

Remains found at Mission San Juan



Mission San Juan de Capistrano

The skeletal remains of about 15 people, presumably American Indians from the Spanish colonial period, were uncovered at Mission San Juan during renovation work at the South Side landmark this year.

The discoveries, made from early spring to mid-summer, were not reported publicly.

Father David Garcia, director of the Old Spanish Missions, which is overseeing the restoration, said the skeletons were not intact and were found in front of the church — at the base of the church's foundation — where burials often took place in the colonial era.

A report by the Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Texas at San Antonio is due next spring, said center director Steve Tomka, principal investigator on the missions project.

Tomka said the remains are believed to be from “the 1780s to 1815 period.” San Juan, the third of San Antonio's colonial missions to be renovated as part of a \$15.5 million preservation campaign, was established after 1731 and was secularized, or removed from church control, by 1824.

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Officials said the bones and bone fragments appeared to have been excavated in the past.

“Over the centuries, other people have dug before us,” Garcia said.

The excavations took place ahead of structural work on the church, Tomka said.

“Our assumption is that the remains are Native Americans who were parishioners and residents of the missions who died and were buried there,” he said.

“A number of remains were discovered, and a number of those are infants, young children and young adults as well as adults,” Tomka said.

Only a few remains were found with any funeral objects, he added.

The bones are being stored at San Juan and will be reinterred near the present-day church, though no date has been set, Garcia said. They will be laid to rest alongside remains of more than 100 others reinterred there in 1999.

“They haven't left the mission,” San Juan parish priest Father Jim Galvin said.

A Mass will be said, and Native American funeral rituals will be performed by members of the Tap Pilam

Coahuiltecan Nation, he said.

Though not a federally recognized tribe, the Tap Pilam trace their roots to the Indians who built the missions and lived in and around them, part of a larger group of Coahuiltecan, nomadic peoples who lived throughout Texas and Mexico and were linked linguistically.

Similar remains have been found at San Fernando Cathedral and the missions of San José and Concepción, Garcia said.

“In every case, there have always been human remains,” he said. “In an old colonial mission, there always are.”

Excavation and reburial, however, remain sensitive issues for American Indian groups. They have argued that the city's five missions are sacred sites, or camposantos, Spanish for cemeteries, but have not been treated as such and often desecrated for academic pursuits.

“How many Irish Catholic cemeteries have you desecrated?” Ramon Hernandez, who serves on the Tap Pilam tribal council, asked of archeologists he accuses of callousness. Scholars have countered that studies of ancient bones, as well as newer ones, can produce important insights to the past.

Over several decades, remains and artifacts have been returned to tribes and reinterred. Federal laws such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act have helped.

The reburial of 100 sets of remains in 1999 at the old church ruins at Mission San Juan came after a protracted battle involving indigenous groups, the Archdiocese of San Antonio, state archaeologists and the National Park Service.

Every year, on the day after Thanksgiving, members of Tap Pilam and its nonprofit agency, American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, hold an overnight vigil at the site.

Unlike that episode, protocol was followed in the latest San Juan discovery, according to several sources.

“Any human remains are treated with respect and dignity as they would in a Catholic funeral,” Garcia said. “The protocol is to treat them exactly the same way.”

Tap Pilam leaders were notified but didn't know how many remains were uncovered. Told it was 15,

Ramón Vásquez, the AIT director, said, “Wow, we were only told at the time that there were at least three that were infants found right outside the church doors.”

Vásquez said unfinished business from the 1999 case includes artifacts still held by UTSA and the lack of a monument or marker at the reburial site, a request the group said it made of the park service, which manages the lands on which the four South Side missions are located.

The park service didn't return calls for this story.

“We don't have an official report,” Vásquez said of this year's excavations. “I can't say anything was done right or wrong. What I can say is that what was done right is we were included in the conversation.”

Galvin said the San Juan church renovations are expected to be completed around Christmas.

Mission Espada is next.

eayala@express-news.net

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