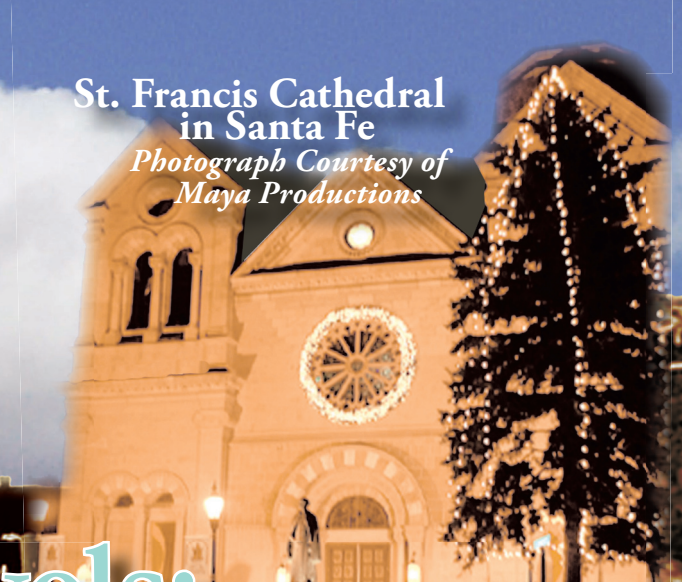





San Miguel Chapel  
in Santa Fe  
*Photographs Courtesy  
of Library of Congress.*



St. Francis Cathedral  
in Santa Fe  
*Photograph Courtesy of  
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# Historic Jewels: Spanish Colonial Churches

by Laura L. Carlson



When the Spanish explorers came to New Mexico, they brought their religion with them. It was unthinkable not to start building a church wherever they stopped or settled. Catholicism was as much a part of their lives as their loyalty to the King or the air they breathed. And upon arriving at a new place, the first order of business was to convert the native population to their god and their way of thinking.

All along the Río Grande and in every Indian pueblo, the Spanish built mission churches, sometimes with the coerced aid of their converts. Once the soldiers left, many of the friars lasted only a few days before the suspicious Puebloans killed them. But in spite of the dangers, more came.

The Spanish were a bold, determined people and not easily dissuaded.

*After the Pueblo revolt of 1680 and the reconquest twelve years later, the Spanish began to build churches for their own settlers who were making New Mexico their permanent home. Some of these churches still survive, and a few are still used for services.*

These churches and missions were strange to both European and native eyes. The friars tried to copy the soaring cathedrals of Spain, but the scarcity of materials in New Mexico forced some significant changes. Instead of masonry, they used adobe bricks, a new technology to the Puebloans, who had used a “puddling” method of hardened clay before then. Because of marauding tribes and vicious attacks, the walls were fortified and windows were few. There was typically no money or resources for nice worship vessels and items, sometimes not even

benches or pews. The resultant churches looked like barren, whitewashed warehouses to visiting dignitaries and bizarre caves to the natives. Even so, each church visually and politically dominated the village or pueblo it was in.

The Spanish and their converts didn’t necessarily worship together. Shortly after the capital was moved to Santa Fe, construction began on a segregated mission church to be used exclusively by the Mexican Indians—the Tlascalans—who had accompanied explorer Don Juan de Oñate. The resultant **Chapel of San Miguel** is sometimes touted as the “oldest church in the US,” but actually, several are older, including those at Isleta and Acoma. However, San Miguel is recognized as an historic building by the Department of the Interior, and can be found near the intersection of Old Santa Fe Trail and DeVargas Street, in the Barrio (neighborhood) de Analco. “Analco” translates to “across the river” in Aztec, since the Spanish lived separately on the opposite side of the Santa Fe River.

Underneath the “oldest house” next door, archeologists discovered an 18-inch Tewa-style foundation, so it appears that the house and mission sit on an ancient pueblo. The mission itself dates to 1625, but was later rebuilt and fortified in 1710 after the reconquest.

At one point, San Miguel had an unstable, five-level tower (Shown Above left), which held a

780-pound church bell. The origins of the bell are also disputed



Nuestra Señora de Perpetuo Socorro  
(Our Lady of Perpetual Help)



## St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe

*Photograph Courtesy of  
Library of Congress*

## Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de Tomé (also called Immaculate Conception)

*Current Photo Courtesy of Angie Gould  
Sepia Courtesy of Library of Congress*



among authorities.

The engraving on it looks like the year “1356,” so some assume that it was made in Spain and arrived via ship and oxcart. Others swear the year says “1856” and it was made right there in the courtyard. Whichever is true, the four-inch thick bell is said to have a “sweet” tone.

San Miguel has seen its share of problems. Besides the revolt and the Spaniards’ return, General Kearney marched into Santa Fe in 1846, and later the Confederates quartered there in 1862. A severe storm in 1872 took out the upper levels of the tower. The church has also had its roof burned, its santos (saint statues) stolen and recovered, and its wonderful, painted altar screen slopped with ordinary housepaint. Just before the whole building was ready to fall down in the 1880s, civic-minded individuals came to the rescue and organized a restoration. Thanks to them, we can visit this historic building today.

*Another old church in Santa Fe,  
Our Lady of Guadalupe, at the  
intersection of Agua Fria and  
Guadalupe streets, is the oldest  
church in the US dedicated to the  
holy vision seen by Mexican  
peasant Juan Diego.*

He reported seeing the Virgin Mary, dark-skinned like an Aztec, on a hill outside Mexico City. Our Lady became the patron saint

of the poor and disenfranchised in Mexico and beyond. The church was originally built around 1692 at a point near the end of the Santa Fe Trail, with a later version erected between 1776-1795. The reredo (altar screen) was painted in 1783 by Mexico City artist José de Alzibar. The screen was so large that it was transported in pieces on the backs of mules and reassembled on site.

After a fire in 1922, the church needed some extensive repairs and the parishioners eventually built a new church behind it to worship in. In 1976, the old church was restored to its late 19<sup>th</sup> century appearance, retaining the three-to-five foot thick adobe walls, lintels, and some original vigas (beams) and corbels (supports). It is now a museum and used for various performing arts groups like the Santa Fe Desert Chorale.

Up the High Road from Santa Fe (highway 76) is the village of “Santo Tomás Apóstol de Río de las Trampas,” or simply, Las Trampas. The name means “traps” in Spanish,

referring to beaver traps that used to be set in the river. Its church, **San José de Gracia**, is considered to be one of the most authentic and best preserved examples of colonial Spanish architecture in the US. It has been designated a National Historic Landmark.

Built during 1760-1776, San José is made of adobe with mud plaster. It has two bells in its towers, named “Gracia” and “Refugio,” rung for the deaths of infants and adults, respectively.

The church was originally a lay chapel. It was used by the seclusive Penitente sect, a group that originated in medieval Europe and practiced self-flagellation, often reenacting Christ’s crucifixion during Lent in painful detail. At one point, Las

*- Continued on page 120-*

## San Francisco de Asis, in Ranchos de Taos

