



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
April 21, 2008

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**Cornerstones Community Partnerships’  
Preservation Work at San Miguel Chapel, Santa Fe, New Mexico  
Might Reveal Mystery of Tlaxcaltecs**

**SANTA FE, NM**—Cornerstones Community Partnerships has recently begun the work of preparing a conditions assessment and preservation plan for San Miguel Chapel in Santa Fe, New Mexico—known colloquially as the oldest church in the United States—work which could potentially reveal what group of Mexican Indians built the church in the 1620s.

“As a historian, I’m always surprised to learning from long-time Santa Fe residents that they have never been inside San Miguel,” comments Cornerstones executive director, James Hare. “I hope the public will join us in the chapel at noon on June 25<sup>th</sup>, to hear more about this amazing building and the art works it contains. As we approach Santa Fe’s Cuartocentenario, this is a great opportunity to reconnect, through the story of San Miguel, with the origins of this wonderful place in which we live.”

Tradition holds that both the *Barrio de Analco*—the oldest continuously inhabited neighborhood in the United States—as well as San Miguel Chapel—were founded and built by a group of Tlaxcaltecan Indians, Christian Indians who arrived in Santa Fe with the Spanish. The Tlaxcaltecs allied with Cortez and the Spanish in 1519 and helped topple the Aztecs. They also assisted with other military and political endeavors as the Conquest moved north. The presence of Tlaxcaltecs in Santa Fe has long been assumed, but no evidence has ever been brought to light that undoubtedly proves their presence here. Are they indeed the Indians who built San Miguel Chapel in Santa Fe?

This mystery might be solved by the strict protocol that Cornerstones and the consulting archeologist, Elizabeth Oster, must follow pursuant to a host of guidelines from the city and the National Park Service. These guidelines include vigilant protection of any bones or human remains that might be unearthed in the assessment process, which is probable considering the existence of an old graveyard beneath the paved entrance of the chapel, and likely burials under the church itself.

In order to properly assess the condition of San Miguel, Cornerstone’s highly skilled project managers must remove samples from the middle of the adobe walls after removing layers of stucco, and disturb the foundation—although as minimally as possible—in order to ensure internal conditions and any signs of damage are documented, such as water damage in the adobe walls. Long-term moisture entrapment in adobe brick walls, or in hard packed dirt floors—the kind of floor that exists under a wood floor in San Miguel Chapel—ultimately causes structural failure by turning the bricks or hard dirt into dust.

The project must also comply with guidelines for communicating with a long list of Native

American Tribes in the region, in order to solicit their concerns about work that might impact the pre-Spanish Puebloan remains that are known to exist beneath and around the chapel.

Elisabeth Oster, the project archeologist hired by Cornerstones to consult on the San Miguel Chapel project, calls the work she is contributing “Cultural Resources Archeology.” “This is a great opportunity for a new kind of archeology,” she said, “the archaeological work and the knowledge gained from the fieldwork and resulting analyses will be conducted so as to directly contribute to the long-term preservation of San Miguel, and the stories of the people who built it and used it over hundreds of years in Santa Fe.”

Oster has been steadfastly researching the mystery of the Christian Indians in Santa Fe and has published a paper for the San Miguel Chapel & Barrio de Analco Preservation Project called “Who Were the Tlaxcaltecs de Santa Fe.” The assumption seems to be that any “Mexican Indians” assisting the Spanish would have been from Tlaxcala, although by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century there may have been some other logical candidates. Notable among these would be Caxcans of Nueva Galicia, the region of what would become the modern states of Jalisco and Zacatecas, which is where Don Juan de Oñate’s family settled in Mexico and from where he traveled to colonize northern New Mexico.

In her work, Oster has found that although the Spanish documented every detail regarding their colonization of Santa Fe, such as detailed lists of personal possessions and the names of all family members, she has not found any proof that the founders of San Miguel were Tlaxcaltecs and is trying to piece together how the assumption came to be.

San Miguel Chapel, designated a National Historic Landmark in 1968, was preceded by a similar building erected c. 1610-1628 when Santa Fe was established. The building was partially destroyed in 1640 and rebuilt by 1680 when it was once again severely damaged during the Pueblo Revolt of that year. The present building was reconstructed in 1710. The first and only archeological work performed at the site, 1955-58, turned up evidence of two earlier church buildings, and at a lower level, remnants of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Ancestral Puebloan structure.

The resulting structure is a quintessential integration of Spanish Colonial and early New Mexican architecture, as well as one of the most significant examples of earthen architecture in the United States. This early historic preservation work on the chapel also places it in a very small group of buildings that are the examples of the earliest historic preservation projects in the U.S.



San Miguel after bell tower collapse in 1872.



San Miguel Chapel and St. Michael's dorm after 1872.



San Miguel Chapel as it currently appears.

For high-resolution images, contact Jennifer Padilla.

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*Established in 1986, Cornerstones Community Partnerships assists diverse communities in the preservation of historic structures, promotes the use of centuries-old building practices, and supports the continuum of cultural values and heritage unique to the Southwest. The work is carried out in partnership with Hispanic and Native*

*American communities throughout New Mexico, neighboring southwestern states, and northern Mexico. Cornerstones' community-based approach fosters the involvement of youth, supports strong, unified communities, and helps insure that cultural traditions and heritage are passed on to future generations.*