



Storied Property: María Cordova's Casa by Lydia R. Otero (review)

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ing with the heliograph stations affected the careers of the army lieutenants who oversaw them. Davis names these officers and describes their later careers, both in the text and in an appendix. He could have expanded, however, on how service with the heliograph stations itself affected the careers of these officers, but he only occasionally mentions their later advancement. I would have liked to have seen how their performance during the heliograph exercises was judged by their commanders.

Overall, *Lieutenants and Light* is an informative read for those interested in the history of military communications in the United States. If one is looking for a greater examination of the effect these heliographs had in military operations or on the careers of junior officers, this work does not provide that. Rather, it shows how the U.S. Army's heliograph network morphed and shifted through its years of operation. The book shows how geography and supply were deciding factors in the placement of the heliograph signal stations even more than the relative signaling advantages of their locations. Davis maps that history both through text and cartography.

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Storied Property: María Cordova's Casa. By Lydia R. Otero. (Tucson: Planet Earth Press, 2025. Pp. 242. \$24.40 paperback; \$24.40 ebook)

Behind the narrative on every historic marker is a more complex history of place. Lydia Otero delves into Tucson archives to trace the history of "La Casa Cordova," a Sonoran row house today preserved by the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block. *Storied Property* reveals how the house's namesake, María Navarrete Cordova (1895–1975), cultivated popular interest in the building's historic characteristics when she lived in it—and how Tucson's city government used that history to remove her from her home in the name of historic preservation.

María Navarrete Cordova was born in Mexico in 1895 to a

wealthy, transnational family. When Cordova moved to Tucson with her parents and siblings in 1911, they joined family members who had lived there since the 1870s. They included Cordova's great-aunt, Refugio Dias Carrillo Rambaud, who bequeathed personal property and real estate to Cordova in 1934. Otero begins with a deep dive into this family history to demonstrate not only how they came to own property in Tucson but also how this history is entwined with broader economic and political currents in Mexican and United States history.

When popular films and local history writing directed popular attention to Tucson's Euro-American "pioneers," Cordova used her home at 173 North Meyer Avenue to cast herself as an authority on a local past that pre-dated U.S. claims to the area. The core of the adobe house, she said, was built in the old Spanish presidio before U.S. annexation of the land in 1854. When Cordova invited local journalists, photographers, and elites to her home, she turned the house into a stage for recounting family histories and showing off historical paintings and artifacts. By the 1950s, Cordova's personal histories and private space informed a popular understanding of local history. This enhanced her social capital and may have attracted business to the family's smoke shop on the same block.

Otero examines how Cordova engaged historical consciousness as a strategy for resisting incursions of "urban renewal" on her family home. In the 1950s and 1960s, public and private development sought to remake downtown Tucson with modern architecture, automobile infrastructure, and tourist amenities. Large-scale clearance of buildings and removal of their residents targeted a lower-income residential neighborhood south of the Cordova house. But smaller projects of demolition and development approached the Cordova home near City Hall. As developers demolished a growing number of old buildings, some Tucson residents campaigned to preserve adobe rowhouses as a distinctive architectural form. Cordova cultivated her home as a prime example of this building type and infused it with the distinction of being part of an even older architectural complex, the Spanish presidio. By showing off her knowledge of her house, she characterized herself as the steward of a historic building that deserved to remain standing in the modernizing city.

As downtown redevelopment continued, however, Cordova

claimed that her home's location within the walls of the old presidio held legal as well as architectural significance. In the 1960s, María Cordova and her son Raul Cordova, a lawyer, began to make public claims to owning the land formerly encompassed by the presidio when it was under Mexican rule. They had inherited a title, they said, that had not been respected and recorded as mandated by the 1854 Gadsden Treaty. In 1965, soon after the city passed a new plan for urban renewal that included the Cordova house, Raul Cordova began a legal fight to retain ownership of the family properties within the renewal district. Otero explains the messy history of land titles during Tucson's founding era and traces Raul Cordova's (ultimately unsuccessful) legal suits through various courts in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1972, Tucson city government took possession of the Cordova family home through eminent domain. The Cordovas, however, lost their home not to demolition but to preservation. Otero turns to the history of the Tucson Art Center to explain how the institution worked with the city to remake the neighborhood into a cultural campus that packaged Latin American art as a historical artifact, shaped to attract elite seasonal residents and tourists. Architectural "restorations" that preserved the Cordova house as an artifact of Mexican territorial history erased evidence of the Mexican American family who had lived there for three-quarters of a century. This late-twentieth-century definition of preservation defined historical authenticity by returning a structure's appearance to an earlier era rather than stewarding the layered history that it had accrued over its lifetime. Only more recently has the museum, now the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block, embraced histories of urban renewal and displacement in its programming.

Otero constructs this history of "La Casa Cordova" with an eye toward its relevance to Tucson today. *Storied Property* offers a richly detailed narrative of the Cordova family and local sites grounded in landmarks past and present—details that can be difficult to follow on occasion, even with the assistance of maps to orient readers to Tucson locales. Otero generously shares rich archival sources with readers, not only by reproducing many images in the book but also by publishing primary sources for each chapter on a companion website. These documents will resonate with readers who care about shifts in the urban economy

and landscape reshaping Tucson today as well as in the past.

In the book's acknowledgements, Otero confesses to moving away from the lens of historic preservation while writing because it seemed to limit Cordova's story. Yet *Storied Property* has plenty to offer to histories of historic preservation. The history of "La Casa Cordova" speaks to many themes in this scholarship: how surprisingly diverse types of preservationists both advanced and resisted colonization, how homeowners and business owners engaged historic buildings to leverage power and profit, how urban planners used historic preservation as a tool of displacement, and how cultural leaders activated preservation to build a cultural economy geared toward tourists rather than residents. *Storied Property* shows how María Navarrete Cordova helps to expand the history of historic preservation as a field full of diverse actors with complex motivations, and why Tucson should be studied alongside Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, and Santa Fe.

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Un-Americanism: A History of the Battle to Control an Idea. By George Lewis. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2026. Pp. 372. \$110.00 hardcover; \$110.00 epub; \$200.00 pdf)

George Lewis, a historian at the University of Leicester, England, has written a thought-provoking history on the concept of un-Americanism. Rather than subsuming the topic under nativism or subversion or anti-radicalism—especially anticommunism—Lewis believes that un-Americanism warrants its own comprehensive examination. Such a study, suggests Lewis, can illuminate and enhance our understanding of modern U.S. political history. During much of the twentieth century, investigating "un-Americans was . . . a pervasive feature of [U.S.] political, social, and domestic life," yet proponents and opponents of un-Americanism never formed a consensus on a "single, objective definition" (p. 1). Lewis finds that the historical contexts of un-Americanism—domestic and international—always shaped how contemporaries understood the idea.