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Recovering Abiquiú's Lost Church Records

Samuel Sisneros 11/11/2019

(Posted on *Manitos Digital Resolana*, Manitos Community Memory Project. See *manitos.net*)



It was as if angels fell from the heavens to hand me the task of dealing with the return of a group of long-lost historic New Mexico church registers. I am a manuscript archivist at the Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections (CSWR) at the University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library and in my long career as an archivist, I have had the opportunity to work with many and various archival collections. But the physical appearance of the original registers of the Catholic church of the Pueblo de Santo Tomás Apóstol de Abiquiú, discussed henceforth, was particularly rewarding. These registers not only consumed me but they also afforded me the unique opportunity to secure these once missing and forgotten historical records for preservation, public access, community building and further discovery of the fascinating history of a northern New Mexico's church, community and its surrounding villages.

It was during a normal workday in early 2016, that an elderly couple came into the CSWR determined to donate six hide-covered books to the archives. As they spread the volumes on a table, they confessed they did not know their contents because they were unable to read the colonial Spanish handwritten script. They expressed that even though the books had been held for many years in the care of their family, they thought the University of New Mexico would be a suitable place for them to be preserved and studied. I immediately realized that these antique books were the long lost baptismal, marriage and burial registers (1777-1861) from the Mission Church of Santo Tomás Apóstol de Abiquiú.



Registers before rehousing and preservation.

It is unknown exactly when and how the registers came into the care and private possession of this particular family. In 1957 pioneer archivist and historian, *fray* Angélico Chávez inventoried the ancient New Mexico Catholic Church's sacramental books and documents belonging to the Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. He stated that the archives he worked on were assembled by Archbishop Rudolph Aloysius Gerken in 1933. The six books that I had before me had not been included in the inventory, as they were apparently not turned in to the archives by 1933. Therefore, they were possibly in private hands since as early as 1861.

Upon my review of the registers, it became apparent that the information in these records would fill many voids in local family, regional and church history. I informed the donors about the contents, extent and significance of the books. I expressed to them, that while their family cared for the registers for many years, the larger community and the descendants of those recorded within the pages are also stakeholders and benefactors of the information contained in each register. I also told them that the rightful repository for the registers is the Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe (AASF). They agreed with this assessment and the registers were eventually, at the completion of the project, transferred to the AASF. I believe making this decision to transfer them and moving forward with what became an extensive recovery project involving several stakeholders, fits within the tenets of my profession's "Responsible Custody" code of ethics, of which the Society of American Archivists states that archivists should "strive to balance the sometimes competing interests of various stakeholders" and they must "collaborate with external partners for the benefit of users and public needs."

Preparing the registers for the next phases of the recovery and transfer to the AASF, I preserved the registers in proper archival folders and in an acid free box. I then inventoried them describing their condition, type, and date. Below is a list of the register types and dates:

- **Burial registers March 22, 1777 - May 3, 1827; Jan 20, 1829 - Feb. 23, 1861**
- **Baptismal registers Jan.1, 1812 - Feb.24, 1821; Jan.17, 1829 - May 3, 1832; Jan.19, 1852 – Dec.20, 1861**
- **Marriage register May 2, 1829 – Oct.16, 1853**

After rehousing and inventorying the registers, the next step was to make archival preservation surrogates of each page in each registry in the form of microfilm and digital files. The CSWR funded the digitization phase of the project and produced digital files and a microfilm edition, which was catalogued in the university library system and made available for public access in the CSWR microfilm reading room. The CSWR also gave a set of CDs containing the page by page images to the Pueblo de Abiquiú Library and Cultural Center.

The next step after digitization involved extracting and translating from Spanish to English pertinent information from each register entry to be compiled into extraction books. Catholic Church baptismal, marriage and burial registers give invaluable statistics including names of the person receiving the sacraments, names of their parents, grandparents and godparents, and residencies. In addition, church registers often contain clerics' notes on church and community affairs. Most entries list place of residency of parishioner and with the Abiquiú church registers the place names mentioned are those of the surrounding settlements such as Moqui, Barranca, El Rito, Salazares, Martinez, Coyote, Cañones, Tierra Azul, Puente, Colorada, Ojo Caliente and others. The burial registers not only give the residency of the parishioner but they often note modes of death and burial locations inside and outside the church in the cemetery grounds.

The extraction phase of the recovery project was more difficult than making public access digital copies. With my knowledge of Spanish colonial paleography, I extracted the earliest of the burial registers (1777-1825). and entered the information onto an Excel spreadsheet, which was later transferred to a Word file for publication. The spreadsheet, which can be sorted for various demographic studies, is now downloadable as a dataset through a UNM Digital Repository web portal at https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/ulls_sp/4/ . Extracting this burial register turned out to be a tedious back breaking and eye blurring experience, so I solicited the help of the New Mexico Genealogical Society (NMGS) to complete the extractions of the other Abiquiú registers. Their extraction books of the registers are available for sale through Amazon.com. The NMGS generously gifted several copies of each extraction book to the Pueblo de Abiquiú Library & Cultural Center for their own fundraising.

The data extracted from these registers can contribute to a better understanding of the town and region's history, make generational family links to its' early settlers, and describe the church and faith

community's history. It can also provide demographics such as social, political and cultural history including racial and ethnic categories of community members and their cultural and artistic traditions. Working with the extraction phase of the recovery project and in particular with the early burial extractions, not only did I appreciate the family and social history embedded in them, I also discovered some very interesting never known local and regional historical accounts and a rare example of a particular New Mexican artistic tradition.



One of the hide painting fragment covers (loose). Here the crowned Mary with wrapped Christ child in arms is depicted on or inside the holy vessel, which is placed at the foot of the cross to collect the stream of blood coming down from what would be the section containing imagery of the crucified Christ.

Initially, while working on the registers, I did not pay much attention to the worn and faded leather covers. But after handling the books for a while, I began to see subtle figures, colors and lines on some of the covers. I discovered that three of the registers were covered with fragments of a buffalo hide painting (each piece approximately 19"x 13") and when opened and placed together form part of a very large hide painting. The painting depicts the *Arma Christi* or instruments of Christ's passion or crucifixion and death, which was used early on as a visual tool to teach Catholic ideologies and in particular for Native American conversion. These rare hide paintings are uniquely regional New Mexico artistic expressions that depict the ancient iconography of the items of Christ's passion story. This iconography, seen in early centuries throughout Spain and Mexico, usually includes the rooster on top of a column or pillar (associated with Saint Peter's denial of Jesus and the pillar where Christ was flogged), hands (perhaps depicting Pontius Pilate washing of hands), lantern (to find and betray Christ), Veronica's veil (cloth used to wipe face of Jesus as he carried the cross), dice (cast for Christ's garments), a ladder (used

to bound Christ to the cross and to remove him), the instruments of Christ's death (the scourge, pitcher of vinegar and gall, lance, swords, pliers, etc.), holy vessels (last supper), angels and Christ on the cross.



Opened front and back of another leather hide fragment showing angels and rooster.

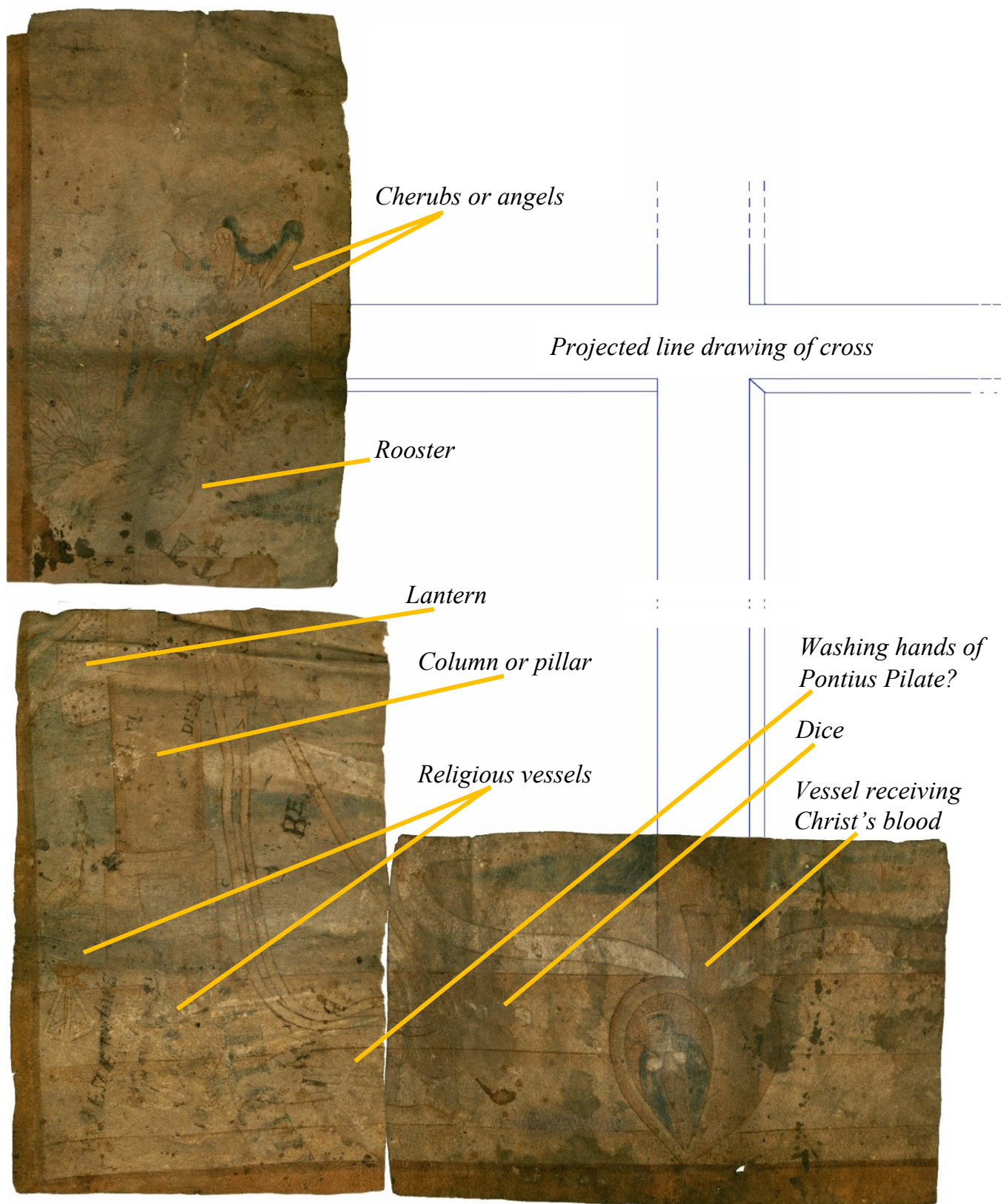


Diagram of digitally joined hide fragments by Samuel Sisneros

Examples of *Arma Christi* hide paintings are rare and there are only two known complete *Arma Christi* hide paintings in existence. One at the San Miguel Chapel and the other at the Museum of International Folk Art both located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Hide painting was mostly a Plains Indian tradition during the colonial period and perhaps in this case it was painted by a resident servant or freed Native American trained in church doctrine and assigned to depict this imagery on buffalo hide. Why and when this particular hide painting was cut up and used as covers to the Abiquiú Church registers is unknown. Perhaps other pieces exist as covers elsewhere or are hanging in local churches or museums.



Arma Christi hide painting at San Miguel Chapel, Santa Fe, NM. Image from *A Sense of Mission: Historic Churches of the Southwest*, David Wakely and Thomas A. Drain, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1994.

The *Arma Christi* hide painting fragments used as covers for three of the registers contribute to the study of this amazing facet in New Mexico colonial art history.

In addition, the contents of the first burial book that I extracted provided details related to the social and spiritual life of Abiquiú area parishioners and community during the late 1770s and early 1800s. Some of the entries give the location of the deceased's burial – describing architectural features of the church by mentioning the nave, transepts, sacristy, baptistery, cemetery, etc. The burial records also describe death patterns or unusual events such as deaths due to accidents, crime, epidemics and from warfare between local residents with Navajo and Comanche forces.

An example of unusual death events found in these registers is a 1781 note that mentioned a smallpox (*viruelas*) epidemic with 150 deaths. Another example is the 1779 burial record of Jose Antonio Valdes which notes that he died as a result of being thrown from a horse while playing the traditional horse race game of the running of the roosters (“*murio de una caída que dio un caballo corriendo a los Gallos*”). The game involves racing to pluck a partially buried live rooster from the ground. This entry gives proof that the *Correo de Gallos* was practiced in this region during the colonial period which is a tradition rarely seen in modern times. Another accidental death was noted in the November 11, 1817 burial of Joaquin Naranjo, who died during a religious celebration when a *baqueta* or metal rod, used to load a gun, was discharged and broke into three pieces – two of which entered the lungs of Naranjo. There are also burial entries that offer a glimpse of regional criminal history. An example of this being a 1817 note by the Mayor of Abiquiú describing the situation of an individual that was hanged by a rope and whose body was found in a swamp near Ojo Caliente. The note further described how a man from that village confessed to murdering the dead man but blamed his actions on the meddling of the wife of the deceased. This may have been a love-triangle drama gone terribly wrong.

In addition to the previous described burials found in the register, a very extraordinary note appears in 1820. The note, entered by the parish priest Theodoro Alcina after a routine burial entry, discussed a flood that took place April 13 of the previous year, which caused water to gush into the church damaging the area where María Jusepa de Jesús Velarde was buried. She died at the age of eleven and was buried in a *cajón* or wooden casket at this spot next to the church altar back in 1814. The use of caskets during the colonial time was rare. The note proceeded to describe how María's casket was inundated due to a void in the casket which drew the water in. He described that the exposed and flooded casket did not have a foul odor and he further noted that this was indicative of her being saintly. The priest also related that many miracles had been attributed to her and, knowing the child personally, said that she predicted the day and time of her own death. As a result of finding this note, current efforts have been made to inform New Mexico Catholic Church officials of the contents of this note and of the identity and family history of this special child. It is possible this interesting and unique information found in this recovered

register could set into motion the process of sainthood of this native Hispanic New Mexican young girl. Below is the note of the flood incident and the burial record of María Josepa de Jesús Velarde, along with the transliterations and translations of both.

Nota.
En dicho dia y Sep. Se encontro el Cajon Citado en la foja 75 buelta con el cuerpo de Maria Josepa de Jesus Velarde el que reconocido publicam^{te} en atencion a una dichosa Muerte y virtudes en vida lo encontre despues de seis años tres meses menos diez dias a pesar de una Chorrera grande que en el año pasado le cayó en la Sepultura, Entero el cuerpo Mojado, y sin olme

sin olfato antes si trasendiendo Señales que manifestaron santidad y virtudes d^a Criatura, se han experimentado varios milagros en varias personas que se han encomendado a ella, y para que conste en todo tiempo lo firmo anadiendo que señalo la hora en que havia de morir y se verifico. oy 13 de Abril de 1820.
Fr. Theodoro Alcina, Ministro

Abril 13, 1820 note, front and back.

Nota

En dicho dia y Sepultura se encontro el Cajon Citado en la foja 75 buelta con el cuerpo de Maria Josepa de Jesus Velarde el que reconocido publicamente en atencion a una dichosa Muerte y virtudes en vida lo encontre despues de seis años tres meses menos diez dias a pesar de una Chorrera grande que en el año pasado le cayó el la Sepultura, Entero el Cuerpo Mojado, y sin el menor olfato antes si transiendiendo Señales que manifestaron santidad y virtudes de dicha criatura; Se han experimentado varios milagros en varias personas que se han encomendado en ella, y para que conste en todo tiempo lo firmo anadiendo que señalo la hora en que havia de morir y se verifico oy 13 de Abril de 1820.

Fr. Theodoro Alcina, Ministro

Note

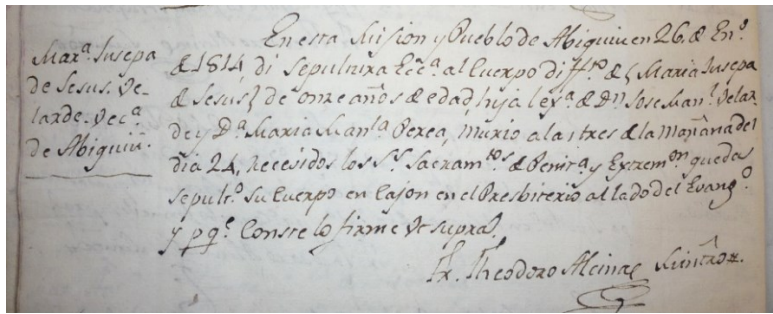
On said day and said burial a casket was exposed of which the burial was cited on the back of page 75 which was of the body of Maria Josepa de Jesus Velarde who was publically recognized as having a blessed death and life of virtue. This burial casket is found after 6 years, three months minus ten days later - at which time a large flood in the past year caused water to go into the casket, and wet the body, but without the least amount of foul smell, and that in the past there were signs transended that manifested the saintliness and virtue of the said child. Various miracles attributed to her were witnessed by various persons, and so that it is registered for all time, I sign this note adding that she (Maria Josepa) predicted the date of her death which I verify today April 13, 1820.

Fr. Theodoro Alcina, Minister

Maria Jusepa de Jesus Velarde.
Vecina de Abiquiu

En este mission y Pueblo de Abiquiu en 26 de Enero de 1814 di sepultura Ecclesiastica al cuerpo difunto de Maria Jusepa de Jesus de onze años de edad hija legitima de Don Jose Manuel Velarde y Doña Maria Manuela Perea, murio a las tres de la mañana del dia 24, recibidos los santos Sacramentos de Penitencia y Extrema uncion queda sepultado su cuerpo en cajon en el Presbiterio al lado del Evangelio y para que conste lo firmo v. supra

Fr. Theodoro Alcina, Ministro



Burial entry, page 75 (back).

Maria Jusepa de Jesus Velarde
Resident of Abiquiu

In this mission and town of Abiquiu on the 26th of January of 1814 I officiated the ecclesiastical burial of the body of the defunct Maria Jusepa de Jesus, 11 years old and legitimate child of Don Jose Manuel Velarde and Doña Maria Manuela Perea, who died at three in the morning of the 24th, having received the holy sacraments of penitence and extreme unction her body is buried in a casket in the presbytery on the side of the pulpit and so that it may be recorded, I sign this.

Fr. Theodoro Alcina, Minister

(Note: Transliterations and translations done by Samuel Sisneros)

As demonstrated with this recovery (and discovery) project, regional demographics and historical accounts (normal and extraordinary) can be extrapolated from studying these registers, which in turn can contribute not only to scholarship but also toward social, community and religious enlightenment. This project also demonstrates that with community participation, institutional backing, scholarly and religious research initiatives, and perhaps a little “help from the angels,” a project of this sort can become a win-win situation for all the custodial stakeholders and at the same time create new resources for public access and research. The family that cared for and eventually shared this heirloom is to be much indebted with gratitude. As part of this gratitude, it was my honor as an archivist and historian to not only preserve and make these records accessible using my profession’s best practices and codes of ethics, but to also bring to light for further study, noteworthy historical information that has been previously unknown. This recovery project turned out to be a serendipitous experience for me and, as I am also a stakeholder being one of the many dispersed members of the Abiquiú descendent community, I was able to personally connect to these records when I found in one of the recovered Abiquiú burial registers, the May 25, 1800 burial entry of Ines Madrid (wife of Antonio Sisneros), one of my early paternal-maternal ancestors that lived and died in the Pueblo of Abiquiú area.