

ARCHAEOLOGY IN TUCSON

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Old Presidio Cemetery Encountered Downtown

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*Monday, January the 20th 1992, 8:30 AM:
Workmen discover 3-4 pieces of bone from
[the trench] west of Church inside the
probable bounds of the Presidio... they are
[from a] human cranium.*

And thus my field journal indicates how it started: a month of concentrated effort by the staff of Desert Archaeology, Inc. and volunteers from the *Archaeology in Tucson* program exposing, recording, and removing the skeletons of some of Tucson's earliest European inhabitants. The site is immediately north of the Old Pima County Courthouse (the one with the tiled dome) along what is now called Alameda Street, and dates from the late 1700s through the mid-1800s. This graveyard once lay within the bounds of the presidio, Tucson's early Spanish-Mexican walled fortress.

While digging a trench for a new gas pipeline between Church and Court avenues for Southwest Gas Corporation, workmen from Nelson's Pipeline Company uncovered several of the skeletal remains along with other archaeological "features." These other features included an early Hohokam pithouse and storage pit, and various trash pits from the turn of the century. Quite a slice of time for one trench. Because the project was being carried out within City of Tucson rights-of-way and the sensitivity of excavating in the presidio vicinity was recognized, the City had required in advance that the project be monitored by professional archaeologists. Thus, an archaeologist from Desert Archaeology, Inc. was present and took charge of the discoveries immediately; Nelson's Pipeline Company continued working elsewhere while Alameda Street was off-limits. Southwest Gas and the City of Tucson deserve credit for much of the project's successful outcome.

It was the skeletons, however, that were the focus for the public, the media, and the archaeologists. For the next 12 days most Desert Archaeology staff archaeologists and various experienced volunteers worked 10 hours a day in five areas where skeletal remains were concentrated. At anyone time during these first two weeks as many as 12 excavators delicately exposed burials found in the trench, while 50 to 100 interested people watched and asked questions of the ever patient crew.



Archaeologists and volunteers working in Alameda Street trench to remove burials from the Tucson Presidio cemetery. [Photo courtesy of Photo-Wise, 923 W. Prince, Tucson.]

In the first few days, television crews and newspaper reporters interviewed staff members. Later on, classes from Davis Elementary, Carillo Elementary, and other local schools visited. Some people came from as far as Hermosillo, Sonora and Sierra Vista, Arizona specifically to observe the diggings. We even were surprised to find people still interested and coming downtown over the weekends! All received impromptu lessons in the history of the area and were provided with free brochures and maps explaining the operations. It was a wonderful opportunity to share in the excitement of discovery and in the exercise of interpreting various aspects of it.

It was also a time to recognize that archaeology is not just digging up relics. The project instilled new awareness and respect for how earlier peoples lived and cared for their dead. And for how people who claim descent from the original inhabitants of the Tucson Presidio,

Catholic Church representatives, Native Americans, and others are concerned with how we treat the dead today.

The burials were initially located with the prudent use of shovels, trowels, and occasionally, a carefully operated backhoe. Some remains were discovered by direct exposure of bones, others were revealed because the dirt that had filled the graves was so much darker than the surrounding native soil, which allowed for accurate identification of the graves' edges. Then began the tedious task of fully exposing the remains with dental picks and brushes, and sifting the dark soil that surrounded the burials through 1/8th-inch mesh screens to search for any artifacts that had been buried with the dead.

After careful exposure, all remains were mapped and recorded using scientific methods. Skeletons were then carefully removed, in whole sections where possible: lower limbs, pelvis, chest cavity with upper limbs, cranium. All remains were wrapped in tissue and plastic bubble-wrap to cushion them during transfer. It could take two archaeologists as many as five days to complete all tasks on one skeleton. The crew's workload lessened after the first two weeks as work focused in on one last concentration, but that one area turned out to have 5 full adult burials, 4 young children, and numerous isolated remains. It was exactly a month after the project began before that gas pipe was laid in the cleared trench.

In all there were 17 full or nearly full extended and supine burials, including infant burials. Three others were much less preserved because they had been almost completely obliterated by later burials. Of these 20 burials, 12 were adults, 1 a child of about six years of age, and 6 were infants or toddlers. In addition, five more graves were recognized by their distinctive soil color, but we were able to leave them undisturbed because they were out of the way of the pipeline.

Tuesday, January the 28th, 1992: Notes on Feature 5: this jumbled mass has been very difficult to properly excavate, i.e., take down in levels. The bones are all in at odd angles.

People in these graves hadn't all been buried at once. Most of the graves either cut into earlier ones or had been cut through by later ones. Often both earlier *and* later disturbance occurred, so displaced bones of previously buried people ended up mixed with bones of the newly interred. Isolated, reburied bones represented another 14 clusters of human remains, with the different bones representing perhaps another 20 or more individuals. In some instances disturbed remains were thrown back into graves with no apparent concern, but many bones were set in more carefully, in line with the newly interred body. Regardless, the isolated remains were most always placed on or near the complete body's legs.

During excavation we identified the gender for only three individuals (2 females, 1 male), all from characteristic pelvic shapes. Detailed studies will be needed to identify the sex of the others, and the causes of death of all.

Questions were put forth as to whether some of these individuals had died of the cholera epidemic of the 1850s, or if some died violently. We just don't know at this time, but it does appear as if these people were buried on different occasions, over a long rather than a short time period. We found no bullets, arrowheads, or other obvious death-causing artifacts in any of the graves, but we've not yet completely checked the chest cavities of the burials that were removed in sections (with the dirt still holding them together). It is possible that we will yet see some evidence that implements caused some deaths.

All bodies still whole enough to determine orientation were laid out exactly to magnetic east-west, 11 of them with their heads to the west, 8 with heads to the east. Of 10 burials with their arms intact enough to determine original positions, 2 had the arms straight down along their sides, 3 had arms crossed with hands on the upper arms, 4 exhibited hands placed closer to their elbows. One burial, that of a six-year-old, was particularly poignant: the child's hands were clasped for prayer. The two deepest burials were nearly 42 inches below the paved surface of Alameda Street. The shallowest ones averaged 27½ inches below the street top. However, the presidio cemetery's graves probably were dug 4 to 6 feet deep originally, because Tucson paving records indicate that up to 2 feet of the topsoil was scraped off when road-bed for the current Alameda Street was graded.

We identified five clusters of skeletal remains that we think represent five separate rows of graves. If you can imagine these grave-rows as being numbered from east to west, the second row had the greatest number of burials in the smallest space. Conversely, a large gap without burials separated Rows 1 and 2 from Rows 3 through 5, farther west. Also of interest, the three western rows were all laid out with heads to the west, whereas the eastern two rows had their heads more frequently to the east. Could this indicate that the large void between Rows 2 and 3 was the cemetery's central passageway?

We didn't see clear evidence for coffins, but in three graves there were some circumstantial details, namely wood fragments (including some forming a line as if they were part of a box) and pieces of metal suggestive of coffin hardware. In addition, some nails were found in other graves but they were loose, not in a pattern or in the numbers suggestive of coffin nails. At least three of the full burials were associated with lime powder, possibly added to inhibit decay of the bodies long enough for funeral services to be held.

Though nails were scarce, other artifacts were even scarcer. One burial in Row 4 had scraps of a fine weave tex-

tile still attached to a metal garment clasp, plus some small glass beads resembling tiny Christmas tree ornaments, a few fragments of metal and wood, and a loose sherd of blue and white Majolica pottery—a ware that was common mainly during the Spanish Colonial and Mexican periods of southern Arizona's history. Cloth fragments were found in four other graves besides the one that produced the garment clasp. Two burials yielded one button apiece. An adult skeleton had four beads—one of black, fired clay and three of solid blue glass; another grave yielded one other blue glass bead. All five of these beads were found in the skeletons' neck areas, and each skeleton also had greenish discolorations on its chest bones. These green stains imply that copper- or nickel-bearing ornaments of some sort were present on these bodies when they were buried, but completely oxidized away in the scores of years since then. There was nary a cross nor a crucifix found on any skeleton, but who knows?—a pendant found on the chest of one infant, formed by twisting together strands of copper wire, was badly deteriorated when it came to light; might this pendant originally have been in the shape of a cross?

Several lines of evidence establish that the skeletal remains found during this project are from the Spanish Colonial and Mexican periods. Historic documents indicate that the presidio cemetery was in this immediate vicinity. One even notes that great quantities of human bones were found just below the ground surface when one of the three successive county courthouses built on this city block was constructed between the 1860 and 1930, and suggests that these bones were from an old Spanish 'osario' or bone pit. The skeletons we found were buried in ways typical of western European cultures, and the few artifacts found directly with the human remains are all consistent in age with the dating of the presidio occupation. Also, archaeologists had excavated other burials from this area in the late 1960s and early 70s prior to construction of the courthouse parking garage on the north side of Alameda, and when a sewer line was placed down the street's center. All of this evidence clearly indicates that



Alameda Street now runs approximately east-west through Tucson's old presidio, which is viewed from the west in this artist's reconstruction. [Art courtesy of Arizona Historical Society.]

the between Church and Meyer streets, Alameda Street was built through a historic cemetery.

Two questions asked by many visitors were: When was this graveyard abandoned? And why was Alameda Street built right through it? A history of Tucson by Bernice Cosulich states that priests of the Tucson Presidio "baptized, married, and buried the soldiers and citizens. In fact the small graveyard north of the church soon became so crowded that another was dedicated outside the [presidio] wall to the north..." According to Federico S. McAninch, Curator of Tucson's Fremont House Museum, Catholic Church records indicate that the presidio graveyard was still used as late as 1864, and that the new cemetery was being used by 1866. And an 1872 map shows "Cemetery" Street (now called Alameda) already running through the heart of the old presidio. So chances are that the presidio cemetery was abandoned some time between 1864 and 1872. Just why the street was built through the cemetery is more difficult to answer. One wonders what grave markers might have been, or might have been removed by the early 1870s, or even might never have been. Or whether the Anglo newcomers who built the street didn't have much regard for the remains in the old Spanish-Mexican cemetery.

Who were the people buried here? We may never know their names. It may be that those whose remains were close together, especially in Row 2, were members of particular family groups, but this is a speculation. As far as their biological affinity goes, we think that many were of European descent judging from limited field observations of the few craniums that were intact. There are also some individuals of mixed races and perhaps some Native Americans who had embraced Catholicism.

A map of the site is now being made using computer graphics so that we can accurately locate the burials' positions with respect to today's city configuration. This is just one of the contributions of this project. We have also learned more of the presidio's geography and have been able to contribute to the reconstructions of Tucson's history. And we have been able to share this information with a large, interested audience. It may be possible to avoid disturbances of this cemetery area again because we now have information to convince others of its sensitivity and importance. Currently, the Tucson-Pima County Historical Commission and the City of Tucson are working to develop improved procedures for protecting fragile archaeological and historical sites in the downtown area.

The human remains that were removed during the project have the potential to provide more scientific information during additional, limited, scientific studies. Then they will be reburied in an appropriate new location. The details concerning additional studies and reburial location are still being discussed as this issue goes to press.

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Jeddito Black-on-yellow pitcher in collection of the Tonto National Forest (see p. 7). Photo courtesy of Photo-Wise.

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The Center for Desert Archaeology

The Center for Desert Archaeology is a nonprofit research and education organization that specializes in the study of archaeology and history of desert regions. Our primary research focus has been southern Arizona.

Archaeology in Tucson

Archaeology in Tucson is the membership program of the Center for Desert Archaeology. The *Archaeology in Tucson* Newsletter is published quarterly and is one of the benefits that members receive. Lectures, site tours, discounts on publications, and participation in archaeological field projects are additional membership benefits. Memberships run a full year from the time they are received.

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