



2021

CHRISTOPHER
OLIVAREZ

RE-SIGNIFYING THE OLD NUENCES
COUNTY COURTHOUSE

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2020 - 2021 Graduate Thesis

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This project could not have been completed without the love and support from my family and close friends. Words cannot begin to describe how grateful I am for the continuous uplifting encouragement I receive from you on a daily basis.

A special thanks goes out to Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi Special Collections and Archives, Mary and Jeff Bell Library for providing me access to the important documents of the courthouse.

For my parents and grandparents:

Mom and Dad, for as long as I could remember, I was so eager to hear your stories about growing up in Corpus Christi, especially the ones passed down from your parents to you. It truly is a luxury to have that connection to past generations, because as this research demonstrates, it is these intangibles that are of the most vulnerable traits that could easily be forgotten.

To my chair, Marcelo Lopez-Dinardi:

You supported and pushed me to explore my gut-feeling attitudes towards this project from the beginning. Your guidance helped me navigate approaches to Historic Preservation from a very inclusive perspective. Throughout Graduate School, our discussions made a significant impact on my outlook towards architecture, and helped me push my design strengths to new boundaries. You reminded me to never stop learning.

To Dr. Brent Fortenberry:

Your insights and suggestions were always embraced with full attention. From your guidance to breaking down and analyzing the small details of a historically significant site like in Bermuda, to getting a hands on experience of archiving the material details of a historic building. You reminded me of the significance details.

To Dr. Chanam Lee:

Your comments and suggestions during my reviews echoed and reinforced my attention to the surround site of the building, to experiment with authentic connections of the user's experience to the environment. You helped me consider unique aspects of design.

To my studio professor, Ray Holliday:

Your patience and moral support cannot be ignored. Whenever I ran into a mental brick wall, you were understanding, supportive, and that managed to push me forward every single time. Thank you.

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Before I take you on this journey, I would like for you to try and see my vision of the project through the lens of the design intentions. To first and foremost, understand the decisions made as responses to this research.

At specific moments in this book, the black page interrupts the story, abruptly. This is an attempt to encourage you to reflect, and digest the research, with the hope of having you facilitate your own dialogue with the same information that I discovered.

Perhaps you would agree, perhaps you would disagree; the intention is to advocate for an awareness of not only the specific issue that the Old Nueces County Courthouse is facing, but to approach the concept of Historic Preservation and conservation in a unique manner.

This is intended to act as a space for contemplation.

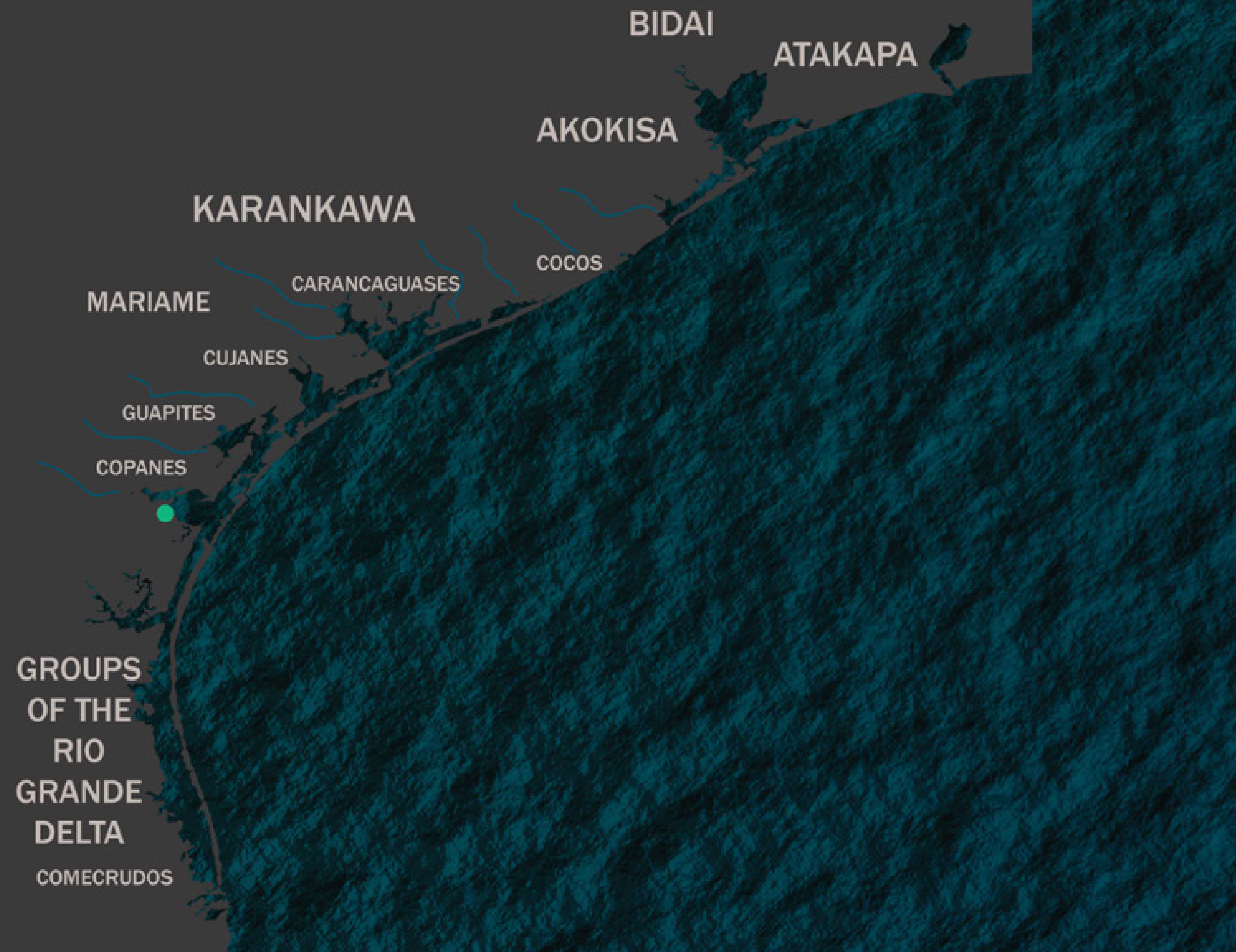


The project seeks to explore ideas that address the engagement that individuals have with historically charged buildings or monuments of their recent past. It focuses on the re-signification of an abandoned courthouse as a byproduct for the treatment of the site and its position as a potential bystander to the opening of newly acquired space replacing a large public infrastructural monument.

The dynamic factors surrounding the courthouse present a unique opportunity for architecture to explore. Situated in between a growing urban and industrial center, the neglected condition of the building is also a physical embodiment of the decaying state of some of Corpus Christi's oldest neighborhoods, which currently stand as some of the last remaining monuments that thrived in conjunction with the courthouse. The dissociation of the building on site to the landscape is evident to both residents, local officials, and even tourists. The imminent removal of the hovering expressways will ultimately highlight this effect in the future.

Therefore, the site intends to further support the community as a bridge for the residents of Corpus Christi's northside to the downtown area, which in itself is a connection to the rest of the city and even foreign travelers. The strict nature of the courthouse's presence will be juxtaposed within the site to demonstrate the evolution and progression of the landscape over time. When passing through this cultural hub, visitors will hope to experience and absorb aspects of what brings the residents of Corpus Christi together.

The initial motivations influencing this approach to preservation stem from the intent to not treat the site as memorial; that it should be untouched, left as is. The project intends to celebrate community. The approach of intervention intends to guide us towards Re-Signification.



THE EARLIEST TEXANS

Before the arrival of European Conquerors to the central Texas Gulf Coast in the 16th and 17th centuries, the name given to the handful of native groups who shared a common language and culture in this region was the *Karankawa*.

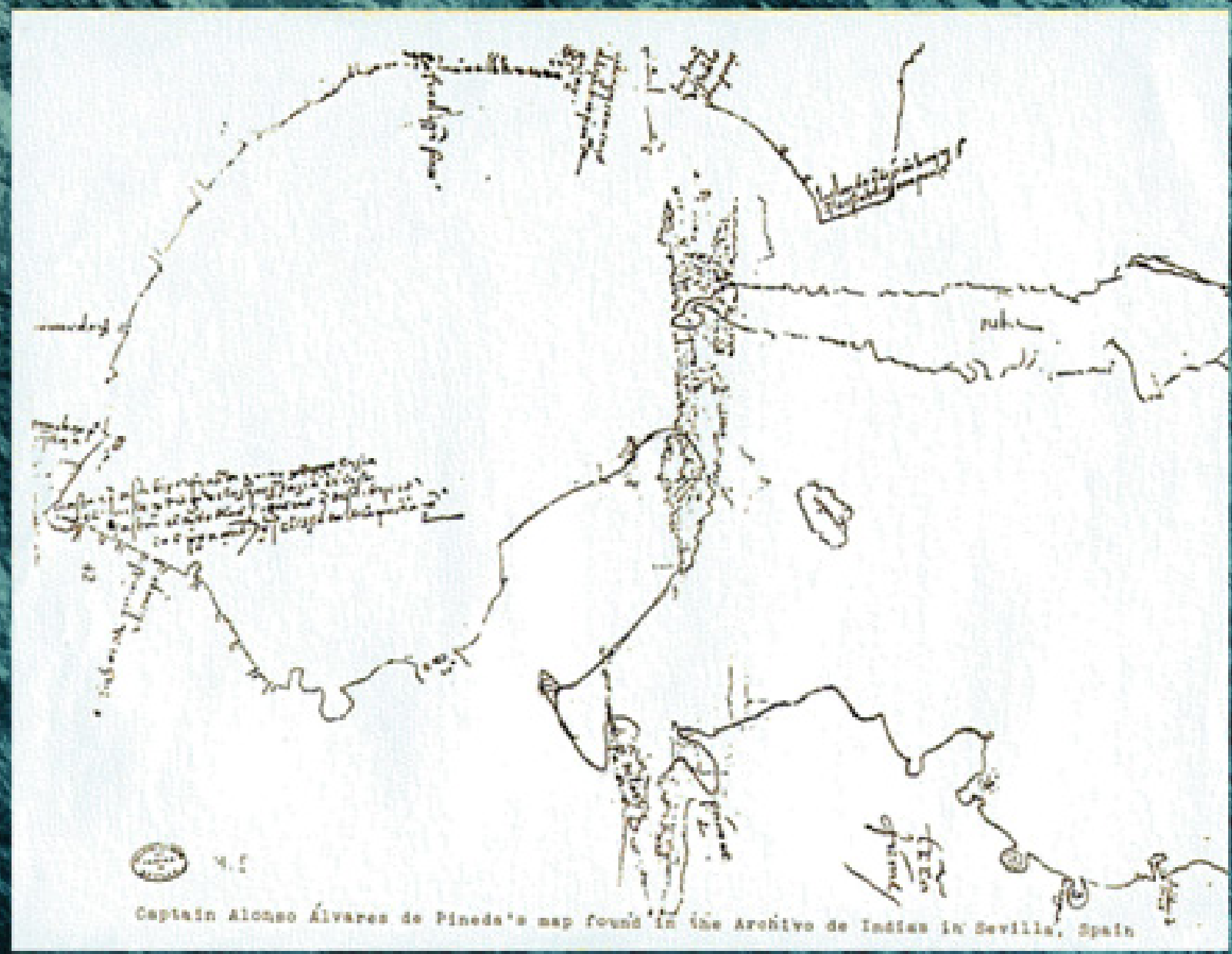
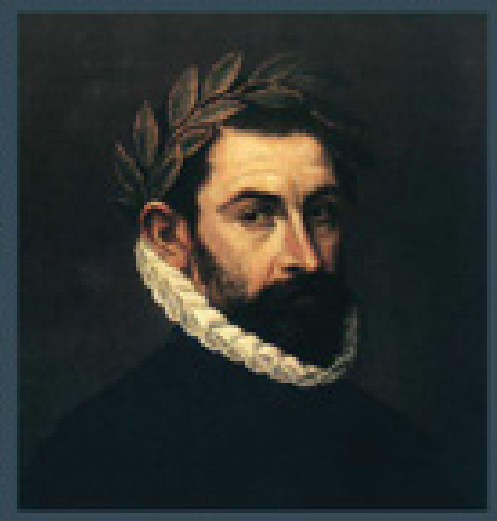
The Karankawa are believed to have lived a mobile-based lifestyle. Research indicates they migrated seasonally from further inland, to the coastal bluffs and barrier islands as long as resources became available.

During the Spring and Summer months, they were known to spend their time inland hunting deer and buffalo and also gathering roots. For the Fall and Winter months, they were known to make their way towards the coastal regions in order to harvest fish, and shells for tools. Temporary huts were constructed out of brush and other local materials that could be assembled and disassembled conveniently to assist a mobile lifestyle.

Native peoples of Texas relied on “oral traditions to explain their presence” and stories of origin for their respective band they identified with. Some believe their ancestors emerged from underneath the landscape, illustrating a deeper bond between themselves and the earth. To the Native, every physical thing possesses a spirit, or an essence, and the same goes for celestial objects in their view.
(La Vere, 2004)

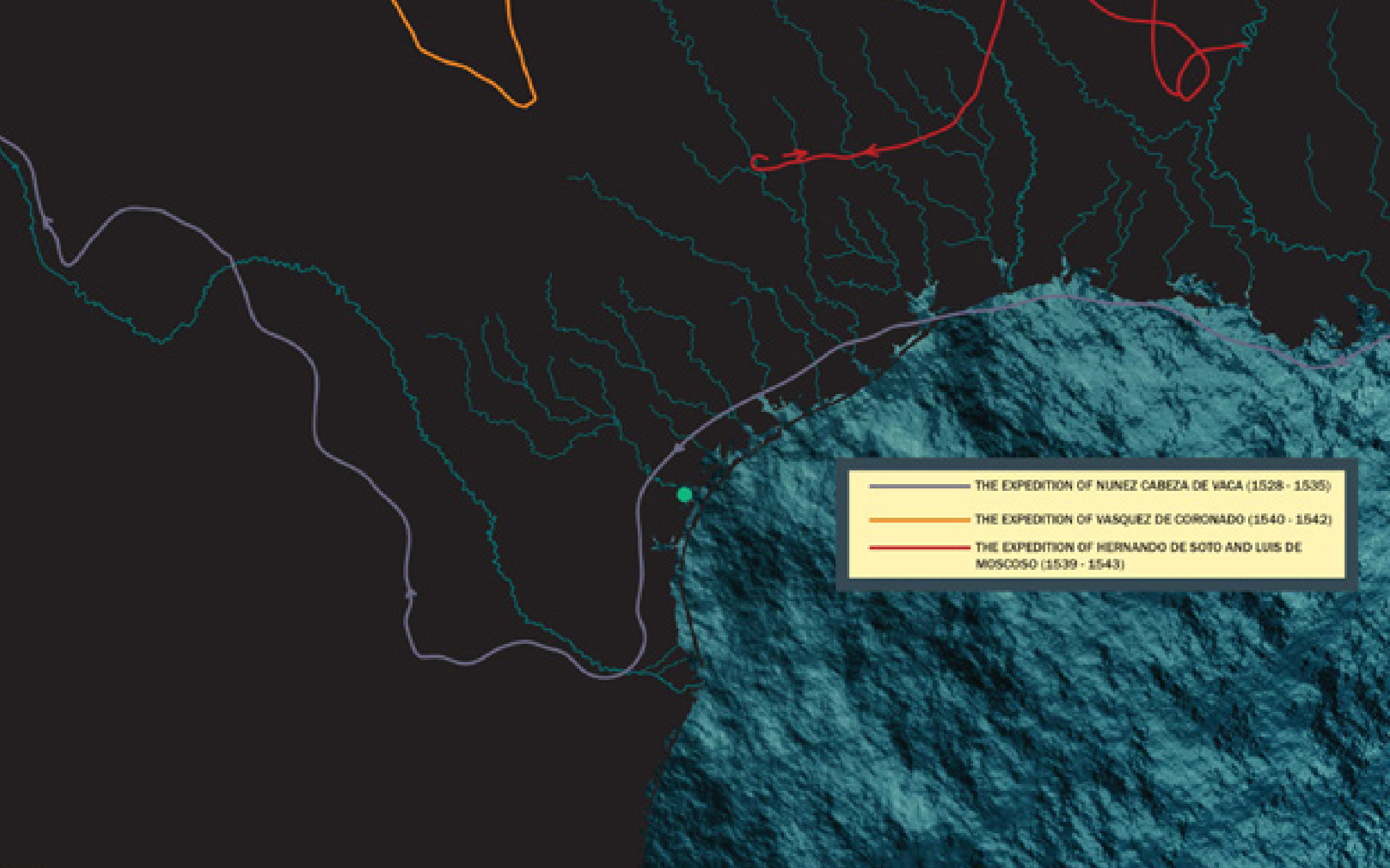


Artifacts recovered among the regions belonging to Karankawa, and other Native groups of the Coastal Praries and Marshlands



In June, Alonzo Alvarez de Piñeda travels into Baffin Bay on the day of the feast of Corpus Christi. From this moment on, Corpus Christi became the common name used by "travevlers" to this region.

The map above is one of the earliest known surviving maps first showing in detail the coastlines of the Gulf of Mexico by Alonzo Alvarez de Piñeda. Corpus Christi Bay, although not identified, should be located somewhere around the noth central region of the far western coastlines of the Gulf, on the upper-mid left side of the map.



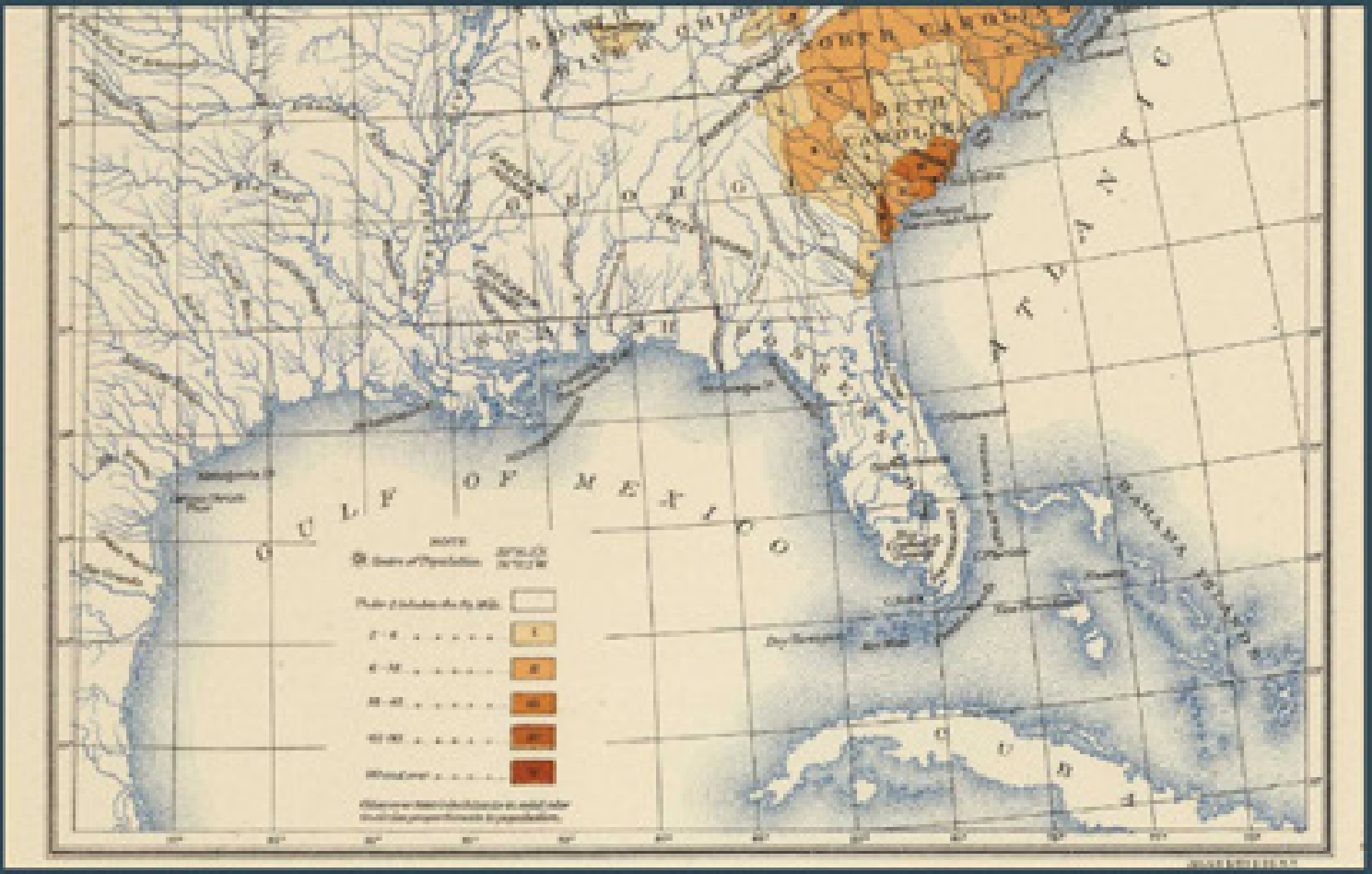
The following decades begin to illustrate the roots of the European footprint on North American soil. While the details surrounding the *expeditions* of these particular Conquistadores are unique, the rippling effects of these documented experiences also mark the beginning of a constructed prejudice towards the local inhabitants that they encountered. The writings of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca describing his days along this route are among a few of the earliest known accounts of Indigenous North Americans recorded in history. However, he did not begin to write about these encounters until many years later, only after he sailed back to Spain, relying only on his memory to recall these accounts.

All of these routes are the subject of much debate among historians. The three presented here are general approximations based off historical maps.

For much of the next two centuries, Spain's presence on the rest of the globe nears its zenith. In Texas, the Spanish Royal Roads are used to connect established missions and presidios strategically placed throughout the landscape. The roads notably follow similar paths of the conquistadores from the 16th Century. This stretch of colonization directly impacts the lifestyle of the Karankawa, as the roads and settlements cut in between their seasonal routes from inland hunting to coastal fishing.

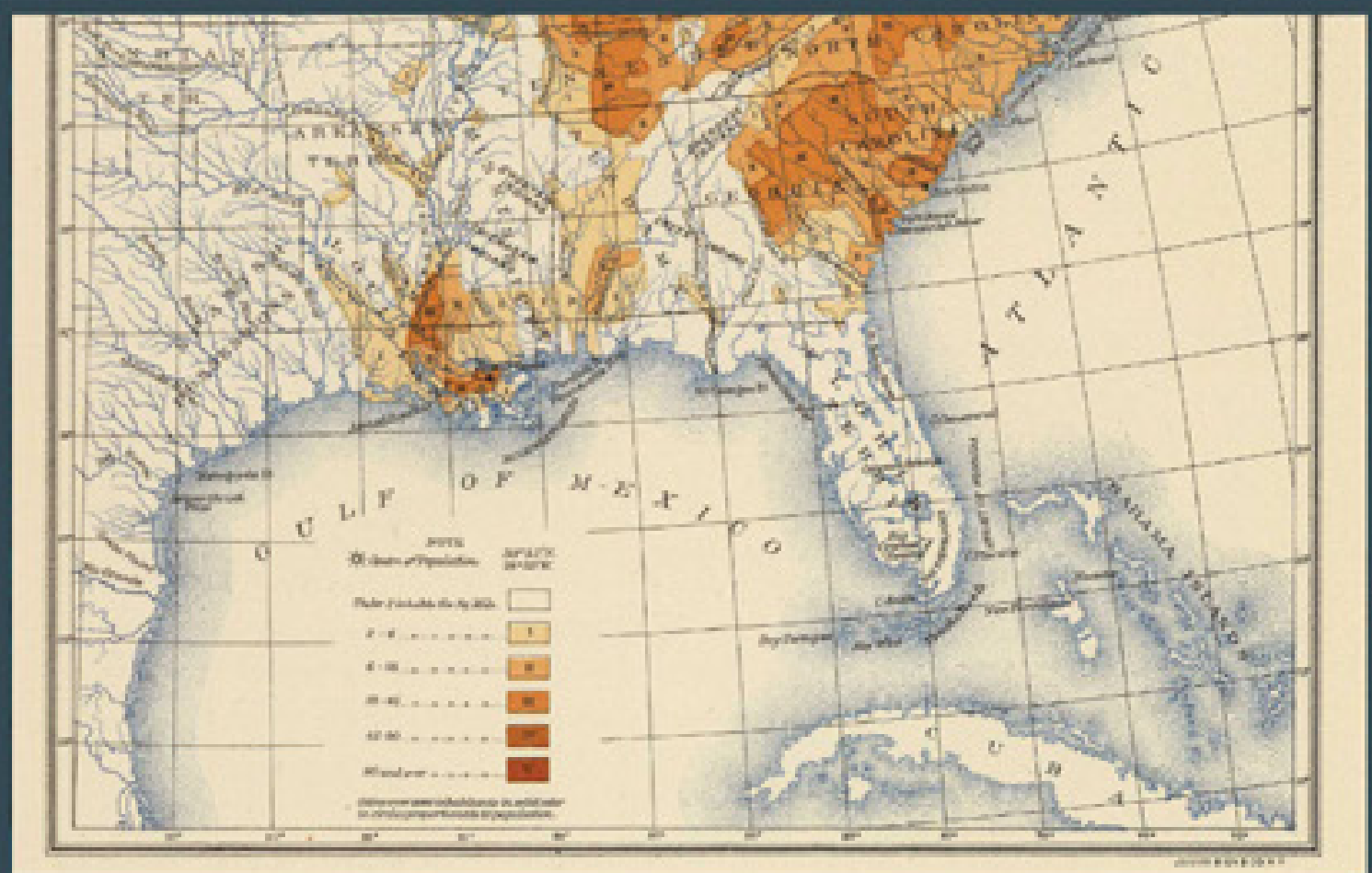
Spanish influence at this point is cemented throughout the landscape. Missions and Presidios are now the beacons that harbor the agencies of the ongoing 'ethnic cleansing' promoted and carried out by Catholic Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits. This map intends to examine the relationship of the networks of Virreinato de Nueva España using Catholicism as a means of infrastructural guidance for expansion.

A few decades after the independence of the United States of America, we can start to see the wave of westward expansion shaping out. The agents of colonization in North America are nearing the crossroads of their expansion. In the middle of all of this territory gain, the maps also tell the story of indigeneous homelands being lost, seemingly forever. The sweeping col- orization of of the maps also indicate the positions of displacement for these people over time.

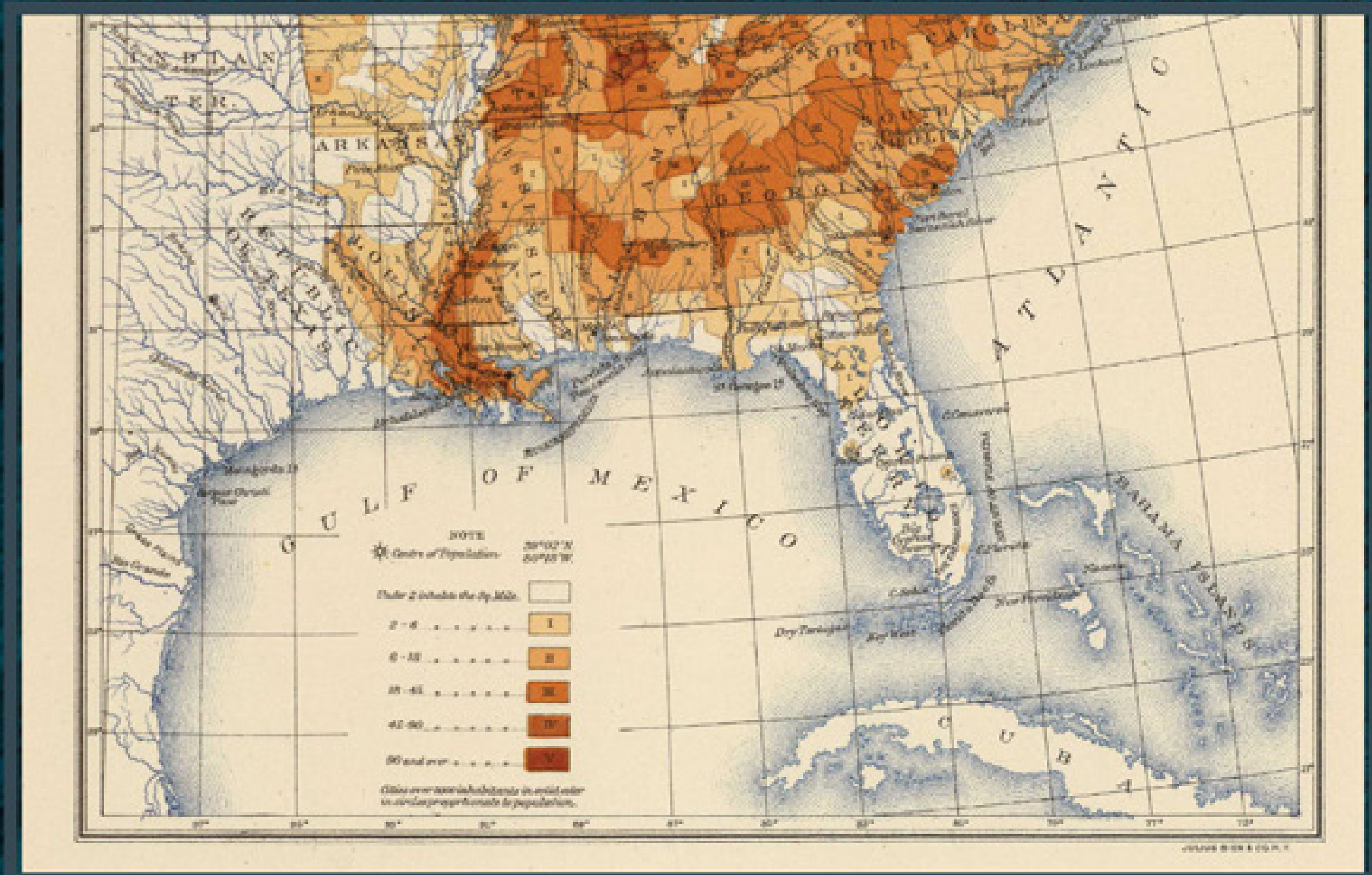
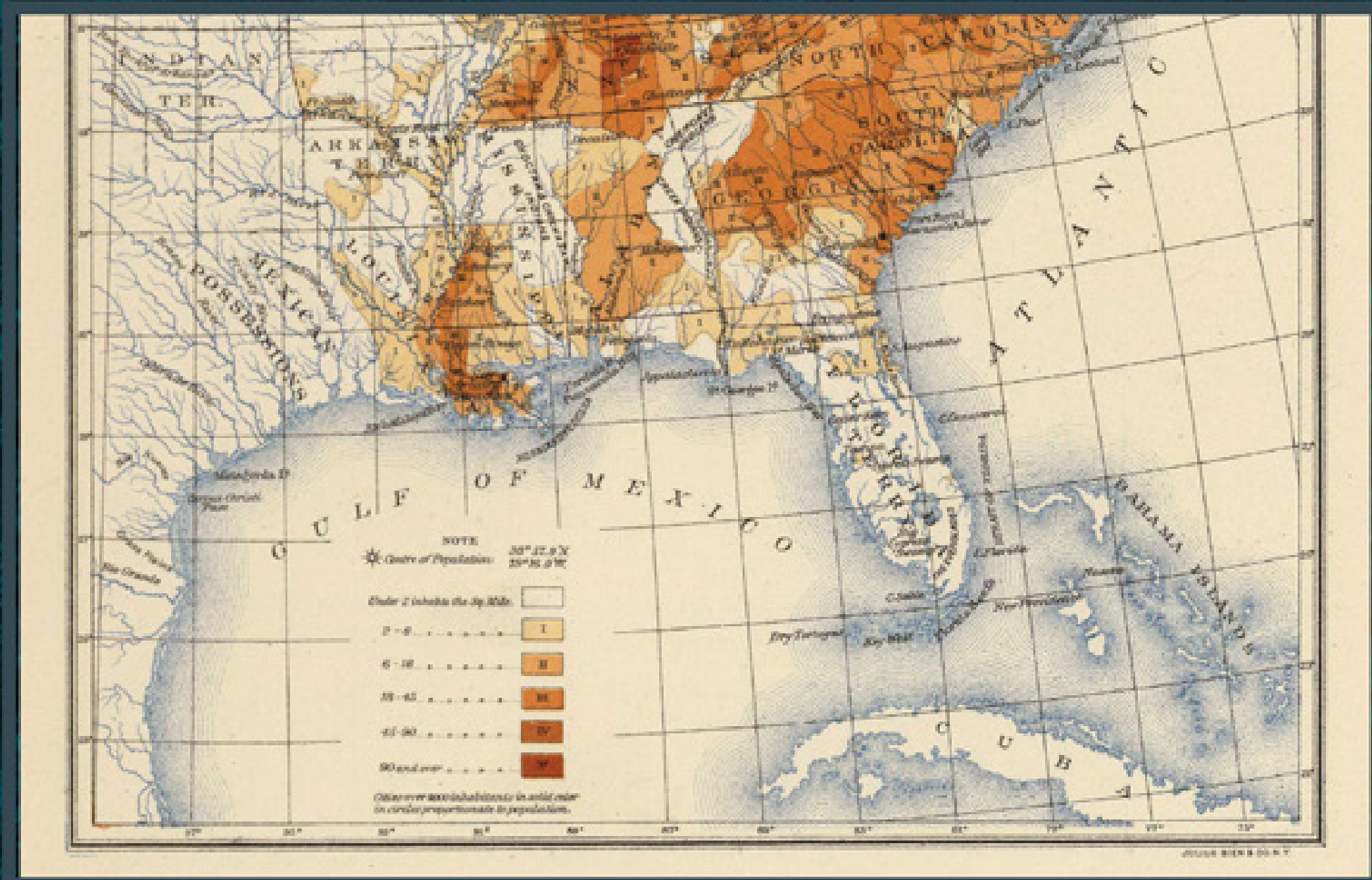


1790 - 1800 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY

Gradually, we can start to see the population density of The United States converging around the Mississippi River and New Orleans. The Louisiana Purchase gave the U.S. access to the Gulf Of Mexico directly from other parts of the north through total access of the Mississippi River. The preemptive right to claim more Na- tive American lands was another result of this expansion, furthering the displacement of the in- digenous population.



1810 - 1820 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY



1830 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY

1840 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY

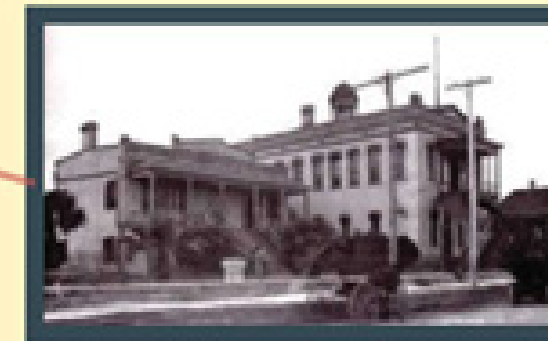
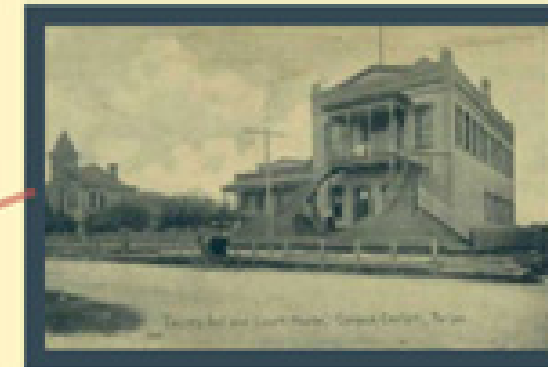
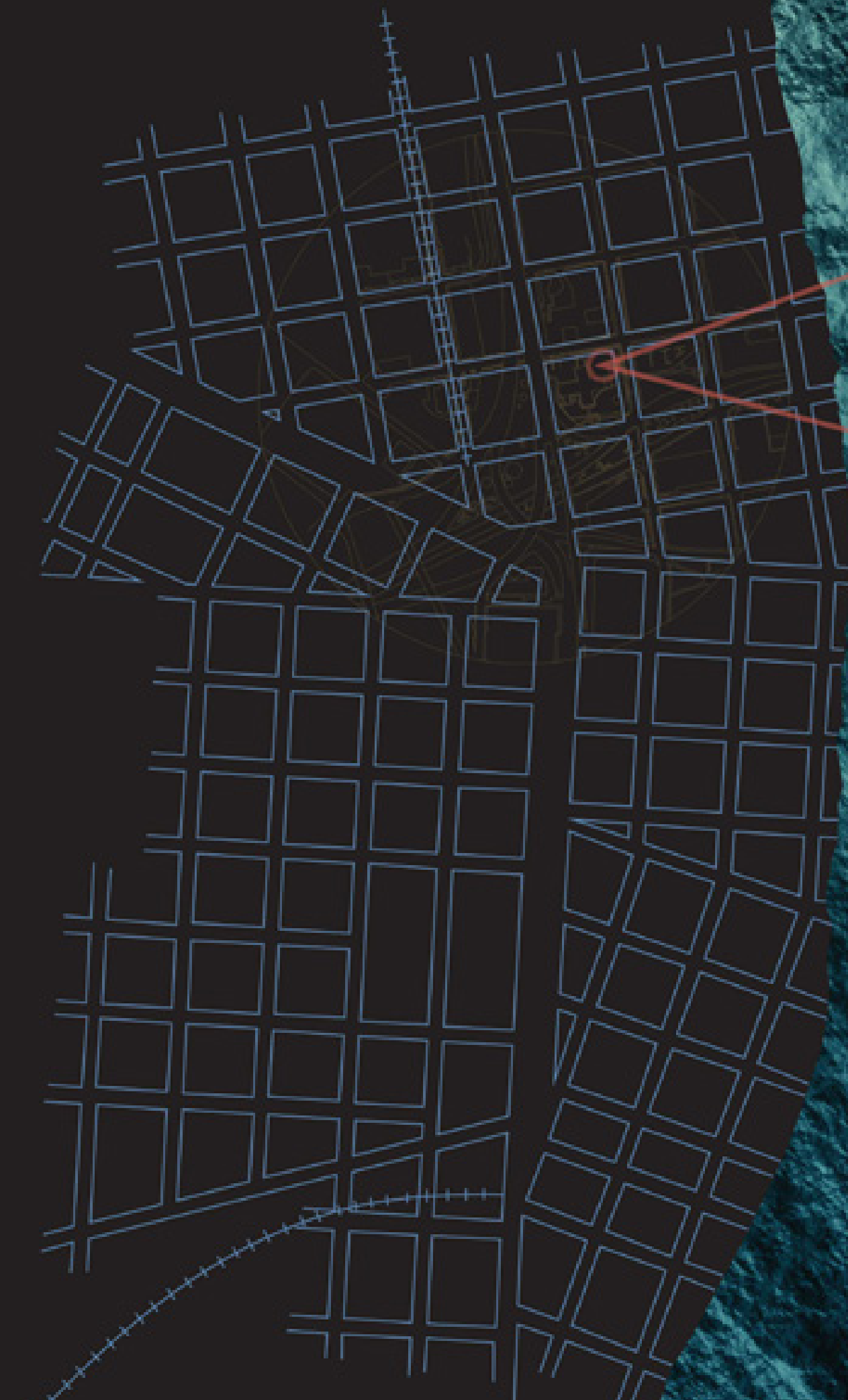
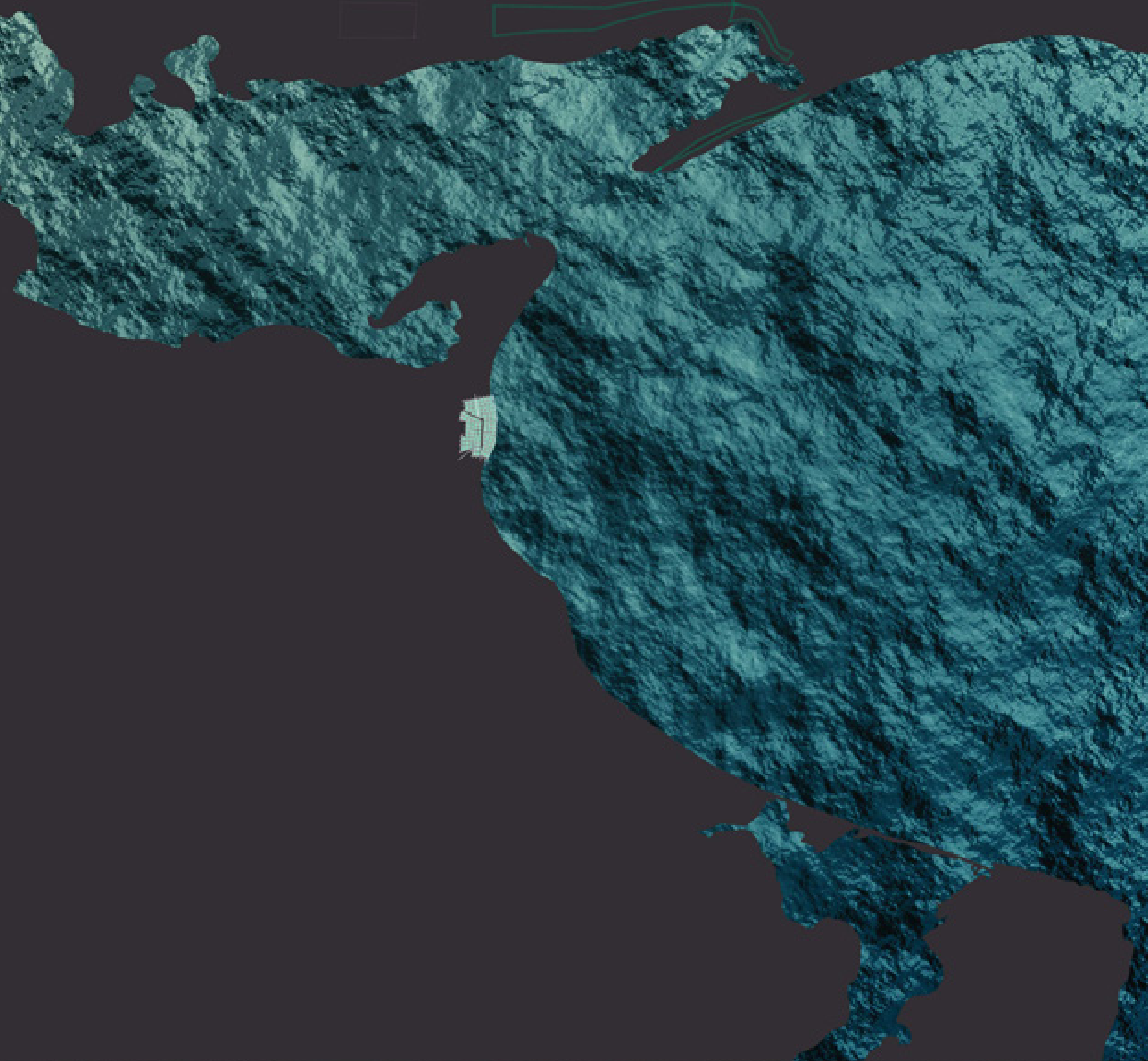


The painting depicting General Zachary Taylor's army occupation is significant because it illustrates the most relatively recent attempt to accurately record the natural landscape of the Corpus Christi region before urbanization.

1838 - 1841
 Henry Lawrence Kinney begins a life of trading and ranching near present-day Corpus Christi on land that was previously used for trading by local Native peoples.

This trading post became commonly referred to by travelers as 'Kinney's Ranch'.

1845
 General Zachary Taylor and his "corps of observation" were stationed here en route to Mexico to prepare for war. During this time, the settlement gained a reputation as a haven for smuggling activity.



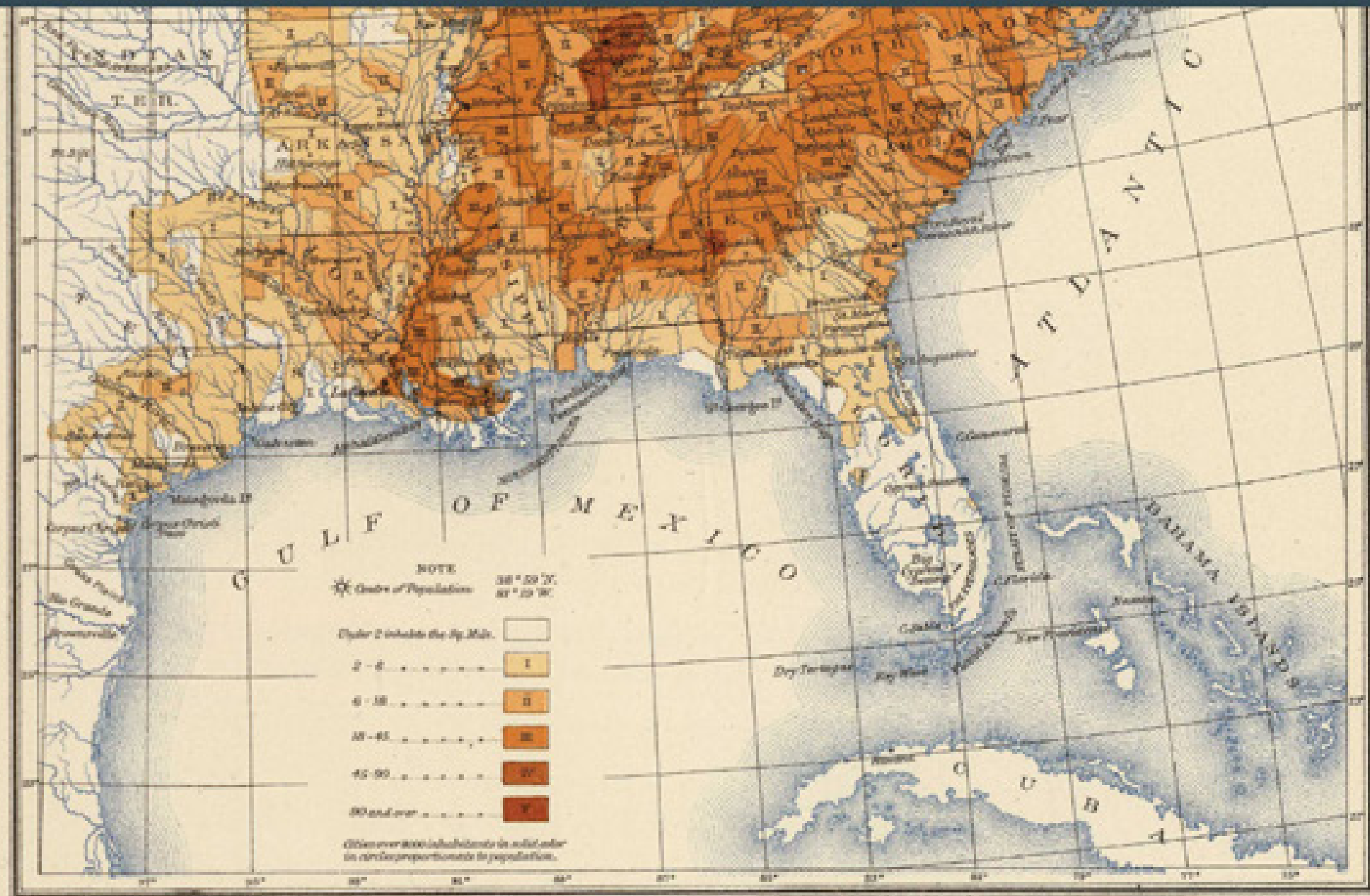
THE FIRST COURTHOUSES

1st Courthouse - Made of shellcrete (cross between adobe and concrete), designed by Felix von Blucher.

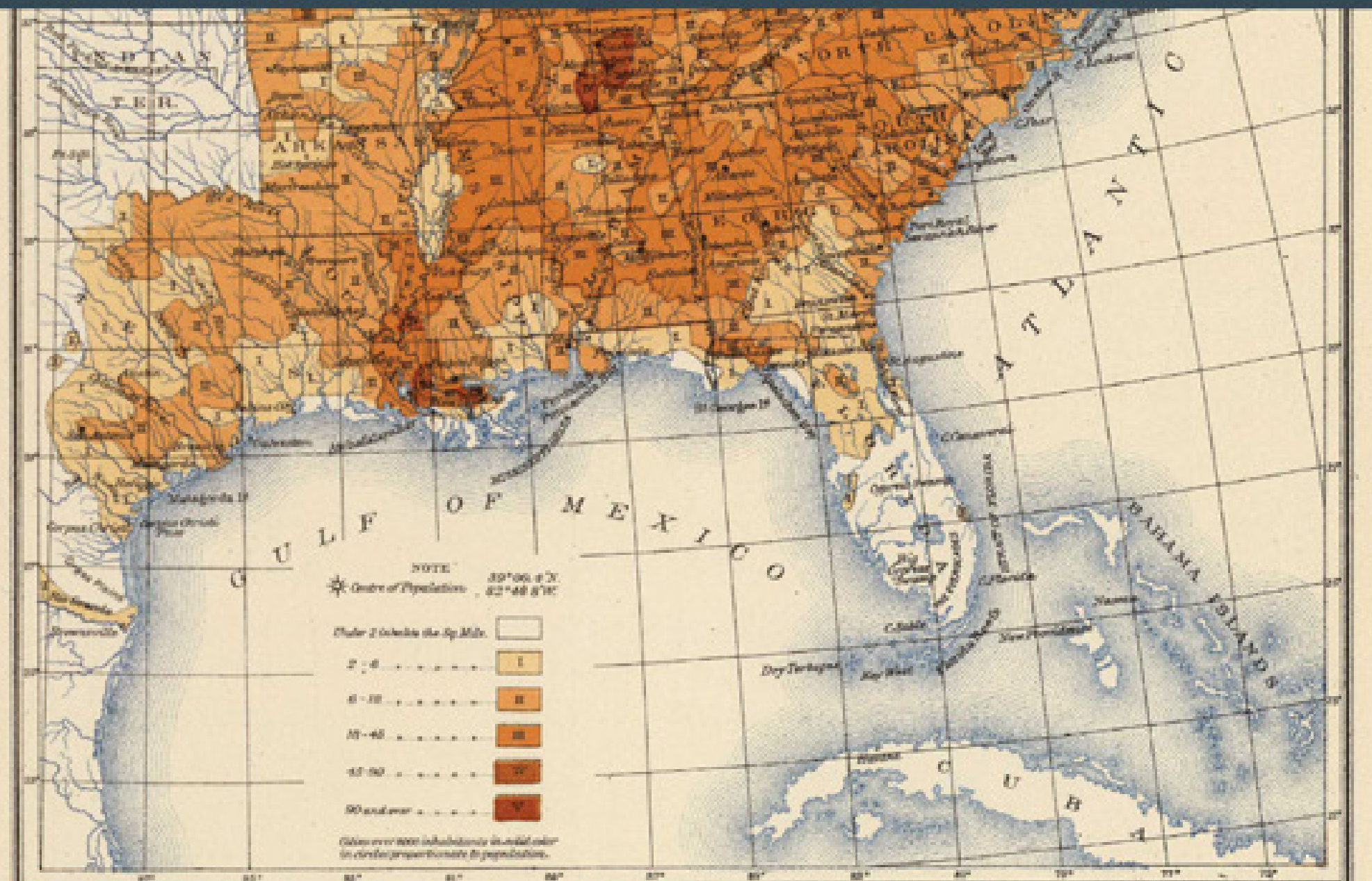
2nd Courthouse - Built in Greek Revival & Italianate style w/ concrete blocks, a wooden portico and a grand staircase

"In 1853, lawlessness in Nueces County, which covered most of the area from Corpus Christi to the Mexican border, prompted the construction of the first county courthouse. On this block, three lots were purchased for \$300 from Corpus Christi founder, Henry Lawrence Kinney (1814 - 1865). A second courthouse was built in the mid-1870s beside the first."

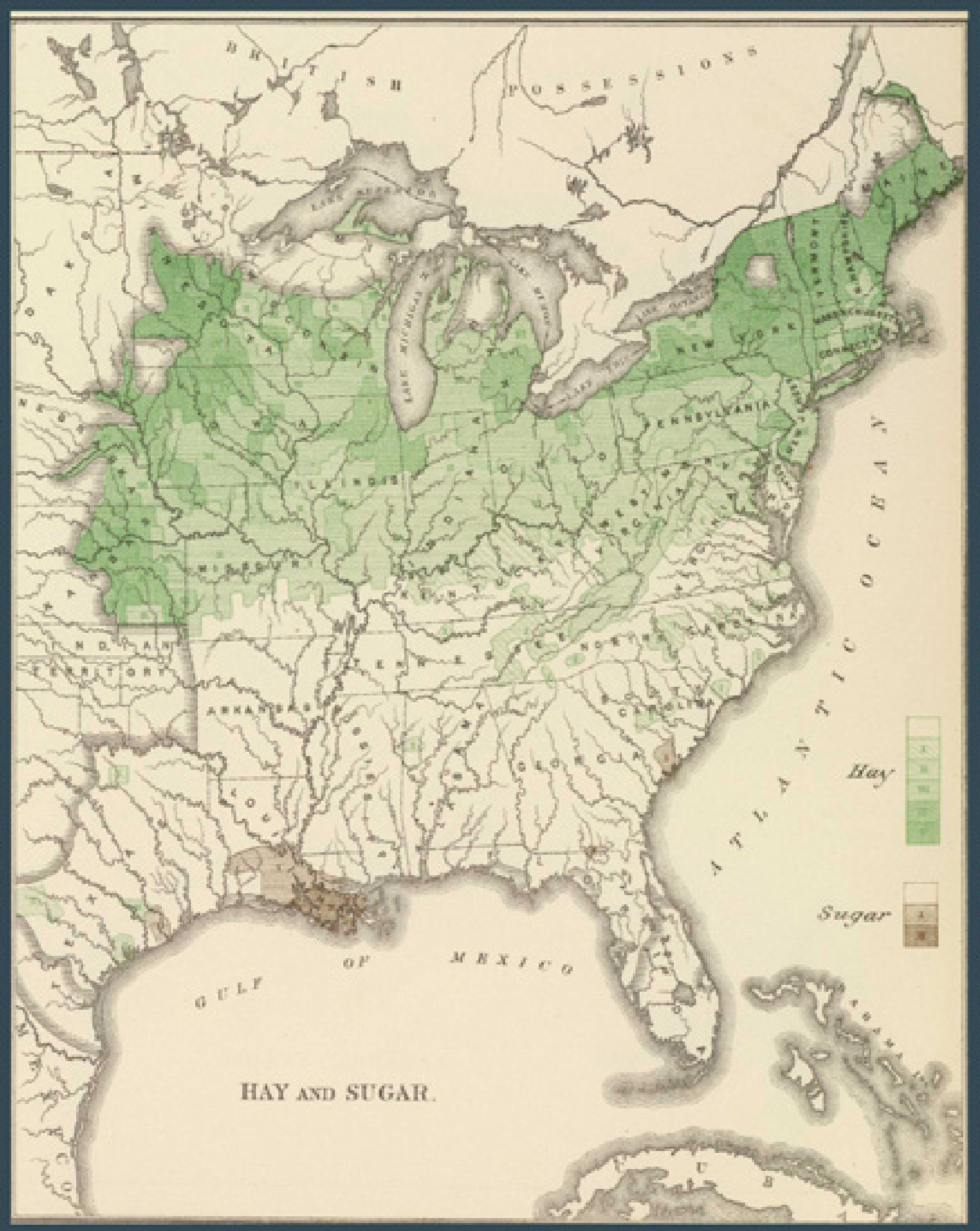




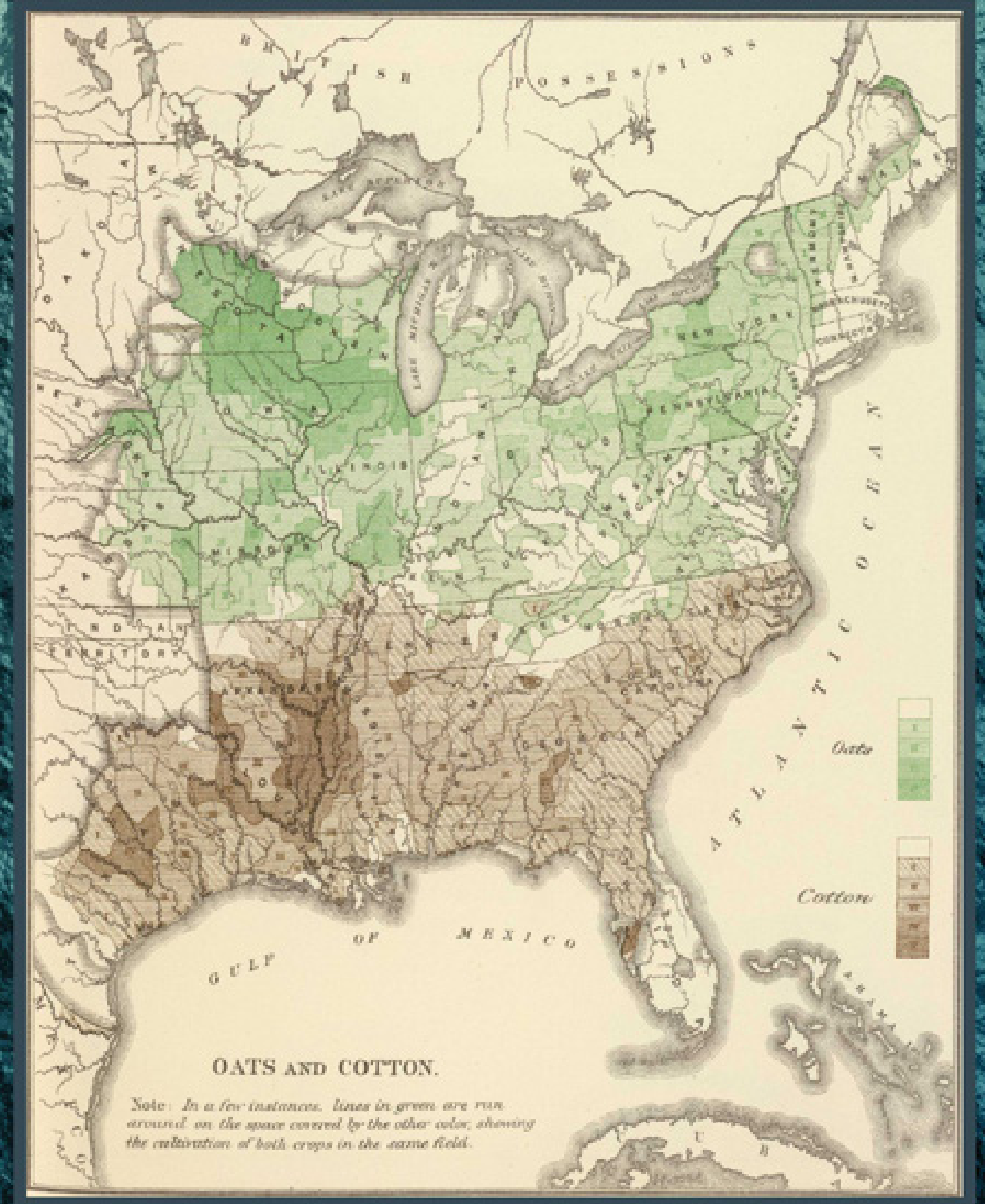
1850 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY



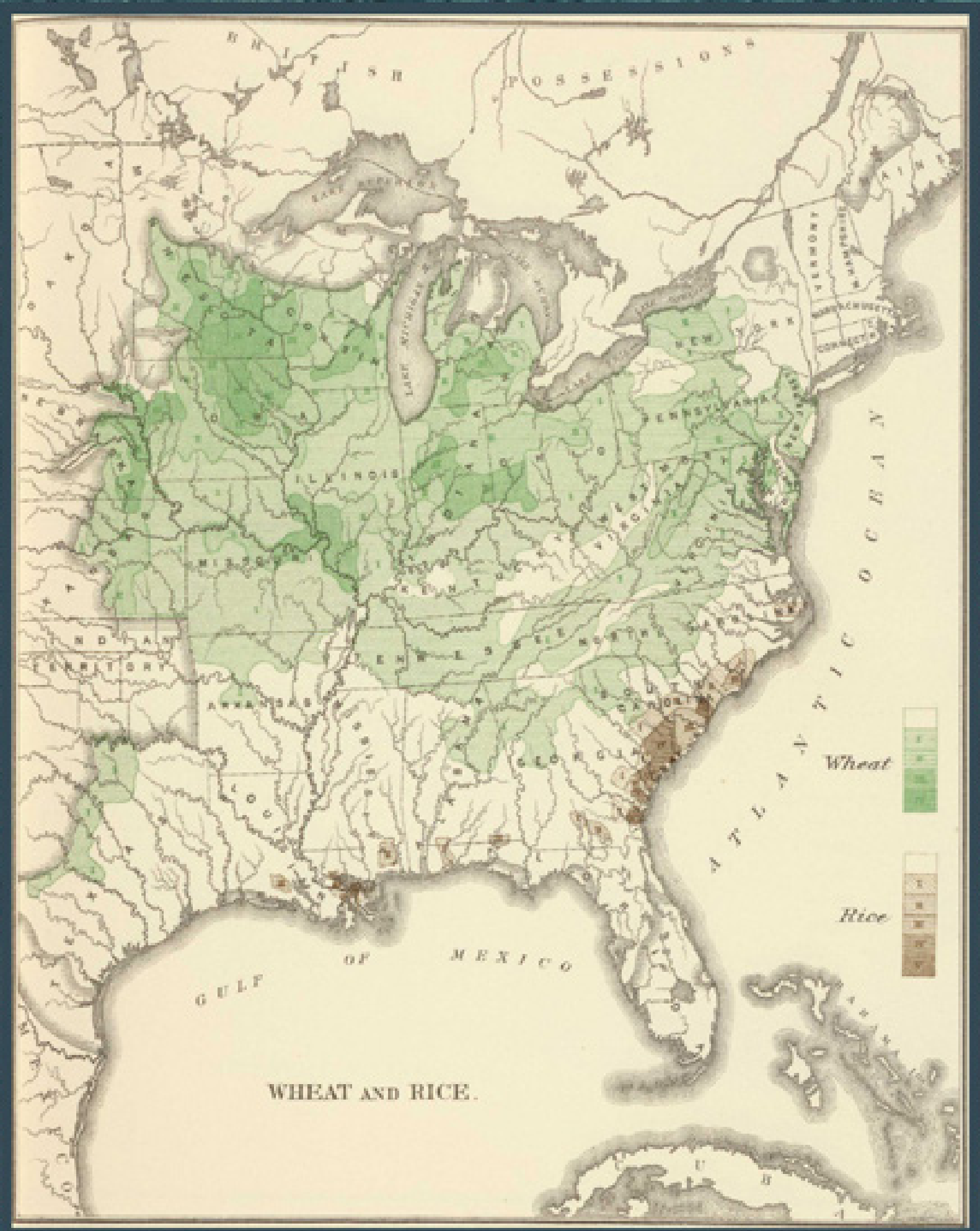
1860 | U.S. POPULATION DENSITY



1870 | CULTIVATION: HAY & SUGAR



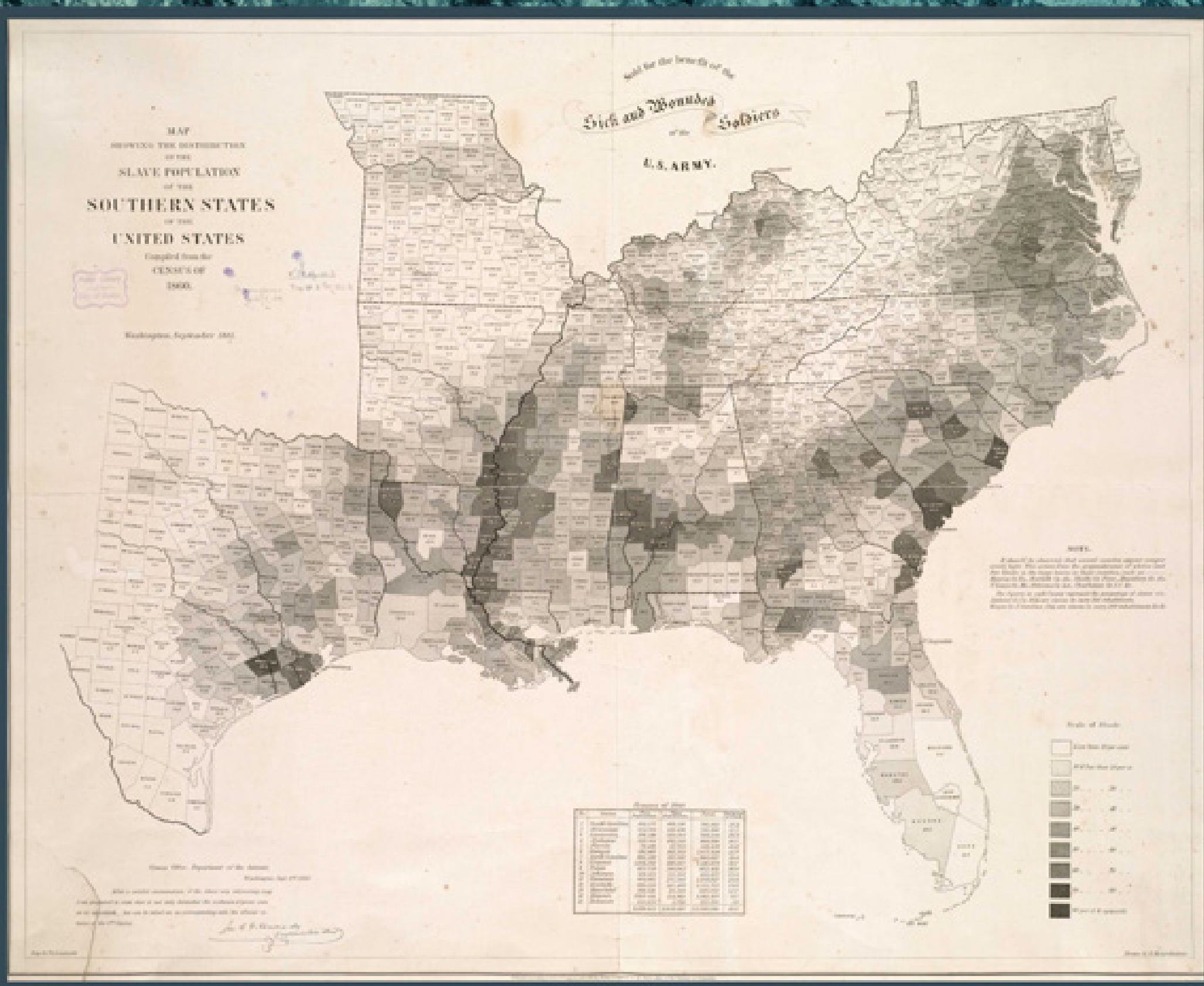
1870 | CULTIVATION: COTTON & OATS



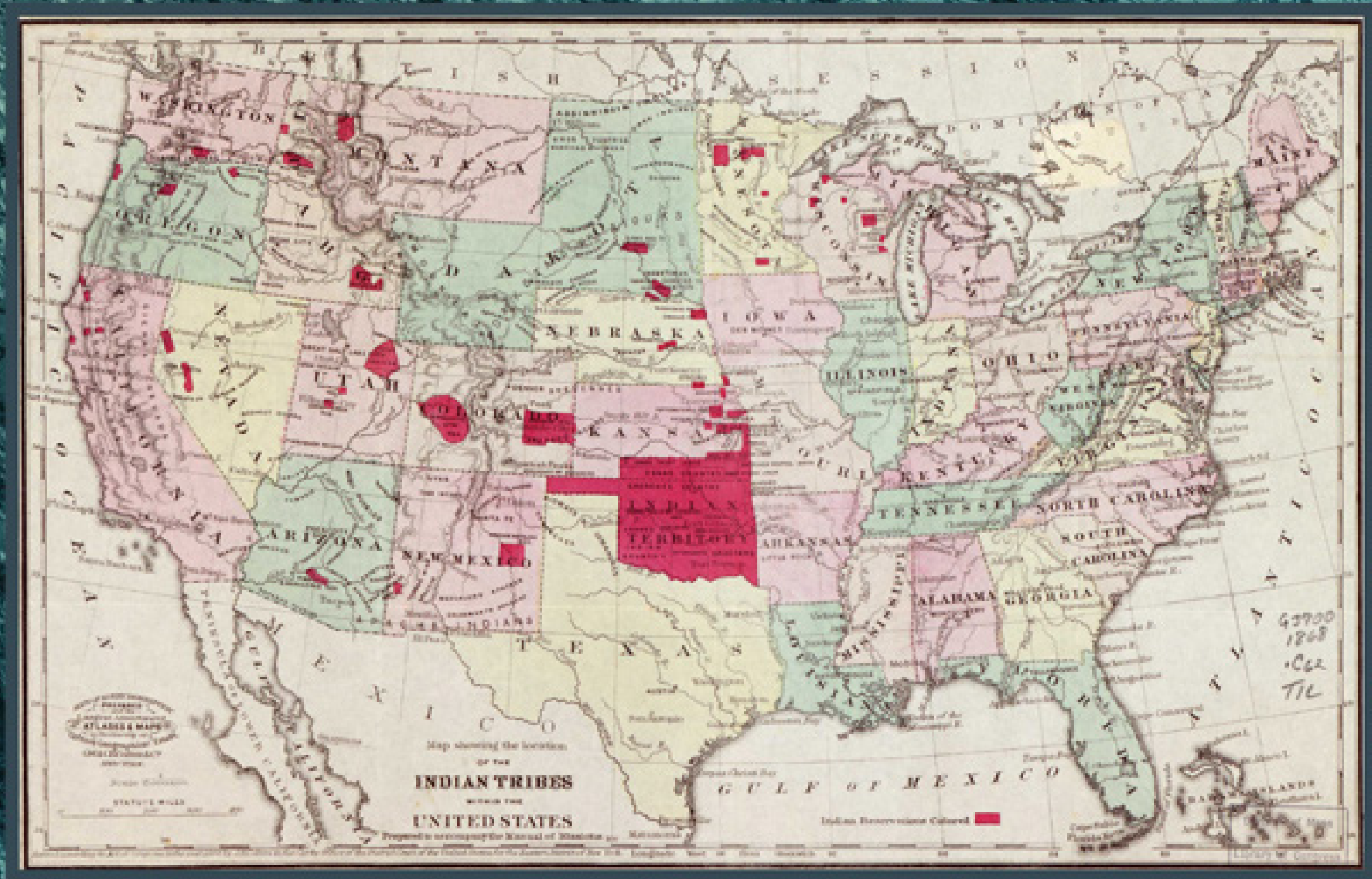
1870 | CULTIVATION: WHEAT & RICE



1870 | CULTIVATION: HOPS & TOBACCO



Statistics gathered near the beginning of the American Civil War illustrate the concentrated regions of enslaved African Americans throughout the Southern States, showcasing their relationship to major bodies of water. The concentrated areas also follow the wave patterns of expansion as seen in the previous maps. One important takeaway from this map is that this is another documented blueprint for the complete replacement of Indigenous lands replaced with the cultivation of slave infrastructure.



Seen here, during the middle of the Reconstruction Era in the United States, as the country enters an awkward political phase, Native Americans continue to be removed and pushed back into designated territories. No longer continuously connected, only a small fraction of allowable land is given to this shrinking population. It is striking to note, for instance as we look along the Texas coast, that less than a three centuries before this, the Karankawa were still recognizable in their homeland. In the span of just a few centuries, thousands of years of verbal history, passed down from each generation is nearly lost forever.



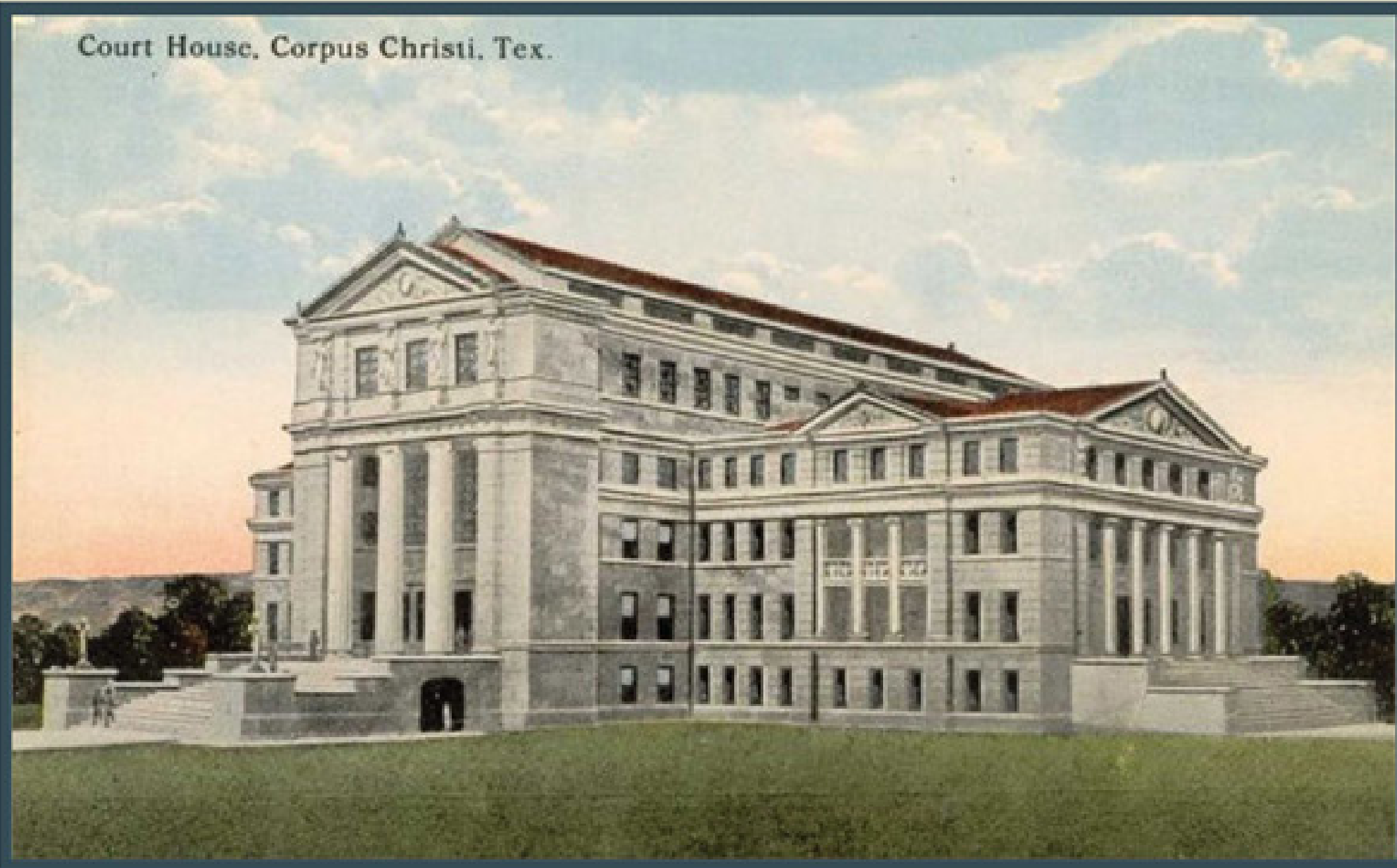
BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF
CORPUS CHRISTI,
NUECES COUNTY, TEXAS, 1887.



Image to the left: The first authentic attempt of representation showing a Bird's Eye view of Corpus Christi. The image attempts to depict the city no longer as a small coastal town, but instead as an active port with all the basic infrastructural components to supplement future growth. This moment in time is commonly referred to as the Second Industrial Revolution.

Image Above: Corpus Christi is at the frontier to the gates of the west. In the coming decades, the city eventually sees a massive population boom that coincides with the expansion of the Port of Corpus Christi. The rapid growth of the town will soon require updates to public infrastructure facilities, and the current courthouses among other buildings are subject to a revision.

Court House, Corpus Christi, Tex.



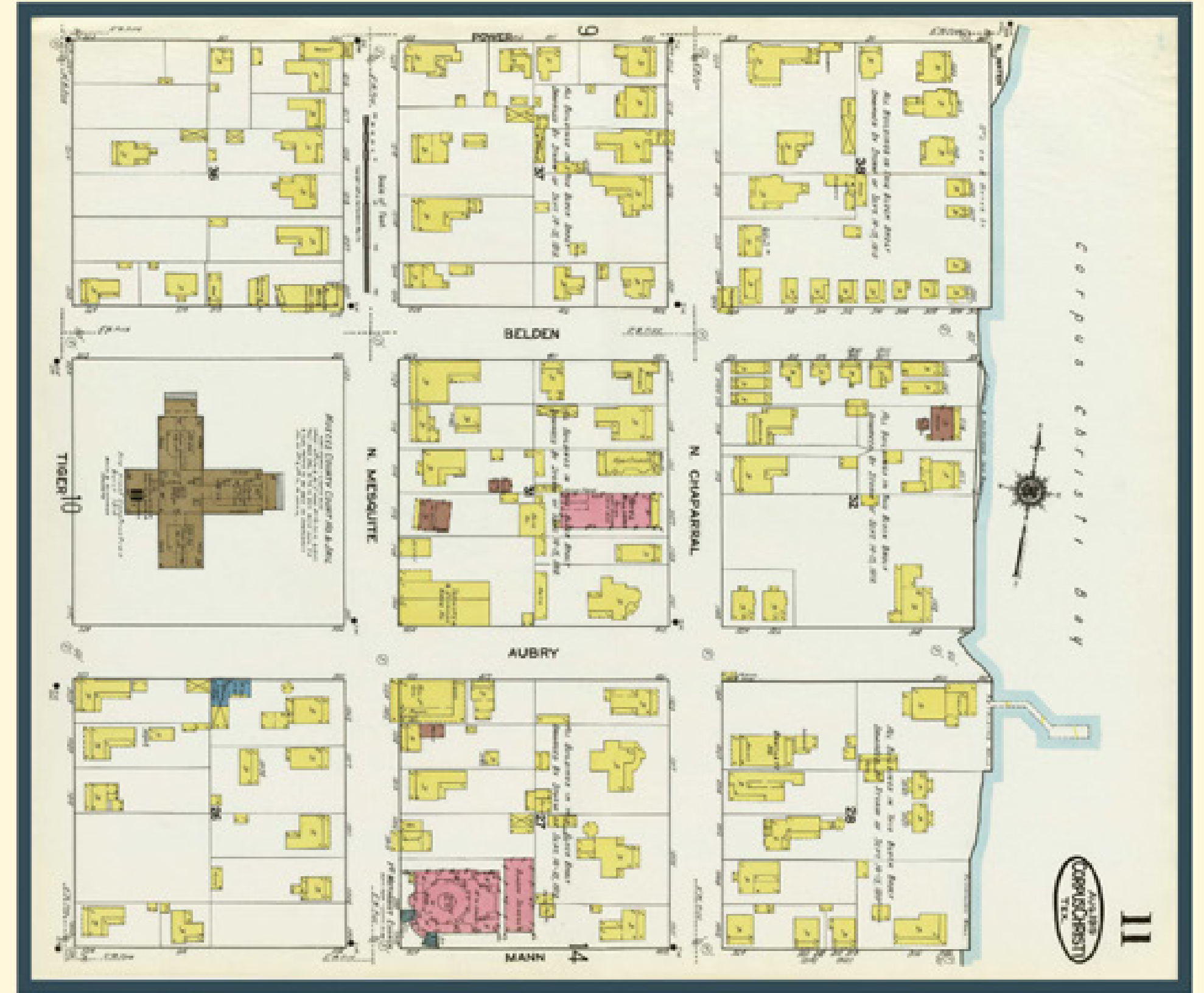
Architect:
Harvey L. Paige

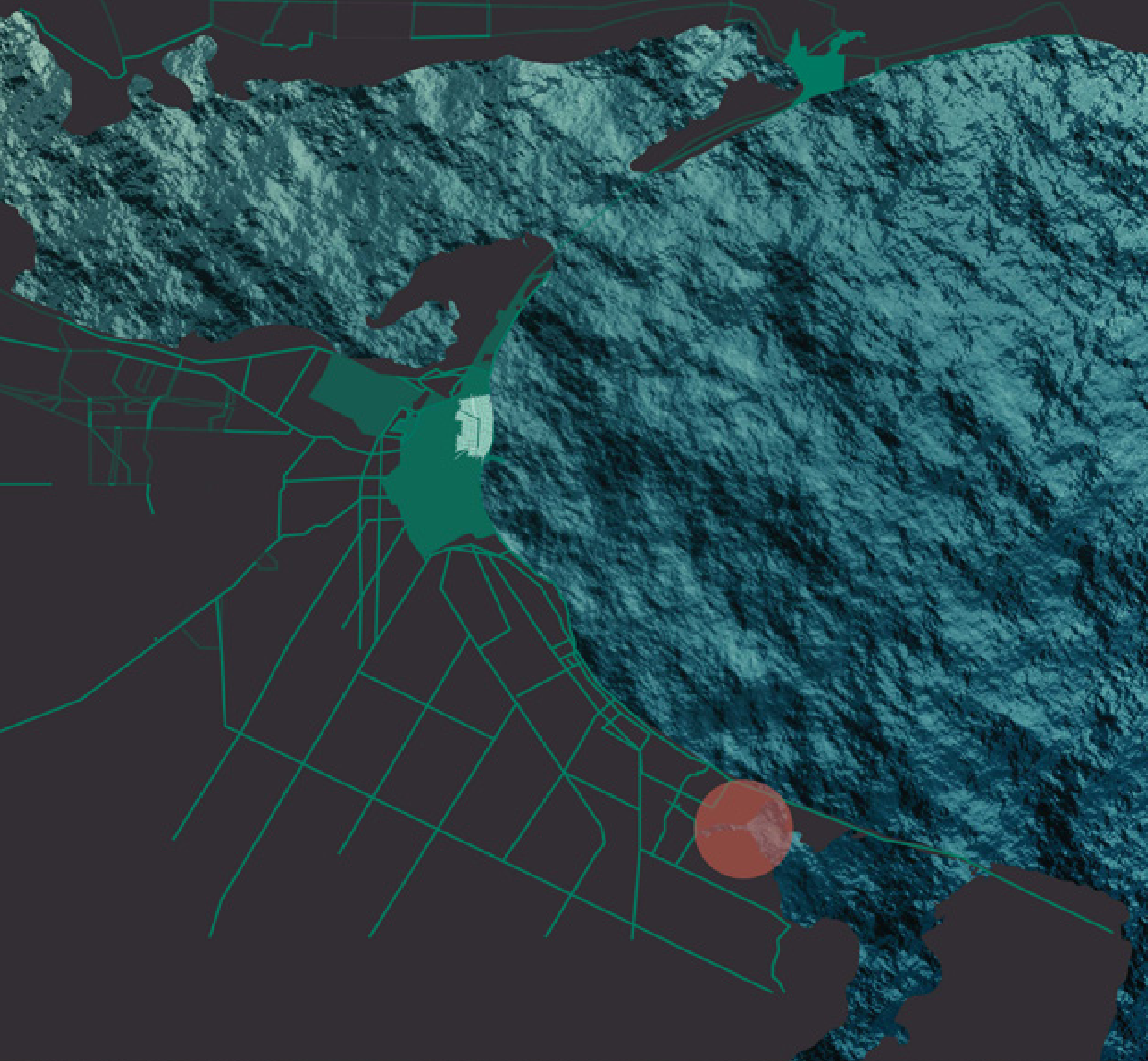
Built in the Classical Revival style in a T-Shape plan, of stone with a brick veneer and a red tiled roof.

Additional west wing was added to complete the cruciform shape in the 1930's.

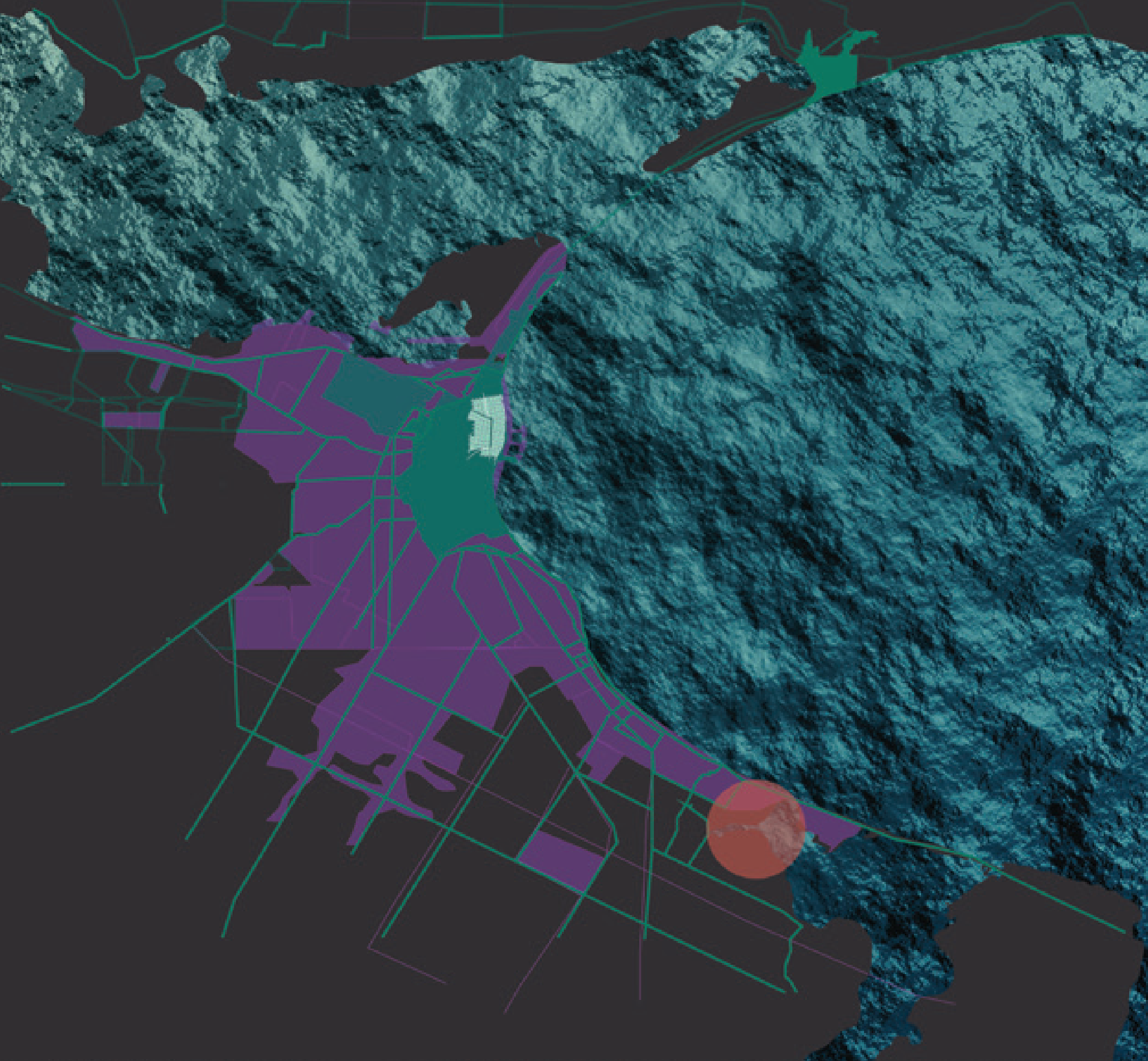
Construction for a new courthouse began in the 1970's, leaving this one abandoned in 1977.

Overview: This version of the courthouse reinforces the classical theme of government structures seen across the country. The monumentality of the materials used (massive stone base, concrete bone structure, brick veneer, and red tiles on the roof) not only intensify the tectonics of the overall form, but the juxtaposition of its presence amongst the rest of the landscape. The symbolic effect is now shifting towards the imposing and intimidating.

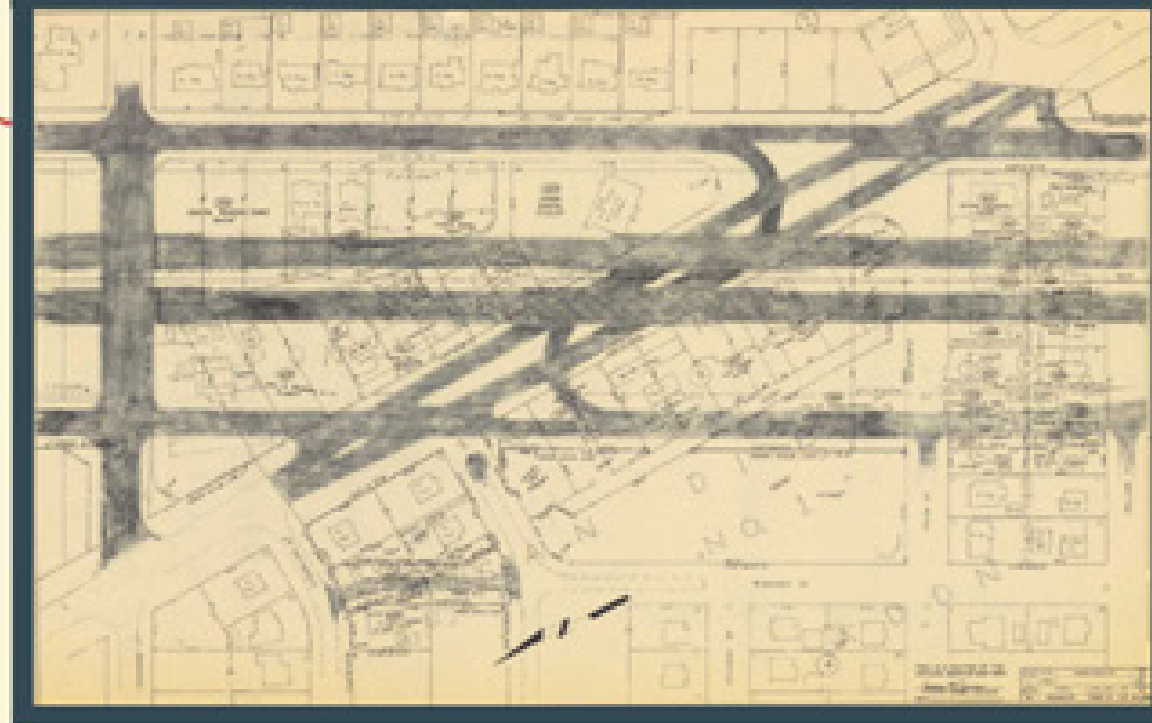
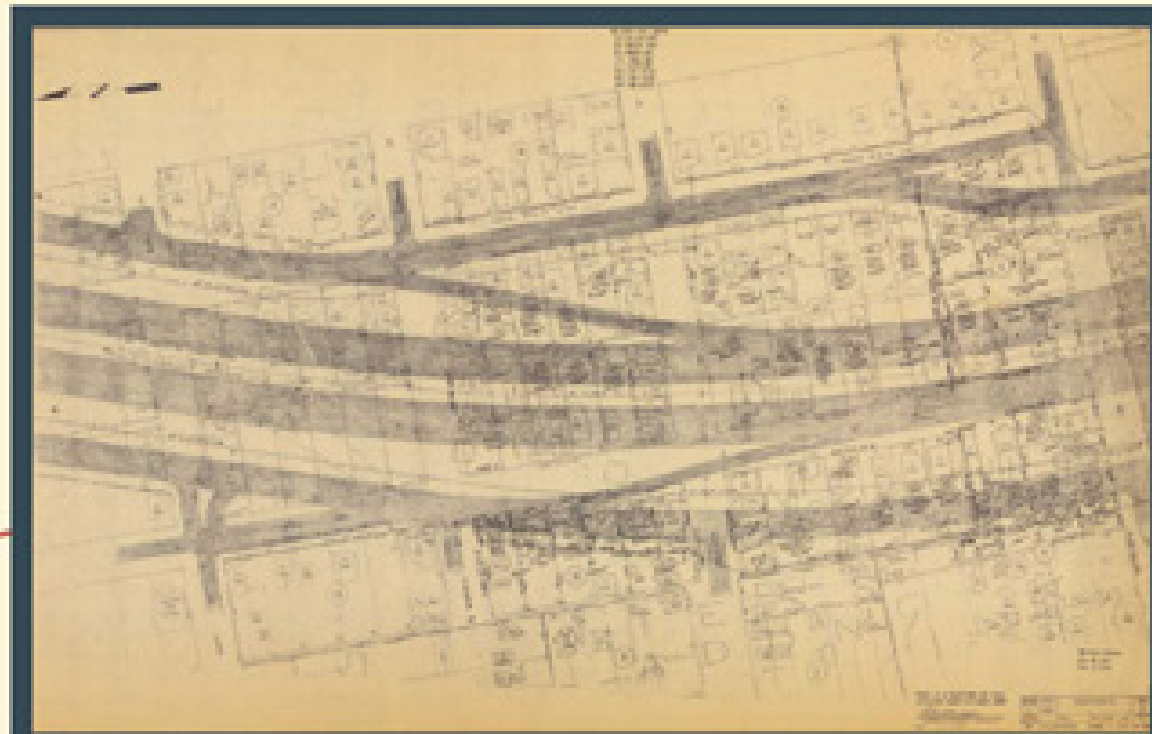
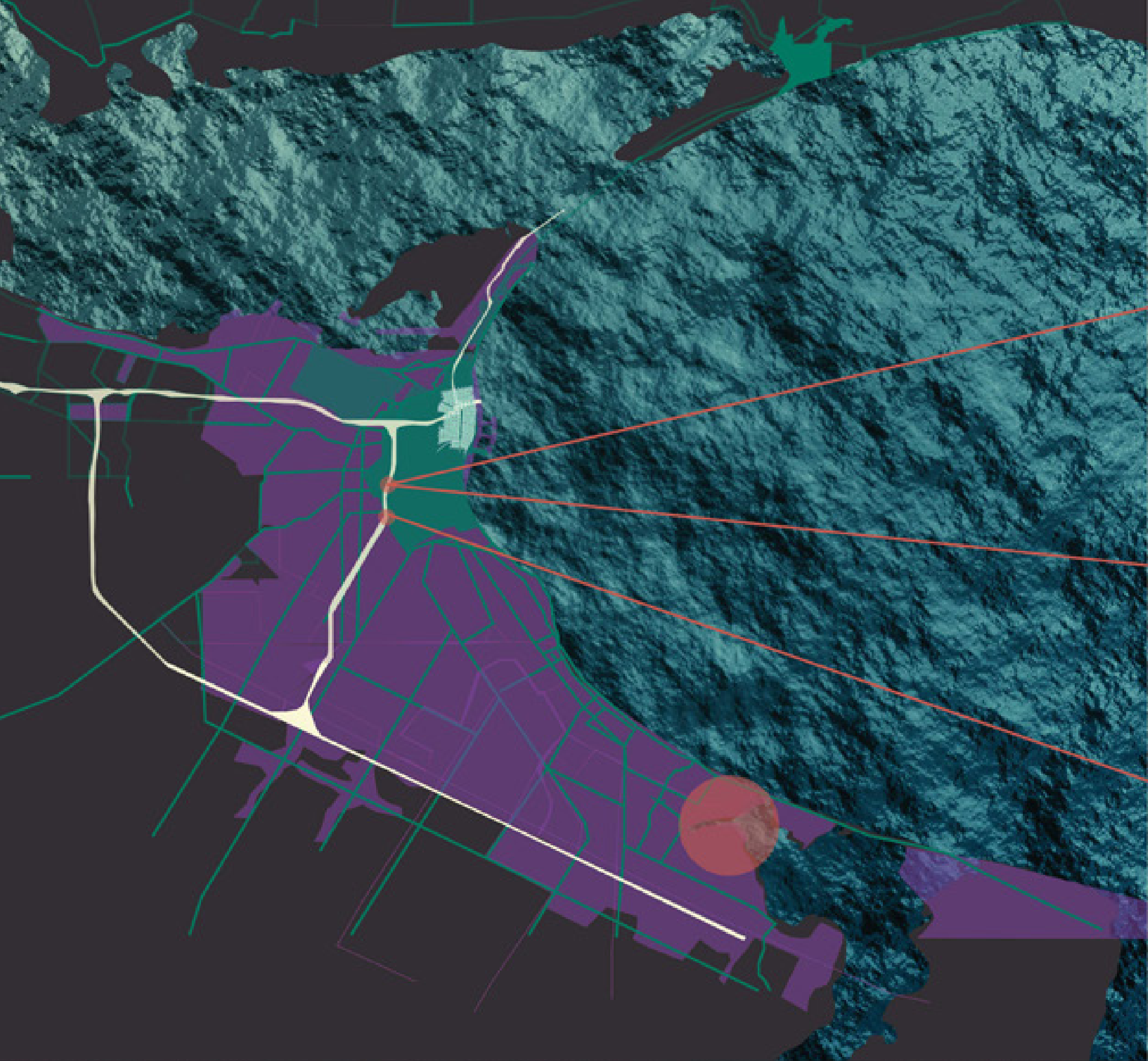




1925 | CORPUS CHRISTI



1951 | CORPUS CHRISTI



Top and Bottom Images: Plan views showing the Crosstown Expressway overlaying former neighborhoods and businesses.

Middle Image: Photograph of the front entrance to Elizondo's Barber Shop off of Agnes Street. Once belonging to my grandfather, Valentin Garza Elizondo, he was one of the many small business owners who were bought out to make way for the construction of the Crosstown Expressway.

The recurring theme observed in this research is the subjugation of one particularly marginalized population. The forceful displacement of a group of people is unfortunately viewed as a logical solution to technological development at the city and regional scales.

Total replacement is a more convenient, time-saving, and cost-saving solution than experimenting with methods of adaptation.

Perhaps, this is a relatively recent concept to reflect on. This is a topic of discussion that perhaps only exists because of where we are today as a result of decisions like these made and recorded for people like us to look back on.

Nonetheless, one aspect of this research illustrates the commodification of human beings. Whether treated as subjects to be converted and indoctrinated into Christianity to enforce colonization, to be valued as property used for forced labor, or inconveniently positioned in the way of construction, these actions are carried out with a complete disregard for culture and heritage.

Regardless of the *compensation* in any form to those displaced, the intangible traits associated with these human factors stand as irreplaceable.



“While courtroom designs have remained largely unchanged, conveying a certain stability and continuity within our legal system, changes in courthouse exteriors to styles reminiscent of corporate architecture seem to indicate that something is changing in the way the public perceives law’s role in contemporary society.”

(Rosenbloom, 1998.)



Viewing the current courthouse from above, we can notice a more engaging design characteristic applied to the site. The symmetrical diamond form of the bridge-way cuts through a shaded green area that connects to the sidewalk, streetsid, and into the pathways along the large parking lots. This is drastic change from the Classical revival building that featured a highly ornate exterior. This version of the courthouse follows a more static approach to the form, that still coincidentally evokes the firm, unchanged design of the interior spaces of the courtrooms, and that of the law being practiced within the walls.



The Federal Courthouse completed relatively recent, appears to shift back to using elements of the classical revival styles, in this case leaning more towards Spanish Colonial Revival. This has become a notable trend seen throughout the southwest and Texas, in particular. Whether its borrowing elements of a mixture of classical styles and tuning them to reflect a Spanish Colonial look, there seems to be a longing for a past that never used to exist in the areas which some of these structures are built in.

Although executed well, the architecture still bears no association to the history of the city. The building has now claimed water-front real-estate, self-imposing its monumentality and overall presence to the public space of the sea wall just across the street. Not only that, but aside from a collectin of palm trees, there is no transition space between the building's entrance and to the pedestrian sidewalk. The intimidation effect of the architecture appears to haave returned to the city, to remind us of possibly a shift in the perception of law seen from those on the inside, looking out, than that of the public.



CURRENT NUECES COUNTY COURTHOUSE

OLD NUECES COUNTY COURTHOUSE

FEDERAL U.S. DISTRICT COURTHOUSE

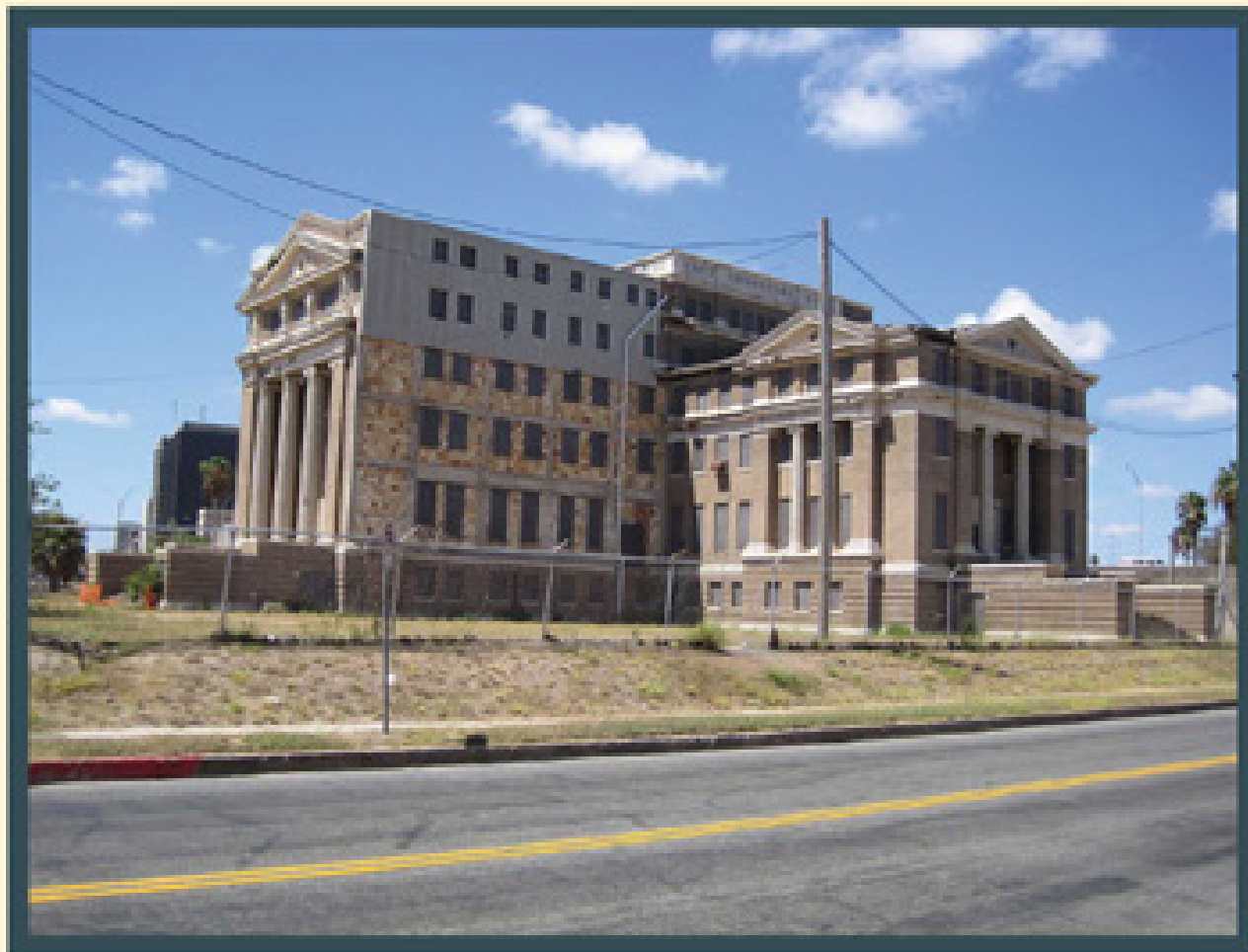
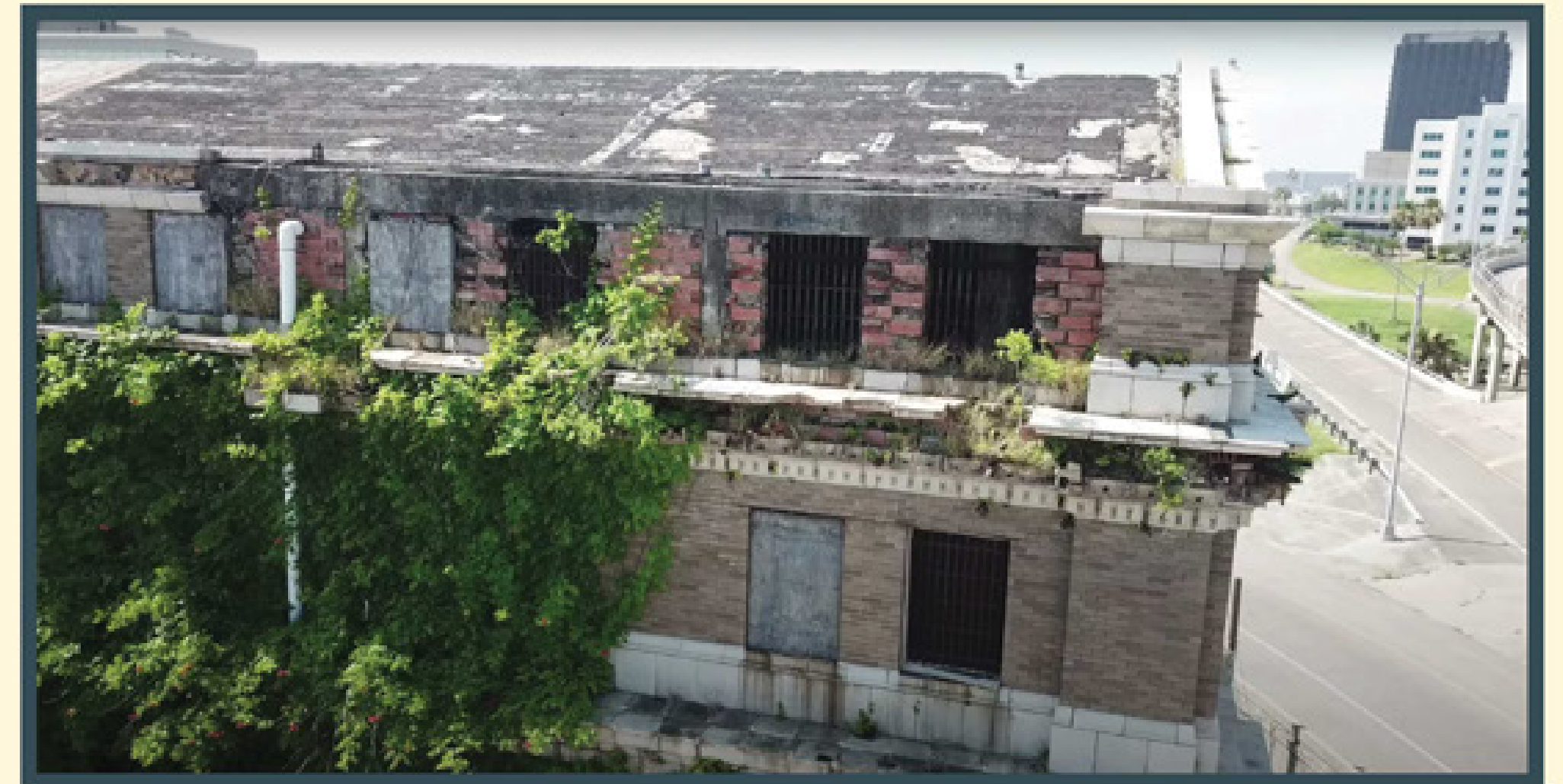
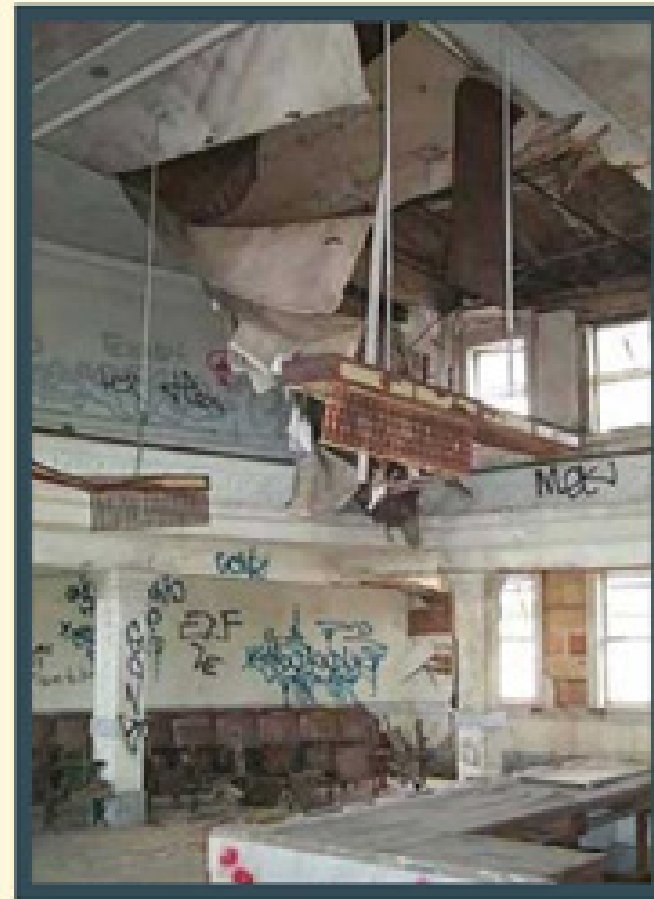


From this angle, you can start to notice how significant the location of the Old Courthouse will eventually become once the expressways behind it are completely removed. The building's site presents itself as a gateway to the rest of downtown and to the bayfront sea wall, a popular destination for joggers, casual walking, fishing, photography, street vendors, general outdoor leisure.

The locality of the site not only intensifies the preservation aspect of the building, but an opportunity to investigate potential adaptations to an area that is bound for drastic revisions to promote tourism, and development.



Current conditions of the building are visually displeasing, for better or worse terms. Pieces of the terra cotta continue to chip and fall off the facade every day. Wild ivy is starting to wrap itself around the north side of the west wing, entirely. Individuals continue to sneak over the walls after hours to either video record the interior driven by a mystique of what lies inside the building, to spray paint the walls with vulgarity, or to try and steal original elements of the building's interior. It seems that the building is ultimately waiting for itself to completely fall apart as much as possible for the foreseeable future.



July 3, 2000, A preservation Master Plan for the Courthouse was developed on behalf of MCGLOIN + SWEEN: Architecture - Interior Design - Planning firm, collaborating with LIMBACHER & GODFREY ARCHITECTS, S. Patrick Sparks, P.E. Consulting Engineer, HORIZON ENGINEERING, and AndersonGroup Construction Management.

The overview of the master plan indicated:

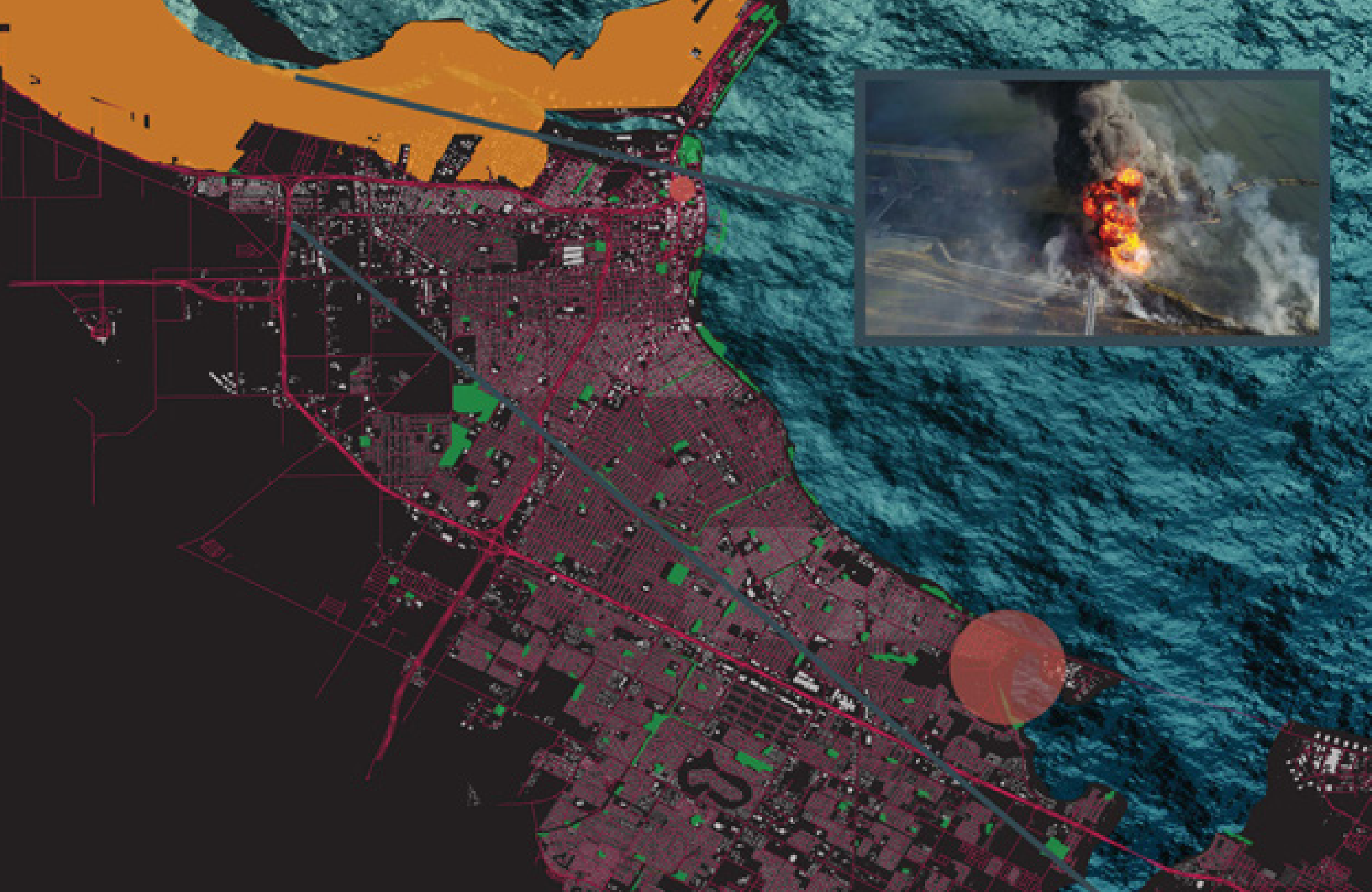
"Significant loss of historic material has occurred due to vandalism...graffiti and damaged marble...Fire damage."

"Significant portions of the historic interiors have been destroyed by exposure to the weather, removal of metals, marble, and other commercially valuable materials by scavengers, and malicious damage by vandals."







2006:

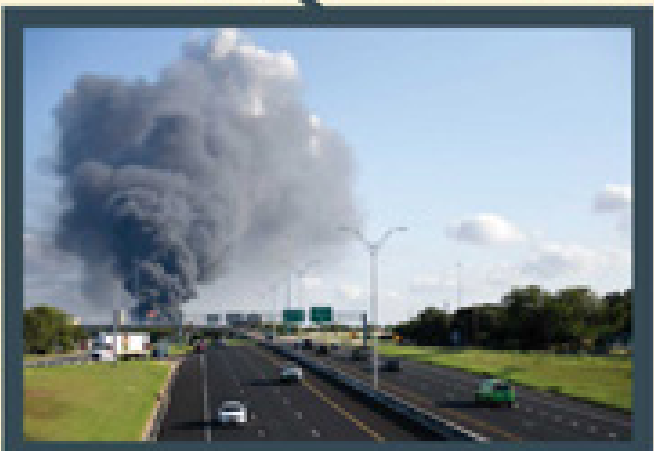
Phase 1 of the restoration project was completed, which included "replacement of the existing roof, a stabilization of the exterior masonry, and protection of the exterior door and window openings. The entire facade of the south wing was restored to its original condition as a demonstration project."





PARKS, ROADS, INDUSTRIAL ZONES, AND BUILDING FOOTPRINT OF CORPUS CHRISTI

-  INDUSTRIAL ZONE & REFINERY ROW
-  PARKS
-  BUILDING FOOTPRINTS
-  ROADS
-  COURTHOUSE
-  CAYO DEL OSO SITE 41NU2



POLLUTION THREAT

Health Outcome Data

Although ATSDR's review cannot directly link illnesses to chemicals found in Refinery Row air, asthma hospitalization, birth defect, and cancer rates for the Corpus Christi Refinery Row area were compared to the rates for other areas.

Health Outcome	Finding
Asthma	Nueces County has a higher rate of asthma hospitalizations among children than Texas as a whole.
Birth defects	Two heart defects (ventricular septal defect and "other anomalies of the aorta") were slightly more common in children of mothers living within 2 miles of Refinery Row compared with children of mothers living 10 or more miles away ¹ .
Cancer	Comparisons based on statewide cancer rates show the number of male colon and rectum, bladder, kidney, and liver cancer cases reported for the Corpus Christi Refinery Row area ² was statistically greater than expected. No increase in cancer rates was observed in women.

¹ Refers to children of mothers living more than 10 miles from Refinery Row but still within the tri-county (Nueces, San Patricio, and Kleberg) Corpus Christi area.

² The Corpus Christi Refinery Row area for the cancer rate analyses is defined by ZIP codes 78401, 78402, 78404, 78405, 78406, 78407, 78408, 78409, 78410, 78411, 78416, 78417 and 78370, which approximates a 5-mile buffer surrounding Refinery Row.

ATSDR ASSESSMENT OF AIR QUALITY

For Short term exposure:

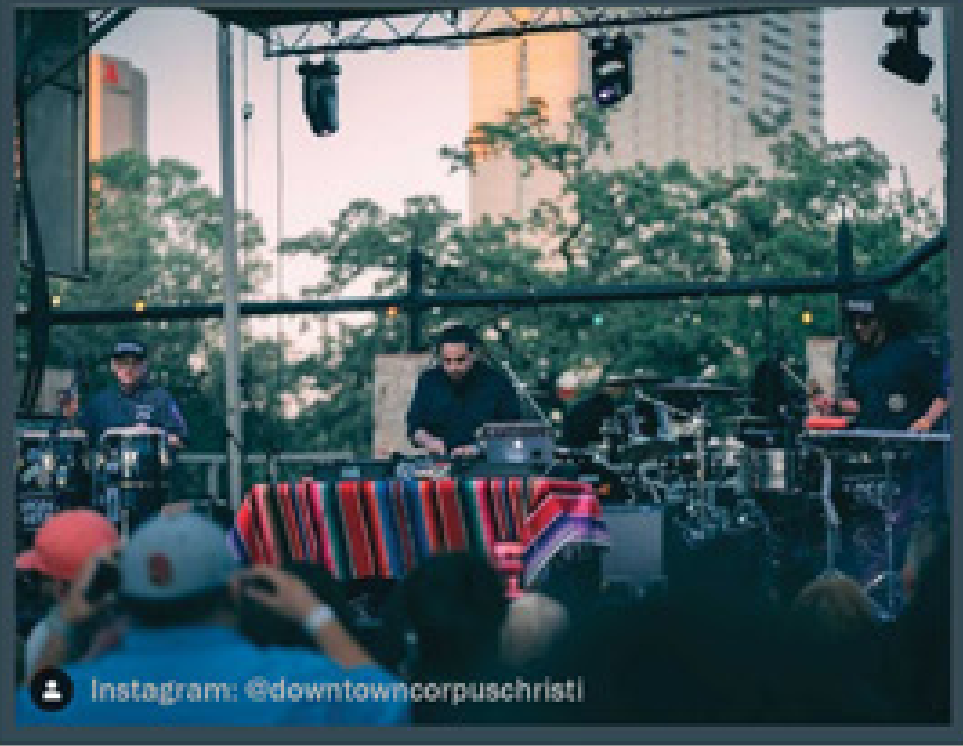
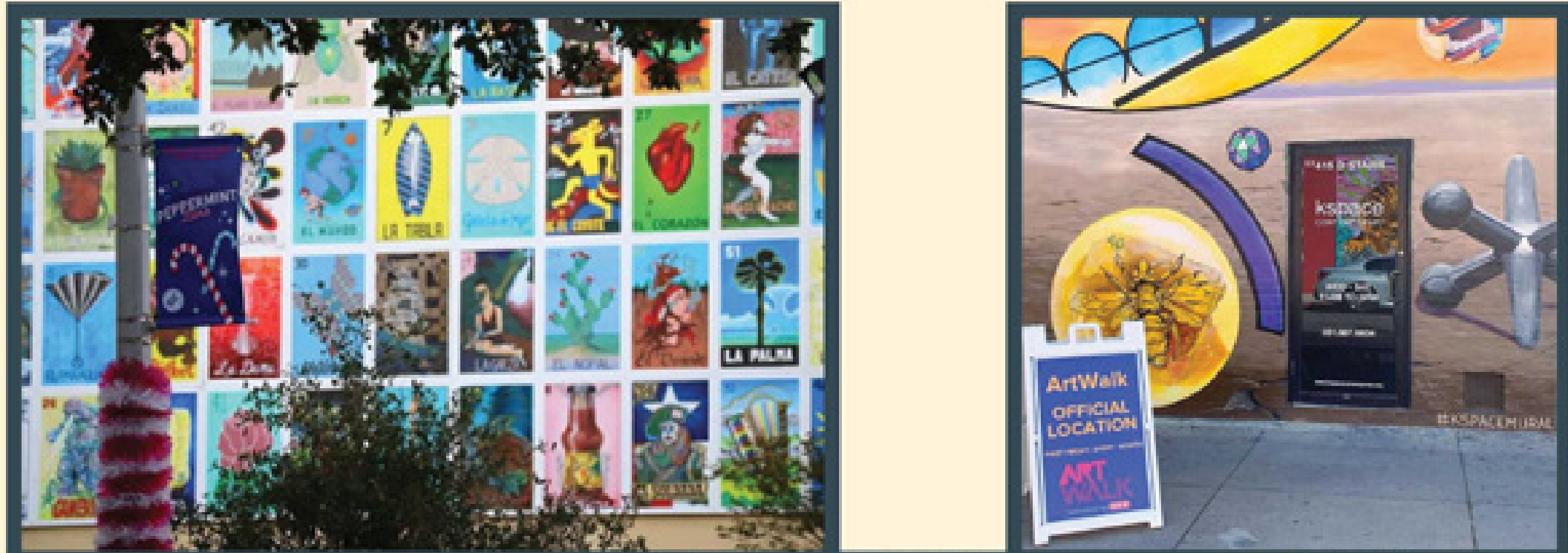
Benzene, Hydrogen sulfide, particulate matter, and sulfur dioxide could either individually, or in combination lead to temporary respiratory and neurological effects in individuals walking, running, and biking near the facilities.

For Long term exposure:

For all cancer causing compounds detected in Refinery Row: Combined cancer risk for a mixture of Refinery Row chemicals is about 2 additional cancer cases per 10,000 people, which means there is an increased risk of cancer. The main contributors to this combined cancer risk are benzene (31%), 1,2-dibromoethane (26%), and chromium (11%).



CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE





LOOKING AT THE BIG PICTURE



0 2000 5000 ft

PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND PROXIMITY TO COURTHOUSE

- COMMUNITY CENTERS
- MUSEUMS
- RETAIL
- RESTAURANTS OR CAFE
- LIBRARIES

“Initially, Washington-Coles was the main neighborhood in the city where African Americans could rent or own property. The first black church and first public school for African Americans in the city were both established there in the late 1800s, and by the 1950s the neighborhood was home to several African-American-owned shops, restaurants and nightclubs...After the neighborhoods were established, the Port of Corpus Christi opened and an industrial district expanded around the neighborhoods, but the City failed to protect home values or resident health and safety. The city’s first zoning ordinance in 1937 zoned Washington-Coles exclusively for commercial, retail and industrial uses despite it being a residential neighborhood long before Corpus Christi’s industrial boom. Over half of Washington-Coles remained zoned for heavy and light industrial from the 1940s through the 1960s, with some multifamily zoning added in the easternmost corner of the neighborhood.”

- Beeler, Melissa (2015)

The Hillcrest, Washington-Coles neighborhoods are slowly beginning to disappear. A \$50 Million buyout program is preventing the Port of Corpus Christi from using eminent domain on the properties. Residents here are on all sides of the fence, with some willing to accept relocation for a “new opportunity” and to avoid pollution hazards for their relatives with underlying health issues. Some residents who choose to stay have an emotional attachment to the neighborhood because they were raised here and are willing to stay because they want to be a part of the potential future development of the area that is going to be boxed off by I-37 to the south, the shipping channel to the north, the refineries to the west, and now the future harbor bridge to the east.

“When you deprive a neighborhood of thriving, this is what you get, and it’s sad.”

-Maddy Chapman, a homeowner in Hillcrest, reflecting over the changes to the neighborhood over the decades leading to its current neglected state.

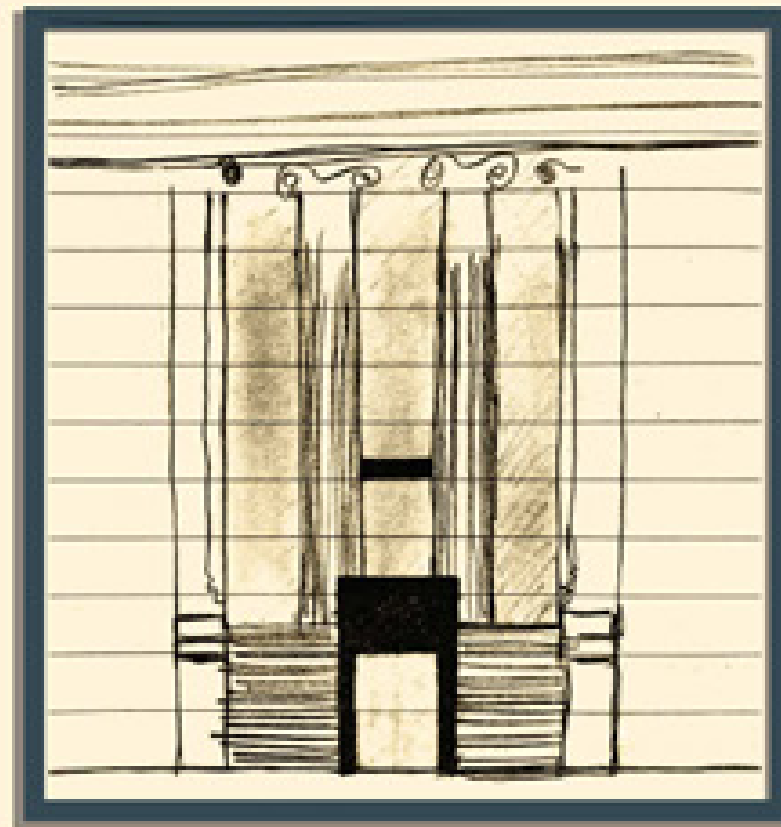


- WASHINGTON-COLES NEIGHBORHOOD
- HILLCREST NEIGHBORHOOD
- NEW HARBOR BRIDGE PROJECT PATH
- EXISTING ROADS CONNECTING TO CURRENT HARBOR BRIDGE

DESIGN RESPONSE



Left: Looking West towards the Old Courthouse from inside of the Federal Courthouse



To the left is the initial sketch that was the driving component to approach an intervention with the building, to create a more welcoming gesture to the public and pedestrian spaces along the street. Cutting through the monumental stairs deliberately challenges the imposition of the grand staircase while preserving it at the same time. This creates a totally new engagement with the architecture and massing; it is no longer a hurdle to climb the massive stairs. Opening the building from the ground level provides access to all demographics





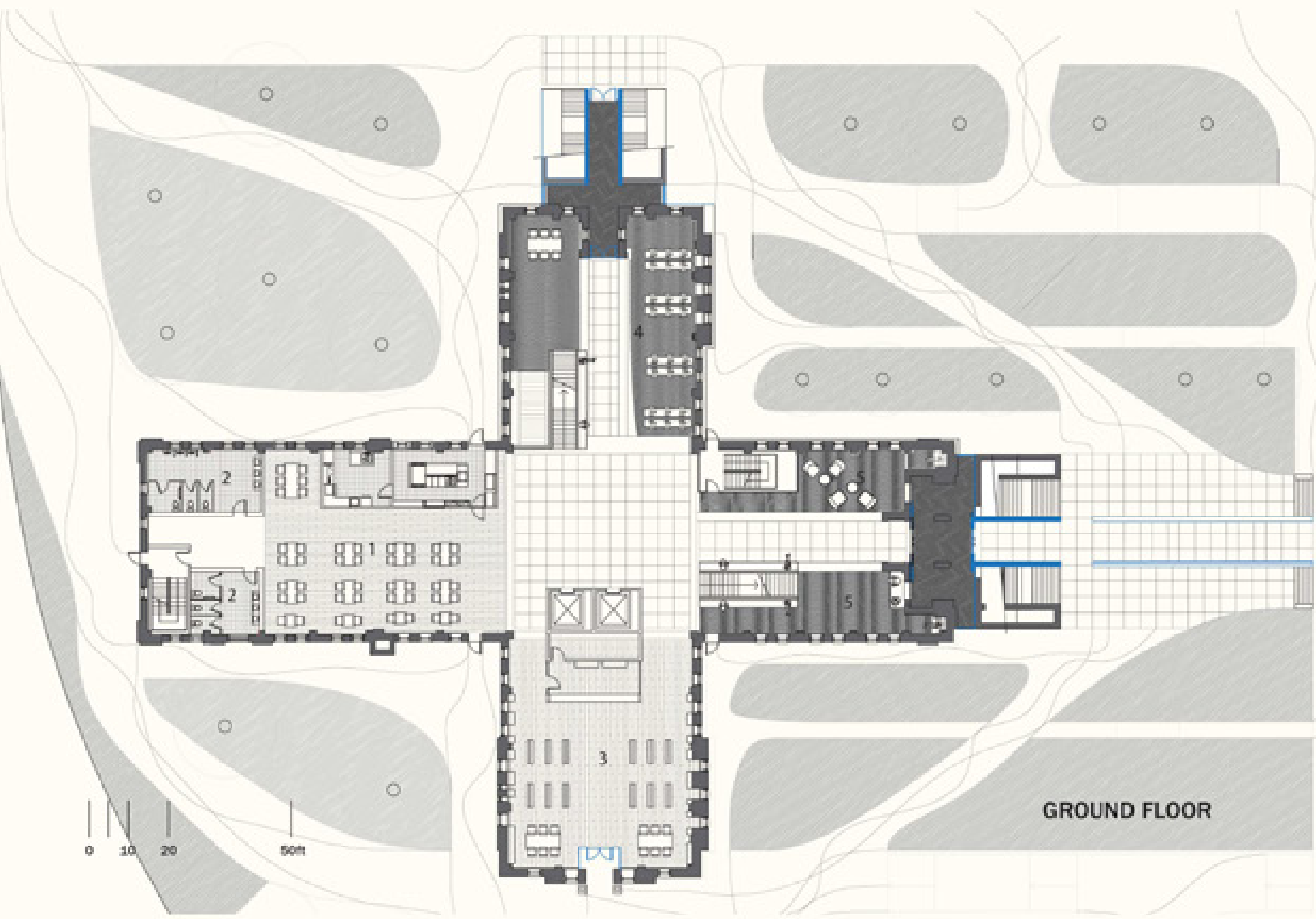




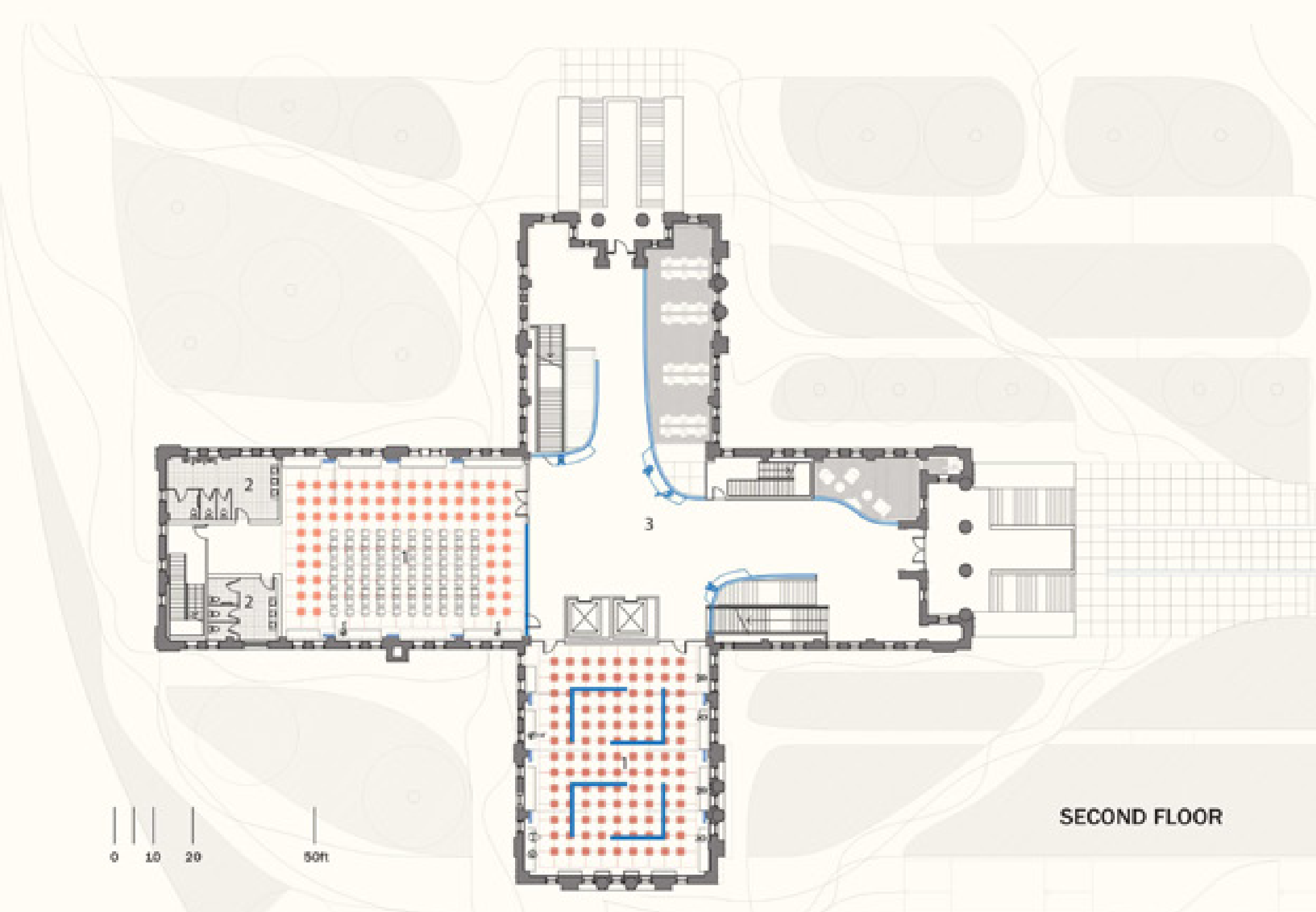
PUBLIC SPACE

The design intends to provide opportunities for a vast range of scenarios of social engagement. One fitting potential of the entrance area is to provide a space to exercise their First Amendment, seen here.





- 1 Cafe
- 2 Restrooms
- 3 Retail Space
- 4 Computer Labs
- 5 Social Gathering Space



- 1 Flexible Event Space
- 2 Restrooms
- 3 Lobby Terrace

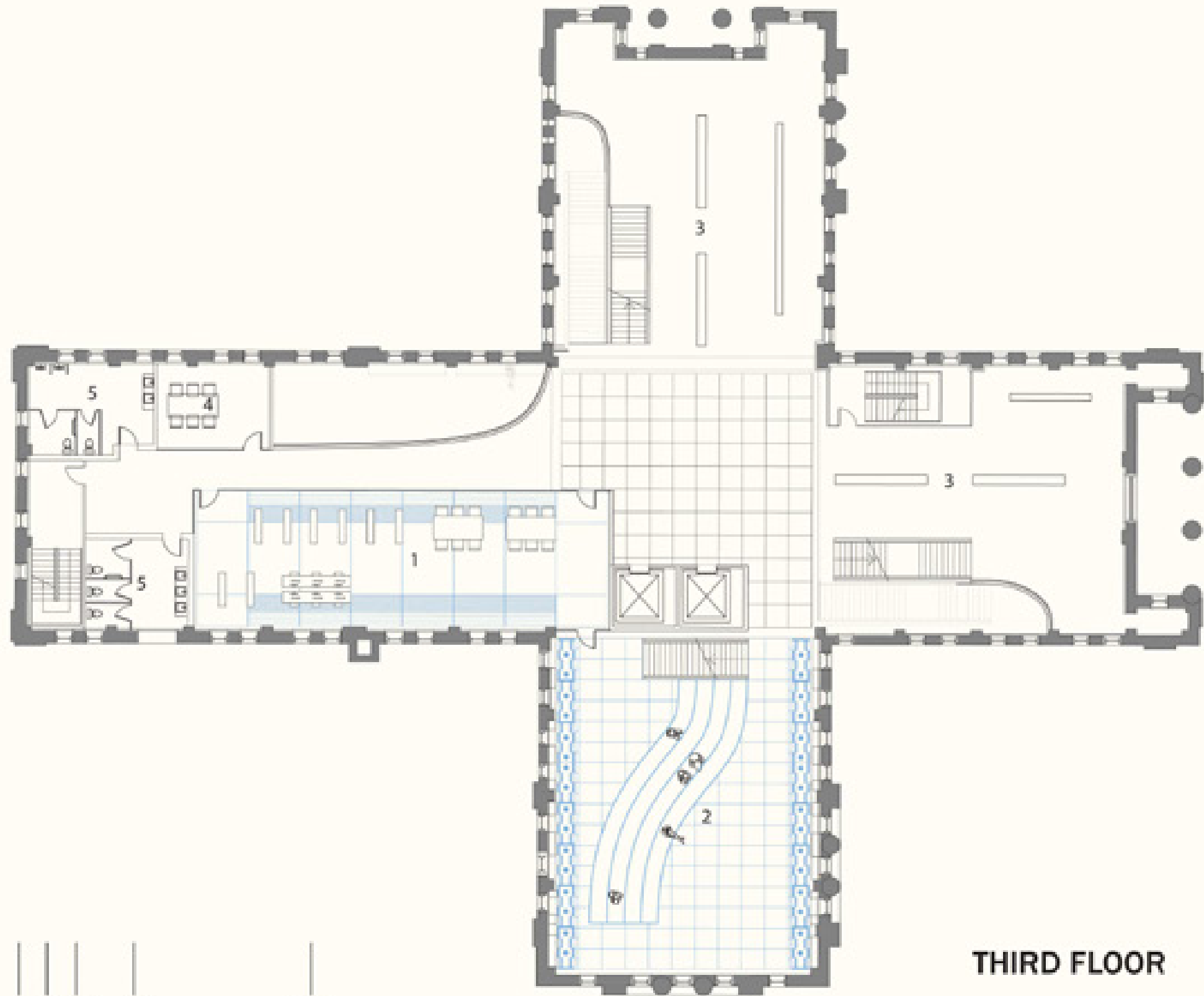






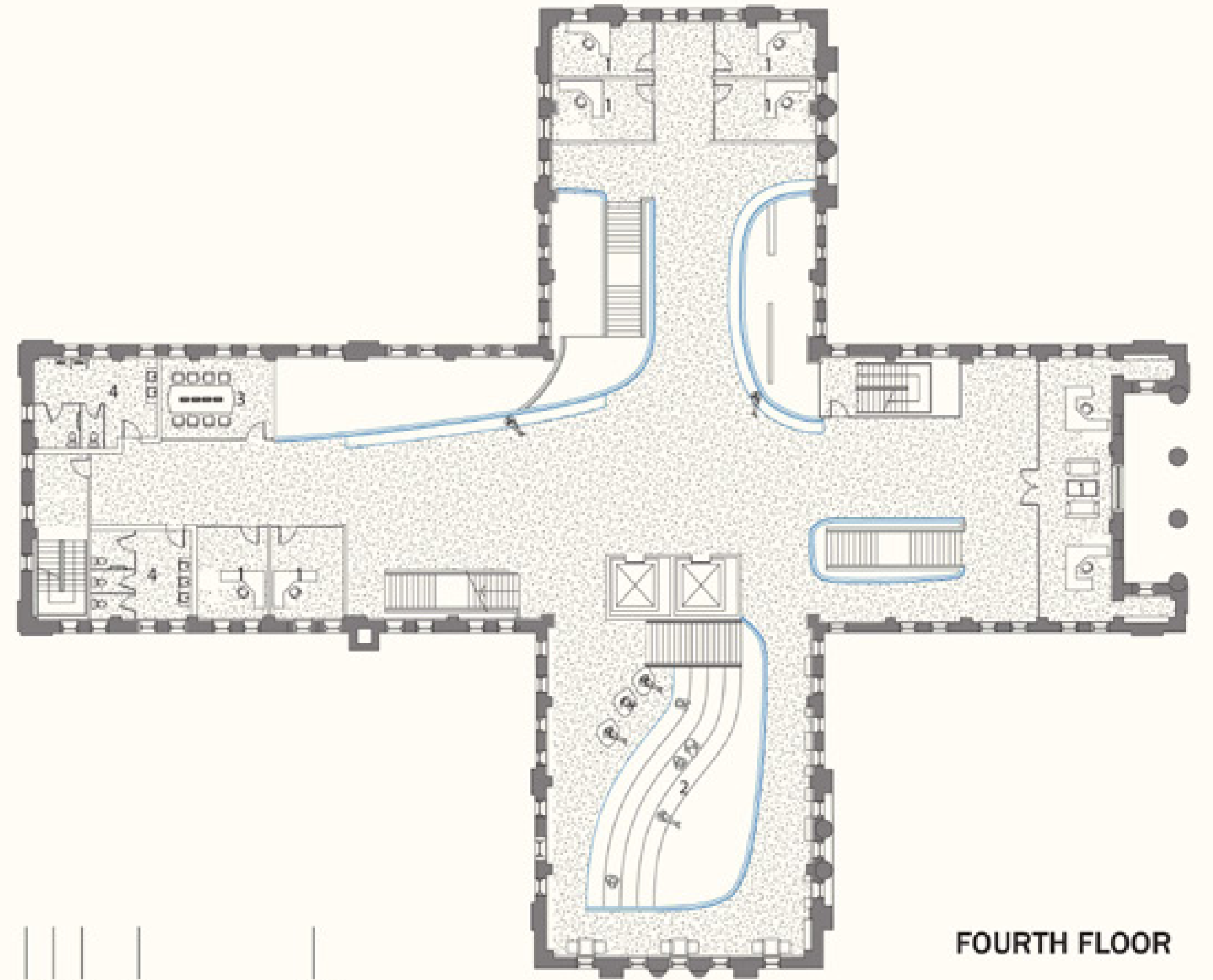






THIRD FLOOR

- 1 Archive Space
- 2 Library
- 3 Gallery Space
- 4 Conference Room
- 5 Restrooms

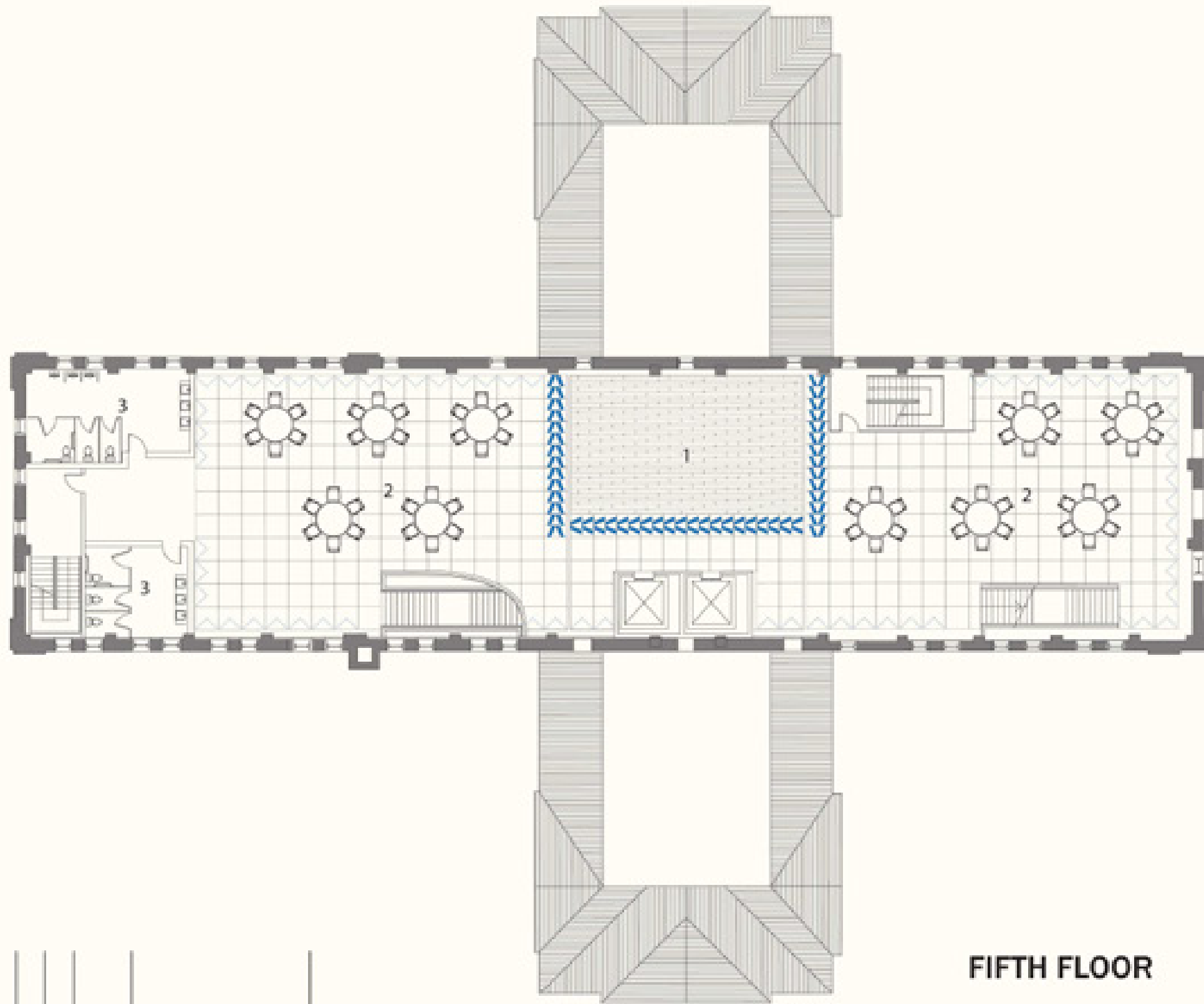


FOURTH FLOOR

- 1 Office Space
- 2 Library
- 3 Conference Room
- 4 Restrooms

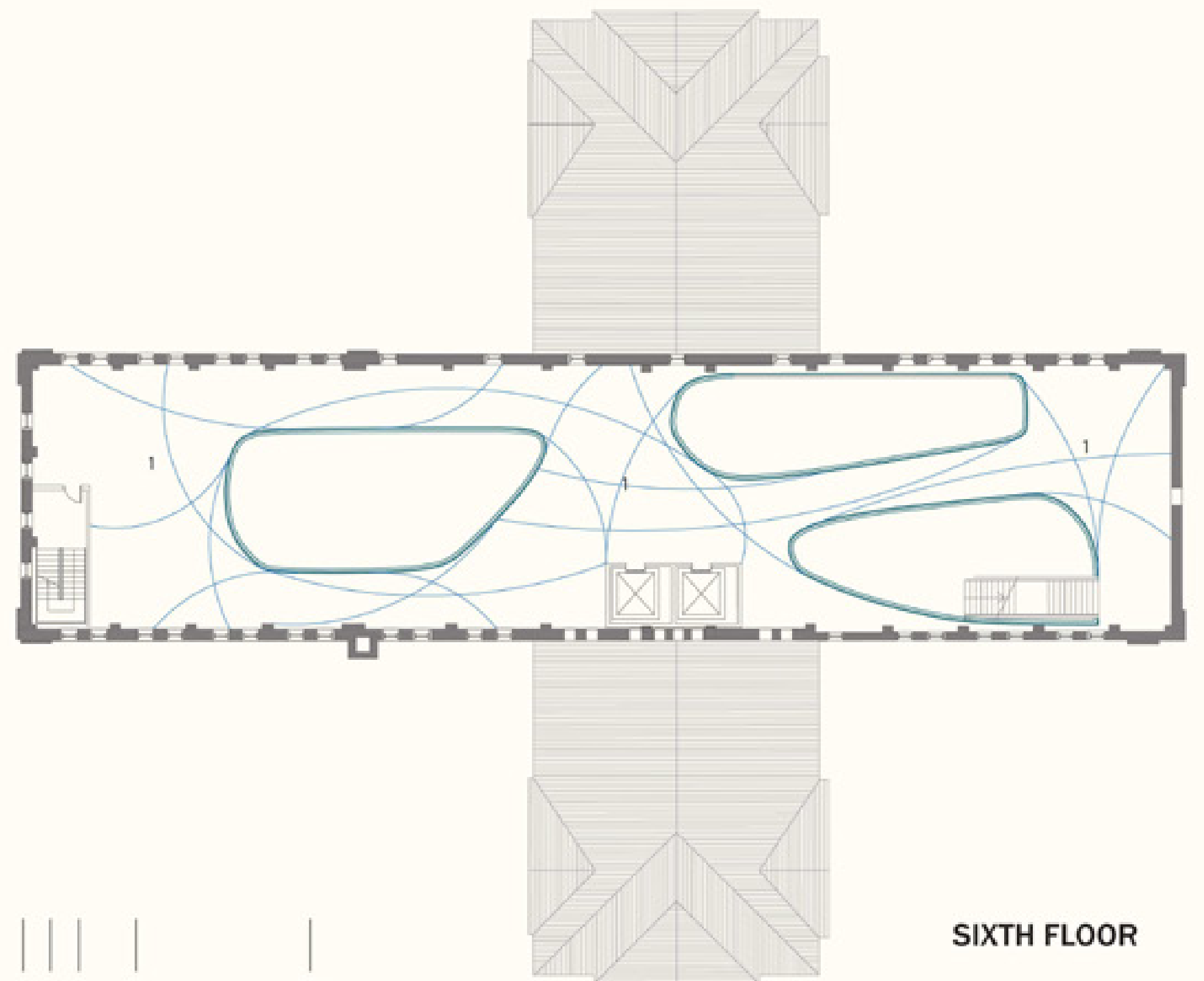






FIFTH FLOOR

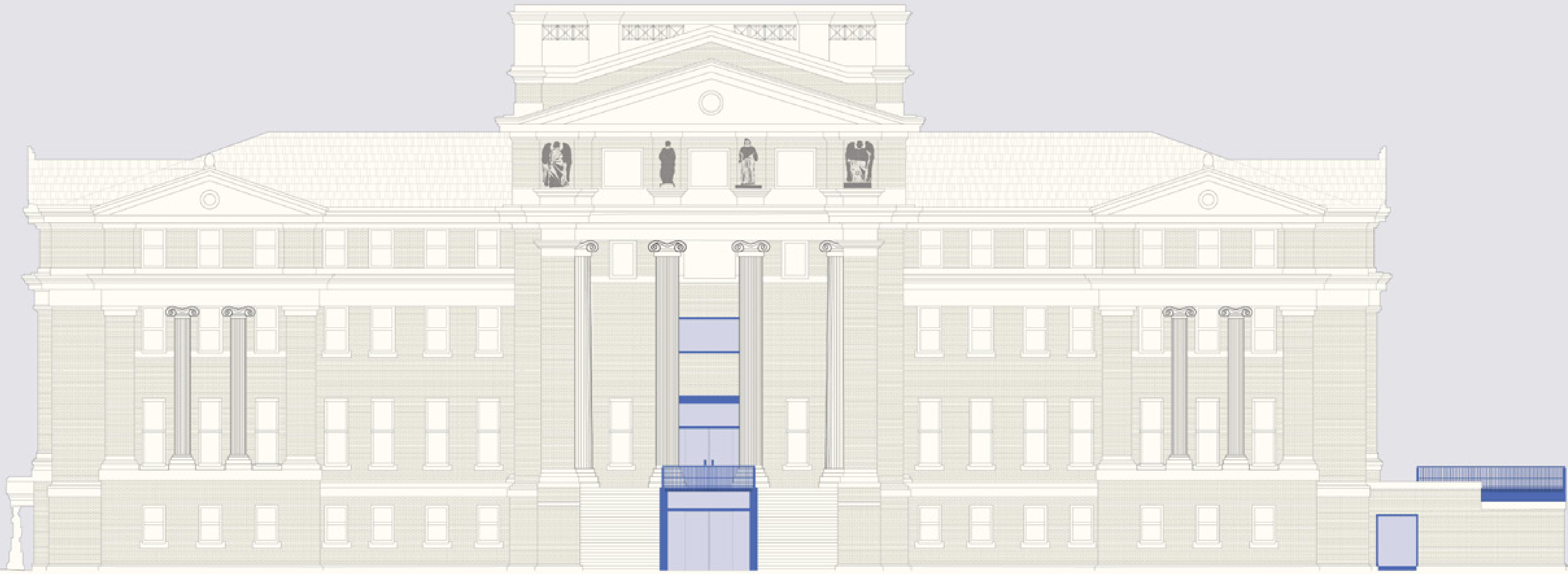
- 1 Wood Floor Dance Space
- 2 Gathering Space
- 3 Restrooms



SIXTH FLOOR

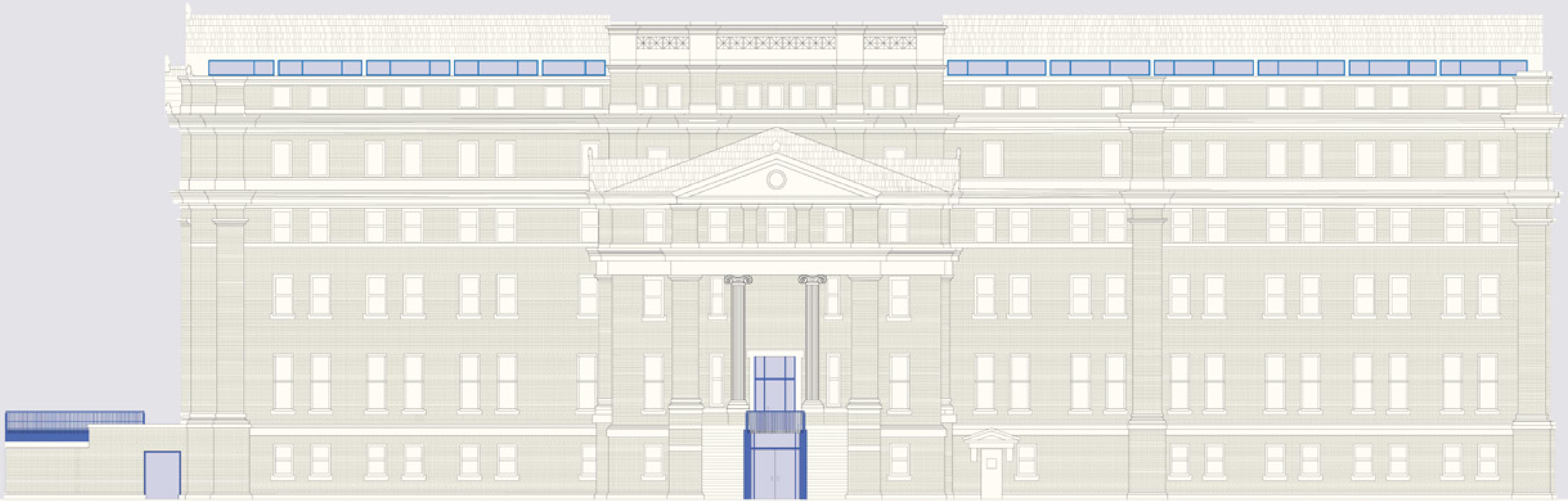
- 1 Gathering Space





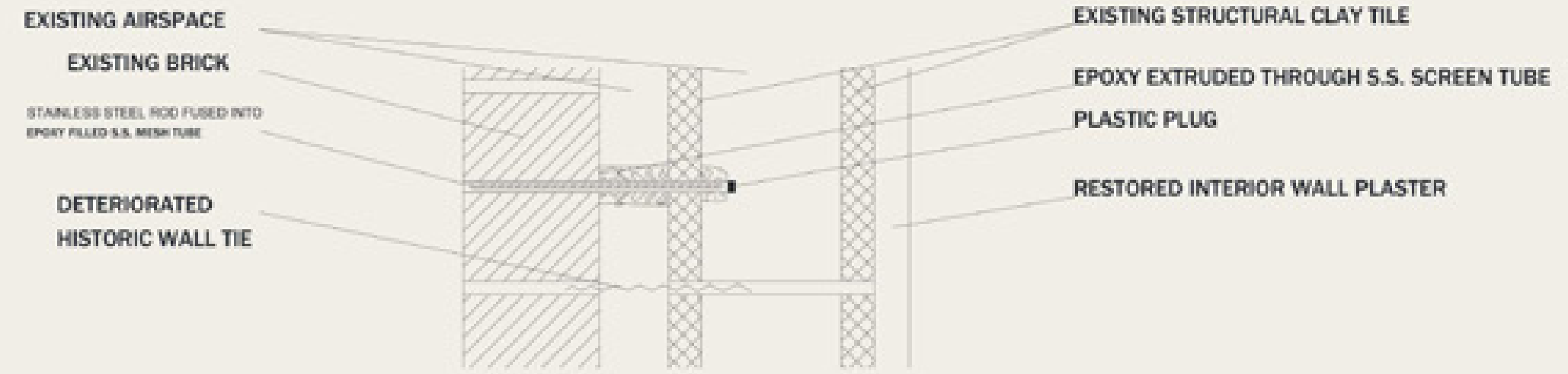
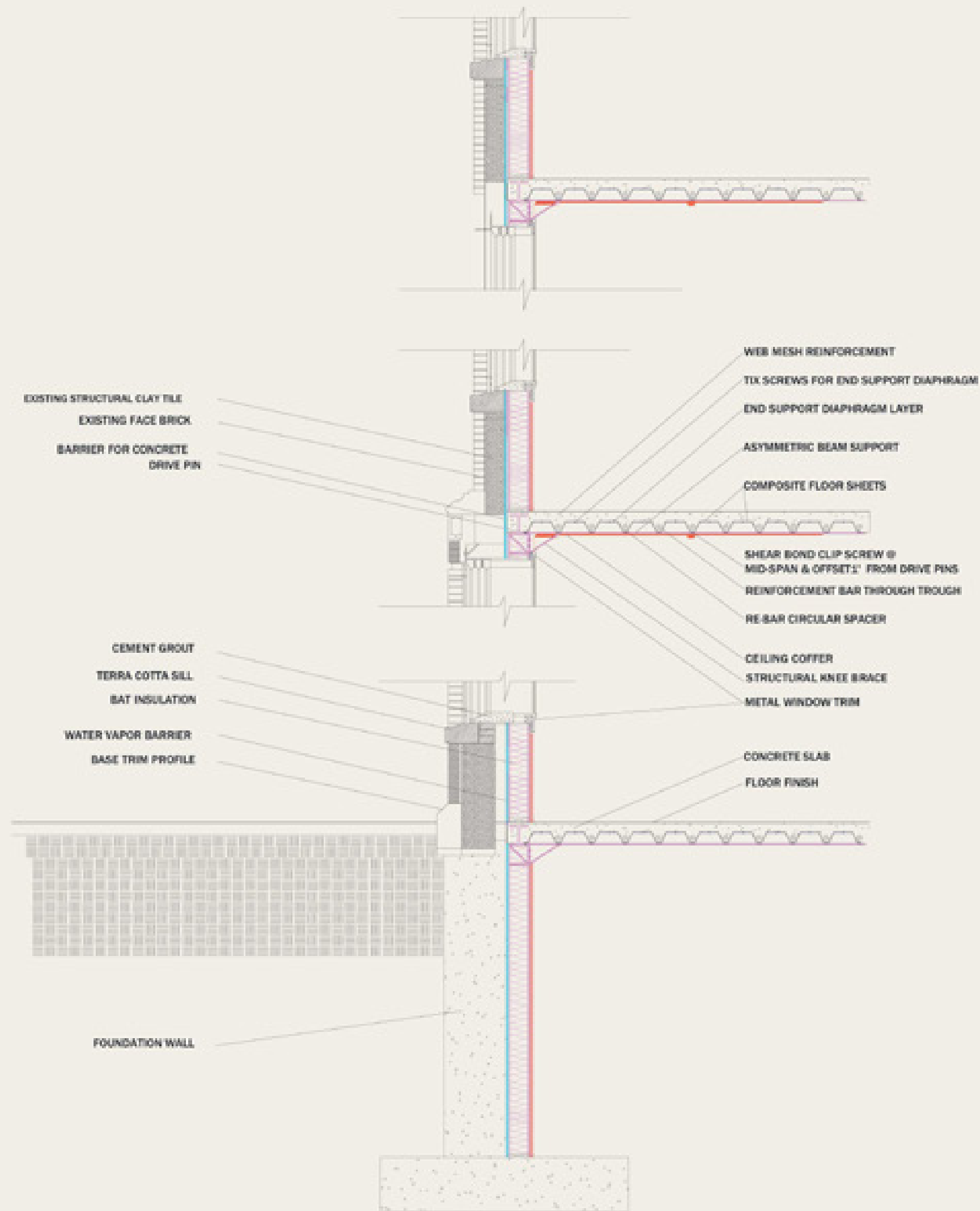
0 10 20 50ft

EAST SIDE ELEVATION



NORTH SIDE ELEVATION





SEA WALL

SHORELINE BLVD.

FEDERAL COURTHOUSE

N. CHAPARRAL ST.

N. MESQUITE ST.

FORMER WIDTH OF U.S. - 181

GARDEN AND JOG PATH CONNECTING
OLD CURTHOUSE TO SEA WALL





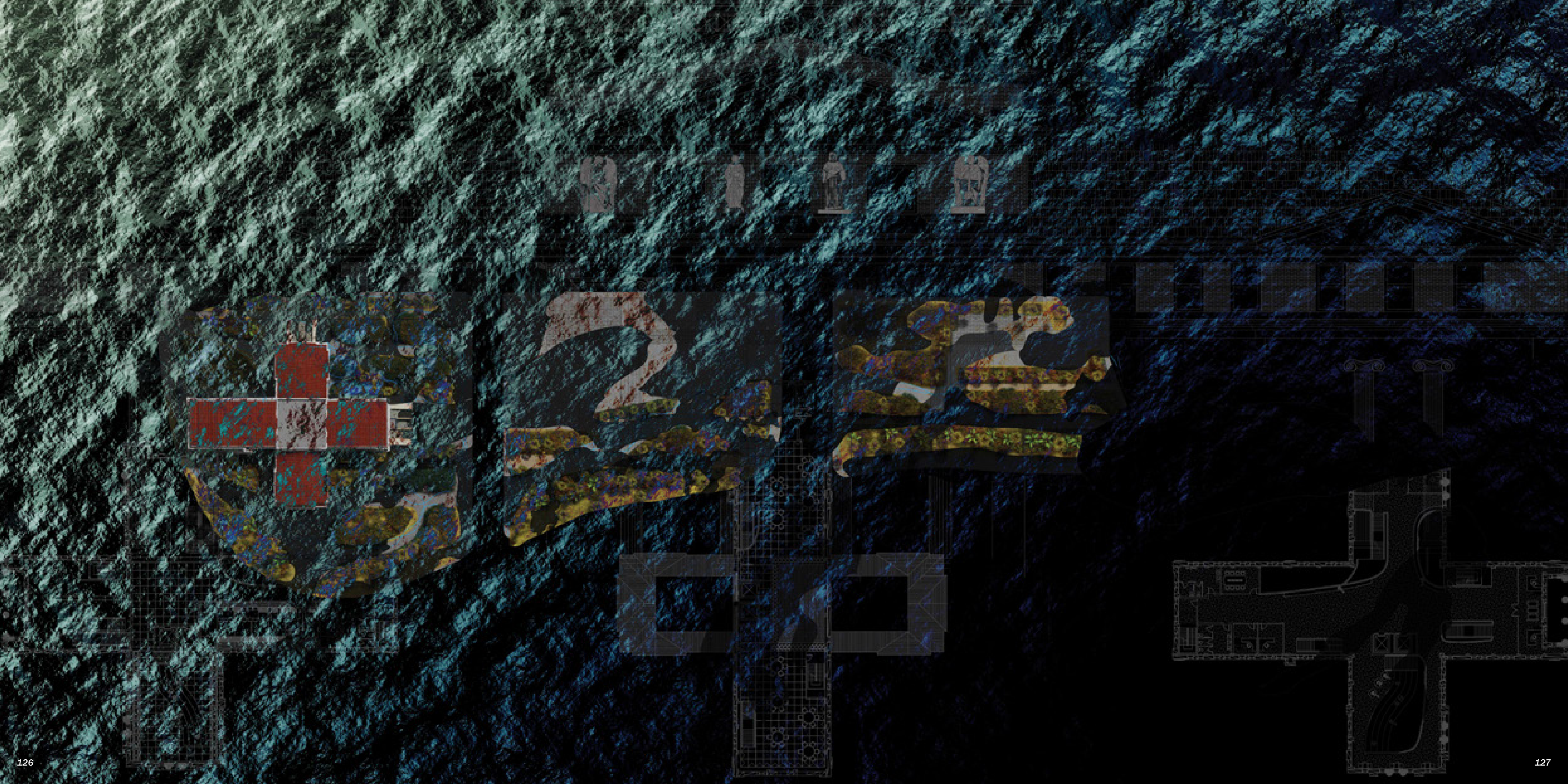


REFLECTION

Flexibility is the name of the game when it comes to contemporary design for interior spaces. The obvious purpose is to address future issues like the current one we are experiencing with similar structures like the Old Nueces County Courthouse. This research was able to provide me with a well-rounded approach to complimenting the concept of Preservation and Conservation with a contextual analysis of the site and the history associated with it. The intention was to develop a hypothesis that could respond to the issues of the site at varying scales, through investigating interventions of radical adaptations of the interior spaces, rather than following similar approaches of traditional adaptive re-use projects. I wanted to *first* approach the project with a clean slate, without any preconceived notions of what *ought* to be done with the existing conditions.

This research also provided me with the realization of the restrictions attached and appropriated to all structures labeled as historical landmarks. These guidelines are understandable, for the majority of preservation projects are typically attributed to sites that are sometimes centuries older than our courthouse. In those cases, the association to the architecture has virtually no connection to its surrounding context. It becomes reasonable to preserve the site as a relic, left on display for heritage conservation, or strategically used as a product of heritage tourism. The responses to the current conditions of the site and of the courthouse itself intend to address these ideas of preservation in conjunction with future plans of real estate development and the hazards they could potentially pose as new *heritage development*.

The following page displays a personal commentary on the discourse of the courthouse and the historical significance of preserving the structure, through graphic representation. The theme of the water shown in the background of the research pages is exaggerated here to evoke the rising tide of the ocean, notable from the rising ocean levels around the globe as a result of climate change. The site of the design project, along with a model of the building, and plan views appear to be sinking into the rising water. None of these elements are intended to be visually recognizable because that appears to be imminent future that the courthouse and its site is headed towards. The building is subject to the same commodifications and displacements that were witnessed as themes in this research.





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