

San Miguel Chapel History

401 Old Santa Fe Trail

Santa Fe, NM 87501

www.sanmiguelchapelsantafe.org



San Miguel Chapel is the oldest Catholic Church in America. Built about the same time the City of Santa Fe was founded, circa 1610, San Miguel still sits upon its original foundation over a pueblo Indian dwelling. It is located at the crossroads of the Old Santa Fe Trail, El Camino Real, and the Old Spanish Trail. The chapel is dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel and has served as a place of worship for indigenous Mexicans, Franciscan Missionaries, Spanish Conquistadores, French Christian Brothers Education Foundation and native Pueblo Indians. Original construction was thought to be rectangular in shape and composed of a dirt floor and mud roof.

The Chapel was most likely constructed by the indigenous people from the province of Tlaxcala (Tlas-cal'-a) Mexico who came to New Mexico as Spanish allies and settlers. They built the chapel for themselves and the Spanish soldiers as a shrine to San Miguel under the direction of the Franciscans. The chapel is located in the Barrio de Analco district, which means the "other side of the river." The district is 2-1/2 blocks south of the Plaza.

San Miguel was targeted by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. The roof was burned and part of the walls were damaged. Everyone hiding in the chapel perished; It was a concerted attack that drove the Spanish as far south as El Paso for a twelve-year exile. In 1692-1693 Governor General Don Diego De Vargas returned to Santa Fe and resettled the area for the Spanish. The second rebuilding of San Miguel was completed in 1710.

In 1798 the mayor of Santa Fe helped fund major repairs and the construction of the beautiful altar screen. It is believed the Laguna Santero (name unknown) carved the Retablo which is indicative of Spanish Colonial architecture for the period.

In 1848 a three-tiered bell tower was added to the chapel and in 1856, the 780 lb San Jose bell was added to the tower. There is more information below on the Bell.

In 1859 Archbishop Lamy commissioned the La Sallian Christian Brothers to start a school for boys. A 3-story building was constructed close to San Miguel which housed the dormitory students from 1859 to 1968. The third floor burned in 1926 and the Lamy Building was granted status on the National Register Historic District in 1975. St. Michael's High School used the chapel during this time period and is the proud owner and caretaker of this historic treasure today.

In 1872 a horrific windstorm destroyed the 2 top tiers of the tower and knocked the San Jose Bell to the ground leaving it in several broken pieces. When it was recast, it was brought into the nave of the church where it has remained since 1895.

In 1887-1889 the Chapel was in need of serious repair. To stop the Christian Brothers from demolishing the building due to lack of funds and manpower to restore it, the villagers built stone buttresses to shore up the adobe walls, and a tar and gravel roof replaced the old mud roof. Two years later buttresses were added to the north wall. The Christian Brothers added a wooden floor three feet above the earthen floor, a communion rail, and a large door at the western entrance.

In 1955 Ms Elizabeth Boyd (a Spanish Colonial art curator) initiated a restoration of the beautiful Retablo and removed white paint that was used to cover soot and dirt on the Retablo. The original dirt floor and sanctuary steps beyond the communion rail can now be seen through the plexiglass floor windows. Many human remains and pieces of pottery were discovered buried below the chapel floor.

In 2008 St. Michael's High School entered into a collaborative relationship with Cornerstones Community Partnerships for the preservation of San Miguel Chapel. Cornerstones is noted for its preservation, restoration and maintenance of old adobe buildings throughout northern New Mexico. In 2010 The Portland cement stucco was removed, the adobe was repaired and adobe plaster finish coat was applied. In the spring of 2020, another external chapel wall was restored and preserved with adobe plastering and lime whitewash. A video of this process can be viewed at www.sanmiguelchapelsantafe.org.

The origins of the San Jose Bell are unknown. Legend and oral tradition state the bell was cast in Spain to commemorate a Christian victory over the Moors. The bell made its way across the ocean and up through Mexico where Senora Ortiz purchased the bell in Vera Cruz and brought it to Santa Fe. Another legend says the bell was cast in sand in New Mexico.

ARTWORKS ON THE ALTAR SCREEN -

#1-9 starting at the top, left to right.

OVALS: from Viceroyalty of New Spain, 18th century.

Oval #1: Saint Teresa of Avila/Santa Teresa

Painting #2 (top center): Archangel Michael/San Miguel (New Mexico, c.1755, restored) An early work by Spanish-born artist, mapmaker, and civic leader Bernardo Miera y Pacheco (1713-1785, commissioned and gifted to the Chapel by patron Manuel Saenz de Garvisu)

Oval #3: Saint Clare of Assisi/Santa Clara

Oval #4: Saint Francis /San Francisco

Painting #5 (middle enter): Christ the Nazarene/ Jesus Nazareno (New Spain; restored)

Oval #6: Saint Louis IX, King Of France/San Louis Rey

Bulto#7 (statue); Unidentified Saint, (St Francis?) New Mexico, 19th century

Bulto #8 (statue bottom center): Archangel Michael/San Miguel/ New Spain, 17th century

Bulto #9 (statue): Likely Saint Anthony/San Antonio

