

Tzelaqui/Sevilleta Piro Pueblo

When the Spaniards first arrived in New Mexico in the 1500s, they discovered numerous Puebloan cultures. One of the largest of these was the Piro Nation along the Rio Grande in today's Socorro County. The largest northernmost Piro pueblo was *Tzelaqui*, also recorded as *Seelocú*, on a high bluff overlooking the Rio Grande. A short distance south is the historic town of La Joya on the east side of the river.

Tzelaqui was an ancestral Piro pueblo, established in the 1300s, and visited by some of the early Spanish explorers in the 1500s. Juan de Oñate, leading his colonization expedition over trails between the pueblos that became El Camino Real, visited Tzelaqui in late May 1598. The pueblo on the hill in front of the river reminded Oñate of Seville, the capital city of Spain. So much so, he renamed the pueblo to *Sevilleta*, *little Seville*, the name it holds today along with the nearby Wildlife Refuge.

Oñate, and later Franciscan priests, estimated the population of the Piro Province at 5,000 people living in 17 pueblos along the Rio Grande. To gain better control of the Piro people, scattered from Milligan Gulch near Fort Craig to Sabinal, the Spaniards enacted their *consolidacion* beginning in 1620. This ordered the abandonment of all smaller and outlying pueblos, moving the Piro to one of four large pueblos. The pueblos selected were Senecú (near San Marcial), Pilabo (today's Socorro), Alamillo (adjacent to Polvadera), and Sevilleta (near La Joya). Once completed, the Franciscans built churches and *conventos* at these pueblos, making them the four mission pueblos in the Piro Province.

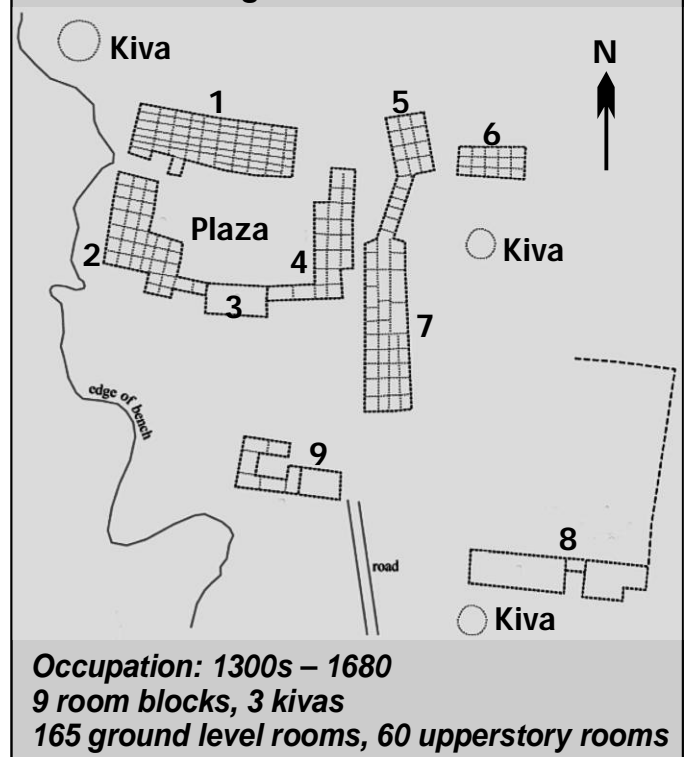
The *San Juan de Obispo* mission and convent was built at Sevilleta. In the 1640s, when the occupants of the Salinas pueblos, known as the Jumanas or Tampiro people, began to abandon their pueblos due to drought, many moved to the Piro mission pueblos along the Rio Grande, including to Sevilleta.

Also during the early 1600s, Sevilleta became a popular stop on El Camino Real. It became a staging area for southbound wagons, often spending weeks at Sevilleta until a sizeable caravan could be assembled. For

northbound caravans, Sevilleta was also a welcomed rest stop – symbolizing the Jornada del Muerto and the rough trails were behind them. From just north of Sevilleta, around Contreras, the trail becomes very straight and gentle to La Bajada Hill just before Santa Fe.

Consolidacion, influx of the Tamiros from the Salinas pueblos, the mission church, and activity along El Camino Real, caused Sevilleta to grow to about a 250 room pueblo during the 1600s Colonial era.

Plan map of Tzelacú/Sevilleta pueblo from archaeologists Marshall and Walt.



The map above shows the layout and size of the pueblo at the time of its abandonment during the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, adapted from Mike Marshall and Henry Walt from their 1984 "Rio Abajo survey" of Piro cultural sites.

Room blocks 1, 2, and 7 appear to be the original pueblo with room blocks 4, 5, and 6 built prior and after Spanish contact. Of interest are blocks 3 and 8 which clearly have Spanish influence and artifacts, and thus built in the 1600s with structure 8 the assumed mission church. The southern "road" is likely El Camino Real that entered the pueblo.

The Importance of Sevilleta

Sevilleta remains a very important surviving pueblo in New Mexico – and Socorro County. Even though the adobe walls have long melted into the Earth, the rock foundations are still visible for extensive study and mapping. It is one of the few Piro pueblos that has experienced little disturbance due to erosion, looting, human development, or other damage that has claimed so many other pueblo sites.

Sevilleta is on shared private property for which the owners keep a keen eye out for trespassers – no doubt responsible for its unmolested condition.

The most important feature of Sevilleta is it is one of the last surviving mission pueblos in New Mexico with Spanish influence and structures, and the only one remaining in the Piro Province. In Socorro County, the mission pueblo of Senecú is gone, likely claimed by the Rio Grande; other than the San Miguel mission church, modern Socorro is built atop the old Pilabo pueblo; Alamillo remains elusive as the site has never been found. Sevilleta remains as the only Piro pueblo and Franciscan mission still in an intact state.

Sevilleta, and later La Joya, are also two well documented historic sites. Travelers along El Camino Real almost never neglected to record their arrival to the area, offering some degree of description of the pueblo and her people, which remains important historical documentation for us today.



The appearance of an unexcavated pueblo. Looking up the hill at Sevilleta are the foundation rocks of a multi-story portion of the pueblo.



The view of the Rio Grande and Ladrone Peak from the west roomblocks of Sevilleta pueblo.

Archaeological Research at Sevilleta

One would think with Sevilleta identified as a cultural gem, there would have been extensive excavation and research performed by now. This has not been the case. Sevilleta has been largely ignored by archaeologists. In fact, the entire Piro Province, once home to over 5,000 people – Socorro's original occupants – seems not to interest but few archaeologists.

While the site has been long known to local La Joya residents, it was during the 1930s that it was roughly mapped and recorded as an archaeological site by Dr. Harry Mera from the New Mexico Laboratory of Anthropology.

It was not until 1984 that Sevilleta was looked at again by professional archaeologists Michael Marshall and Henry Walt under the *Rio Abajo Survey*, a program to document all archaeological sites along the lower Rio Grande. Even this entailed no excavations but a surface survey only, yet remains the most complete documentation on the Piro Province.

In 2007–2009, Michael Bletzer studied and visited the Piro pueblos for his PhD dissertation, appropriately entitled "Pueblos Without Names." He became so interested in the lost Piro pueblos, he and his wife moved to New Mexico where he could continue his research. Dr. Bletzer excavated portions of Teypana, the first Socorro near Luis Lopez. He is now an archaeologist for the *Jornada Research Institute* in which he has done some excavation work on Pilabo near San Miguel church and has now focused on Sevilleta pueblo.

2015-2016 Excavations at Sevilleta

Under the direction of Dr. Bletzer, the first excavations have begun at Sevilleta over the past two years with another session planned for this October. Excavations have been partially funded by the Jornada Research Institute with much volunteer time devoted by Bletzer. Many volunteers have also come from the Torrance County Archaeological Society (TCAS). SCHS members Dr. Peggy Hardman, Paul Harden and Craig H. also assisted in the May excavations.



Dr. Bletzer (right) at one of the Sevilleta sites being excavated.



SCHS member Dr. Peggy Hardman at the May Sevilleta dig.

These excavations have proven to be very fruitful that is already altering our current understanding of this historic mission pueblo. The previous surface surveys of Mera and Marshall had assumed the Spanish structures on the southeast portion of the pueblo (#8 on the map) was the Juan de Obispo mission. In 2015, excavations of this complex proved to be of Spanish origin, but not the mission church.



This structure is indeed of Spanish origin, but it is not the assumed Juan de Obispo mission church.

The style of construction, type of doorways, internal details, and artifacts found verify Spanish occupation, though likely a hacienda or other unknown structure, not a church.

Earlier surveys also assumed the "L" shaped wall from this structure, typical of a *campo santos*, or church cemetery, further identified this as the mission. No evidence was found that this area was once a mission cemetery.

It should be noted that should human remains be uncovered during an excavation, they are cataloged, but never removed or disturbed per the Antiquities Act. No human remains have yet been found at Sevilleta.

In early 2016, additional excavation work tested newer portions of the pueblo in search of the mission. This included surface "wall tracing" to make distinctions between pueblo and Spanish built walls.

Juan de Obispo Mission Discovered

During the early 2016 work parties, a wall inside the pueblo of Spanish construction was found. About two feet wide, it was typical of the walls of other small Franciscan built mission churches. Additional work parties eventually uncovered all four walls to verify the high likelihood that the Juan de Obispo mission church had been found.

The church is built running east-west, with the entrance on the east end, typical of the Franciscan missions and most Catholic churches today. Various artifacts from the excavation are now being analyzed.

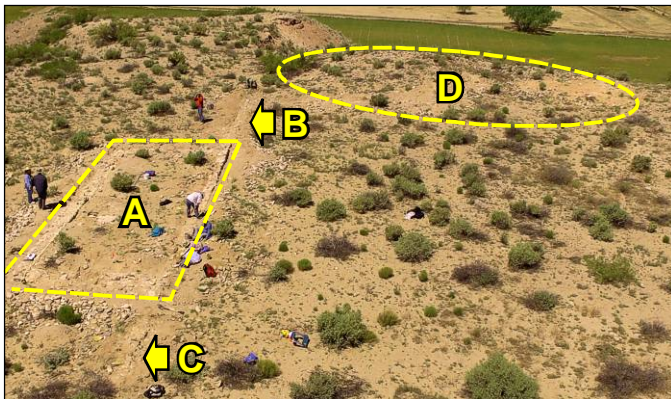


The first Spanish style wall found inside the pueblo that indicated a possible mission wall.



Drone photo of the mission building after the four walls were uncovered.

From the assumed mission building recently excavated, a similar wall, or perhaps a passageway, runs west to a mound of melted adobe and foundation ruins that may also be of Spanish construction. The next planned excavations will be to trace and uncover the walls in this complex to determine if a part of the pueblo, or if Spanish built. If the later, combined with proper room dimensions and artifacts to be found, would identify the rooms as the convent portion of the Juan de Obispo mission.



(A) Juan de Obispo mission church (B) wall or passageway to suspected convento (C) another E–W wall, unknown purpose (D) foundation ruins of suspected convento pending excavation.

Artifacts recovered are undergoing analysis and carbon dating by Dr. Bletzer. It would not be appropriate to reveal the findings until first released through professional channels (though some are clearly Spanish in origin).

This is exciting work that is adding a new chapter to Socorro County history, El Camino Real, and the Piro pueblos. Volunteers may be needed this October. If you are interested, let Paul know at:

na5n@zianet.com.

Helping with such an excavation is a full day of hard, hot work, but worth it to learn the archaeology and history involved. Dr. Bletzer is a great teacher. There's quite a feeling of standing in the middle of a Piro pueblo abandoned for 336 years.



Paul and Craig piloting the drone for mapping and aerial photos.



A unexcavated roomblock of the pueblo.



Volunteers from Torrance County Archaeological Society (and a few from Socorro) assisting with the mission excavation.



Aerial view of the recent excavation, May 2016



El Camino Real entering Sevilleta from the south