

HISTORIC MOUNTAIN CHURCHES OF NEW MEXICO

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Amid the upper tributaries of the Rio Grande and Pecos River, the terrain rises dramatically to the jagged crests of several mountain ranges, richly blanketed with colorful forests nourished by winter snows and summer showers. In some places these mountains diverge into arid foothills densely stippled with both juniper and piñon, interspersed with chamisa and native grasses; in others it breaks suddenly to hills of scrub brush, then flat grasslands. Over the ages the relentless forces of nature carved into the rocky hills picturesque canyons which occasionally widen into narrow alluvial valleys. Shaded by towering mountain ashes and spreading cottonwoods, clear bubbling streams, sometimes fickle, rush through the alluvial soils of the valley floors. Today, relatively unspoiled by man's hands, even after many generations of occupation, the tranquil land seems to reflect a sense of spiritual timelessness.

Frequently visited in both prehistoric and historic times by nomadic native Americans, the cradles of settlement formed by small pastoral valleys attracted tiny enclaves of Spanish colonists. In this harsh environment of blistering summers and chilling winters stoic colonists sought opportunities to cultivate crops of corn, wheat, and oats, and to raise their burros, sheep, and goats, developing a close kinship with the land. On lands granted by the *capitán-general* of the province, then sometimes subgranted, they formed communities, in some instances with adobe buildings placed end-to-end creating plazas and providing for common defense, in other instances with structures forming open groupings, but in all cases with a church as a focal point—a reflection of the importance of religion in their lives. Eminating from Santa Fe or other cities in Mexico and Spain, the settlers brought with them generations-old traditions on building customs but innate understandings of the need to adapt these to the exigencies of their circumstances—the recalcitrant land and ageless tradition, not formal considerations, determined the character of their communities. While the towns from which the settlers came may have been developed according to formal procedures, the mountain communities were woven into the texture of the land.

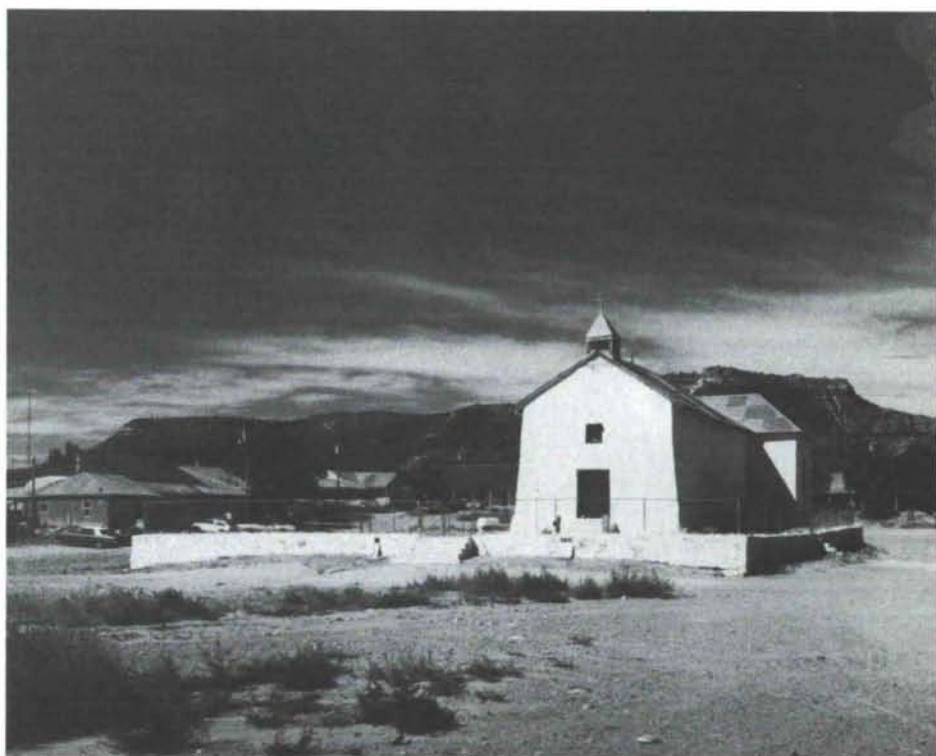


Figure 1. Our Lady of Guadalupe, San José

Responses to irregularities of the land therefore caused numerous variations in patterns of towns. Founded under the patronage of certain saints, the settlements, feudal in social and religious make-up, sometimes nestle into the sides of hills, but in many instances were firmly planted upon small plateaus. In any event buildings rarely occupied low-lying fertile farmlands—a condition that also protected against flooding and may have facilitated defense.

Reflecting the Christian devotion that was organic with life, a church or chapel, distinctive in form, size, and location, formed a prominent nucleus of virtually every community, regardless of sometimes diminutive population. Authorized and licensed by the Vicar of the See of Durango, Mexico, and erected either individually by a wealthy land owner or collectively by a village, it was the focal point of a deeply religious as well as strongly superstitious society. While many churches were *visitas* which were without resident clergy, although periodically visited by priests who celebrated mass and heard confessions, they were a vital spiritual refuge for the people. There, they received penance, gave thanks for the blessings of

God, and prayed for redemption, protection, grace, and salvation in a sometimes hostile environment, the natural forces of which were little understood. There, the people felt the presence of God and manifold saints who granted favors and protection—a condition reassured by historical events in Christendom which were understood by colonists through a language of symbols associated with holy persons.¹ Further, the church provided a sacred setting for the sacrament of baptism, for matrimony, and for the requiem for departed souls, all of which brought communities together. The church also provided a focus for fiestas celebrating patron saints. Occasionally a priest noted for service to the Church or other individuals who could afford high burial fees were interred under the floor, further contributing sacred venerability. With survival itself dependent upon faith, the land, and self-defence, it is little wonder that the house of worship occupied a vital place in the lives of the colonists.²

The church also served practical needs. It was central to social intercourse and was a permanent landmark, serving as a physical reference point.

Either adjacent to the church or in the

vicinity was a *camposanto* (burial yard) reverently marked with an array of grave stones, crosses, and grave enclosures. An integral adjunct to the church—regardless of spatial position—the *camposanto* was a place lovingly adored by patriarchal and sentimental families, a situation reflected yet today by flowers and icons which richly decorate graves. The *camposanto* dominated by a large cross situated on the main axis of the gate and church seemed to assure perpetuity of the closely knit family and its ancestors. The preferred location for the community burial ground was either in front or at one side of the church; in this situation it was enclosed by a low wall ordinarily setting the sacred ground apart and protecting against degradation by livestock. In several instances, the burial ground and church were elevated above the plane of their sites by earth fill within retaining walls, accenting the prominence of the house of worship (Fig. 1). Providing a sense of procession and transition to a holy place, historically access was through a tall gate, often spanned by a lintel or an arch supporting an adobe wall, surmounted by a cross, all of which was located on the axis of the church, as at La Iglesia de la Virgen de Guadalupe, Velarde, the date of construction of which is unknown, although a chapel appeared upon the site as early as 1830 (Fig. 2). However, if space were limited near the house of worship, the *camposanto* was located upon high ground away from outskirts of the settlement, as at Truchas (Fig. 3). At some villages more than one burial ground was consecrated and occasionally a cemetery with graves marked by iris flowers is now the sole lonely vestige of a religious community and its buildings that have long since melted back into the earth.

While formal requirements had been developed in Spain to govern the relationship between church and *villa* in the new world—set forth in the “Ordinances concerning Discoveries, Settlements, and Pacification,” which were probably unknown to most *nuevo mexico* colonists—the spatial relationships of the two in the mountain villages conform to no consistent pattern with respect to position, orientation, and space. Occasionally the church occupies an elevated position in the community, as at Villanueva, commonly it is at a midpoint, but rarely on the lowest ground. Orientation likewise varies; the ecclesiological orientation, with the sanctuary in the east appears, although a facade oriented to easterly and southerly points seems to prevail, also a departure from northeast-southwest, orientation which resulted from specifications in the “Ordinances.” However north orientation rarely appears—a stipulation of the Church.³ Since many communities were without plazas, the customary situation



Figure 2. La Iglesia de la Virgen de Guadalupe, Velarde.

with the church adjacent to a large community space is uncommon, although always some type of open space appears in front of the church. Whenever a plaza was developed, as at San José, the church is occasionally located within it, rather than adjacent, presumably because of the need for a defensive enclosure around the plaza during historic times (Fig. 1).

After the position and attitude of the church were determined and approval to build had been secured, the lines of its plan evidently were roughly traced upon the ground, using basic geometrical relationships—also an elementary European custom. Then upon a rough stone or adobe foundation hands unspecialized in the art of building and equipped only with primitive tools raised thick walls of adobe or stone, or a combination of the two, the height also determined by simple geometry.⁴ Protecting the edge of the roof against weathering the walls were extended above the roof, forming parapets.⁵ Wall exteriors were plastered with a mixture of mud and straw applied by women, then the uneven surfaces were whitewashed.

Characteristically the planar quality of the walls was emphasized by the rhythmic

character and contrasting color of exposed roof work. Ordinarily naves and other spaces were spanned by heavy *vigas*, often unhewn but resting upon carved corbel blocks (Fig. 4). Across these were laid boards, which supported heavy layers of mud and straw. After the railroads arrived in New Mexico, however, making mass-produced materials available, gable roofs covered with either shingles or corrugated iron eventually either covered or replaced most flat roofs.

Floors, on which worshipers sat or knelt conformed to the character of other parts of the edifice. They were earth or slabs of rock, perhaps made somewhat comfortable by blankets brought with worshipers.

While the determination of the position of the church in a village was influenced by the land the location of other buildings, and the plans of the houses of worship conformed to medieval folk traditions—forms that were universal. Recalling such buildings as the *Parroquia* of San Francisco in Santa Fe, the mission chapels, and other buildings in both Mexico and Spain, they were either on bar-shaped or cruciform plans, occasionally with sacristies or other spaces such as *conventos* attached to back

parts. In the bar configuration, the form of sanctuary was often defined by either offset sacristy walls or walls angled inward, the latter producing a coffin shape. However, *moradas*, chapels erected by the *Penitentes*, in numerous mountain towns were simple box-like forms, with severe lines seemingly reflecting the rigor of their order (Fig. 5). Obviously laid out without the use of sophisticated measuring devices, the configuration of the plan was determined by fundamental geometry. The size of the parish evidently had little influence on the dimensions of the edifice — the length, as a rule, was close to either three or four times the width, ordinarily the former, consistent with geometric proportioning common in Renaissance Europe. Often the height was approximately equal to the width. The long narrow form, while essential to maintain spans that were within the limits of *vigas* carrying heavy loads of earth, dramatized the sanctuary with its crucifix, altar, and retablo or *reredos* — a condition that also was dramatized by offset wall planes defining the chancel. Long wall planes, accented with evenly spaced stations of the cross, along with the rhythm of closely spaced *vigas* moved the eye forward, climaxing at the elevated high altar — the holy of holies. At the back was a choir loft which defined spatially a narthex-like space, a characteristic feature of many Spanish colonial churches located in other Spanish colonial regions, for example, Texas.

On the exterior the image of the church reflected the experience of the builders, as well as their autochthonous workmanship. Timeless and universal, stylistically undatable forms recall buildings the colonists had known elsewhere in Mexico. While countless details of workmanship provide individuality in each church, the manner of disposing the bells which summoned the faithful to worship and tolled at funerals of the departed comprise, formed, in addition to the plans, a major theme of design.

When upon cruciform plan, some early churches incorporated twin towers rising above a narthex, a configuration complementing paired transepts. Often casting long shadows across burial grounds, they recall in symbolic form the pretentious churches of Mexico and Spain, as well as the mission churches and the *Parraquia*, an edifice in Santa Fe which was rebuilt and repaired numerous times after its initial construction in the seventeenth century, but evidently always with paired belfrys.⁶

Among the most charming and stately of these buildings with twin appendages is San José de Gracia de las Trampas, a license for the construction of which was issued in 1760, only six years after twelve



Figure 3. Llanitas Cemetery, near Truchas.



Figure 4. El Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Esquipulas, Chimayó.

Figure 5. Morada, Truchas.



Continued on page 25 