

SAN FELIPE DE NERI



Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66

The noonday sun shines brightly over the city of Albuquerque. More than that, it shines down on a cruciform shape that sits across the street from Old Town Plaza — considered by many to be both the square and birthplace of the city. What makes this cross different from the many that stand tall and are silhouetted against the sun atop many buildings and cathedrals is that it's an actual cathedral itself. It graces the square in the form of an adobe building that has been around since Albuquerque had an additional "r" in its name, and New Mexico was a Spanish territory. That building is the historic church of San Felipe de Neri.

The place of worship that stands today was not the first in a material sense. The original church was established in 1706 — the same year that Albuquerque was founded. King Philip IV of Spain granted a group of colonists the right to develop a villa, aka settlement, on the banks of the Rio Grande. The title of a villa was something of a misnomer, unbeknownst to the Spanish King, due to a villa requiring fifty families, and the colonists only consisted of about thirty. So, the settlers tweaked a record to obtain the title and privileges of a villa.

Being a religious people, the settlers, of course, made a point of action to build a church for their new community. While the church was established in 1706, a proper structure wouldn't be constructed until 1718 due to the time constraints of the Franciscan pastor, Fray Manuel Moreno. "Although Friar Manuel was assigned as its first pastor, he was also one of the head honchos of the Franciscans, and they were spread throughout the corners of New Mexico at the time," said Edgar Romero-Ramos, director of Religious Education, communications director, and museum curator. "So, he was running around to get the other Franciscans in order, while also being assigned as the pastor."

However, by 1719, the first church was completed. It had a simpler structure than what stands today, but it had all the makings of a Medieval monastery, just in a more condensed space (a sacristy, living quarters, courtyard, and greenery for the priest). The original title of the church was dedicated to Saint Francis Xavier (or, Javier, in the Spanish translation) but was eventually changed by the Duke of Alburquerque to San Felipe in honor of both the King and the saint who was his namesake.

The now revered structure stood as the villa's house of worship for some time, but back then, the church's simple building received some ire from the community. The churches in nearby communities, such as the parish in Santa Fe, had received new buildings that took a cruciform shape, both for the symbolic meaning and the practicality of fitting more people inside. It was a practice that was standard in Europe at the time, with the rise of gothic architecture, and reserved for communities of prestige. However, the governor, at the time, refused to invest in the reconstruction. So, the community forced his hand by not maintaining or re-mudding the church after the monsoon seasons that occur in the summer. Their patience eventually paid off after a particularly rainy day in 1792. "Over a twenty-year span of intentional negligence, it caused the church to finally

collapse," said Romero-Ramos. "That's when they were able to justify building a new church, and by then, Albuquerque had become a significant trading post on the way from Mexico to Santa Fe."

Franciscan clergy managed the administration of the church until 1821, when Mexico gained its independence from Spain. By then, the Mexican government wanted to gain its identity as a young country by expelling any aspects of the Spanish crown, which, in this case, included the Spanish-born clergy members of San Felipe. They were replaced then by Diocesan clergy — a Diocese being the clergy that works within the district of a bishop — who staffed the church until the end of the Mexican-American War, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848, and Mexico ceded Upper California and New Mexico. "That's when the Diocese of New Mexico was founded. When we got our first bishop, Jean-Baptiste Lamy," continued Romero-Ramos. "He comes in, sees the clergy that he inherited, and brings in his own people that he trusted. That's when he invited Jesuits [missionaries that are sent where the church believes they're needed] from Naples who were exiled from Italy because of the revolutions there."

One of Lamy's immediately recognizable contributions to the church was the construction of the two towers erected in 1861 and 1862, respectively. The bishop wanted the cathedrals to have a more European aesthetic, something in line with the church of Notre Dame. San Felipe was an early example of what Romero-Ramos calls "Folk Gothic Architecture," which other parishes in the area would eventually replicate.

By 1965, the Jesuits left San Felipe after 98 years of service. The reasoning was that upon an agreement between the Jesuits and the Diocese, if they were to be of service for one hundred years, the church would become a Jesuit parish and essentially become a ward of the Jesuit society. Since the Jesuits didn't want to assume complete control over the parish, they left gracefully after nearly a century of service.

A near-quarter of a millennium since it was built, the parish still celebrates daily Mass, maintains a full Sunday service schedule, and has a Catholic school that has been running for over 140 years, making it one of the oldest scholastic programs in the state. Aside from a few renovations, restorations, and additions, San Felipe de Neri has stood as the same structure that it was back in the late 16th Century, when it stood in the heart of downtown. And its iconography isn't lost on what it means to the city. "To this day, San Felipe is still an icon to what it means to be Albuquerque. The towers are shown on city buses, and you'll typically see the church in magazines promoting tourism," said Romero-Ramos. "Even though the church may not be the end-all-be-all for Burqueños [people of Albuquerque], it's still a part of the cultural identity of the city."

Today, Albuquerque is a busy, bustling, thriving urban center, but a simple trip to San Felipe de Neri offers a beautiful reminder that some of the city's history and culture still very much remain..

Words by Mitchell Brown.