



# Guerrero Viejo History Suspended In Time

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**A**ntigua Ciudad Guerrero, better known as Guerrero Viejo, is a ghost town. Built during the colonial period on the border between what are now Tamaulipas and Texas, the city was abandoned in the mid-twentieth century and then submerged under the lake created by the International Falcon Dam.

Guerrero Viejo (previously known as Revilla) was founded as part of the colonization of Nuevo Santander (today known as Tamaulipas) by José

de Escandón in the mid-eighteenth century. For almost 200 years, the Spanish had not been able to penetrate the northeastern part of the land they conquered in 1521, a region inhabited by warring-hunting tribes in the Huasteca region. Even when they managed to create settlements in northern territories like Nuevo Reyno de León, Coahuila and Texas, most of Nuevo Santander remained outside their control. In addition to the problem of the local warring tribes, there was an external risk factor: during the second half of the eighteenth century, the French took over the Louisiana or Mobile territory, subjugating several indigenous tribes. This allowed them to penetrate

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Photos by Gustavo Ramírez.

Texas, part of New Spain, where they confronted the Spanish. This was of concern to the authorities in Mexico, who clearly saw the risk of losing Texas to the French. For this reason, the viceroy commissioned Colonel José de Escandón, the Count of Sierra Gorda, to “pacify and colonize” the Seno Mexicano coast. Escandón had distinguished himself in the military actions that procured the vicerealty control over Querétaro’s Sierra Gorda region.

In 1748, accompanied by more than 2,500 colonists from Querétaro, Nuevo Reyno de León and elsewhere and 750 soldiers, Escandón undertook one of the most fabulous colonizing efforts in the last years of the colonial period. Revilla, founded October 10, 1750, would be one of the six Villas del Norte (or “towns of the North”), together with Laredo, Hacienda de Dolores, Mier, Camargo and Reynosa, which marked Nuevo Santander’s real

border. The town was named after the then-viceroy of New Spain, Juan Francisco de Güemes y Horcasitas, the first Count of Revillagigedo. The town would change location three times until it was definitively established in 1754 on the right bank of the Salado River, very near to where it joined the Rio Grande.

At the end of the eighteenth century, groups of Indians from the North American plains, pushed by the advance of white settlers, put an end to the peaceful life of the Villas del Norte. Apaches and Comanches kept the population in check for more than a century, forcing the inhabitants to defend themselves. Thus, some ranches like San Ignacio (across from Revilla on the left bank of the Rio Grande) built fortifications.

Its geographical location encouraged thoughts of independence: far from the center of the vice-

One of the outstanding buildings is the Church of Our Lady of Refuge, which began construction in the last days of colonial times, and later incorporated elements from other periods and styles.



royalty, with no ports for communication or commerce and overwhelmed by taxes imposed by the regional criollo elites, the *villas* joined the national unrest that led to independence from New Spain. From that environment of unrest in Revilla emerged figures of the stature of the brothers José Bernardo and José Antonio Gutiérrez de Lara. The former was commissioned by founding father Miguel Hidalgo to negotiate with the United States for a loan to purchase arms and munitions. He also distinguished



himself in the insurgency in Texas while serving as the first constitutional governor of Tamaulipas. José Antonio, for his part, represented Nuevo Santander province in the first National Constituent Congress and was president of the Local Legislative Assembly that met in Padilla, Tamaulipas, which ordered the execution of the former emperor, Agustín de Iturbide. José Antonio was Iturbide's confessor.

After independence and the passing of the 1824 Constitution, Nuevo Santander became the Free, Sovereign State of Las Tamaulipas. In 1827, in an attempt to leave behind its colonial past, Revilla was renamed Guerrero and was recognized as a city.

When the country adopted a centralist regime, Tamaulipas and particularly the Villas del Norte were the seat of profound federalist feelings. The border towns saw the rise of a radical movement from 1838 to 1840, based in Guerrero. The northern federalists headed by José María Carbajal, Juan Nepomuceno Molano, Antonio Canales and Antonio Zapata (originally from Guerrero) sought support from Texas, giving rise to their movement being called separatist and accused of wanting to create a supposed Rio Grande Republic.

In 1839, federalist troops occupied Guerrero and a year later, set up a "provisional government of the eastern departments," presided over by Jesús Cárdenas, which published a government newspaper, the *Correo del Río Bravo Norte* (North Río Grande Courier). The northern federalists were finally defeated; Antonio Zapata was shot and his head exhibited outside his home as a warning to Guerrero residents.

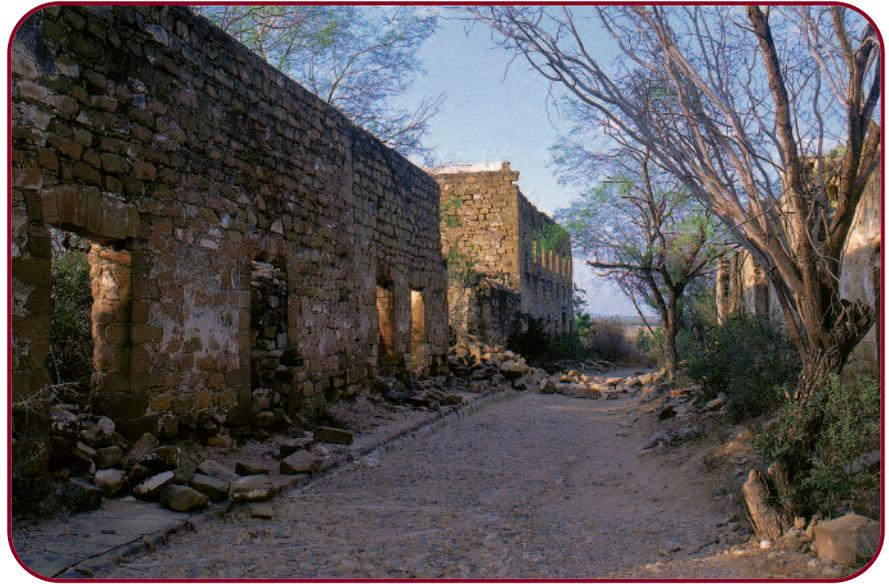
For Guerrero, like the rest of the Northern District, the war of 1846 was an intense experience that included occupation by U.S. troops. The loss of the Franja del Nueces and the establishment of the new border along the Rio Grande had a profound impact on the region. The disproportion between the Villas del Norte and the new Texan towns on the left bank of the Rio Grande created a tense climate.

Plagued by high tariffs, distance and lack of communication with the country's center, residents insistently demanded the creation of a free-trade zone, which they achieved in 1858. This gave rise to heavy trade and a boom for Matamoros; the Villas del Norte were the natural inland area for the trade generated, while, at the other end, the city of Monterrey became the zone's marketplace.

Guerrero's prosperity of that period, when steamboats went up the Rio Grande to Mier-Roma, ended in the late nineteenth century when the railroad that joined Mexico City to Nuevo Laredo side-stepped the rest of the border towns.

Once again the site of clashes between federal and revolutionary forces, the town of Guerrero joined the great armed movement of 1910. In March 1914, General Gustavo Guardiola took over

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Ciudad Guerrero, but shortly thereafter was defeated by Constitutionalist Generals Jesús Carranza and Antonio I. Villarreal.

In 1944, the signing of the Treaty of Borders and Waters by Mexico and the United States would seal Guerrero's fate: to regulate the Rio Grande, it was agreed that the Falcon International Dam would be built, flooding the city.

#### ARCHITECTURE AND MONUMENTS

The great drought that has plagued Mexico's Northeast for just over 20 years lowered the dam's waters considerably, revealing the ruins of a city that still preserves almost 1,000 extraordinary stone buildings. Isolated from Central Mexico, Guerrero developed a characteristic architecture in sandstone, anachronistically using eighteenth-century styles in the middle of the nineteenth century. Its facades are splendidly decorated with lintels, cornices, frames and carved stone sidewalks. Water fountains in the shape of baptismal fonts are veritable works of art and a contribution to Latin American architecture. Wrought iron was used to cover windows and balconies, create railings and protect tombs in the old graveyard. One of the outstanding buildings is the

Church of Our Lady of Refuge, which began construction in the last days of colonial times, and later incorporated elements from other periods and styles, giving the building strength, beauty and personality. Its 15 x 30-meter rectangular lay-out is like a basilica with three naves separated by columns linked by semi-circular arches above which rise the walls crowning the central nave. It was covered with a flat roof over wood beams, nine meters high in the main nave and 5.5 meters high in the side naves. Three doors crowned with semi-circular arches grace its beautiful facade. The central door is flanked by smooth sandstone columns reaching up to a long frieze decorated with triglyphs and a molded cornice. Atop this is a large belfry with three windows and sandstone voussoirs.

This church, originally dedicated to Saint Ignatius of Loyola is considered Tamaulipas's most important religious monument. In 1998 work was begun to restore it, the first step in the recovery of one of the most important areas of monuments in Mexico's Northeast. Other important monuments are the old market or *parián*, the graveyard, the home of the Gutiérrez de Lara brothers, the customs house and the Flores Hotel.

Today, Guerrero Viejo testifies to the greatness of the architecture of a town suspended in time. **MM**