

Rio Grande City

In Rio Grande City, the line between past and present gently fades. Time slows and the gracious residents make guests feel like royalty. Few people visit just once — visitors are inexplicably drawn time and time again to this 18th-century river community.

Rio Grande City, seat of Starr County, lies along the Rio Grande River near the border of Texas and Mexico. It is a part of Los Caminos del Rio, or “roads of the river,” a heritage corridor rich in natural and cultural legacies. In 2001, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named Los Caminos del Rio to its list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

“Rio Grande City and the surrounding area is where Mexico really began to spread architecturally into Texas,” said Wayne Bell, FAIA, founder and senior principal of Bell, Klein and Hoffman Architects in Austin. “It is an area quietly enriched with history, and it beckons you to stop and walk and examine.”

The Texas Historical Commission designated Rio Grande City an official Texas Main Street City in 2002, an indication that visitors can count on the continued preservation and revitalization of this vibrant and lush border town.

A Rich History

Present-day Rio Grande City was originally part of a land grant made to Captain José Antonio de la Garza Falcón in the late 1760s. Half a century later, two worlds merged when a descendant of Falcón, María Hilaria de la Garza Martínez, married a young Kentuckian named Henry Clay Davis. Davis platted the town site of Rio Grande City in 1848 along the Texas

side of the river. It became an important stop for the prosperous steamboat industry that traveled up and down the Rio Grande. Shortly after the founding of Rio Grande City, Fort Ringgold, one of many border forts, was established nearby.

Historic Sites and Buildings Abound

Silverio de la Peña Drugstore and Post Office. 423 E. Main Street. Built in 1886, this two-story brick structure features intricately detailed, pressed brick. It is recognized as one of the best-preserved and most impressive structures by South Texas builder Heinrich Portscheller. Portscheller, a German master brickmason, was well-known for structures that exhibited sophisticated moulded brick details. *National Register 1980.*

The former Starr County Courthouse/Mifflin Kenedy Warehouse. 203 Water Street. The original Starr County Courthouse was constructed in 1856 by Mifflin Kenedy as a warehouse for his steamboat trading business. In 1865, the former warehouse became the first courthouse of Starr County. The Mifflin Kenedy Warehouse is a two-story building with a one-story balcony across the second level.

Juan Gonzales House. 104 E. Main Street. This one-story, stuccoed brick residence was constructed in 1853 as the first hotel in Rio Grande City. Later, it became law offices and a meeting place for political groups. *Recorded Texas Historic Landmark 1964.*

— Continued on page 10



Shown left: The Silverio de la Peña Drugstore and Post Office is considered one of the best-preserved structures in South Texas.

Right: Rio Grande City hosts festivals featuring food and cultural events throughout the year.

Inset, top right: An abundance of birds draw nature enthusiasts to the area.

Inset, lower right: The Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto was built in 1928.

TRAVEL TEXAS

Contact these sources for more information when planning your travel to Rio Grande City:

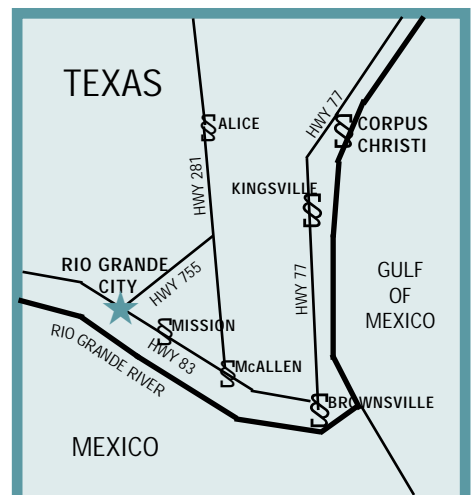
■ Rio Grande City Chamber of Commerce
601 E. Main St., Box 2, 78582
956/487-3024
www.riograndecity.net

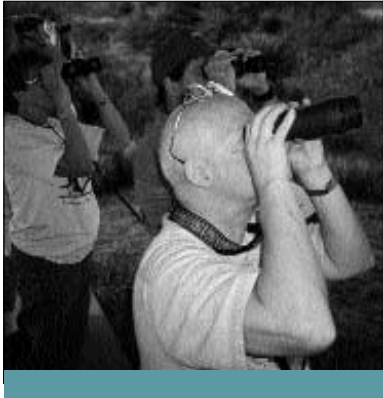
■ Rio Grande City Main Street Program
101 S. Washington Street, 78582
956/487-0749
www.riograndecity.net

■ Los Caminos del Rio Heritage Corridor
956/849-0099
For a free brochure, call 512/463-6255 or
email: thc@thc.state.tx.us.
www.thc.state.tx.us

■ Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail
Texas Parks and Wildlife
512/389-4396
www.tpwd.state.tx.us/birdingtrails/lower/riobravo/text.htm

■ Lomitas Ranch
Benito and Toni Treviño
956/486-2576
email: lomitas@vsta.com





HACC

Above: Bird watchers flock to the nearby World Birding Center.

La Borde House. 601 E. Main Street. 956/487-5101. This 1897 two-story brick structure, originally called the Ringgold Hotel, was built as a residence and store by French immigrant and Rio Grande City merchant François La Borde. In 1917, the building was converted into a hotel, and prominent architect Leo M.J. Dielmann was hired to design a second floor. The hotel was active for 60 years, but by the 1970s it had fallen into disrepair. In 1980, a San Antonio businessman undertook a massive \$1 million restoration. Today, guests enjoy the bougainvillea-covered courtyard of the beautifully restored seven-room hotel. *National Register 1980.*

Howard L. Bass Home. Main and Washington streets. Built in 1877 of lumber from a sunken steamboat with mesquite block flooring and handmade brick, the Bass Home was the residence and business of John Peter Kelsey, Starr County judge and landowner who came from New York in 1848. The building now serves as City Hall. *Recorded Texas Historic Landmark 1966.*

Tijerina Wall. 400 block of Main Street. The Tijerina Wall is said to be the oldest wall in town and is constructed of different-sized rocks, possibly dating back to the original Rancho Davis of the 18th century. A brick-framed door with wooden lintel is set in the rubble wall.

Lázaro López-Tijerina House. 302 E. Mirasoles Street. Possibly one of the oldest structures in Rio Grande City, the original Lázaro López-Tijerina House was a one-story stone house, built in the 1830s. A second story was added 30 years later.

Robert E. Lee House. Fort Ringgold, behind Officers' Row. Originally the Commandant's Quarters, this frame building is known locally as the Lee House, in honor of Robert E. Lee who came to the fort on two occasions. The building is atop the crest of the easternmost hill. *Recorded Texas Historic Landmark 1965.*

Rio Grande City's **Trolley Ride Tours** provide both historical and educational tours. Tours begin at La Borde House and last approximately 90 minutes. Tour schedules and special arrangements can be made through the Rio Grande City Main Street Program.



The La Borde House has undergone significant restoration since it was converted into a hotel in the late 1910s, above. Today, pictured right, the La Borde House still welcomes guests to stay in one of the seven unique sleeping rooms.



Eco-tourism Opportunities

Like the rest of the Valley, Rio Grande City has benefited from the burgeoning eco-tourism business, a growing segment of the tourist industry. Rio Grande City offers opportunities for nature enthusiasts, including bird watching, which is swiftly growing in popularity. **The World Birding Center** in Mission is only 25 miles downriver from Rio Grande City.

“The Valley is one of the most diverse birding areas in North America,” said Mark Klym of Texas Parks and Wildlife’s Wildlife Diversity branch. “People from all over the world flock to this area for bird watching.”

The **Chachalaca Wildlife Refuge** is a 94-acre tract of land along the Rio Grande between downtown Rio Grande City and Fort Ringgold. Chachalacas are tropical birds indigenous to Central America, Mexico and parts of South Texas. Birdwatchers from around the world travel to the Rio Grande Valley to hear the unusual mating chorus of the chachalacas.

The Chachalaca Wildlife Refuge is one of two Rio Grande City sites affiliated with the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail. The other site is **Rancho Lomitas**, where bird, butterfly and plant enthusiasts enjoy an abundance of fauna and flora. Visitors can walk the property or enjoy the grounds in a hayride-style wagon with a sunshade.

La Puerta Preserve is a 3,800-acre sanctuary in brush country owned by the U.S. Department of the Interior and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. View endangered plant species, beautiful escarpments and wild game. The preserve is open to the public and is three miles east of Rio Grande City.

Charming historic buildings, exotic tropical birds and South Texas hospitality amid a backdrop of lush landscapes and the powerful river make a trip to Rio Grande City memorable. Come and experience the rich culture that draws people back time after time. ★

A FIRST-CLASS FORT

FORT RINGGOLD —

Fort Ringgold was established in 1848 along the border in Rio Grande City and was a vital link in the chain of Civil War forts used to defend the Texas/Mexico border. Originally called “Post at Davis’ Landing,” it was renamed Camp Ringgold and Ringgold Barracks in honor of Maj. Samuel Ringgold, who was mortally wounded by a cannonball at the Battle of Palo Alto during the U.S.-Mexico War. In 1878, the name officially became Fort Ringgold.

In 1861, the Confederate Army occupied Fort Ringgold as well as federal installations. In 1865, federal troops re-occupied it and the fort remained active until 1906. Fort Ringgold was active again from just before World War I through World War II in 1944. The fort hosted an array of prominent military figures, including Robert E. Lee and John J. Pershing.

Fort Ringgold was sold to the Rio Grande public school system after World War II. Remarkably, the

constant use of the fort by the school district is one of the reasons Fort Ringgold is one of the best-preserved forts in Texas. The Fort Ringgold Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The parade ground remains open and virtually undeveloped, contributing greatly to the district’s overall historic character. Almost all the notable military buildings, such as the barracks, officers’ quarters and quartermaster’s warehouses, retain their historic integrity, despite conversion into classrooms. The buildings are one or two stories tall and utilize brick load-bearing construction. Most buildings facing the parade ground have one-story arcades, remotely suggestive of Mediterranean architectural influences. The Rio Grande City Consolidated Independent School District recently received a grant to restore the Robert E. Lee House, the hospital, the crematorium and the armory. ★

These articles were written by Kim McKnight, program specialist for the THC’s Main Street Program.



Fort Ringgold’s hospital, constructed in the late 1870s, received a Texas historical marker in 1965.

