

## **Cassinelli Gin House**

The Cassinelli Gin House is a simple two-story, load-bearing masonry building with gabled-roof; the rectangular structure measures approximately 25' by 50'. Quarry-faced, random-laid limestone was used for the first story and handmade brick in a common bond for the second. The only attempts at decoration are the tooled margins at the building's four corners. Openings are generally constructed with brick segmental arches arranged asymmetrically.

The Cassinelli Gin House is a two-story, masonry, commercial building located near the banks of San Felipe Creek not far from the center of Del Rio, Texas. The design of the structure is in keeping with its utilitarian function, and is devoid of significant ornamental features. The four exterior elevations are irregular in terms of the placement of their fenestration. The first-floor walls are constructed of quarry-faced random ashlar masonry, with the second-story walls being formed of homemade bricks. This contrast in materials is the closest thing to architectural decoration that can be found on the structure.

The four exterior elevations are unique unto themselves, with variations in the fenestration patterns defining each elevation. On the first floor, the west elevation contains a single, large, segmentally arched opening fitted with a pair of arched wooden doors. The second-story contains a pair of segmentally arched window openings placed symmetrically above the large first-floor archway. The east elevation has no openings on the first-floor level. At the southeast corner of the structure there is a limestone pedestal which serves as a landing for the quarter-turn stair that rises up to the second floor of the structure. The second floor of the east elevation is broken by a centrally located doorway, flanked by transoms, which opens onto the exterior staircase. To each side of the doorway is a single segmentally arched window opening.

The south elevation features a pair of segmentally arched window openings on the first floor, with four identical openings on the second-floor wall. The north elevation is perhaps the most asymmetrical of all, with a segmentally arched doorway and two window openings on the first floor, and a doorway and three window openings on the second. The placement of the doorway on the second floor of this elevation is somewhat puzzling, as there is no indication that there was a separate exterior staircase to serve this entrance. The opening is barred on the exterior to prevent persons from accidentally opening the door and walking out.

The interior of the structure was damaged in a fire in 1977, and has since been rehabilitated. Each floor now contains a single large space, with the fire having removed the later partitioning that had been installed when the structure was converted to apartments. The doors and windows are replacements for those lost to the fire, but are based upon the original designs. The very gently sloped roof is covered in standing-seam metal in keeping with the utilitarian character of the structure.

The Cassinelli Gin House contains elements typical of brick and stone commercial structures built by immigrant Italian stonemasons during the turn-of-the-century boom years of Del Rio. The relatively unaltered state of this structure provides an excellent example of techniques employed at that time. The original owner and builder, Giovanni Batista Cassinelli, was a

prominent stonemason and businessman. The second-floor hall housed many of Del Rio's gatherings and social functions during the early decades of this century. Part of Del Rio's historic canal system forms one of the property's boundaries.

G.B. Cassinelli and his partner, John Taini were the best known of Del Rio's immigrant Italian stonemasons. They may have been recruited by an American contractor to build brownstone houses in New York City. Later, Cassinelli worked on U.S. Government projects such as the stone buildings of Fort Clark (1871-1875, NR-1979). He also worked on the Val Verde County Courthouse (1887, Nr-1977). During the 1880s, the railroad came to Del Rio and new settlers arrived to farm well-irrigated fields around San Felipe Creek. Much work was available for stonemasons building the structures of a growing town. Generally, the stonemasons found wives from among recently immigrated Italian farm families.

Cassinelli became a successful businessman, operating a general store in addition to contracting. In 1903, he purchased the land on which the gin house stands, and had completed it by 1908, when he mortgaged both land and building. Cotton production increased tremendously in Texas during 1880 to 1900, and was probably the major reason for building the gin. However, the venture was apparently not successful, because of competition from other cotton gins and local production problems.

The mixture of stone and brick on the building's facade is peculiar. It may be due to economy or availability of materials. Due to the remote location and functional character of the building, appearance was not a primary concern. The first floor originally housed cotton-ginning equipment. The second floor was used for receptions and dances, at least from 1909 until the late 1920s. By the early 1930s, the upper floor had been converted into an apartment, reflecting the national need for inexpensive housing during the Depressin years. In 1952, the entire structure became a single residence, and a homestead exemption was filed.

The gin building was also close to a ford of the San Felipe Creek and downstream from a hydro-electric dam. The reservoir was a popular swimming hole. Del Rio's historic canals (1870s) surround the property. Old San Felipe Ditch and the larger main San Felipe Canal roughly form western and eastern boundaries. This irrigation system was responsible for fertile fields which drew early settlers.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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