

Mission San Juan De Capistrano, Chapel  
Berg's Mill-Graf Road  
Berg's Mill Community  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-321 A

HABS  
TEX  
15-SANTIV,  
3A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MISSION SAN JUAN DE CAPISTRANO,  
CHAPEL

HABS  
TX  
15-SANTO  
3A-

HABS No. TX-321 A

Location: Berg's Mill-Graf Road, Berg's Mill  
Community, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

Present Owner: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio.

Present Use: Public museum and church.

Significance: The chapel is a typical component of a Spanish mission complex built during the period of Texas frontier.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1756.
2. Original and subsequent owners: See History section of Mission San Juan de Capistrano, HABS No. TX-321.

B. Historical Context: Although the mission was virtually abandoned during the early 19th century Mexican revolution, the chapel was said to be in use during that time.

In 1840, when the mission re-opened under Reverend John M. Odin as part of a revival of the Catholic Institutions of Texas, the chapel was in a ruinous condition, the result of years of abuse and neglect. By the 1850s the chapel was fully reconstructed and had a thatched gable roof.

The mission having been abandoned again in the latter part of the 19th century, the chapel by 1890 was again roofless and unfit for use. It was reported at that time that traces of the original wall frescoes were still visible.

In 1907-1908 the missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary undertook an extensive reconstruction program and at that time the building was roofed, floors were installed, the chancel elevated and the altar and benches put in. Rededication of the chapel occurred on January 31, 1909. A second renovation program was undertaken in 1915.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: San Juan Chapel is a long, narrow rectangular one-story structure having as its prominent feature the bell gable rising flush with the east (front) facade over the old main entrance at the north end of the building. A second notable feature is the wall structure of engaged piers and arches on the east facade.

2. Condition of fabric: The walls of the church are sound having undergone numerous repairs in recent years.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 20' X 101'-5".
2. Foundation: The exact nature of the foundation is undeterminable but it seems certain that it is rubble masonry and lime mortar, in effect the lower masonry courses of the exterior walls.
3. Walls: The walls are made of rubble stone native to the area, principally limestone, sandstone and marl, with the sandstone, of a reddish color, the predominant type.

The east (front) facade and both end walls are stuccoed with a modern cement mixture while the rear (west) wall is unstuccoed.

Ranging along the east wall is a series of engaged piers and segmental arches which are bonded onto the chapel wall itself serving as a form of buttressing or reinforcement.

A rough flying buttress of low height abuts the north end wall and appears to have been a part of the adjoining structure on the north rather than of the chapel.

4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing walls reinforced with engaged piers and segmental arches ranging along the east wall. Corresponding piers are found on the interior, and are decoratively treated as framing members of the doorways. The flat roof is supported by boxed beams.
5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: There are two main entrances into the chapel and one entrance to the sacristy, all located on the east facade.

The principal doorway into the nave which appears to be the original main entrance is centered in the second bay at the north end of the chapel and falls under the south side of the bellcote. This entrance is framed with a wide unmolded sandstone architrave.

A second doorway is located in the center of the fourth bay at the north end of the chapel. Although this doorway appears on photographs taken before the turn of the century, it was at that time filled in and no dressed stone frame is evident. It appears, therefore, that if this entrance is original that it was a secondary entrance used by the priests to enter the sanctuary.

The third doorway provides the only entrance to the small square sacristy adjoining the sanctuary on the south end of the chapel.

Doors are wood with regular panel design.

- b. Windows: All windows are modern replacements or additions to the chapel. A large rectangular splayed opening in the north end wall, spanned by a wood lintel, has a casement window.

A second large casement window is centrally located in the west wall and is a later addition.

A third window, undoubtedly original, is a small round opening located high in the west wall nearly opposite the north entranceway. This opening has a circular unmolded stone frame and a single pane of glass.

A fourth small window also undoubtedly original is located high in the east wall in the chancel area. This window is elliptical in shape and has an elliptical stone frame.

Over the altar, centered in the south wall, is a round opening which is a later addition. At present an electric fan fills the opening.

Further lighting is provided by a series of circular skylights which were built at the time the new roof and ceiling were constructed. These skylights have a gabled covering and a frame with modern wire reinforced glass lights.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape and covering: The present roof is a modern replacement for the original roof. From views made of the chapel in the mid-1800s through the latter part of the century, we find that the roof at that time was a low pitched gabled roof with wood rafters and shingles. In those views a broken opening is evident, falling immediately across the center of the sanctuary. It may be that a lantern was located there and later removed. In any event it is evident that the roof continued across the sacristy to form a gable on the south end.

The present roof is a flat roof with a parapet wall across the ends and front. A galvanized metal gutter runs along the edge across the west wall.

- b. Bell gable: A notable feature of the chapel is the bell gable rising from the north end of the east facade. It is a two-stage construction with the upper stage off-set. The ends of the gable are buttressed at the

parapet line by large double unmolded vaults. Two plain round arch openings are provided in the first stage with classical fillet-echinus "capitals" at the impost level. The upper stage is treated the same except that it has only one arch opening.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The chapel plan follows the standard monastic form developed in the sixteenth century Mexican churches in arrangement being simply one narrow oblong wooden platform three steps high and the altar is on a wooden dais of one step.

A balcony or choir has been constructed across the north end of the nave and includes the heating stove and the organ.

2. Stairway: The stairway, a wooden quarter-turn staircase running along the north end wall, provides access to the choir and is a later addition, circa 1915.
3. Flooring: The floors are wood, 1" x 6" yellow pine, tongue-and-groove, with the exception of the central aisle and the two entrance aisles which are reinforced concrete. The chancel flooring is 1" x 4" yellow pine, tongue-and-groove. All wood flooring is unfinished.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plastered from the floor to the ceiling. It appears that this is a modern plaster. A paint coat of the palest pink is the only finish.

The ceiling has boxed beams traversing the ceiling and a boxed girder running the length of the long walls. 1" x 4" beaded ceiling boards complete the ceiling.

5. Doors: No interior doors.
6. Hardware: All hardware appears to be modern replacements with no attempt to reproduce replica pieces. The doors have modern rim locks and back hinges.
7. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: A forced-air blower located in the loft provides heating for the chapel. There was no provision for original heating.
  - b. Lighting: Electric hanging fixtures in "colonial" style.
8. Furnishings: Crude wooden benches with backs and kneeling rails. Not original.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The chapel is oriented almost due north and south with the altar at the south end of the building. It occupies a site in the west line of buildings that originally formed the western boundary of the mission compound. The site was well chosen, being located at the edge of the slope leading down to the San Antonio River which flows roughly parallel to the line of the chapel several hundred yards to the west. Ruins and reconstructed buildings extend both north and south from the chapel, indicating the extent of the west line of the compound. The ruins of the other structures are only outlines of the walls a few feet above ground level for the remainder of the compound. The present approach is a dirt road entering the compound in the middle of the north line of buildings.

Prepared by: John C. Garner, Jr.  
Director, Bexar County  
Architecture Survey  
1969

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, chief of HABS, the project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Academy buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress. Dewey G. Mears of Austin, Texas took documentary photographs of the San Antonio structures.

The 1983 photographs of the chapel are part of the 1983 San Antonio Missions project, which was sponsored by the Southwest Regional Office, National Park Service. John Lowe of the HABS/HAER Office, Washington, D.C., took the photographs.

ADDENDUM TO  
MISSION SAN JUAN DE CAPISTRANO, CHAPEL  
(San Juan Mission, Chapel)  
San Antonio Missions National Historical Park  
Berg's Mill-Graf Road  
Berg's Mill Community  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
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