

**The Acosta-Taylor House**  
804 North Street, Nacogdoches  
by James E. Corbin and Charles Phillips

Although the Spanish had attempted to colonize their eastern frontier (what is now Texas and Louisiana) as early as 1690-91, they made no really serious attempt until 1721. In 1721-22, the Spanish established a series of six missions and two presidios from the Neches River into present day Louisiana. The western most presidio and civil settlement of Los Adaes was the capital of the province of Texas and Coahuila until 1773. The primary reasons for the settlement, presidios, and missions was to forestall French designs for the area and to Christianize the native Caddo Indians. The missionary portion failed miserably and, with the cessation of hostilities between France and Spain, the Spanish government no longer saw a need for settlements, presidios, and missions on the eastern frontier. Presidio Los Adaes, the civil settlement of Los Adaes, and the remaining missions (Linares at Los Adaes, Dolores dellos Ais, and Guadalupe de los Nacogdoches) were abandoned.

The residents of the pueblo of Los Adaes, many of them born and raised in Los Adaes, were ordered to San Antonio. Although the people asked the government to allow them to establish residence at the Dolores mission or at Nacogdoches, their request was denied and they proceeded to San Antonio. There they found all of the good land taken and that they were not welcome. Don Antonio Gil Y'Barbo, the spokesman for the group, finally persuaded the government to let the Adaesanos form a new town, Bucareli, on the west bank of the Trinity River in 1774. . Paged by Comanches, floods, and finally a fire, the Adaesanos abandoned Bucareli and, under the leadership of Y'Barbo, relocated near the abandoned mission of Nacogdoches in 1779.

One of the returning Adaesanos was Anders de Acosta. Born at Los Adaes in 1744, Andres was accompanied by his young wife, Maria Concepcion Padilla. Eventually, Andres and his family settled on a lot (30 X 53 varas) on the east side of the road leading northward out of the town. The census for the District of Nacogdoches in 1809 notes that Acosta had a wood house (casa de madera; probably a type of vertical construction known as palisado), four horses, one mare, two oxen and three cows. In addition, their family now included three sons, Juan Manuel, Jose Isidro, and Juan Jose de la Cruz. Elsewhere, the census notes that Andres and his sons farmed a large field on the Chabana rancho west of town.

In 1826, Andres de Acosta sold his lot and a house (called a casa fabricada), possibly a different house from the one described in the census) to Joseph Durst for 100 pesos and moved his family to a new rancho on the Attoyac Bayou east of town. Durst, an alcalde of Nacogdoches, eventually sold the house and lot to David Hoffman in 1836, who in turn sold the place to Isaac Watt Burton and William Young Lacy in 1837. In 1838, Burton and Lacy sold to Charles H. Simms. Simms, in 1839, bought an additional portion of land behind and adjoining the original Acosta lot. Bennett Blake bought the property in 1841. Whether Blake lived in the house is unknown, but after owning the property for four years, he sold it to Thomas J. Rusk, who in turn sold it in the same year

to William Ochiltree. The next year (1846), John Blackburn purchased the property, retaining it until 1861. At that time Madison G. Whitaker became the owner until he sold it to Lawrence S. Taylor in 1870.

Taylor, the son of a prominent Nacogdoches resident and signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence, Charles S. Taylor, married Harriet Durst Irion and brought her to live in the house on North Street. When Taylor died in 1926, the property passed to his heirs, who retained the property until 1989. In order to save this important piece of Nacogdoches and Texas heritage, the property was purchased by the Jack and Claudine McKinney Historical Foundation. At that time a long-range plan, including historical, architectural, and archaeological research was created to facilitate the preservation and restoration of the house and grounds.

The existing primary structure on the property is a dwelling which is an excellent example of a simple story-and-a-half hall-and-parlor plan house with an engaged porch and shed rooms. This type of dwelling was constructed throughout the Deep South from the 1820 to 1850. The Acosta-Taylor House evolved from a house with exposed joists and unceiled secondary rooms to a polished town dwelling completely ceiled within. Well proportioned Federal survival mantles on the first floor and Greek revival mantles on the second floor gave the house an air of sophistication. The two panel doors onto the porch have a fine ogee sticking, and the porch, supported by four boxed Doric columns with exaggerated entasis, was finished like a room with flush sheathing and a beaded base board. The crowning feature of the porch is paneled shutters, extremely rare in Texas before the middle of the nineteenth century.

Although the date of the house is difficult to ascertain, it is evident that it was, with the exception of hewn sills and galloping joists on the first floor, constructed of sash sawn material. Later ceilings also utilized sash sawn lumber, while later alterations, including the Greek revival mantles and Doric columns, used circular sawn materials. Local tradition suggests the introduction of circular saws to Nacogdoches county by 1839. Thus, if the *casa fabricata* purchased by Durst in 1826 is a different house from the *casa de madera* listed on the property in 1809, then one could well argue that Andres de Acosta had the original frame house constructed sometime before 1826, presumably after ca. 1820. Of course, if the *casa fabricata* listed in the deed of 1826 is not represented, at least in part by the extant structure, then we could probably attribute its primary construction to at least the Joseph Durst occupation of 1826-1837. In addition, the back of the house is on the parallel to the back of the original Acosta lot, suggesting at least a pre-1839 construction date.

The finer points of the house obviously were added after the Durst occupation and some could be attributed to Bennett Blake, a wealthy and prominent citizen of Nacogdoches.

The archaeological research on the property was conducted by an archeologist grant from the McKinney Historical Foundation. The initial work was conducted in the immediate vicinity of the house in order to discover additional structures associated with

the present building and to facilitate dating the occupation and the age of the building. In addition, the artifacts recovered would give clues as to the various lifestyles represented by the several occupants of the house.

The excavations have corroborated some of the data gleaned from the architectural analysis. The front and side sills were replaced at some time, and it is possible that some or all of the foundation piers were replaced or partially replaced at the same time. All of the piers in place at the time of the acquisition of the property were clearly twentieth century replacements. The only exception may be the fragment of a mill stone recovered from the bottom of the southwest corner pier. An excavation for a foundation pier at the southeast corner of the house is slightly out of line with the present structure, suggesting that the structure may have been moved slightly at some time or that it had slipped from its original foundation, possibly during sill replacement or after sill replacement. In addition, the original foundation for the south chimney does not align with the present house orientation, again suggesting slippage or movement of the structure.

While the south chimney had been set on a dry laid brick footing set well down into the ground, excavations in the vicinity of the north chimney revealed that the chimney had been set on a hard compacted feature at the ground surface. This compacted area was traced southward under the house and appears to be an earthen floor that is smaller in area than the present house. If this feature is indeed a floor, it would most likely be associated with a Spanish style palisado house (constructed of vertical posts set in the ground and plastered with adobe) or a French, style bousillage house (a half-timbered structure of wood and adobe built on the ground or set on a low rock footing or piers). In all likelihood, this floor would be associated primarily with the Acosta occupation and should represent the casa de madera listed in the 1809 census.

The artifacts recovered during the excavations primarily are objects or fragments of objects of ceramic (dishes, etc.), bricks, glass (window glass and bottles, etc.), and metal (mostly iron nails of various types). At this time, most temporally sensitive artifacts are the numerous shreds of ceramic vessels recovered. Eighteenth century Spanish, Mexican, French ceramics are easily distinguished from their English counterparts. Likewise the predominant English ceramics of the first half of the nineteenth century can give us some temporal clues as well. In addition post-Civil War English and American ceramics are easily distinguished from their predecessors.

A few shards of French faience, Mexican majolica, and Chinese import porcelain re[re]semt the veru earliest Euro-occupation of the site (ie, 1780-1800), the Adres de Acosta family. Some sherds of local and/or Mexican Indian manufacture are also probably representative of this occupation. Numerous shards of undecorated, handpainted, and edged English (and, possibly some Dutch wares) creamware and pearlware are also associated with the Acosta occupation. The paucity of French and Mexican earthenwares is consistent with the transient nature of this colonizing group, while the presence of the English creamwares is indicative of the world-wide predominance of the

English ceramic trade in the late eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Abundant shards of later varieties of English transfer-printed and handpainted creamware-pearlwares attest to the pre-Civil War occupation represented by Joseph Durst, Bennett Blake, and John Blackburn. The undecorated American and English whitewares of the post-Civil War period are well represented at the site and probably are associated with the Whitaker and later Lawrence Taylor occupation of the site.

Future plans for the Acosta-Taylor House call for a complete restoration of the house and grounds utilizing combined data from historical, architectural, and archaeological research. The house is unique for its time and place and certainly is the earliest known extant structure in Nacogdoches that remains on its original location. The restoration will evolve eventually into a living museum of early nineteenth century Nacogdoches to further emphasize the diverse and unique cultural heritage of Nacogdoches and East Texas. In addition, the combined historical, architectural, and archaeological approach will stand as a model for future historical restorations in the area.

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