

ROMA BLUFFS

Southwest side of Water Street between Lincoln and Juarez Avenues

Roma

Starr County

Texas

HALS No. TX-8

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

National Park Service

U.S. Department of Interior

1849 C Street, NW

Washington, DC 20240

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### ROMA BLUFFS

HALS NO. TX-8

**Location:** The Roma Bluffs stand above the north bank of the Rio Grande running roughly southeast to northwest and paralleling Water Street at the southwest edge of the Roma National Historic Landmark District in Roma, Starr County, Texas.

**Significance:** The Roma Bluffs are historically significant as a natural landmark noting a shallow ford of the Rio Grande used by Native Americans, Spanish explorers, traders and settlers. The bluffs are an integral landscape feature contributing to the site and setting of the Roma National Historic Landmark District.

**Description:** The Roma Bluffs are sandstone bluffs above the north bank of the Rio Grande that mark the southern edge of the historic town of Roma, Texas. The bluffs mark the site of a low ford across the Rio Grande at the convergence of arroyos on both sides of the river leading into the interior. Here the bluffs are oriented roughly northwest to southeast with an overall length of approximately 800 feet. The Rio Grande flows below the bluffs at 141' above mean sea level (AMSL) at the approximate midpoint of the bluffs. The elevation at the top of the bluffs varies along its length, but is typically within 5' of 200' AMSL, thus with a height of approximately 60' above the river. The highest point of the bluffs is at 202' AMSL, adjacent to the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and Water Street, which is the location of the old Customs House and a modern bird watching deck built out over exposed sandstone. The historic town plaza of Roma begins at the top of the bluffs and extends to the northeast.

The northwest edge of the bluffs has a raw water pump at the base of the bluffs with conveyance pipes rising along a concrete slope to a water treatment plant above (both constructed in 1985). The northwest end of the bluffs has the steepest slope, approximately 50 percent grade. From this steepest portion, the bluffs gradually lessen in slope and become more vegetated toward the southeast. The slope at the midpoint of the bluffs is approximately 40 percent grade, gradually decreasing to approximately 20 percent at the southeast end. The slope of the bluffs is generally steepest at the northwest end and near the top. A set of concrete and stone steps lead down from the southwest corner of the Roma plaza along the southeast edge of the bluffs. Mature trees grow on the bluff's gradual slope facing the river. Numerous large boulders sit at mid-slope or near the base of the bluffs, evidence of erosion. In 1980, a picnic area consisting of six concrete tables and three barbecue pits was situated among the boulders. At the southeast corner of the bluffs, the slope decreases and meets the slope of an arroyo, receding into a hillside along the southeast edge of the plaza.

The vegetation along the bluffs is typical of scrub species found in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Giant reed (*Arundo donax*) dominates the riverbank, with various grasses and retama (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) found in the understory. The canopy on the bluffs is composed of Huisache (*Acacia farnesiana*), Mexican ash (*Fraxinus berlandieriana*), and Texas paloverde (*Parkinsonia texana*). Texas prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia engelmannii*) is found on sunny, exposed areas at the top of the bluffs. The

overall vegetation on the bluffs has changed since the construction of the Falcon Dam upstream began in 1950. Historically, the bluff was sparsely vegetated with small shrubs. Since 1950 a mature tree canopy has developed.

The Roma Bluffs sit where the Rio Grande meets the south end of the Jackson Group, an Eocene-era sandstone and clay formation running north to south with the south end centered on Roma. South of and running east from Roma, the geology is fluvial terrace deposits.<sup>1</sup> These terrace deposits are the result of the extreme shifting of the river's course throughout its history. The point where the river course meets the sandstone of the Jackson Group has resulted in a stable river course at the bluffs over time, in contrast to the constantly changing river course downstream caused by seasonal floods. The construction upstream of the Falcon Dam, completed in 1954, stabilized the entire river course downstream in the modern era and reduced spring flooding, resulting in the bluff's slope being more densely vegetated compared to prior to the construction of the dam.

The Roma Bluffs are included in the boundary descriptions of both the Roma Historic District National Register of Historic Places nomination (1972) and the National Historic Landmark nomination (1993). The significance of the bluffs to the district are not explicitly stated in either nomination. However, the bluffs are mentioned throughout as an important natural feature leading to the settlement of Roma.

History:

The Roma Bluffs have been an important landmark for various cultural groups both prehistorically and historically. The course of the Rio Grande at Roma, where the river cuts through the sandstone formation, has remained stable compared to downstream portions of the river and was known historically as the convergence of trade and exploration routes down arroyos to the ford of the Rio Grande. The convergence of arroyos at this site created a natural access point to the river ford from the interior. The Roma Bluffs are bordered on the north by the Arroyo de los Negros and to the south by Arroyo Roma. Across the river, a broad arroyo from the San Juan River drainage runs northwest to the river.

Archaeological excavations at a nearby archaeological site on the elevated sandstone terrace just upstream of Roma revealed prehistoric and historical cultural deposits representing five levels of human occupation as far back as the middle to late Holocene (6,200 years before present [6200 B.P.] to 600 B.P.). The site was visited for short periods in the summer months to refurbish lithic toolkits and collect and process local plants and river mussels.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Brewton, F. Owen, S. Aronow, and V. E. Barnes, "McAllen-Brownsville Sheet," *Geologic Atlas of Texas*, Arthur Carleton Trowbridge Memorial Edition (Austin: University of Texas, 1976; reprinted 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Site 41SR392 is a large site more than 15 meters above the Rio Grande. The site was excavated in 2008 and the findings of the excavation are reported in James D. Gallison, et al., *The Prehistory and Alluvial Chronology of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Geoarchaeologic Investigations and Data Recovery of 41SR392 and 41HG218 Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron Counties, Texas* (Albuquerque: HDR, 2011).

Recorded history at the Roma Bluffs began in 1746 with the organization of the new Spanish province of Nuevo Santander. José de Escandón, a Spanish military leader, was chosen by the Spanish crown to lead an exploratory mission to scout the area for potential settlement sites. The only existing non-native settlement at that time was a small group of ranches approximately 10 miles upstream from the bluffs at a small ford called El Cántaro. In 1747, Escandón set out from Monterrey and began the survey at the junction of the San Juan River and the Rio Grande, near present day Camargo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. While the primary mission was exploration, the expedition was privately financed by Escandón's men who hoped to capitalize on their investment. Salt lake beds were known to exist north and east of current-day Roma. From the San Juan drainage, the explorers followed a broad arroyo, named the Arroyo de San Pedro by the explorers, to the Roma Bluffs and noted the location as the easiest and most direct route to the salt beds. The crossing was named *El Paso de la Mula*, or Mule Pass, referring to the pack animals used to transport the valuable salt back to Monterrey. The largest salt bed was located in Hidalgo County, a mile-long lake with a circumference of 5 miles known as La Sal del Rey.<sup>3</sup>

The first settlements founded by Escandón were at Camargo and Reynosa in 1749, followed by Dolores and Revilla in 1750, Mier in 1753, and Laredo in 1755.<sup>4</sup> The settlement of Mier, upstream and on the opposite side of the river from present-day Roma, held the seeds of settlement for the area around Roma. Beginning in 1767, the Spanish crown granted Escandón settlers *porciones*, or land grants, on the north bank of the Rio Grande. The *porciones* were narrow parcels perpendicular to the river that extended far into the interior, providing each owner with access to the river. *Porciones* 71 and 72 were granted to the Juan Salinas and Juan Ángel Sáenz families; by sometime after 1770 the families occupied these lands on the north side of the river. Joaquín and Juan Ángel Sáenz settled above the bluffs and the family community became known as Rancho de Jesús de Buena Vista, or simply Buena Vista.<sup>5</sup> Other families started *ranchos* on the north and south banks between Mier and Camargo. These *ranchos* were typically named for families—Rancho de los Sáenz, Rancho García—or for landmarks—such as Rancho del Esterito and Rancho Buena Vista.

Little is known about the development of the community of Roma from the rancho period until the 1840s. Stephen F. Austin travelled to Mexico in 1821 and 1822 and his correspondence includes a hand-drawn map from 1823 that labeled Roma and the surrounding ranching and agricultural lands.<sup>6</sup> Mexico's independence from Spain in

---

<sup>3</sup> Eloise Campbell, "La Sal Del Rey," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Denton: Texas State Historical Association) accessed August 30, 2011, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/gplpe>.

<sup>4</sup> Clotilde P. García, "Escandon, Jose De," *Handbook of Texas Online* (Denton: Texas State Historical Association) accessed August 30, 2011, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fes01>.

<sup>5</sup> Wayne Bell, "Roma Historic District" National Register of Historic Places Nomination (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1972) and Jose E. Zapata, "A Historical Archaeology of Roma, Texas" (masters thesis in Anthropology, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2002). The dates of settlement at Buena Vista and other ranchos near Roma are uncertain. Some sources state as early as 1760, while more recent studies analyzing genealogical records (Zapata 2002) place the date closer to 1785.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Weitze, "Roma Historic District" National Historic Landmark Nomination (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993).

1821 was followed by several decades of political turmoil and conflict along the Rio Grande. In the 1830s, towns in northern Tamaulipas rebelled against the central Mexican government. In 1835, settlers north of the Rio Grande rebelled, formed the Republic of Texas, and claimed lands north of the Rio Grande, while Mexico continued to claim lands north of the Rio Grande all the way to the Nueces River. The boundary dispute continued after the annexation of Texas in 1845, and the United States went to war with Mexico in 1847. The Mexican-American War ended in 1848 with Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which firmly established the Rio Grande as the international boundary. Throughout these three decades the confluence of the three arroyos at the sandstone bluffs overlooking a shallow ford of the Rio Grande continued to be a major river crossing used by raiders, armies, and traders.<sup>7</sup>

In 1848, the García Sáenz family contracted Edward Hord, a lawyer originally from Virginia, to draw up plans for a townsite on the family's *porciones*. The plan consisted of 15 blocks, each with 8 lots, and a broad avenue-type plaza running perpendicular to the river from the top of the sandstone bluffs. The elevated siting of the town was ideal, providing commanding views of the upstream and downstream portions of the river as well as into Mexico. The Roma plaza type deviated from the more common square plaza configuration, instead copying a type usually reserved for coastal or river towns in Spain's New World colonies. The town plan reflected a commercial emphasis in the broad avenue plaza and lacked the typical accommodation for a religious structure on the plaza (though by 1894 a block at the northeast end of the plaza had been reconfigured for a church). The long avenue plaza began at the top of the sandstone bluffs, extending northeast. The plaza could be accessed from roads leading northwest to the Arroyo de los Negros and on its south side from roads leading to the Arroyo Roma.

Roma thrived as a commercial center due to its location at the highest navigable point on the Rio Grande from its mouth and due to the intersection of routes leading into the interiors of both countries. Roma's commercial success came from both lawful trade and contraband trade. In 1852, Major William Emory conducted a boundary survey between the United States and Mexico. The depiction of Roma in Emory's report includes a woodcut engraving of the Roma Bluffs. Emory's report also included an anecdote about the smuggling industry of Roma. Emory remarked on the obvious prosperity of the town and wondered how it was sustained, until he encountered a nighttime convoy of mules laden with contraband goods headed toward Mexico.<sup>8</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, at the height of steamboat traffic on the Rio Grande, riverboat wharfs were constructed at both arroyos, and by 1880 a Customs House had been constructed on the highest point of the bluffs nearest the Arroyo de los Negros to regulate commerce entering the United States at both ports of entry.

The history of the site as a crossroads of commerce continued even after riverboat traffic ceased in the late nineteenth century due to falling river depth caused by upstream irrigation. Ferry service across the river to the neighboring town of San Pedro

---

<sup>7</sup> Weitze, "Roma Historic District."

<sup>8</sup> William Hemsley Emory, *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1857).

de Roma (now Ciudad Miguel Alemán) likely began in the nineteenth century with the construction of river wharfs at the upstream and downstream ends of the bluffs and continued until construction of an international bridge in 1927. The routes once used by early settlers and traders evolved into modern commercial corridors, precipitating the construction of the Roma-San Pedro international suspension bridge adjacent to the southeast end of the bluffs in 1927. Construction of the Falcon Dam upstream began in 1950 and the dam was dedicated in 1953. Since the construction of Falcon Dam, the downstream course of the Rio Grande has remained stable. The reduction of seasonal flooding since the dam's construction has also resulted in more vegetation along the bluffs, particularly mature hardwood trees. A modern concrete bridge was constructed in 1988 next to the 1927 suspension bridge.

Sources:

Bell, Wayne. "Roma Historic District" National Register of Historic Places Nomination. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1972.

J. L. Brewton, F. Owen, S. Aronow, and V. E. Barnes, "McAllen-Brownsville Sheet," Geologic Atlas of Texas, Arthur Carleton Trowbridge Memorial Edition. Austin: University of Texas, 1976; reprinted 1994.

Campbell, Eloise. "La Sal Del Rey." In *Handbook of Texas Online*. Denton: Texas State Historical Association. Accessed August 30, 2011. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/gplpe>.

Darnell, J. L. and D. H. Jepsen. *Geology Report, Roma Diversion Dam Site, Valley Gravity Project, Texas*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Region 5, October 1947.

Emory, William Hemsley. *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1857.

Garrison, James D., Michael K. Church, Michael H. Jennings, J. David Kilby, Nicole A. Ramirez, Christine A Hajek, James C. Chatters, Jodi A. Jacobson, Kathryn Puseman, and Judith Steinhilper. *The Prehistory and Alluvial Chronology of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: Geoarchaeologic Investigations and Data Recovery of 41SR392 and 41HG218 Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron Counties, Texas*. Prepared for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Ft. Worth District and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Albuquerque: HDR, 2011.

García, Clotilde P. "Escandon, Jose De." *Handbook of Texas Online*. Denton: Texas State Historical Association. Accessed August 30, 2011. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fes01>.

International Boundary Commission. *Topographical Map of the Rio Grande from Roma to the Gulf of Mexico*. El Paso, Texas: International Boundary Commission, October 24, 1912.

Weitze, Karen. "Roma Historic District" National Historic Landmark Nomination. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1993.

Zapata, Jose E. "A Historical Archaeology of Roma, Texas." Masters Thesis in Anthropology, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2002.

Historian: Chad Blackwell, HDR, Inc. 15 September 2011. Prepared for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Galveston District and U.S. Department of Homeland Security

**Historic Photographs**

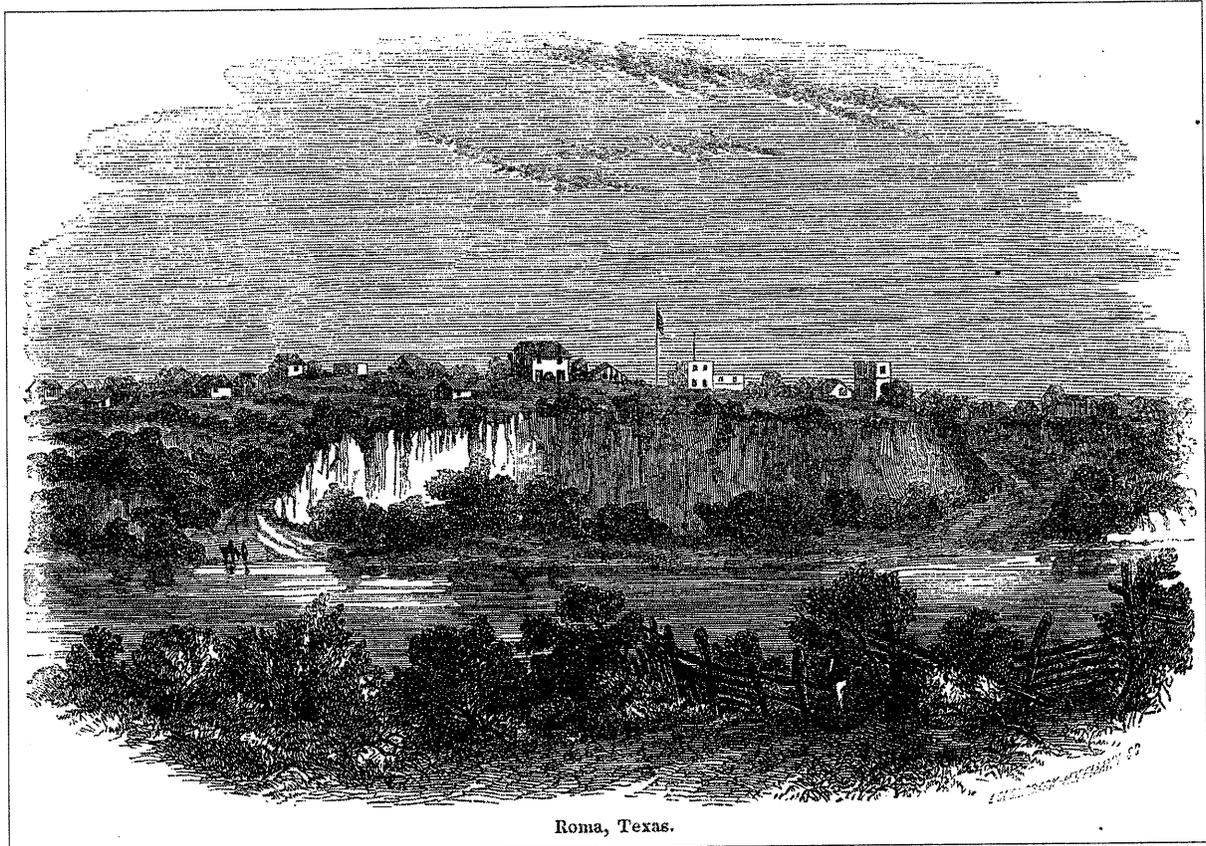


Figure 1. 1852 sketch of Roma Bluffs from William Hemsley Emory's *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1857).

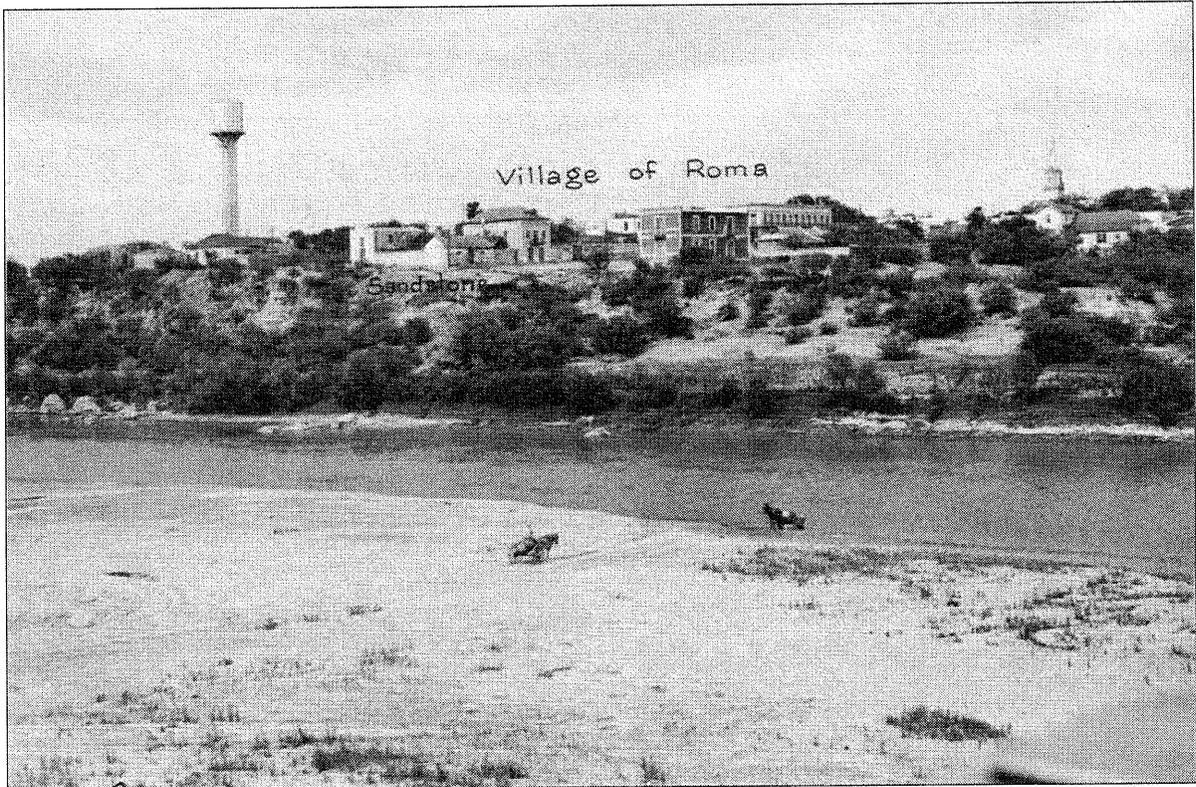


Figure 2. 1947 Photo from *Geology Report, Roma Diversion Dam Site, Valley Gravity Project, Texas* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, October 1947).

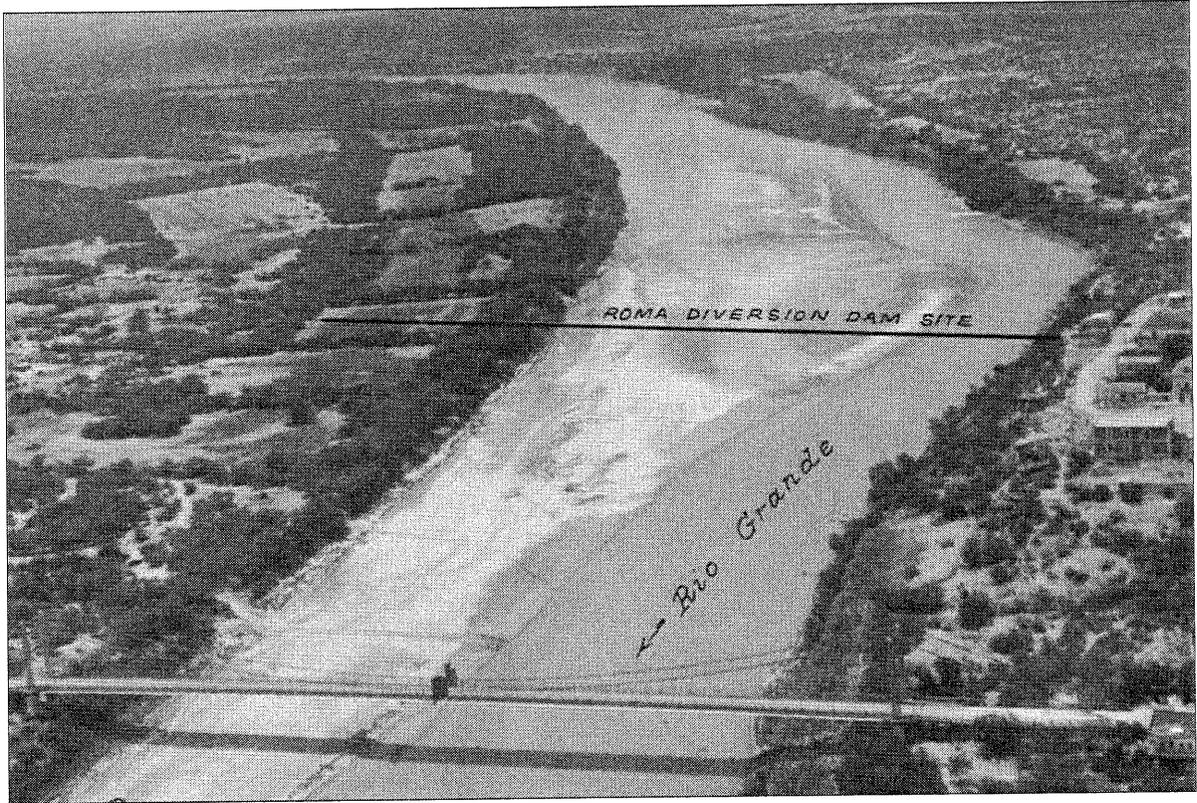


Figure 5. 1947 Photo from *Geology Report, Roma Diversion Dam Site, Valley Gravity Project, Texas* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, October 1947).

Historic Maps

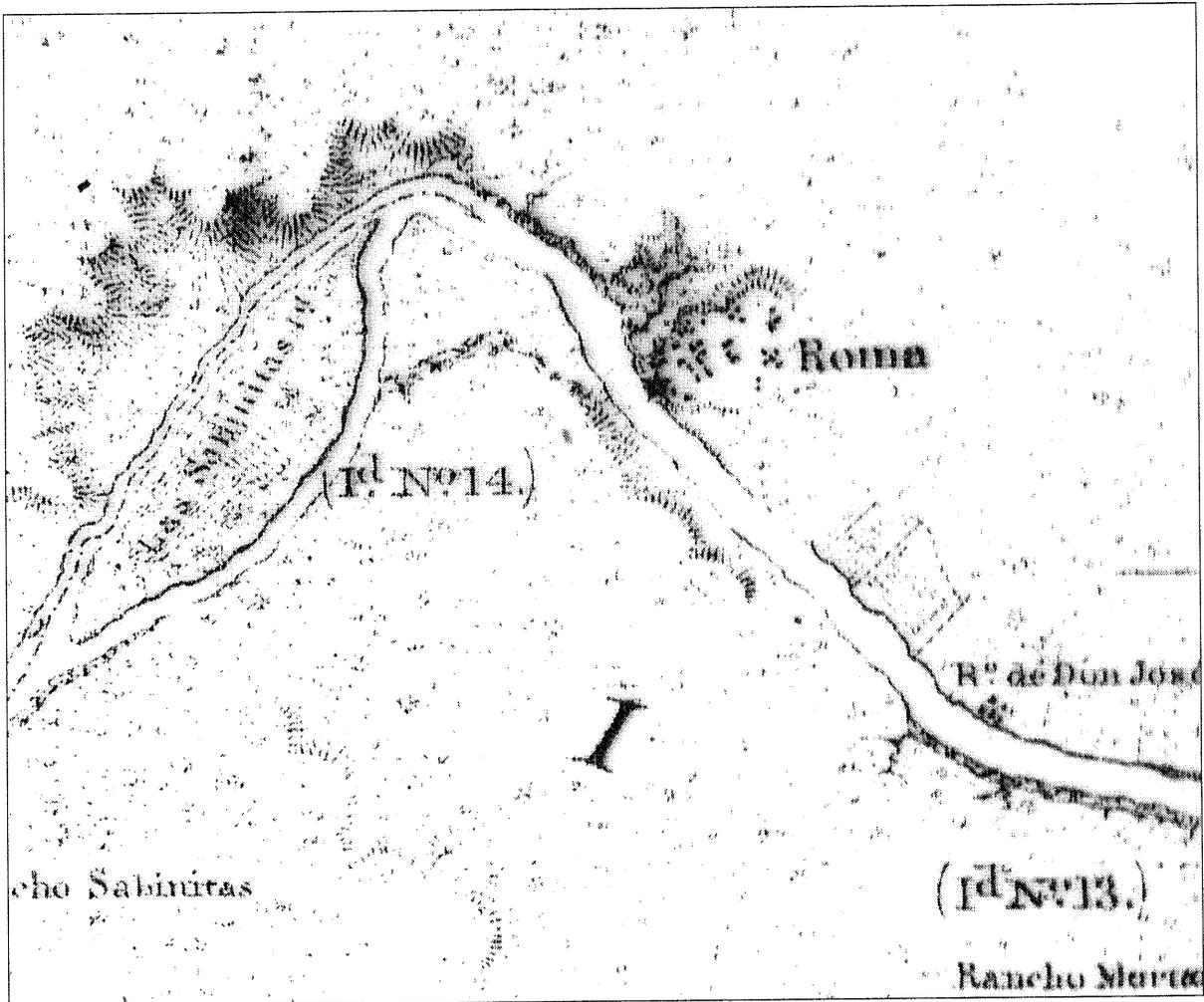


Figure 7. Sketch Map of Roma and surrounding environs by William Emory, ca. 1852, in *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1857).

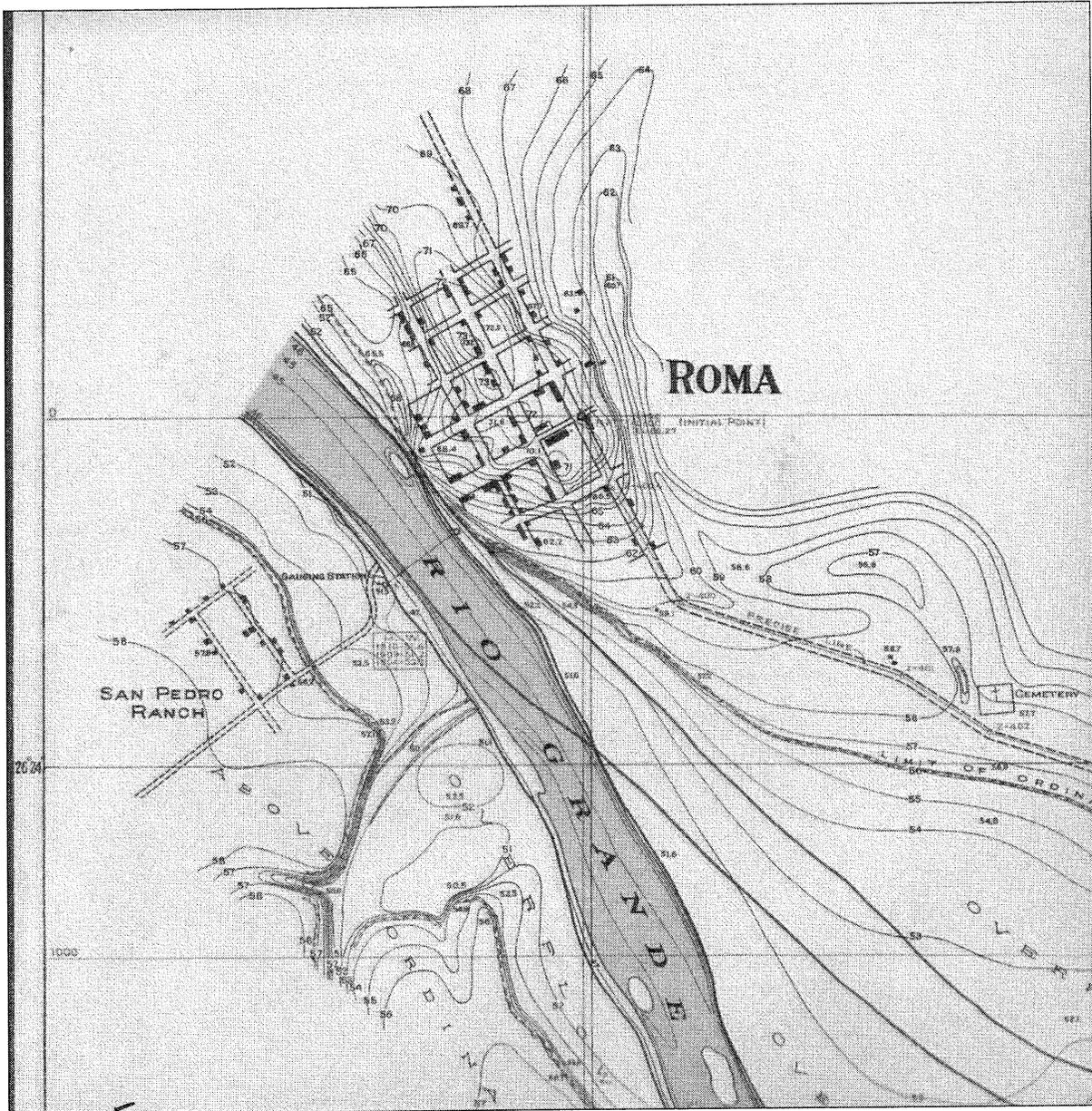


Figure 8. <sup>5</sup> Map of Roma ca. 1911, from International Boundary and Water Commission 1912 Report on Bancos, "Topographical Maps of the Rio Grande from Roma to Gulf of Mexico."

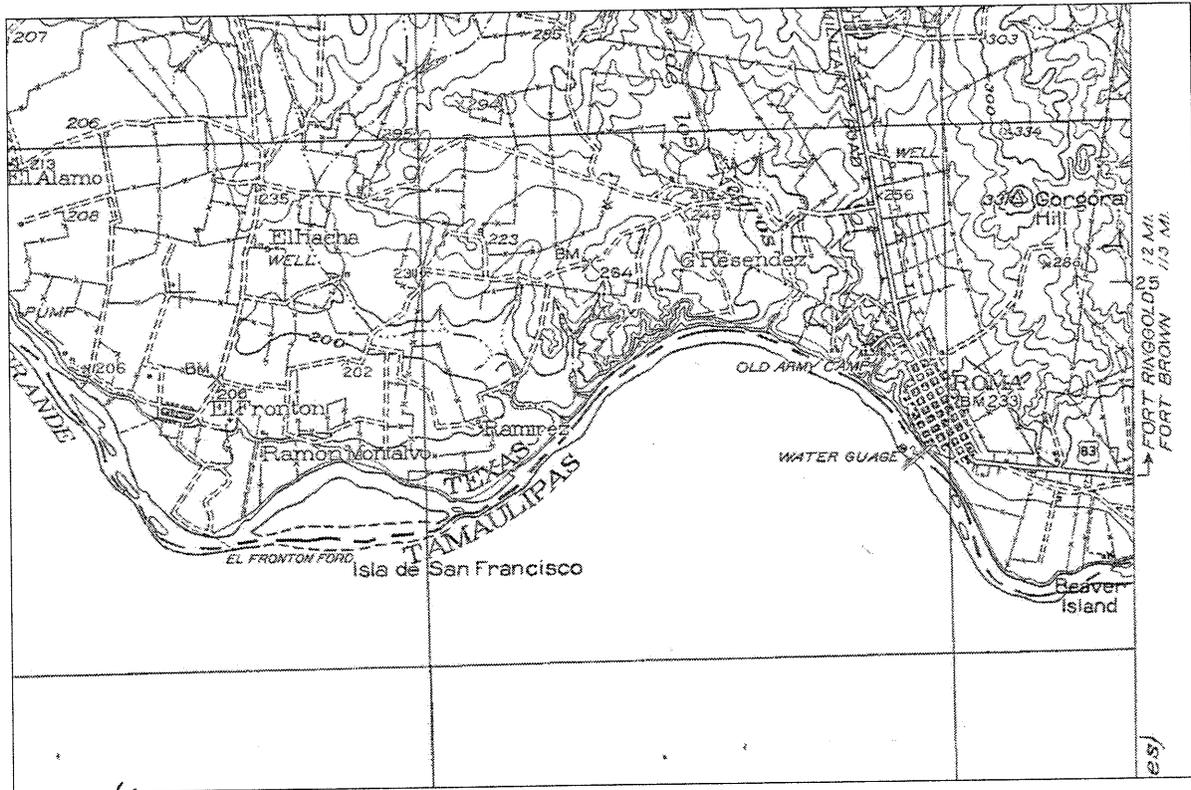
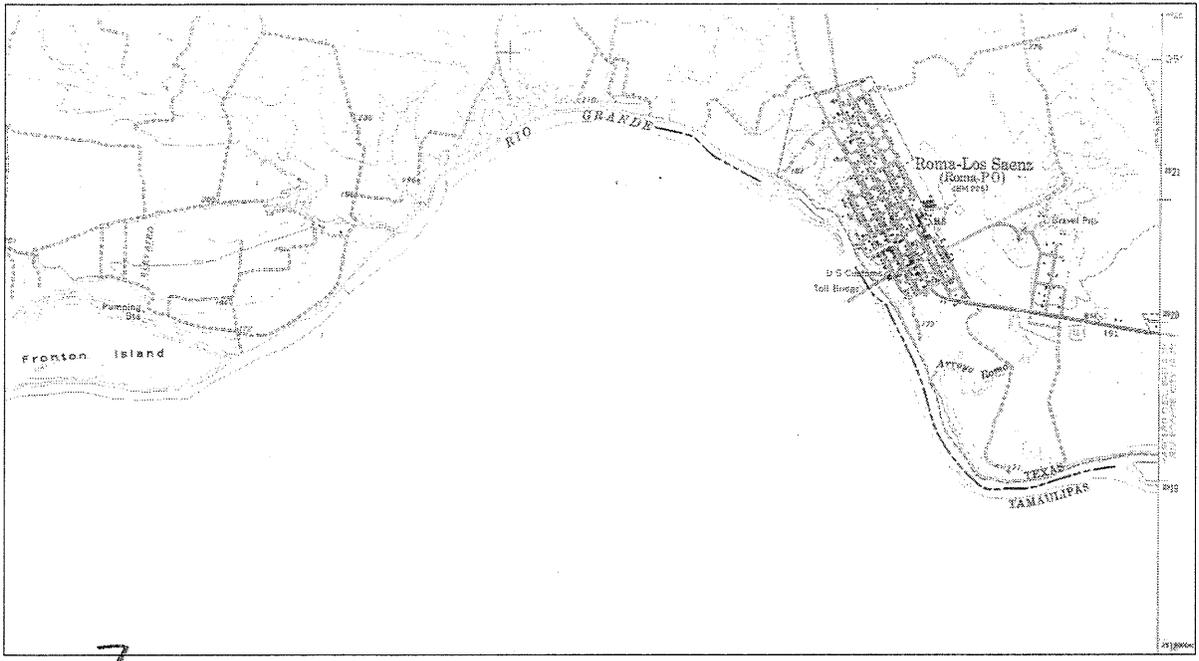


Figure 9. Roma Quadrangle Topographical Map, 1925 Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army Tactical Map.



7  
Figure 10. U.S. Geological Survey, Topographical Quadrangle Map, Roma-Los Saenz West, Tex. 1965