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# HISTORYNEWS

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**LA CASA CORDOVA**

***iNUEVolution!***  
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Public History  
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# New Directions for



Prentiss Weinberg

By Lydia R. Otero

In 1972, preservationists officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places the house in downtown Tucson, Arizona, that Maria Navarrete Cordova had lived in for most of her life and had labored to keep in her family's possession. Designated as *La Casa Cordova*, her home's historical marker states that it is one of the oldest standing structures in Tucson and that portions of the house were built before the Gadsden Purchase of 1854, when the United States acquired southern Arizona. Dying just three years after its listing on the National Register, Cordova departed resentful of efforts by the new owners of La Casa Cordova to orchestrate her invisibility.<sup>1</sup>

# La Casa Cordova: Recentering the Latinx Past and Present in Tucson



Prentiss Weinberg

Interior of the new La Casa Cordova.

The preservation and restoration of La Casa Cordova provides an example of how narratives of exclusion grounded in settler colonialism got imprinted on the built environment in the Southwest by preservationists in the 1970s. Their decisions involving periodization in particular allowed them to actively manipulate the historical meanings attached to the home and to marginalize its owner, Maria Cordova. While the house's historical marker states, "The house was named for Maria Navarrete Cordova, whose family acquired it in 1896," it also obscures her subversive actions and efforts to resist the power of eminent domain. Revisiting this preservation effort provides a constructive example of the challenges involved in re-interpreting sites that have worked to erase and disrupt people of color's connection to place and history. In this case, it also involves looking beyond the information provided on an institutionally sanctioned bronze marker and revisiting the efforts of previous generations of preservationists for actions motivated by bias and exclusion.

**B**orn in 1895 in the small town of San Miguel de Horcasitas, in the state of Sonora, Mexico, Cordova's family had lived in the region since the 1840s. Shifting geopolitical relations between the United States and Mexico in the 1840s and 1850s forced her family and others in the region to navigate a host of new challenges. In 1848,

the U.S. acquired most of Arizona—but not the southern and most densely populated quarter—under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This southern portion remained part of Mexico's northern state of Sonora. Five years later, the United States annexed this area—which included Tucson and was inhabited primarily by Native Americans and *tucsonenses*—under the terms of the Gadsden Purchase, or *La Venta de La Mesilla*, as it was known in Mexico. Although December 30, 1853, marked the official transfer of national sovereignty, Mexican troops remained in Tucson until 1856. No other U.S. city remained under Mexican control longer than Tucson, where Anglo Americans represented only a small minority of settlers. In fact, Mexican people outnumbered Anglos throughout the nineteenth century and until 1920, when Anglos became the majority.<sup>2</sup>

Cordova descended from upper-class parents, and she experienced wealth and privilege beyond most Mexicans. These advantages diminished, however, once she moved to the United States as a child and entered a system with different racial and ethnic hierarchies. She acquired what would become La Casa Cordova from her great aunt, Refugio Rambaud, and took ownership of the house in 1934. She did not work outside the home and supported her family by renting out portions of the house and establishing the Cordova Brothers Smoke Shop, run mostly by her sons. But Cordova tended to customers daily and the house's location near the courthouse and police department before downtown redevelopment in the 1960s made it a popular destination.

In 1960, Cordova made the local papers when she delivered a letter to the mayor and council claiming that all of the land in downtown Tucson still belonged to her and her family. In 1965, Cordova and her son Raul filed a joint petition in U.S. District Court requesting that the federal and local government formally recognize their Spanish land grant. This move threatened private property ownership in the most developed area of downtown—even the courthouse in which the suit was litigated sat on property the Cordovas claimed as theirs. In a letter to the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, Raul mediated their claims by offering that he did not intend to displace or "inconvenience any innocent people (living on) the land now." Rather, he sought clear title to his "historic family home" and expected compensation for



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Tucson in the early 1900s.

the rest of the land. The federal court dismissed Cordova's claim, but this publicly defiant move challenged perceptions and legacies that celebrated nineteenth-century Anglo American pioneers, or settler colonists, who upon their arrival in Tucson had quickly and unrestrictedly acquired large portions of the most desired properties downtown. Tucson's early settlers, with last names such as Hughes, Mansfeld, Steinfeld, and Drachman, who arrived from distant lands and once comprised the minority population, ensured for themselves the right to govern and endorsed legal transactions that gave them an advantage when it came to property ownership and the acquisition of wealth. From the 1960s through the 1980s, elite descendants of these influential Anglo Americans also commanded the local preservation scene and spearheaded projects that elevated their families' social position and importance in the city's history.<sup>3</sup>

On March 1, 1966, the voters of Tucson approved the Pueblo Center Redevelopment Project, which targeted the most densely populated eighty acres in Arizona. The state's first major urban renewal project included government buildings, a modern retail complex, a performance arena, and a community conference facility. For close to a century, Mexican Americans or *tucsonenses* had created their own spatial reality in this same area that most called "*la calle*." Here, they patronized small retail and service shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues and openly lived and celebrated their culture.

To make way for the new structures, however, city officials removed residents and ordered the condemnation of nearly three hundred properties in the urban renewal area. Although Maria Cordova's house stood within the area targeted for demolition, the City of Tucson's Historical Sites Committee had recommended that it, as well as fourteen other older adobe homes, be spared because of their historic value. Once the city took title to the Cordovas' property, they intended to enter into a ninety-nine-year lease with the Tucson Museum of Art (hereafter TMA) for a dollar a year, with the museum taking on responsibility for the structure's restoration and operation.<sup>4</sup>

City and museum officials expected the Cordova family to accept what had been assessed as a fair value for their home and vacate. That the Cordovas desired to maintain possession

of and live in their house proved an unexpected obstacle. In 1971, Maria and Raul Cordova challenged Tucson's efforts to condemn their house and to categorize it as a "slum property," requesting that the Arizona Court of Appeals intervene. In the end, the city condemned the property through the power of eminent domain because the city intended to put it to "public use." The Cordovas were formally evicted on April 25, 1972, when the courts denied further appeals and issued a judgement that the house was worth \$135,250.

As a woman of relative means, Maria Cordova had taken pride in her home and had surrounded herself with books and fine furnishings. Photographs submitted shortly after the property's listing on the National Register in 1972 allow us a glimpse into her interior space. Oil paintings of historical landmarks painted by Cordova hang on the walls; one is prominently displayed over the fireplace. Her paintings had been exhibited at the Arizona State Museum about seven years before her eviction. In contrast to this lifestyle, restoration efforts sought to transform the house into what the Junior League (the organization tasked by the TMA to lead the preservation effort) referenced as its "original" condition, from when Tucson was a Mexican outpost. This decision meant that anything affiliated with the Cordovas or considered modern was removed—including the Cordovas themselves.

## The rear section of the Cordova House "may be the oldest surviving structure in Tucson."

Preservationists' zeal to preserve the physical structure presented mounting difficulties to the Cordovas, the long-time owners and occupants of the property, as they continued to resist city directives by refusing to vacate. Preservationists in the 1970s never publicly contested urban renewal dictates and the land redistribution policies that resulted in transferring the Cordova property to the TMA. They also willfully ignored Cordova's connection to the home. Evidently, to preservationists, the structure's best use entailed recasting and restoring the house to an imagined Mexican past. This reinvention, however, required a clean slate. Thus, the well-being of the Cordova family, the rental income generated from the property, and the Cordovas' desires to remain in the home come across as a non-issue—as if the Cordova family's disappearance were part of a logical historical script.

The Junior League, a group comprised largely of elite women with close associations to the local Anglo power structure, had conducted another preservation project in the area that was similarly problematic with regards to their treatment of the region's history and historical residents. They had garnered attention for restoring the Frémont House, named after Arizona's Territorial Governor John C. Frémont. In so doing, they ignored claims that cast doubt that Frémont ever spent a night in the home and purposely overlooked the Mexican American families who had built

and lived in the house. They completed their restoration in 1972 and were surprised to encounter resistance from the Mexican American community for overlooking the Sosa and Carrillo families' connection to the house and naming it after Frémont; in 1993, the name was officially changed to the Sosa-Carrillo-Frémont House on the National Register. But this incident and criticism provided at least one important lesson: one year later, when preservationists targeted Maria Cordova's home, they never considered naming the structure after anyone else. When it came to La Casa Cordova, the Junior League embraced the opportunity to direct the restoration effort and went as far as matching the funds awarded by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 for their project. And, although they had learned how to tap into local and national funding networks and heeded the lessons about naming the structures they targeted for preservation, the Junior League overlooked the more substantive lessons of community and historical inclusivity as they pursued their goals from a purely Anglo perspective that ignored more than one hundred years of the house's history.

The nomination form listing the house on the National Register of Historic Places, dated May 4, 1972, claims that the rear section of the Cordova House "may be the oldest surviving structure in Tucson" and that it was "also the City's oldest continuously occupied residence." The preservationists requested the National Register listing "on the basis of the house's value to the City of Tucson as an architectural entity which has survived from the period when Tucson and all Arizona south of the Gila River were once part of Mexico." Revealingly, the form also discloses that "Because of pending legal difficulties between the City of Tucson and the Cordova family, the historical surveyors and others have been denied access [by Cordova] to the interior of the house." Undeterred, the historical preservationists who authored the nomination optimistically and dismissively ventured that "When this situation improves and an inspection of the house's interior is permitted, this report will be amended accordingly." Maria Cordova finally left her home a few months after the filing of the nomination and died less than three years later in 1975.

The Junior League stated to the *Daily Citizen* in January 1975 their goals for transforming the house and the history they aimed to highlight, stating, "We want it to be an environmental experience. The restoration will be as pure as possible. Exterior walls will be of raw, unplastered adobes, sealed with a special product to protect them from the erosion. The floors will be of mud-packed dirt so they'll even smell like dirt as they did in the earliest days." Thus, plaster was removed from the walls and the wood floors were taken out. Restorers also removed all the inside plumbing and constructed a new outside area for cooking. Periodization also demanded that the house be stripped of all heating and electricity. Outside, they added a new well and turned a small building that the Cordovas had used for storage into a faux outhouse. Doors made of rough plank with hand-forged nails replaced more contemporary ones.

The Junior League invested countless hours and funds into their preservation agenda. Their actions and deci-



On Congress Tucson (flickr) by CC 2.0

Tucson today.

sions were not arbitrary or neutral. Junior League efforts indicated more than a desire to divorce Cordova's history of struggle and resistance from La Casa Cordova. The imagined Mexican past this elite group formulated and tangibly recreated held great symbolic value. It worked to remind the larger community of the benefits that accompanied settler colonialism and highlighted the "progress" and modernization Anglos had brought to the region. This re-imagining of La Casa Cordova also shifted attention away from land policies such as urban renewal that targeted people of color and offered an alternative story of nameless people who lived in Tucson long ago and who had willingly disappeared into the past.

On November 21, 1975, a small crowd of preservation-minded Tucsonans met to celebrate the completion of the La Casa Cordova restoration process. The Junior League announced that "it had two goals—to restore the house as authentically as possible, and help bring about the establishment of a Mexican museum in the house." Although the Junior League often expressed that they envisioned a Mexican Museum, once they restored the house they relied on the TMA to make this a reality.<sup>5</sup>

As planned, the restored La Casa Cordova effectively erased the Cordova family entirely. It invited visitors to roam the patio and the house's interior, complete with period furniture acquired from outside sources, without mentioning the people who once lived there. The displays highlighted the house's connection to Mexico but none mentioned how the TMA had come to acquire the house. Junior League preservationists' expressed hopes that the new La Casa Cordova would inspire a sense of pride in the city's Mexican heritage are difficult to comprehend considering their role in reinforcing historical categorizations that placed Mexican Americans in unequal and substandard spaces. In contrast to their interpretations at La Casa Cordova, the TMA's other home restoration efforts associated with Anglo American "pioneers" touted Anglos' innovative spirits and their enthusiastic embrace of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Efforts to establish a Mexican Museum, although talked about in the press, were never actively pursued and the TMA never tapped into the house's potential to educate the public



Tucson postcard, early 1900s.

## FURTHER READING

- Bettina O'Neil Lyons, *A History of La Casa Cordova and the Gabino Ortega Family and the Family of Maria Navarrete Cordova* (Tucson: Tucson Museum of Art, 1980).
- Lydia R. Otero, *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).
- Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

about Mexican Americans as active contributors to the building of Tucson, issues of displacement, and burgeoning social movements such as the Chicana Movement. Ultimately, the restoration resulted in promoting misleading portrayals of Mexican people as pre-modern and belonging to the distant past in houses with dirt floors and outhouses. In the end, the TMA has found it more expedient to close down the bulk of La Casa Cordova for the past ten years, with the exception of a small room at the end of the house that features an intricately crafted and whimsical *nacimiento* (nativity scene) erected in 1978 and open to the public during the winter months. They used the house's interior and former living quarters for storing random office equipment.<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, the dormant house came to symbolize bad decisions and missed opportunities. Maintaining the older adobe house also proved expensive. In 2016, the TMA received funding to initiate a series of needed repairs to La Casa Cordova and to make the house's interior accessible to the public. This forced the organization to revisit the meanings and stories associated with and previously assigned to the structure. More than four decades had transpired since the restoration had left the house frozen in time, and after reflecting and revisiting the research archives, the TMA moved in a more inclusive direction. They decided to add another layer to the building's history, one that included Maria Cordova and her family. In June 2017, they reopened another room in La Casa Cordova. Their new exhibit prominently includes Maria Cordova's letters and a few large, one-dimensional installations that also feature her words and image. The TMA did not shy away from the issue of families displaced by urban renewal, and a looped video station featuring Mexican Americans reflecting on the past and the changes in downtown form a critical part of this exhibit. The

TMA anticipates telling a fuller story of Mexican Americans in Tucson when it opens more rooms in the house in the future.

The current political climate that too often references walls and borders highlights the need for more Latinx historic places and stories. Sites like La Casa Cordova serve to counter portrayals of all Latinx people as recent arrivals by accentuating this ethnic groups' extensive history as active contributors in local and national history. It also tells the story of a vibrant binational woman who remained true to her cultural and political beliefs. In the world of Latinx heritage conservation and heritage conservation in general, the new exhibit in La Casa Cordova represents constructive change. That the museum is currently only one small room may overwhelm visitors, but its exhibit represents a dramatic shift of priorities, one of inclusivity and that prominently integrates the history of Maria Cordova with her former house. ●



Born and raised in Tucson and having deep family roots on both sides of the Arizona-Sonora border inspired the author's interest in regional history. In 2011, the Border Regional Library Association awarded Lydia R.

Otero's book *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City* a Southwest Book Award. Their newest book project, *Quién lo dice?: Narratives of Exclusion and Historical Preservation in a Southwest City*, highlights the activism of women who launched separate historical projects spanning more than three decades in the latter half of the twentieth century in Tucson. Otero wishes to thank Marianna Pegno at the TMA for insisting that Maria Cordova's images and words made their way back into La Casa Cordova.

<sup>1</sup> The Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and Arizona Historical Society installed the bronze marker.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I use "Anglo American" or "Anglo" to refer to someone of Euro-American descent, even though many of the people I am grouping together under this designation did not trace their roots to England, to reflect a usage widely accepted by Tucsonans in the past.

<sup>3</sup> Two of the main preservationists had descended from the Mansfeld and Steinfeld families, powerful merchant and landowning families since the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> Urban renewal is the focus of my book, *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Sue Giles, "Art Museum Gets 'Keys' to La Casa Cordova," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, November 24, 1975, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Those involved with the restoration declared that "It is hoped that the museum will give Tucsonians [sic] a sense of pride in their Mexican heritage." "La Casa Cordova Getting 'Old' Adobe Look," *Tucson Daily Citizen*, January 3, 1975, 21.

<sup>7</sup> The elaborate *nacimiento* or nativity scene crafted by Maria Luisa Leon Teña involves many layers and miniature scenes and has become a local attraction during the holiday season. Since the TMA did not announce La Casa Cordova's closure, longtime TMA employees estimate that it has been closed for more than ten years.



La Casa Cordova today.