

St. Joseph Academy: Serving Brownsville since 1866

This begins a series describing the history of St. Joseph Academy, which has a long history of providing education in Brownsville.

The community of Brownsville was established in 1848, which was about the time the United States Army began building a military facility directly opposite Matamoros. This facility became known as Fort Brown, and was located on the Rio Grande River.

It was anticipated an American community would develop adjacent to the fort. Charles Stillman, a resident of Matamoros, and two partners acquired acreage and began laying out a town site. Soon the new community began attracting residents, and this was followed by the establishment of businesses, schools and churches.

Priests from France, representing the Oblate Fathers of Mary Immaculate, arrived in Brownsville in 1849. The next year they began holding worship services in a small frame building in the downtown area. In 1854, plans were developed for construction of the Church of Immaculate Conception, the first substantial church building in Brownsville. It took until 1859 to complete the structure.

Reverend Hiram Chamberlain arrived in 1849 and organized the Presbyterian Church. In 1854, a church building was erected on the corner of Elizabeth and Ninth Streets.

Reverend Nehemiah Cravens arrived in early 1850 and began working to organize a Methodist Church. Shortly after his arrival he purchased a lot at the corner of Elizabeth and 8th Streets (now the location of the Brownsville City Hall), where he began constructing a church building.

In 1851, a group of Brownsville citizens began working to establish an Episcopal church, which became known as the Church of the Advent. A church building was constructed at 10th and Washington Streets.

These churches struggled in the early years, and a severe hurricane in 1867 damaged or destroyed some church buildings. Finances were scarce, making it difficult to raise money for construction and for operating expenses.

The first public school was established in 1854, with F.F. Fenn as the teacher. The school began with eight students; a number which increased to forty within a few years.

In 1851, Bishop Jean Marie Odin of the Catholic Diocese of Galveston traveled to the Vatican. One of his objectives was to discuss Catholic missions in Texas. While there, he was authorized to establish a college for young men.

In 1852, four Catholic nuns of the Incarnate Word sailed to America from France, a voyage of 52 days. For nine months they studied English and Spanish at Galveston, then in 1853 they traveled to Brownsville. They opened the second Catholic school in Texas, the Incarnate Word School for Girls. Their first building, located on Fronton Street, was destroyed by the hurricane of 1867, and then a new convent was built on St. Charles Street, between 7th and 8th Streets.

The Oblate Fathers assumed responsibility for developing a school for young men, but during the 1850s there was little progress. The Oblates were also working at the same time to get a church built, and may have found it difficult to provide funding for both the church and the school. They also had to deal with a yellow fever epidemic, which took a toll on their personnel.

However, in April 1863, Father Augustine Gaudet was able to acquire an entire city block “for the purpose of erecting a school, college and chapel.” The price was \$1,100. This property was Lot 52 of the City of Brownsville, located on Elizabeth Street between 6th and 7th Streets. It seems likely the property was intended for use as both a school and a church. No school was established at the time, due to the turmoil of Civil War conflict which affected Brownsville, but this location did become the home of the school for many years.

This story will be continued next week.

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