

# Sustain and Endure

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In his book “A Journey Through Texas,” Frederick Law Olmsted observed in 1855 the interest that was taken in education and the building of schools in the German settlements he visited. This was particularly true of the German immigrants that founded Fredericksburg and settled Gillespie County in the 1840s. Like other rural Texas communities, they leveraged meager state funds with local support to build and maintain a county-wide network of rural schools that, by 1900, peaked at over 44 districts, each with its own “one-room” schoolhouse.

By 1960, all of the rural schools were decommissioned by state mandate. The deep attachment many locals felt for the schools they or their parents attended, built, and maintained — and an appreciation of the practical utility of these sites as community meeting places — has ensured their survival. Concerned that the state would sell off the land upon which the remaining schools stood to private investors, school club members and local citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to allow public school properties to be donated to governmental or nonprofit organizations at

no cost. Today, The Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools oversees 12 historic German country school sites, which are owned by the county and leased to the Friends. These schools, and four others held in private hands, make up one of the largest collections of rural schools managed by a single entity in the United States. Most are available for private use, and all are accessible to the public on the Gillespie County Country Schools Driving Trail, which is the only one of its kind in Texas. It may be the only such heritage experience in the United States.

In essence, the Texas “common school” was a district partially funded by state money to be further supplemented with revenues raised and managed by locally elected trustees. To be eligible to receive government funds, each county district was responsible for hiring the teachers, buying the books and desks, purchasing the land, building the schoolhouse, and providing the necessary maintenance and repair. The funding of education in Texas during the period of 1840 to 1949, known broadly as the Texas Common School Era, was essentially a voucher system where the state paid a nominal contribution to locally managed schools. Through volunteerism and a spirit of self-reliance, the German community schools became some of the best in the state.

From barns to homes to simple log cabins, rudimentary means were first employed to hold classes. As clusters of rural families grew larger and spread deeper into the farm and ranch lands around Fredericksburg, permanent structures were erected by the students’ parents and became symbols of community pride and cultural solidarity. As the following examples will show, the first permanent buildings erected by the Germans of Gillespie County were small log cabins copied from American settlers. Limestone was soon quarried and worked locally. Milled lumber, tin cladding, and conventional American themes and stylistic elements became more common with the arrival of rail service at San Antonio and Austin, and with improved roads enabling overland transportation by wagon or automobile.

## **Rheingold School**

The Rheingold School is situated 14 miles northeast of Fredericksburg in the community named after the Gold family, who were among the early German settlers in the region around 1860. The first schoolhouse was built in 1873, and it is the oldest building standing on the Rheingold School property. It began as a 12-ft-by-14-ft log cabin and is typical of early German log buildings in the mid-19th century. The original log cabin school was stuccoed on the south side and sided over with vertical wood boards at the gabled ends. The Germans of the Texas Hill Country were critical of the traditional southern log cabin, which was drafty and not very comfortable. They improved the typology by infilling the spaces between the logs with brick or stone and mortar instead of mud and straw, a European method known as nogging, and they routinely stuccoed their buildings, as was the custom in Germany, for both aesthetic and practical reasons.

The original 1873 log cabin was converted to the teacherage after the second schoolhouse was built in 1881. A permanent residence for the teachers who were hired by the school trustees better accommodated a married teacher with a family, reduced the time of travel to the

school location each day, and afforded the teacher in residence the opportunity to regularly maintain the buildings and the grounds. The log cabin teacherage was enlarged with a matching wood frame addition in 1881 extending to the west and doubling the size of the original cabin. A second addition of limestone, measuring 10 ft deep and estimated to be from the 1920s, was added to the north, running the full length of the first two structures.

The second Rheingold Schoolhouse is a 20-ft-by-36-ft rectangular plan constructed of milled wood framing sheathed in painted 1-in-by-6-in clapboard siding. The structure is topped by an open gabled roof that has been recently covered with new galvanized standing seam metal panels matching the teacherage. The front door on the east elevation is protected by a 6-ft-by-8-ft porch, and a total of 12 wood-framed, double-hung windows draw light into the classroom: three on the north facade, two on the east facade, and seven on the south side of the building. The west end comprises a tapered limestone chimney that serves a wood burning stove. The interior walls are tongue-and-groove horizontal wood boards; the ceiling is a similar type, with a beadboard face; and the floor is exposed pine wood boards. Easier to transport and faster to erect on site, factory-milled lumber allowed for larger window openings — not practical in either log or nonreinforced stone construction — and this increased the amount of natural daylight to the interior rooms before electricity became available. The design is typical of American one-room schoolhouses of the era, and it breaks from the traditional German-Texan log cabin and limestone masonry used in the teacherage.

A unique building type developed at many of the German country school compounds is known as the “pavilion.” These covered gathering spaces evolved from seasonally constructed open-air pole structures covered with tree limbs and foliage, referred to locally as “brush arbors.” They were likely inspired by the open-air revival camp “tabernacles” common throughout the rural areas of the United States in the years following the Second Great Awakening. Permanent wood tabernacle construction methods, introduced to the Texas Hill Country by settlers from Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee, would have been discoverable by the Germans of Gillespie County, as many were constructed in nearby counties, including McCulloch, Mills, and San Saba. Timber-framed pavilions, both open and enclosed, began to appear in the early 1930s at various school complexes in Gillespie County.

The Rheingold pavilion is open-air, with an enclosed stage area at the west gabled end, and its construction dates to 1938. Throughout the county, elaborate theatrical performances and musical recitals took place during the end of classes each year to raise funds for school operations. Newspaper announcements show that the annual “school closings” were staggered so members of different communities could attend. The typical pavilion stage was a raised proscenium and often had an angled cyclorama backdrop and a hand-painted, canvas advertising curtain, a common 19th-century American rural school tradition. The backstage area was used for dressing and storing props and had openings for scene entrances; the house floor area was suitable for seating an audience or holding a dance.

The typical rural school often had a saddle barn, loafing shed, and fenced areas for horses and donkeys, as many students rode them to school. Wells were dug; cisterns were installed to store rainwater for use in times of drought; and additional dependencies such as well pump sheds, smoke houses, storage buildings, and outhouses were standard.

A common feature at many schools, particularly at those with a pavilion, is a large barbecue pit that is often covered with a pole structure shed. Food and drinks were sold, and admission was charged for the plays and dances, all with the purpose of raising school operation funds at the school closing events. An important aspect of the American country schools was to function as places of community gathering and social interaction beyond regular classroom activities. It is easy to assume that ranchers and farmers grow accustomed to living alone in isolated settings; however, in the German states from which the 19th-century immigrants originated, agricultural communities were much larger, lived closer together in villages, and were used to regular socialization. The need for frequent community activities and conviviality did not die out in Texas, and the German-speaking school — much like German singing groups, social clubs, and turnvereins, as well as their numerous iconic dance halls, many of which still survive — were and still remain integral to the social well-being of the German-speaking community.

The German pioneers of Gillespie County were the first Europeans to settle the area, which was in the heart of the Comanche Nation. The threat of hostilities was ever-present and a major factor in the location of the early rural schools. In the 1860s and 1870s, it was preferred that the schools be within walking distance of the children's homes, as the use of horses provided incentives for theft by raiding bands of Comanche. They quickly learned to use the natural terrain effectively; choosing locations near a stream was desirable, and yet flooding was a constant concern. Many early schools were moved or simply abandoned for lack of water, infestations of ants and rattlesnakes, poor roads, and shifts in population. In places where reliable well water was not available, hand-dug cisterns collected rainwater from roof gutters. Buildings were oriented to maximize natural sunlight, and structures on the site were spaced far apart to allow the turning of horse-drawn wagons and grass mowers, which kept the vegetation cut close to the ground to provide playing fields for the children and to discourage snakes and varmints.

### **Pecan Creek School**

The Pecan Creek School consists of three adjoined buildings incrementally constructed between 1916 and 1940 and representing a single building strategy. A log school was built in 1888, and classes later moved to a wood-frame farmhouse purchased in 1901 as a private school for a few families. This second schoolhouse was dismantled, moved in sections by mule teams, and reassembled in 1916 at its present location. It is thought the clapboard siding was sheathed with embossed tin panels, and the large bay of south-facing windows was added in 1935. Teachers usually boarded with a family in the area, and no teacherage was ever built.

In 1936, an open-air pavilion measuring 14 ft by 40 ft was extended to the east. It is composed of long-span wooden trusses supported by timber columns and beams. The adjoining stage at the north side, as well as the shed roof and south-facing gabled roof at the east end, were added in 1938, and, by 1940, the stage and pavilion were enclosed with corrugated steel siding with top-hinged awning window panels, identical to those found on many dance halls, making the pavilion usable year-round. A painted canvas stage curtain decorated with business advertisements is suspended from a rolling rod, and it is thought to date from the 1940s.

The Pecan Creek School pavilion is directly attached to the primary schoolhouse and provided additional classroom space as the number of grades was expanded and student enrollment increased. The economy of the Depression years dictated a penny-wise mentality toward school construction, and multifunctionality is a hallmark of the German rural schools. The barbecue pit shelter dates to 1936 and was rebuilt in 2016, and the stand-alone restroom building was erected by school club members in 2008. After consolidating with Fredericksburg in 1955, the Pecan Creek Community formed a community club and continued to use and maintain the building for social activities. It has been upgraded with modern restrooms, and the building is regularly used today.

### **Williams Creek Common School**

The ranchers who settled along Williams Creek built a one-room log cabin in 1881, which proved to be too remote, and, in 1897, a schoolhouse measuring 43 ft x 23 ft was constructed from locally quarried limestone dressed in an ashlar pattern. Four large, symmetrically spaced window openings on the north and south sides, respectively, illuminate the interior. Two similar windows straddle a set of two wooden entry doors with a three-pane transom at the west facade. The east facade is blank except for a brick chimney at the ridge to relieve the flue from a wood-burning stove located near the middle of the room. The original wooden window frames were replaced in the 1950s with aluminum units, and the original cedar shingles have been replaced — first with tin, and, recently, with a modern, standing seam galvanized metal panel system. At the west gable sits a wooden bell tower containing the original bell. The interior walls are washed in plaster; the pine tongue-and-groove floor and beadboard ceiling are original; and, above the ceiling, the attic is used for storage.

The community grew rapidly, necessitating an addition, built in 1923, measuring 31 ft by 23 ft and extending to the west of the original limestone structure. Constructed of milled wood framing with embossed tin panels protecting the original, board-sided exterior walls, the addition is connected to the limestone structure by an 11-ft-wide, semi-enclosed “dogtrot” breezeway. Grades one through five were held in the east room, and six through 10 met in the west room, which features the original canvas stage curtain that was unrolled during intermissions at plays and performances, creating an impromptu stage area about 9 ft deep at the windowless west wall.

Texas law stipulated that two teachers could not hold classes in the same room. Districts with enrollments large enough to hire two teachers had to provide a separate classroom for each teacher. At Pecan Creek, the enclosed pavilion doubled as the second classroom, and at Williams Creek, the second classroom doubled as the pavilion. The latter school is a few yards to the east of the famous Albert Dance Hall (constructed in 1922), and it is often referred to as the “Albert School.” Williams Creek was known as a “singing community,” and, over the years, various singing clubs and musical groups used the dance hall and the schoolhouse as places to rehearse and perform. The convenient proximity of the school to the Albert Dance Hall may have inspired the construction of similar pavilion structures at other rural school locations throughout Gillespie County in the 1930s.

### **Sustainable Mentality**

The surviving country schools in Gillespie County provide an overview of the more than 44 common rural country schools known to have existed at one time between 1856 and 1960. They are also windows into the history of 19th and early 20th-century American rural education, when locally run, one-room schoolhouses across the United States, numbering more than 200,000 by 1920, played a major role in public education. Some of the rural schoolhouses grew to become social, cultural, and educational centers as a result of incremental adaptation, addition, and expansion. Teacherages, painted scenic stage curtains with local advertisements, and holding community fundraising events and social occasions at the schools were traditional American practices.

The invention of the school pavilion near an oversized barbeque pit is a German Hill Country innovation. The makeshift means of providing educational spaces in remote locations on tight budgets produced an ad-hoc mixture of materials and styles resulting from the communal process of building expediently as well as a willingness to employ the various skills of community volunteers who were experimenting with techniques learned from direct application. Log cabin construction, locally quarried limestone, factory-milled wood framing and siding, metal cladding, and manufactured brick and concrete block were all used at different points in time, but the essential ethos of the schools’ patrons and builders did not change: They worked within the natural environment and were guided by an egalitarian ethic of community participation aimed at the preservation of cultural identity. The schools remain useful and important to the present because of volunteerism on the part of the descendants of the students and original builders. Dedication to the repair of structure and envelope, particularly the timely replacement of roofs, has preserved the buildings for future generations. The rural German common schools surrounding Fredericksburg demonstrate that sustainability is not merely the result of durable materiality — it is also the product of an enduring mentality.

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no cost. Today, The Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools oversees 12 historic  
*Palo Alto Common School, c. 1900. The log school with a brush arbor porch (right) was built in 1869 and converted to a teacherage when the limestone schoolhouse (left) was erected in 1883. In 1934, enrollment peaked at 65 pupils taught by two teachers covering grades one through nine. The school finally closed in 1946. - photo courtesy Gillespie County Historical Society, Fredericksburg, Texas*



In his book "A Journey Through Texas," Frederick Law Olmsted observed in Rheingold Common School/Community Center. The stage and pavilion (left) was built 1936; the second schoolhouse (right) was built 1881. - photo by Ben Shacklette, AIA

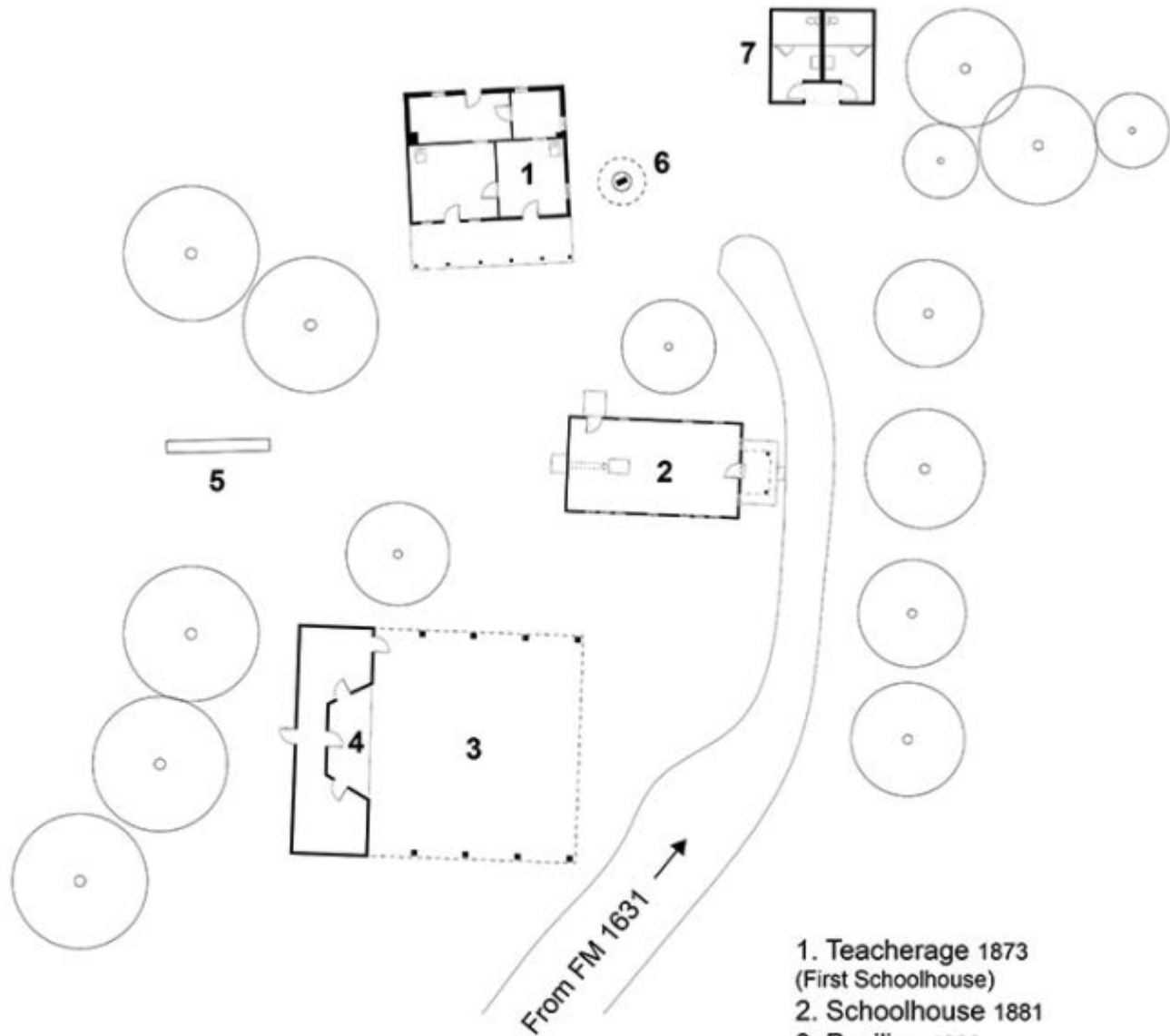




citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to  
*Rheingold Common School/Community Center. The log-framed limestone schoolhouse was built*  
*in 1878 and served as a teacherage after 1881. - photo by Ben Shacklette, AIA*

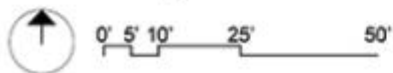


citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to Rheingold Common School/Community Center. The wood-frame schoolhouse, built in 1881, is currently used as a community club meeting room. - photo by Ben Shacklette, AIA



**SITE PLAN: RHEINGOLD SCHOOL**  
 334 Rheingold School Road

- 1. Teacherage 1873  
(First Schoolhouse)
- 2. Schoolhouse 1881
- 3. Pavilion 1936
- 4. Stage 1936
- 5. Barbecue Pit 1936
- 6. Cistern/Water Pump 1936
- 7. Restrooms 2002

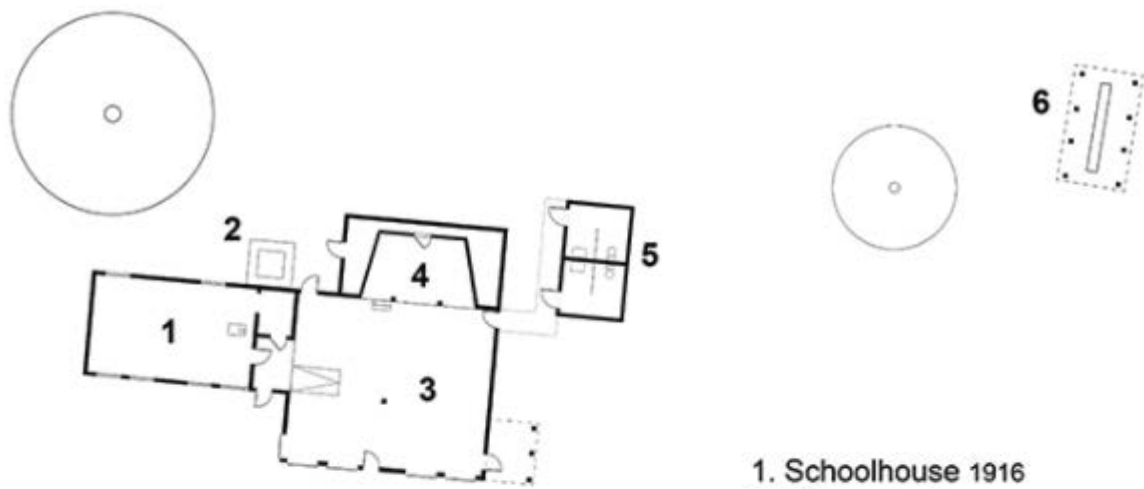




*Pecan Creek Common School/Community Center. The schoolhouse (left) was constructed in 1916 using wood framing with embossed tin siding. The attached pavilion (right) was constructed between 1936 and 1940 using timber framing with corrugated steel siding. - photo by Ben Shacklette, AIA*



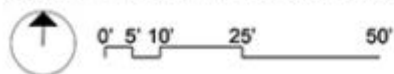
citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to  
*Pecan Creek Common School/Community Center. Pavilion and community meeting hall. - photo* profit organizations at  
*by Ben Shacklette, AIA* cost. Today, The Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools oversees 12 historic



1. Schoolhouse 1916
2. Cistern 1936
3. Pavilion
4. Stage
5. Barbecue Pit Shelter
6. Restrooms 2008

## SITE PLAN: PECAN CREEK SCHOOL

3410 Pecan Creek Road





citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to

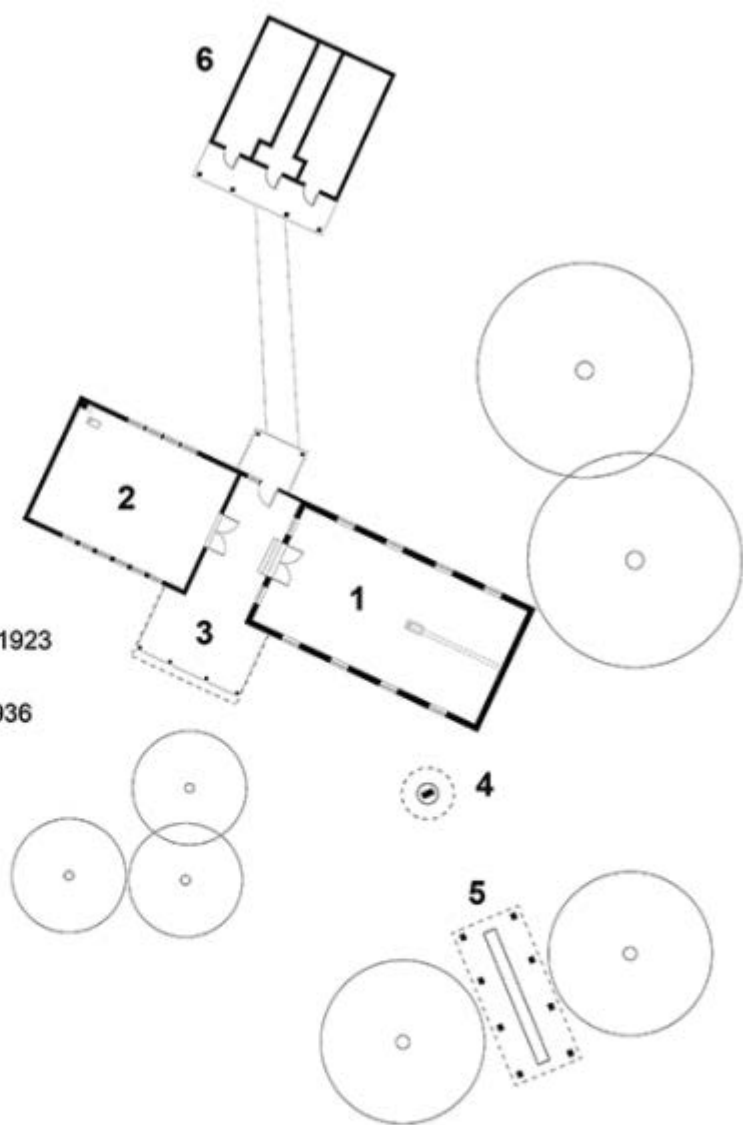
*Williams Creek (Albert) Common School/Community Center. The first schoolhouse (right) was* nonprofit organizations at  
*built in 1897 and constructed with dressed limestone. The schoolhouse and dogtrot entry addition* oversees 12 historic  
*(left) were constructed in 1923 using wood framing with embossed tin siding. - photo by Ben* German County school sites, which are owned by the county and leased to the Friends.  
*Shacklette, AIA* These schools, and four others held in private hands, make up one of the largest collections



citizens instigated the signing of Texas Senate Bill 116 in 2002, which changed Texas law to  
*Williams Creek (Albert) Common School/Community Center. 1928 schoolhouse and community*  
*meeting room.- photo by Ben Shacklette, AIA* profit organizations at  
Friends of Gillespie County Country Schools oversees 12 historic



1. Schoolhouse 1897
2. Schoolhouse Addition 1923
3. Dogtrot 1923
4. Cistern/Water Pump 1936
5. Barbeque 1936
6. Restrooms 2000



**SITE PLAN: WILLIAMS CREEK (ALBERT) SCHOOL**  
**5501 South Ranch Road 1623**

