

Ynformes de Sn. Jn. Bautista

Dedicated to the Preservation of Our Mission's Historical Resources



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Secrets from the Convento Floor

By Ruben G. Mendoza, Project Manager

On the Ides of March contractor Mario Trujillo and his crew began exploratory work to determine how best to repair the rutted redwood plank floor in the Vestments Room of the Old Mission Museum (Room 12). After removing a layer of sheet metal and a long rubber mat that had been nailed to the museum floor nearly a decade ago, we discovered that those “temporary” repairs had done more damage than they were intended to address. The combination of sheet metal and rubber mats served to trap moisture below the floor, and as such much of the redwood flooring layer in the threshold of the entryway door had so rotted that it had been reduced to a sponge-like consistency. As a result, a decision was made to find a conservation friendly solution that would permit the preservation and stabilization of much of the existing floor. That solution required a change in perspective...of 180 degrees to be exact.

Our solution was to remove and turn the planks in such a way that the rutted portions formerly located at the north wall were now positioned at the south wall. Each plank was turned 180 degrees, and then lifted from its original position and placed at the opposite side of the room (from east to west). By so doing, we effectively turned the entire floor 180 degrees. As a result, we now have an un-rutted, and safer, entryway floor area courtesy of the carpentry skills of Chuck Allen and his colleagues.

Ship Lapped Planks and Old Bones

During the course of turning the rutted redwood plank floors of the Old Mission Museum...we learned a thing or two about ship building and animal bones. And, while the floor did not give up its secrets easily

(particularly as the initial efforts to correct the floor spanned some three days), we soon learned that the redwood planks were ship lapped and adzed like those on the old sailing ships of the 18th and 19th centuries. This meant that we could not merely reverse individual planks and hope for a proper fit...and as such the whole of the floor had to be reversed. And, so it was that Chuck Allen, Fred Trujillo, Jim Quirke, Jesus Perez, Cesar Aguirie, and Raul Rocha reversed each plank and dug shallow trenches in order to bury 4” x 4” pressure treated support beams so as to properly stabilize and level the corrected floor.



The rutted redwood plank floor at the threshold of the Museum entryway was so rotted by humidity that much of it had been reduced to the consistency of a wooden sponge. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.

While removing the planks we also recovered a host of chicken bones...perhaps the forbearers of today's San Juan variety. Maybe someday the bones will give up the tale of precisely when the plank floor was laid down. On the other hand, although I've heard arguments to the contrary, the first mention of the plank floor occurs during the 1840s Mexican era inventory of the convento buildings. Prior to that, we believe that the floor was very likely composed largely of fired ladrillo floor tile.

Taking Stock, and a Few Measurements Too!

For those of you who like to keep track of such things, myself included, we measured and tested the old floor planks prior to their replacement. The floor planks varied in length, but averaged about 22 feet in length by 15 ¾ inches in width. The depth of each notch for the ship lapped portion of the beam varied from 1 ¼" to 1 ½" inches in depth. The heavily adzed portions of the boards that remain face down (so as to preserve the adze marks so recorded) measured approximately 11 ¼" in surface width. The depth or thickness of each worn plank varied between 2 ½" to 3". The planks required several workmen to lift as they clearly weighed well over 100 pounds each.



The redwood planks that compose the Convento floor were harvested from the Santa Cruz Mountains, and generally measure some 22 linear feet. Note ship lapped and adzed underside of plank. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.

Today, the Vestments Room has been reopened, and for the first time in 10 years, visitors can appreciate the appearance of the floor sans rubber mats and sheet metal. Oh, by the way, it should be noted that visitors were temporarily routed into the Old Mission Museum via the corridor fronting the Museum Dining Room area for the period of the project. The main entryway via the Vestments Room has been reopened, and by the end of summer, that area will actually constitute the final room and exit route through the Old Mission Museum. Also, it should be noted that that portion of the flooring that remains rutted will soon be concealed under a wooden exhibition platform and railing at the

south end of the existing Vestments Room floor. But more on that in a future *Ynformes* report.

Saint Anthony's Reprieve

On Sunday, March 26th, the Reverend Dennis Gilbert was contacted by a visitor who wished to meet on a matter of personal concern. Upon meeting, Father Dennis was informed by way of an intermediary that the gentleman who asked for the meeting had been plagued by a sense of guilt stemming from an incident that took place some 37 years ago. The gentleman recalled visiting the museum at the age of 16 and borrowing or absconding with an Old Mission Museum relic. Upon explaining his remorse as a result of this act of youthful indiscretion, the gentleman produced a small leather bound box with a brass clasp (pictured below). Opening the Black Box, Father Dennis spied two small brass containers and an opaque white glass jar with a black screw-top lid. The box and its contents consisted of a "Sick Call Kit" used in the "sacrament of the anointing of the sick." Each of the containers originally held oil of chrisem and cotton for said anointing. Ultimately, we here at the Old Mission would like to thank the gentleman who "borrowed", and subsequently returned, the item in question. We would also like to encourage any others out there who are holding or sheltering similar such items from the Old Mission to join us in returning lost items (no questions asked) for the enjoyment of all who celebrate the history and heritage of Old San Juan.



This "Sick Call Kit" was recently returned to the Old Mission Museum. Photo © Ruben G. Mendoza, 2006.