**Blackwell School Alliance**
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RECEIVED
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Texas Historical Commission

Texas Historical Commission
National Register Coordinator
P.O. Box 12276
Austin, TX 78711-2276

February 22, 2017

Dear National Register Coordinator:

The Blackwell School Alliance writes to you today to request consideration of the Blackwell School for the National Register of Historic Places.

Education in Marfa, Texas, for children of Mexican descent dates from 1889, when this former Methodist church became a schoolhouse. Mexican American students in Texas were not separated from their Anglo counterparts by state law like African American students were. Instead, Texas school districts established separate elementary schools for Mexican American children through the practice of *de facto* segregation. In Marfa, where the majority of the population was Hispanic, that school was the Blackwell School. The Blackwell School closed in 1965 when a new elementary school opened and Marfa's schools achieved integration.

Please find included:

- Current Photographs *(pages 1-4)*
- Significant Dates *(page 5)*
- Historical Overview *(pages 6-7)*
- Current and Historic Maps and Plans *(page 8)*
- Historic Photographs *(pages 9-12)*

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with you to pursue this listing for our site.

Sincerely,

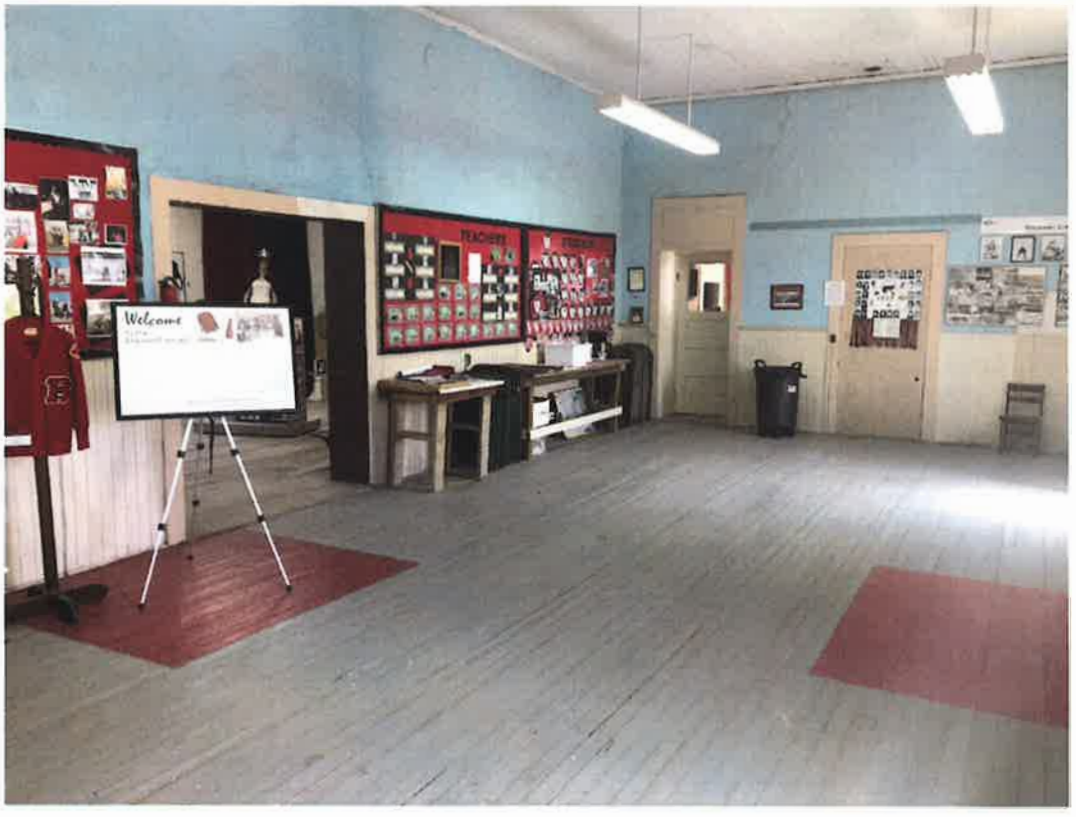
Gretel Enck
President, Blackwell School Alliance
432.295.3359

**Current Photographs**

*Above: East side of the Blackwell School.*
*Below: Recorded Texas Historic Landmark plaque, 2010.*

*Above: North side of the Blackwell School*
*Below: South side of the Blackwell School*

*Above: West side of the Blackwell School*
*Below: Interior of the south room*



*Above: Interior of the north room, facing west*
*Below: Interior of the north room, facing east*

**Significant Dates**

The Blackwell School was a segregated Mexican American school in a rural Marfa, Texas, that operated from 1889 to 1965. The original schoolhouse was built in the 1880s as a Methodist Church. The Methodist congregation offered the building to be a school for the community's Mexican American children in 1889 and subsequently the building was used solely as a school. Buildings were added to the growing Blackwell School campus from the 1920s to 1948.

Marfa schools were integrated in 1965. The other Blackwell School campus buildings were torn down in the early 1970s to make room for public housing. But the original Blackwell School adobe schoolhouse remained. During the late 1960s or early 1970s the school district removed an adobe wall to improve access for a vocational shop class.

In 2006 several Blackwell School alumni learned that this building, the Harper Building as it had come to be known, was slated to be sold or demolished. They visited with the Marfa ISD and asked for a reprieve. They explained that this building belonged to the students, to the neighborhood, and the town of Marfa. They offered to dedicate themselves to preserving the historic building and its legacy.

Marfa ISD officials agreed and the Blackwell School Alliance was formed. The Alliance signed a 99-year lease, at a dollar a year, with the school district. Debris was hauled out of the building, and former students cleaned and aired out the school. The Alliance has hosted many reunions, open houses, fundraisers, and events. Without computers or cell phones, this determined group of alumni raised almost $50,000 in ten years to stabilize the school and build a collection of photographs and memorabilia.

Today the building is preserved by the Blackwell School Alliance and was designated a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 2010. The building contains a museum-in-progress with exhibits and a meeting room and is open to the public weekly.

**Historical Overview**

The Blackwell School was a segregated Mexican American school that operated from 1889 to 1965. While the story of school segregation in America is well told through the example of schools that served African American students, the story of Mexican American school segregation is largely unknown and lacking in tangible places to tell this story. The significance of the Blackwell School is demonstrated both in the stories represented by the physical building and the building itself.

The original 1880s school building has been described by Cornerstones Community Partnerships this way:

> The historic Blackwell School building is a physical record of the longevity and beauty of the distinctive design and craftsmanship using traditional techniques and in relying upon local, readily available materials and skilled labor. The design and workmanship represent the transition from purely the vernacular to the period of materials, design, and workmanship made available after the arrival of the railroad (Fulton 2008).

The Blackwell School is also a rare tangible reminder of a time when the practice of "separate but equal" dominated education and social systems. Despite being categorized as "white" by Texas law, Mexican Americans were regularly excluded from commingling with whites at barbershops, restaurants, funeral homes, theaters, churches, and schools. The original Mexican American students were not separated from their Anglo counterparts by state law like African American children were. Instead, Texas school districts established and perpetuated separate elementary schools for Mexican American children through the practice of *de facto* segregation. In Marfa, where in 1920, 74 percent of the population was Hispanic, that school was the Blackwell School.

There was no separate Hispanic high school because it was assumed that no Mexican American children would continue to high school, even though a young man named Juan de la Cruz Machuca became the first Hispanic to graduate from Marfa High School in 1911, and by the 1960s nearly all Blackwell students went on to Marfa High (Taylor 2016). Blackwell was closed in January 1965 when a new elementary school opened and Marfa's schools achieved integration.

The spectrum of experiences of students and teachers at the Hispanic Blackwell School constitute an important record of life in a segregated school in the context of the history of Texas and America. The Blackwell School is closely associated with the broad patterns of our local, state, and national history in the area of school segregation. Mexicans and other members of the Latin American diaspora have placed a high value upon education as a means of economic, political, social maintenance, and upward mobility. Equitable opportunities and access to quality educational facilities have posed a formidable challenge to Latinos throughout U.S. history (MacDonald 2013, 321-2), and representative stories of this experience are available at the Blackwell School.

In addition, Mexican and Mexican American culture in Marfa, Texas, is tied to the Blackwell School through the more than seventy years that Blackwell School served as a school and the leading feature of the Hispanic community of Marfa, illustrating the challenge of maintaining cultural identity in a dominant Anglo society.

The Blackwell School has the opportunity to contribute to this facet of Texas and American history by becoming a fully functioning museum that contains exhibits about the experience of students, staff, and

neighbors placed in the context of Mexican American schools of that era. Academic research, combined with oral histories and community conversations, form the basis for educating visitors and stakeholders, including school children, about this neglected piece of our history. The Blackwell School currently curates a growing collection of documents, photographs, objects, and memorabilia—desks, diplomas, sports trophies and uniforms, a paddle for corporal punishment—associated with the era of segregation. Many of these items are on display currently and available for visitors and researchers to view.

The Blackwell School was, unfortunately, not at all uncommon in its existence as a segregated Mexican American school; many communities in Texas and across the borderlands had such schools. Today, however, remaining structures are uncommon, and those actively being preserved even more so. Aurelio Saldana at UTEP is conducting doctoral research on segregated Mexican American schools in rural areas in the borderlands. He told us that he has not found another school where there is both an intact structure with its original integrity and a group of people working to preserve it. The Blackwell School is uniquely positioned to tell this story—both the historical and architectural narrative for this often overlooked chapter in Texas and American history.

The long-term goal of the Blackwell School Alliance is to see this building become a museum that tells the stories of Mexican American school segregation and celebrates the rich and varied history and culture of Mexican Americans in Marfa. The preservation of the Blackwell School represents the confluence of commemorating history and embracing a better future. Marfa is a majority Hispanic community and we believe the Blackwell School has an important and on-going role in honoring our community and sharing our community with our many visitors. It's not just a Marfa story; it's not just a Hispanic story; it's an American story.

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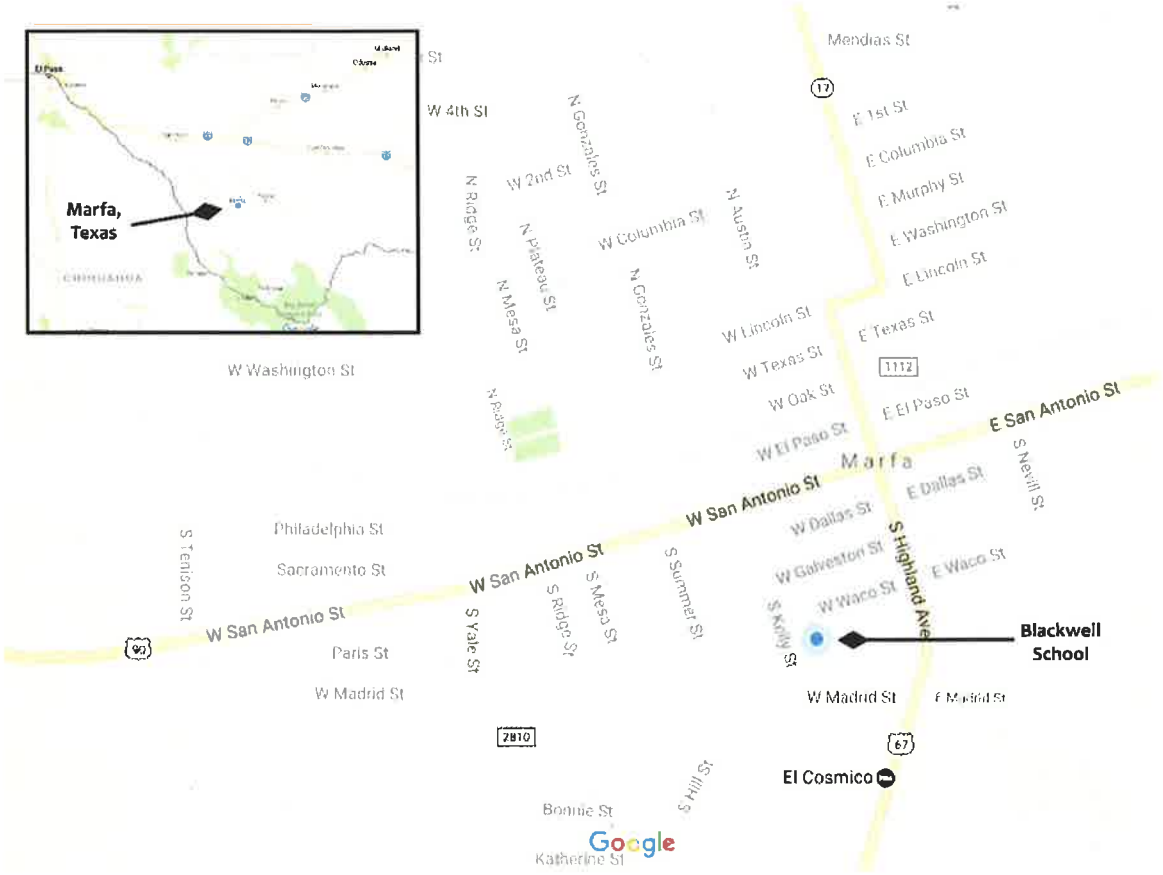
Fulton, Jean. 2008. A Conditions Assessment and Preservations Recommendations. Cornerstones Community Partnerships.

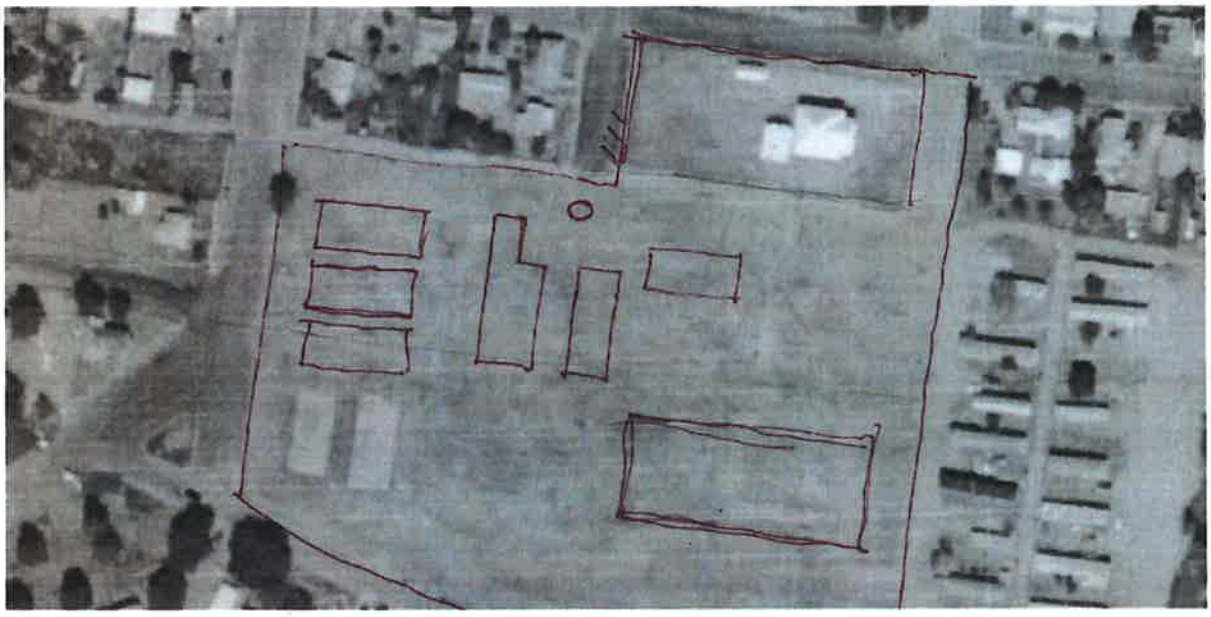
MacDonald, Victoria-Maria. 2013. Demanding their Rights: The Latino Struggle for Educational Access and Equity. In American Latinos and the Making of the United States: A Theme Study, 307-329. National Park Service. https://www.nps. gov/heritageinitiatives/latino/latinothemestudy/

Taylor, Lonn. 2016a. The lost history of Blackwell School. The Big Bend Sentinel. June 2. http:// bigbendnow.com/2016/07/the-rambling-boy-120/

## Current and Historic Maps and Plans




*Above: Current map of Marfa showing location of the Blackwell School*
*Below: Historic architect's drawing of Blackwell School campus buildings in the 1950s, with the original (and remaining) schoolhouse shown in the upper right*



**Historic Photographs**

*Above: Oldest known photograph of the Blackwell School, date unknown*
*Below: Blackwell School Campus, 1950s*

*Above: Children line up for the bus, date unknown*
*Below: Mrs. Newsome's second grade class, 1950s*

*Children on the slide in front of the original Blackwell School building*

*Above: The Blackwell School in 1987 when it was being used for vocational training*
*Below: The façade in 2009 with a temporary mural installation, before the adobe was repaired and replastered*