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Paper Presented at the National Council of Preservation Education Conference

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Paper Presented at the National Council of Preservation Education Conference

Samuel Sisneros

Preface:

Historic preservation's principles and practices directly correlate and support the charge of librarians and archivists to provide resources for the public and contribute to scholarship and community engagement. Preservation efforts not only preserve historic sites and buildings but they also create further resources by producing reports, studies, plans, documentaries and articles. In fact, the Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections (CSWR) house many student/class and professional reports of community /site planning projects and architecture preservation efforts including many Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and companion programs' studies and reports. Indeed, the CSWR manuscript and architecture collections are often used in preservation and restoration work.

*My initial historical context research (mostly using CSWR archival collections) for my Belén recovery project, of which I presented at the National Council of Preservation Education conference, resulted in the production of additional resources that circulated back into the UNM Libraries' shelves for public access. This includes my capstone project "Belén's Plaza Vieja and Colonial Church Site: Memory, Continuity and Recovery" (F804.B38 S56 2016 c.1); an article published in the New Mexico Historical Review. See: "Los Genízaros and the Colonial Mission Pueblo of Belén, New Mexico," NMHR vol. 92, No.4, Fall 2017; a self-published book catalogued in the Zimmerman Library titled *The Plaza Vieja and Colonial Church of Nuestra Señora de Belén, New Mexico* (F804.B38 S56 2018 c.1); a 1790 census dataset published in the UNM Repository. See: "1790 Census of Belén, New Mexico" (https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ulls_sp/5/); and a chapter in an upcoming anthology book to be published by UNM press titled *Nación Genízara: Ethnogenesis, Place, and Identity in New Mexico*. In addition to these library resources, the project was presented by local newspaper and news media (see links at end of following presentation).*

While attending the joint National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Council of Preservation Education conferences in Denver, Colorado (Oct. 10-12, 2019) I quickly realized that at the national level there were primarily two ideological camps in the historic preservation field. There are those who uphold the architectural legacies (think Frank Lloyd Wright) of historical elite and notable properties and business districts, civic landmarks and a nationalistic narrative with the primary purpose of boosting real estate values and economic development. And then there are those that seek to preserve the social history of underrepresented people and spaces. This second group undoubtedly values the lived experiences in the built environments and cultural landscapes and they strive to be inclusive of that perspective. Some from this camp refer to themselves as "memory activists." My presentation at the conference got the attention from both groups because they were intrigued that my project involves the recovery of an almost nonexistent building and a living community connected to the historic building and space. They were also interested in my concept of continuity of memory, place and people.

The following is my paper formatted to include the images I showed during my fifteen-minute presentation:

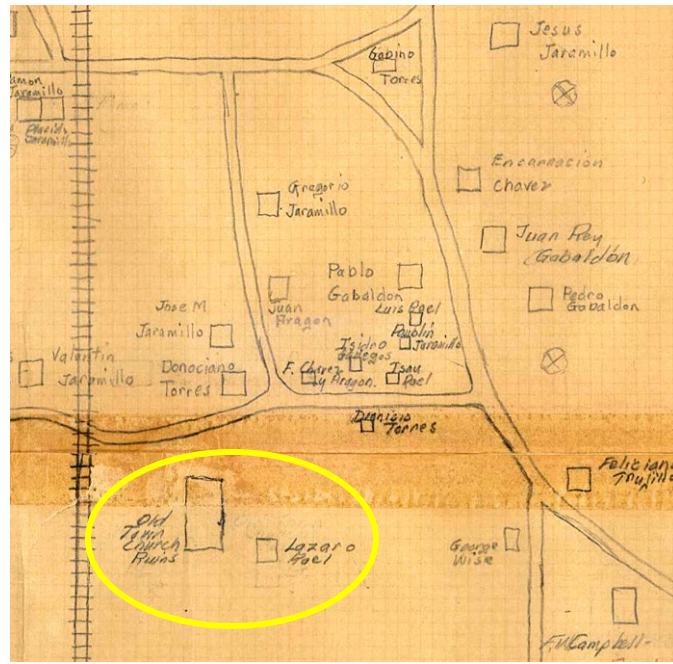
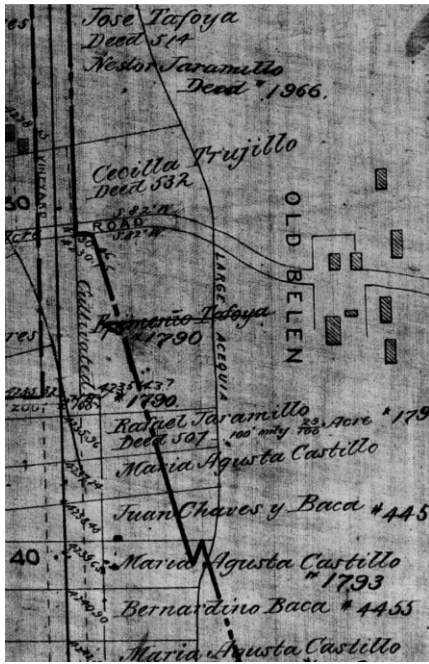
[Recovery and Preservation of a Vanishing Historic Site
in Belén, New Mexico
Samuel Sisneros 10/12/2019

My seven-year, ongoing project involves the recovery and preservation of Belén, New Mexico's old town square or *Plaza Vieja* and the practically vanished built environment of its first Catholic Church constructed in 1791. In addition, it attempts to reclaim Belén's Native American, Spanish/Mestizo and Mexican identity and sense of place. The recovery of this built environment, identity and historical actuality contrasts the official and popular narratives and the town's alternate use of its new civic plaza. With academic research and grassroots community perspectives, this project reaffirms a more accurate and inclusive history of Belén's utmost sacred and traditional social space - affectionately known as La Plaza Vieja.

The town of Belén is located thirty-five miles south of Albuquerque along the Río Grande agricultural corridor and the ancient Camino Real de Tierra Adentro trading route connecting Santa Fe, New Mexico to Mexico City. Belén was a principal village during the 18th and 19th centuries. As a modern railway and commercial crossroads town, it combines both rural and urban landscapes with a current estimated population of 7,269 that includes 60% Hispanic/Latin American, 30% White and 7% Native American.

Imagined narratives, historical amnesia and myth have continuously obscured the history of Belén's colonial plaza and Catholic Church and the pioneer society of its founding Native American, and Spanish/Mestizo families. These narratives, added on to a long history of political, cultural and environmental changes, have disrupted this important space to a point of complete neglect and abandonment. This is demonstrated by no official recognition or historic markers designating the site as the location of Belén's first church or the town's original plaza. Yet many people have lived and flourished in this historical vibrant cultural landscape. However, unlike other colonial villages such as Albuquerque and Santa Fe, Belén did not maintain public use of its traditional plaza.

Belén's original colonial mission church was in use until 1855 when heavy rain and floods demolished it. In 1860, after much protest and division, American Catholic clergy built a new church at a newer section of the town. As a result, the old church lay in ruins for decades. 1882 and 1905 maps of Belén note the location of the "Old Town Church Ruins," along with houses and roads that exist today. Descendants of those households still live there and the roads are still recognizable in a modern map.



Unfortunately, the church ruins are no longer visible and the popular story of its demise is that in 1910 John Becker bulldozed the remaining walls and removed the adobe and rock debris to use as fill to make what became known as Becker Avenue. John Becker, heralded as Belén's principle pioneer, immigrated from Germany to Belén in 1871, where he became a successful banker and merchant and is credited for Belén's railroad development. Regardless if Becker's repurposing of this building material (or desecration of it) is fact or lore, the last documentation of the physical church building is a 1942 photo that shows a local priest pointing to the exposed foundation at the Plaza Vieja site.



Most likely continuous residential growth and the advent of modern urbanization has caused the complete above ground surface disintegration of Belén's first church. Regardless of its disappearance, the site's property owners have kept alive the memory of this unique place. Family matriarch, Valentina Sánchez O'Neal single handedly turned the traditional family home on the site into a museum, which was in operation from late 1980's through the 1990's. She also organized and hosted community Catholic folk practices at the property. Her labor of love and faith was the expressive connection to her husband, Fidel García/O'Neal's family property and its historical legacy. The García/O'Neal house was built on part of the church foundation in the late 1890s by Fidel's father, Manuel García (O'Neal). The now empty and abandoned museum and the once colorful and vibrant outdoor signage placed by Valentina such as: "Plaza Vieja", "Site of First Our Lady of Belén Church-1793," and a crowned Mary holding the Christ baby on her lap (traditional representation of Our Lady of Belén), along with a large cross, altars and a wooden gazebo have slowly aged and faded by time and the elements, yet they remain as iconic representations of the property's historical use as a social and spiritual gathering place - the true "heart" of Belén.



The grounds of Valentina O'Neal's museum includes a variety of old farm implements as well as signs announcing its origins.



This property site is the principal remaining thread that links, through continuity of place, memory, and family genealogies, over two centuries back to Belén’s Colonial and Mexican periods. Valentina’s humble intentions to preserve and celebrate the memory of this place continues to be countered by Belén’s popular and official history and civic identity which emphasizes as its cultural and historical

center, the modern civic plaza at Becker Avenue & Main Street in the downtown area, about a quarter mile south from the Plaza Vieja site.



In 2007 the City of Belén and Chamber of Commerce started a renovation project at the civic plaza. They built a large archway entrance, nativity scene steel sculptures, and metal benches that showcase the city and state emblems, Anglo centric narratives, and signage touting the spot as “The Heart of Belén.” While providing a modern social, civic and economic focal point for the mostly Mexican American/Hispanic population, the new civic plaza de-emphasizes Belén’s Native American, Spanish/Mexican and Catholic origins.

Modern celebrations at this downtown center embrace an association of the place name of Belén to the biblical town of Bethlehem and nativity motifs instead of traditional Catholic associations of Mary and the mysteries of her maternity. This is similar to other Marian name associations such as Our Lady of the Annunciation and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Gradual modifications from Marian practices to simplified nativity scene celebrations became easily identifiable and relatable to non-Catholics and resulted in a shift toward an ecumenical, civic, and commercial reinterpretation of Belén’s place-name history and religious identity.

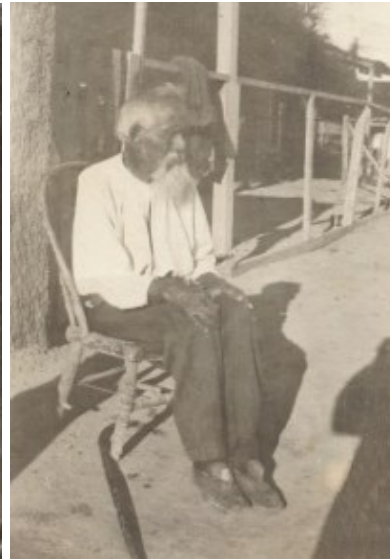
Further supporting the alternate history of Belén is various official city and commercial branding found in web page content and planning and marketing studies with slogans such as: “Two Spaniards, Captain Don Diego Torres and Antonio Salazar founded Belén in 1740. They named it Belen, Spanish

for Bethlehem, in honor of that town.” From this one-liner, the narrative usually jumps to the nostalgic railroad history and anecdotes of Belén’s “pioneer” John Becker. There is no mention of Belén’s Native American origins, overall colonial life nor of the historic mission church and plaza.

The Native Americans that settled and founded Belén were freed Indian servants categorized during the period as Genízaros. They were primarily from various plains tribes and were originally captured in warfare or purchased from Comanche traders, and consequently taken into Spanish/Mestizo homes where they were Catholicized and Hispanized. In the early 1730s Genízaros started moving into the Belén area, organized, and petitioned the Spanish government for lands. This settlement was perhaps the earliest and largest Pan-Native American self-represented, freed slave colony in what is now the current United States. This designation is not known or embraced in New Mexico nor in Native American scholarship at this point. By 1750 Belén had 168 residents with 57% Indian and 43% Spanish and Mestizo and by the mid-1800s the town was well mixed and became culturally Mexican.

Continued erasure of Belén’s early origins and inclusive settlement history is seen in the recent update of the City of Belén’s website, which boasts of “Belén’s rich history” and “cultural experience” stating “We were founded in 1740 as Nuestra Señora de Belén, interwoven with Spanish, German and other cultures over almost three centuries.” It further states, “Belén's most important attraction is our historic downtown, where you can see the only Harvey House museum...,” which “...supported the Santa Fe Railroad for decades in Belén.” This fails to note the fact that in the 1940s the local Belén railroad union had in their charter that “No Mexican, no Negro and no Oriental” could become an engineer, fireman, conductor or brakeman with the railway. There was much opposition to this by local Belén residents including State Senator Tibo Chávez, who, in reaction to this, created the 1949 Fair Employment Practice Act that outlawed discrimination in hiring and promoting.

Aside from the official and popular narratives and counter narratives that I have expressed in this presentation, the complete history of Belén is much more complex and requires further illumination. But the strength of this recovery project is the continuity of people and place. Members of the descendent community, particularly the families that still live in the area and specifically the Garcia/O’Neal family, are living links to Belén’s Native American and Spanish/Mestizo early colonial ancestors.



Generational photos of property site family.

1. Samuel Sisneros with Garcia/O'Neal family members – cousins Pasty Torrez and Alberta O'Neal. 2. Alberta's parents -Valentina Sanchez O'Neal and Fidel Garcia O'Neal. 3. Fidel Garcia's - parents Manuel Garcia O'Neal and Antonia Rael and family. 4. Manuel's mother - Delfinia Garcia and her husband Charles O'Neal. 5. Delfinia's father Isidoro Garcia (noted as being and Indian servant in the 1860 US census).

To “ground truth” so to say, this continuity of people and place, I have teamed up with expert bio archeologists from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Nevada and Hampshire College. After two excavation seasons their work has been very successful and informative. They have uncovered many human bones (indicating church burials) and areas of large rock foundation, which Francisco Uviña, adobe architecture expert, has identified as features befitting of a large colonial period building.



1. Archeologist with UNM preservation staff and students discussing the rock foundation feature. 2. Detail of rock foundation feature. 3. Archeology team working with youth from the community. 4. Community members at end of second excavation *despedida* ceremony with three boxes of bones in front of the makeshift altar before their trip the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Division for safe keeping until studied and eventual reinterment.

The archeologist's work will gleam light into a buried history and memory of a people, church and community plaza and contribute towards a more comprehensive historical context. With their initial excavation along with archival and community sources including this 1795 floor plan of the then newly built church, I am able to tentatively place in scale the location of the historical church in the current Belén cultural landscape.

historical and ancestral space as a community center once again. This collaborative effort now includes the NCPE for awarding the project the 2020 *Communicating the Value of Historic Preservation* grant which will be used to create oral history interviews and a documentary.]

Project media coverage: http://www.news-bulletin.com/news/archeologists-to-excavate-nuestra-se-ora-de-belen-site/article_16a807c4-881d-11e7-b8b5-a7617893df72.html ;
<https://www.krqe.com/news/excavation-planned-to-uncover-belens-first-catholic-church-from-1700s/>
<https://www.krqe.com/news/new-mexico/archaeologists-work-to-uncover-belens-first-church/>