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Written by: Dan Murphy  
Editorial: Ron Foreman and Randolph Jorgen  
Design: Lawrence Ormsby and Carole Thickstun



## BUILDING THE CHURCHES

The mission system in New Mexico was supported by church administered supply trains that made the months-long, arduous haul from Mexico City to Santa Fe every three years. Accompanied by a herd of cattle, whose constant bawling was punctuated by the "crack!" of bullwhips, this triennial caravan brought new priests and supplies to the growing network of missions.

Packed in those wagons were containers of lamp oil for altars yet to be built, in churches yet to be designed, in pueblos yet to host their first Spaniard. One marvels at the confidence with which these missionaries set out, and the extent to which they succeeded. A partial list of initial supplies assigned to each friar hints at the enormity of the challenge, and the sheer physical labor involved in establishing a mission on the frontier:

- 10 axes*
- 10 hoes*
- 1 medium-sized saw*
- [plus chisels, augers, a box plane for smoothing boards]*
- 600 tinned nails (for decorating the church door)*
- 60 nails four inches long [other nail sizes, counts]*
- 10 pounds of steel for making other tools*
- 1 large latch for the church door*
- 12 hinges*

There were personal items, and sacred supplies:

- Complete set of vestments [minimum 5 pieces]*
- Rug for altar steps*
- [various cloths, such as damask & Rouen]*
- Enameled silver chalice*
- One small bell to sound the Sanctus*
- One pair brass candlesticks*
- One pair snuffing scissors*
- One copper vessel for holy water*
- One wafer box for the unconsecrated host*



*Two and a half pounds of incense*  
*Three ounces silk wicking to make candles*  
*Three peso's worth of soap for washing vestments*  
*Missal, three books of chants*

The contract promised some renewables every three years:

*45 gallons sacramental wine*  
*42 pounds of prepared candle wax*  
*26 gallons lamp oil for illuminating the altar*

Upon arriving at Abo, Fray Francisco Fonte first negotiated with the village leaders, and either purchased or was given several rooms on the outside edge of one of the room blocks. Almost certainly he converted one of them to a temporary chapel. Fonte then turned to more ambitious aims.

Fonte knew what a mission should look like, in principle. Years of training had exposed him to many churches in Spain, Mexico and the colonial hinterlands. Theologically and practically, he knew what the basic requirements were. New Mexico missions built during the seventeenth century shared certain characteristics, but the buildings also displayed intriguing individuality, showing that they did not come from standardized plans. The architectural and engineering skills of these priest-builders were remarkable. They knew the forces and weights involved in large-scale buildings, and often devised sophisticated solutions.

The mission was more than just a church building. The Franciscans also taught the Indians the Spanish language, new agricultural methods, and crafts. A convento was needed to house this effort. For the convento at Abo, Fonte laid out two large connected square buildings with rows of rooms surrounding two garths (open courtyards). The convento contained a dining room, kitchen, storerooms, infirmary, latrine, classrooms, storerooms, workshops, and sleeping rooms for the religious. Fonte and helpers pegged out the plan on the ground with surveying tools, then Indian laborers dug the foundation trenches.

The red Abo sandstone, which broke in roughly tabular pieces, was well suited for wall construction, and there was plenty of clay and water for mortar. The Pueblos had centuries of experience in this type of construction, and the women and children soon erected the walls. Timbers brought from the mountains were laid across the walls as vigas. Smaller sticks, brush, and dirt completed the roofs. The building's dimensions, including doors and windows, were larger than the Pueblo people were accustomed to, but the building techniques were familiar.

If the size of the convento impressed the Indians, the church Fonte laid out must have astonished them. He planned a building about twenty-five feet wide and eighty-four feet long on the inside, with a ceiling over twenty-five feet high.

As the walls rose other crews began the timber work, thankful that the Spaniards had brought metal axes, an incredible advance over the stone tools the Pueblos had. In addition to creating scaffolds for the masonry crews, Pueblo woodworkers learned to make window frames, doors, and stairs. One set of stairs led to the choir loft, while another was needed to reach and ring the two hundred-pound stationary bell in the tower.

Large logs for ceiling beams had to be cut, trimmed, carried from the mountains, and carved before being lifted into place. Today empty beam sockets still hold scraps of plaster displaying the negative mold of the original carved beams. Lifting the beams twenty-five feet high was a difficult and sometimes dangerous job. Shear jacks, the x-shaped hoists used on Spanish ships, probably were devised to lift the beams into position.

Fonte made the roof above the transept and altar a few feet higher than the roof over the nave, where the people stood, and installed an opening called a clerestory window in the space between the two roof levels. This window, not visible to the congregation, focused a dramatic beam of light on the altar and the decorations around it.

In 1626 Fray Alonso de Benavides, the dynamic new custos for New Mexico, arrived on the mission supply train with twelve new priests and plans to build a burst of new missions. Benavides's responsibilities included the Salinas Province, and he assigned fellow traveler Fray Juan Gutierrez de la Chica to establish a mission at Quarai.

The following year Gutierrez began construction on Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion de Cuarac (Quarai). He chose to build the mission on a large mound of abandoned rooms on the east side of the village. After first constructing a retaining wall around the mound, he and his Pueblo laborers leveled the rubble within.

The people of Quarai first built the convento before tackling Gutierrez's ambitious design for the church itself, which was to form the shape of a cross and be considerably larger than the one Fonte had just completed at Abo. On a foundation 7 feet deep and 6 feet wide, the workmen constructed 5-foot-thick walls as high as 40 feet, enclosing a space that was 100 feet long, with a 27-foot-wide nave and 50-foot-wide transept. It took five years for the skilled Pueblo laborers to produce one of the grandest churches on the frontier.

Before these missions were built, few Indians had ever seen an enclosed volume greater than their own rooms and kivas, which were quite small by comparison. Imagine their sense of accomplishment and wonder as they worshiped in these great sanctuaries they built to the glory of this new religion.

A governor once complained that the church buildings the Franciscans built were too elaborate. He insisted that, if a person truly worshiped, a hut would do. He found himself summoned before the Inquisition, which held that noble architecture and pageantry were essential and effective in converting the Pueblos.

Today, on rare mornings when fog covers the Salinas, one can hear clear echoes in the now-roofless churches. Imagine what it must have been like for Pueblo Indians of the seventeenth century to walk into these sanctuaries for the first time.

Benavides himself visited the Salinas Province in 1627 and "accomplished the conversion" of Las Humanas. Today, at the Gran Quivira Unit of Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument, the visitor trail leads through a large plaza between house mounds, past what appears to be the circular remains of a large kiva. Apparently this was the main plaza where Benavides stood on April 4, 1627, and preached to the natives. He described the day in his Memorial to Pope Urban III three years later:

*I was in the middle of the plaza, preaching to numerous persons assembled there, and this old sorcerer, realizing that my arguments were having some effect on the audience, descended from a corridor with an infuriated and wicked disposition, and said to me, 'You Christians are crazy, you desire and intend that this pueblo shall also be crazy.' I asked him in what respect we were crazy. He had been, no doubt, in some Christian pueblo during Holy Week when they were flagellating themselves in procession and thus he answered me, 'How are you crazy? You go through the streets in groups, flagellating yourselves, and it is not well that the people of the pueblo should commit such madness as spilling their own blood by scourging themselves.' When he saw that I laughed, as did those around me, he rushed out of the pueblo, saying that he did not wish to be crazy. When I explained to the people the reason why we scourged ourselves, they laughed all the more at the old man and were more confirmed in their desire to become Christians.*

The Indian priest expressed quite logical doubts about what he had seen adherents of this new religion do, and the subtleties of Benavides's explanation may not have survived the translation. Benavides also claimed his sermon was so effective that a great number of Indians embraced the new faith immediately, and rejected their old religion. More likely, the polytheistic Indians saw this new god as a logical addition to the ones they already had. After all, they had borrowed effective deities from neighboring peoples before.

Much of this new religion rang true to the Pueblos. The Bible stories were set in a desert land, to which the Pueblos could relate. When the people heard how Elijah competed with the prophets of Baal to see who could break the drought, it made sense. These were real problems that needed real solutions.

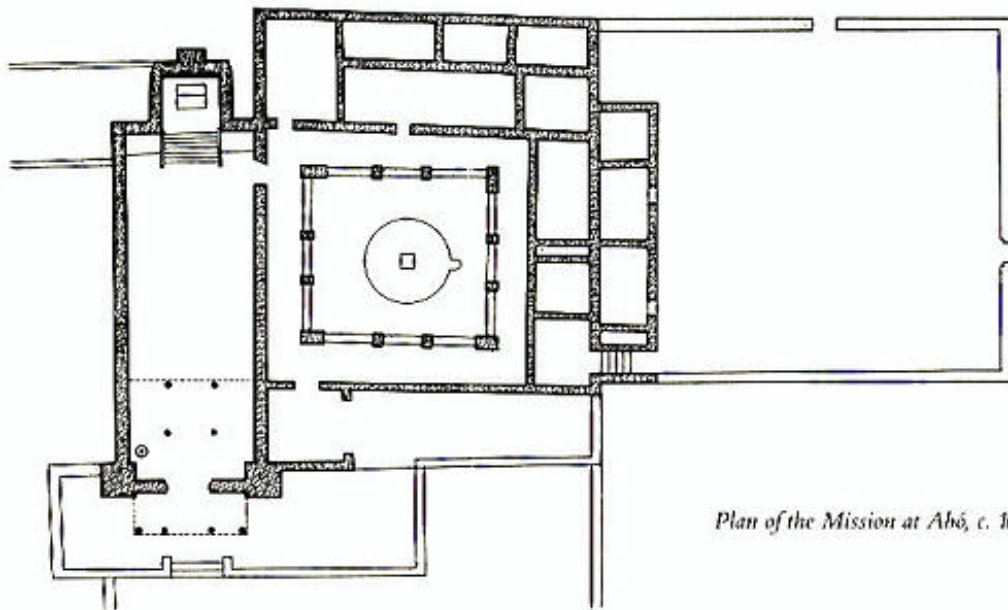
From the Indians' point of view, a kiva and a church could be perfectly harmonious. Indeed, at both the Abo and Quarai missions there appears to be a kiva in the garth, or courtyard, of each convento. The Franciscans should have considered such a thing to be sacrilegious, but perhaps they pragmatically allowed the kivas to be built to help the Indians make the transition to Christianity. In any event, mass conversions such as Benavides recorded almost always failed, as each side gradually realized what the other side really meant.

Among the new priests who arrived on the 1629 supply train were Fray Francisco Acevedo, who was assigned to assist Fonte at Abo, and Fray Francisco Letrado, who began the church at Las Humanas.

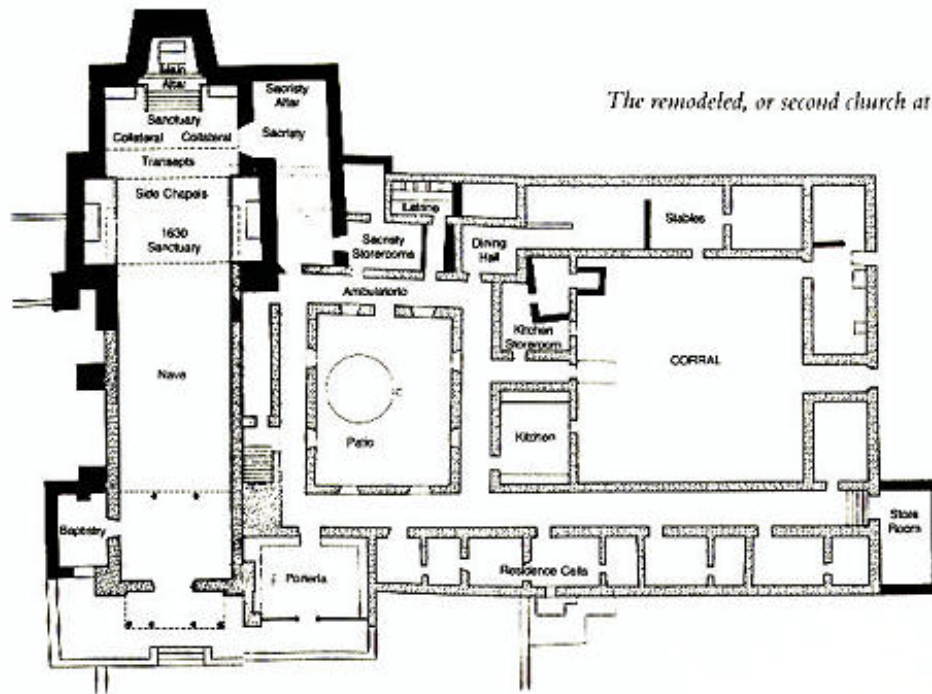
Like Fray Fonte at Abo, Letrado took over eight abandoned Indian rooms, which were later unearthed by archeologist Alden Hayes. Letrado remodeled the rooms and there is evidence he widened the original, tiny doorways, perhaps to better accommodate the skirts of his Franciscan habit. Letrado changed one room into a small chapel, and his first mass in this remote place must have fascinated his hosts.

When the temporary facilities were ready, Letrado next planned a large, permanent church building and convento. It took considerable effort to cut into the hillside at what would become the altar end of the church, using the dirt and rock as fill at the other end. Letrado had just begun work on the walls when, in the autumn of 1631, he was transferred at his request to Zuni.

Tragically, Letrado was martyred there the following spring. It appears that he may have interrupted an Indian ceremony to urge the people to mass. The affront was fatal. A military force was sent from Santa Fe to exact retribution, and during a rest-and-water stop at the rock called "El Morro" the troop marked their passing, as so many other travelers had done, by carving graffiti into the soft sandstone cliff.



*Plan of the Mission at Abó, c. 1630.*



*The remodeled, or second church at Abó, c. 1670.*

When Letrado left Las Humanas he was not replaced. Acevedo supervised completion of the small church, visible at the Gran Quivira unit of the park today, but the village could not support a major mission. All missions, including those in the Salinas, were expected to establish large-scale farming and ranching operations to help defray operating costs and teach the Pueblo people Spanish agricultural techniques. But farming and ranching of any sort requires water, and Las Humanas barely had enough to live on. The churches at Las Humanas and Tabira, another village not within the boundaries of the present-day park, thus became visitas, or circuit parishes, which Acevedo served from Abo.

In 1640, after eleven years under Fonte's tutelage, Acevedo became the sole guardian at Abo, and began to renovate and enlarge the buildings there almost immediately. It was a remarkable job of designing and planning, both to use the aging church as the basis for the new one, and to arrange construction so the convento and church could continue to be used during construction.

First, the north, altar end was removed entirely. Then the roof was dismantled, probably with much advice from old workmen who remembered hoisting the heavy timbers the first time. Workmen built buttresses on the outside of both side walls to support them while the roof was absent.

Next, the altar end was rebuilt and a new, higher roof constructed. This was no minor task. The main vigas were about forty-six feet long, weighed about 1,700 pounds each, and had to be lifted more than thirty-four feet and carefully placed. The interior was plastered and painted, and new altars and other furnishings were built and installed. It took about six years for Acevedo to complete San Gregorio de Abo, one of the most remarkable churches in the New Mexico colony.