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Preservation in the Mesilla Valley

Several projects in southern New Mexico are energizing the historic and cultural preservation of the region. The restoration of Nuestra Senora de Candelaria, one of the oldest adobe churches in the area, is near completion. This historic preservation of the church in Doña Ana, a village just north of Las Cruces, funded by New Mexico's Department of Labor and the Cornerstones Community Foundation, employs local young men and women (some who are considered at-risk) to rebuild the exterior walls with 17,000 new adobe bricks. The restored church will serve as a community center once it is finished, and the youths will have acquired valuable job skills in construction, historic preservation, and community preservation.

Also in Las Cruces, the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum is recording, preserving, and exhibiting the agriculture heritage of the area. Agricultural practices from pre-contact Native Americans to Spanish colonial times to recent innovations in growing and producing the food we eat and the clothes we wear are focused on by the museum, the newest addition to the state's museum system. One of the first exhibits of the museum, slated to open in December 1997, will be on the cultivation and consumption of chile. It should be a "hot" exhibit.

The Public History Program at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Las Cruces is active in cultural and community preservation. Under a contract from the NPS, the program is surveying the historic district of Columbus, New Mexico and registering significant structures not on the National Register that were involved in Pancho Villa's raid in 1916. For another project, several graduate students in the program are researching the Onate Expedition into New Mexico in 1598 and writing a weekly summary to help publicize

the 400th anniversary of Spanish settlement of the Southwest. The Public History Program in conjunction with the Language and Linguistics Department at NMSU have begun teaching local high school instructors about oral history. The high school instructors in turn will teach their students who will interview the elders of their community, in Spanish if possible. This project, funded by the New Mexico Juvenile Justice Division, will target teens at-risk and help in preserving the community, language, and culture of the mainly Hispanic towns in southern New Mexico. Finally, the Rio Grande Historical Collection (the archives at



Mesilla Plaza, New Mexico before restoration. Courtesy NPS.

NMSU) is finishing the microfilming of the records of the Archdiocese in Durango, Mexico. These records provide an important account of Spanish colonial period in New Mexico and will be available to researchers.

Despite southern New Mexico often being in the shadow of the arts and culture of northern New Mexico, preservation of the many Hispanic communities continues to be a vital part of the cultural fabric of the state.

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