

Ynformes de Sn. Jn. Bautista

Dedicated to the Preservation of Our Mission's Historical Resources



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Operation Archives Rescue

By Ruben G. Mendoza, Project Manager

Perhaps the most exciting, and at the same time, disconcerting aspect of the SJB Convento Conservation Program to date has been the effort to renovate and secure Archives Room collections. Our prime objective has been to assess, and thereby address, that level of pest and humidity-related damage that has accrued to date. 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 an inordinately high relative humidity (ca. 65-75 RH) and some very hungry pests – i.e., bookworms and silverfish, should be prioritized. To that end, I authorized the release of funds to see through the capping of the Archives Room floor. Mission Archivist, Wes Leiser, coordinated the recruitment of contractors to see through the renovation in question. This was accomplished by way of sealing the existing hodge-podge of old and splintered planks, modern plywood, and broken boards with a reversible layer of plywood, a second layer of masonry board, and ultimately, a *Salttillo* tile cap. The decision to install a “reversible” tile floor in a room consisting of a badly compromised plank floor was ultimately based on a similar such treatment undertaken, albeit not related to the conservation efforts in question, in the former Padre’s Kitchen area of the convento. In the latter instance, the treatment effectively sealed the floor in a fashion that would permit the removal of the tile floor at a latter time without in turn damaging the existing plank floor.

Ynforme de Sn. Jn. Bautista is the lead phrase that preceded all official reports (*Informes*) prepared by the early Franciscan friars at Old Mission San Juan Bautista. Said reports to the Church in Mexico City span the period from 1797 through 1834 for our mission.



During the course of the Archives Room cataloging project, CSU Monterey Bay student project assistants catalogued some 1600 manuscripts and objects late into each evening's efforts. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.

Archaeology in the Archives

One other factor underlying the decision to install a *ladrillo* tile floor in the Archives Room centered on an impromptu salvage excavation necessitated by the realization that an area beneath the Archives Room floor offered indications of subsurface architectural features. With the assistance of CSU Monterey Bay interns Carolina Vicky Sordia and Adrian Lopez, it was soon determined that the subsurface features in question consisted to two earlier tamped clay floors. The penultimate flooring treatment that anticipated the relatively recent plank floor in fact consisted of a *ladrillo* or fired-tile floor layer. While the *Salttillo* tile floor now in place differs in appearance from the original *ladrillo* tile floor, we found it necessary to weigh the merits of archives collections stabilization, and thereby, the capping of the permeable floor layer, against the historically “correct” appearance of the floor itself. Having completed the re-flooring, we

have contracted to build an archivally-sound bookcase enclosure with an interior shell fabricated from Medex plywood. Said plywood has been recommended for such applications by our manuscripts conservator as it has been demonstrated to minimize or eliminate that degree of damaging off-gas emissions so typical of untreated wooden materials available today.



Upon clearing the Archives Room of all manuscripts and objects, the efforts to catalog materials continued in the Rectory area. Pictured, clockwise, from lower left to right are Irene Casas-Ruiz, Carolina Sordia, Father Dennis Gilbert, Adrian Lopez, Matthew Lussier, and Brunilda Cleveland. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.

Collections Management

Initial treatments include the preparation and flattening, and or digitization, of a number of historic and recent maps, including the Ehrenberg map of 1849. Both museum and historic church collections are currently being identified, catalogued, and photographed for the ongoing development of the first ever comprehensive electronic catalog and visual database for Old Mission San Juan Bautista. To that end, we have already made significant headway in preparing a robust and authoritative museum collections lexicon that reflects the appropriate descriptors for Mission era artistic and cultural objects and artifacts. This latter effort seeks to assure that all intended conservation treatments, curatorial considerations, and anticipated interventions by conservators will be accompanied by the appropriate body of documentation. To date, project interns, including collections management and database development intern Genetta Butler, and I have met with

several key objectives intended to facilitate a series of intended outcomes that include (a) protecting, preserving, and conserving the historical resources of an early California Mission, (b) updating and improving the museum experience for visitors, (c) enhancing the educational value of said experience for the community and its guests, and (d) generating a collections management model and information protocol for the effective and authoritative development of a comprehensive electronic catalog and lexicon of California mission *objects de art* and culture housed in the Missions of the Diocese of Monterey.

Planning for the Future

Ultimately, any and all efforts undertaken to date have been prioritized with an eye toward conservation assessments and interventions that will serve to preserve those Old Mission Museum and Archives Room collections in most dire need of such treatments. In the weeks and months to come, we intend to move forward with vestments, manuscripts, and liturgical objects conservation treatments, and the deployment of security systems, the purchase and installation of museum quality exhibition cases, bilingual (English-Spanish-Ohlone Mutsun) museum signage and exhibitions development and design, and targeted retrofits of adobe architectural features in both the Old Mission Museum and Church areas of the Old Mission complex. To that end, we are currently preparing to deploy a museum needs assessment survey and questionnaire intended to solicit critical feedback from San Juan parishioners, residents, and visitors. In the end, were it not for community interest and consideration, the support of the Parish staff, and the very generous financial support of the Louise Davies Foundation, the Field Fund, the California Missions Foundation, and the critical and timely intervention of our anonymous benefactor, the Old Mission's fate might have fallen to the legions of pests, mold spores, and vandals that have so undermined the Ohlone Mutsun and Hispanic Catholic heritage of this early California Mission community.