

## Project Summary

A historic resources survey of the Upper Westside area of Corpus Christi will implement the city's Historic Preservation Plan, Goal 2: Enable Community Driven Preservation, and Strategy 9 to document underrepresented historic resources ([www.cctexas.com/hpp](http://www.cctexas.com/hpp)). The Upper Westside consists of approximately 3000 parcels and includes the Leopard St. and Staples St. Commercial Corridors, and early twentieth century to post World War II neighborhoods including the Ben Garza Park/Uptown area, Oak Park, Up River Road and Saxet Heights neighborhoods. This survey area reflects the settlement and expansion of the city's Hispanic population.

Originally, Hispanic residents lived west of the bluff and south of Leopard St., an area known as the "Hill." This early settlement would lead to the development of businesses, churches, schools, and civic organizations. One of the earliest Hispanic churches in this neighborhood was Iglesia Metodista Mexicana, which formed in 1872, and later relocated to 1610 Comanche Street and was renamed Kelsey Memorial Church in 1948. Dating back to the 1880's, the Grande Saloon, was a prominent landmark located at the corner of Leopard and Waco. Owned by Francisco Grande, the building housed a hotel, restaurant, and pool hall, and was later operated by his son Ben. In 1896, Corpus Christi Independent School District opened a formal program to teach English and academics to Mexican American students. The settlement consisted of linear grid streets lined with shotgun houses, folk Victorian homes, and Bungalows.

The Sanborn Fire Insurance maps provide some insights into the early Hispanic settlement. The 1906 map denotes "Mexican shanties" along Comanche St. near Tanchua St. The 1914 map shows the Mexican Presbyterian Church at 601 Waco St. near Mestina St., one block south of Leopard, and the Corpus Christi College Mexican Roman Catholic classrooms and dormitory at 801 Tanchua and Antelope Sts. In 1919, the Fourth Ward School for Mexicans was located at 923 Mestina St., and the Mexican Methodist Church at 601 Waco St. In 1927, the Mexican Presbyterian Church was at 1401 Mestina St., and the Mexican Baptist Church was at 1501 Caldwell St.

Between 1910 and 1920, immigration from Mexico increased due to the Mexican Revolution. Established in 1925, the Corpus Christi Chapter of the *Orden Hijos de America*, a mutual aid society, fought for a new Mexican school. Their other civil rights activities included the desegregation of the Palace Bath house, removal of "No Mexicans Allowed" sign at North Beach, allowing Mexicans to serve on juries, and assisting tenant families with landlord issues. The Mexican school was renamed for Cheston L. Heath in 1926, and a new building was erected in 1927 at 519 Carrizo St. to accommodate the growing number of Hispanic students. The school continued operations until it was closed in 1968 with integration and became the site of the new Nueces County Courthouse.

Leopard St. was one of the first Corpus Christi streets named by founder Henry Kinney and shown on his 1852 grid of streets. Historically, it was one of the most heavily traveled streets. Due to growth of the Port in the 1920's, the character of Leopard Street began to change with banks, hotels, and other businesses springing up along this important corridor. Leopard St. became a multicultural corridor where many ethnic groups owned and patronized businesses. Hispanic businesses on Leopard St. included inns, saloons, restaurants, movie theaters, barber shops, a photography studio, a blacksmith shop, drug store, and auto repair shops as the "Hill" and Upper Westside neighborhoods developed. On this corridor were two

unsegregated theaters where Blacks and Hispanics enjoyed movies and shows. The Grande Theatre, at 1015 Leopard, showed movies from Mexico.

Cotton production peaked in the 1920's and later post-World War II. Most cotton was transported to the Port for export via Leopard St. and Highway 9. Leopard was busy especially on Saturdays in cotton-picking season when the street was packed with families shopping in town. By 1930, the discovery of oil fields in South Texas brought new industries and employment opportunities. In the 1930's the city limits extended to Palm Drive by Holy Cross and Rose Hill cemeteries. The construction of Corpus Christi High School in 1932, and Fred Roberts Memorial Hospital in 1928 on Leopard St. and Old Robstown Road at the edge of the city was in response to the city's growth westward. New buildings continued to be constructed along Leopard St., with most Hispanic businesses locating on the western part of the street. Leopard St. was dirt or shell until 1930 when the city paved it to Palm Drive. A dirt road connected Leopard St. to Highway 9, which was lined with roadhouse bars and dance halls. Highway 9 which extended to Calallen would later be renamed Leopard St.

Staples St. was another important commercial corridor in the Upper Westside. In 1929, the City Council changed the name of Black Street to Staples. South Staples, beginning at 200 S. Staples, and extended from Kinney Avenue south to the southernmost part of the city, to an intersection today known as Six Points. Restaurants, groceries, furniture stores, and drug stores located on Staples St. Many historic buildings on Staples St. were razed, and whole blocks are currently vacant. On the northwest corner of the 400 block of Staples St. was Vicente Lozano's grocery. Lozano immigrated from Bagdad, Mexico, in 1891, and built his first store on Staples St. in 1915. In 1941, he constructed the Lozano building where a pharmacy was located. Down the street was the Lozano café. Unfortunately, the Lozano block was razed, and is vacant.

With the influx of Mexican immigrants, the Hispanic population continued to grow and expand. New organizations formed to assist these immigrants in adjusting to their new home, promoting the teaching of English and citizenship. In 1929, around 200 Mexican Americans met at *Obreros* Hall at Lipan and Carrizo Sts., to unite three organizations into the League of United Latin American Citizens, with the purpose of advocating for Mexican-American citizens, with Ben Garza as their leader. Civil rights and access to education became the organization's central objectives.

The Great Depression resulted in some areas of the city being overcrowded, unsafe and lacking basic amenities. In 1938, the United States Congress authorized the United States Housing Authority to lend \$500 million over a three-year period for slum clearance and low-rent housing construction. In that year the City of Corpus Christi set up a planning commission to determine the feasibility of launching a low-rent housing project with the result that \$1 million was requested to build 1,100 housing units. The United States Housing Authority approved \$938,710 for the construction of 242 units. Located in the La Pascua Addition, 300 buildings were removed and replaced by 210 homes in 1941. This housing project was named Navarro Place.

The Mexican Chamber of Commerce, established in 1939, would locate its offices on the second floor of the building at 1100 Leopard St. Later, in 1948, the American G.I. Forum was founded in Corpus Christi by Dr. Hector Perez Garcia to protect rights of veterans, expand access to education, and fight for equal rights. By 1949, the private sector began to build suitable low-cost housing units. Having access to G.I. benefits, returning Hispanic veterans from World War II purchased homes and opened businesses on Leopard and Staples Street. Many of the early homes have deteriorated due to aging and

neglect. Today, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines this area (Census Tract 11) as a racially or ethnically concentrated area of poverty (R/ECAP). These small affordable homes could benefit from rental and homeowner rehabilitation programs, or tax incentives. Vacant lots within this area present opportunities for compatible infill development.

In the 1960's, as the city expanded and shopping centers and malls were developed in other parts of the city, the businesses on Staples St. and the eastern part of Leopard St. saw a decline. After Hurricane Celia in 1970, various governments located government buildings on the south side of Leopard St. in hopes of bringing new vitality to the area. Despite the city's efforts to revitalize Leopard St., many buildings remain vacant today and others have been demolished. The construction of Interstate 37 from Corpus Christi to San Antonio was initiated the 1960's. Interstate 37 would be completed by the 1980's, eventually replacing Leopard St. and State Highway 9 as the primary route to San Antonio.

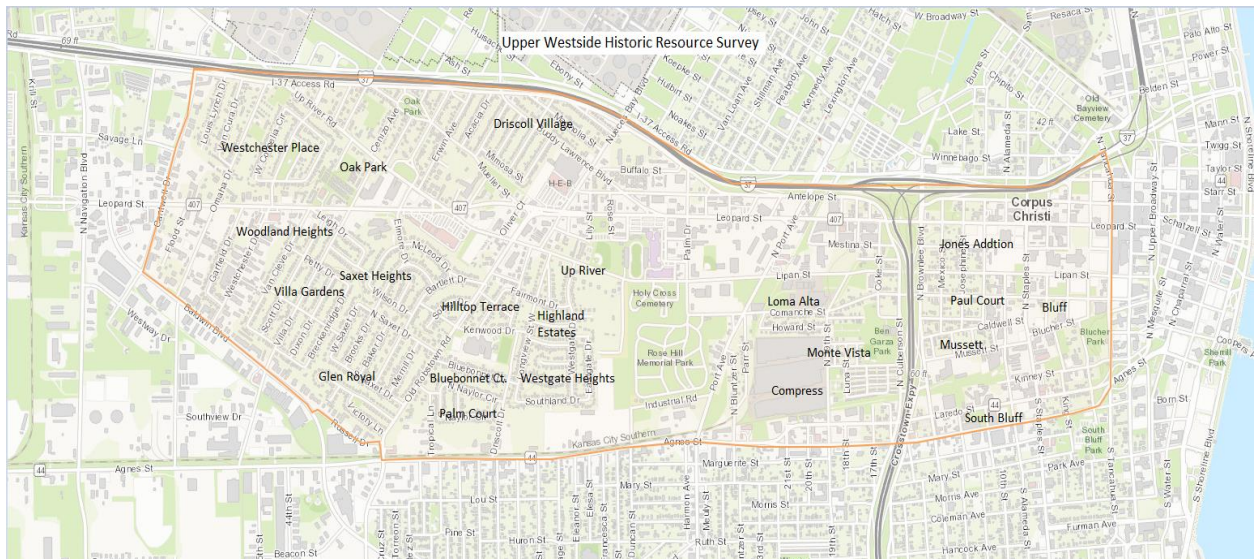
Housing was needed to accommodate the civilian and military personnel at the Naval Air Station, and refinery and industry workers. The Federal Housing Administration provided programs to insure mortgages. New neighborhoods sprang up on the upper western edge of the city, located south of refineries and other industry, for middle-class families. Farmland was carved into new subdivisions, with winding streets and neighborhood parks. One hundred acres of farmland west of the Holy Cross and Rose Hill Cemeteries was purchased in 1871 by James C. and Frances Priour Hatch, who would settle there, raise 12 children and grew fresh vegetables to supply the Corpus Christi Trading Post. In the 1920's, Frances Hatch sold off half of the farm to developers, which would later become neighborhoods, including Saxet (Texas spelled backwards) and Country Club. Five large homes were built along Up River Road with a 200-foot setback to the road. In 1933, Frances Hatch's daughter, Rhoda, would establish a trailer park business on a portion of the property, which has been operated by the Hatch family for four generations.

Suburban neighborhoods of Oak Park, Saxet Heights and Up River Road developed during the 1920's through the 1950's. The homes were located close to jobs, and rooftops led to the expansion of businesses along Leopard St. from Port Avenue westward. These neighborhoods showcased popular housing styles, including Minimal Traditional, Tudor, Four Square, Mediterranean, and Ranch. Most of these homes are wood construction, with a few that are masonry. Today these neighborhoods are predominantly Hispanic. After the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, segregated housing was banned, and neighborhoods became integrated. Post-World War II development of Leopard St. was auto-focused, with shopping centers serving nearby neighborhoods, motor courts, auto sales and repair shops, and drive thru restaurants. Woodlawn Plaza and the Saxet Center on Leopard St. and the Buccaneer Plaza on Old Robstown Road were outdoor shopping centers close to residences and accessible by car. Unfortunately, these shopping centers have declined and have vacancies. However, the surrounding neighborhoods, which are between 50 and 80 years of age, remain viable, in spite of the Gulf coastal storms that frequent the city.

There are opportunities for revitalization of the Leopard and Staple corridors and the Upper Westside neighborhoods, with local historic designations, potential tax incentive programs, and compatible infill development as stated goals in the city's newly adopted *Historic Preservation Plan* (June 2022). The update of the Westside Area Development Plan which promotes historic designation, and the Leopard and Staples Streets Corridor study are also underway. Additionally, the Unified Development Code is being updated to include a corridor zoning district that will implement a compatible mixed use, urban design

standard along a corridor with buildings closer to the street and parking exemptions. This survey will lay the groundwork for future preservation and revitalization efforts.

Although scattered sites in this area were surveyed in the 1990's and by TxDOT in 2012 for the Harbor Bridge project, a survey for this area is incomplete and requires updating. A consultant will be hired to undertake the survey, and the data, pictures and community history videos will be accessible through the City's "Landmark Commission Web Viewer ([www.cctexas.com/landmark](http://www.cctexas.com/landmark))." An ESRI Collector application of the Texas Historical Commission Survey Form was created for the survey. This platform, accessible through the internet, will facilitate the survey in the field via phone or laptop. Once uploaded the survey will be mapped instantaneously along with the site photography. A project website will host additional information including outreach opportunities, historical background, video/oral histories, and other reference materials. This data will provide the basis for future local, state, or national designations and potential incentives for preservation and rehabilitation efforts.



Map of Upper Westside Survey Area

## Bibliography

- "About Hatch RV Park, Our History", [www.hatchrv.com](http://www.hatchrv.com), November 7, 2022.
- Corpus Christi Times. "Shop on Leopard" advertisement, August 5, 1927, p. 8.
- Givens, Murphy. "Leopard was city's main street in 1930s and '40s," *Caller Times*, September 9, 2015.
- Givens, Murphy. *Streets of Corpus Christi*. Corpus Christi, Texas. Nueces Press. June 1, 2019.
- Insurance Maps of Corpus Christi, Texas. New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1906, 1909, 1914, 1919, 1919, 1927.
- Knight, Lila, Re-Evaluation of Proposed Leopard Street Historic District for Individual Section 4(f) Evaluation. Corpus Christi Harbor Bridge Project, Nueces County, Texas. Knight and Associates, Kyle, Texas. April 2013.
- McGregor Photograph Collection (digital). Corpus Christi Public Library. Fred Roberts Memorial Hospital, Leopard St. at Shell Rd., 3/19/1937; Temple Lumber Co., 3302 Leopard St.
- Mitchell, Richard E., Corpus Christi Harbor Bridge Reconnaissance Survey, Vol. I: Survey Report and Appendices A-D. Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas. Mead and Hunt, December 2012.
- Mitchell, Richard E., Corpus Christi Harbor Bridge Reconnaissance Survey, Vol. II: Appendix E, Field Survey Forms, Resources Nos. 10199e. Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas. Mead and Hunt, December 2012.
- Nueces County Appraisal District Records.
- Nueces County Plat Records.
- Victor, Sally S. 1991 Corpus Christi City-Wide Historic Site Survey, Phase II, June 1991.
- Victor, Sally S. 1993 Corpus Christi City-Wide Historic Site Survey, Phase II.A, June 1993.
- Victor, Sally S. 1995 Corpus Christi City-Wide Historic Site Survey, Phase II.B, April 1996.
- Victor, Sally S. 1997 Corpus Christi City-Wide Historic Site Survey, Phase II.C, July 1997.