



A Sacred Mission

SECURING A FUTURE FOR THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SAN ESTEBAN DEL REY AT ACOMA PUEBLO, “A PLACE THAT ALWAYS WAS”

Settled more than a millennium ago and sited atop a sandstone mesa that rises more than 100 meters above the surrounding landscape, Acoma Pueblo, 96 kilometers west of Albuquerque, NM, is North America's oldest continually inhabited village. Its name denotes a “place that always was.” Dominating the settlement is the soaring edifice of San Esteban del Rey, a seventeenth-century mission church commissioned by King Charles II of Spain and built at the cost of countless Native American lives. It is also one of the few colonial churches in the American Southwest to have weathered the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

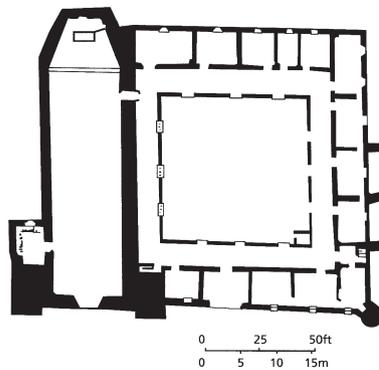
Built of sandstone and adobe, the church was erected under the direction of the Franciscan friar Juan Ramirez between 1629 and 1640, at which time much of “Sky City” was rebuilt, having been leveled in large part by the Spanish in their quest to subdue the region at the close of the sixteenth century. Most of the destruction was wrought by the provincial governor Juan de Oñate and 70 of his men, who, in 1598, retaliated against the people of Acoma for killing 13 Spanish soldiers who were attempting to steal grain from the pueblo's storehouses.

San Esteban del Rey is laid out on a single-nave plan with an adjoining *convento*, or residential cloister, and cemetery. The walls of the church, which rise some ten meters, are more than two-meters thick and erected atop a stone foundation. Two adobe towers flank the building's austere east-facing façade. Within the south tower a wooden spiral staircase provided access to the roof; the north tower belfry was reached by a flight of earthen stairs.

Construction of the 2,000-square-meter mission complex required the importation of an estimated 20,000 tons of earth and stone from the canyon floor. It has been said that the church's wooden roof beams, each of which is more than ten meters long and weighs in excess of a ton, were brought to the mesa from Mt. Taylor some 50 kilometers away, transported to the building site having never touched the ground, which would have been considered a sacrilege.



ALSO KNOWN AS SKY CITY, ACOMA PUEBLO IS SITED ATOP A MESA THAT RISES 100 METERS ABOVE THE SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE. A PLAN OF SAN ESTEBAN DEL REY AND ITS CONVENT CLOISTER, RIGHT. CENTURIES OF EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS HAD TAKEN ITS TOLL ON THE MISSION CHURCH, SHOWN BELOW AS IT LOOKED IN 1882.



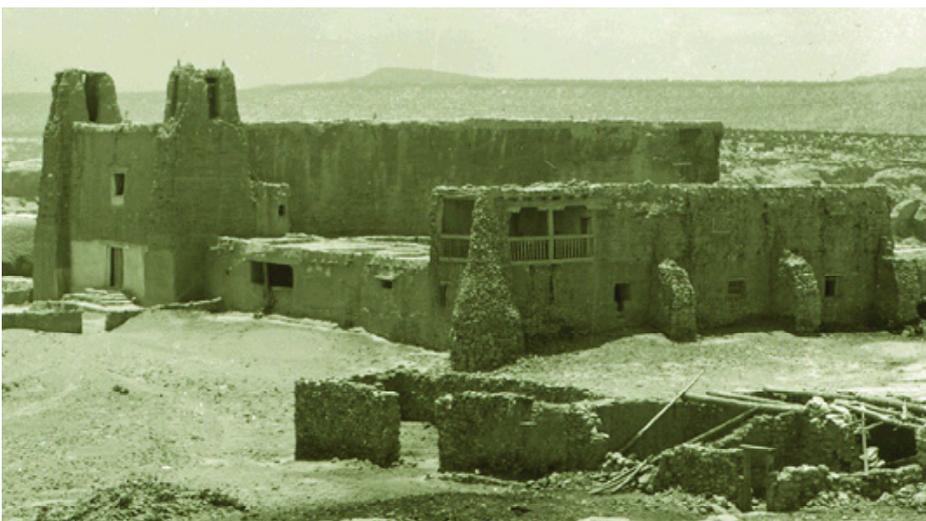
A clerestory window, not of glass but of Selenite, a crystallized form of gypsum mined from Acoma lands, illuminated the sanctuary's raised altar. Woodwork throughout the church and cloister was ornately carved and painted with natural pigments, reflecting a high level of craftsmanship. Colorful murals graced the mission's interiors.

Upon completion, the church was appointed with a fine collection of ecclesiastical art—gilded retablos and carvings—most crafted by artists in Mexico. In time, these would be complemented by a suite of paintings rendered on buffalo hide.

Given the tremendous sacrifice made by the people of Acoma in the construction of San Esteban del Rey, it should be of no surprise that generations of pueblo inhabitants have worked to preserve the church, believing their ancestors' spirits reside in its walls. The remains of many of their forebears were buried in the mission cemetery. Over the centuries, however, the mission complex has witnessed its share of destruction and modification. Although the church survived the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, it sustained damage to its roof and woodwork and part of the cloister was destroyed.

In the years that followed, the roof was replaced and the nave's damaged clerestory was removed. In its place, a third window was added to the sanctuary's south wall to illuminate the altar. In the mid-eighteenth century, a second-story *mirador* and buttresses to support it were added to the north side of the cloister.

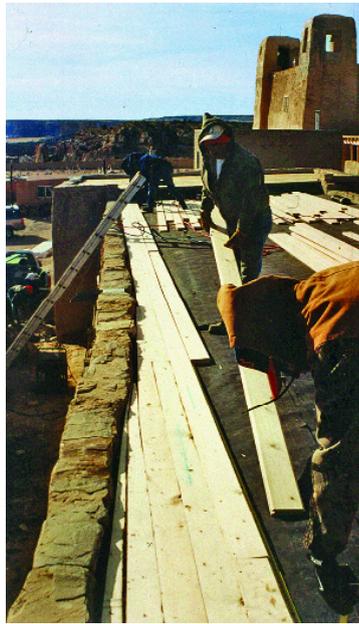
By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Pueblo of Acoma had been politically reduced to a *visita*, or mission church, under the aegis of the parish of Laguna, some 25 kilometers to the north. As a result, the mission complex fell into a slow decline. At some point, the baptistry behind the south tower was struck by lightning. By 1890, a visitor to the pueblo noted that, "the south wall is wasting away, as are...the huge towers, once square, which rise just high enough to admit ...belfries."



In 1911, the pueblo embarked on a community driven restoration campaign to address some of the site's most pressing conservation problems. At that time, the eroding towers were rebuilt of local sandstone, sash windows were put in the nave, and pitched metal roofs replaced flat wooden and adobe ones on portions of the cloister. Despite this work, members of the Committee for the Reconstruction and Preservation of New Mexico Mission Churches, who visited San Esteban del Rey in 1920, found the site in dire need of repair, having suffered from exposure to the elements and water infiltration, which had weakened the adobe walls and resulted in substantial surface loss on both interior and exterior finishes. In 1924, the church roof was replaced with a mud-covered concrete slab to mitigate further water infiltration—a controversial solution to the problem according to some involved in the restoration.

A lightning strike had caused a severe crack in the west wall of the south tower, the core of which had already been weakened by erosion. In light of the poor condition of the south tower, and the fact that the Committee considered the 1911 reconstruction of both towers out of keeping with the original architecture, they were dismantled and rebuilt in a seemingly more sympathetic manner between 1927 and 1928. Given a shortage of time and money, only minor work was carried out on the convent cloister.

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, WORK ON THE MISSION COMPLEX HAS INCLUDED THE REPLASTERING OF INTERIOR SURFACES AND THE REPLACEMENT OF DETERIORATING WOODEN SUPPORTS AND THE CLOISTER ROOF WITH TRADITIONAL MATERIALS SUCH AS YUCCA FIBER AND TIMBER.





OVER THE YEARS, RAINWATER FILTERING IN FROM A LEAKING ROOF WEAKENED THE ADOBE SANCTUARY, CAUSING SUBSTANTIAL SURFACE LOSS TO INTERIOR FINISHES, ABOVE. EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS ALSO TOOK ITS TOLL ON THE EXTERIOR OF THE MISSION COMPLEX, RESULTING IN EXTERIOR DAMAGE, EVIDENT IN THE CONVENT CLOISTER, BELOW.

In 1934, the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) carried out an extensive survey of the mission complex, producing more than 30 drawings detailing existing conditions. In the decades that followed, however, numerous modifications were made to the mission complex, piecemeal and with little or no documentation. The roof was replaced yet again and stone facing was applied to much of the church exterior to bolster fragile adobe walls. The latter treatment would ultimately result in substantial structural damage.

Following San Esteban del Rey's listing as a National Historic Landmark in the early 1970s, plans for its restoration were once again on the table. This time, work would include stabilization and reinforcement of the cemetery retaining wall, rehabilitation of the cloister and archaeological excavation of its interior courtyard, and measures to address leaks that had developed in the church roof. It was during this phase of work that traces of murals that had originally graced the cloister walls were discovered under layers of plaster and paint.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s work continued as did substantial, and at times alarming, modifications to the mission complex that the local State Historic Preservation Office later deemed, "inappropriate to, and out of character with, the historic character of the church."

After several false starts and much animated discussion, a far more holistic approach to the long-term preservation of San Esteban del Rey was finally adopted in 1999 by Acoma Pueblo with the help of New Mexico-based Cornerstones Community Partnerships. Spearheaded by Brian Vallo, an Acoma native and head of the pueblo's on-site Historic Preservation Office, the restoration project has made great strides over the past five years. In addition to carrying out emergency stabilization work, primarily on the north wall of the church nave, conservators have





restored most of the convent cloister, using it as a proving ground for methods and materials slated for use on the church itself. Work on the cloister and several smaller historic buildings in the pueblo has also served as an ideal laboratory for training local craftsmen and younger people in the art of traditional adobe construction and maintenance pioneered and practiced by their forebears.

Restoration of the wooden staircase in the south tower has been completed and work on the nave is now underway. Conservators are focusing on the massive roof system of the entire mission complex and plan to replicate the seventeenth-century Selenite clerestory, which was destroyed early on.

“San Esteban del Rey stands as a symbol to the immense human sacrifice made by our ancestors,” says Vallo, adding that the Acoma are one of the first tribes to take the preservation of their historic structures seriously. “Not only are we preserving one of North America’s most important early building complexes, we are ensuring the survival of our own cultural identity. Through the process of assessing and documenting historical data, we are enhancing our oral teachings—the way information is transferred from person to person within the tribe. Knowing one’s history strengthens one’s identity as a member of the Acoma community today. Beyond that,” he says, “we have set the standard for tribally managed initiatives.”

The entire restoration project will cost an estimated U.S. \$13 million to complete, of which some \$3 million has been raised. Support for the initiative has come from numerous sources, including Save America’s Treasures, which has provided \$475,000; \$25,000 from The J. Paul Getty Trust; revenues from the pueblo’s commercial ventures; and the World Monuments Fund, which provided a \$100,000 grant through American Express and \$25,000 from the Virginia Manheimer Trust. San Esteban del Rey was included on WMF’s 2002 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. ■

—REPORTED BY AMHS, DONNA VOGEL, AND BRIAN VALLO

SAN ESTEBAN’S ATTACHED CLOISTER, ABOVE, WAS USED AS A CLERIC’S RESIDENCE. THE SECOND-STORY MIRADOR, ADDED IN THE MID-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, SERVED AS A SCHOOL ROOM. THE SCHOOL ROOM CEILING, BELOW, WAS RECENTLY RESTORED USING TRADITIONAL METHODS AND MATERIALS.

