

Mission Churches - Part I

The Mission Churches in Socorro County

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For El Defensor Chieftain

The early Spanish Missions and churches along the Rio Grande, spreading to nearly every settlement in New Mexico, remain today as landmarks to the region. Indeed, these churches have long given New Mexico her identity. It is difficult to imagine the Land of Enchantment without these mission churches or the faithful people who fill their pews.

THE SOCORRO MISSION

It was in Socorro that the first settlement in the new world was established. Crossing the Rio Grande at El Paso in April 1598, the expedition led by Juan de Oñate encountered the first native people at the pueblo of Senecú, south of present day Socorro. As the Spanish colonists continued northward, they found the land along the Rio Grande suddenly peppered with inhabited pueblos.

Traveling with the Oñate Expedition was a delegation of ten Franciscan friars and ten priests under Padre Alonso Martinez. In May 1598, two of the friars, Fray Salazar and Fray Martinez, and possibly several families, chose the Piro Indian pueblo of Pilabo in which to settle and begin their work. Pilabo Pueblo, renamed Socorro, was the first Spanish settlement in what is today the United States. They became the first "white man" to permanently reside within an Indian pueblo, and the first to minister to the native people with Catholicism and European ways.

Within several months, Oñate had established other settlements from Acoma to beyond Santa Fe, and with it, similar missions. With only ten priests to serve over 50,000 native Indians, Oñate divided the province into seven districts. The Piro region along the Rio Grande, including Socorro, Senecú and Qualacú, were assigned to Father. Juan Claros in August 1598.



Photo by Paul Harden

San Miguel Mission is one of the oldest Catholic church in the United States – founded in 1598 – and one of New Mexico's landmark missions. The appearance has changed little over the past 200 years, since the early 1800s reconstruction.

First holding mass in a small adobe room within the Pilabo pueblo, the Friars soon mobilized the Piro Indians to build a small mission. The Pilabo mission, named Nuestra Senora de Perpetuo Socorro, or Our Lady of Perpetual Help, marks the start of Christian evangelism in southern New Mexico.

The Piro Indians along the Rio Grande embraced Christianity. By around 1618, New Mexico fell under the administration of the newly formed Durango Diocese in Mexico. It was from here that missionaries, friars, priests, tools and supplies poured into the province along El Camino Real to expand the missions.

In Socorro, a larger mission was started around 1618, adding to the older one, under the direction of Father Garcia y Zuniga. The Piro's had become excellent craftsmen with the tools brought in by the Spaniards. Early documentation mentions the beautifully carved vigas and corbels with a solid silver altar rail in the Socorro mission. This suggests the mission at Socorro was built to the same beauty and style as the best churches in Mexico and Spain as local materials allowed. This likely held true for all the area's missions.

These missions were not scanty, empty adobe hulks, but works of art for their time.

In contrast, regarding our country's earliest settlers, Wikipedia states, "The 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* were the earliest permanent European settlers in what would become the United States." This classical view of U.S. history totally ignores that by 1620, there were an estimated 1,500 Spanish living along the Rio Grande with over 50,000 pueblo Indians, the Spanish flag flew above the capitol at Santa Fe, the Palace of the Governors had been built, and a trade route, called El Camino Real, was firmly established between Santa Fe and Mexico City.

Also around 1620 marked the arrival of Father Alonso de Benavides and 27 additional friars from the Durango Diocese. In addition to his unwavering dedication to the church and direction in building new missions, Father Benevidez is credited with his writings. They are considered the most authentic history of the mission work and life in New Mexico recorded at the time.

Father Benevidez penned in 1626, regarding the Socorro area, "the Piro nation, on both sides of the Rio Grande for 15 leagues, from Senecú to Sevilleta (San Marcial to La Joya); 15 pueblos, 6,000 Indians, all baptized; 3 missions, Socorro, Senecú and Sevilleta." Benevidez summarized in his report that in 1626, there were about 50 friars in New Mexico serving over 60,000 natives, living in 90 pueblos, served by 25 missions and conventos, and that each pueblo had its own church.

The building of 25 missions in less than 30 years is an amazing accomplishment that seems to go

unrecognized. And, three of them were in Socorro County. While the pilgrims at Plymouth were scrambling for their next meal, New Mexico was an established and growing empire teeming with activity.

This all came to end in 1680 when the Pueblo Indians revolted against the harsh Spanish rule, causing most of the Spanish military and colonists to flee New Mexico.

Even though the reoccupation of New Mexico began in 1698, Spanish law made it illegal to settle along the lower Rio Grande, or Rio Abajo region, south of Belen. The Spanish military simply did not have the resources to protect settlers in this region from attacks by the Apache. A small settlement of Spanish merchants and wagon masters at La Joya is the only known exception. La Joya was a popular staging area on El Camino Real for caravans returning to Mexico.

During the 1700s, the Socorro mission remained abandoned, though it could clearly be seen from miles away. For example, in 1760, Father Tamaron recorded that he could see the walls of the church as they passed Socorro on the east side of the river. This is a testament to the size of the original Socorro mission.

THE SAN MIGUEL MISSION

Spanish authorities finally allowed resettlement of the Rio Abajo around 1800. Church records show Father Miguel Zepeda was the first resident pastor sent to the Nuestra Senora de Perpetuo Socorro mission in 1803. He was joined by a handful of families from the Belen and Valencia areas to rebuild the mission and reoccupy New Mexico's first settlement.



Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society

The original Socorro mission was destroyed in 1680 during the Pueblo Revolt. Today's San Miguel Mission has changed little since being rebuilt in the early 1800s, as shown in this 1880s photograph.



Courtesy Socorro County Historical Society

San Miguel mission was central to the life and culture in Socorro. This 1880s photograph shows the march from the church to the plaza for the annual fiesta – a tradition that continues to this day.



Courtesy San Miguel Parish

The beautiful San Miguel Parish following the 1973 renovations. Some of the walls and flooring are from the original 1600s mission.

During this reconstruction, Apache Indians attacked the Socorro mission. During the raid, the Apache suddenly retreated. A captured Indian said they saw a man in the sky above the church with wings and yielding a heavy sword, which frightened the Apache away. Father Zepeda interpreted this as an appearance by Saint Michael, believed by many Catholics to be the patron saint and protector of the Church. As a result of this incident, Father Zepeda renamed the mission to San Miguel, the name it carries today.

Little is known about this reconstruction phase of San Miguel Mission. Oral history, passed from generation to generation, states today's mission was built from the ruins of the old mission, which was built atop the Pilabo Pueblo.

For years, many questioned the accuracy of these claims. However, during renovations in 1941 and 1973, excavations revealed some of the walls contained the original mission adobe. Burned adobe and charred wood beams were found, evidence of the 1680 destruction.

During the 1973-74 restoration, three layers of wood flooring were discovered and removed, revealing five skeletons, buried without coffins, under the bottom floor. Archaeologist David Snow, from the Museum of New Mexico, was called in, verifying the skeletons and manner of burial as an Indian burial ground.

Further excavations revealed rock foundations consistent with early pueblo construction, clearing showing today's San Miguel mission was indeed built

atop the Pilabo Pueblo, and from portions of the early 1600 mission.

The other two missions in Socorro County did not survive. Sevilletta pueblo, and the San Luis Obispo mission, were never reoccupied after the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Today, only scattered ruins mark the site a few miles north of La Joya.

The Senecú pueblo, whose mission once contained an organ, has completely vanished. It was visible for years by travelers along El Camino Real north of Black Mesa, placing it in the vicinity of San Marcial on the west side of the Rio Grande. Numerous surveys by archeologists over the years have been unsuccessful in locating the site. It is presumed Senecú was claimed by a catastrophic flood or erosion from the Rio Grande prior to the 1800s.

OTHER AREA CHURCHES

The missions and churches built throughout New Mexico in the 1600-1700s were financed and staffed by the Spanish throne and the church, though built primarily by the local people under the direction of the Padres. In 1821, the Spanish empire disintegrated and Mexico achieved her independence from Spain. New Mexico was now a province of Mexico.

At this same time, New Mexico continued to grow, regardless of the color of flag flying over Santa Fe. In Socorro County, recently reopened for settlement, new families were arriving constantly, lining both sides of the Rio Grande with farms, ranches and new settlements.

The Socorro area remained under the Diocese of Durango, but there was little money to do much more than maintain the major missions in New Mexico. Construction of new missions and churches all but halted. Yet, there was a need for the church in every new settlement. The building of churches in New Mexico evolved into the philosophy, "if we build a church, a pastor will come."

This opened a new chapter in New Mexico history – the community built mission church. With the exception of San Miguel mission, every Catholic church in Socorro County today were built by the people, as is the case throughout most of New Mexico. Many are simple structures, usually of the nave style, yet some of the most charming churches in New Mexico. They were built entirely with love, devotion, and back breaking work.



Photo by Paul Harden

The Santa Rita Mission church at Riley. Built in 1883, it continues to be used today. It is the classic Spanish nave design with an external sacristy.



Photo by Paul Harden

The Santa Rita church, like so many of the community built mission churches, were built with love and devotion that have spanned the centuries.

SANTA RITA CHURCH

In 1882, Pedro Aragon and his family relocated from Polvadera to a small valley on the southwest flank of Ladron Peak, where he found a spring. The naturally moist soil from the Rio Salado proved to be excellent for growing everything from beans to peaches. Shortly afterwards, other families from Polvadera joined the Aragons to farm the land, forming a small community. It was known for its productive fields and extensive orchards.

Almost immediately, they began building a church. All of the families toiled making the adobes and cutting the lumber from the cottonwood trees found along the Rio Salado farther to the west. Other supplies were purchased with donations by the town folk, from what little they could afford. These supplies and materials were purchased at the stores in Alamillo and Bernardo, or the nearby trading post at Puertocito.

These supplies were brought to Santa Rita by wagons, traveling along the sandy river bed of the Rio Salado, or along a treacherous trail over Ladron Peak into Bernardo. The round trip to Alamillo or Bernardo for supplies could take two or three days, depending upon the condition of the trail.

The families worked on the church for over a year, completing it in 1883. Keep in mind, while they were building the church, they were also building their own homes, corrals and working their farms. Every spare moment, often well into the evening, the people of the small community would work on the church until it was

completed in 1883.

At first, mass was held twice a month by a priest from Socorro. Twice a month, on horseback, the priest would travel to the mission churches at Alamillo, Santa Rita, Magdalena and Kelly, offering mass and performing other ecclesiastical duties. In those days, the poor Padre was always on the trail, going from one church to the next. It was always a pleasure for the local families to host the priest with a good meal and a soft bed, for which the Padre no doubt greatly appreciated.

Application was made for a U.S. Post Office at the growing hamlet of Santa Rita. Since there was already a town named Santa Rita at the copper mines near Silver City, the Post Office forced the small town on the Rio Salado to change their name. They changed their name to Riley, and the Post Office was opened in 1890. However, they retained the name Santa Rita for the church, the name it continues to bear to this day.

In 1895, ecclesiastical oversight was transferred to Belen, where the priest would visit the church monthly.



Photo by Paul Harden

Lawrence Aragon grew up in Santa Rita (Riley) and attended the school there. He still lives in the area. Pedro Aragon, his great-grandfather, was the founding father of Santa Rita in 1882.

In 1913, Santa Rita was transferred back to Socorro, where mass was offered by Father Martinez on the first Tuesday of every month. In 1919, when the Magdalena parish received her own priest, Santa Rita became a mission of Magdalena, receiving mass twice monthly.

In 1926, under the Magdalena Parish, the Santa Rita mission received some renovations and improvements. The original dirt floor was covered with a wood floor, a larger wood burning stove was installed for better heat, and the sacristy extension was added.

During the 1930s, the crops began to fail as the water table dropped and less water seemed to flow along the Rio Salado. In the 1940s, most of the men of Riley were in uniform during World War II. When the war was over and they returned to Riley, there was little to return to.

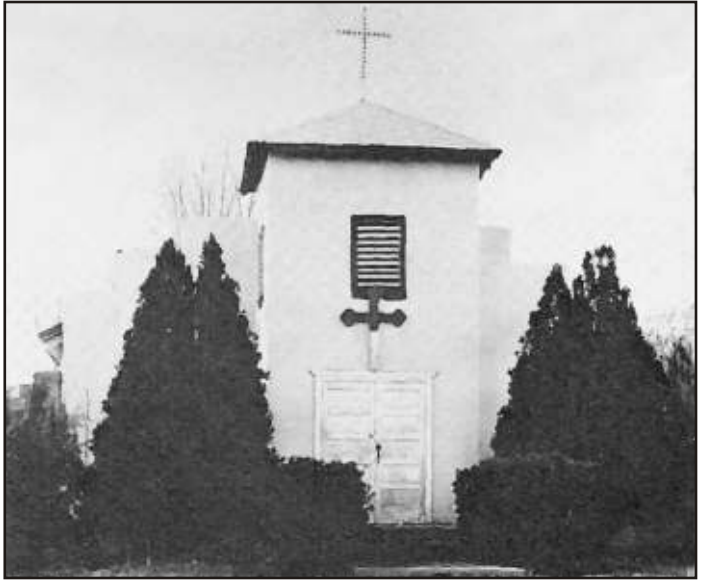
Many of the families had moved to be with family in Magdalena, Belen or Polvadera, and the land unsuitable for farming. The few remaining families moved nearby to where more land was available for farming and ranching. The school continued to serve these ranching families until it closed in 1953. After that, the town of Riley was abandoned. Today, the Hipolito Romero and Lawrence Aragon families still remain in the area.

Magdalena continued to serve the area ranchers at the Santa Rita mission with occasional mass until 1974, when once again, the mission was transferred to Socorro. The priest from Socorro offers mass in the Santa Rita church once a year, on Saturday of the Memorial Day weekend, during the annual Santa Rita fiestas.

Today, Riley is considered one of New Mexico's best ghost towns. And her church, the Santa Rita mission, is one of New Mexico's most charming remote mission churches. Former residents keep the nave style church in pristine condition. Though the town has been uninhabited for about 50 years, the Santa Rita mission still stands proud. Not an ounce of faith or love has been lost.

OUR LADY OF FATIMA (FLORIDA)

Many years ago, there was a small village located north of Socorro called Florida. It was a small farming community of several families started in the 1890s about three miles north of Socorro. Today, most people consider Florida merely the northern tip of Socorro, being located west of I-25 near the flood control channel.



Courtesy San Miguel Mission
Front view of the Florida church about 1970. The church as razed in 1986, after falling into disrepair.

Many of the Florida farms near the river were wiped out in the 1929 and 1937 floods. It was after these floods that many of the areas irrigation channels were constructed. This allowed many of the people north of Socorro to reestablish farms, and build new homes to be near their farms. The Florida area grew again into a small village on both sides of U.S. 85.

In 1950, the families of Florida requested permission from San Miguel parish to build a community mission church. The request was granted and construction of the small church began.

The land upon which to build the church was donated by Eusaquio and Priscilla Saavedra. Like all community churches, it was built by the entire village. The Saavedra family, the Salazars, the Torres', Gonzales, Nuñez, Barela and others - all helped with clearing the land, building the foundation, making the adobes, and donating every dollar they could spare for materials, paint and fixtures.

Some of the pews came from the old San Marcial church, destroyed by flood in 1937. The pews had been stored in a barn near San Antonio for years and given to the people of Florida for their church. It was also learned the old San Marcial church bell was still around. The Gomez and Gonzales families, formerly of San Marcial, gave the bell to the new church – if they could find it!

Following the 1937 flood, the San Marcial church collapsed. The bell was removed and buried nearby to

prevent it from being stolen. The search was on, and after several weekends, it was finally located amidst the now thicket of tamarisk that marks the old town site.

The huge bell, estimated to weigh between 600 and 800 pounds, was unearthed and loaded onto a truck. It was brought to the Florida church by Lucas Garcia, and after considerable effort, the heavy bell was finally installed in the church.

Like most nave-style churches, it has a covered entrance way before entering the main worship area of the church. Above this entrance way is often a small tower for housing a bell and mounting the steeple. In the Florida church, an especially large entrance way and tower had to be built to house the over sized bell given to them by San Marcial. This can be seen on the accompanying photographs.

By late 1951, the church was nearing completion. The people of Florida decided the church should honor Our Lady of Fatima. The new mission church in Florida was dedicated and blessed by Archbishop Byrne on December 16, 1951. Mass was offered monthly by one of the San Miguel priests.

The following year, Saturday October 11 through Monday October 13, Our Lady of Fatima held their first fiesta. Mrs. Joe Gianera and Mrs. Joe Bianchi donated the beautiful statues of Our Lady of Fatima and Our Sacred Heart saints for the new church. They were installed during the fiesta.

Music was by Danny Romero and Band with prizes given for a variety of dance contests. The first Patrinos of the church were selected based upon the couple winning the jitterbug contest. Unfortunately, the names of the winners, and the first Patrinos, aren't known.

In 1955, two masses were held during the fiesta, offered by Father Louis from San Miguel. The Patrinos that year were Mrs. and Mrs. Milton Lopez.

Our Lady of Fatima mission church was well attended by 30 to 40 families regularly. The Florida fiestas remained a big event for many years.

In the early 1960s, a shortage of priests in Socorro caused the cessation of regular services, though weddings, baptisms, funerals and special services were still supported by San Miguel parish. In the late 1960s, giant bulldozers and earthmovers appeared in Florida, cutting a path through the center of the village for Interstate 25.



Courtesy Joe O. Torres and Felix Torres

This 1952 family photo shows Our Lady of Fatima mission church in Florida shortly after it was built. The names of the children are not known.

The new highway literally cut the small town of Florida in two. Those living east of I-25, along the East Frontage Road, Harold Drive and northern Chaparral Drive, were literally cut off from the town and their church. Driving around the interstate was an eight mile round trip for those east of the new highway. Those living in Florida proper and attending the church dwindled to less than a dozen families.

In 1975, due to the declining attendance, San Miguel permanently removed Our Lady of Fatima church in Florida from the Archdiocesan records. Over the next ten years, the church went unused and fell into



Photo by Paul Harden

Joe O. Torres and family attended Our Lady of Fatima church. One of his sisters was married in the church. Most Floridians walked to the church before they were cutoff by the interstate in the 1960s.



Photo by Paul Harden

Mattie Gonzales grew up attending Our Lady of Fatima church in Florida. She remembers how hard it was pulling the rope when it was her turn to ring the heavy church bell.

disrepair. In 1986, the church was razed.

In 2005, Louis Saavedra built a handsome shrine to Our Lady of Fatima at the site of the church on Fatima Road, using the statue of the Blessed Mother from the original church. Though the building is now gone, the love of the people for the church and devotion to their patron saint is as strong in their hearts as ever.

Next month in Part II, we'll look at the history of some of the other mission churches along the Rio Grande and throughout Socorro County.



Photo by Paul Harden

A beautiful shrine marks the site of the Florida church today, still honoring Our lady of Fatima. the shrine was built by Louis Saavedra.

Some of the references used in this article: San Miguel mission church records, "Rio Abajo" by Michael Marshall, Santa Fe Archdiocese records, additional church records courtesy John Taylor, Socorro Chieftain archives, and interviews with Joe Torres, Nattie Gonzales, Betty Trujillo, Rose Apodaca, Bella Salazar, Priscilla Saavedra, Bennie Barreras, and others. A special thanks to Joe O. and Felix Torres for locating the photograph of the Florida church.

Some photographs not published with the original article.



Photo by Paul Harden

The raised floor of the nave and pulpit is still visible in the foundation ruins.



Photo by Paul Harden

Remaining foundation of the Florida church as it appeared in 2006 and 2007.