

La Casa Grande (Clifton Casa Grande, Henry Lesinsky Residence)
Clifton Townsite
Park Avenue
Clifton
Greenlee County
Arizona

HABS No. AZ-183

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6-CLIFT,
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

LA CASA GRANDE (Clifton Casa Grande, Henry Lesinsky Residence)

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Location:

Clifton Townsite, Park Avenue, Clifton, Greenlee County, Arizona

Significance:

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 for its significance as an early adobe building and for its association with the early settlement in Clifton. Constructed ca. 1874, La Casa Grande is the oldest known extant building in Greenlee County. It was constructed by Henry Lesinsky who, with his brother Charles and Uncle Jules Frudenthal, opened the copper mines in the Clifton area to development. La Casa Grande was built in two parts, one half of which served as the residence of Henry Lesinsky and the second half which served as the Lesinsky company store.¹

Description:

La Casa Grande lies at the north end of Park Avenue, the main thoroughfare on the east side of the San Francisco River in central Clifton. Both Park Avenue and the river run roughly from the northwest to the southeast at this point. The building lies on the northeast side of the road, oriented toward the river.

Since its initial construction in 1874 to the present day, La Casa Grande grew from a six-room adobe building to nearly triple its original size. One addition after another was made with the end result being a relatively intact front with a jumble of building forms attached to the rear. In general, the building appears to have evolved as two separate structures -- the main adobe and a wood-frame house -- which grew together to form a single building.

The portion of the building identified with 1874 construction lies along Park Avenue, and is exposed (without additions) on the northwest side, the southwest front, and the southeast side. It is a rectangular adobe building with a flat roof and parapets. The walls are about two feet thick and are stuccoed. There is a veranda porch (a late addition) across the southwest front, supported on six plain wooden posts and covered with a wood shingle hip roof. The floor of the porch is concrete. The front parapet is taller than the side parapets, having been extended with an additional two feet of red brick, which has been left exposed. All original door and window openings are either boarded shut or infilled to match the walls.

The interior layout of the 1874 era building consisted of a central corridor running the length of the building (southwest to northeast) with rooms on either side. It appears that each side was divided into three rooms, although later alterations have obscured these conditions. The southeastern corridor wall, together with related room partition walls, has been removed and replaced with piers and posts to support the roof. This alteration probably dates to the YMCA period (1917-32). A portion of the northwestern corridor wall has also been removed near the building front. Several wall sections collapsed in the 1983 flood and remain in a failed condition. Existing interior finishes include wood strip flooring, plastered adobe walls, and painted fiberboard ceilings. Wood trim

includes baseboards, picture rails, and door and window molding. The appearance of the interior woodwork is consistent with the YMCA time period, i.e. simple, modern-movement profiles typical of interior construction between 1900-1930 as opposed to highly detailed Victorian moldings which were popular at earlier dates.

The wood-framed residential structure at the northeast end of the property appears to date from the 1900-1906 period. Because of later additions, little of the original house is visible today. A second story and a southwest-side garage were added, and porches were infilled. Today, the house has wood clapboard walls and standing-seam metal roofs. It rises above the remainder of the building.

Between the main adobe building and the house, additions were made in two or more phases which joined the two structures. Most of these additions were constructed of brick, which has since been painted. Immediately to the northeast side of the adobe, a shed-roofed addition spans the full width of the building. A second, gable-roofed section abuts both the house and the front building, and appears to have been the last section built. Most of the building additions appear to date from the YMCA period, between 1917 and 1932.

History:

Construction of La Casa Grande dates to the earliest phase of Clifton history. It is the only remaining building from this initial era. The copper deposits in the vicinity of Clifton were first identified in 1865 by Henry Clifton, but it was not until 1870 that Jim and Bob Metcalf made note of the location. In 1872 the first claims were recorded, including those of Bob Metcalf known as the Longfellow mine. Metcalf needed capital to develop the mine and came into contact with Silver City, New Mexico, merchants Charles and Henry Lesinsky. Henry Lesinsky persuaded his brother Charles to go in on the venture and by 1874 the brothers established a smelter at the confluence of Chase Creek and the San Francisco River. Here the small community of Clifton prospered. At first just a grouping of tents and shacks, in 1874 Henry Lesinsky constructed a large adobe building as his residence and as a base of operations. Known as "La Casa Grande," (The Big House in Spanish) it was the most imposing building in the community.²

Faced with the difficulty of finding willing and able workers for his mines and smelter, Henry Lesinsky relied on Mexican miners recruited to travel to the isolated Clifton area. These men were skilled with mining operations from experiences in Mexico, and familiar with adobe construction techniques. They built La Casa Grande as a formidable structure, one that could withstand an attack from Apache warriors if needed. Its thick walls offered protection from the elements as well. The building served as Henry Lesinsky's residence in Clifton and also as a store and community center. In 1882 the Lesinsky brothers sold their interests in the mines, smelter, and town site to Frank L. Underwood, who in turn sold the property to the Arizona Copper Company in 1883.³

The Arizona Copper Company took to the new venture with vigor. Its directors ordered the construction of a narrow gauge railroad called the Arizona and New Mexico which linked Clifton to the Southern Pacific line at Lordsburg, New Mexico. It is likely that La Casa Grande served a similar purpose for the A.C. Co. as it did for the Lesinsky Brothers: a center of operations, general office, and occasional residence. In later years, as the Company began to construct additional facilities, these functions were moved to other locations. By the turn of the century, La Casa Grande served as the offices for M.J. Egan, the Company legal advisor. Known by the titles of "Judge" and "Colonel," Egan initially occupied La Casa Grande as his residence and office. Egan moved later

his residence to a building constructed behind La Casa Grande. According to James Colquhoun, "Egan was one of those upon whom nature had bestowed her highest gifts." Colquhoun continued, stating: "Of fine presence, an accomplished lawyer, a born diplomat, a natural orator and a patriot, he was the friend of all and his own worst enemy." At time of the 1906 flood, the building still held Egan's law office and the residence of Mr. and Mrs. J. Glenn Cooper. The flood severely damaged the building and a contemporary observer noted that a "portion will have to come down."⁴

The building was repaired after the flood and continued to serve as office space and occasional residential use. After the building boom in Clifton during the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, office and residential space in Clifton was no longer at a premium and the building saw little use. In October of 1916, La Casa Grande was occupied as the headquarters for the Democratic Party, a thought that must have given the directors of the A.C. Co. pause. It might also have set them thinking about other possible uses for the property.⁵

During World War One, Clifton residents joined those of many other communities in establishing a branch of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to develop young men with moral and physical guidance. An initial meeting to organize the group was held on March 31, 1917 and the first Board meeting held on April 28. A.C. Co. General Manager Norman Carmichael offered to remodel La Casa Grande as "temporary" YMCA headquarters. Repairs began in April of 1917 and were completed in May. Two of the major elements in the remodeling included construction of shower baths and a library room.⁶

Although first contemplated by the A.C. Co. as only a temporary use for the building, La Casa Grande was home to the Clifton YMCA until 1932. Its large and commodious space, and the its adjacent tennis court, made La Casa Grande a center for physical and mental diversions for the young men of Clifton. Civic groups used the rooms for meetings as well. The Clifton YMCA did go through some tough times with Clifton, as the post-WWI depression in the copper market robbed it of members. Early in 1921, the Elks contemplated taking over the building under a lease from the A.C. Co. Shortly after, the A.C. Co., faced with financial problems, began to reduce its donations. By summer the building was closed. It remained closed until 1923 when Phelps Dodge provided the funds to clean and repair the building and to pay for operating costs. Phelps Dodge gave the YMCA a rent-free lease on the building. On November 16, 1916, the doors to La Casa Grande once again opened to YMCA members in a "grand re-opening ceremony." As the economy turned up for Clifton during the rest of the twenties, La Casa Grande saw happy and healthy YMCA members use its facilities. Soon known as the "YMCA building," La Casa Grande hosted numerous civic meetings in the twenties as Clifton residents turned their attention to developing alternatives to their dependence on the copper industry, such as an interest in luring tourists and health seekers to the town.⁷

Even with the assistance of Phelps Dodge and an improved economy, the Clifton YMCA frequently held membership drives to build the organization. With the advent of the depression decade of the 1930s, the YMCA faced a loss of members as many left Clifton when the mines and smelter closed. In July of 1932, the Presbyterian Church took over leadership and supervision of the YMCA to keep La Casa Grande open as a community center. Church members provided sponsorship for general recreational and reading purposes. The church members struggled with keeping the building open through the summer and early fall, but they also suffered a decline in membership due to the depression. In November of 1932, members of the local American Legion post stepped in took control of the building. The Legionnaires officially opened La Casa Grande for use on November 15 and extended a welcome to the community to use the building free of charge. The YMCA

equipment - the games, pool table, and library - remained in the building.⁶

The Clifton American Legion post got its start on August 21, 1919, when veterans held an organizational meeting in the High School Auditorium. The men selected M.H. Kane as temporary Post Commander and J.B. Brown as temporary Post Secretary. Enthusiasm for the post ran high in Clifton and a week later official recognition for the post was secured. The veterans selected the name "Harold B. Wilson" for their post, to honor the first Greenlee County boy who lost his life in action during World War One. Legion members actively boosted Clifton during the twenties, and in 1924 contemplated purchasing a building for their use. Other plans sidetracked this idea as the Legion members took on the development of a swimming pool for Clifton as their project. In 1925 American Legion incorporated the Clifton Swimming Pool Co. to push the project. While the swimming pool and baths were eventually constructed under Town auspices, the Harold B. Wilson Post was instrumental in pushing the idea (see HABS No. AZ-191).⁹

The Harold B. Wilson Post of the American Legion occupied La Casa Grande until 1978 when the Greenlee County Historical Society took over the building. The Historical Society converted the building into an archives and museum for Clifton and Greenlee County. The carefully amassed collections were destroyed during the 1983 flood and very little was salvaged. The Historical Society removed what remained to a building on Chase Creek. La Casa Grande has stood vacant since the flood.

Sources (endnotes):

1. National Register of Historic Places Nomination form for Clifton Casa Grande Building, on file at Arizona SHPO, May 3, 1979.
2. National Register of Historic Places Nomination form for Clifton Casa Grande Building, on file at Arizona SHPO, May 3, 1979; James M. Patton History of Clifton (Clifton: Greenlee County Chamber of Commerce, 1977), pp. 7-11.
3. National Register of Historic Places Nomination form for Clifton Casa Grande Building, on file at Arizona SHPO, May 3, 1979.
4. Patton, History of Clifton, pp. 18-21; James Colquhoun History of the Clifton-Morenci District (London: John Murray, 1924), p. 48; Copper Era December 13, 1906 (l, 1: 1-5).
5. Copper Era October 6, 1916 (l, 1: 5).
6. Copper Era April 6, 1917 (l, 1: 4); April 20, 1917 (l, 1: 2); May 11, 1917 (l, 1: 4); May 25, 1917 (l, 1: 4); November 9, 1917 (l, 4: 4); June 28, 1918 (l, 1: 5).
7. Copper Era January 7, 1921 (l, 5: 1); March 11, 1921 (l, 1: 6); November 9, 1923 (l, 1: 4); November 13, 1926 (l, 1: 1).
8. Copper Era December 11, 1926 (l, 1: 6); March 12, 1927 (l, 1: 5-6); July 2, 1932 (l, 1: 4); November 19, 1932 (l, 1: 1).
9. Copper Era August 22, 1919 (l, 1: 3); August 29, 1919 (l, 1: 2); March 14, 1924 (l, 1: 6); January 16, 1925 (l, 1: 4); August 13, 1927 (l, 1: 5); November 19, 1932 (l, 1: 1). The Clifton Swimming Pool Company was incorporated on September 24, 1924. Post members Lloyd V. Potter, Mack Lewis, J.T. Quinn, J.R. Turner, Ross Smith, G.E. Dichtenmiller, and Robert Anderson served as the initial board of directors. See the Arizona Corporation Commission "Oead Files" at the Arizona Department of Library, Archives, and Public Records.

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