

Robert L. Spude

## Exploring Hispanic History and Culture

“As we approach (Santa Fe),” wrote Susan E. Wallace, “it is invested with indescribable romance, the poetic glamour which hovers about all places to us foreign, new, and strange.”<sup>1</sup> A cultivated woman and wife of the governor of New Mexico, Susan Wallace’s writings of a century ago reveal a midwesterner’s curiosity and eagerness to learn about her Hispanic neighbors and their land, though at times with Victorian bias or effusion. One of the first preservationists—she saved many early records being slowly destroyed by neglect in the Palace of the Governors—she serves as the spring board for our discussion of preserving and understanding the Hispanic traditions of the United States.

Susan Wallace’s romanticized view of the Hispanic Southwest echoed that of other writers as well as that of the first generation of preservationists to restore and interpret sites related to the Hispanic past, primarily missions in California and elsewhere. Part of this movement no doubt contributed to the establishment of the oldest designated National Park Service structure related to the theme, the Franciscan mission church of Tumacácori, now part of Tumacácori National Historic Park located in the Santa Cruz River valley south of Tucson, set aside in 1908. The next year, president Howard Taft designated Gran Quivira National Monument, New Mexico, a 17th-century church ruin and pueblo site now part of Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument. Susan Wallace’s home in Santa Fe, the Palace of the Governors, also received attention and during the 1910s was restored and renovated as a museum, a use continued to this day.<sup>2</sup>

This focus on the preservation of the romantic Spanish colonial era also influenced architectural

revival styles—California mission, Spanish Rococo, Santa Fe styles. One of the finest examples of the Spanish-Pueblo Revival style, and one of the most handsome

of National Park Service offices, is the Old Santa Fe Trail building of the Intermountain Region Support Office, Santa Fe, built during the Great Depression.

### *New Views*

This romantic view created what one writer called the “Spanish fantasy heritage.”<sup>3</sup> This criticism coincided with a concern within the Hispanic community itself about their broader national identity. Revisionist historians took to task the images of pastoral California, peaceful friar with benign Indian missions; the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s confronted issues of prejudice, oppression, and long standing injustices.

Historians added to the debate. They have asked such questions as “Significant to whom?” and “What are the broader interpretations and Hispanic view?”<sup>4</sup> These questions continue to be asked as seen in the following essays. Hispanic or Chicano historians have re-evaluated and rewritten the Hispanic past, at least in terms of shifting the focus from the view of easterners like Susan Wallace, who saw the land as foreign. To those of us born in the Southwest, it is not “foreign, new, and strange.”

While historians have revised the historical framework, preservationists have helped broaden our understanding of Hispanic sites. During the past 30 years, the New Preservation movement has broadened our definition of heritage and what is worth preserving. As Jerry Rogers writes in the Foreword, we must continue to strive for a more comprehensive view of the past and of what is worth preserving.

Our preservation and interpretation of sites has gone through a transformation. San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, slow to develop after the San José mission was set aside in 1941, has become a show case in the new interpretation. Besides the preservation of the missions, the park is moving toward an understanding of the entire colonial era systems, including farms, ranches, and industries—of peoples working the bean fields, the parishioners, laborers in the grist mills; the world of late Spanish colonial Texas and its multicultural society. The state of Texas, especially the Texas Historical Commission, has done much in the work toward understanding the Hispanic past. One example, on the Los Caminos Del Rio, is included here.<sup>5</sup>

### *The View from New Mexico*

“We learn about history by reading it in school,” wrote landscape architect J. B. Jackson, “we learn to see it when we travel, and for Americans the place where we see most clearly the impact of time on a landscape is New Mexico.”<sup>6</sup> Preserving that landscape and places begin with an understanding of its evolution. Jackson, and other writers, have focused attention on the villages of northern New Mexico and their traditional landscapes, of church and plaza, of fields and orchards,

*The turn-of-the-century Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe, as Susan Wallace would have known it.*





Interior of the San José de Gracia Church, c. 1935, Las Trampas, New Mexico.

and of irrigation ditches or *acequias* built to counter the unpredictable rains. He explains how the Hispanic villages evolved over the centuries and are powerful reminders of the agricultural set-

tlers who brought Spanish traditions and adapted them to the new environment.

Jackson has taught us to see the historic landscape differently than his romantic predecessors who saw it as a land of *poco tiempo*, a land that time forgot. The economic changes by the late-19th century gave rise to myth of the land of *poco tiempo*, but as long as remnants remain they will remind us of the old order. Northern New Mexico is not a place frozen in time, but an agricultural enclave, a place of many overlapping traditional cultures, that is changing as surely as other parts of rural America.<sup>7</sup>

Preservation of the traditional Hispanic village is complicated by the necessity to provide for the economic basis, while respecting and re-using historic structures. The most identifiable structures are the adobe churches, brought to the attention of a national audience by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 most endangered landmarks list for 1996. Cornerstones, a non-profit preservation group, has also done much to assist local preservation efforts (see *CRM*, June 1997) in saving these churches. In his book on New Mexico churches, Marc Treib helps us understand that the church is the most reliable evidence of continuity—it is an integral part of the Hispanic village and Pueblo landscape.<sup>8</sup> The church, as an important symbol of old world ties, has remained the largest or dominant structure in the village or larger town plaza. Understanding the workaday world of the community begins with understanding the community tie to its church.

#### *The View from Outside New Mexico*

Hispanic history, of course, is not just limited to New Mexico, Texas, or California. As Dwight T. Pitcaithley points out in his essay, this history not only allows us to understand how different cultures clashed and accommodated themselves to each other, but also illustrates the scope of the geography in Hispanic history. Hispanic cultural sites stretch across the entire southern half of the United States from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans. The importance of this history is recognized by the establishment of a wide range of national parks, national

and state historic sites, National Historic Landmarks and National Register properties spanning the entire geographic range and history of the United States.

The essays that follow illustrate the diversity of Hispanic history and provide a review of the variety of work being done in the field. History of the Hispanic community is a dynamic field at present. Much exciting new work is underway, as evinced by the articles in this issue of *CRM*. There is none of the romantic or "Spanish fantasy heritage," but some good scholarly efforts to identify, preserve and present the Hispanic past. Susan Wallace, sitting in the Palace of the Governors, trying to save what she could while rummaging through the Spanish colonial records, would probably be humbled and pleased.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Susan E. Wallace, *The Land of the Pueblos* (Troy, N. Y.: Nims & Knight, 1889), p. 13.
- <sup>2</sup> A good historical overview and review of National Park Service sites is Bernard L. Fontana, *Entrada, The Legacy of Spain and Mexico in the United States* (Tucson: Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, 1994).
- <sup>3</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Santa Barbara, California: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1946, reprint 1973), pp. 70-83.
- <sup>4</sup> For an overview of recent historiography, primarily on the American West, see David Gutiérrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West," in Clyde A. Milner II, *A New Significance, Re-envisioning the History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 67-89; also see, Manuel P. Servín, *The Mexican-Americans: An Awakening Minority* (Beverly Hills, California: The Glencoe Press, 1970).
- <sup>5</sup> See Helen Simons and Cathryn A. Hoyt, eds., *Hispanic Texas, A Historical Guide* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), for a compilation of essays on the history, culture, foods, architecture and more, plus a guide book.
- <sup>6</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Two recent sympathetic views of Hispanic villages are Don J. Usner, *Sabino's Map, Life in Chimayo's Old Plaza* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1995) and William deBuys and Alex Harris, *River of Traps, A Village Life* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).
- <sup>8</sup> Marc Treib, *Sanctuaries of Spanish New Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

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