

Dear Rotarians,

In 2018 the annual Rotary District Conference will be held in Santa Fe from April 26 - 29. As a lead-in to the Conference, we will be sharing brief monthly stories and legends about the city and some of the historic characters who helped create the "City Different" that we all know today. We hope these brief messages will share some little-known information about the Capitol city, and entice you to attend the Conference, enjoy the wonderful fellowship of Rotary, and learn more about Rotary - and about this crucial crossroad of the Old West.

The Conference will be held at the beautiful ***Eldorado Hotel***, only a couple of blocks off the Plaza. We have a special rate of \$129 per night at the Eldorado, which is inexpensive by Santa Fe standards. You can reserve a room by calling [505-988-4455](tel:505-988-4455) and asking for the "Rotary Rate."

Even if you have not yet decided to attend the Conference, we hope that you will mark your calendar, so the dates will be available as the year rolls around. We promise you some great Rotary workshops on topics that should be of benefit to you - and your club, some unique entertainment, a dinner at the NM Governor's Mansion, and much more.

Please open the listed files to read about the "Legends of Santa Fe." I think you will find them interesting and entertaining!

Thanks,

Donna Pedace, Chair  
D5520 District Conference 2018



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## Legends of Santa Fe #1

Most Americans know about the Camino Real from Mexico City to Santa Fe and about the Santa Fe Trail from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, but the Old Spanish Trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles is often forgotten. Each of these trails enabled traders and settlers to move through often inhospitable country and they were crucial to opening the Southwest and West to exploration and development.

From the Old Spanish Trail Association “The Old Spanish Trail linked two provinces of Mexico separated by such difficult topography and climatic extremes that, despite attempts beginning as early as 1776, a route was successfully opened only in 1829. In that year Antonio Armijo, a merchant from Santa Fe, led 60 men and 100 mules on the known trails blazed northward by trappers and traders with the Utes, and backtracked along the route Spanish padres Dominguez and Escalante recorded as they returned to Santa Fe from southern Utah more than fifty years earlier.

Armijo’s group then blazed a new path using parts of Jedediah Smith’s routes of 1826 and 1827, and Rafael Rivera’s route of 1828. Armijo avoided the worst of the Mojave Desert, traveling south of Death Valley following intermittent streams and locating springs to support the party. He arrived at San Gabriel Mission in California with his group intact, although the men were forced to rely on mule meat during their final days on the trail. In California, they traded the blankets and other goods carried by packsaddle from Santa Fe for horses and mules, available in great numbers and little valued by the Californios. Several thousand of these horses were driven back to Santa Fe, where they became important in trade with both Chihuahua and St. Louis...”



## Legends of Santa Fe #2

### POPE c1640-1692

The only successful Native American revolt in North America was led by Popé and other Pueblo leaders. Little is known about this medicine man who orchestrated and executed the revolt. His name was Popé (poh-pay') and it is believed he was originally from San Juan Pueblo, though he moved to the nearby Pueblo of Taos in the 1670's. The revolt was a well-planned and coordinated attack on the Spanish by men from almost all the pueblos in the state. The Spanish were forced to withdraw from the territory of New Mexico and they did not return for twelve years.

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, the Pueblo people knew a mostly peaceful life amid the vast lands and of New Mexico. The land provided enough food for immediate use and their habit was to store food for times when the harvests were not so abundant.

Life for the Pueblo people was forever changed with the arrival of the Spanish settlers in the late 1500's. Relations with the Spanish generally began with mutual suspicion, but also with the civil exchange of food, medicine and other goods. As the Spanish influence grew, strange new diseases, accidentally brought by the Spanish, swept through the land killing many.

In 1598, when Onate first explored the area, there were over 100 pueblos. By 1680, only 43 remained as functioning villages. The Spaniards' imposition of the *encomienda* system put additional pressure on the people as it forced Pueblo families to donate food crops every year to support the Spanish missions, military and civilians. The *repartimiento* system was similar; except, instead of food, the Pueblo people were forced to work in Spanish households and fields for little to no pay.

In an effort to stop the Kachina dances, Padre Alonzo de Posada, ordered the Spanish priests to destroy all Kachina masks. He felt that the dances and beliefs in the "old ways" kept the Indians from embracing Catholicism. In 1675, Governor Juan Francisco Trevino rounded up 47 Indians and charged them with witchcraft, or sorcery, a charge frequently used for those creating unrest among the tribes. Popé was among this group. Of the 47 people put on trial, three were found guilty and hanged. The remainder were publicly flogged and humiliated on the Santa Fe Plaza. They were eventually set free when a large number of Pueblo people converged on the Plaza demanding their release.

This action made it evident that the Spaniards were vulnerable to large numbers of protestors and Popé quickly realized that the way to defeat the Spaniards was with a large-scale revolt. Collectively, the Pueblos had over 8,000 warriors compared with the less than 200 arms-bearing Spanish colonists.

Popé conferred with other Pueblo leaders and they planned the revolt that they hoped would eliminate Spanish and Christian cultural practices. The plan was a simple one, but timing was of the essence. The

plan was to storm into the churches and kill the priests if they would not willingly leave the area. They would then kill the soldiers and any Spanish officials in their village, before they marched into Santa Fe to kill or drive the Spaniards out of New Mexico. The revolt was planned for August 13, 1680 and it was agreed that the leaders in each Pueblo would await messengers who would carry a knotted strip of tanned hide. The number of knots in the hide represented the number of days remaining before the attack. Every day the village chiefs would untie one knot and when all the knots were untied the Pueblos would attack.

The practice continued until August 9 when it was learned that the messengers had been captured and it was feared that they would tell of the planned revolt. Timing was now critical and Popé knew they had to quickly take action if they were to be successful. Warriors immediately invaded the homes of the priests and the Spanish mayor and other Spanish officials in each village. Pueblo warriors killed every priest and soldier in their villages then moved on to Santa Fe.

The Indians raided Santa Fe on August 13. The Spaniards in the town sought refuge at the Governor's Palace but the water supply was soon cut off, creating great hardship for those inside the Palace. The church was set on fire, as were the doors of the palace. The natives were caught off guard when a troupe of Spanish soldiers marched outside the palace and attacked. The ensuing struggle resulted in many casualties for the Indians.

The Indians regrouped and retaliated. The Spanish were outnumbered and had no choice but to retreat back inside the Palace. On August 21, the revolt ended as the Spaniards agreed to leave and headed south, down the Rio Grande Valley towards Mexico. The Spanish left Santa Fe with several carts containing their belongings and several hundred animals. Their journey ended when they reached the Spanish settlement in El Paso. The Teypana people had not joined in the revolt and they retreated with the Spanish to El Paso. They never returned to the area and their descendants still live in Socorro del Sur in Texas. Over 400 Spaniards had been killed during the revolt, including 21 missionaries/priests.

After over 80 years of Spanish rule, the Pueblo villages began returning to customary pueblo life, although some Spanish influences still remained. Popé tried to force all such influences from Pueblo life, but the pueblo people considered many of his edicts excessive and, over time, he lost his leadership role.

During the next ten years the Spaniards made three unsuccessful attempts to re-conquer the Rio Grande Valley. It was not until 1692, less than a year after Popé's death, that Don Diego de Vargas finally led the Spanish back to Santa Fe. By this time, the Pueblo coalition had crumbled. Several years of devastating drought had weakened the Pueblo resolve, and the Navajo, Apache and Ute tribes were increasingly attacking the Pueblos. De Vargas promised a pardon to all the Pueblo people if they did not fight his army and they agreed to accept the return of the Spanish.

The efforts of Popé and the other Pueblo members were not in vain, however. The agreement allowed the Pueblos greater freedom to practice their own religions; there were fewer demands for food and labor; and the Spaniards even armed them to defend their village lands against other tribes. Although Popé might never have agreed to such conciliation between the Pueblos and the Spanish, the revolt succeeded in winning some basic rights for the Pueblo people. His actions created the conditions for the continued existence of both the Pueblos and the Spanish in the American Southwest.

Cliff Fragua, a Jemez Pueblo sculptor, created a 7-foot statue of Popé, the legendary leader of the successful 1680 Pueblo revolt against the Spanish. Members of the New Mexico Statuary Hall Commission selected Fragua to create the piece that stands, along with 96 other statues from all 50 states, in the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol in Washington DC. Fragua created the piece from a 7.5 ton block of Tennessee pink marble in his Singing Stone Studio at Jemez Pueblo.

The statue of Popé is the earliest historical figure depicted, the only one celebrating Pueblo culture, and New Mexico artist Cliff Fragua was the first American Indian to sculpt a figure for the National Statuary Hall. Congress established this Hall on July 2, 1864.

The sculpture depicts many symbolic items: the knotted cord used to determine when the revolt against the Spanish would begin, a bear fetish symbolizes the center of the Pueblo world-their religion, a pot symbolizes the Pueblo culture, a necklace is a constant reminder of where life began, and on his back are the scars from the whipping that he received from Spanish officials.

## **Legends of Santa Fe #3**

### ***La Conquistadora***

Tucked safely in a high niche in her own chapel at the Cathedral Basilica de St. Francis in Santa Fe is a small religious icon that is the only icon in the United States ever crowned by an ambassador sent by the Pope to do the honors. Most visitors to the Cathedral never see La Conquistadora or know of her history, as the chapel is to the far left of the Cathedral altar in a recessed area, so you have to search for this special piece of New Mexico history. She is set up in a beautiful altar screen designed and constructed by the Hispanic priest and historian, Fray Angelico Chavez in 1957.

La Conquistadora is a 28” wooden statue that may be the oldest, continuously revered image of the Virgin Mary in the Americas. Fray Alonso de Benavidez, a Franciscan priest, first brought her to New Mexico on a wagon train in 1626. Originally constructed of olive wood, possibly from the Middle East, she has been modified and repaired, most recently in 1933 by the famed Taos artist, Gustave Baumann. A tree-ring dating test done at the University of Arizona determined that she was made sometime between 1448 and 1648. Since the icon was known to be in New Mexico in 1626, it is believed to come from an earlier period.

Over the years, the icon has been called Our Lady of the Assumption, Our Lady of the Conception, Our Lady of the Rosary and, more recently, Nuestra Senora de la Paz “Our Lady of Peace.”

Many believe that the icon was carried on a warrior’s lance during the Crusades, but no one knows how it arrived in Mexico. At the time of the Pueblo Revolt in 1680, the icon went to El Paso del Norte (now Juarez, Mexico) with the retreating Spanish settlers.

After 12 years of exile, Don Diego de Vargas, led the Spanish settlers back to New Mexico without bloodshed between the Spanish and the Pueblo tribes. The icon returned with him and was credited for the successful resettlement of New Mexico. At that time, her name was changed to La Conquistadora, Our Lady of the Conquest.

De Vargas built a chapel to the Virgin Mary as he had promised. This has been replaced by the Rosario Chapel, and it is to this chapel that La Peregrina (a copy of La Conquistadora, is taken in solemn procession on the 14th day after Trinity Sunday each year, leaving her ornate shrine in the Cathedral for her annual fiesta, the Fiesta de Santa Fe. In 1771, La Conquistadora was proclaimed patroness of Nuevo Mexico and Queen of Heaven.

### **La Cofradia**

A group of devoted parishioners belong to “La Cofradia de la Conquistadora,” and the officers have the responsibility to protect, preserve and care for La Conquistadora and La Peregrina.

La Cofradia consists of five officers: Mayordomo, Assistant Mayordomo, Sacristana, Secretary and Treasurer. The Mayordomo and Assistant Mayordomo are responsible for transporting La Peregrina to all requested visitations. The officers make all the necessary preparations for the annual La Conquistadora processions, novena masses and special events as scheduled. They

work to keep and preserve the traditions handed down by their ancestors. The Sacristana is responsible for changing the dress and accessories of La Conquistadora, often with help from a few members of the Cofradia.



### **Her Wardrobe and Jewels**

One of the more unique aspects of La Conquistadora is her extensive wardrobe and collection of jewelry and crowns. She has over 300 gowns, which the faithful have made especially for her. Written documents in 1686 noted the first known donations to her wardrobe. At that time, the records also showed that the icon already had dresses of silk and satin, strings of pearls, gold and silver earrings, and a filigree cross. These donations have increased over the years.

The stories of those who have given the clothing and jewels include parishioners who sought divine intervention for personal health or other troubles, or those who were thankful for help they believed they or their family received.

Some of the gowns were individually designed and professionally sewn of the finest cloth, but many were more modest and handstitched by the faithful. The following are three of the unique outfits: 1) a regal dress commissioned by the non-Catholic actress, Ali MacGraw, that came complete with two hidden Scottie buttons, representing the actress' favorite dog; a dress by the

Santa Fe designer, Paul Valdez, modeled after a peach, salmon, spice, and pumpkin silk organza and satin gown from historic portraits of Lady Jane Grey and other early English royals; and a cape and apron-like scapular sewn from heavy gold brocade from Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy given in the 1850s. His gift included a rosary sparkling with crystals and a heart-shaped container of holy water from the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France. Many brides have had small dresses made from their bridal gowns and given them in hopes of a happy marriage. Except for special holidays or occasions, the clothing and accessories of La Conquistadora are only changed once per month.

The jewels of “La Conquistadora” range from simple crosses to an 18-carat cross studded with 220 diamonds and encrusted with sapphires and an emerald that arrived in a mysterious box mailed to the Cathedral by an anonymous donor in 1960. Former New Mexico legislator, Concha Ortiz y Pino de Kleven donated a filigree necklace of 22-carat gold; a four-inch-diameter crown that fits the tiny head of the icon was donated by a Native American; and a gold vermeil filigree crown was made in Mexico in the Spanish Baroque style.

The most famous piece of jewelry is The Corona Grande, aka the Papal Crown, that was conferred during her papal coronation in 1954 by Cardinal Francis Spellman, who was sent by the Pope. She was re-crowned in 1960 during the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Santa Fe. That crown is made from gold, silver and many jewels, all donated by local parishioners. Many gave necklaces, wedding bands and watches to be melted down and recast as the crown. Families also gave the jewels that were used to decorate the crown. All of her clothing is kept in a special wardrobe room at the Cathedral, but the jewels and crowns are kept in a bank vault, due to their value.

An interesting side note happened in 1973, when two young men “kidnapped” La Conquistadora and demanded ransom for her return. The icon was later discovered hidden in an abandoned mine shaft in the Manzano Mountains near Los Lunas. It was after that experience that the new chapel was designed and decorated with an altar screen that allowed her to be set high above reach without a ladder. A locked screen now keeps visitors from getting too close to this most extraordinary religious icon, La Conquistadora.

## **Legends of Santa Fe #4**

### ***Dona Tules***

María Gertrudiz (Gertrudes) Barceló

La Tules/ Señora Toulous/Madam Barceló/Lona Barcelona

1800? - January 17, 1852

This infamous woman was one of the more fascinating and financially successful women in the Southwest during the early-to-mid 1800s. She was known by many names, but today she is most commonly referred to as Dona Tules.

Though many considered Dona Tules as little more than a courtesan and gambler, she led an independent and very colorful life. Despite her financial success and her business relationships with many prominent men in the community, or perhaps because of them, “respectable women” often complained about her, saying that she dressed in a suggestive manner, and they were horrified by her smoking habits, a scandalous trait for a woman in those days.

Dona Tules ran a gambling house and salon, on what is now known as Burro Alley in Santa Fe, just one block off the Plaza. She also owned her home, her mother’s home, and several other properties in the immediate area. The salon, reported to be a block long, was credited with having etched glass mirrors, European carpets covering the dirt floors, crystal chandeliers, drapes, and carved furniture that Tules had shipped in from St. Louis over the Santa Fe Trail. There was much speculation about other more scandalous activities that might have gone on in her gambling establishment but little in the way of proof.

Dona Tules was well known in the New Mexico Territory during her lifetime and she was one of the most famous Monte card dealers in the West. Monte is a card game using a 40-card Mexican deck that consisted of four suits; clubs, swords, suns, and cups. It was a national passion in Mexico and the obsession with the game moved north with settlers into what is now New Mexico. Both residents and travelers passing through the area knew of Dona Tules’ dealing skills, and many sought out her games.

Little is known of Dona Tules’ origins, and varying reports by American travelers to Santa Fe said she was born in Spain, France, Mexico, Taos, or in the southern New Mexico area. Some stories say that she was an aristocratic woman who had to earn her living by managing a gaming house, although that is almost definitely not true. Other stories relate that she was a conniving woman who had multiple lovers and may have managed a house of prostitution as well as a gaming house. She left no record of her early life and the official records showing her name are sketchy.

It is known that she was married for a time but, after she and her husband had been in Santa Fe for a few years, the husband disappeared from the official census records with no indication of what happened to him. There are some records that imply that Dona Tules may have given birth

to two sons, both of whom died before the age of four months. There is no record of any other natural born children.

As of June 1, 1833, Dona Tules, her husband, her mother Delores, and her adopted daughter Refugio all lived in Santa Fe. She and her husband were also the religious godparents to many children and she adopted and raised several girls during the following years. Adoption was not such a formal affair in those early days and the adoptions were probably just the case of them taking in orphaned or illegitimate girls of relatives or friends to raise as their own. The girls included at least Refugio, Petra Gutierrez; Rallitos Gutierrez, alias Sisneros; and Carmel Sisnero. There may have been other adopted daughters as there are many young women whose names figure in her history, but it is also possible that they were servants or served in some other capacity, possibly even as prostitutes, rather than adopted daughters.

Dona Tules entertained a wide range of men at her gaming hall. They included miners, soldiers, politicians, priests, and judges. She was said to have been well versed in political happenings of the area, and she became a powerful woman through the skillful use of information she gathered in the gambling rooms and often shared with powerful friends

When New Mexico was still a territory of Mexico, the Territorial Governor, Manuel Armijo, was a good friend and frequently visited her establishment. Her relationship with Armijo was reported to have been very close for several years. Many of the American military and political hierarchy filled his absence after the United States took over the territory from Mexico in 1846.

When the U.S. military moved into the area in 1846, Gov. Armijo fled south to Mexico City. Dona Tules invited the U.S. military officers to a dinner at her gambling salon the first night they arrived in Santa Fe. She quickly became good friends with the new U.S. military officers and American businessmen moving into Santa Fe. She received credit for alerting them to the plans for a Mexican-Indian uprising in December 1846. Governor Bent and the military acted on that information to quell the planned Christmas attack. However, Governor Bent and many others were killed a few months later in the Taos uprising.

Colonel David Dawson Mitchell, serving under General Stephen Kearney, soon obtained a \$1000 loan from Dona Tules to outfit troops going into Mexico. It may not have been a condition of the loan, but Colonel Mitchell soon after escorted her to the performance of the first play to be performed in English in Santa Fe. Members of the U.S. Army staged the play, *Pizarro*, at the Palace of the Governors. She was also reported to have a military escort to attend the annual Victory Ball at the La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, a lavish affair attended by only the better families of the area. Her attendance must have created quite a stir.

Another sign of her connections was the account of Manuel Alvarez, a local merchant who was prominent in New Mexico political affairs, that Colonel Sterling Price sent a military escort with Dona Tules and her long-time friend, August de Marle, who was also believed to be her then lover, for a 12-day trip to the southern part of the territory in 1847 for unknown purposes.

An itinerate actor, Matthew “Matt” C. Field, traveled over the Santa Fe trail and kept a journal of his experiences in the Southwest and of the people he met along the way. He described Dona Tules “as intelligent, shrewd, a woman who knew good manners and had a nice figure.” He wrote that she waltzed with elegant ease and often entertained the Alcalde (Governor Armijo) in her gaming establishment. Field called her “the supreme queen of refinement and fashion” in Santa Fe, a belief that was apparently not shared by the women of local families.

Others, such as Dr. Josiah Gregg, described her quite differently. He wrote of Dona Tules in his book, *Commerce of the Prairies* as: “a female of very loose habits.” Susan Magoffin, one of the first Anglo women to travel over the Santa Fe Trail wrote: “There was Dona Tules, the principal Monte bank keeper of Santa Fe, a stately dame of a certain age, the possessor of a portion of that shrewd sense and fascinating manner necessary to allure the wayward, inexperienced youth to the hall of final ruin.”

Another quote from *The Centuries of Santa Fe*, by Paul Horgan: “37, Calle de la Muralla, or Rampart Street. It was run by a woman of strong temperament and tolerant shrewdness called La Tules.” She seemed like an animal predator to him. At first she “lived (or rather roamed) in Taos.” She was a female “of loose habits,” who “finally extended her wandering to the capital. She there became a constant attendant upon one of those pandemoniums where the favorite game of *monte* was dealt *pro bono publico*. For some years she spent her days in lowliness and misery.” But, he said, her luck changed, she opened a bank of her own, and “she gradually rose higher and higher in ... affluence, until she found herself in possession of a very handsome fortune.” In the end, she was “considered the most expert *monte* dealer in Santa Fe,” and - he was shocked – she was “openly received in the first circles of society,” calling herself “Senora Dona Gertrudes Barcelo.”

Dona Tules was an astute businesswoman. Over the years, she became wealthy and invested in property and several business ventures, including investing at least \$10,000 in trade over the Santa Fe Trail, a huge sum in those days. She was involved in her gambling establishment, real estate, gold ventures, and trading mules across the Santa Fe Trail. She may have been involved with prostitution but there is little definitive documentation on this issue. Despite several searches, no record of any arrests in Santa Fe for prostitution charges has ever been found. She also rented out rooms in her home to military and businessmen up until the time of her death. Lucius Thurston (a Chihuahua trader and 20-year friend), Major John Munroe (civil and military governor of N.M.), and Lt. Lafayette McLaws were among her tenants.

Several months before she died on January 17, 1852, Tules planned an elaborate funeral for herself, and it was arranged that she be buried in the wall of the Santa Fe church, a rare honor usually reserved for church officials or major church benefactors. She was the first person in New Mexico to have Bishop Lamy, who had arrived in Santa Fe the previous year, officiate at her funeral mass and burial. The Episcopal Bishop, Josiah Cruickshank Talbot, wrote in his diary that Bishop Lamy’s participation in the funeral was “utterly disgraceful”. Apparently, the Episcopal Bishop felt that Dona Tules reputation was not befitting such an honor by the Catholic Bishop.

The funeral records substantiate that she paid the then princely sum of at least \$1000 directly to the church and between \$650-\$800 to other participants in the funeral. It is believed that the funeral expenses were among the highest paid up to that time in New Mexico. Some of the costs listed in the funeral and newspapers records include:

- the sweeping of the frozen streets between her home and the church
- a band that played in front of the procession
- several stops along the route where different priests prayed for her soul
- the use of a tall cross in the procession, instead of the more traditional small cross
- a cortege of black robed priests in the procession (at least four priests participated)
- chanters
- an organist for the mass
- lesser servants of the church

Her death and funeral were reported in the St Louis Republican and the New York Daily Times newspapers, which demonstrated her reputation in the Southwest and beyond. It is not known what happened to her remains when Bishop Lamy replaced the church with the new Cathedral of St. Francis of Assisi in the late 1860s.

Her will, one of the few wills of a woman from that period, is believed to be the first one written in English in the New Mexico Territory, and gives some insight into her life. It clearly establishes that she was a woman of wealth, owning several properties, mules (which were of great value when sent east to Missouri or west to California), jewelry and other personal property, and cash. No documentation of the amount of the cash has ever been found.

The will was signed on October 30, 1850 and those who signed the document as witnesses are an indication of her prominent position in the Santa Fe community, they were:

- Donaciano Vigil - governor of New Mexico Territory, 1847-1848
- Jose Francisco Ortiz y Delgado
- Charles McDougall, M.D. - U.S. Army surgeon who was thought to be her doctor
- Manuel Alvarez, - a man prominent in New Mexico political affairs, and a local merchant.
- Juan Esteban Sena - a local merchant
- Francisco Baca y Ortiz, known as “El Ciudadano” - he was the first Alcalde or “mayor” of Santa Fe in 1833 and again in 1837
- Samuel Ellison – the interpreter and secretary to Colonel John Munroe, a military man who was then the civil and military commandant of New Mexico, he rented rooms in Dona Tules’ home

Her gambling salon was demolished around 1904 and her home was demolished in 1939. Today, Burro Alley is the well-known location of shops and restaurants, just a block off the famed Santa Fe Plaza. Today, a bronze burro statue marks the entrance to Burro Alley, and it is a popular tourist venue, although few know the story behind the importance of the street.

Only four objects that were owned by Dona Tules are known to exist today; two are owned by private individuals and two are owned by the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in Santa Fe, a fitting location for items from the most infamous woman from early New Mexico history.

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### *The Mysterious Staircase*

In Our Lady of Light Chapel (Loretto Chapel), Santa Fe



## **Legends of Santa Fe #5**

### ***Legend - The Mysterious Staircase***

In Our Lady of Light Chapel (Loretto Chapel), Santa Fe

By Donna Pedace

The mystery of the amazing staircase in the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe has fascinated and intrigued people for over 160 years. Who designed such an intricate stairway and how was this beautiful stairway built without any nails or support structures so long ago?

The Sisters of Loretto, who opened and managed a school for girls in Santa Fe, were in need of a chapel for the use of the Sisters, and the construction of the new chapel was begun on July 25, 1873. The completion date of the chapel, due to a shortage of finances, ranges from 1878 to well into 1891.

Bishop Jean Baptiste Lamy who brought architect Antoine Mouly and his son, Projectus Mouly from Paris to be architects in the building of St. Francis Cathedral encouraged the sisters to utilize the father and son to design and build their dream chapel. The older Mouly had been involved in the renovation of Sainte Chapelle, in Paris, in the early 1800's. Mouly was encouraged by the bishop to fashion the small Loretto Chapel after the Sainte Chapelle, which was a favorite chapel of the bishop from his early days in Paris, France. That meant that the chapel is Gothic in style, in fact it became the first Gothic structure west of the Mississippi River.

Unfortunately, no one realized until the chapel was almost completed that the plans failed to incorporate sufficient space for a traditional stairway to the choir loft. Whether that was deliberate or a mistake has been debated for years. In those days, many chapels did not have stairs since the priests and monks often just climbed a ladder. But the Sisters, with the long habits that they wore, needed a stairway to reach the choir loft and Mother Magdalen went in search of a builder to provide one.

Local builders said that the building was too narrow to allow for any type of stairway to the choir loft without using a considerable amount of floor space, blocking almost half of the pews. The chapel was already quite small, only 25 ft. x 75 ft. with a height of 85 ft., and the Sisters found that solution unsatisfactory. The Sisters were reported to have made a novena to St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters, for help in solving their stairway problem. Mother Magdalen called in many carpenters to try to build a stairway; but each, in turn measured and said "it can't be done" without using much of the floor space.

One version of the legend says that shortly after the Sisters made the novena, a stranger arrived saying he was a carpenter and had come to build the stairs. With only the most basic tools consisting of hammers, saws, and a T-square, the man built a 360-degree circular stairway with 30 steps using only wooden pegs and no visible means of support. The staircase makes two complete 360 degree turns and there is no center support structure. Somehow, the tightly circling treads support each other and the entire weight rests on the base. Reports differ on how long it took to build the stairs but it was somewhere between a few weeks and six to eight months to finish the stairs. The legend says the carpenter left Santa Fe as quietly and quickly as he had come. The lovely chapel was finally complete.

At the time the staircase was built, it had no banisters and they were added later for safety purposes. The part under the treads and between the stringers looks like a light wood, but actually it is a lime plaster with horsehair imbedded to strengthen it. Over the years, many students and visitors chipped off pieces of the plaster to take home as a souvenir so, in 1952, the Sisters had the plaster filled in and painted over to resemble varnished wood. A local architect remarked on the perfection of the curves of the stringers, saying the wood is spliced along the sides of the stringers with nine splices on the outside and seven on the inside. Each piece is perfectly curved. How this was done in the 1870s by a single carpenter using only the most primitive tools has never been explained.

The stained glass windows in the chapel were purchased in 1876 from the DuBois Studio in France. One can only imagine the difficulty of shipping them safely across the ocean to New Orleans, then by paddle boat to St. Louis, and then by covered wagon across the rough and wild lands across the Santa Fe Trail to Santa Fe.

However, there is another possible ending to the legend that current owners of the chapel do not accept or advertise. After considerable research, Mary J. Cook wrote a book, Loretto: The Sisters and Their Santa Fe Chapel, where she names Francois-Jean Rochas as the carpenter. Cook states that Rochas was a member of Les Campagnon, a French guild of celibate and secretive craftsmen who had come to New Mexico to work on the Cathedral. She indicates that after his work on the Cathedral was completed, he moved next door to work on what was probably his masterpiece, the Loretto Chapel staircase.

A review of the records in the “Day Books” at the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Loretto shows that a total of \$2,818.30 was paid to a Mr. F. Rochas, with some additional payment notes having no amounts listed. The first payment was made in 1880 and the last on Dec. 23, 1885. So it is clear that a Mr. F. Rochas did a considerable amount of work for the Sisters of Loretto, although none of the payments indicate “staircase” in the notation line. Most indicate that he worked for the “school”, meaning the Loretto Academy, which could have included the chapel.

After completing the staircase, Rochas became something of a recluse. He lived for a time in the area outside Las Vegas, NM, and then in a stone cabin he built near the mouth of Dog Canyon outside Las Cruces, where he planted an orchard and built incredible stone walls up the canyon, which are still visible today. He was found dead, with a bullet wound to the chest just after Christmas in 1894. Local authorities determined it was suicide, but many believed he was murdered over some sort of dispute.

The ruins of his cabin can be seen today along a trail in the Oliver Lee Memorial State Park.

Cook reports that a Jan. 6, 1896, paragraph in The Santa Fe New Mexican named him as the builder of the stairway and that she further found a freight slip for wood delivered to him by ship from France. Regardless of whether Rochas was the carpenter, it is an interesting possibility that only adds to the mystery of the staircase.

Many modern day architects have said that the stair should not be able to support itself, and they do not know how any carpenter could have attained such perfection in the curve of the 33 treads, using only the basic tools generally available at that time. The wood used is not native to New Mexico and the legend indicates the origin of the wood is a component of the mystery of the staircase. The staircase remains a thing of beauty that compliments the magnificence of the chapel.

The Loretto Academy was closed in 1968, and the property sold to a private owner. Our Lady of Light Chapel, now the Loretto Chapel, was deconsecrated as a Catholic Chapel and is now owned and operated as a private museum.



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