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Center for Archaeological Research

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Archaeological Testing and Monitoring for a Proposed Drainage Channel at Mission San Juan Capistrano, San Antonio, Texas

Kevin J. Gross

Robert J. Hard
Principal Investigator

Texas Antiquities Permit No. 1748

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The University of Texas at San Antonio
Archaeological Survey Report, No. 283
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1. Type of investigation: Monitoring

2. Project name: San Juan Drainage

3. County: Bexar

4. Principal investigator: Robert J. Hard

5. Name and location of sponsoring agency: National Park Service, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, San Antonio, Texas

6. Texas Antiquities Permit No.: 1748

7. Published by the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, 6900 N. Loop 1604 W., San Antonio, Texas 78249-0658, 1998

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Abstract

In October 1996 the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) completed preliminary archaeological investigations south of Mission San Juan Capistrano in areas specified for a proposed 800-ft drainage channel. Shovel tests, excavated at five-meter intervals along this route, revealed this area contains a very limited amount of Colonial period and modern artifacts in a mixed context.
Acknowledgments

The cooperation we received from Mark Chavez, James Oliver, and Stephen Whitesell, all from the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park (National Park Service, NPS), is greatly appreciated. CAR staff archaeologists Ed Johnson, Bruce K. Moses, Rick Robinson, and Andrew J. Scease are thanked for their assistance in the field. Bruce’s work on the final excavation map is also appreciated. Thanks are extended to Cynthia L. Tennis, the small project coordinator at CAR, for completing the pre-field work. Robert J. Hard, the principal investigator for this project and director of CAR, is thanked for his guidance. Finally, Marcie Renner, the CAR editor, and Bruce Moses, our draft person, are thanked for preparing the manuscript for final publication.
Introduction

In October 1996, the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) of The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) completed archaeological investigations south of Mission San Juan Capistrano, one of the chain of Spanish colonial missions that make up the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park (Figure 1). Shovel tests were excavated at 5-m intervals in areas specified for a proposed 800-ft drainage channel to direct rain water away from the mission (Figure 2). The investigations revealed this area contains a limited amount of Colonial period and modern artifacts in a mixed context.

The project was conducted under Texas Antiquities permit number 1748. Robert J. Hard and C. Britt Bousman were co-principal investigators, with Kevin Gross as project archaeologist. Artifacts and field notes from this project are curated at CAR.

Project Area Background

Mission History

Only a general overview of the historical development of Mission San Juan is presented here. Habig (1968), Ivey et al. (1990), Procter (1965), and Schuetz (1980) should be consulted for more complete descriptions of the historical and architectural histories of the mission.

Mission San Juan de Capistrano was established at its present location in San Antonio on March 5, 1731 (Habig 1968:158–160). Campbell and Campbell (1985) suggest that members from at least 20 Native American groups lived at the mission at various times during the Colonial period. As with the other missions in San Antonio, the population at Mission San Juan fluctuated over time. The population was relatively large and stable in the early years of the mission except for a brief period in ca. 1739–1740 when smallpox and measles epidemics killed or forced many of the Indians to flee the mission. The known resident Indian neophyte population climaxed at 265 in 1756, then gradually and continuously declined until secularization. The last census taken at the mission in 1815 recorded only 15 Indian residents (Habig 1968:270).

Fox (1993:1) suggests that the first church at San Juan was probably a jaco, located on the line of the southern wall. A 1756 inspection of the mission noted...
Figure 2. Plan view of Mission San Juan Capistrano.
that a stone church, the *convento*, a kitchen, and a
number of miscellaneous rooms had all been completed
along the west wall. There was an enclosed *convento*
in the southwest corner of the compound by the early
1760s. By 1772, 15 stone Indians’ quarters were being
constructed at the north end of the compound (Fox
1993:1; Schuetz 1980). The same report also noted
that a granary, measuring 40 x 6 *varas* (approximately
111 x 17 ft), of *jacaZ* construction with a tile roof, had
been built, possibly along the south wall of the main
suggests that construction of a new church and granary,
that were never completed, was initiated on the east
side of the compound after about 1772.

San Juan was partially secularized on July 14, 1794,
and made a sub-mission of Mission Espada. On
February 29, 1824, the mission was fully secularized
and the administration of San Juan was turned over to
the local diocese (Habig 1968:180). Apparently the
mission continued to be occupied throughout most of
the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Fox
1993:2–3).

Ivey et al. (1990:8–9) document a number of repairs
to the chapel between 1907 and 1910 and then again
in ca. 1915. A partial restoration of the walls was
completed in the 1950s. The restoration of the
*convento*, chapel, friary, and the caretaker’s house, was
completed in the late 1960s.

Previous Archaeological Investigations

Schuetz (1968, 1969) investigated the northwest and
southwest corners of the mission and identified the
foundations of the incomplete church on the east wall
of the compound during the reconstruction of Mission
San Juan.

In 1971 Schuetz (1974) tested beneath the floor of the
present church in preparation for restoration work.
Scurlock (1976) completed excavations west of the
current church in 1975. In 1983, the post-Colonial Tufa
House was investigated by Escobedo (1984). Finally,
Fox (1993) tested along the east wall and southeast
corner in advance of a drainage project.

Field Methodology

Forty-three shovel tests (STs) were excavated at five-
meter intervals along the route of the drainage channel
(Figure 2). STs 26 and 27 were not excavated because
of a large amount of gravel and caliche stockpiled on
the surface of this portion of the route. The tests were
excavated in 15-cm levels to a maximum depth of 60
cm below the surface. Soils were screened through
¼-inch wire mesh. Shovel-test locations were plotted
on a site map generated from the engineering plan
provided by NPS.

Results

Cultural material was recovered from 21 of the 43
excavated tests. Eighty-eight highly fragmented
Spanish-colonial and post-colonial artifacts were
collected (Table 1). Tests containing cultural material
were, in general, limited to the west and northern
portions of the proposed channel (e.g., STs 11 through
25). The majority of the artifacts (61 percent) were
recovered from Level 1, 0–15 centimeters beneath the
surface.

The Colonial artifacts comprise 18 percent of the
assemblage from this project (n=16). They include
three sherds of Goliad ware, an unrefined earthenware
manufactured locally by Native Americans throughout
the Colonial period; and one lead-glazed sherd of a
type often imported to Texas from Mexico during the
Colonial period. The proximal portion of a Guerrero
projectile point, commonly found in mission-period
collections, and ten pieces of lithic debitage were also
recovered.

The 72 post-Colonial artifacts (82 percent of the
assemblage) include, but are not limited to, two refined
earthenware sherds, nine unidentifiable metal
fragments, and one piece of plastic. Bottle glass (n=32)
and animal bone (n=19) fragments make up 70 percent
of the collection. The limited number of Spanish colonial
artifacts recovered all came from mixed contexts; no
unmixed Spanish colonial levels were identified.
## Table 1. San Juan Drainage Artifacts

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the shovel testing suggests that no intact Spanish-colonial period deposits will be impacted within the proposed route of the drainage channel. However, it is recommended that the channel excavation be monitored by archaeologists to detect possible deeper deposits not encountered in the shovel testing.
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