

# THE BRONCO

The Newsletter of the Blackwell School Alliance

Summer 2017



## Historic Structure Report Gets Underway...

The cornerstone of the Blackwell School Alliance's mission is the original adobe Blackwell School building, currently in fair condition but in need of much work to preserve and restore its historic integrity and to make it viable as a museum to tell the stories of the Blackwell School and Mexican American culture and history in Marfa and serve our goal of community engagement. The work that has been done in the past ten years has made necessary repairs to stabilize the building. Now we are ready to step back and make a long-range plan to restore the building completely.

With guidance from the Texas Historical Commission, the Alliance is developing a Historic Structure Report (HSR) to know how to proceed in that work of preservation and restoration—both in ensuring the work is done in manner compliant with historic preservation standards toward identified goals for use, and in demonstrating to stakeholders and funders that we are proceeding in a manner that is well considered and respectful of history.

## ...With Help from UT San Antonio

Students from the UTSA graduate program in Historic Preservation Architecture spent a week at the Blackwell School in July as part of a summer seminar learning to conduct research necessary for a Historic Structure Report. They were like real-life history detectives putting together pieces of a puzzle, all for the benefit of the Blackwell School.

Research in Marfa included investigations of the historic Blackwell School building to determine how and when it was constructed, review of historic documents and photographs, deed research, a Community Conversations event, and individual interviews with former students, educators, and community members.



*Read more about the HSR and what the students discovered on pages 4 and 5.*

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*Professor Bill Dupont (lower right) and twelve students spent their summer graduate seminar in historic preservation architecture investigating the Blackwell School. Also pictured is Gretel Enck (upper left).*

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## Letter from Gretel Enck



Dear Friends,

Thank you so much for your donations, memberships, and continuing support of the Blackwell School Alliance. We hope that you will enjoy reading in these pages about all the things we are making happen this year because of the team behind us.

The big news is the progress we are making toward a comprehensive plan to restore the building. It's no secret that the building needs a lot of work to restore it in the way we want to—honoring its history and also providing a safe, modern space for a museum and community center. This takes big money. So this year the Blackwell School Alliance has embarked on a mission of applying for grants from philanthropic foundations. Many individuals and foundations with money want to support sites like the Blackwell School. The challenge is to find them and to present our case effectively. We are learning how to do that.

One exciting and rewarding result of our planning efforts has been the partnership with UT San Antonio this summer. You can read about that on page 4. You will also read about some mysteries that the students attempt to solve, such as the origins of this building—a pretty important part of our story!

A highlight of the students' site visit was an event that we called Community Conversation. The students led small group discussions with members of our community on the topic of values. We heard a lot of important opinions and feelings about the Blackwell School—big picture stuff. And it really validates what we are trying to do here.

I really like what student Amber Walker had to say: "The place in history (where) we currently stand, begs the protection of the Blackwell School's history. It forces our communities to examine the current state of education, and whether we are equally providing all persons with access. Mexican American history is the history of Marfa, and this institution contributed to the protection of that education."

And finally, that's me above in a photo by visitor Cressandra Thibodeaux. If we haven't met yet, please come say hello. If we *have* met, come say hello. Open hours are every Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

## Whatever It Takes

Keeping the dream of the Blackwell School alive truly is a team effort. Members of the Board contribute in many ways. One way that has been very important this summer is the upkeep of our grounds. Lionel Salgado has been tireless in keeping the lawn mowed and the weeds trimmed. Yes, we have a lawn this year! With all of the rain, the Blackwell lot is downright LUSH! But thanks to Lio, it looks great. And with all of our special visitors this summer, it's been nice to welcome them to our well-kept grounds. Thanks very much, Lio. It makes a difference.

## Voices of Blackwell, Revisited

As part of our ongoing goal to record and share oral history interviews with former students of the Blackwell School, we are working with Diana Nguyen, a producer at Marfa Public Radio. As part of MPR's ongoing goal to feature real stories from real people of Marfa, the borderlands, and beyond, Diana is creating a series of short radio stories featuring Blackwell students talking about many aspects of school life, and growing up in Marfa.

This partnership kicked off with a little bit of funding left over from a Humanities Texas oral history grant that the Blackwell School Alliance was awarded last year. This seed money gave Diana the flexibility to conduct interviews and spend the necessary time editing them to fit into the busy programming schedule of our local public radio station.

To accompany the series Voices of the Border, we all agreed it would be

appropriate to call the series Voices of Blackwell—harkening back to project idea of the Alliance's.

We had a little preview on August 18. The radio show Texas Standard, out of Austin, did a live broadcast from Marfa that day. Diana featured a short interview with Mario Rivera that accompanied the live broadcast. Diana says this piece is “just a snippet of what’s to come.” Diana hopes, as we do, that sharing these stories will educate the radio station’s listeners to a broader understanding of Marfa’s history and our rich border heritage.

Listen to Mario’s “snippet” here: <https://soundcloud.com/texas-standard/marfa-lifer-is-happy-about-the-towns-renaissanceexcept-for-the-clothes>

And tune in to Marfa Public Radio in September for Voices of Blackwell: [www.marfapublicradio.org](http://www.marfapublicradio.org)



Diana Nguyen, far left, interviews our visitors from UTSA for the show West Texas Talk, another way the Blackwell School Alliance is being supported by MPR this summer.

## Tell Us Your Story

Oral History is the recorded interviews with people who were part of a shared experience—in this case, a connection to the Blackwell School. Interview are an important piece of the puzzle as we create exhibits and educate youth and visitors about the Blackwell School.

Everyone has a story to tell. Please tell yours. Contact Gretel Enck to make an appointment at [gretel.enck@zoho.com](mailto:gretel.enck@zoho.com) or 432.295.3359.



# The History of the Blackwell School Comes to Light



Jennifer Uria and Thommy Sebastian are suited up to investigate the crawl space.

Some of the UTSA students' findings confirmed long-held understandings about the building. But they also found evidence that contradicts established stories and offers new insights into the values held by the community around the Blackwell School.

A significant contradiction addressed by students is the construction date of the Blackwell School building. The story told by the Blackwell School Alliance involves construction in the 1880s and the building's origins as a Methodist Church. This story is found in a 1940 document which has been widely referenced since that time. But a firm construction date was unknown.

In preparation for the students' visit, local historian Lonn Taylor conducted deed research at the Presidio County Clerk's Office. He found that, "John M. Dean was the founder of Marfa; all of the land within the city limits originally belonged to him. Dean sold the lots on which the present Blackwell School Building is located to the School Trustees of District #1, Presidio County, for \$150 on June 25, 1909." Lacking a description or mention of a building on the property, Taylor concluded, "The present building must have been constructed after that date (1909)." Almost corroborating

this date is a written memoir by Mary Lee Harper, who started teaching at the school in 1924. Harper wrote that the building was constructed in 1908.

In a Presentation of Findings at the Blackwell School on August 10, student Lisa Garza explained two pieces of evidence to support a build date after 1908. First, the building originally had two centrally located brick chimneys. Although the chimneys have been removed above the ceiling, the top portion of the chimneys are visible in the interior adobe wall, a wall determined to be part of the original construction. The chimneys are made of baked D'Hanis brick, a local brick manufactured in D'Hanis, Texas, starting in 1905.

The second piece of evidence is found in the nominal dimension lumber found in the attic that is part of the original construction. Nominal dimension lumber (where the actual size of a 2"x4" is slightly smaller) came into standardized practice in America in the first decade of the 20th century. It's reasonable to believe that such lumber would have been available in Marfa as early as 1907, but not in the 1880s.

What this new evidence means to the understanding of Mexican American education in Marfa is unclear. The first

Professor Bill Dupont (in white shirt) leads students in a preliminary walk-around with Lionel Salgado and Mario Rivera (from left). Dupont explains, "The Blackwell School has the potential to be a phenomenal resource for the community and the region. And to achieve that full potential it's necessary to go through steps in a process. The Historic Structure Report is one of those steps."





We had a great turn-out of community members for the Presentation of Findings by the UTSA students on August 10. Our sincere thanks to everyone who participated in both events—it helps the students help us determine our path forward toward our goals.

Marfa schoolhouse from 1885 still stands on Galveston Street. Did this serve Mexican American students until 1909/1910? Did it have ties to the Methodist Church? Was the current Blackwell School building ever associated with the Methodist Church? Is there yet another building that served as a school before 1909/10? We obviously still have many questions to answer.

In addition to researching the building's physical structure, the UTSA students were interested in the values that people have for the building. Why should we care about this old school?

The students hosted an event during their site work in July and invited members of the community to come in and talk about the Blackwell School. What they discovered was that the well-built walls and historic construction were not what gave the school its value. As student Jennifer Uria explained, buildings like churches, schools, and government buildings were usually made out of heavy material and were meant to last because these were places where cultural identity was most clearly celebrated. The Blackwell School exemplifies this. "We know from personal experience

just how important cultural identity is to a community, and it is key for us that people visiting this historical site truly get a sense of it," said Uria.

A further theme that the students addressed is how education has historically been used as a tool to distance opportunity for people of color, specifically Black and Brown people—and the fight for equal education continues today. Student Amber Walker addressed this topic by looking at the history of Latino education across Texas and how the Blackwell School fits into this larger context. Picking up on the input of Marfa community members, Walker cited the "perseverance of Latino communities, like those in Marfa, who were products of a segregated education system," and the dedicated passion of those former students in preserving the Blackwell School today.

The context provided by the students, combined with the articulation of values by members of our own Marfa community, supports the Alliance taking a bigger picture view of where the Blackwell School fits in Texas history and the history of Mexican Americans in the United States.

## Paying for an HSR

Comprehensive planning documents such as the HSR are not cheap: they take a lot of research, dialog, and consultation—not to mention the writing and photo documentation.

The Blackwell School Alliance expects to spend \$20,000 to have the HSR done by a professional architect. Currently we have been the very grateful recipients of a grant of \$10,000 from the Permian Basin Area Foundation and its Tillapaugh Public History Fund. We have applications in to the Texas Historical Commission and other foundations for remaining funds. We hope to receive funding and have the work completed by this time next year.

Although this seems like a long time and a lot of money to spend on "just a document," the dividends are already paying off: we are spreading the word about the Blackwell School and engaging new partners, many of whom are historic preservation specialists. They are all now fans of the Blackwell School and they want to help us!



## Archiving and Curating

It was a year ago today, as I write this, that we lost our dear friend, and Blackwell's archivist, Richard Williams. His legacy definitely lives on in the photos and memorabilia that he helped to collect and display—and in our hearts. We are so grateful.

And now it is time for us to get organized in a new way with our collection. So we are putting together a project for archiving and curating all of our documents, photographs, sweaters and uniforms, trophies, jewelry—well, everything!

We are working with a local curator to determine the best way to protect and display our objects. We are also working with archivists at Sul Ross State University to establish a professional museum cataloging system. And to tie it all

together, we will purchase software that museums use to keep it all organized.

It's not fun to have researchers ask for a copy of a photo they see on the wall, and we can't find a copy on the computer. Richard knew where everything was. But now we need help. And fortunately, we are getting it.

The next step is to get a little bit of money. So we are applying to foundations for grants to purchase more storage and display cabinets as well as the software and special acid-free storage for papers and photographs.

It's not the most glamorous work, but we want you to know that if you donate something to the Blackwell School Alliance, it will be cared for in a way that saves it for future generations to enjoy.

## Welcome, Mayor Nafziger

You probably know that Marfa has a new mayor. Did you also know that she is a long-time friend of the Blackwell School?

Mayor Ann Marie Nafziger and her husband Peter Stanley played a big role in turning the lot connected to the Blackwell School into a thriving city park and playground. They live in the neighborhood and supported the creation of a playground on the south side of Marfa. Ms. Nafziger joined the city parks board, they enlisted volunteers, and they won a grant from the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department specifically to fund local parks.

Professionally, Ms. Nafziger is an artist, and she coordinates special projects for Marfa Public Schools. One of those projects is the READ MARFA volunteer reading program. In this role, she worked with the Blackwell School Alliance to create our very fun Holiday READ MARFA event at the Blackwell School in December 2016.

In addition, she is enthusiastic about helping the Blackwell School compete for Hotel Occupancy Tax Fund money that is available for historic preservation and special events.

We look forward to working with the Mayor and the City of Marfa to achieve our goals.



*Photo of Ann Marie Nafziger  
courtesy of the Mayor's Office*

## Will We See You at Marfa Lights?

This year's Marfa Lights will be a little bit different for the Blackwell School Alliance. We are NOT doing the beer tent this year. The Chamber of Commerce feels that they need the revenue from the beer tent to pay for the event.

While we will miss that income (our beer tent made \$5000 last year), we are also kind of relieved. It's a lot of work, and we're not getting any younger! So we wish the Chamber great success—support them with your purchase!

And for us? The Blackwell School Alliance will have a hospitality tent and snow cones for sale. Stop by and have a seat in the shade. Buy a snow cone or two for yourself, your sweetheart, or your grandchild.

We will also have an entry in the parade to show our Blackwell School pride. We hope to see you back in Marfa, or just out and about, for one of the most fun weekends on Marfa's calendar.

The Marfa Lights Festival will take place Labor Day Weekend, **September 1 - September 3**, around the historic Presidio County Courthouse. This will be the 31st year for the festival.

Read more about the festival at [www.marfachamber.org/menu/](http://www.marfachamber.org/menu/)

Although the festival goes on late into the night every night, here are the hours you can find the Blackwell School Alliance at our tent:

**Saturday 12:00-6:00 p.m.**  
**Sunday 12:00-6:00 p.m.**

Please stop in and say hi.  
**SNOW CONES!!!**



## Thank You, Members!

If you received this newsletter in the mail, it is because you are a member of the Blackwell School Alliance. Thank you for your support. We definitely appreciate the money. Plus, as we enter into grant writing this year, foundations want to know that we have a strong membership base. So an even bigger thank you for making us look good!

We hope that as you are reading the stories in this newsletter, you are taking satisfaction in being part of an active organization. In the past year we took

the time to complete a strategic plan. From that we are now working on our Historic Structure Report and other activities called for in the strategic plan.

We are busy! Please know that we are committed to being around long into the future, preserving this important Marfa history for all of us. We are so glad you are a part of this work.

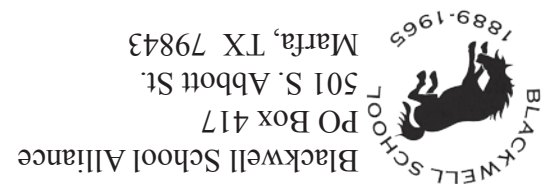
If by chance you are reading this and you are NOT a member, it's not too late. Dues are just \$25 per person per year.

**Membership is \$25 yearly**

**Please mail a check to:**  
*The Blackwell School Alliance*  
**PO Box 417**  
**Marfa, TX 79843**

**OR**

**Pay on our website at**  
[www.theblackwellschool.org/support](http://www.theblackwellschool.org/support)



## Blackwell Block Party: Save the Date

Friends, mark your calendars. Saturday, April 28, 2018 is the date of the first annual Blackwell Block Party—a one-day festival celebrating and commemorating the unity of bi-national culture and the rich heritage of Mexican Americans in Marfa, Texas.

BBP is a family friendly event catering to multiple generations and people of all backgrounds through art, music, dance, stories, food, and events. BBP is the

result of many organizations and individuals bringing together varied visions of the Marfa dream to create a shared experience of Marfa pride, ownership, and engagement.

The Blackwell Block Party will take place at the Blackwell School. More details will be shared as the event takes shape. Just know that we want to see you here for what will be a very fun and meaningful day. Stay tuned!