

## Tap Pilam will rebury remains of 15 at San Juan



San Antonio Missions National Historical Park is the nation's largest collection of Spanish colonial resources. Pictured left to right, and established along the San Antonio River, missions Concepción, San José, San Juan and Espada are part of a colonization system that stretched across the Spanish Southwest in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.

The remains of about 15 people, many children, who were buried at Mission San Juan Capistrano in the Spanish colonial era and unearthed during renovations last year will be reburied Saturday in Catholic and Native American ceremonies.

Leaders of the San Antonio-based Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation — along with other tribal leaders, the mission church parish and the archaeologist who oversaw excavations — will gather for a 9 a.m. outdoor Mass and re-interment. The public is invited.

Along with human remains, a series of artifacts — a necklace, a pin, a belt buckle, lots of buttons and

coffin wood and nails — will be reburied, officials said.

The ceremonies will close a more cooperative chapter between descendants of the Mission Indians, the Archdiocese of San Antonio, the National Park Service and archaeologists involved at the historic mission.

In 1999, Tap Pilam re-interred the remains of about 150 Mission Indians at the same site after a divisive battle with archdiocese officials and state archaeologists.

Some artifacts from that episode also will be reburied Saturday, officials said.

The Catholic Mass will include a funeral liturgy, even though it's presumed the 15 souls received Catholic or Native American burials at the time of their deaths, said Father Jim Galvin, pastor of the congregation that still worships in the old mission church.

“I feel very happy that we're able to do this,” Galvin said. “I think we've managed to create precedence for the future, and I think the important thing is communication between us.”

Tribal representatives will conduct drumming and mourning rituals, including the traditional llanto (Spanish for crying) funeral lamentation.

The Mass will be followed by a short procession to the burial spot, site of the old church ruins. Tap Pilam elders will lead the service, said Ramón Vásquez, executive director of its nonprofit agency American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions.

The remains, which have been bundled in cloth, will be placed next to those reburied in 1999.

Vásquez said various Tap Pilam members are keeping a 24-hour vigil at the mission since the remains were delivered Monday by the University of Texas at San Antonio Center for Archaeological Research.

Since passage of the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Vásquez said tribes across the nation have had to deal with the reburial issue as universities, museums and other institutions



were forced to repatriate remains and artifacts.

“People have to understand that these are unfortunate circumstances that we all find ourselves in,” Vásquez said, adding, the 1999 reburials involved desecrations, while the recent case was “an incidental find. We understand that. That’s why we want to do the right thing.”

Steve Tomka, director of UTSA research center, agreed.

“It’s good to do things the right way, and this is the right way,” said Tomka, who will attend the ceremonies.

Vásquez said Tap Pilam consulted with tribal elders across the country for Saturday’s spiritual ceremony.

“Because no one was ever intended to be reburied, there is no traditional way to do any of this,” Vásquez said. “This is a reburial of forgiveness for disturbing their eternal peace.”

Delegations from the Cheyenne Arapaho, Lipan Apache and Carrizo/Comecrudo will attend, as will members of San Antonio River Mission Descendants.

Officials said that as two other missions are renovated — and as San Antonio works to win UNESCO World Heritage site status for its Spanish colonial missions — more remains could be disturbed.

“Everyone at the table, the National Parks Service, the Archdiocese of San Antonio, all are more sensitive today than they were in 1999,” Vásquez said.

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