

# The presidio san elizario



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The Presidio of San Elizario In 1598, the Spanish nobleman, Don Juan De Onate from Zacatecas, Mexico was leading a group of Spanish colonists from Mexico to settle the newly discovered province of New Mexico. The group traveled for weeks across the desert until it reached the banks of the Rio Grande River near the San Elizario area. Soon afterward, Onate proclaimed possession of this area in the name of his King, Phillip II. The small town of San Elizario is named after the French Saint Elcear, the French patron saint of the military.

It is one of the oldest communities in the El Paso Area. The community was established during the late 1700's. A presidio was built in the area in order to protect the Spanish settlers from the attacking Apache and Comanche Indian raiders. The exact date of when the presidio of San Elizario was first built remains a debate between many local historians. One well known area historian, Metz, writes, " The original presidio was built around 1773 and that the original chapel was built of mostly adobe and some wood, and took approximately 40 years to construct. Most of the work was done by prisoners, some of them Indian, mostly Apache. (254). As noted by an online source, the presidio itself was surrounded by a double wall of adobe measuring 13 feet tall by seven feet wide. Inside were barracks for soldiers and special officer quarters. Also within the fort were family residences, corrals, store rooms, and a small chapel. This small chapel was built in a box pattern reflecting the early " European colonialism. " (San Elizario). The chapel has gone through major changes throughout its history, yet still remains close to its original location to this day.

As historian John O. West notes, the San Elizario Presidio is often mistaken as a mission. However, the presidio of San Elizario was not created to convert the local natives to Christianity, but in fact was created as a fort or presidio to protect the Camino Real and other area settlements from Apache and Comanche Indian raiders. (19). An online source also notes that the presidio was involved in numerous military engagements and natural disasters which forced its movement many times throughout it's early history. (Reyes).

According to another historian, Douglas Kent Hall, " The presidio was moved 37 miles up the Rio Grande in 1780 to its current site. " (131). According to another internet source, " During the early 1830's the unpredictable Rio Grande River changed course, virtually isolating San Elizario and its surrounding communities as an island in the middle of the Rio Grande. " (San Elizario). After the US-Mexico War of 1846-1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, establishing the Rio Grande River as the boundary between Texas and Mexico.

This left San Elizario to become part of what is now the state of Texas. San Elizario is steeped in both Texas, and Hispanic history. Still remaining today, the San Elizario presidio and chapel has moved many times and gone through many changes since its original construction. One online source notes, in 1829, the Rio Grande flooded completely destroying the " Chapel at San Elizario. " (San Elizario). A different Website points out that the chapel that stands in the same location today was rebuilt in 1882. (Kohut). Another online source notes, the exterior has changed little from its original construction.

The main difference was in the change of the front “ facade,” as this added to the, “ early European colonial,” influence on the contemporary construction of the time. A fire destroyed much of the interior of the chapel in 1935. The inside has undergone dramatic changes since then, again reflecting the influence of “ European architectural style. ” With “ pressed-tin” covering the original ceiling covers and beams. Several additions have also been made to the exterior of the chapel. For instance, an orchard has been added to the east side of the chapel and the surrounding plaza.

More adobe structures have also been added to the surrounding area in order to add to the formality of the area. The formal rectangular patterned streets and building orientation “ reflects the elements of early Spanish colonialism. ” In 1944 the chapel was repainted in order to honor the local soldiers who fought overseas in World War II. (San Elizario). A local college student writes in the Borderlands Website that a “ major restoration of the chapel” began in 1993, however much work still needs to be done to the exterior walls of the structure.

The Mission Trail Association, which was formed in 1986, has done much work to uphold the heritage of the chapel at San Elizario and other local Missions. Through their hard work, the Socorro and Ysleta missions, along with the San Elizario chapel have retained their beauty and strength through hundreds of years of faith and devotion. (Reyes). With the help of the Mission Trail Association and donations from tourists and local interest in its preservation, the San Elizario chapel can be a monument for many more generations to enjoy. Works Cited Hall, Douglas Kent.

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