

PRESERVATION SPOTLIGHT

THE MISSING DEAD OF HISTORIC SANTA FE: A PRESERVATION PROBLEM 400 YEARS IN THE MAKING

Cemeteries are wonderful features of historic cities. In such old places, we expect to find individual gravestones, and family monuments of their founders, cared for and documented. We generally hope that historic cities will have cemeteries preserved for generations—a retreat for descendants, as well as historians, archaeologists, and genealogists. The like-minded among us yearn to visit such places, strolling through a city’s history, one gravestone at a time.

In Santa Fe, we can visit the past 150 years of her resting dead at the Rosario Cemetery. No less than Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, later archbishop, gave the land next to the Rosario Chapel for the cemetery in 1868. Nearby, the honored military dead since 1870 repose in orderly rows at the Santa Fe National Cemetery.

View of the Manderfield Mausoleum in Rosario Cemetery. Established in 1868, Rosario Cemetery lies within the Santa Fe National Historic District. IMAGE: Alysia L. Abbott



These two largest and oldest of Santa Fe’s historic cemeteries are the resting places of thousands of its citizens, historic and modern, prominent and ordinary. Yet the existing historic cemeteries are too few and too recent to account for all who must rest beneath the City Different since 1610. How could the locations of historic graves be so completely lost to popular memory? How is it that

A toppled gravestone in the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery. It is not difficult to understand how historic cemeteries are lost. Today in Santa Fe, one can see cemeteries in the midst of a profound preservation crisis. Within the boundaries of every existing historic cemetery, the ravages of time—and often vandalism—are reducing the monuments to rubble, leaving the dead unmarked. Development is squeezing boundaries, and the cost of maintaining cemeteries can be overwhelming. Eventually, a cemetery can become a parking lot. IMAGE: Alysia L. Abbott



in Santa Fe, City of the Holy Faith, even the town’s most celebrated citizen, Don Diego de Vargas, who reconquered the villa for Spain, lies unmarked somewhere under the city?

Where are the missing dead of historic Santa Fe? Although their markers are lost, the graves of Santa Fe’s earliest historic residents are not truly missing. Actual graves yet lie beneath city streets, buildings, parks, and parking lots. Over 400 years, through a process of decay and development, cemetery locations have simply been lost—some with remarkable swiftness. As grave markers fall, survivors also pass away; development advances; and cemeteries are buried, paved, and forgotten. The dead await rediscovery.

We know that some of Santa Fe’s earliest citizens lie beneath the floors of Santa Fe’s historic churches, such as San Miguel Chapel, and within their walled churchyards, or *camposantos*. But the vast majority of Santa Fe’s earliest citizens, and even many of her later dead, repose unmarked and unknown under the city. Even as the historic significance of these “lost” burial grounds remains unexplored, their presence presents an enormous preservation challenge for Santa Fe.

—Alysia L. Abbott,
Abboteck



Cross standing among graves of clergy and Loretto Sisters in Rosario Cemetery. IMAGE: Alysia L. Abbott



The Santa Fe National Cemetery has been protected since its founding, but this is not true of all cemeteries in the area. Since the city mandated archaeological work prior to development (see page 14), archaeologists, in partnership with historians, are required to research for the presence of historic resources, including gravesites, prior to development or construction. As a result, hundreds of historic and precontact (before the arrival of Europeans) gravesites have been reported, with archaeology continuing to expose burials every year. Chance encounters are grossly insufficient, however, with so many people yet to be documented, or even located, under the city. As archaeologists piece together the residents’ history, only a comprehensive program of ongoing investigation can reveal where they lie, and help plan for their ultimate protection. IMAGE: ELLEN HERR