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The beginnings of Socorro is history most of us know. In 1598, Spanish explorer Juan de Oñate and his caravan of colonists arrived in the region. Thirsty and hungry from months on the trail, they arrived at a Piro Indian pueblo on the Rio Grande. There, the Piro people gave the starving Spaniards food and nourishment. For the life-saving assistance they received, Oñate named the pueblo "Socorro," the Spanish word for "help" or "aid." The rest is history.

Except, there's a little more to the story. It is well documented that today's Socorro is built on top of an old Piro pueblo named Pilabó. However, Oñate clearly recorded that the pueblo he renamed Socorro in 1598 was originally called "Teipana." The relationship between these two pueblos — and two Socorros — has confused historians for years.

Spanish documents, and the fairly recent discovery and excavation of a Piro pueblo near Luis Lopez, have clarified this once murky chapter of Socorro's history. This two-part article is the story of how Teipana became the first Socorro, and how and why it moved to the town of Socorro we know today.

EARLY SPANISH EXPLORATION

The Spanish Crown sent a series of expeditions into New Mexico during the 1500s for exploration — but not for colonization. It was not until 1595

that King Phillip II authorized the colonization of the northern frontier of New Spain — today's New Mexico. Led by Juan de Oñate, the colonization expedition consisted of soldiers, settlers (many with their families) and 10 Franciscan friars, for a total of about 500 people.

In October 1597, those who were approved to participate began their travel from Mexico City and Zacatecas to Santa Barbara, near Chihuahua, the official start of the expedition. With all assembled at Santa Barbara, the expedition departed on Jan. 15, 1598 with a caravan of 83 *carretas* (ox carts), 24 supply wagons, and 7,000 head of sheep and cattle. Once on the trail, the caravan extended several miles in length.

On April 21, 1598, after 800 miles and 86 days on the trail — an average of 9 miles per day — the first of the colonists arrived at the Rio Grande near today's El Paso, Texas. It took several days for the entire caravan to emerge from the desert.

Once the colonists were assembled on the banks of the Rio Grande, looking into New Mexico, Fray Alonso Martinez offered Mass on April 30, followed by a large feast to give thanks for their



Courtesy Texas History

Oñate and 500 settlers were the first Europeans to colonize New Mexico in 1598. Their first encounters with native people were the Piro Indians along the Rio Grande in today's Socorro County. Teipana pueblo was renamed Socorro, the name later being carried to the pueblo of Pilabó — today's Socorro.

safe deliverance to the "New World." This feast is recognized by many as the first "Thanksgiving" in North America — 22 years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock.

1598 ENTRADA DE OÑATE

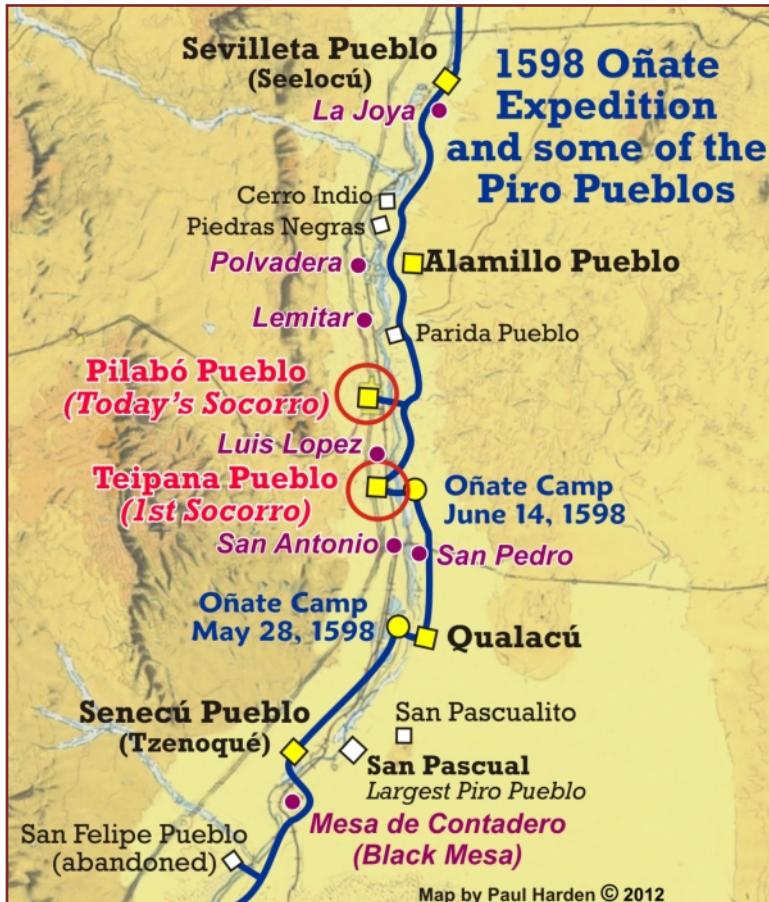
On May 4, the entire caravan crossed the Rio Grande into New Mexico. Oñate formed a party of 60 conquistadors, including his nephews Vicente and Juan de Saldivar, Capitan Diego de Zubia, and Father Martinez, for the forward march into New Mexico. This advance scouting party searched for trails, campsites, and water for the colonists and wagons to follow.

Contrary to wisdom, Oñate and his party suddenly departed the refreshing water of the Rio Grande to enter a waterless desert — later to be known as the Jornada del Muerto. This has led historians to believe Oñate was being led by Indian guides — likely from the Mansos villages near El Paso — who knew the short cut.

Oñate's advance guard, and the wagon train behind them, blazed a trail along these old Indian foot paths. This trail became El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro — the Royal Road to the Interior Lands of New Mexico. Miles of this famous trail remain through Socorro County to this day.

Traveling through the winter and spring months, the colonists found little to help them "live off the land." They emerged from the 90-mile long Jornada del Muerto sick, exhausted and in a desperate need of food. As they rejoined the Rio Grande, they knew the Piro pueblos ahead would be a welcome sign of relief.

However, as they approached the first Piro pueblos, they found them



to find some of the pueblos deserted and their storerooms of food empty.

ARRIVAL AT TZENOQUÉ

By late May, Oñate and his party approached Mesa de Contadero, or Black Mesa, near San Marcial. They passed the southernmost Piro Pueblo, called San Felipe, which was abandoned. This pueblo was named 17 years before by explorer Francisco Chamuscado. Located on the Rio Grande near Milligan Gulch, this pueblo has since been inundated by the waters of Elephant Butte Reservoir.

Circumventing Mesa de Contadero, the caravan crossed the river to the west bank at Valverde and entered the inhabited pueblo of Tzenoqué. Here were the long-anticipated Piro Indians, the original inhabitants of today's Socorro County.

Tzenoqué — more commonly known as Senecú (Sen-a-COO), is one of the missing Piro pueblos located somewhere near San Marcial or Tiffany. Its exact location remains unknown, likely claimed by a Rio Grande flood long ago. Since the pueblo has never been found, archaeologists can only guess at its size or other details.



abandoned. The horses, oxen and wagons of the caravan kicked up dust that could be seen for miles. The historical record tells us that the squeaking wood axles of the wagons and carretas could also be heard for miles.

The Piro Indians saw, and heard, the caravan approaching their villages. The sight of the wagons, hundreds of unknown men and women, and conquistadors on their horses, must have been frightening. Many of the Piro fled their pueblos to seek refuge. As a result, the colonists arrived only

It must have been a large pueblo with a significant population, for it was here, in 1626, that the Franciscans built a large mission church. Early documents tell us the mission was well adorned, had a large vineyard, and the Christianization effort was highly successful. The church also had the only organ in New Mexico at the time, which was transported up the Camino Real by a later mission caravan. Senecú wine, made by the friars, was used as ceremonial “Blood of Christ” at mission churches and the *conventos* (convents) throughout New Mexico. These are all indications Senecú was a large and viable pueblo into the Spanish colonial period.

However, when Oñate arrived, many of the inhabitants fled the pueblo in fear. Those who remained explained, through sign language, that they had no food to spare. Oñate left empty handed to locate the next Piro pueblo.

Across the river and within sight of Senecú was the pueblo of San Pascual. Consisting of about 750 rooms, it is the largest known Piro pueblo in the Rio Abajo. Curiously, Oñate did not record visiting this pueblo. Whether his scouts found it abandoned, simply missed it, or found it uninteresting, is not known. Those who followed Oñate in later years certainly did not miss San Pascual. El Camino Real, north of Black Mesa, runs directly past the sprawling pueblo.



Photo by Paul Harden

The majesty of the Abo pueblo still stands due to the timeless rock construction. Unfortunately, Piro pueblos were made of adobe. Their walls have melted into the desert, making them difficult to locate.

Today, after more than 300 years of abandonment, most of the adobe rooms have melted. Only remnants of the once majestic Piro pueblo remain.

ARRIVAL AT QUALACÚ

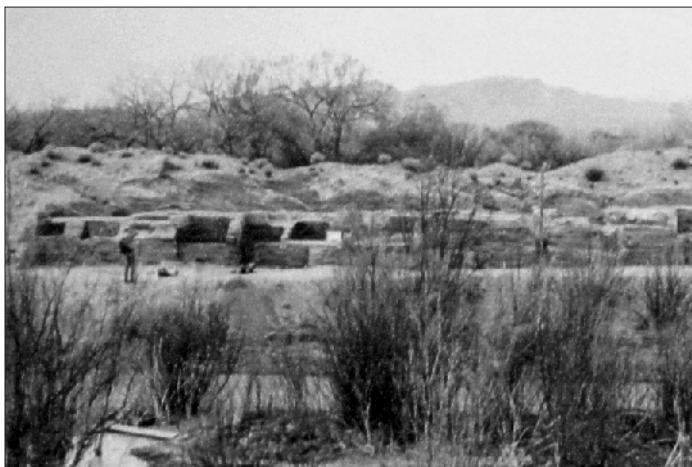
Oñate's party continued up the river another three leagues — about 10 miles. On May 28, they arrived opposite the Qualacú (Kwa-la-COO) pueblo, located on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, about 5 miles south of

today's San Pedro. It was a large, rectangular pueblo with two plazas. Again, the colonists found it mostly vacant as they approached, the inhabitants had fled “to the hills.”

Qualacú is one of only three Piro pueblos to be partially excavated for archaeological study. In 1980, construction of a conveyance channel through Bosque del Apache tore into the pueblo and exposed a series of rooms along the river bank. Subsequent excavation, in 1985-1986, was led by archaeologist Michael Marshall.

Marshall was able to map the site, which revealed it was a pueblo of about 250 ground-floor and 100 second-story rooms. Carbon dating of samples disclosed an occupation from the early 1300s into the Spanish contact period. After the partial excavation, the pueblo was stabilized and preserved for future study.

Oñate recorded that they camped “on the opposite side of the river” waiting for the rest of



Author's copy

A photo of the Qualacú pueblo being partially excavated in 1984 after a conveyance channel cut through one of the room blocks.



Photo by Paul Harden

El Camino Real, not far from the Qualacú pueblo, as it appears today. This stretch is near the old village of Guadalajara, south of San Pedro.

the caravan. In time, most of the pueblo inhabitants returned, after seeing the Spaniards as no threat.

In spite of its large size, the people of Qualacú communicated that they barely had enough food to feed their people, never mind 500 starving Spaniards. The Indians pointed to the north, indicating there was another pueblo farther up the trail that may have food.

Oñate's timing for his famous expedition seems a bit awkward. Arriving at the Piro pueblos in May, the freshly planted fields were in their infancy and struggled in the blazing sun. The monsoon rains were still a month away. What food the Piro had in their storerooms was from the previous year. This food had to feed the pueblo people for several more months until the autumn harvest. For these reasons, the Piro were understandably hesitant to part with their food.

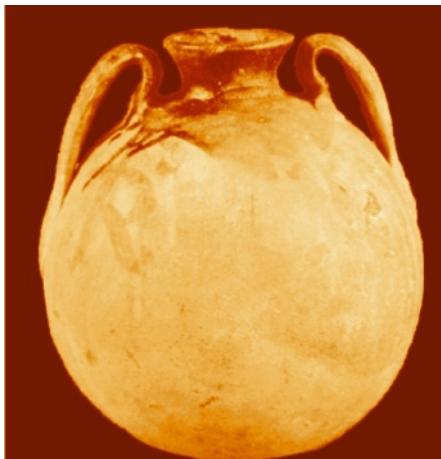
Oñate's colonists camped and rested near Qualacú on the Camino Real for nearly three weeks, and lived off their herd of sheep and cattle. They likely foraged the land, fished the river, and hunted for rabbits, turtles and birds — foods of the Piro. What the colonists were lacking in their diet were fresh vegetables, and grains for making bread and tortillas.

TEIPANA PUEBLO

After their three-week reprieve at Qualacú, the colonists continued their march up the east side of the river. On June 14, they spotted a large pueblo on the opposite west bank. Fording the river, they entered the pueblo, which to their surprise was not abandoned. In fact, they were heartily greeted, some standing on the flat roofs of their adobe homes to get a better look at the arriving Spaniards.

Once in the village, they were welcomed by Chief Letoc, the leader of the pueblo, who offered the colonists corn, food, and *otra cosas* (other things). Though not specifically recorded, it is likely the colonists exchanged items of their own to reward the kindness of the Piro. This may have included anything from a few trinkets to clothing or tools, or perhaps leaving a few of their sheep.

Letoc also provided very accurate and truthful



Courtesy Southwest Archaeology
An olive jar was used by the early Spaniards for carrying liquids and other items along El Camino Real. Finding such items on the trail or in Piro pueblos is positive proof of Spanish or European contact or occupation.

accounts of the pueblos and people that lay ahead, which proved very valuable information for the rest of the journey.

Of this experience, Oñate recorded in his itinerary, “*A catorce, andobimos tres leguas, parando siempre en campaña. Dormimos frontero de Teipana, pueblo que llamamos del Socorro porque nos dio mucho maiz.*”

This archaic Spanish translates to: “On the 14th (of June) we walked three leagues, always stopping together in camp. We slept opposite of Teipana, the pueblo which the people called Socorro because it gave us much corn.”

These two sentences, written 414 years ago, tell us much about the naming and location of Socorro. First, it states they marched three leagues, or about 10 miles, north of Qualacú, to reach the pueblo. This clearly places the location near Luis Lopez, and about two leagues short of today's Socorro.

Second, it indicates it was the people — the colonists — who collectively named the pueblo Socorro, though Oñate usually receives the credit.

Third, this is one of the few cases where the original name of a pueblo, “Teipana” in this case, was recorded by the Spaniards. Renaming of the pueblos to Spanish names was common; thus, the original native names were often lost. This is why the detailed study of the Piro pueblos, by archaeologist Dr. Michael Bletzer, is aptly named “Pueblos Without Names.”

It is believed Teipana, as Oñate spelled it, means “village flower” in the now extinct Piro language. The Piro language was similar to the Tiwa language, such as that spoken today at Isleta Pueblo. Later Spanish documents also spelled the pueblo “Teypana” and “Teypama.”

Finally, and perhaps most important, it clearly identifies the pueblo of Teipana as the Piro pueblo and people that first received the name Socorro — not the pueblo of Pilabo, where Socorro is located today.

This must have been a few enjoyable days for the colonists as the people from two different cultures interacted with each other. The Piro, no doubt, marveled at the Spaniards' huge oxen that pulled their wagons, their clothing, durable metal



Photo by Paul Harden

B.L.M. archeologists Brenda Wilkinson and Jane Childress stand on El Camino Real north of Pueblito. In the 1600s, this section of trail connected Socorro to the mission pueblos at Alamillo and Sevilleta.

tools and cookware, and their “funny” language. In turn, the colonists were entertained with their tidy adobe homes, watching the women prepare food with their manos and metates, other pueblo activities, and their “funny” language.

One can also imagine the children playing together and running about — different languages being no barrier to healthy play.

BACK ON THE TRAIL

After about two weeks at Teipana, the colonists said goodbye to their new friends at the end of June and continued their trek to the north. They still had more than 200 miles to travel before escaping the desert and hopefully finding fertile fields farther to the north.

It is noteworthy to mention that upon leaving Teipana, Capitan Gaspar Pérez de Villagra recorded, “the entire earth shook and trembled (under) a veritable downpour of rain, accompanied by such mighty claps of thunder that we were terrified.” Only miles from Socorro, the Spanish colonists experienced their first New Mexico monsoon downpour and thunderstorm.

After a day’s travel, they passed the Pilabó Pueblo, today’s Socorro, clearly visible from the Camino Real. However, there is scarcely a mention of Pilabó in the Oñate documents. It is not known if Oñate, or any of his scouts, bothered to cross the river to make contact with the Piro at Pilabó.

They continued northward until reaching the Alamillo Pueblo, opposite today’s Polvadura, and

several days later, the large Seelocú Pueblo (See-loe-COO) near La Joya. This later pueblo was renamed Sevilleta for its likeness to the town of Seville, Spain. After passing a few other Piro pueblos, they finally arrived at the well established Isleta Pueblo. They were now in the Tiwa Nation of pueblos.

After another month on the trail, the colonists finally arrived at the fertile green fields of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo. Located on the Chama River, it was here the colonists decided to stay for the winter. They renamed the pueblo to San Juan.

TEIPANA AFTER OÑATE

The pueblo of Teipana, south of Luis Lopez, was the first Socorro. We don’t know much about life in Teipana in the early years of Spanish colonization. Nor do we know much about the Piro people. What clothing did they wear? What did they eat? Did they trade with other pueblos? Was their conversion to Spanish rule and Christianity willing or reluctant?

We do know that of the 10 priests of the Franciscan Order traveling with Oñate, two elected to remain with the Piro people at the first Socorro. They were Frays Cristóbal de Salazar and his cousin Alonso Martinez. Some sketchy documentation indicates that the two friars built a small building at the pueblo, or perhaps occupied pueblo rooms, from which they served the nearby Piro. These rooms were their living quarters, not an early mission. Most historians believe Mass and other Catholic activities were held in the plazas before the missions were built in the 1620s.

We do not know how long Frays Salazar and Martinez lived at Teipana. By the early 1600s, they were headquartered at Santo Domingo with documentation showing them about everywhere at one time or another, indicating they were



Courtesy Georgetown Univ.
Much of what we know about the early Spanish colonial days are from the writings of the Franciscans, such as this 1630 report by Father Alonso Benavidez.

very mobile — and busy — in their clerical duties. At this same time, the pueblos from Isleta to the Piro villages fell under the guiding hand of Fray Juan Claros.

In the early 1600s, there were very few Franciscan priests in New Mexico. They had dozens of pueblos to minister to, that stretched from Pecos to Zuni and Taos to Socorro. Although spread fairly thin, the friars did their best to make regular visits to the Piro pueblos along the Rio Abajo.

Unfortunately, this early period of Socorro is not well understood. In fact, Teipana virtually disappears from the written record rather quickly. It appears Teipana was abandoned and ceased to exist as a community in the early 1600s.

REDUCCIÓN

The reason for the abandonment is a subject of debate. Reasons include a declining population due to Spanish contact diseases, such as small pox, to a known drought and famine period in the 1630s. Most likely, however, the Piro people abandoned Teipana and moved to Pilabó under the Spanish policy of "Reducción."

This is the Spanish word for reduction or contraction. The Reducción system was a resettlement policy employed by the Spaniards, which was designed for a more convenient administration of the colonies. The Spanish authorities enticed the natives, if not forced, to live near the churches, or within hearing distance of the *bajo de la campana* — the lowering or ringing of the church bells. Thus, pueblos were ordered to be abandoned and the population consolidated at a designated pueblo.

In the case of Teipana, it was likely ordered to be abandoned under Reducción with the inhabitants relocated to Pilabó. They took the name "Socorro" with them, and renamed the Pilabó pueblo to Socorro — the Socorro we know today. Other Piro pueblos were also mysteriously abandoned during this period.

In the early 1600s, the Franciscans, and Spanish authorities, listed 14 fairly large Piro pueblos. By 1670, Fray Augustín de Vetancurt recorded that "Sevilleta, Alamillo, Socorro and Senecú" were the only four Piro pueblos remaining in the Rio Grande valley.

On Jan. 23, 1675, Senecú was attacked by Apache Indians, who killed the priest, Fray Alonso Avila, and many of the inhabitants. Most of the survivors fled to Socorro, which left only three



Courtesy San Miguel Church

Father Labreche holds a human tibia found under San Miguel church during the 1974 restoration, later identified as Piro. The restoration provided many artifacts that showed the connection between the 1620s built mission to the Pilabó pueblo.

inhabited Piro pueblos by the 1680 Pueblo Revolt.

PILABÓ – THE SECOND SOCORRO

Pilabó Pueblo was located about 10 miles north of Teipana on the west side of the river. It is where Socorro stands today. Although only scant traces of the pueblo's existence remain today, the pueblo stood in the vicinity of the San Miguel Mission.

The name of the pueblo was first recorded as "Piloque" by Oñate as he ascended the Rio Grande from Teipana on his northward journey. Just about everybody else called it "Pilabó." While Oñate didn't seem real impressed with the westside pueblo, others certainly were. When Fray Alonso Benavidez first visited the Piro, he described Pilabó as "the principal pueblo" of the province.

This reference to the principal pueblo suggests it was the dominant population center of the Piro, indicating nearby sizable pueblos had been vacated — such as Teipana.

In 1626, Father Benavidez dedicated the Pilabó mission, and named it Nuestra Señora de Perpetuo Socorro. As a minimum, this indicates that the name Socorro had clearly been transferred from Teipana to Pilabó by the time of the good father's dedication visit.

Early documentation reveals an interesting, if not somewhat complicated and confusing, history of Socorro. The name of our city was first applied to the pueblo of Teipana. When that pueblo was ordered abandoned and the inhabitants moved to the pueblo of Pilabó, her people so loved and admired the name, they brought it with them. And, just as curious, the people of Pilabó seemed to eagerly embrace the name Socorro as well. The name of our fair city clearly has roots to June 1598, which makes us the oldest, continuously named European colony in the Americas.

The location of Teipana has been lost to time. However, a recently discovered archaeological site, south of Luis Lopez, has indications that point to Teipana.

In Part 2 of this article, we'll look at the partial excavation of this pueblo, and how it seems to support that the first Socorro has finally been found. The article includes photographs of the excavation, and some of the artifacts recovered — which will soon be on public display at El Camino Real International Heritage Center, south of Socorro.

Some of the references used in this article:

“Pueblos Without Names: A Case Study of Piro Settlement in Early Colonial New Mexico,” by Dr. Michael Bletzer; The Land of Sunshine Magazine, Vol. XIII, by Charles Lummis; “The Memorial of Fray Alonso de Benavidez, 1630,” translated by Mrs. Edward Ayer; “Rio Abajo: Prehistory and History of a Rio Grande Province,” by Michael Marshall and Henry Walt and field work by the author.



Piro Artifacts

In 2011, the City of Socorro dug a trench in front of San Miguel church on Bernard Street for the purposes of installing new street lamps. The author recovered these artifacts from the trench while it was exposed.

The artifacts consist of both decorated and utility pottery shards. A few rim pieces were also found, which allowed identification as glaze "E" and glaze "F" — indicating late pueblo and Spanish contact period glaze ware.

While these artifacts have little value, their location in front of the church, and recovered about two to three feet deep, presents almost indisputable evidence that the original 1620s built Socorro mission (today's San Miguel) was built within the Pilabó Pueblo.