

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Santa Rita Courts
Austin, Travis County, Texas

Section MAP Page 1

(Oct. 1990)

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF+ HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM**

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

HISTORIC NAME: Santa Rita Courts (1938-39)
OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER: NA

2. LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER: Roughly bounded by E. Second, Pedernales, Santa Rita, and Corta streets
CITY OR TOWN: Austin **VICINITY:** N/A **NOT FOR PUBLICATION:** N/A
STATE: Texas **CODE:** TX **COUNTY:** Travis **CODE:** 453 **ZIP CODE:** 78702

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this (nomination) (request for determination of eligibility) meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property (meets) (does not meet) the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant (nationally) (statewide) (locally). (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official

Date

State Historic Preservation Officer, Texas Historical Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

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I hereby certify that this property is:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

entered in the National Register

See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register

See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register

removed from the National Register

other (explain): _____

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

5. CLASSIFICATION

OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY: Public-local

CATEGORY OF PROPERTY: District

NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:

CONTRIBUTING

NONCONTRIBUTING

12	0	BUILDINGS
0	0	SITES
0	0	STRUCTURES
0	0	OBJECTS
12	0	TOTAL

NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER: 0

NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING:

6. FUNCTION OR USE

HISTORIC FUNCTIONS: Domestic/Multiple Dwelling

CURRENT FUNCTIONS: Domestic/Multiple Dwelling

7. DESCRIPTION

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Santa Rita Courts
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ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: International Style

MATERIALS: FOUNDATION CONCRETE
WALLS BRICK, CERAMIC TILE
ROOF ASPHALT
OTHER

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-#).

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA

- A** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH EVENTS THAT HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROAD PATTERNS OF OUR HISTORY.
- B** PROPERTY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVES OF PERSONS SIGNIFICANT IN OUR PAST.
- C** PROPERTY EMBODIES THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TYPE, PERIOD, OR METHOD OF CONSTRUCTION OR REPRESENTS THE WORK OF A MASTER, OR POSSESSES HIGH ARTISTIC VALUES, OR REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT AND DISTINGUISHABLE ENTITY WHOSE COMPONENTS LACK INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTION.
- D** PROPERTY HAS YIELDED, OR IS LIKELY TO YIELD INFORMATION IMPORTANT IN PREHISTORY OR HISTORY.

CRITERIA CONSIDERATIONS: N/A

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: Social History, Politics/Government, Community Planning and Development

PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1938-1957

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1939

SIGNIFICANT PERSON: President Lyndon Baines Johnson

CULTURAL AFFILIATION: N/A

ARCHITECT/BUILDER: H.F. Kuehne (supervising architect), Giesecke & Harris, Page & Southerland, Kreisle & Brooks

NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE (see continuation sheets 8-# through 8-#).

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

BIBLIOGRAPHY (see continuation sheets 9-# through 9-#).

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PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS): N/A

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

PRIMARY LOCATION OF ADDITIONAL DATA:

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University (*Architecture Library, UT Austin*)
- Other -- Specify Repository: (*Austin History Center*)

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF PROPERTY: 3.2 acres

UTM REFERENCES	<u>Zone</u>	<u>Easting</u>	<u>Northing</u>
1.	14	623486	3347791
2.	14	623400	3347824
3.	14	623530	3347913
4.	14	623447	3347926

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION: (see continuation sheet 10-#)

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION: Nomination includes all property historical associated with the first phase development of Santa Rita Courts. The boundaries are the historic boundaries of Santa Rita Courts and constitute the property originally developed by the Austin Housing Authority in 1938 and 1939.

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE: Fred L. McGhee, Ph.D

ORGANIZATION: Fred L. McGhee & Associates

DATE: September 6, 2006

STREET & NUMBER: 6300A Carson Ridge

TELEPHONE: (512) 275-6027

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Santa Rita Courts
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CITY OR TOWN: Austin

STATE: Texas

ZIP CODE: 78741

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION

CONTINUATION SHEETS

MAPS (see continuation sheet Map-#)

PHOTOGRAPHS (see continuation sheet Photo-#)

ADDITIONAL ITEMS (see continuation sheets Figure- through Figure-)

PROPERTY OWNER

NAME: Housing Authority of the City of Austin (James Hargrove, President and CEO)

STREET & NUMBER: P.O. Box 6159

TELEPHONE: (512) 477-4488

CITY OR TOWN: Austin

STATE: Texas

ZIP CODE: 78762-6159

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Santa Rita Courts
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Description

Santa Rita Courts in East Austin, Texas, consists of 11 one-story housing structures and 1 one-story storage building occupying a site of 3.2 acres. These buildings are of brick, reinforced concrete, tile, and masonry construction. The property is bounded on the east by Pedernales Street, on the south by East 2nd Street, on the north by Santa Rita St. and on the west by Corta St. The official address of the property, which includes construction of an annex completed in 1954 not considered contributing, is 2341 Corta St. These buildings were designed to comprise a planned neighborhood development of 40 units (142 rooms) of public housing.

The buildings, with the exception of the storage building, each measure approximately 100 feet by 25 feet. Eight buildings extend in four parallel rows aligned north-south to allow all units to receive morning or afternoon light. Three structures stand perpendicular to the other eight, with two residential structures located along Pedernales Street, and one building along Corta Street. Courtyards, approximately seventy-five feet wide, separate the buildings, and are currently used for hanging laundry out to dry and as small children's play areas. A distinctive feature of Santa Rita Courts' plot plan (reproduced in this nomination) is a 76' x 224' children's play area that bisects the housing development along an east-west axis and forms the primary social space. This Bauhaus method of organizing common space is an original row housing design feature based on German *Zeilenbau* principles also evident in the later San Felipe Courts Historic District in Houston (National Register of Historic Places, 1988), and represents the concept's earliest American social housing implementation by the United States Housing Authority created by the 1937 Housing Act.

The floor plan of Santa Rita Courts consists of a basic living room-kitchen-bathroom arrangement. The unit illustrated in this nomination (Architectural Forum, January, 1940) has at its left end two L-shaped, single-bedroom apartments, and at its right end a similar plan, with one having three bedrooms without departing from the simple bar shape. Variations on this central theme are arranged in a serpentine pattern enclosing three courts. Walls and partitions throughout are structural tile.

Santa Rita Courts retains an excellent degree of integrity. The site plan is intact including the setting, building orientation and the relationship between built and open spaces. The housing development's integrity of workmanship, feeling, and association all remain unaffected. The buildings have had few structural alterations or unsympathetic additions, and the most recent renovation conducted on the housing project in 2002 was done in a historically sensitive manner and primarily entailed interior improvements. The principal alterations to the property consist of replacement of metal casement with metal sash windows in the original window openings, and the addition of low-gabled composite-shingle roofs over the original flat roofs. The thin concrete canopies, cantilevered from the second-floor beams, designed to provide sun and rain protection above doors and windows have also been slightly modified with low hipped composite-shingle roofs, although the original supports are intact. Both the roofs and canopies can be restored to their original condition, and their low pitch does detract overall from the horizontal emphasis of the buildings. Original features still intact include metal door and window frames as well as smooth yellow interior 4 x 8 inch tile painted with tung oil. Landscaping is mature, and has been reinforced with community enhancing vegetation by tenants over the years. Like other first generation American public housing, these buildings were designed and constructed of materials of such a kind that the local housing authority would be able to maintain and operate them efficiently over a period of years. Santa Rita Courts still functions as much needed public housing almost seventy years after its construction.

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Statement of Significance

Santa Rita Courts in Austin, Texas is the first public housing development completed under the 1937 Housing Act that created the United States Housing Authority (USHA). Santa Rita Courts, built to house families of Mexican descent, was one of three East Austin housing projects built under the 1937 Act, the others being Chalmers Courts (built for white families), and Rosewood Courts (built for African-American families). Constructed between November 17, 1938 and June 24, 1939, the development is nationally significant under Criteria A and B in the areas of Community Planning and Development, Social History and Government, and for its association with President Lyndon Baines Johnson. The period of significance is 1938-1957.

An Overview of the 1937 Housing Act

The United States Housing Act of 1937 (50 Stat. 888) marked the first permanent federal commitment to slum clearance and the production of low-cost public housing for poor people. Its passage was the by-product of years of public housing advocacy on the part of “modern housing” activists such as Catherine Bauer and like-minded individuals ranging from Edith Elmer Wood to Lewis Mumford. The deciding factor in the bill’s passage, however, was the Great Depression and the undeniable and acute shortage of affordable housing that accompanied it. The law made it the official policy of the United States government “to promote the general welfare of the Nation by employing its funds and credit...to remedy the nonsafe and unsanitary housing conditions and the acute shortage of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings for families of low-income, in urban and rural non-farm areas” (cited in Robinson, vol. 2, et.al. 1999: 38).

The bill creating the law was introduced in Congress three times before it passed. Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York sponsored the first and subsequent versions. The first Wagner Bill (S. 2392) was introduced in the Spring of 1935 and was written by Mary Simkhovitch, Helen Alred, Louis Pink, and Ira Robbins, who had been working together in a small group called the National Public Housing Conference (Radford 1996: 184). The bill provided the basic blueprint for subsequent changes and would have terminated the PWA Housing Division, replacing it with a housing division in the Department of Interior. It was killed in committee.

Version 2 of the bill, commonly known as the “Ellenbogen Bill” after Rep. Henry Ellenbogen of Pennsylvania, introduced the concept of a United States Housing Authority, whose purpose would be “to construct, and aid in the construction, of modern large-scale housing, available to those families who in good as well as bad times cannot afford to pay the price which will induce the ordinary and usual channels of private enterprise to build such housing” (Radford 1996: 185). The bill provided definitions of “slums” and “low income,” and also introduced the idea of funding the housing via the issuance of bonds instead of direct allocation from Congress (McDonnell 1957: 112). The bill was killed by Congressman Henry Steagall of Alabama, the Chairman of the House Committee on Banking and Currency in 1936 (McDonnell 1957: 210-234).

The bill that passed both houses of Congress and was eventually signed by President Roosevelt on September 1, 1937 evolved further. The law sought to incorporate many of the lessons learned by the Housing Division of the Public Works Administration and sought to forge a compromise with opponents of the bill such as Congressman Steagall. The U.S. Housing Act that passed fully decentralized the construction, ownership, and management of public housing and

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established the United States Housing Authority (USHA) whose job consisted of making 60-year loans to local Public Housing Authorities (PHA) for up to 90 percent of the development cost of slum clearance or low-rent housing projects.

The 1937 law also contained other compromises. In a concession to real estate groups who opposed the bill, houses were to be built at costs which could not exceed a certain ceiling, so as not to compete with private sector real estate. A section on nonprofits and cooperatives was also eliminated. Southern members of Congress insisted that the prospective housing be segregated, and a provision ensuring such was inserted. And an "equivalent elimination" clause was inserted by Senator David I. Walsh of Massachusetts which protected commercial landlords from publicly supported increases in the supply of available apartment units which could have driven down rents (Radford 1996: 190).

USHA Administration and Building Standards

President Roosevelt appointed Nathan Straus as USHA administrator. Straus was faced with budgetary constraints that the PWA Housing Division did not have to confront, and was largely responsible for the standardization and parsimony of the new agency. Straus utilized an exemption to the Walsh amendment to emphasize construction over slum clearance. He also encouraged rural Congressmen and small cities to apply for USHA funding. Under Straus the agency put the 1937 law into practice by transitioning the federal government from builder to banker and leaving almost all aspects of site analysis, land acquisition, tenant distribution, and project design to local public housing authorities (Robinson, vol. 2, et.al. 1999: 40).

Straus's USHA quickly issued standard guidelines and technical advice for PHA's. The structures had to meet certain minimum standards with respect to the amount of area for bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, and kitchens, and they had to meet essential requirements for sanitary and clean living, in keeping with their slum clearance function. The buildings were designed to advertise the project to the public as a progressive example of slum clearance housing for low-income families. Modern architectural design, allied with unusually high standards of material selection and detailing, reinforced this progressive connotation.

Straus's USHA also saw an important role for itself in fostering public support for its programs and the new housing projects (Robinson, vol 2, et.al. 1999: 42). Santa Rita's national stature as a showpiece small-town public housing project was reinforced in a January 1940 feature in the *Architectural Forum* (Vol. 72, No. 1) in which Santa Rita Courts is favorably represented in a feature titled "USHA Housing...four representative examples." Santa Rita Courts is prominently featured alongside Queensbridge in New York City (the nation's largest USHA project), Brentwood Park in Jacksonville, Florida, and Willert Park in Buffalo, New York.

The Site Selection and Design of Santa Rita Courts

The land for Santa Rita Courts was purchased for approximately 3.5 cents per square foot. About six acres in total were initially purchased. The land was mostly vacant, although several structures on the property were demolished.

Santa Rita Courts was designed by the firm of Giesecke & Harris under the supervision of H.F. Kuehne. The prime contractor for the project was the San Antonio based firm of Vincent Falbo & Sons. The general construction contract totaled \$76,711. Martyn Bros. Inc. of Dallas successfully won the bid to install plumbing at Santa Rita for \$18,994, and W.K. Jennings Jr. of Austin received the electrical wiring contract for a figure of \$6,572. The housing development took 220 working days to complete.

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All of the architects had an affiliation with the school of architecture at the University of Texas. Hugo Franz Kuehne (1884-1963) was a founder of the school of architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, and established the architecture library there. He entered practice in 1915, after receiving his architecture degree at MIT, serving as a draftsman in Boston, and teaching at UT Austin between 1910 and 1915. Kuehne worked in a number of styles, although he is best known for designing the Austin Public Library (1933), now the Austin History Center, the Bohn Brothers building at 517 Congress Avenue (1929), alterations for Brackenridge Hospital (1933), the Steck Building at 419 Congress (1932), the Commodore Perry Hotel (1950), the International Life Building (1952), the American National Bank, the Texas Department of Public Safety building (1952), and buildings for the Austin State Hospital. Although the architectural style of Santa Rita Courts was largely determined by USHA's regulations, Kuehne's supervision of Bertram E. Giesecke (1892-1950) and August Watt Harris' (1893-1968) design indicates that he was also a skilled international style modernist architect.

In addition to a variety of Austin landmarks such as the Norwood Tower (1929) and the Queen Theatre at 700 Congress (1926), the firm of Giesecke & Harris also designed Brenham High School (National Register of Historic Places, 1990), the Kurt and Meta Schemedes House in Austin (National Register of Historic Places, 2000), as well as the old Merchant and Manufactures Building (the M & M Building) that now houses the University of Houston's downtown college. The ten story structure, dedicated in 1930, was patterned after a similar Chicago building of the 1920's.

Public Housing in Austin

Upon passage of the Wagner-Steagall Bill, the U.S. Housing Act of 1937, the 45th Texas legislature authorized the creation of local public housing authorities, and also exempted PHA's from paying property taxes. Upon passage of the state law, the Austin City Council established the Austin Housing Authority on December 27, 1937. In keeping with the federal law, the housing authority was chartered as a public corporation under the laws of Texas to "promote the housing of families of low incomes." The Mayor and the City Council appointed five commissioners to serve on the authority: E.H. Perry, A.J. Wirtz, W.R. Nabours, Hubert B. Jones, and Miss Louise Haynie. E.H. Perry was named chairman. W.R. Nabours resigned June 10, 1939, and was succeeded by James H. Pittsford on June 22, 1939. The city manager of Austin was named executive director of the housing authority.

The Austin Authority made an initial application to the USHA in the amount of \$500,000 (later raised to \$714,000) to build 186 units of public housing. The three housing projects consisted of Santa Rita Courts (40 units) designed for Mexican families, Rosewood Courts (60 units) to house African-American families, and Chalmers Courts (86 units) built to lodge white families. The segregation of public housing was part of the federal law and was an accommodation to southern members of congress such as Representative Steagall who insisted upon the legislative language as one of their conditions for supporting the bill. Another accommodation was the insertion of express rules forbidding government competition with private enterprise, legislative language which was sought by boards of realtors (local, state, and national) and chambers of commerce. The prohibitions were inserted into both the federal and state law. Upon approval of the loan, the Austin Authority selected three sites in the eastern portion of Austin for the housing developments, in keeping with City of Austin's 1928 master plan which segregated the city by race. Of the three housing developments, Chalmers Courts is located closest to downtown Austin.

HACA has grown to 19 housing developments spread throughout Austin. The agency administers 1,928 units of conventional public housing for more than 4,000 residents.

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President Lyndon Baines Johnson's Use of Public Housing as Civil Rights Advocacy

Much of Santa Rita Courts' national significance under Criterion B rests in its association with President Lyndon Johnson and Johnson's role as one of the greatest civil rights and social justice presidents in American history (Public Broadcasting Service 2006). There is a strong direct link between President Johnson and Santa Rita Courts, and its funding and construction stand as one of Johnson's major achievements. Johnson did not just vote for the 1937 U.S. Housing Act, he "called together Tom Miller and his other local heavies, and said 'Now look, I want us to be first in the United States if you're willing to do this, and you've got to be willing to stand up for the Negroes and Mexicans'" (Dugger 1982: 209-210). Austin, Texas was selected as the site of the first USHA housing project because of Johnson's single-minded, persistent and remarkable talent for political persuasion, a skill which would become a Johnson trademark (Caro 1981: 456). The housing project serves as an enduring physical reminder of President Johnson's early political career, of the political ideals embodied during the late New Deal period that found later expression during Johnson's Great Society initiatives, and as an early example of Johnson's tenacious and courageous advocacy for civil rights and social justice. Johnson ran for Congress in 1937 on a New Deal platform, and his ambitious and tireless efforts on behalf of his 10th Congressional District constituency has left substantial memorials on the central Texas landscape. During his time in the House of Representatives (1937-1946), Johnson was instrumental in securing federal funding for the electrification of the rural central Texas countryside and for establishing himself as a classic Texas wheeler-dealer who eventually won the confidence of President Roosevelt. In keeping with his commitment to civil rights, he remained a staunch supporter of public housing throughout his subsequent political career and was instrumental not only in vigorously defending the program in the face of robust political opposition, but also in passing crucial public housing funding legislation while Senate Majority Leader in 1955 (Caro 2002: 604-609). Senator Johnson also proposed billions of dollars in new public housing construction funding in 1959 after the 1958 elections emboldened Democrats during the latter years of the Eisenhower presidency (Unger & Unger 1999: 223-224).

The most remarkable achievement of Johnson's Senate career was winning passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Bill, while fending off deep sectional rivalries within the Democratic party. The bill, the first concerning civil rights since Reconstruction, lacked authority to compel significant change, but Johnson saw it as a crucial first step (Public Broadcasting Service 2006). Johnson's presidency marked the passage of the most far-reaching civil rights bill in American history in 1964, the Voting Rights Act a year later, as well as other programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, and almost 200 other pieces of Great Society legislation such as the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. Johnson also appointed civil rights attorney Thurgood Marshall to the post of Solicitor General and later Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, making him the first African-American to serve in either position. After the murder of civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo, Johnson went on television to announce the arrest of four Ku Klux Klansmen implicated in her death. He angrily denounced the Klan as a "hooded society of bigots", and warned them to "return to a decent society before it's too late" (Woods 2006: 262). Johnson's civil rights advocacy on behalf of Mexican-Americans—which in many ways started with Santa Rita Courts—also found expression in the passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the first piece of federal legislation regarding minority language speakers. Among Johnson's lasting presidential achievements in the area of housing specifically are the establishment of the cabinet level Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1965, and subsequent enactments such as the 1968 Fair Housing Act (Dallek 1998: 228-229, 517). The passage of these laws served as a capstone on a political career that found their first bold expression in the funding and construction of Santa Rita Courts thirty years prior.

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At the beginning of his career Johnson's New Deal advocacy entailed a variety of approaches, including radio addresses. In his famous "Tarnish on the Violet Crown" radio address (Austin had been dubbed "the City of the Violet Crown" since the 1890's by O. Henry) delivered on Austin radio station KNOW on January 23, 1938, Congressman Johnson talked about scenes of Austin he had observed while on a walking tour of the city the previous Christmas: "Within the shadow of the Capitol I found people living in such squalor that Christmas Day was to them just one more day of filth and misery" (Dallek 1991: 173). He saw a family of eight or ten people living in a room 20 by 25 or 30 feet, a fire hydrant from which 110 people took their drinking water, and an outdoor toilet which they all used (Dallek 1991: 173). Johnson continued, "But why do I tell you this? Why, some may ask, should one who is elected to represent this district take note of such unattractive spots when our city has so much to be proud of?" No one is more proud of the beauty and attainments of the City of Austin than I. But for that very reason I am unwilling to close my eyes to needless suffering and deprivation, which is not only a curse to the people immediately concerned, but is also a cancerous blight on the whole community" (Congressional Record 1938). Prior to delivering this speech, Johnson had spoken before the Austin City Council just before Christmas 1937. He observed "We have some slums in Austin. We ought to be progressive enough to remove certain eyesores" (Dugger 1982: 210). He argued there was a correlation between poor housing areas and juvenile delinquency, crime in general, and poor health, especially tuberculosis and syphilis.

To ensure that his speech reached a national audience, Johnson had his colleague Morris Sheppard enter the speech in its entirety into the Congressional Record on Thursday February 3, 1938. And in a revealing passage indicative of his already considerable ambition, Johnson noted: "One thing I believe all of us have learned from the Roosevelt administration is that none of us can remain prosperous long unless more of us have an opportunity to live better and purchase more from our stores; for it is on the wide distribution of our manufactured and agricultural products that the prosperity of this country depends" (Congressional Record, Feb. 3, 1938).

By the time Congressman Johnson delivered this speech, the Austin Housing Authority had just been established a few weeks prior. Johnson himself named two of the new agency's commissioners, E.H. Perry, a retired cotton broker, and Alvin Wirtz. The geriatric Perry was mostly a figurehead; the authority would be mostly run by vice chairman Wirtz. The Austin city manager was named executive director.

After passage of the 1937 Housing Act, five housing authorities were initially approved and three loans announced by President Roosevelt: New York, New Orleans, and Austin, Texas. Congressman Johnson—so the local story goes—had the grants announced in alphabetical order, knowing that recognition of Austin would precede New Orleans and New York (Dugger 1982: 210). Why Austin? "Because," said Leon Keyserling, then deputy administrator of the federal agency, "there was this first term congressman who was so on his toes and so active and so overwhelming that he was up and down our corridors all the time..." Johnson called on Keyserling and said, "Lady Bird and I want you to have cocktails with us"—"How's that?"—"Well, we want Austin to be announced first"—"Well, why first?"—Mayor La Guardia [of New York] might not like that."—"Well, it's the first in the alphabet, isn't it?" (Dugger 1982: 210). Keyserling noted: "...It was his go-getterness that got the first project for Austin" (Unger & Unger: 1999: 71).

The three were announced simultaneously.

According to D.B. Hardeman, longtime assistant to former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn and Johnson biographer, Johnson "was proud of that project and bragged about it all the time and in places where it couldn't have done him the slightest good, only the opposite" (Miller 1980: 73).

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The March 20, 1938 *Sunday Austin American-Statesman*, featured a front page picture of the signing of the initial awards. From left to right the picture (reproduced in this nomination) featured Congressman Lyndon B. Johnson, Vice President John N. Garner (a fellow Texan), Representative Joachim Fernandez of New Orleans, USHA administrator Nathan Straus, and Rep. Henry Steagall of Alabama, the reluctant House sponsor of the legislation.

Some of Austin's principal realtors tried to scuttle the project. They objected to "government competition" in rental property, warning that it would discourage private building and cost the city several million dollars in business activity. They also denied that Austin had "real slums." A past president of the chamber of commerce spoke up against the city going into the rental business since, he said, every American has the right to say where he will live and "if his home is built of license plates, he still retains his independence" (Dugger 1982: 210). They opposed what they considered to be a socialistic undertaking.

In a famous meeting attended by these conservative realtors, Austin Mayor Miller and others, Congressman Johnson vigorously defended the public housing idea. The opponents of the project, he said, were "rent hogs," men who worried that decent, low-cost housing for the poor would replace slum dwellings from which they profited. When one of the realtors flailed the public housing plan (Simon Gillis), Johnson pointed out how many slum units the man owned. Johnson rejected the idea that government was "competing" with business and said "the government is competing with the shacks and hovels and hogsties and all the other foul holes in which the underprivileged have to live" (Dugger 1982: 211).

To back up his assertion, Johnson pointed to a study conducted by the Austin Housing Authority which showed that 1030 out of 1697 houses in East Austin were substandard (the study was largely based on the city's 1934 real property inventory), meaning that they were either in need of major repair, unfit for use, or had no running water or sanitation. The housing authority also prepared maps for the meeting which backed up Johnson's claim that the highest concentration of juvenile delinquency, petty crime, relief families, and diseases like tuberculosis and syphilis were in older areas of town with the poorest housing. The areas with medium and high cost housing showed little evidence of these social and medical blights (Austin Housing Authority 1939).

Johnson also pointed out that Austin's housing did not measure up to national standards: 22.3 percent of all Austin homes were "either in dangerous disrepair or even unfit for habitation" compared with 18.1 percent in 64 other cities around the country. Nationally, one home out of twenty lacked running water; in Austin it was one out of six. Twice as many Austin homes lacked a private toilet as in the 64 sample cities. "If anybody says to you that the people of Austin do not need...[new] dwellings," Johnson concluded, "...take them through the blocks of slums we have, and show them conditions that are a disgrace to Americans in any city" (Dallek 1991: 173).

Johnson also noted that both the federal and state housing laws did not compete with "legitimate private enterprise" (Congressional Record 1938). Johnson pointed out that "express rules against competition [were] written into the United States Housing Act of 1937 and into the Texas Act" (Congressional Record 1938). Johnson was referring to the required 20 percent gap between the upper income limits for admission to public housing projects and the lowest limits at which the private sector provided decent housing.

There was also a political dimension to Johnson's advocacy for public housing in Austin. He had won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in a special election in which Blacks could vote and he carried most of the Black vote (Caro 2002: 735-737). The Black vote in Austin was significant because until the 1960's it represented the principal minority segment in Austin and drew the largest public attention (Orum 1987: 172). As in other southern states, African-

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Austin, Travis County, Texas

Americans had been disenfranchised from voting in Texas primaries for decades. But the special election which Johnson won was a *direct federal* election that bypassed the established Jim Crow primary system in Texas. Johnson saw the new housing act as an ideal means of providing assistance for poor Mexican-American and African-American voters whose political support he actively courted.

Austin's housing agency became the first in the country to complete and lease a unit under the 1937 Housing Act. Its housing was built for only \$2500 a unit compared with a \$4500 national average for similar units, and it provided the lowest rent for the same amount of space available in Texas (Dallek 1991: 173). This figure is impressive considering that Santa Rita Courts' interior appointments were lavish by the standards of the time: the kitchens included a gas range and wood open shelving as well as a gas hot water heater, and the living rooms contained unit gas heaters.

The first family to move into Santa Rita Courts was a family of seven that had been occupying a one room hovel without indoor plumbing or electricity. They now lived in a modern five room housing unit for \$15 a month plus utilities, the same rent they had been paying for their one room hovel. Posing happily with five of the family's Mexican-American children in front of their new home at Santa Rita Courts in 1939, Johnson said "this country won't have to worry about isms when it gives its people a decent, clean place to live and a job, they'll believe in the government—they'll be willing to fight for it" (Dugger 1982: 211).

Santa Rita Courts to the Present

Following passage of the 1949 Housing Act, the Austin Housing Authority authorized the construction of 520 new units of public housing. This resulted in the construction of a 60 unit annex to Santa Rita Courts (not part of this listing) starting in 1951, as well as the construction of two new housing developments, Meadowbrook Courts in South Austin, and Booker T. Washington Terrace in East Austin. The Santa Rita annex was designed by Jessen, Jessen, Millhouse and Greeven, with the firm of Carter & Burgess serving as project engineers. The Yarbrough Construction Company was the contractor, and construction was completed in January of 1954. Both Rosewood and Chalmers Courts had been expanded before Santa Rita, with Rosewood containing 130 units by 1948 and Chalmers containing 159 units, respectively.

The most historically significant aspect of Santa Rita Courts' post-1954 history was its symbolic role in the battle for the desegregation of all housing in Austin. The political battle for the passage of an Austin fair housing ordinance in 1968 involved Santa Rita because it once more pitted the same forces in the battle over public housing in 1937-38 against one another. The losers in the 1937 fight over public housing—the Austin board of realtors and the chamber of commerce (Orum 1987: 251)—again opposed the proposed fair housing ordinance as an encroachment upon private property rights.

Throughout the 1950's and 1960's Austin civil rights activists had fought for the desegregation of public accommodations, against police mistreatment, and for fair and equal access to housing. Like citizens in other southern cities, many prominent Austin business owners adopted a strong anti-desegregation stance. For instance White's Pharmacy at the corner of Sixth and Congress tore out its stools rather than serve Black customers, and Scarbroughs Department Store, also on Congress Ave., completely shut down its restaurant (Orum 1987: 257). Local race relations were profoundly affected by President Johnson's civil rights actions, especially the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and subsequent enactment of the Voting Rights Act and Fair Housing Act in January of 1968. Imminent passage of the federal law immediately desegregated all public housing—one of the more glaring shortfalls of the 1937 Housing Act—and strongly influenced the Austin City Council when it passed a local fair housing ordinance drafted by the city human relations commission in 1967 by a vote of three to two.

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Santa Rita Courts
Austin, Travis County, Texas

The Austin Board of Realtors, as before “dedicated to preserving the right of private property” in a series of advertisements in the *Austin American* declared the new ordinance to be “forced public housing” (Orum 1987: 264) and organized a referendum campaign that successfully overturned the ordinance. After more political wrangling, the issue of open housing in Austin was eventually put to a public vote. The local fair housing ordinance was defeated by a vote of 13,913 to 10,391 in October of 1967. Speaking before the city council several days after the election, local realtor Nelson Puett said that “it was a glorious thing that the people of Austin were able to see what the issue was—the right to private property against those who wanted to dilute the rights of private property” (Orum 1987: 266).

The vote was an indicator that both local and national politics were changing. By 1968 the local Board of Realtors was aided by a rising pro-growth sentiment that by this time was beginning to see the New Deal and civil rights as dated and overreaching. The federal Big Money that Lyndon Johnson and Tom Miller had used to shape Austin’s growth in the 1930’s was now being replaced by private-public entrepreneur lucre and an accompanying spirit that emphasized private as opposed to public endeavors. In a nutshell, the battle was about civil rights versus property rights.

Officially desegregated since 1968, Santa Rita Courts currently houses 97 active units of which 66% percent of the residents are Hispanic, 32% are African-American, and 5% are Caucasian.

Significance Summary

While it is frequently noted that PWA housing was built to a higher and more costly architectural standard (Robinson, vol. 2, et.al. 1999: 40) than USHA housing, it is useful to bear in mind that the primary purpose of the PWA was to produce jobs not to build housing. And “although the PWA limited-dividend housing projects were of high quality, rents were well beyond the means of most low-income families, and only one project complied with the PWA’s objectives of creating new housing while at the same time clearing slum areas” (Lusignan 2002: 37). The political and social battles represented by the passage and subsequent implementation of the 1937 U.S. Housing Act offer a more comprehensive historical window into the relationship between race and class in twentieth century America. The political career of President Johnson furnishes an ideal lens from which to investigate this aspect of federal domestic policy because few—if any—national figures advocated as forcefully and successfully for public housing as Johnson did over so long a time period and at multiple levels of government. Moreover, many of the sensitive political and social concerns associated with public housing remain unresolved and are debated down to the present. It is instructive that contemporary discussions concerning affordable housing policy and public housing’s role in it mostly mirror, sometimes exactly, the same discussions and apprehensions raised in the 1930’s. As the first USHA project Santa Rita Courts embodies those hopes, struggles, and historical memories.

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Austin, Travis County, Texas

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August 31, 1949

The Austin Statesman

June 23, 1938

The Austin Sunday American-Statesman

March 20, 1938
June 25, 1939

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Dec. 17, 1939

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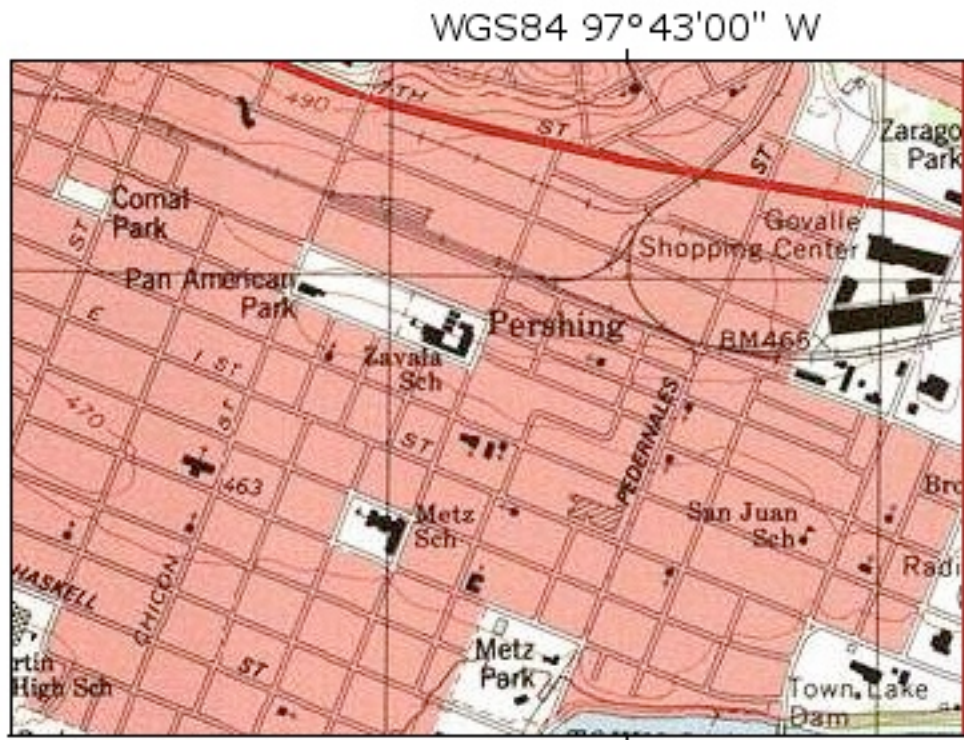
n.d. Bertram Family Papers
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AR.F.007, G.3 (D), (Box 21)


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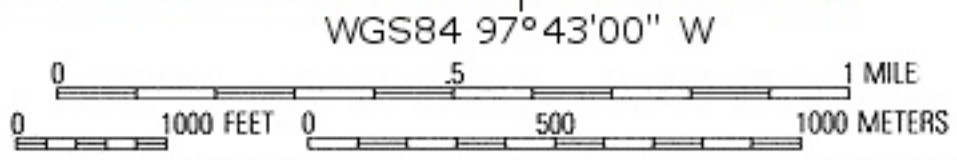
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Santa Rita Courts
Austin, Travis County, Texas



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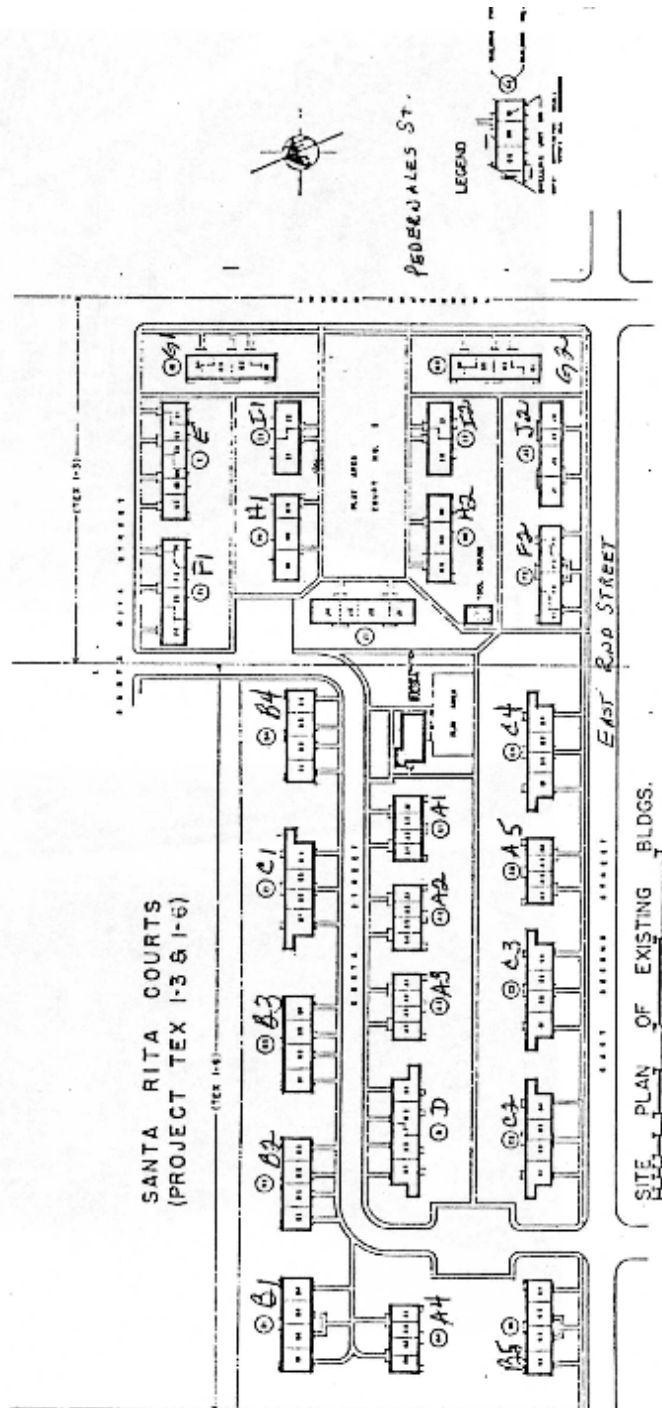


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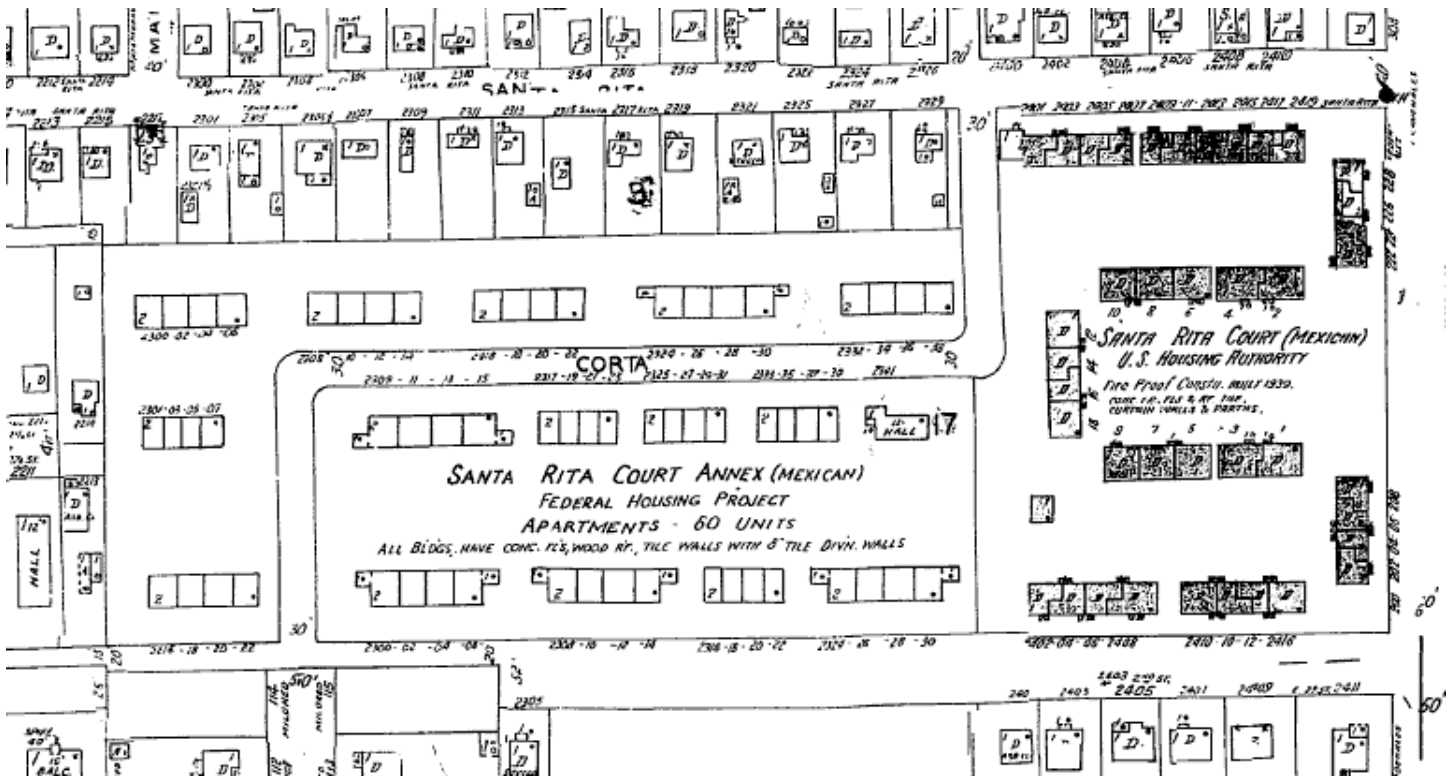
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Sanborn Fire Insurance Map
Austin 1935 vol. 2, 1935-May 1962, Sheet 215



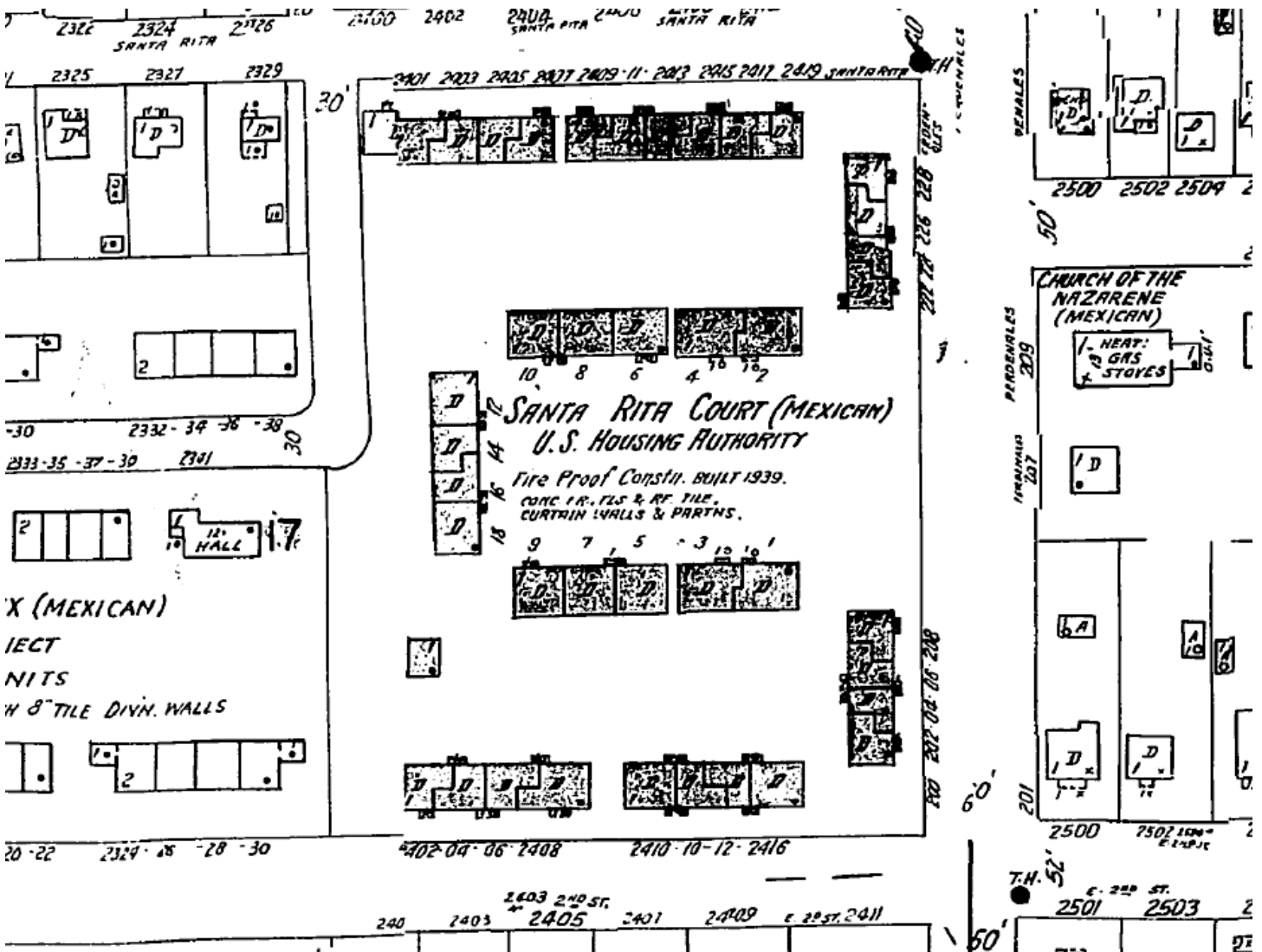
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Sanborn Fire Insurance Map
Austin 1935 vol. 2, 1935-May 1962, Sheet 215



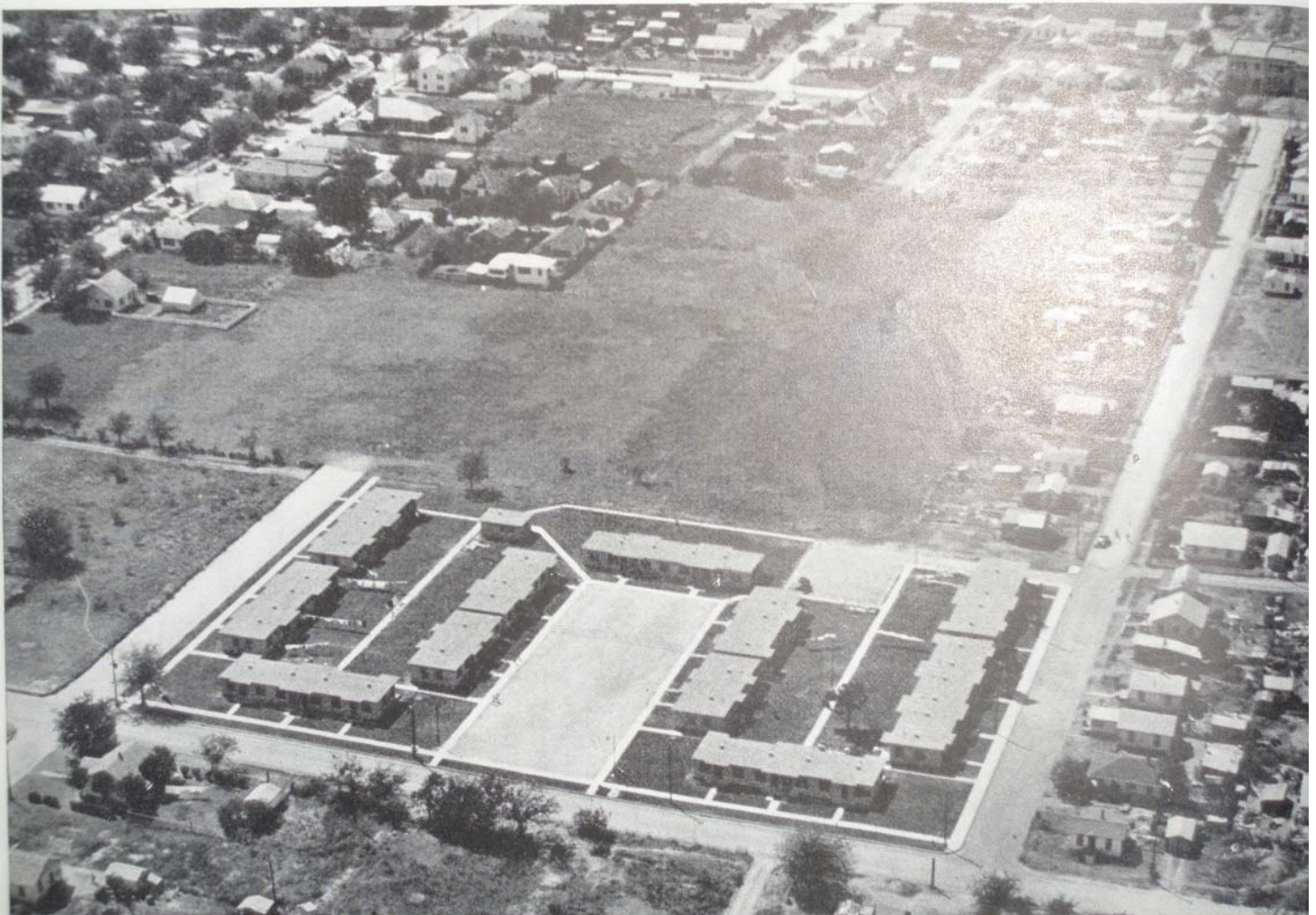
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SANTA RITA, AUSTIN, TEXAS

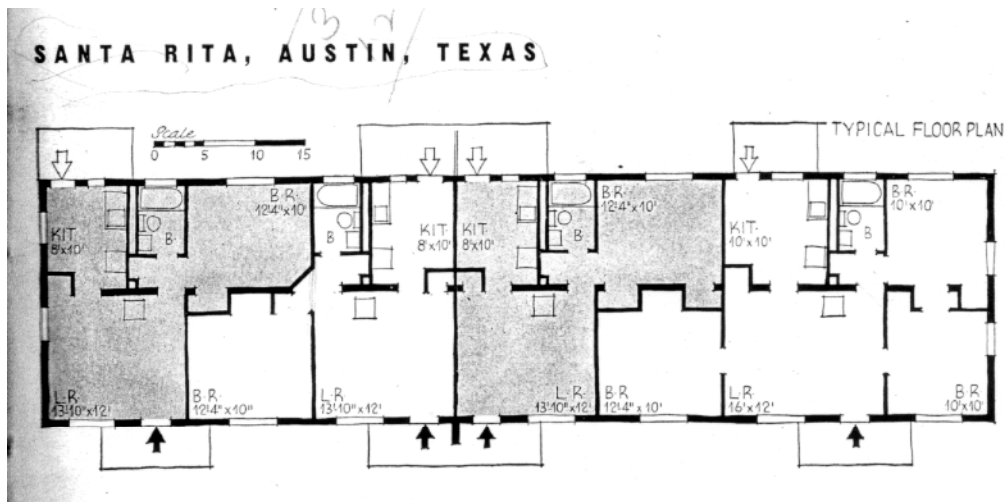
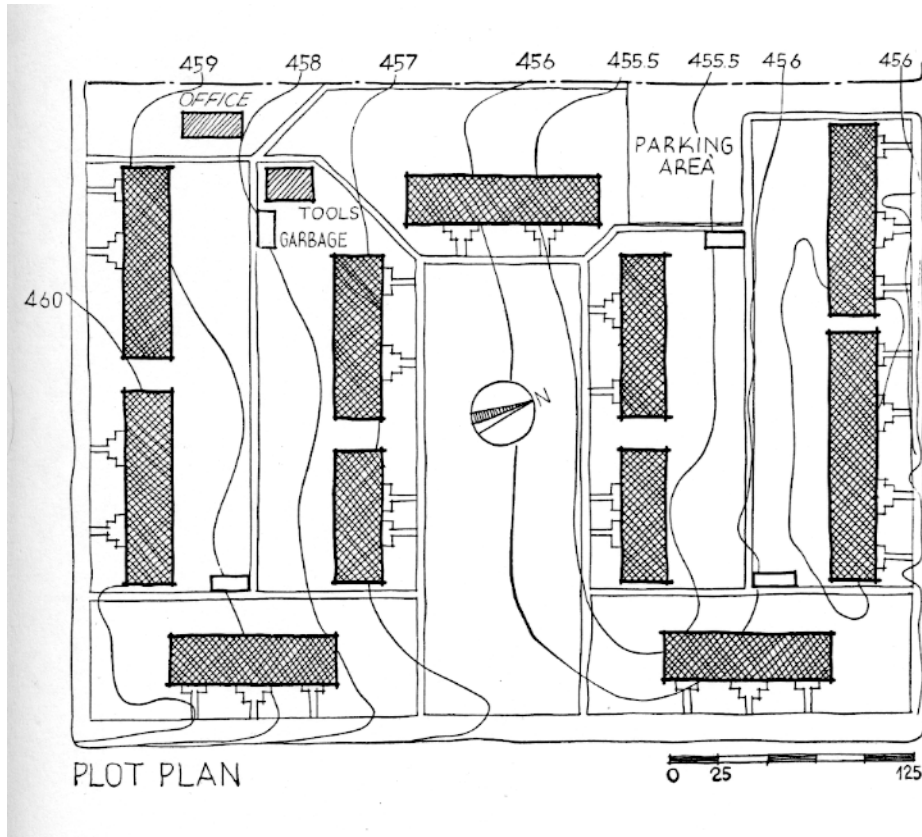


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OTHER
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3 SECTIONS—42 PAGES

AUSTIN, TEXAS, SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 1938

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As Austin Housing Papers Are Signed

Cong. Lynd, the 10th Texas district is Vice Pres. John N. Garner, United States housing auth. Administrator (seated), countersigned the papers for the Austin low cost housing project. Pres. Roosevelt had approved the Austin project and three others a few minutes before this picture was taken. Cong. Johnson is at the left, while at the right of the vice president are Rep. Joachim Fernandez of New Orleans, and Rep. Henry B. Steagall of Alabama.



Associated Press Photo

Citizenry Escaping War City

Rebels Shift Bombing 50 Miles Down The Coast

TRUCE SET IN CAPITOL RAIDS

Half of Population Of City Is Reported Gone to Hills

By the United Press

BARCELONA, March 19.—Thousands of civilians streamed out of Barcelona Saturday night while the nationalists shifted their bombing raids to the Tarragona, 50 miles down the coast.

The war ministry announced officially that the two raids on Tarragona at least 18 persons were killed and 50 injured. Forty buildings were destroyed.

Many Buried

"These figures cannot be considered definite," the ministry said, "because many victims are buried under destroyed buildings."

There have been no raids on Barcelona since 3 p. m. Friday. In 48 hours ending then, an estimated 1,200 persons were killed.

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Santa Rita Courts
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THE WEATHER



Partly
Cloudy
Sunday

Sunday American-Sta

Volume 26.

PRICE 10 CENTS IN AUSTIN

AUSTIN, TEXAS, SUNDAY, JUNE 25, 1939.

Rites For FHA Unit Held Here

Apartment First In
U.S. To Be Taken
Under Plan

2 OTHER UNITS
TO OPEN LATER

15 Mexican Families
Now In; Room
For 40

Proudly 15 Mexican families Saturday night were busy getting themselves settled in spite and span new lodgings,—apartments of Austin's first low-cost housing project to be completed.

With news reel cameras grinding and with officials of the city in attendance, the new housing project of 40 apartments was formally opened Saturday afternoon. The larger white and negro low-cost housing projects are still under construction.

Reared for Johnson
Cong. Lyndon Johnson had set a national record when the first of the sham-clearance suits here received its habitants Saturday.

The Austin housing program was the first presented to the United States housing authority, the first to win federal approval and the allotment of federal money; the first to be started and completed; and is the first in the nation in which

(Continued on page 12, col. 4)

Jones In Key Sp

World's Biggest Money Comes to Texan on Record as R F C Chief

THE world's No. 1 financial job was placed in the hands of a Texan when Pres. Roosevelt made his logical and expected selection of Jesse H. Jones as head of the new federal credit administration.

This appointment called the Texan to a financial post more important than the head of the Bank of England, far greater than the chairman of the federal reserve system or the secretary of the treasury. It in effect made Jesse Jones the leading official to every citizen and to every institution in the United States which shares the direct financial partnership with the government.

Mr. Jones has proven himself in his service as a member and chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. He has proven his service to the nation was one of patriotism and not of politics; and if he does as well the world ahead as in the past, he will bring justice, fairness and opportunity to the humblest citizen who needs his house repaired, and to the largest of the railroads, faced with problems of meeting payrolls and keeping employed their hundreds of thousands of workers.

Above all, the billions of dollars this Texan lends on behalf the government will be lent intelligently.

It is safe to predict that the financial mind of Jesse Jones will carry on the leading division of the government as a profit to the 130 million people of the nation.



JESSE JONES

London Bombings Hike Fear

Explosions Believed Work of Irish Republicans

12 HURT; AREA IS BADLY HURT

One Suspect Taken; Crowd Attempts Lynching

By International News Service
LONDON, (Sunday) June 25.—Five time-bomb explosions, attributed to renewed terrorism by the outlawed Irish republican army, rocked and damaged portions of London's crowded central area during the night, injuring at least 12 persons and throwing thousands into panic.

Three men were seized by police for questioning and one of them, an Irishman, was attacked by an enraged crowd in Piccadilly and was rescued by police with extreme difficulty after being severely man-handled by the indignant people who yelled:

"Lynch him! String him to a lamp post!"

Terror Spreads

A small army of foot and mounted police and reserves established an all-night emergency patrol in London's west end where terror was spreading as a result of the

Japan, Sov Block Sp

Japs Say 3 Air Bases Put Up in Area By Russia

12 MORE SHIPS LOST BY REDS

Jap-Ruled Manchukuo Believed Building Up Forces

By International News Service
TOKYO, (Sunday) June 25.—Reports from the Asiatic mainland Sunday indicated that Soviet and Japanese air and land forces are concentrating and deploying for a major test of strength along the outer Mongolian-Manchukuoan frontiers.

Japanese sources, claiming a fresh victory in which 12 additional red planes were said to have been shot down Saturday, asserted that the Soviets have established three air bases in the Russia-sponsored outer Mongolian republic.

It was assumed the Japanese and the Japanese-controlled Manchukuoan forces were making similar preparations to cope with further large-scale hostilities.

Field dispatches to Tokio declared that 60 Soviet planes crossed the vaguely-defined border Saturday morning and were engaged in battle by an unspecified number of Japanese aircraft, losing 12 planes.

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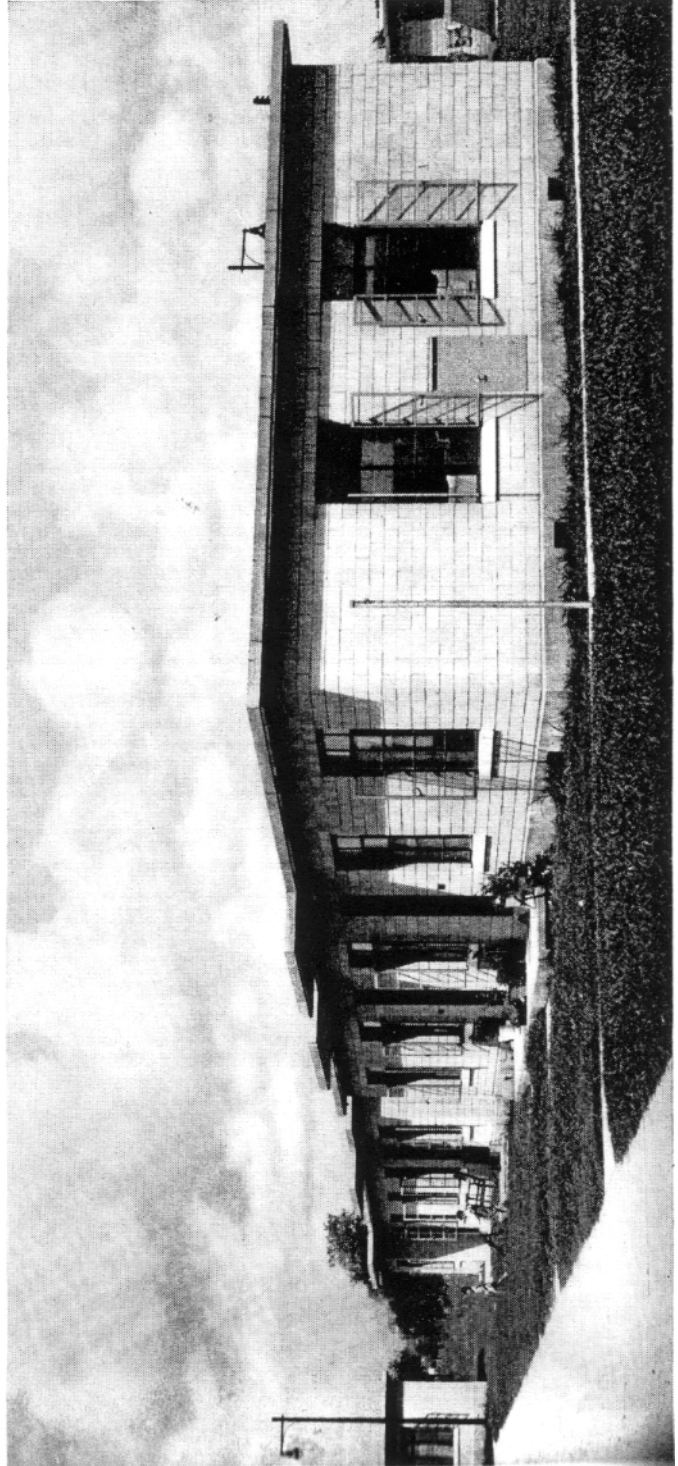
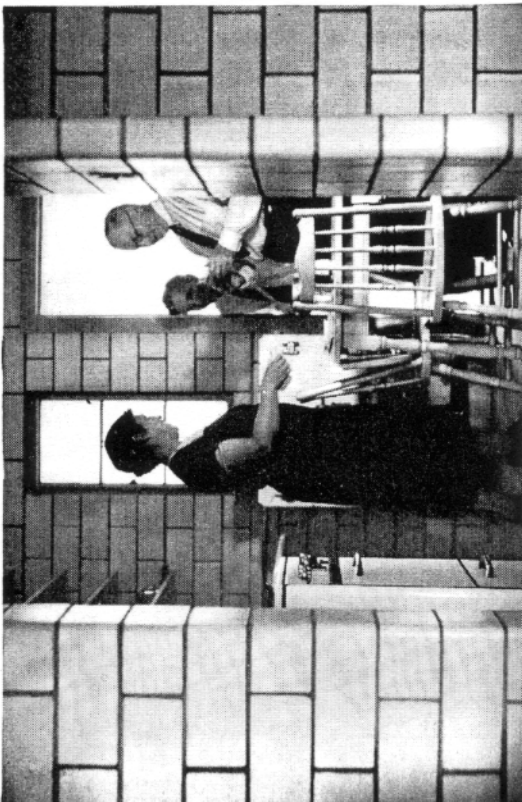
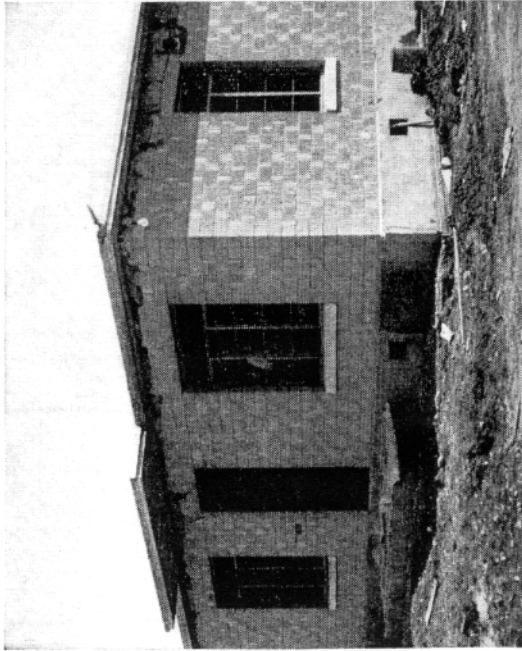
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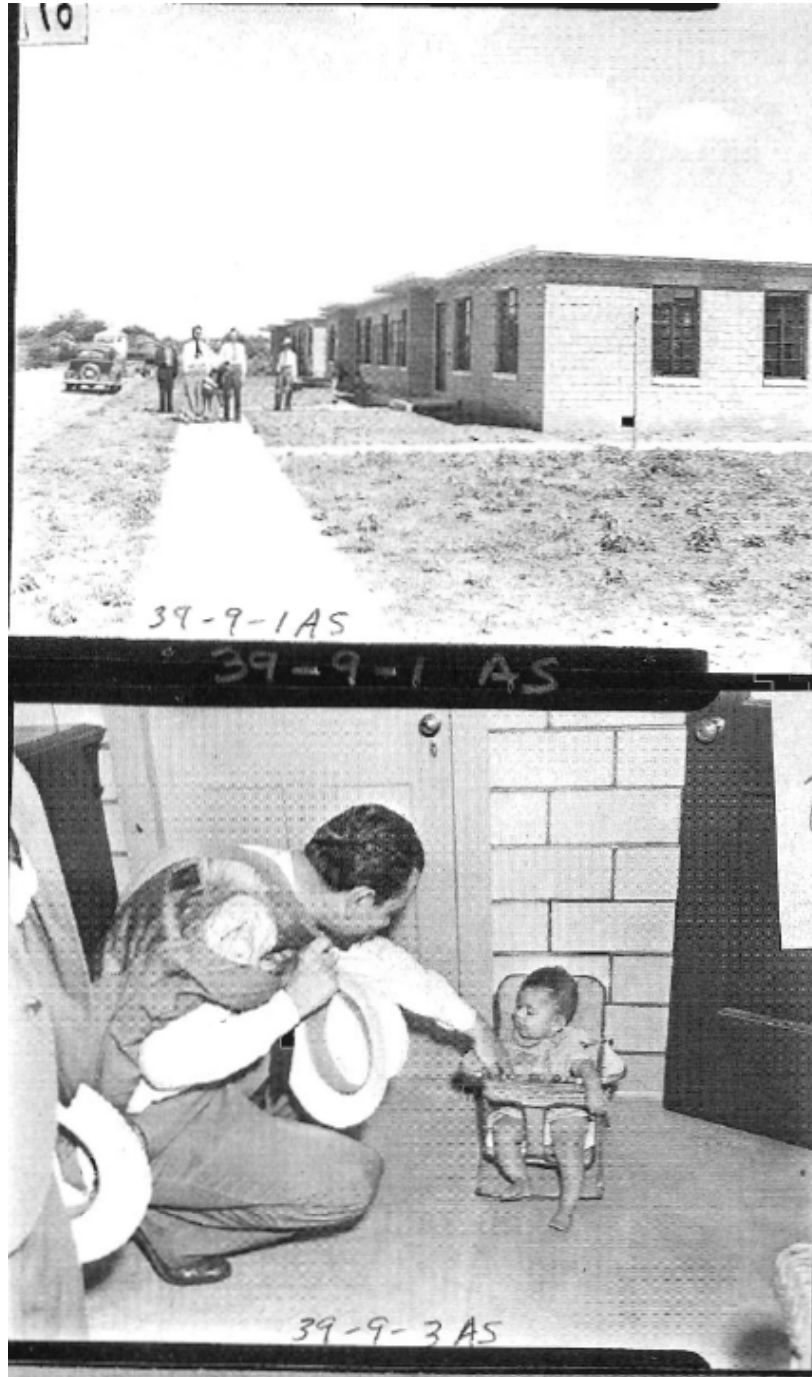


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