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**For Immediate Release**

**THE HISTORY OF THE BLACKWELL SCHOOL COMES TO LIGHT**

**Marfa, Texas**

Students from UT San Antonio performed investigations and research at the Blackwell School in July as part of a graduate seminar in historic preservation architecture. They recently submitted their report which becomes the foundation for the Historic Preservation Report to be completed in the next year. Some findings confirmed long-held understandings about the building and its history. But the students 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, which served as a school for Mexican American children until 1965. 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 has not been known.

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.

Part of the students’ work was to look for physical evidence to support or contradict either the 1880s build-date or a date after 1909. What they found clearly showed that the building could not have been built in the 1880s.

In a Presentation of Findings at the Blackwell School on August 10, student Lisa Garza explained two pieces of evidence to support that claim. 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 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?

Some eras of the school’s history were easier to corroborate. The building served as a CVAE (vocational) school during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Former students and school administrators remembered when building modifications were made, and the evidence supports the dates and the sequences. Because the vocational school taught construction, many of the modifications were made by the local students themselves.

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.

As the Blackwell School is restored, this sense of cultural identity needs to inform decisions about creating a museum and community center so that everyone—from next-door neighbors to strangers from afar—can connect with the stories and relate to the issues of the Blackwell School. The stories are personal, yet they are part of a bigger, universal story that gives this structure and this place a greater relevance.

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.

Walker concluded, “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.”

The next step for the Blackwell School Alliance is to secure remaining funds for the completion of the Historic Structure Report through a contract with a professional architect. The work of the students provides both a strong foundation of data for the HSR and the validation of the worth of this project for the long term benefit of the Blackwell School. The HSR will provide a road map for restoring the building in a way that honors its history and allows for the development of a modern, professional museum and community center.

Finally, 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.

Photo Captions

*UTSA Students*: 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) with the Blackwell School Alliance.

*Student Presentation:* Student Gustavo Ochoa explains the work of documenting the foundation and other investigations in the crawl space of the school during the Presentation of Findings on August 10.

*D’Hanis Brick:* Visible in the attic, the humble baked chimney brick (lower center) is from the D’Hanis Brick and Tile Company and helps tell the building’s story.

*Sanborn Map*: Marfa’s “Mexican School” appears on a 1933 Sanborn Map Company fire insurance map. The small building to the left of the main school building was the band hall, and during the era of the vocational school a hallway was built connecting the two buildings.