

Ynformes de Sn. Jn. Bautista

Dedicated to the Preservation of Our Mission's Historical Resources



A Report of the Mission Conservation Program of San Juan Bautista, California – Volume 1, Number 1 – January 28, 2006

The SJB Mission Conservation Program

By Ruben G. Mendoza, Project Manager

Many of you have had occasion to observe a good deal of activity in and about the Old Mission as of late. An historic preservation and museum conservation program was recently initiated within the areas of the Old Mission Archives and Museum, and in and about the Convento and Mission Church proper. Formal conservation efforts were initiated with the correction of a negative drainage problem adjacent to the front entryway of the Mission Church during the month of December 2005 and January 2006. As a result of this initial effort, trenching activities resulted in the rediscovery of the original foundations of the Victorian era bell tower constructed on that site in the 1870s. The discovery in question has added significant new information to what we know of the architectural history of Old Mission San Juan Bautista.

The Mission Conservation Program is the direct result of an ongoing series of grants made possible by the Louise Davies Foundation, and Field Fund, based in San Francisco. All monies for the conservation effort are being administered and dispersed via the California Missions Foundation based in Riverside, California. As the result of ongoing negotiations with our Foundation benefactors, the California Missions Foundation, the Diocese of Monterey, and the Reverend Dennis Gilbert, I have been named the Mission Conservation Program Project Manager for any and all efforts targeting the historic preservation program in question. In that capacity I have been actively engaged in seeing to it that any and all money dispersed will be used to conserve, preserve, and enhance the historical resources of the Old Mission Museum and Archives areas at San Juan Bautista. Our long term objectives in that regard are to see to it that all appropriate conservation efforts have been made to conserve and restore historic manuscripts, vestments, and

related museum and art collections here at Old San Juan Bautista. To that end, we have already met with several key objectives intended to make possible the broader goals of (a) protecting, preserving, and conserving the historical resources of this early California Mission, (b) updating and improving the museum experience for visitors, and (c) enhancing the educational value of said experience for the community and its guests.



As the result of our preliminary cataloging of Archives Room materials, we found many ancient books, like this 18th century Spanish liturgy, that have been severely damaged by bookworms and other pests. We have consulted with manuscripts conservator Kathleen Orlenko, and will soon work to address the sad state of the Old Mission's manuscript collections. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2005.

The Victorian Tower Digs

The filming of the Alfred Hitchcock motion picture *Vertigo* portrayed a very tall Mission period bell tower of the 1870s. Unfortunately for Hitchcock and his crew the tower was dismantled in 1949 just prior to filming. Since that time the area immediately to the left (or south) of the main portico of the Mission

Church has been dominated by plants, trees, and the occasional yucca or two. Because plants require water, and the area where the tower once stood has not been shielded from the weather since 1949, moisture has collected in that location over the years and has, as such, damaged the adobe walls in and around the adjacent Victorian museum room. Water has seeped through the walls and the increased humidity has promoted both the growth of mold and an increase in damaging pests...such as bookworms and silverfish, which thrive under warm and moist conditions.

As we now know all too well, moisture, bookworms, and related pests have damaged some 60 Mission period books and manuscripts beyond repair. Some, like that pictured on page 1, have been damaged so severely that they have been lost to history and the liturgy. Many others can be treated by conservators and protected well into the foreseeable future. To address the problem of moisture penetrating the gallery rooms of the Old Mission Museum, Mario Trujillo and his firm were contracted to address the problem under my supervision. As any excavation on sensitive historical sites without the on-site monitoring of an RPA certified (Register of Professional Archaeologists) archaeologist violates both State and Federal statutes, I oversaw and monitored all trenching activities in and about the front entryway of the Mission Church. As an RPA certified archaeologist, I have had many an occasion to assess, recommend, or see through such monitoring, and have thereby averted the destruction of key historical resources in the process.

The trenching of the Victorian Tower Area resulted in the discovery of a 70 cm wide siltstone foundation. Because Mission period foundations at San Juan generally span 90 and 120 cm widths, I initially concluded that we'd stumbled upon an earlier Mission structure. Soon, however, I came to the realization that we'd actually recovered the siltstone foundations of the Victorian bell tower of the 1870s. Needless to say, this was a particularly exciting day for my students and I. During the course of archaeological monitoring we also recovered a Mission era bronze or copper "cuff link" replete with button and hasp, a few ceramic shards, and a couple of hand carved bone buttons. The discoveries in question in turn forced

me to revise the idea that the original Church plan included the laying of foundations for the construction of each of two bell towers that would have framed either side of the Church portico. Now, I can safely say that had the Church been completed, it would have incorporated a massive bell tower on a square footprint to the right side (or north half) of the front façade of the Old Mission Church. Ultimately, the negative drainage problem has been corrected and we can now begin to address the resulting damage to the historical resources of the Old Mission Museum and Archives Rooms.



Trenching operations exposed the foundations to the Victorian bell tower and revealed that the Serra statue was installed immediately atop said foundations. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.

Operation Archives Rescue

Perhaps the most exciting, and at the same time, disconcerting aspect of our project to date has been the effort to renovate and the Archives Room, and address the conservation and cataloging of its collection of historic manuscripts and artifacts. As the result of a consultation with Kathleen Orlenko, our manuscripts conservator, we soon determined that effectively sealing the Archives Room from the damaging effects of relative humidity and some very hungry pests should be prioritized. To that end, I authorized the release of funds to see through the capping of the Archives Room floor. This was accomplished by way of covering the hodge-podge of old planks, modern plywood, and broken boards with a reversible layer of plywood, a second layer of particle board, and tile [*To Be Continued!*].