers in the area. In 1827 Austin consented, setting aside a league of land at the site and securing permission from the Mexican government to proceed. By 1829 the town of Matagorda was formally organized, and it was incorporated in 1830; by 1835 it was the third largest town in the province of Texas, with 1,400 inhabitants, and one of the region's most important ports.⁶

The municipality of Matagorda was established in 1834—while the region remained under control of the Mexican government—and spanned a large area, with its western border along the Lavaca River as far north as present-day Colorado County. Before and during the Texas Revolution, the Matagorda area was represented in councils, conventions, and battles, as at the Convention of 1833 and when area troops aided Colonel James Fannin in the fight for independence. After the war the new Republic of Texas organized twenty-three counties, of which Matagorda County was one, with the city of Matagorda as its seat. The county of Matagorda was created by the Republic of Texas on March 17, 1836, but its organization was not completed until July 1837, when county officers were selected. The new county showed strong growth from its start: its coastal location brought agriculture, shipping, and immigration—all things important to the early growth of Texas.

The city of Matagorda became the second largest seaport in Texas and served as a point of entry for immigrants from 1840 until 1865, and it was during this time that Matagorda County saw a large increase in transportation and industry development. Both livestock and cotton were important components of the local economy by 1850, at which time 1,200 slaves were counted among a total county population of 2,124. The growing agricultural economy encouraged the further importation of black slaves, and by 1860 there were more than 2,100 slaves in the county—well more than half its total population of 3,454.⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Matagorda County Historical Commission, *Historic Matagorda County, Vols. I and II* (Houston: Armstrong Co., Inc, 1986), 35.

⁷ Kleiner, op. cit.

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In 1861 voters in Matagorda County supported secession from the union by a count of 136 to 8, and Confederate camps and posts were established around the county. The Civil War did not physically come to Matagorda, as no Union troops entered the county, but it did not remain untouched by the realities of war. Several white supremacist groups, such as the Klu Klux Klan and the White Man's Union Association, formed locally to protect white interests by suppressing the black population of the area.⁸

The Union blockade of the Texas coast meant that foreign trade was restricted, greatly hampering the Matagorda economy that relied on the export of cotton. Decreased land values and the emancipation of slaves following the Civil War brought about a sharp decline in Matagorda County's cotton production, which did not rebound until the 1870s; the local economy and population grew slowly until the end of the 19th century.⁹

At the end of the 19th century Matagorda County saw an influx of people from other states and an expanding economy. Settlers moved into the county as rice started to replace cotton and livestock. The Matagorda County Rice and Irrigation Company, founded in 1899, helped further rice as an important local crop; rice made up 34 percent of the county's improved acreage. Railroad construction in the county also expanded during the late 19th and early 20th century, which encouraged the development and growth of existing areas and contributed to the establishment of new towns such as Palacios.¹⁰

The population of Matagorda County continued to grow throughout the 20th century as the area's economy diversified to include petroleum and other industries. Agriculture remained important well into the 1970s, as the county was a leading producer of both cattle and rice. The growth and development of Matagorda County now falls under the purview of the Houston-Galveston Area Council, which provides regional planning to the area.¹¹ By 2000 Matagorda County had a population of just over 37,000, with half residing in Bay City.

Freemasonry in Texas

Freemasonry arrived in Texas with the first Anglo-American colonists. Stephen F. Austin attempted to organize a Masonic lodge in 1828, but failed after his petition to the Grand Lodge of Mexico was received with hostility.¹² The first Texas lodge was established in 1835 in Brazoria, but dissolved soon after its charter, a casualty of the Texas Revolution.¹³ By 1837 three lodges were chartered in the Republic of Texas, and President Sam Houston presided over the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas, which grew steadily until the Civil War, when it suffered financial stress and membership took a temporary decline.¹⁴ Membership flourished during the 1880s, and the great

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Don Winnett, *A History of Matagorda Lodge No. 7 AF & AM: Matagorda, Texas*. Unpublished history written by a Senior Warden of the Lodge. 1988. Genealogy Room, Bay City Public Library, Bay City, Texas.

¹³ William Preston Vaughn, "Freemasonry," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/FF/vnf1.html>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

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majority of influential early Texans were members of a Masonic lodge. In the Republic of Texas, Masons accounted for only 1.5% of the general population but approximately 80% of public officials.¹⁵ After annexation, Masons continued to be prominent in the State of Texas, with five of the six governors between 1846 and 1861 members of the fraternity.¹⁶ Matagorda County was one of Texas's most prominent immigration points of entry, and some of the earliest documentation of Masonic activity in the state is centered in Matagorda County; many of the men who came through the county in the early years were Masons.¹⁷ The first lodge organized in Matagorda County was Matagorda Lodge No. 7, formed in 1838.¹⁸

Origins of the Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 at Deming's Bridge

Several accounts suggest that the nominated lodge building was constructed in the small community of Deming's Bridge in 1875. Located on the Tres Palacios River—three miles northeast of what is now the town of Blessing—the area was used by the new settlers as early as 1850, and land was deeded to Tres Palacios Baptist Church in 1854 for the construction of a new church building and cemetery.¹⁹ The community of Deming's Bridge was named for a bridge built by Edwin A. Deming near the church in 1857; in 1858 a post office was established with Deming as postmaster.²⁰

Lodge founder Jonathan Edwards Pierce played an important role in the growth of this community. He and his brother Abel Head "Shanghai" Pierce were born in Rhode Island and moved to Indianola, Texas, sometime between 1853 and 1860.²¹ Jonathan Pierce found work splitting rails at the Grimes Ranch on the Tres Palacios River and bunked there with Edwin Deming, with whom he established a great friendship that later brought him to Deming's Bridge.²² Between 1861 and 1865 Pierce served with the Confederate Army in the Civil War, after which he came to Matagorda County and purchased land near the Deming's Bridge community. On that land the Pierce brothers constructed a large house and established a ranching operation called Rancho Grande.²³

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Winnett, op. cit.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Adelaide Pierce, comp., *Deming's Bridge Cemetery 1850-1898, Trespalacios Baptist Church 1852-1898, and Hawley Cemetery 1898-1978, Matagorda County, Texas* (Blessing, Texas: Hawley Cemetery Association, 1960), 3.

²⁰ Kenneth R. Jacobs, "Hawley, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/HH/hrh96.html>>.

²¹ Becky Gwin, "Deming's Bridge," *Oak Leaves*, Vol. II No. 3 (July 1983), 99-100; also "Pierce, Jonathan Edward," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpi12.html>>; and Chris Emmett, "Pierce, Abel Head (Shanghai)," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpi8.html>>. Emmett states that Abel Pierce traveled to Indianola in 1854; Gwin states that Jonathan Pierce arrived in Texas in 1853, while the uncredited article states that he arrived in 1860.

²² Gwin, 99.

²³ Ross, Darron. "The History of Blessing Lodge No. 411: A Lodge Rich in Heritage, Strong in Character." Unpublished article (2008), 2.

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Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

Jonathan Pierce established the Tres Palacios Masonic Lodge in 1874; the Grand Lodge of Texas granted a Charter under Dispensation on January 29, then a full charter and the assigned lodge number 411 on June 8, 1874.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, the Masons built a new two-story lodge building on the grounds of the church and cemetery, near Pierce's land. A hurricane destroyed the church building in 1875, and the congregation met on the first floor of the new Masonic hall until a replacement church was constructed in 1893.²⁵ After the Tres Palacios Masonic Lodge No. 411 was formed, Brother J.A. McIntyre was elected its first Worshipful Master, and Jonathan Pierce became Junior Warden.²⁶ In the first few months after charter, the lodge received several petitions for membership and visitors from other lodges.²⁷ Pierce became Worshipful Master in 1875 and held the position again in 1879, 1892, and 1903.²⁸ He also served as postmaster of the Deming's Bridge post office in 1876.²⁹

The settlement of Deming's Bridge grew, with a population of 300 in 1884 and 500 in 1892, by which time it had seventeen businesses in addition to the Masonic lodge building and cemetery.³⁰ Lodge history states that two traditional Masonic bronze pillars, Boaz and Jachin, were given in 1890 to the Tres Palacios Lodge by the Brothers of Indianola Lodge No. 84, who had lost their lodge building in the hurricane of 1886.³¹ These pillars stand in the Blessing Lodge today and are used for their original purpose during lodge ceremonies. Jonathan Pierce donated land in 1893 for the construction of a new multi-denominational church building and enlargement of the adjacent cemetery.³² The Masons were active in construction projects throughout the area; the Tres Palacios Lodge laid the cornerstone of the Matagorda County Courthouse "with Masonic honors" in 1895.³³

An 1894 account in the *Victoria Advocate* describes a grand picnic hosted by the Masons in Deming's Bridge that year:

Upwards of three hundred people were on the grounds; Edna, Matagorda, Colorado River and Carancahua were represented, but the majority were people from the immediate neighborhood. Quite early in the morning the Masons repaired to their lodge, from which they emerged later dressed in regalia and marching two by two, the Tyler with drawn sword at their head. The installation took place in the new church. The deep tones of the organ pealing forth a march, greeted their ears as they entered. [...] At the close of the address, the assembly with Masons in the van marched out into the grove, where a magnificent dinner was in waiting. Beef, cooked a la cow driver style, on stakes before the fire, bread, white and light as seafoam, turkeys, chickens, cakes of every size, kind and description with numerous other good things comprised the menu.³⁴

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Pierce, 6.

²⁶ Ross, 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Ibid., 2.

²⁹ Gwin, 99-100.

³⁰ Jacobs, op. cit.

³¹ Ross, 13.

³² Gwin, op. cit.

³³ Junann Stieghorst, *Bay City and Matagorda County: A History* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1965), 42.

³⁴ "Grand Picnic at Deming's Bridge," *Oak Leaves*, Vol. VII No. 3 (May 1988), 120.

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

Of note in the passage is the differentiation between the lodge building and the new church, giving credence to accounts that the nominated building was in existence at Deming's Bridge.

Jonathan Pierce and Blessing, Texas

In 1899 Jonathan Pierce changed the name of Deming's Bridge to "Hawley" in thanks to his friend Robert Bradley Hawley, who secured a position in the Navy for Pierce's son.³⁵ In 1900, his brother Abel Pierce died of a cerebral hemorrhage; Rancho Grande, the Pierces' ranch home, burned to the ground in 1902.³⁶ In 1903 Jonathan Pierce established the town of Blessing on a portion of his land, and then he donated a right-of-way to the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railway to ensure that the new settlement would thrive.³⁷ A grateful Pierce named the town "Blessing" after the U.S. Postal Department denied his original petition for the name "Thank God."³⁸

The settlement of Hawley declined after the railroad came through Blessing. By 1903 the Hawley post office was moved to Blessing, and in 1905 the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway was extended through Blessing to join the existing Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio Railway.³⁹ The Blessing Hotel was built by D.A. Wheeler shortly thereafter, and in September 1907 the townsite was platted.⁴⁰ By 1914 Blessing had 500 inhabitants. Hawley had a one-room schoolhouse until 1904, and the multi-denominational church constructed in 1893 was demolished in 1937.⁴¹ The bridge over the Tres Palacios River known as Deming's Bridge was removed ca. 1930.⁴²

Jonathan Pierce died on March 29, 1915. He was active in the Brotherhood for over 41 years and was the last of the original Lodge petitioners.⁴³ He was laid to rest with Masonic honors in Hawley Cemetery near the grave of his brother Abel, several yards from where the nominated lodge building once stood. In May 1915 a Resolution of Respect was presented by the Masons, which began:

Whereas, on the 29th day of March, A.D. 1915, Brother Jonathan Edwards Pierce, one of our most beloved and honored members, answered the call of the Supreme Grand Master of The Universe and closed his long career of usefulness upon earth; whereas, it is fitting for this Lodge to put on record its high appreciation of his exalted worth and character; therefore be it resolved.⁴⁴

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Emmett, *op. cit.*; Pierce, 3.

³⁷ Stephen L. Hardin, "Blessing, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 2010 at: <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/BB/hlb36.html>>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jacobs; also Gwin, 99.

⁴² Gwin, 99.

⁴³ Darron Ross, "The History of Blessing Lodge No. 411: A Lodge Rich in Heritage, Strong in Character." Unpublished article (2008), 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

Relocation of the Masonic Lodge No. 411 Building

Accounts of the lodge building's relocation are described in the minutes of the Tres Palacios Lodge and summarized in articles by lodge historian Darron Ross.⁴⁵ After the railroad was extended through Blessing and that town grew, the Masons met to discuss a potential move to Blessing. In June 1906 a committee was appointed to request permission from the Baptist church in Hawley to move the lodge building from the church property.⁴⁶ The church granted permission, and in March 1907 it was ordered for word to be sent to the District Deputy Grand Master to request permission to relocate the building.⁴⁷ A building committee was formed to plan the move, and in June 1907 the Brothers voted unanimously to move Lodge 411 and its building.⁴⁸ A town lot in Blessing was donated to the Masons, and the lodge obtained a bank loan to finance the relocation; the firm of Nelson and Pybus was given the contract to move the building to the site.⁴⁹ According to Ross and the 1907 minutes of the Tres Palacios Lodge, the building was pulled by mule teams from Tres Palacios to Blessing, using large logs to support the building and roll it to its present location. Nelson and Pybus carried out the contract during the months of October and November 1907; Pybus is listed in the minutes as a Brother Mason and member of the Lodge.⁵⁰

Organizational information of Lodge 411 in the Grand Lodge proceedings states that the Tres Palacios Lodge "met in the woods" prior to its move to Blessing; this has led to some local assumptions that no lodge building existed in Deming's Bridge. However, lodge records clearly document the moving of the lodge and its building to Blessing in 1907. Lodge historian Ross explains this as a miscommunication between the Tres Palacios Lodge and the Grand Lodge; after the building was relocated to Blessing in 1907, it was discovered that the Grand Master had not granted formal permission for the move. The Grand Lodge was not pleased at this infraction and considered arresting the Charter in 1908, since the Tres Palacios Lodge no longer had a building at Tres Palacios. As the building now was located in the town of Blessing, Right Worshipful Master Brother L. Peine granted Dispensation to the Lodge and recommended that its name be changed to Blessing Masonic Lodge.⁵¹ The Lodge's Organizational Information of the Grand Lodge Proceedings states, "Allowed to move to Blessing on R.R. original location four mield (*sic*) from Blessing name changed to blessing (*sic*)."⁵²

Shortly after the lodge building was moved to Blessing, it suffered minor damage in a storm. The damage is assumed to have been minimal, given the excellent condition of the building today; organizational information for

⁴⁵ The Blessing Masonic Lodge maintains meeting minutes ranging from its establishment in 1875 through the present day. The historic minutes are housed in the lodge building, and only lodge members are allowed access to them. Darron Ross, the lodge historian, used these minutes to compile his manuscript, "The History of Blessing Lodge No. 411: A Lodge Rich in Heritage, Strong in Character," which has been cited within this nomination text.

⁴⁶ Ross, 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵² "Organizational Information," Lodge 411, on file at the Matagorda County Museum Annex archives, Blessing Lodge file. Darren Ross notes in his article "The History of Blessing Lodge No. 411," that the phrase "met in the woods" is from pages 15 and 95 of the Grand Lodge of Texas Proceedings of 1908.

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

the Lodge summarizes the event with little description: "Some building damage. Damage done by Storm on July 21, 1909."⁵³ In 1909 and 1910 the lodge was used as Blessing's first school building. In a 1957 interview, a former teacher at the school recalled that "the Masonic Hall at that time was used for school, Sunday school, dances, banquets, Medicine Shows on the first floor; and the Masonic Lodge meetings held on the second floor."⁵⁴

Summary

The Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 and its lodge building have experienced few changes since the time of Jonathan Pierce. Around 1920 a door was cut into its east façade to permit access from the parking lot to the lower floor community room.⁵⁵ In 1947 a hurricane blew the building off its foundation blocks into the street, but the building remained intact; it was placed on new concrete footings and was restored shortly thereafter.⁵⁶ In 1961 Hurricane Carla blew the roof off the building, but members were determined to maintain their perfect attendance record and chose to meet by candlelight.⁵⁷

The lodge building was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark (RTHL) in 1965 and received a state marker which reads, "Hall built 1875 at Deming's Bridge, near Pierce Ranch, by John Pierce and Masonic brothers. First floor used as Baptist church and community hall. Moved about 1903 when town of Blessing was founded." The marker is incorrect in that the building was moved in 1907, not 1903.

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 has been in continuous use as a Masonic meeting hall since its construction in the community of Deming's Bridge, Matagorda County, Texas, circa 1875; it was moved several miles to its current location in the town of Blessing in 1907. The two-story frame building possesses outstanding architectural integrity and is an excellent example of a late 19th-century vernacular civic building. It is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Social History at the local level of significance, for its important role in the history of the local Masonic chapter, founded in 1874. The lodge's period of significance begins in 1907—when it was moved to its permanent site in Blessing—and ends in 1960; the building therefore is not required to meet Criteria Consideration B for a property removed from its original location.

⁵³ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁴ "Masonic Building used as First School Building in Blessing," Interview with Mrs. H.L. Brown, 1957. Author unknown. On file at the Matagorda County Museum Annex archives, Masonic Lodge file.

⁵⁵ Steve Rabb (Past Lodge Master). Telephone interview by Kristen Brown of Preservation Central, Inc., January 2010.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

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Continuation Sheet

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Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

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USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411, Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

Page 4

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**ACREAGE OF PROPERTY:** less than one acre

UTM REFERENCES	<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
	14	771265	3196942

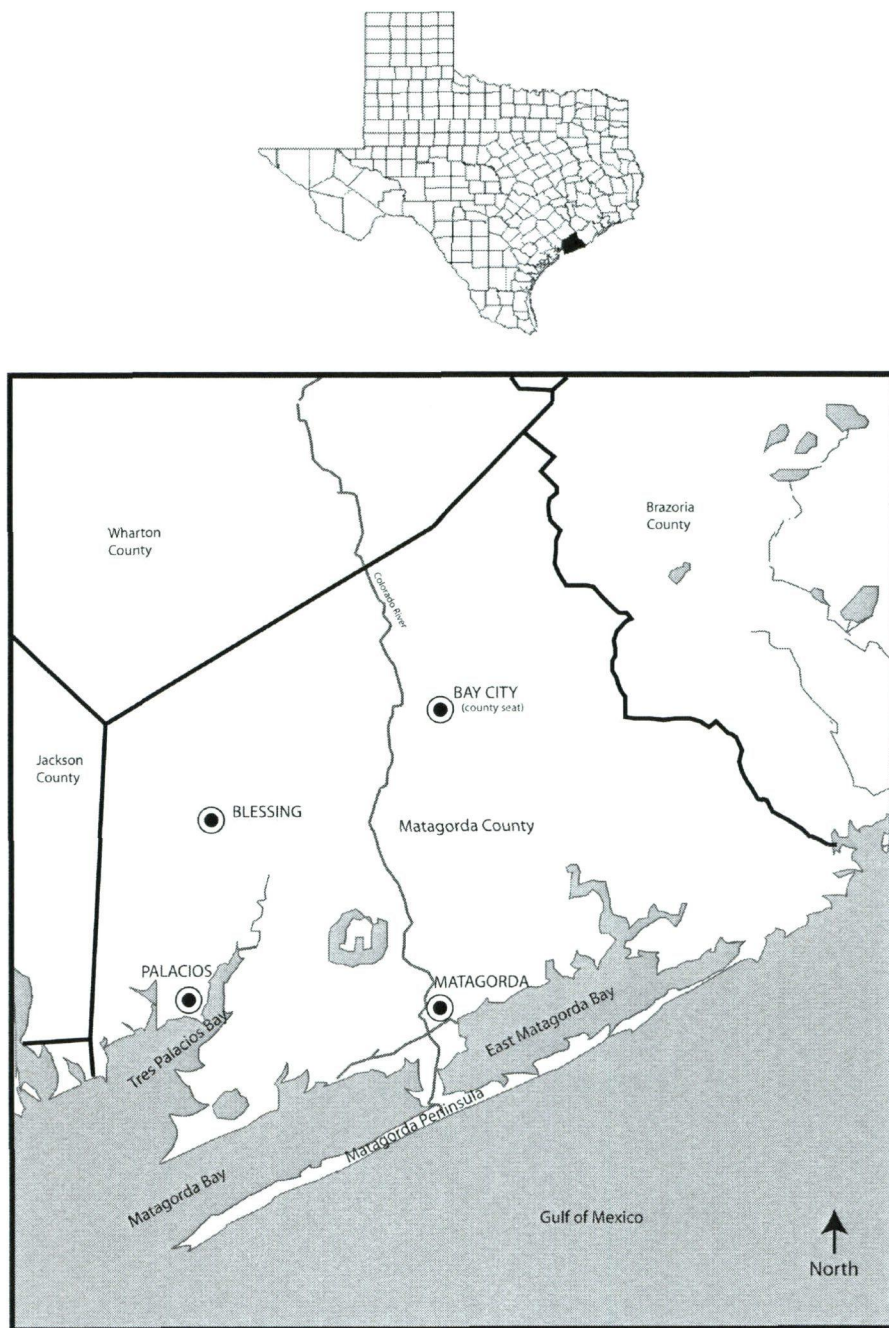
VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION: Block 3, Lot 1 of the original Blessing town site**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:** Nomination includes all property historically associated with the building.**11. FORM PREPARED BY** (with assistance from Rachel Leibowitz, Historian, Texas Historical Commission)**NAME / TITLE:** Terri Myers, Historian; Kristen Brown, Architectural Historian**ORGANIZATION:** Preservation Central, Inc.**DATE:** June 21, 2010**STREET & NUMBER:** 823 Harris Avenue**TELEPHONE:** (512) 478-0898**CITY OR TOWN:** Austin**STATE:** Texas**ZIP CODE:** 78705**ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION****CONTINUATION SHEETS****MAPS** (see continuation sheet Map-19 through Map-21)**PHOTOGRAPHS** (see continuation sheet Photo-23 through Photo-24)**ADDITIONAL ITEMS** (see continuation sheets Figure-22)**PROPERTY OWNER****NAME:** Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 (Darron Ross, Lodge Historian)**STREET & NUMBER:** P. O. Box 674 (619 Avenue B / FM 616)**TELEPHONE:** (979) 240-8230**CITY OR TOWN:** Blessing**STATE:** Texas**ZIP CODE:** 77419

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National Park Service

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Section MAP Page 19

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas



Map 1. Matagorda County.

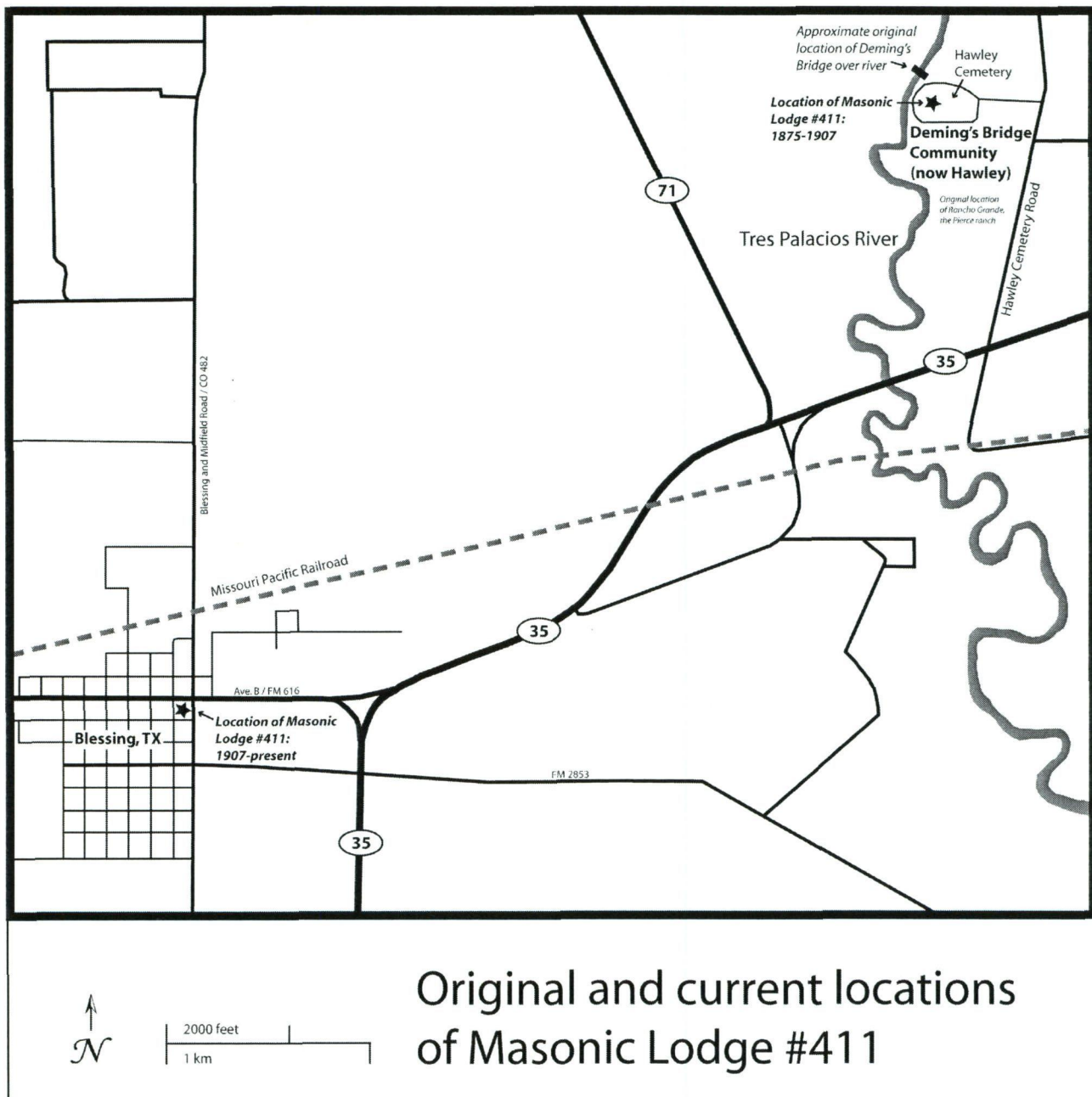
(Map drawn by Kristen Brown, Preservation Central, Inc.)

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National Park Service

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Section MAP Page 20

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas



Map 2.

Locations of Masonic Lodge No. 411: constructed at Tres Palacios River near Deming's Bridge and then moved to current location in Blessing.

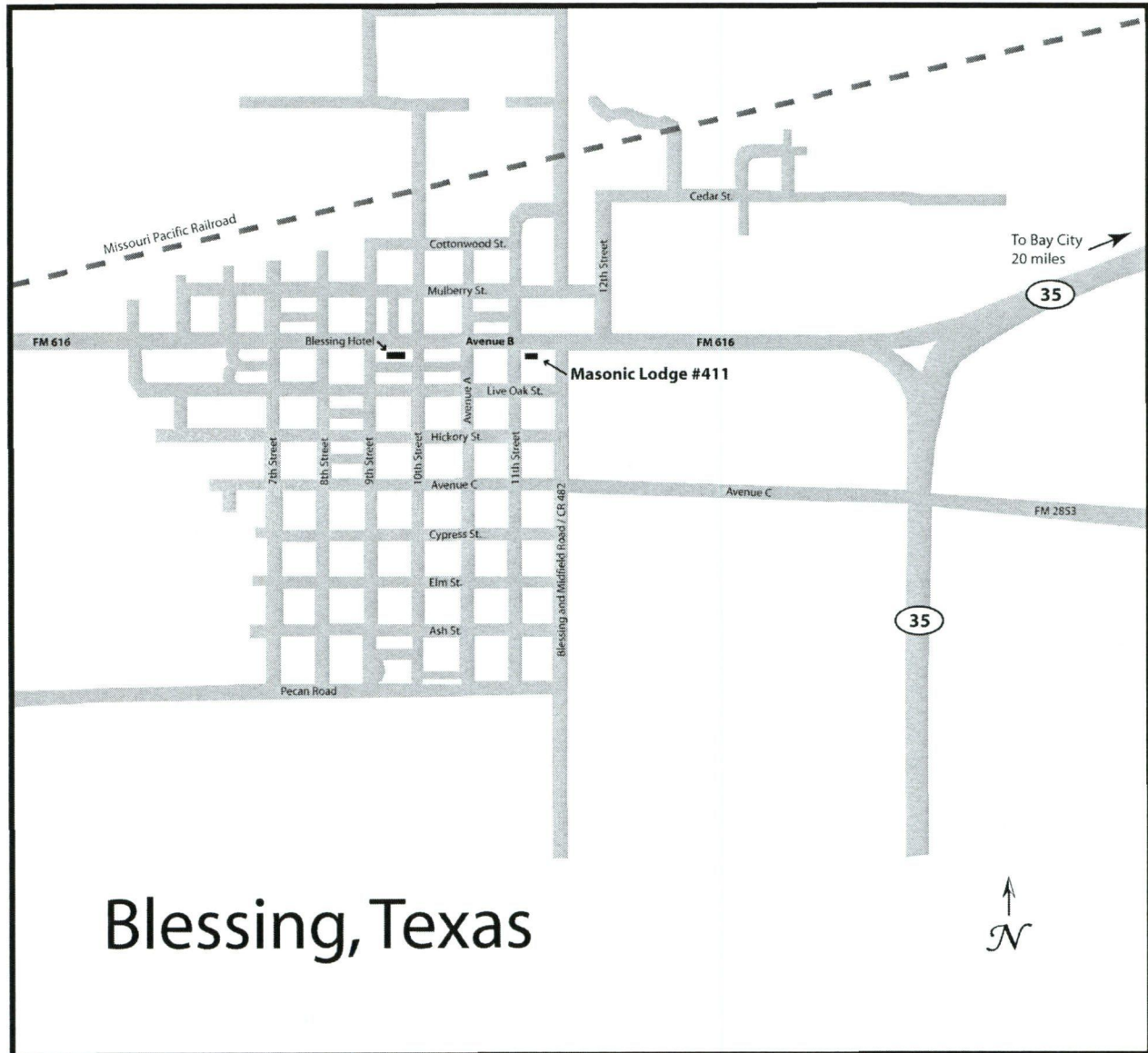
(Map drawn by Kristen Brown, Preservation Central, Inc.)

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Section MAP Page 21

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas



Map 3. Map of Blessing, Texas, with location of Masonic Lodge No. 411 marked at the intersection of Avenue B (FM 616) and 11th Street.

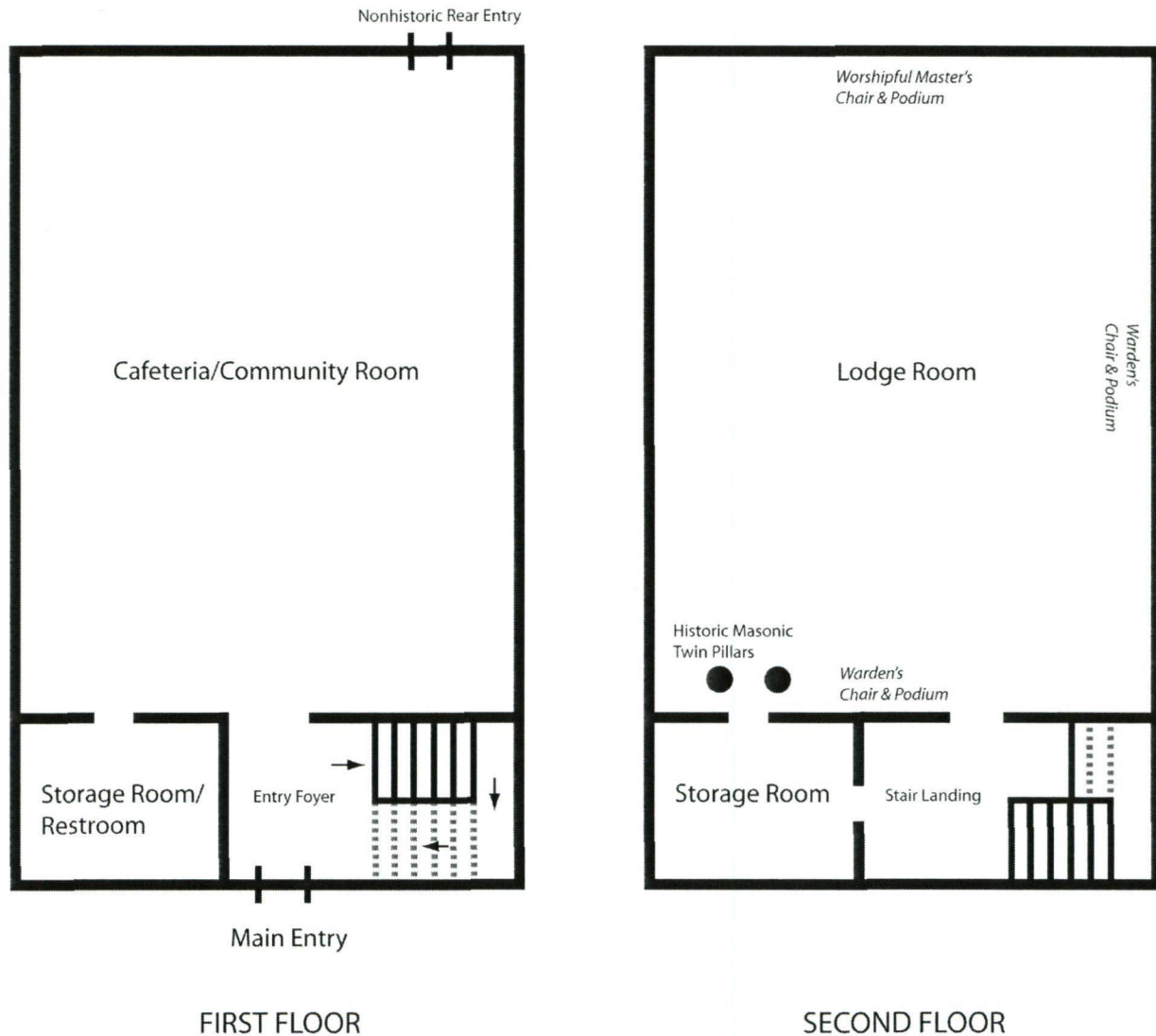
(Map drawn by Kristen Brown, Preservation Central, Inc.)

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Section FIGURE Page 22

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas



← N
Drawing not to scale.
Front facade measures
approximately 30' across.

Masonic Lodge #411 Blessing, Texas

Figure 1. Schematic floor plans of Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411 (not to scale).

(Plans drawn by Kristen Brown, Preservation Central, Inc.)

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National Park Service

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Section PHOTO Page 23

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

PHOTOGRAPH LOG

All photographs are credited as follows:

Name of Property:	Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
City:	Blessing
County:	Matagorda County
State:	Texas
Photographer:	Kristen Brown, Preservation Central, Inc.
Date:	2010
Location of digital files:	Texas Historical Commission, Austin

Printed on Epson Ultra Premium Presentation Paper with Epson Ultrachrome ink

Photo 1 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0001.tif)
Oblique view of west (main) and south (side) elevations
Camera facing: east-northeast

Photo 2 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0002.tif)
Oblique view of east (rear) and north (side) elevations
Camera facing: southwest

Photo 3 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0003.tif)
Oblique view of east (rear) and south (side) elevations
Camera facing: northwest

Photo 4 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0004.tif)
Detail of compass, square, and letter G in gable end on west (main) elevation
Camera facing: east

Photo 5 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0005.tif)
Interior staircase detail
Camera facing: southwest from entrance foyer

Photo 6 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0006.tif)
Historic chairs and podium, lodge room, second floor
Camera facing: east

Photo 7 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0007.tif)
Historic ballot box

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Continuation Sheet

Section PHOTO Page 24

Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
Blessing, Matagorda County, Texas

Photo 8 (TX_Matagorda County_Blessing Masonic Lodge_0008.tif)

Twin pillars Boaz and Jachin, donated to the lodge circa 1886

Camera facing: west

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
NAME:

MULTIPLE
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: TEXAS, Matagorda

DATE RECEIVED: 12/20/10 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 1/20/11
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 2/04/11 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 2/04/11
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 10001222

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

☒ ACCEPT ☐ RETURN ☐ REJECT 2.4.11 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in
The National Register
of
Historic Places

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER _____ DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATA GORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 1



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 2



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 3



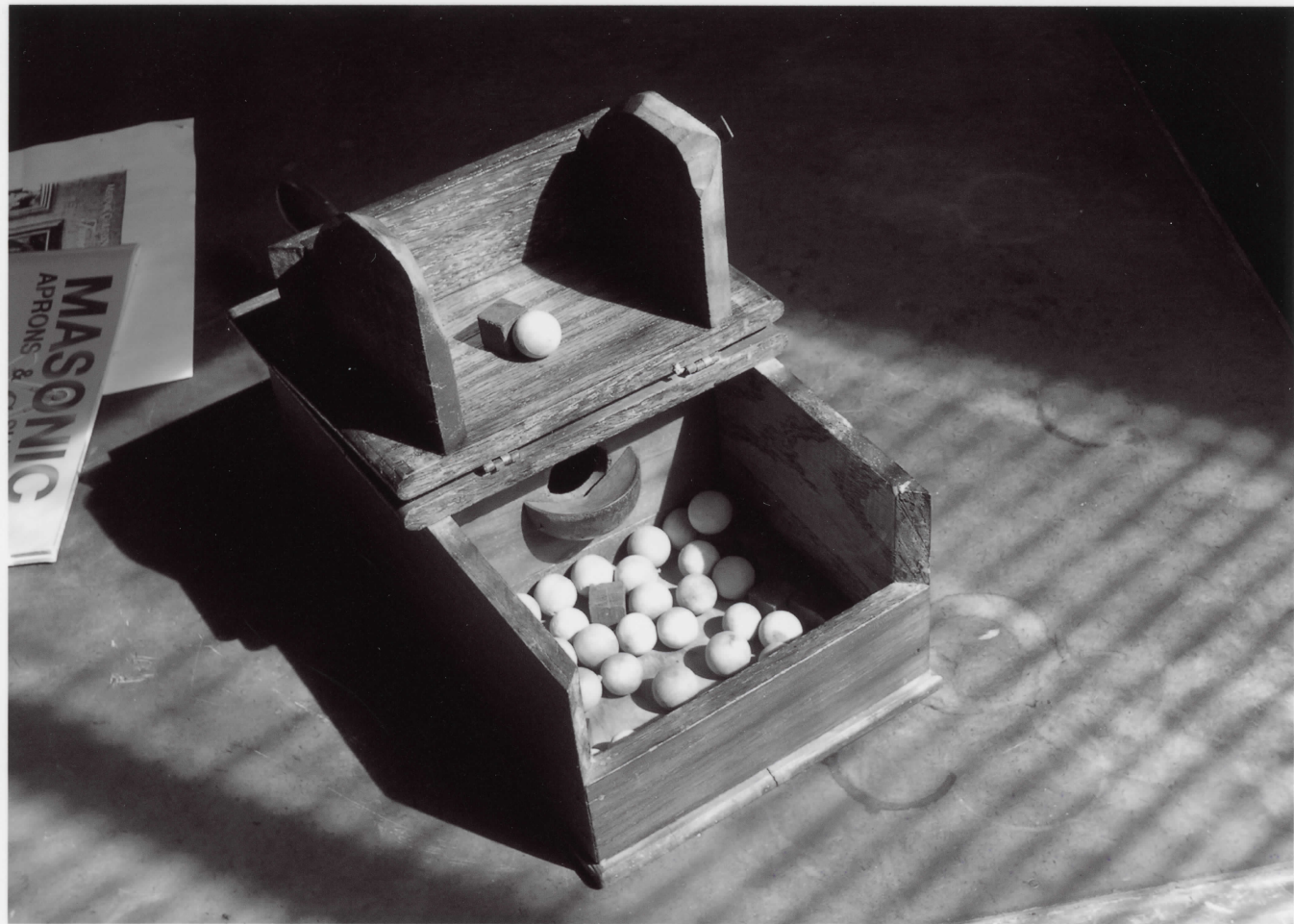
BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 4



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 5



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE #411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 6



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
PHOTO 7



BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411

BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX

PHOTO 8

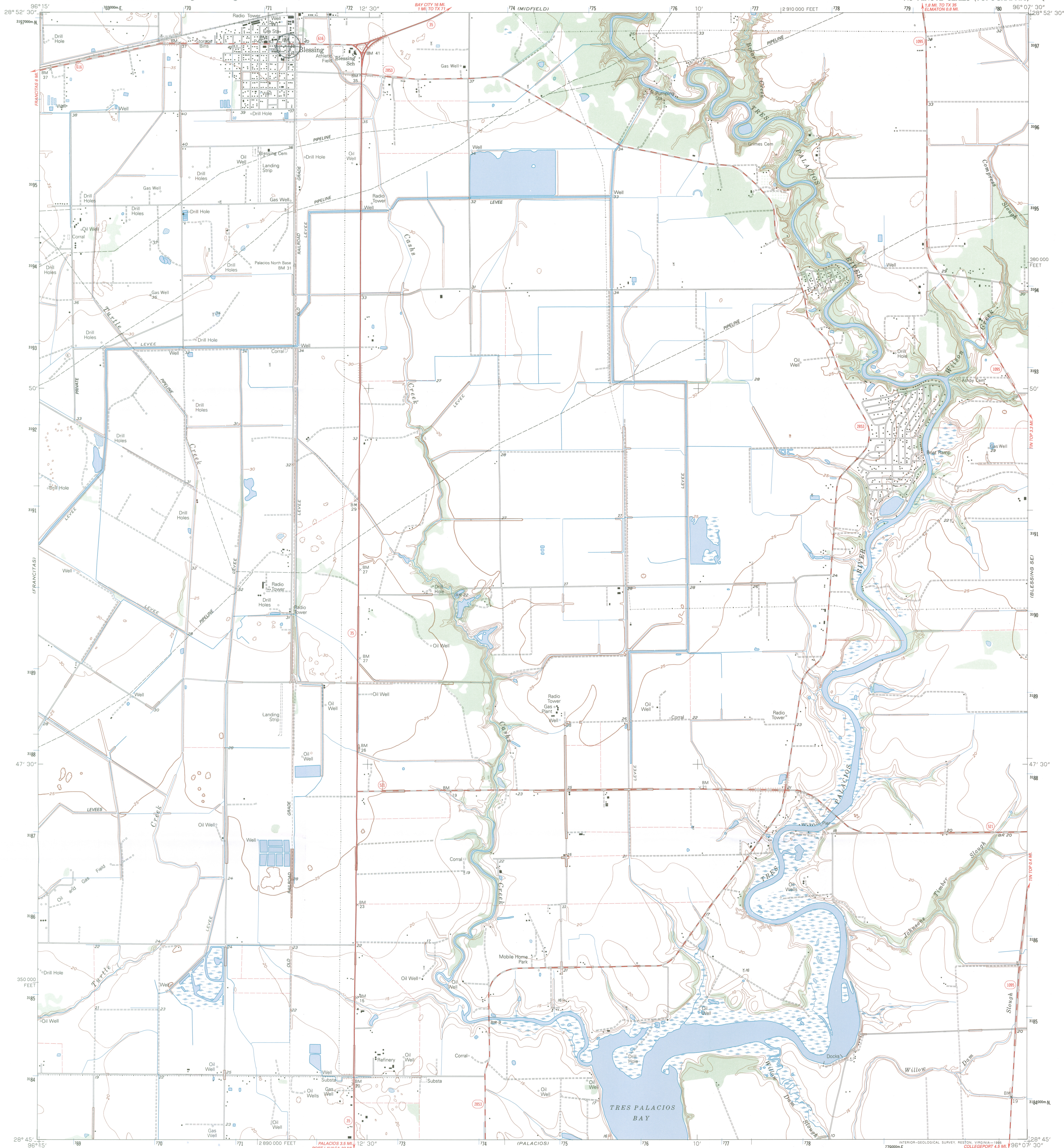
(FRANCITAS NE)

BLESSING MASONIC LODGE No. 411
BLESSING, MATAGORDA COUNTY, TX
ZONE 14
E 771265 N 3194942

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

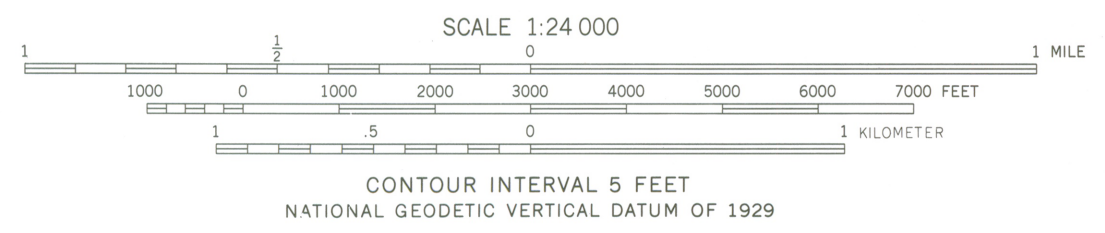
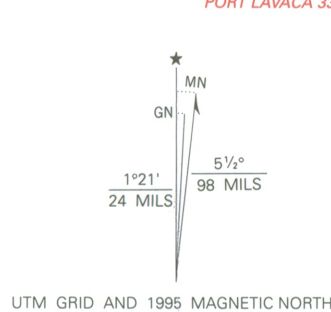
BLESSING QUADRANGLE
TEXAS-MATAGORDA CO
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)

(MATAGORDA NE)



(TURTLE BAY)

Produced by the United States Geological Survey
Control by USGS and NOS/NOAA
Compiled from aerial photographs taken 1946-1947. Revised from aerial photographs taken 1991 and other sources. Field checked 1991
Map edited 1995
North American Datum of 1927 (NAD 27). Projection and 10000-foot ticks: Texas Coordinate System, south central zone (Lambert Conformal Conic)
Blue 1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator ticks, zone 14
North American Datum of 1983 (NAD 83) is shown by dashed corner ticks. The values of the shift between NAD 27 and NAD 83 for 7.5-minute intersections are obtainable from National Geodetic Survey NADCON software
Fine red dashed lines indicate selected fence and field lines where generally visible on aerial photographs



QUADRANGLE LOCATION

ROAD CLASSIFICATION
Primary highway, hard surface
Secondary highway, hard surface
Unimproved road
Light-duty road, hard or improved surface
Interstate Route
U. S. Route
State Route

BLESSING, TX
28096-G2-TF-024

1995

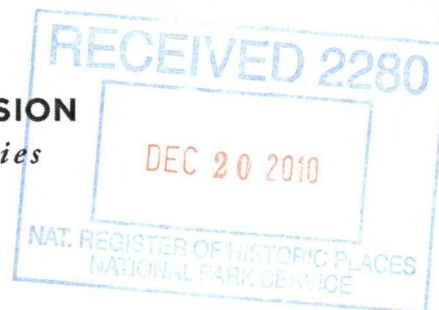
DMA 6741 1 SW-SERIES V882

THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U. S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, DENVER, COLORADO 80225, OR RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

2896-442



TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
real places telling real stories



MEMORANDUM

TO: Linda McClelland
National Register of Historic Places

FROM: Rachel Leibowitz, Historian
Texas Historical Commission

RE: Blessing Masonic Lodge No. 411
619 Avenue B / FM 616, Blessing
Matagorda County, TX

DATE: November 30, 2010

The following materials are submitted regarding 619 Avenue B / FM 616, Blessing:

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Original National Register of Historic Places form
<input type="checkbox"/>	___ Resubmitted nomination
<input type="checkbox"/>	Multiple Property nomination form
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Photographs
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	USGS maps
<input type="checkbox"/>	Correspondence
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other: archival gold CD with digital image files (.tif)

COMMENTS:

- ___ SHPO requests substantive review
- ___ The enclosed owner objections (do___) (do not___) constitute a majority of property owners
- ☒ Other: Consultant took digital photographs with the camera's color function turned off. These images, taken at a high resolution, are of excellent quality and otherwise meet the NPS standards. THC's National Register Coordinator Gregory Smith spoke with Alexis Abernathy on November 29, 2010, and she stated that these black-and-white digital images would be accepted in this case.

