

MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO

OFFICE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT A WELL IN SAN MIGUEL DEL
VADO, SAN MIGUEL COUNTY, NEW MEXICO**

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ADMINISTRATIVE SUMMARY

On July 18, 1994, the Office of Archaeological Studies, Museum of New Mexico, carried out an emergency investigation of a sinkhole that appeared on NM 3 running through the historic village of San Miguel del Vado, New Mexico. The investigating team consisted of Steve Koczan from the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department, along with OAS staff Tim Maxwell, Pat Severts, and Chuck Hannaford. The sinkhole was caused by the presence of a log- and stone-lined water well beneath the pavement. The well, LA 105516, may date as early as 1800, but collected artifacts from the upper fill are from the 1930s. After documentation, the well was filled with gravel and the sinkhole repaired.

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INTRODUCTION

On July 18, 1994, the Office of Archaeological Studies, Museum of New Mexico, carried out an emergency investigation of a sinkhole that appeared on NM 3, which runs through the village of San Miguel del Vado (Figs. 1 and 2). Rita and Paul Burden, residents of the community, had discovered the strange sinkhole the previous Friday and contacted the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department (NMSHTD). By Saturday, the sinkhole had grown from the original 10 cm (4 in) diameter opening to 30 cm (12 in). A 2 m deep shaft with masonry lining was discernible through the small opening during the preliminary examination by Steve Koczan, NMSHTD archaeologist; and Tim Maxwell, director, Office of Archaeological Studies. Community curiosity was inspired by the possibility that the sinkhole might reveal a legendary tunnel connecting the historic San Miguel Church and nearby adobe houses. The sinkhole was investigated more thoroughly on Monday, when NMSHTD crews removed the asphalt from around the opening. The investigating archaeological team of Steve Koczan, Tim Maxwell, Pat Severts, and Chuck Hannaford concluded that the shaft was once a water well, not the legendary tunnel.

The site is on land under the jurisdiction of NMSHTD. The site is within the boundary of the San Miguel del Vado Historic District, which is included on both the *National Register of Historic Places* and the *State Register of Cultural Properties* (HPD No. 150; Appendix 1).

The well, LA 105516, is in the NE1/4SW1/4SW1/4, Sec. 10, T 13N, R 14E, NMPM, San Miguel County; UTM Zone 13, 459160E, 3913380N; USGS 7.5' Sena Quadrangle, provisional edition 1989.

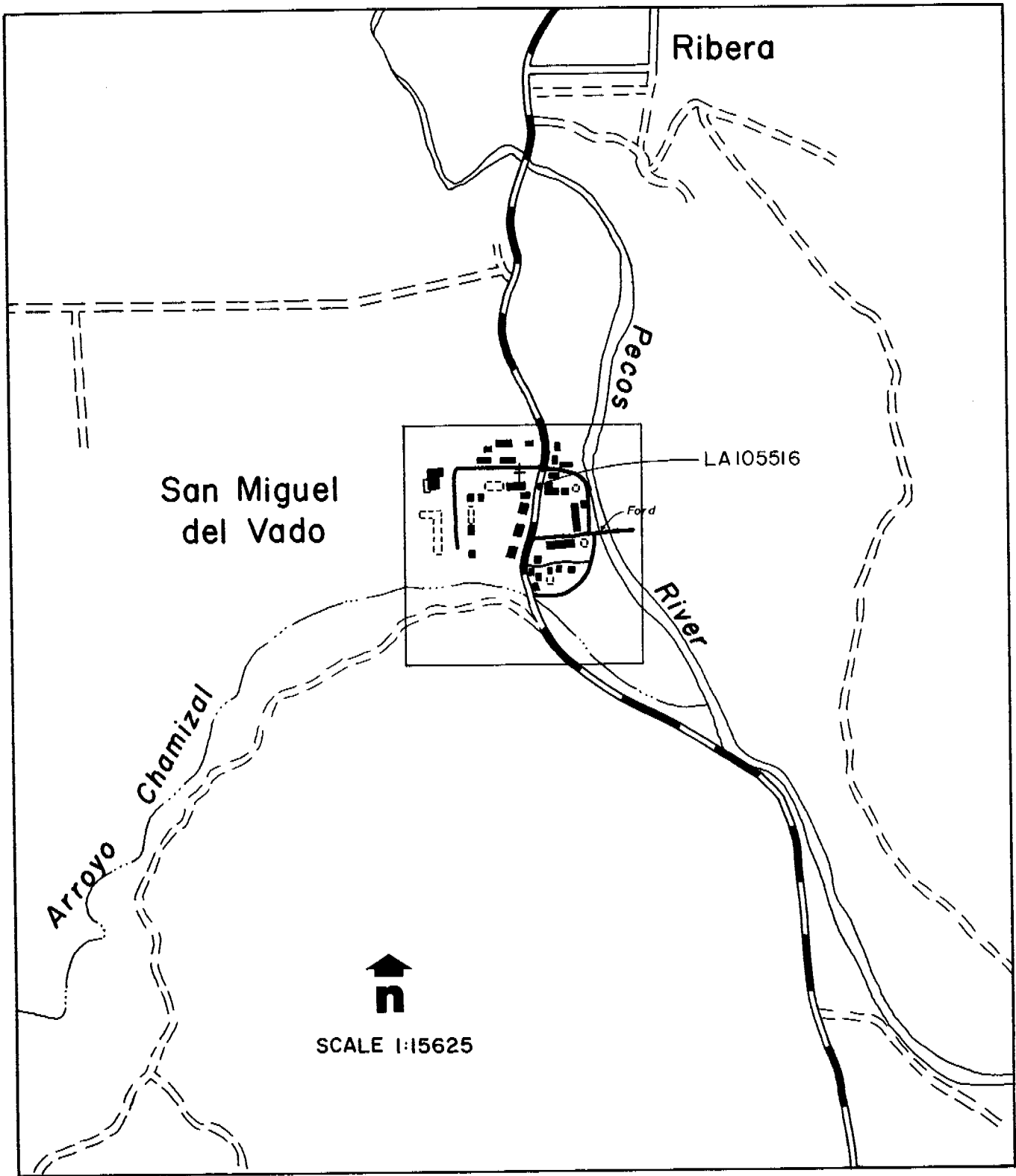


Figure 2. Site location map (after National Register of Historic Places file 150).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

LA 2734, San Miguel del Vado (San Miguel of the Ford), is a small rural village rich in the late Spanish Colonial, Mexican, and Territorial periods of New Mexico's history. The following brief historical summary is abstracted largely from the *National Register of Historic Places* (file 150).

San Miguel, founded in the mid-1790s, was one of the first settlements in the upper Pecos River Valley. Governor Fernando Chacón granted land to Lorenzo Márquez and 51 settlers to establish a buffer frontier outpost against raiding Kiowas and Comanches. Settlement was concentrated around a defensive rectangular plaza enclosed by contiguous adobe houses. The early population of the San Miguel del Vado Land Grant included Spanish military men, Pecos Indians, converted Comanches, and other *gentzaros*, or Christianized Indians. Early subsistence centered around stockraising and farming with irrigation from the Pecos River. Buffalo-hunting parties frequently used the village as a point of departure into the eastern plains. Construction of the village church was initiated in 1805, and by 1812 the community had 230 heads of families.

With Mexican independence from Spain in 1821, the character of the community changed from a protective frontier outpost to a commercial entry port associated with the newly opened Santa Fe Trail. William Becknell, "the father of the Santa Fe Trail," passed through San Miguel on his original trip across the Santa Fe Trail in 1821. San Miguel del Vado was the first settlement encountered by Missouri traders west of the plains, and wagons forded the Pecos River at this location. The village witnessed the rise and growth of commerce along the Santa Fe Trail and is described in the journals of several early travelers, including Josiah Gregg (1831), Lt. J. W. Abert (1846), and Susan Magoffin (1846).

San Miguel figured prominently in one of the principal incidents of the Mexican period, the Texas invasion of New Mexico in 1841. Three hundred Texans on an apparent military reconnaissance of the northern Rio Grande were taken prisoner by Governor Armijo and held captive at San Miguel. The journal of George Kendall, one of the Texans, records the imprisonment at San Miguel, including a graphic description of the execution of two of the Texans in the plaza.

The Territorial period began in 1846 with a gathering of residents in the plaza and a rooftop speech by General Kearny proclaiming U.S. annexation. The village became the seat of San Miguel County and had 1,000 inhabitants in 1850. San Miguel del Vado remained an important stop throughout the days of the Santa Fe Trail, but the growing town of Las Vegas gradually assumed greater importance. The county seat was transferred to Las Vegas in 1860. The 1880 construction of the railroad about one mile north of San Miguel signaled the final decline of the town. By 1930 the population had declined to 217 individuals.

INVESTIGATIONS AT SAN MIGUEL WELL (LA 105516)

The purpose of the investigation was to determine the nature of the cultural feature exposed by the sinkhole with as little impact to the integrity of the feature as possible. The primary question was whether the feature was a water well or a tunnel. The investigation was hampered by safety concerns because of the depth of the shaft, and the uncertainty of the stability of the fill. About 50 cm of the upper fill was probed during the investigation, and 22 artifacts were collected. Investigations were concluded after the lower log lining was determined to be part of a well and not side tunnels. After documentation, the well was filled with gravel by the NMSHTD, repairing the sinkhole.

The well is located beneath NM 3, between the church on the west and an old adobe house on the east, about 9.9 m away (Fig. 3). The well had apparently been plugged and covered and passed unnoticed during the original road construction. NM 3 currently divides the plaza into an east and west section, but the date of this road construction is not known. The church was apparently erected in the center of the plaza, and the original 1821 bell still resides in the left tower. The plaza layout has become obscured by layers of historic development. The old San Miguel County courthouse is now in ruins west of the church, and other adobe ruins suggest that the plaza extended a considerable distance to the south. The well was apparently within the plaza layout of San Miguel and about 100 m west of the current floodplain of the Pecos River.

The stone- and log-lined water well has a rectangular plan (Fig. 4), with interior measurements of about 1 m (east/west) by 85 cm (north/south). The well was dug to a depth of at least 3.4 m below the surface, but the original depth is unknown. The upper walls were lined with tabular undressed sandstone slabs to a depth of about 2.5 m. The gray sandstone slabs were neatly coursed and apparently dry laid. The larger slabs measured 90 cm by 30 cm by 12 cm, and slabs probably averaged about 40 cm by 20 cm. Smaller stones were often used as chinking around the slabs.

The stone lining rested on a frame of juniper logs. The juniper logs measured about 1.2 m by 10 cm and about 2.5 m below the surface. Three to four juniper logs rested side-by-side on each side of the well (Fig. 4) and apparently functioned as a frame or support for the upper masonry. Only one coursing of logs was recognized. The spans of the logs on the east and west sides of the well were bolstered by several large stones to support the weight of the upper masonry. The well was unlined below the logs, where deposits were a natural clay.

The well was apparently constructed by digging a vertical shaft about 1.25 m in diameter to a depth of 2.6 m below the present surface. The diameter of the shaft was decreased at this point to about 80 cm, leaving about a 30 cm bench around the circumference. The lower well was dug to an unknown depth into the thick red micaceous clay. The bench then served as a foundation for the initial juniper-log frame, which in turn supported the primary stone-lining.

The well was an open cavity from the highway base course to a depth of about 2.5 m. The fill at this point was a red sandy clay with a loose consistency. Charcoal fragments were mixed throughout the fill, but artifact content was very low. Two large sandstone slabs both

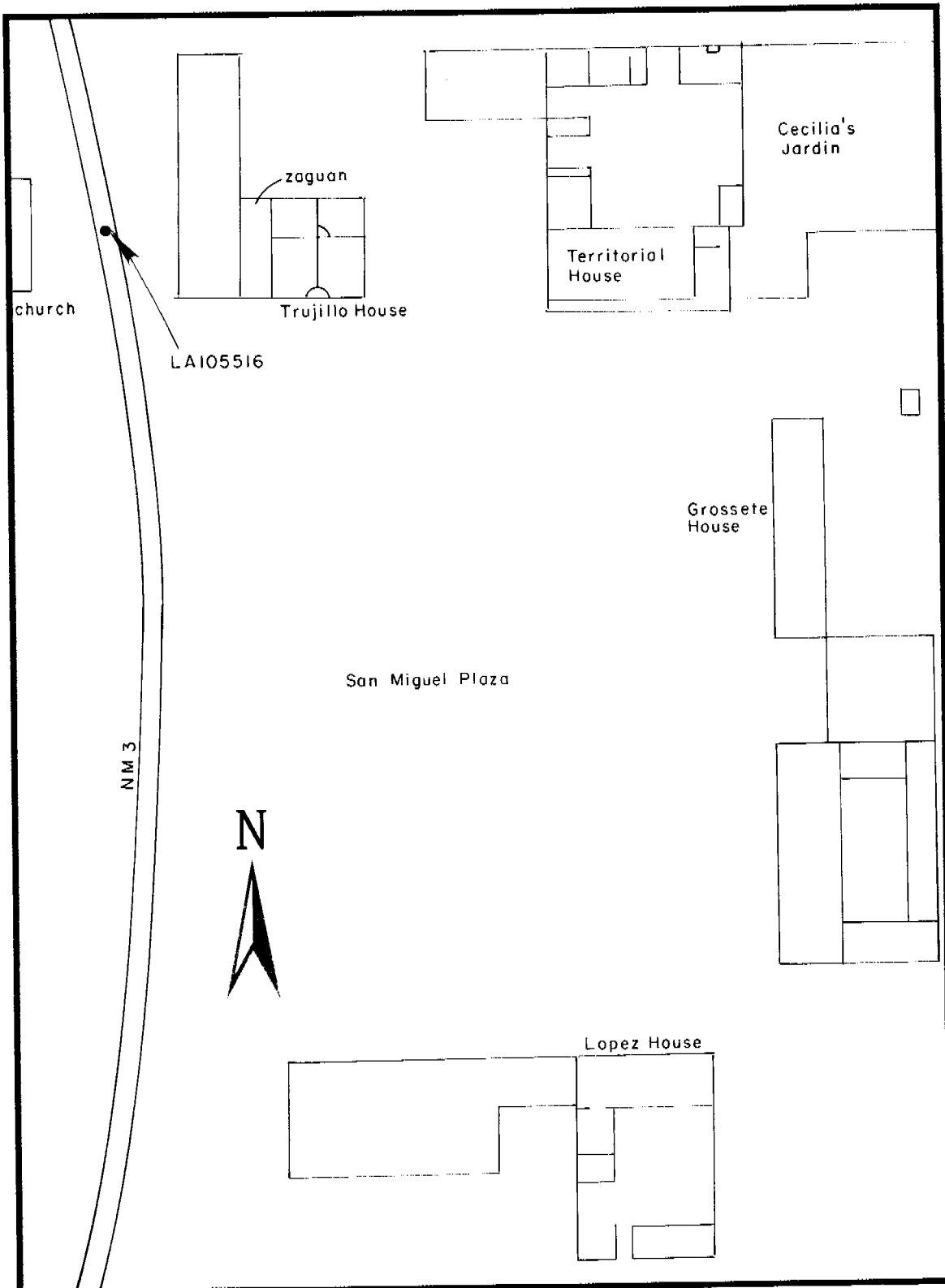


Figure 3. Plat map of Clawson property (after National Register of Historic Places file 150).

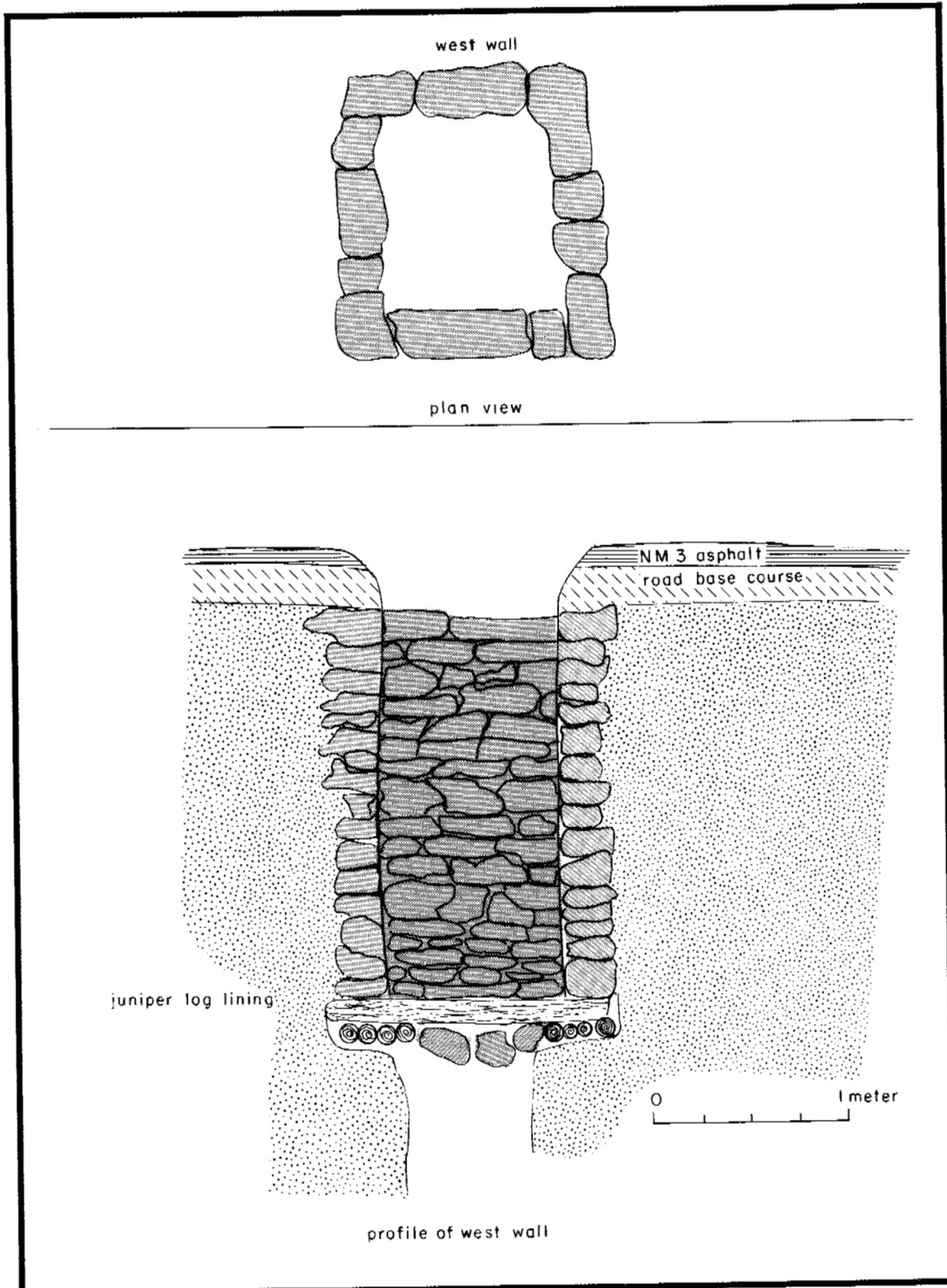


Figure 4. Plan and profile of the San Miguel well.

measuring about 90 cm by 30 cm by 12 cm were vertically positioned in the fill and may have served to cap the smaller north/south dimension of the well. Smaller rock probably associated with upper masonry collapse was also present. Two vertical logs extended from the top of the fill. The largest juniper log, possibly a fencepost, was 2.7 m by 10 cm, and had been thrown into the well. This log extended 70 cm into the fill, suggesting the well was at least 3.4 m deep. The smaller pine log measured 1 m by 8 cm but was badly decayed and broken. This log contained two wire 20d nails. Both logs were probably thrown into the well and did not represent well-related material.

Twenty-two artifacts were collected during the well investigation (Table 1). The artifacts were not collected systematically but collected on an encounter basis from about the upper 50 cm of fill. The artifacts were probably introduced during the 1930s, based on the presence of depression glass, carnival glass, a glass telephone insulator, and a Owens Illinois Glass Co. maker's mark dating to 1929-54 (Toulouse 1971:403). This date is also reflected by two sanitary cans in the fill that were not collected. Artifact content was low in the portion of fill investigated, suggesting that the well had been plugged and not available as a trash repository.

Table 1. Artifact assemblage, LA 105516

Item	Number	Remarks
Domestic Items		
Cobalt blue carnival glass	1	rim from tumbler
Light-green depression glass	1	parfait glass with broken base
Light-green depression glass	1	rim from bowl
White ironstone	1	coffee cup fragment
White ironstone	5	saucer body fragments
White porcelain	1	saucer fragment
Personal Items		
Shoe	1	rubber sole and heel
Construction Hardware		
Iron strap hinge	1	30 cm by 4 cm
Iron hook	1	20 cm long
Communication Item		
Glass insulator	1	aqua fragment
House Furnishings		
Wood or coal stove leg	1	
Miscellaneous Bottles		
Probable medicine bottle	1	Owens Illinois Glass Co. maker's mark; complete clear bottle with threaded lip
Bath salts bottle (?)	1	Complete clear bottle with threaded lip. Bottle still contains an indeterminate white liquid. "Sal de uvas Picot" embossed on side and base.
Indeterminate bottle	1	aqua base fragment with no maker's mark
Animal Bone		
Dog	4	2 humerus and 2 radius from same dog
Artifact Total	22	

DISCUSSION

The construction of the well represents a significant investment of energy in the excavation of the shaft into the thick red clay and the subsequent construction of the stone and log lining. The heavy sandstone slabs were selected and transported to the well site, and their careful coursing exhibits noteworthy craftsmanship. Unfortunately, we have no evidence with which to date the well construction. The small artifact assemblage collected from the upper fill represents low-frequency refuse introduced in the 1930s, but we observed no archaeological evidence from the well to date the actual construction event.

The well is probably associated with the standing adobe building 9.9 m to the east. Labeled the Trujillo house in Figure 3, it was apparently at one time a *hostería*, or hostel. The rear rooms (east) of this house are reported to date around 1800. The complex of four houses in this east section of the plaza, including the Trujillo House, Territorial House (dance hall and saloon), Grossetete House, and López House, were acquired by David Clawson in the 1970s and were in the process of extensive renovation. Mr. Clawson felt these structures were some of the earliest buildings on the San Miguel plaza, although greatly altered by earlier Territorial-period renovations. However, E. Boyd felt the houses date to the later Territorial period and that ceramics suggested that the west plaza, centered around the church, was the oldest plaza. The architectural context suggests that the well could date anywhere from the early founding of San Miguel through the Territorial period. Further historic architectural examinations and oral histories of these buildings are needed to refine their construction dates and place the well in context. The Territorial House, with its placita, had been a social center and the scene of political rallies during the 1930s (Boyd 1971:24), the date of the artifact assemblage from the well.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this investigation was to determine the nature of a sinkhole that appeared in the pavement of NM 3. The sinkhole was caused by the presence of a stone- and log-lined water well beneath the pavement. The well is probably associated with nearby standing adobe houses possibly dating as early as 1800. The well is within the proposed boundary of the San Miguel del Vado Historic District, but the unexpected manifestation does not disturb any of its qualities or elements. The unique discovery is limited to the existing road, and the well is preserved intact beneath the pavement. No elements of the proposed San Miguel del Vado Historic District were affected by the sinkhole repair. The project does not constitute a use of a historic property as defined by the New Mexico Prehistoric and Historic Sites Preservation Act.

REFERENCES CITED

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1972 The Plaza of San Miguel Del Vado. *El Palacio* 77(4).

National Register of Historic Places

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**APPENDIX 1: *NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES* NOMINATION FORM
AND *NEW MEXICO STATE REGISTER OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES*
APPLICATION FOR REGISTRATION**