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## Santa Fe Church and Convent Sites in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Fray Angelico Chavez

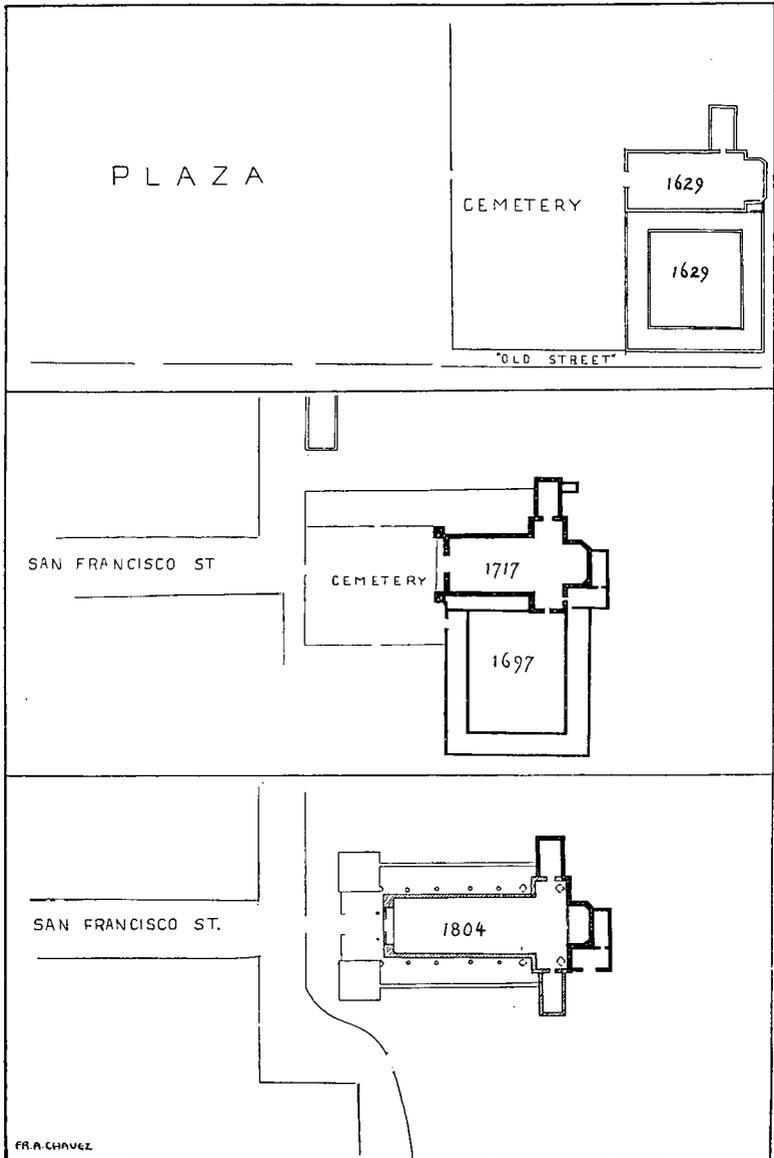
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Descriptive but not accurate sketch showing relative position of the Plaza and Church-Convent before 1680 (*top*); the post-Reconquest Church-Convent (*center*) with San Francisco Street emerging between groups of houses built on the upper Plaza after 1693; and (*bottom*) the present Cathedral built around the 1804 Church, shown by shaded lines. Black outlines show 1717 sections still in use.

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## SANTA FE CHURCH AND CONVENT SITES IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

*By* FRAY ANGELICO CHAVEZ

THE ORIGINAL 1697-1698 document of the erection and act of possession of the first Franciscan Convent in Santa Fe after the Reconquest, besides presenting an interesting picture of those times, furnishes us with some valuable points which, with the help of other published and unpublished data, resolve some old problems concerning the more or less exact location of several historic places in the ancient Capital. Its own quaint rambling phraseology can better describe the occasion than any modern paraphrasing; for this reason the entire manuscript is here given in translation.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards, the points to be discussed can be taken up with greater ease and clarity.

In the Villa of Santa Fe, Headquarters-Capital of this Kingdom and Provinces of the New Mexico, on the Twentieth day of the month of August of the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-seven, before me the Captain Don Alonso Rael de Aguilar, secretary of Government and war of this said Kingdom, there appeared the Señor Don Pedro Rodriguez Cubero, Governor and Captain-General of it and Castellan of its forces and Garrisons for his Majesty, for whom I vouch. I know and declare that he, having arrived on the second day of July past of this year to date and taken possession of his Administration: and on having seen and ascertained that the religious of our seraphic Father Saint Francis had neither Convent nor living-quarters with the

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1. Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, *Spanish Period*, No. 13.

decency which their persons deserve, since those in which they exist and reside are merely some poor lodgings extremely small, in which they live with great inconveniences, surely a sad state of affairs, for which Causes, Reasons, and motives, said Lord Governor and Captain-General had the convent begun which is now being built, which is situated in front of the ancient church and Convent which borders on the north side with the water ditch that passes in front of this Villa. And on the south side, all that once was a street, which forms a front before the convent and Church which existed in olden times. And on the west side with the former plaza of this Villa. And because said Convent finds itself built today for the most part, in that the greater part of its walls is up as ordered by said Señor to be built from their foundations, and because his determination and final Wish are directed towards said end, it being the result of his devotion as so much a son of our Seraphic Father Saint Francis, and because of future Uncertainties and his being a mortal man, he declares before me, said Secretary of government and war, and the witnesses who should be present, that said Lord Governor and Captain-General was making and did make Gift and donation of said Convent freely, purely, clearly, and irrevocably, according to what law calls *inter vivos*, to the Very Reverend Father Preacher, Fray Juan Alvarez, most worthy Custos of this holy Custody of the conversion of Saint Paul, as Head that he is of it, so that in the name of his sacred Order he might accept this said donation which said Señor makes according and as it now stands: and that it continue to be built in the future, for not for this Reason of said Señor making this writing shall he desist from it, but on the contrary shall apply greater interest and care in its furtherance, so that it is finished within a shorter time, and then, when this is so, he shall place said Very Reverend Father Custos, Fray Juan Alvarez, in Royal Possession in order that he may accept it In the name of his Sacred Order, that they Possess and keep it Freely and frankly and without any impediment, and that if some person or persons should place one, said Señor shall answer to the charge since he is making and building said Convent

with his own resources and funds; and with regard to the ground on which it stands [he declares], as Governor and Captain-General that he is of said Kingdom, that none of its inhabitants have right or share to it by Reason of its being on Royal lands won with the arms of his Majesty; for which Cause, in his Royal Name, he made and has made Grant of said ground together with all the rest of the land which should be needed both for building the church as well as [that needed] if said Reverend Father Custos should wish to extend said Convent further, and likewise a piece of Land for a Garden which is situated and extends along the east side and reaches up to said Old Church. And if any of the Settlers of this said Villa had a Grant made [here], said Señor annuls them from Now on and declares them null and of no Validity or effect, for on the other hand he will remunerate them for these and make them good, because it is worthy of all consideration that said Reverend Fathers who now reside in this said Villa, and those who should be in it in the future, have the necessary Conveniences in said Convent due to its wideness and Capacity; and so that it may be Valid concerning this said donation of said Convent and Grant of ground made in favor of the Most Reverend Father Custos, Fray Juan Alvarez, and of his Sacred Order, said Lord Governor and Captain-General so executed and signed before me, said Secretary of government and war, there being present and as witnesses the Royal Ensign Don Miguel de Sola Cubero, the Sergeant Major Juan Lucero de Godoy, and Francisco Rodriguez, living in this said Villa—and said Governor and Captain-General ordered me, said Secretary of government and war, to place the seal of his arms for greater solemnity, force, and Validation—

Pedro Rodriguez Cubero [*Rubric*]

[*Faint shield on wax  
over fancifully cut  
piece of paper, and  
this folded over to  
protect impression.*]

Before me

Alonso Rael de Aguilar [*Rubric*]  
S cr. of government and war.

ROYAL POSSESSION OF THE CONVENT [*On the margin*]

On the Twenty-fourth day of the month of January of the year one thousand Six hundred and ninety-eight, I, the Captain Diego Arias de Quiros, Alderman ordinary of first Vote of this Illustrious Council of this Villa of Santa Fe, about ten in the morning went to the Convent which the Señor Don Pedro Rodriguez Cubero, Governor and Captain-General of this Kingdom and provinces of The New Mexico, recently built, and in the presence of said Lord Governor and the Regents Jose Rodriguez, Francisco Romero, and the High Sheriff Antonio de Aguilera Ysasi, and a great concourse of People, I read the Donation and grant which the said Lord Governor and Captain-General made in favor of the Order of Our Seraphic Father Saint Francis on the twentieth Day of August of the past year of one thousand six hundred and ninety-seven, by Virtue of which, I took by the hand the Reverend Father Preacher, Fray Juan Alvarez, custos and ecclesiastical Judge of this Holy Custody of the Conversion of Saint Paul of this Kingdom and Province of the new Mexico, and I led his paternity walking and, arriving at the principal door, he opened it and rang the bell as a sign of Possession which I gave him, not only of said Convent but also of the grant of lands and garden according and as contained in said grant, in the presence of said Regents who signed it Together with me on said day As above—

Diego Arias de Quiros [*Rubric*]

Antonio de Aguilera Ysasi [*Rubric*]

Francisco Romero de Pedraza [*Rubric*]

Joseph Rodriguez [*Rubric*]

Of prime interest here are the references to an "ancient church" and an "ancient convent." These were the structures erected during the early part of the seventeenth century, and which were destroyed by the Indians in the sacking of Santa Fe in 1680. But first, let us clarify the difference between the church and convent and their mutual relationship. The Franciscans, who exclusively evangelized New Mexico for more than two centuries, lived in community as members of an Order. As distinct from the house or resi-

dence of a secular priest, or the palace of a bishop, either of which can be separate and even distant from the church itself, their communal dwellings were contiguous to and communicated with the parish or mission church which they served. They were not called monasteries, for these are the large secluded dwellings of the older Orders of monks (like the Benedictines and Cistercians), but rather *convents*, or gathering-places, for the *friars*, or brethren—who held a position half-way between the *monastic* life (alone or secluded from the world) and the *secular* life (in the world) of the diocesan clergy. The word “convent” is the ancient official Franciscan term used even today (Latin: *conventus*), which in its ablative form became the Italian and Spanish *convento*. In England, however, the peculiar term was “friary” for the friars, in the same sense that a “monastery” was for the monks. In modern English, too, the word “convent” has come to connote exclusively the dwelling place of religious Sisters, who are a relatively recent development, for the ancient Orders of women were called *monachae* or female monks (*nuns* in English), and their places were also referred to as monasteries (*nunneries* in English). But this ought not make us change the time-honored designation of a Franciscan house as a convent.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in all the New Mexico Missions the Franciscan Convent was joined to the church building, the larger ones united to it fore and aft, and sometimes along the adjoining flank. In Santa Fe, the first permanent parish church of Our Lady<sup>3</sup> was built during the term as Custos of Fray Alonso Benavides (1626-1629); its convent might have been erected sometime before or at the same time; evidence points

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2. Modern Franciscan terminology distinguishes between two main kinds of houses: 1) the “formed” *convent* which must observe the rules of enclosure and must have at least six professed friars, four of whom at least are priests, so that the divine offices and other religious observances are duly performed; 2) the “unformed” house, called a *residence*, which lacks the above requirements. A convent is ruled by a *guardian*, a residence by a *praeses* or presiding superior. O.F.M., *General Constitutions*, Ch. V.

3. For the old Spanish period under consideration, when every stable house was a convent and its superior a guardian, the above distinction has no bearing. During its long history the Santa Fe convent had only two friars, at times only one. An interesting transfer of the use of the term occurred in New Mexico after the Franciscans disappeared in the first half of the nineteenth century. The people continued to call the secular priest’s house a *convento*, and his housekeeper a *conventera*, even to this day.

to the fact that in 1631 the convent was in use, but the Benavides church, its principal nave at least, had not yet been completed.<sup>4</sup> What the shape or plan of these contiguous buildings was we do not know. The Benavides church did have attached an extra "Lady Chapel" which was finished before his departure.<sup>5</sup> From the general appearance of the more important church-convent structures in New Mexico before and after the 1693 Reconquest, we can imagine it to have been similar in style and plan to its post-Reconquest successor or to the still existing plant at Acoma. This church and its convent were razed to the ground by the Indians during the 1680 Revolt.

In his 1692 expedition, Governor de Vargas saw the ruins of these buildings and, prior to his second entry with the colonists in December, 1693, had publicly vowed and resolved to rebuild the church as soon as he was able. During the next few years, the tower-chapel on the southeast corner of the Government Palace served as the parish church, and also, it seems, another temporary structure erected outside the north wall of the town "by the road to Tesuque."<sup>6</sup> During these first years the friars lived in separate hovels or "cells," while the Governor and the people went on with the onerous task of rehabilitation and the suppression of continuous Indian uprisings or threats of revolt. Hence, de Vargas had not found time to keep his vow by the time his successor, Governor Cubero, took over the office on July 2, 1697.

Cubero had bought the governorship from the King, and

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4. On March 22, 1631, after Father Perea had gone out to meet the new Governor, Francisco Nieto de Silva, they returned in procession to the Santa Fe convent; but the grand religious-military reception was held in the "iglesia de San Miguel." San Miguel chapel, called a church in this instance, apparently was serving as parish church while the large Benavides structure was in process of completion.—Archives of New Mexico, A.G.N., Mexico, *inquisición*, t. 372, ff. 3-14.

5. Fray Angelico Chavez, *Our Lady of the Conquest* (The New Mexico Historical Society, Santa Fe, 1948), p. 34.

6. The question of chapels that served as the parish church in Santa Fe between 1693 and 1717 requires further study. R. E. Twitchell's account is a jumble of anachronisms and misapplied titles in this regard. *Old Santa Fe* (Cedar Rapids, 1925), pp. 50-51. A. von Wuthenau identifies the tower-chapel on the southeast corner of the Government Palace with a temporary "parish church of St. Francis" on the road to Tesuque. "Spanish Military Chapels in Santa Fe and the Reredos of Our Lady of Light," *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, X, p. 180. However, the document on which the latter author relies seems to place this Tesuque-road church, not at the southeast corner where the tower-chapel stood, but *outside the town wall* somewhere towards the northeast corner of the Palace block. Twitchell, *Spanish Archives*, II, no. 758.

for reasons of his own did not like de Vargas' tarrying in Santa Fe after his thirty days' *residencia* was over, so he began criminal proceedings against the Reconquistador and threw him into prison.<sup>7</sup> De Vargas himself, although opposed by both friars and people in particular instances during his six-year term, had acquired a well-deserved popularity. We might then wonder if this is not the real reason why, as soon as he arrived, Cubero set to building a convent for the Franciscans—within fifty days of his arrival it was completed “for the most part.” His writs of donation and possession, aimed to be read before the populace, lay heavy stress on this act of pious generosity. Furthermore, he not only provided for the location of the future parish church, object of the unrealized de Vargas vow, but also for the expansion of the new convent.

De Vargas finally got his release, after almost three years in prison, and left New Mexico; but he returned with added royal honors for a second term. Long before he arrived in Santa Fe in November, 1703, Cubero had fled the country by a roundabout way,<sup>8</sup> leaving as his only monument the Franciscan Convent in question; for de Vargas soon made an official complaint against Cubero's destruction of the town's wall and other buildings of defense.

The new parish church was not built until many years later. Perhaps de Vargas did intend to carry out his decade-old vow, but he died during an Apache campaign in 1704. This permanent parish church, dedicated in honor of St. Francis of Assisi and joined to Cubero's convent, was not ready for use until 1717, having been started three years before and brought to completion by the faithful with the assistance of the ancient Confraternity of La Conquistadora.<sup>9</sup> Its exact location, and that of the convent, are definitely established by those rich descriptions which Father Dominguez wrote in his Report of 1777.<sup>10</sup> Most likely he examined this very document of 1697 in the convent archives, for he expressly states that “this convent was built at the

7. L. B. Bloom, “The Vargas Encomienda,” *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, XIV, pp. 378-389.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 392-393.

9. *Our Lady of the Conquest*, p. 39.

expense of Governor Cubero." The parish church to which it was attached was the 1717 structure. Although it fell into ruin at the close of the century, its 1804 successor, longer as to its nave, was built on the same spot, for it incorporated the same old sanctuary, sacristy, and Conquistadora chapel, which had not fallen down. When Archbishop Lamy replaced this building with the stone Cathedral in 1886, these three sections remained intact. They provide a sure starting-point for fixing the exact or at least the approximate location, not only of the church-convent structures, but also of the eastern limits of the foreshortened Santa Fe Plaza, both before the Indian Revolt of 1680 and after the Spanish Reconquest of 1693.

According to Father Dominguez, the 1717 church was about 121 feet long. This would place its front entrance close to the center of the present Cathedral. The 1697 convent, built as a quadrangle with inner cloister, touched this church at the front south corner and at the southwest corner of the sacristy; therefore, its front west elevation ran about 121 feet south from the middle of the Cathedral nave, then as many feet to the east, and again as many feet north to meet the sacristy at the exact spot on which the 1804 south chapel of the Cathedral now stands. Father Dominguez describes this corner very minutely.

As to the eastern boundaries of the plaza, the Cubero document states that the 1697 convent's west front ran along "the former plaza of this Villa." Therefore, the Santa Fe Plaza in its original form, from 1610 to 1680, ran clear up to the middle of the present Cathedral. After the Reconquest, people began building on this upper section of the plaza, so that as early as 1697 many had to be evacuated from the extreme east end to make room for the convent and for the church that was to be built eighteen years later. A cemetery directly in front of the church was already in use by 1732, after the interior floor-space had been used up, as we learn from the burial books; this cemetery is described by Father

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10. *Descripción del Nuevo México hecha por Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, 1777*, Biblioteca Nacional de México, Leg. 10, No. 43. This lengthy and most important document is in process of translation for publication, with pertinent annotations, in the near future.

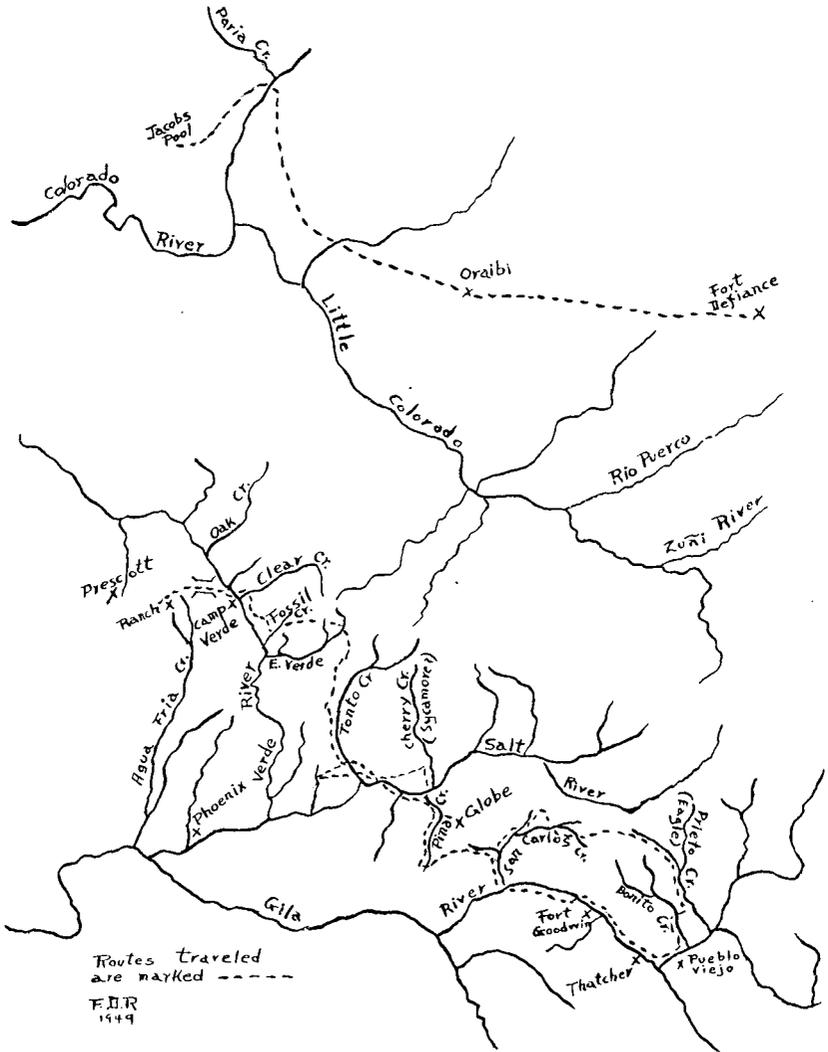
Dominguez as running about 103 feet from the front elevation of the church to a short street parallel with it, while houses were scattered in between this street and the town plaza.

From all this, we can speculate as to the position of the "ancient" church and convent of 1629. They had been destroyed by the Indians in 1680, but their foundations were still visible in 1697. The Cubero document does not say whether the convent was actually south of the church or vice-versa; because the south would be the better protected side, we can suppose almost with certainty that the Fathers used the higher church structure as a wind and weather break on the north. Invariably they chose the sheltered side for their convents in all the Missions. These church-convent foundations stood east of the 1697 convent, and with enough space left between them for a small garden. North of it ran a ditch, its water drawn from a marsh above; south of it was a street "that had been" before 1680, and directly on it was built the south flank of the convent. This would place the Benavides church of 1629 almost directly behind the present Cathedral, its front entrance, and the convent's, along the north-to-south line now occupied by the hospital's two-story brick quarters to the rear of the Cathedral—and not on the front lawn of St. Vincent's facing the Post Office, as commonly believed. The space between it and the original upper limits of the plaza would have been the logical place for the pre-Revolt cemetery in front of the Benavides church.

Certainly, a surveyor with his professional knowledge and his instruments could figure out the more or less exact position of these places. Besides the Cubero and Dominguez documents, the "Urrutia Map" would be of great help.<sup>11</sup> For the present, the accompanying general sketch will have to suffice. All this, in turn, would make it possible for an architect or an artist, with further aid of the Dominguez Report, to build authentic scale models of Santa Fe's center at different periods of its existence. All in all, the whole matter is very intriguing.

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11. This mid-eighteenth century map of Santa Fe is reproduced in Twitchell's *Old Santa Fe*, facing p. 62; also in the *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, X, facing p. 182.



Cook and Tenney Routes Arizona: 1864 and 1870