

Fort Brown Medical Laboratory
Building #84
Northeast of the intersection of May Street
and Gorgas Drive
Brownsville
Cameron County
Texas

HABS No. TX-3279

HABS
TEX,
31-BROWN,
10B-

PHOTOGRAPHY

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service
Department of Interior
Washington, D. C. 20243

FORT BROWN MEDICAL LABORATORY
(Building #84)~~HABS TEX, 31-BROWN, 10B-~~

Location: Northeast of the intersection of May Street and Gorgas Drive.

USGS East Brownsville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 14/651070/2865080.

Present Owner: Texas Southmost College.

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: Under renovation by Texas Southmost College.

Significance: The Fort Brown Medical Laboratory was built in 1867. It is a good example of a utilitarian, permanent military structure built from local materials. William Crawford Gorgas, Surgeon General of the United States Army, and noted for his research on yellow fever which earned him world-wide fame, was stationed at Fort Brown from 1882 to 1884, and possibly worked in this building during his tour of duty there.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: War Department records state that this building was constructed in 1867.
2. Architect: Departmental Office of the Quartermaster General of the United States Army.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Building #84 is located on a tract of land in the Fort Brown Military Reservation in the City of Brownsville. Confusion surrounds the original title to what is now called Fort Brown, after being previously called Old Fort Brown, Brownsville Barracks, Fort Zachary Taylor, and then Fort Brown after Major Brown, who fell during a siege by Mexican forces in 1846. Still on the outskirts of Brownsville, it is known not only as part of Texas Southmost College, but also as Fort Brown Military Reservation.

Negotiations for title to the area of Fort Brown dragged on from 1853 until 1890. In effect, the United States occupied the site for nearly forty years without acquiring a title, or being able to come to an agreement about a purchase price, and without paying rent. (Chatfield, p. 29.) The acquisition of the land by the United States government is still controversial in certain circles.

After World War II, the United States government disposed of much of the Fort Brown property through the War Assets Administration, acting under the authority of the Surplus Property Act of 1944 (58 Stat. 765) and W. A. A. Regulation No. 1.

On April 20, 1948, the United States of America deeded two tracts of land to the Brownsville Independent School District. (Deed Records, Volume 444, page 1 and following.) In 1948, Texas Southmost College was a junior college under the jurisdiction of the Brownsville Independent School District. On November 22, 1950, the same two tracts of land were granted to the Southmost Union Junior College District by the United States of America, acting by and through the Federal Security Administrator, and the Brownsville Independent School District. (Deed Records, Volume 507, page 329 and following.)

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: None known.
5. Original plans and construction: Not researched.
6. Alterations and additions: No additions have been made to the building although it has been altered numerous times. A photo engraving of the building, appearing on page 29 of W. H. Chatfield's Twin Cities of the Border, published in 1893, shows the building with two chimneys and a covered walkway, now gone, along the southwest facade. The building has two-over-two windows and appears to have been painted. The brick dentils are a lighter color and contrast with the rest of the facade which is a darker color.

The 1942 Quartermaster's Report, with its plan and photograph of the building, shows an appearance similar to the earlier view in Chatfield. A six foot by 64 foot porch (which could refer simply to the concrete stoop), appears on the southwest facade in plan, and two interior chimneys are also shown. Presently there appears no exterior evidence of chimneys, although interior flues can still be seen, and the brick of the walls is no longer painted, but exposed.

The Quartermaster's Plan from the 1942 Quartermaster's Report shows the uses of the rooms during the 1930s and early 1940s. On the first floor the main entrance opened onto a hall 6 feet in width. To the southeast of the hall was a medical office and supply room 20 1/2 feet wide. To the northwest was a laboratory (10 1/2 feet wide), an examination room (9 feet 9 inches wide), and an office (12 feet wide). The office is located on the northwest side of the building and the examination room was located between it and the laboratory. The rooms were all connected by interior doors and in addition the office had doors on the northeast and southwest sides. The second floor had a hallway above the one on the first floor. To either side were wards. Two smaller rooms were located on the northwest side above the first-floor office. According to information in the Texas Historical Commission Files, there were separate wards for enlisted men and commissioned officers. This Quartermaster's Report also lists the installation of numerous plumbing and lighting fixtures on the interior between 1936 and 1942.

The building has been twice renovated since it has been in the possession of the college. The first floor was renovated in 1960, and an application for a Texas Historical Building Medallion dated August 28, 1962, states, "restoration of Post buildings in college area to natural brick finish going forward," signifying that the painted finish was probably removed at that time.

Physical evidence shows that several windows and doors have been bricked up. A door on the southwest near the western corner is bricked up as is a window on the southeast end wall. Both the door and the window are shown in plan in the Quartermaster's Report.

In 1977 the interior of both floors has been gutted down to the structural elements for still further renovation. (Texas Southmost College Self Study, page 63.) [The Hedrich-Blessing archival photographs taken for HABS in 1979 reflect the completion of the renovation pending in 1977.]

Texas Southmost College first used the building for a physics laboratory, then for administrative offices. The 1961 Self Study lists the following spaces and square footages:

Faculty office	128 sq. ft.
2 Physics Labs, 20' x 41' about 20' x 48'	1792
2 Storage rooms	333
Battery room	87
Instrument room	48
Brick walls and outside stairways	<u>401</u>
Total Area	2789

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

With its construction in 1897, Building #84 became a part of historic Fort Brown. According to the Quartermaster's Report, it provided a medical laboratory, isolation ward, and offices. The original structure or structures on the site of Fort Brown were described by Chatfield quoting the War Records as "dilapidated, and the works indefensible." These buildings, such as they were, had been burned by confederate troops in 1863 during the Civil War. During the latter part of 1865, temporary buildings were erected, and in 1867, Captain Wainwright of the Quartermaster's Corps received authorization to construct 70 permanent buildings at a cost of \$150,000. A hurricane subsequently destroyed much of the building still in progress, but the Post hospital, adjacent to Building #84 or Medical Laboratory was completed by May 1869. (Chatfield, pages 28-29; Sides, pages 119-120.) Chatfield noted that the Post of Fort Brown ranked low in healthfulness, submitting the third largest quantity of sick reports of any army post. Yellow fever claimed many lives at Fort Brown, although Chatfield stated there was not a single person in the hospital when it was renovated in 1890.

It was the devastation produced by yellow fever in Fort Brown and in other similar low-lying, wet, hot areas that brought forth the most historical figure in Fort Brown, and related this history to the world. It was the work of William Crawford Gorgas, aided by the interest taken in his work by Dr. Charles A. L. Reed of Cincinnati, which revealed that it was the mosquito and its breeding grounds in stagnant pools that lay at the base of the fever, and which led ultimately to the control and elimination of the disease.

William Crawford Gorgas entered the United States Army with a medical degree from Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York, in 1876. He was stationed at Fort Brown from 1882 to 1884. There he met and married his wife, Marie Cook Doughty. It was also while he was there that he survived one of the worst yellow fever epidemics ever seen in that place, and from it he developed an immunity to the fever which made it possible for him to study its development and do his research for its prevention, not only at Fort Brown, but in centers of yellow fever epidemics where ever they occurred.

In 1898, Gorgas went to a yellow-fever camp at Siboney following the occupation of Havana by American troops, and was later in that year appointed chief sanitary officer of Havana. In 1902 he was raised to colonel by act of Congress in recognition for his work in Cuba. Following an outbreak of yellow fever in the Canal Zone in 1904 Gorgas' work was given support there and by 1905 yellow fever had been stamped out. In 1906 President Roosevelt visited Panama and soon Gorgas became a member of the commission to construct the canal.

In the face of much opposition from colleagues with different approaches to the problem (who emphasized cleanliness alone, neglecting the significance of the role played by the yellow-fever mosquito (*Aedes aegypti*), Gorgas gained a reputation in which he was called "the foremost sanitary expert in the world." In 1913 he was invited to visit South Africa and study health problems in the mines there. In 1914 he was appointed surgeon general of the army, with the rank of brigadier general, and made major general the following year. In 1916 he went with the International Health Board to South and Central America, and was soon made a director of the world-wide work to eliminate yellow fever. His work was interrupted by World War I, but he served as head of the army medical service until its close.

In his retirement age he again took up work with the International Health Board when he went, according to Vella, "to investigate an epidemic which was reported to have broken out in a vast region of the Dark Continent stretching from Senegal to the Congo." On his way to Africa, Gorgas was to have had an audience with the King of England, George V, as well as to attend an International Hygiene conference in Brussels. He became ill in London and went directly to the hospital with a cerebral hemorrhage which left him paralyzed. Sir John Goodwin, the Director-General of the (British) Army Medical Service, had Gorgas admitted to The Queen Alexandra Military Hospital at Millbank. There he was visited by King George V, and presented with the Order of the KCMG.

This last episode is misinterpreted both in Webb and the Dictionary of American Biography, where he is described as having been "knighted" by the King. This is, of course, an honor prohibited to a citizen of the United States of America by the Constitution. The source for the correct history of the Gorgas experience at Millbank appears only in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, in an article by Lieutenant-Colonel Ethelwalde E. Vella, M. D., Department of Pathology, Royal Army Medical College, Millbank. Because of the degree of inaccessibility of the Vella material it is being quoted at length below, through the courtesy of Colonel J. T. Joy, Chairman, Department of Military Medicine and History, School of Medicine, Department of Defense, Bethesda, Maryland, who received a reprint of Dr. Vella's article during a visit to London subsequent to its publication in 1970, and who courteously donated a copy of this reprint to the reference files of the Historic American Buildings Survey.

From his close relationship with the hospital at Millbank where he was an important member of the staff, Dr. Vella wrote:

Mrs. Gorgas was with her husband when he was taken ill and the following incident, which impressed her deeply, is best described in her own words. "One morning on going to the hospital, the usual calm and ordinary routine seemed a bit upset. An undercurrent of excitement pervaded the atmosphere, which aroused my curiosity. Dr. Gorgas was steadily improving, and I did not associate him in any way with the stir and bustle. Later the head nurse, Sister Erdley . . . told me with evident pleasure that the King was coming that morning to see General Gorgas. Fearing to excite him, they had deemed it wise to say nothing until soon before the King was expected. 'Will you tell General Gorgas now,' said Sister Erdley, 'that we are expecting the King at any moment!'

I did so at once, and it did me a world of good to see the Doctor's look of surprise and pleasure. The disappointment he had felt in not being able to keep an appointment with the King was swept aside in a moment. To Sir John Goodwin, the King had said, when he heard of Dr. Gorgas's illness, 'If General Gorgas is too ill to come to the palace to see me, I shall go to the hospital to see him'. . . .

By special request of His Majesty I was present at the interview. The King came in quietly 'without fuss or feathers' as he had expressed himself to Sir John Goodwin, accompanied only by Sir John and his Equerry in Waiting. The attending physicians followed with the Matron, Sister Humphrey, and Sister Erdley, the little group standing a few paces back.

The King spoke to us in a delightfully simple way. His cordiality charmed us. The smile which always drew people to him hovered about the Doctor's lips as the King talked with him, expressing distress at his illness and earnest wishes for a speedy improvement.

His Majesty talked at considerable length of the work which had been carried out in Panama and Cuba, and especially of the subject of yellow fever and the extermination of that disease. He thanked Dr. Gorgas for all the help which he had given the British Army in sending medical officers and nurses to work for the British forces, and assured him that this help had been of immense value and was deeply appreciated.

Then, taking from his Equerry the insignia of Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George, the King presented it to Dr. Gorgas saying, 'General Gorgas, it gives me very great pleasure to present you with the insignia of this Order; and believe me, I very sincerely appreciate the great work which you have done for humanity--work in which I take the highest interest.'

In spite of the appearance of improvement, Dr. Gorgas died early in the morning of July 4, 1920. Dr. Vella continued with his own report of the King's decision to give special honors to Dr. Gorgas after his death, as well:

On the death of General Gorgas The Royal Society of Medicine made plans for the funeral service, but the King ordered a State funeral with full Military honours. This took place on the 9 July 1920, the coffin was taken from The Queen Alexandra Military Hospital, borne on a gun carriage of the Royal Horse Artillery [while three major-generals and three colonels from the medical officers acted as the pall-bearers.]

Headed by the band of the Coldstream Guards, and while guns in Hyde Park boomed their farewell salute, the funeral cortege proceeded slowly along the Embankment to St. Paul's Cathedral where the service was held. The Cathedral was crowded with many representatives of governments and academic institutions

The coffin was later brought back to The Queen Alexandra Military Hospital, whence it was taken to Southampton, and then by ship to the United States. The body lay in state for four days in Washington, and now lies buried in Arlington, near Washington, the national Cemetery of the U. S. Army and Navy.

It will be noted, of course, that the drive that makes the boundary of the Fort Brown Military Reservation outside Brownsville is named after General Gorgas.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Files at the Texas Historical Commission, Austin, Texas.

Quartermaster's Reports in the Hunter Room of the Brownsville City-College Library. These appear to date from 1942 and note changes in buildings from the 1930s to that date. Figures for total cost and date completed are not reliable since these often refer to the most recent major renovations.

Deed Records, County Clerk's Office, Brownsville, Texas, Volumes 444, page 1, etc., 507, p. 329, etc.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Chatfield, W. H. The Twin Cities of the Border. Originally published in 1893, from material compiled by Lieut. W. H. Chatfield, U. S. Army. Reprinted in 1959 by the Harbert Davenport Memorial Fund, the Brownsville Historical Association, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Society. Pages 28-29.

Sides, Joseph C. Fort Brown Historical. San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1942.

Texas Southmost College. Self Study. Brownsville: 1961. Copies of this study are in the college president's office.

Vella, Lieutenant-Colonel Ethelwalde E., M. D., Department of Pathology, Royal Army Medical College, Millbank. "The Death of General Gorgas - At Millbank." reprinted from The Journal of the Royal Medical Corps, Vol. 116, No. 3, 1970.

Webb, Walter Prescott. Editor-in-Chief. The Handbook of Texas. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952.

Newspaper Report. The Brownsville Herald, April 2, 1950. [Microfilm available at the City-College Library, Brownsville, Texas.]

Prepared by: Betty Bird
University of Virginia
Project Historian
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This is an example of brick military architecture in the mid-nineteenth century.
2. Foundation: Brick.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: The pinkish-tan common bond brick walls have a molded brick frieze four courses below the top of the parapet wall. The brick frieze consists of three rows of projecting bricks, below which are four courses of denticulated brick work. Below the denticulated brick work are continuous corbeled courses of brick, one and two courses, respectively.
4. Structural system, framing: Brick load-bearing walls with wood frame construction in second floor and roof. The first floor is concrete.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a concrete stoop across the southwest facade that has had the roof removed. On the northeast facade is a concrete stoop across the face of the building extending and becoming a concrete ramp to the parking lot on the southeast. There is an exterior concrete stairway at the stoop. The open-string stairs and top landing are supported by square concrete columns, with half columns at the face of the building. The straight-run stairway extends up with a concrete handrail extending between a newel at the first floor and two intermediate newels on the stairway. The handrail extends around the second-floor landing, ending at the wall with a half newel. An iron-pipe column on top of the newels around the landing support a flat roof above.
6. Chimneys: There is a brick chimney projecting through the center of the roof near the third point of the facade.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The entrance on the northeast facade opens into a large room. There is a wood panel door with five lights in the top with a wood louvre transom. The door has wood surrounds and sill. There is another entrance on the first floor near the northwest end of the northeast facade. It is a wood panel door with wood surrounds, wood sill and a wood louvre transom panel. There is a similar door opposite this one on the southwest facade that is boarded up. The doorway at the second floor from the landing is directly above the main entrance on the first floor. This door is a flush, solid-core wood panel with wood surrounds, concrete sill, and a transom that is boarded up.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows on both floors have six-over-six light, single-hung sashes with wood surrounds, wood sills, and brick sills. Windows have brick flat-arch lintels. Some hinges remain where shutters were removed.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: The hipped roof is covered with asphalt shingles.

- b. Cornice, eaves: There is a brick parapet surrounding the roof with a built-in gutter and metal downspout. The top of the parapet is rounded with a cement wash.

B. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The entrance, near the center of the building, opens into a large room with two windows on the northeast wall to the left of the door and one to the right. There is a boarded-up window on the southeast end wall. A doorway on the northwest leads into a small hallway, with a door on the right leading into a small room and a door on the northwest leading to an end room. The small room has a window on the southwest wall and a projecting flue above the floor on the northwest wall. The end room has a door in the center of the northeast wall and one in the center of the southwest wall that is boarded up. There are two windows on the northwest wall.
- b. Second floor: The second floor is similar to the first floor. The exterior entrance leads into a very large room that has two windows on each side of the door. There are four windows on the southwest wall and an opening on the southwest that has been closed up and a small wood louvre inserted. There is a window on the southeast wall. A doorway in each corner of the northwest wall leads to two small rooms. The room on the west corner has a window on the southwest and northwest walls. The other room has a window on the northwest and northeast walls.

2. Flooring: The flooring on the first floor is of vinyl-asbestos tile over concrete. Flooring on the second floor is of plywood.
3. Walls and ceiling finish: Exterior faces of walls are brick on each floor. Other partition walls are plastered and beaded wood paneling. Ceilings are gypsum board and wood boards. Some ceilings have a wood cornice molding.
4. Doorways and doors: Doorways are wooden with wood panel doors.
5. Mechanical equipment:

Modern air-conditioning equipment and lighting fixtures.

C. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces northeast, behind the administration building, which was formerly the post hospital. To the southwest side of the building is May Street and the Fort Brown Mesaca--a small spit of land nearly surrounded by an elliptical lagoon of water channeled from the Rio Grande. There is a parking lot on the southeast. Landscaped yards surround the building, the campus of Texas Southmost College.

Bordering the campus and separating it from the Fort Brown Resaca is the street named in honor of William Crawford Gorgas, known as Gorgas Drive.

Prepared by: John P. White
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Project Supervisor
1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.