

A Brief Glimpse into Seventeenth Century Santa Fe: The 2011 Santa Fe Plaza Light Post Excavations

MATTHEW J. BARBOUR

☞ SANTA FE PLAZA, LA 80000, is a National Historic Landmark registered in the National Register of Historic Places (October 15, 1966, Item No. 66000491) and the State Register of Cultural Properties (No. 27). It has been the commercial, social, and political center of Santa Fe since at least 1610, if not earlier. However, debates continue to erupt regarding its initial location, size, layout, and use (most recently Hordes 2010; also see Hordes 1990; Noble 2008; Snow 1990; Wilson 1981).

In February of 2011, the Public Works Division of the City of Santa Fe planned to install four light posts along Palace Avenue across from the Palace of the Governors in the Santa Fe Plaza (Figure 1). Accomplishing this task required the excavation of four light post holes roughly .9 m to 1.2 m (3 to 4 ft) in diameter and 2.1 m (7 ft) deep below the current ground surface (bgs), thus necessitating archaeological monitoring and excavations to comply with state and municipal preservation laws.

Under the Museum of New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies (OAS), the four light post holes were designated Test Units (TUs) 1–4. Archaeologists monitored hand excavation of each test unit by Gorman Electric, the contractor for the City of Santa Fe. When intact cultural deposits were encountered, the archaeologist shifted from monitoring the contractor's work

to performing systematic hand-excavation of the light post hole. Archaeological investigations resulted in the documentation of 17 stratigraphic units and the recovery of 1,430 artifacts (see Barbour 2011).

Archaeological Findings

The preservation and accumulation of archaeologically significant strata varied across the four test units (Figure 2). TU 1 contained mixed twentieth-century deposits associated with the installation of the storm drain, and in TU 4 archaeologists failed to recover any temporally diagnostic artifacts from in situ deposits. TUs 2 and 3 yielded substantial unmixed cultural deposits dating to the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These included a clinker (burned coal) deposit believed to be the late nineteenth-century plaza surface (depicted in Figure 2 as Strata 2.2 and 3.2) documented previously by Cross Cultural Research Systems (1992) and the OAS (Barbour 2010; Lentz 2004).

However, only TU 3 (Figure 3) was found to contain lower cultural strata, designated Strata 3.5 and 3.6, dating to the early Spanish Colonial period. Stratum 3.5 appears to represent a late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century surface on which some sort of military engagement may have taken place based upon the number of projectile points recovered from this stratum in 2004 (Figure 4) and a gunflint (Figure 5) found



Figure 1. Aerial view of Santa Fe Plaza and location of light post Test Units.

Level	Meters Below Ground Surface	Test Unit			
		1	2	3	4
1	0.1	Stratum 1.1	Stratum 2.1	Stratum 3.1	Stratum 4.1
2	0.2				
3	0.3				
4	0.4				
5	0.5				
6	0.6				
7	0.7		Stratum 3.2		
8	0.8				
9	0.9		Stratum 2.2	Stratum 3.3	Stratum 4.2
10	1				
11	1.1		Stratum 2.3	Stratum 3.4	
12	1.2				
13	1.3			Stratum 3.5	
14	1.4		Stratum 2.4	Stratum 3.6	Stratum 4.3
15	1.5				
16	1.6				
17	1.7				
18	1.8				
19	1.9				Stratum 4.4
20	2				Stratum 4.5
21	2.1		unexcavated	unexcavated	unexcavated
22*	2.2				
23*	2.3				
24*	2.4				
25*	2.5				
26*	2.6				
27*	2.7	Stratum 3.7			

<== Top of Stratum 3.2 represents uppermost culturally significant deposit.

<=== depth necessary for light pole installation.

- = late twentieth century or mixed deposit.
- = early to mid-twentieth century deposit.
- = nineteenth century deposit.
- = late eighteenth and nineteenth century deposit.
- = late seventeenth or early eighteenth century deposit.
- = early to mid-seventeenth century deposit.
- = unknown, no diagnostic artifacts.
- = culturally sterile.
- = unexcavated.

* = not systematically excavated, but investigated within a 20 by 20 cm window at the base of Test Unit 3.

Figure 2. Strata by period of deposition.

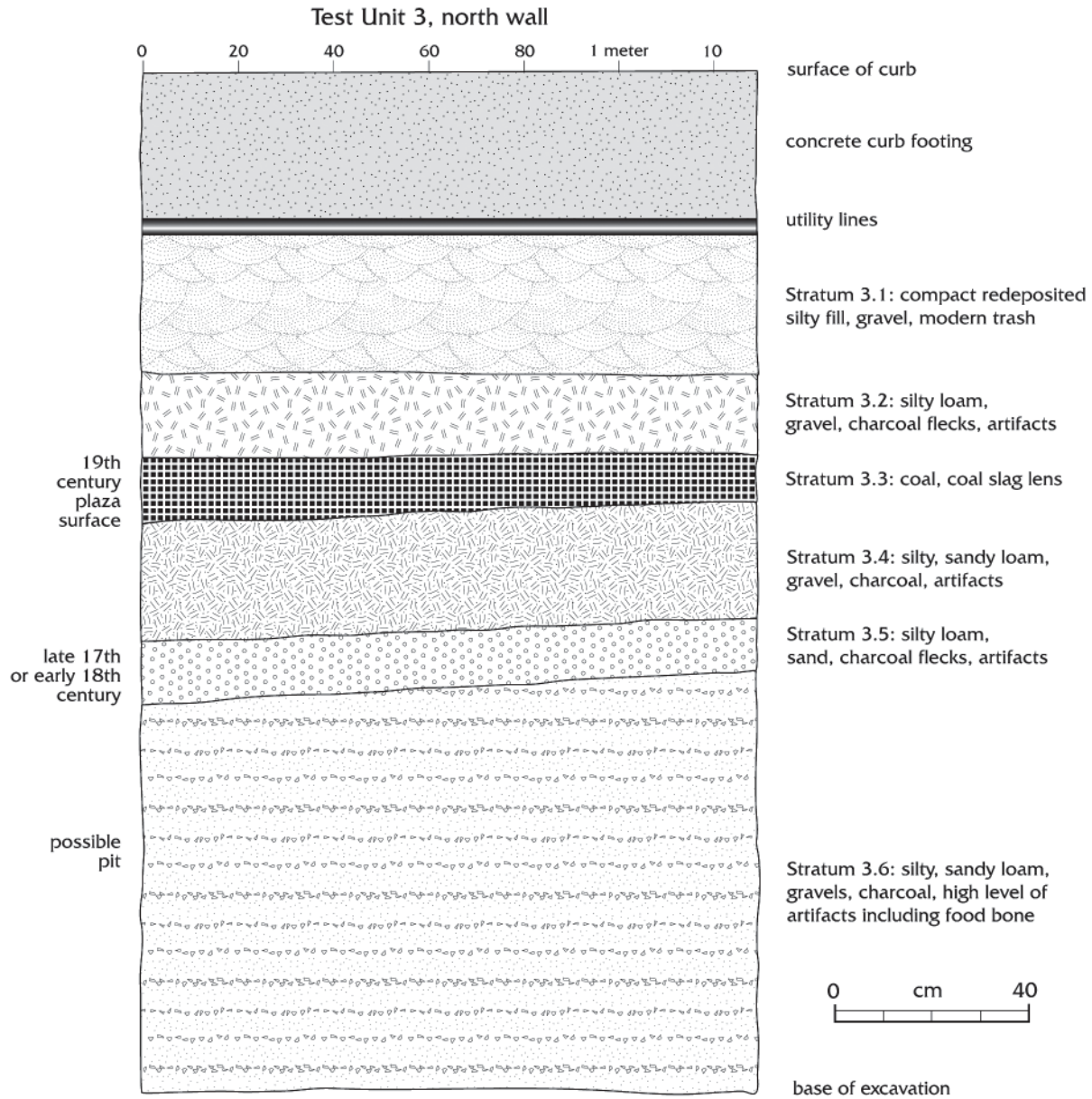


Figure 3. Profile of Test Unit 3.



Figure 4. Projectile points and other flaked stone artifacts recovered from Stratum 3.5 in 2004.
(Note: FS=Field Specimen.)

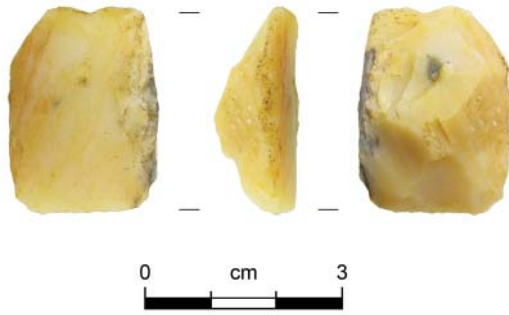


Figure 5. Gunflint found in association with Stratum 3.5.

during current excavations. OAS archaeologist Stephen Lentz (2004:33) initially posited that this surface is associated with the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, but more recent Native American ceramic analysis suggests the deposit dates slightly later based upon the frequency of redwares and presence of Tewa Polychrome sherds (Wilson and Montoya 2011:56-57). If not connected to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, it is quite possible that this stratum is archaeologically representative of the battle to recapture Santa Fe in 1693.

Artifacts recovered from Stratum 3.6 context appear to date to the early to mid-seventeenth century. Stratum 3.6 extended well below the depth necessary for light post installation (2.1 m or 7 ft bgs). To accurately ascertain deposit depth, a small window (20 by 20 cm or 8 by 8 in) was dug into the base of the light post hole and excavated for an additional 50 cm (1 ft 8 in). At 2.6 m bgs (8 ft 6 in), the sediment transitioned into a natural alluvial deposit of coarse sand and river cobbles. No floor was identified at the base of the deposit and appears to rule out the possibility that

excavations were being conducted inside one of the two kivas created on Santa Fe Plaza during the 1680–1693 Native American occupation of the city. Large quantities of butchered fauna found in Stratum 3.6 could represent domestic and kitchen waste deposited within a large pit.

Examining the Seventeenth Century

Most of the Spanish documents in Santa Fe from the seventeenth century have been destroyed (Elliot 1988:27), and archaeology remains one of the few sources of information available regarding early Colonial life in Santa Fe. As a result, particular attention was given to this stratum and the cultural materials recovered therein.

Within the Native American ceramic assemblage, glaze wares outnumbered Tewa decorated wares four to one (Figure 6 and Wilson and Montoya 2011:57). This could indicate greater reliance on and contact between the settlers in Santa Fe and Native Americans living in the Galisteo Basin and regions along the Rio Grande south of La Bajada

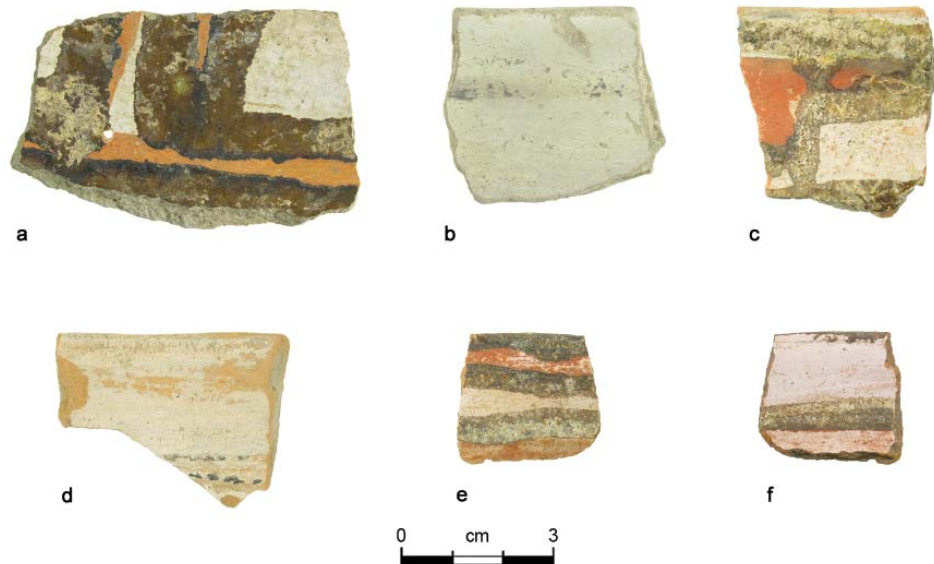


Figure 6. Examples of historic decorated Native American ceramics: (a) glaze polychrome body sherd; (b) Sankawi (?) Black-on-cream; (c) Kotyiti (Glaze F) Polychrome; (d) Sankawi Black-on-cream; (e, f) Glaze F Polychrome.

Hill during the seventeenth century. Conversely, in the eighteenth century, pottery from south of Santa Fe is rare. Instead, colonists are acquiring pottery from their Tewa neighbors to the north.

The vast majority of artifacts recovered from Stratum 3.6 were pieces of butchered animal bone. Fauna from the deposit was examined in relation to data from other seventeenth century contexts elsewhere in downtown Santa Fe (Palace of the Governors, La Fonda Parking Lot, and the Nusbaum House) and was found to be comparable (Akins 2011: 77-78). Combined, this seventeenth century data set shows a diverse array of species presumably being consumed, including buffalo from the eastern plains. While seventeenth-century settlers consumed sheep and goat, they appear to represent one of many protein types in the diet, including cattle and wild game. It is not until the 1700s that goat and sheep were overwhelmingly the primary protein source (Figure 7).

Stone artifacts were rare. Analysis of flaked stone indicates a preference for chert or quartz-like material (Moore 2011:89). It is probable that these materials were favored for their ability to maintain a sharp, resilient edge, ideal for use as a strike-a-light. Two strike-a-lights were



Figure 7. Relative frequency of cattle and sheep/goat bone in the downtown Santa Fe area.

encountered (based on the presence of metal adhesions along utilized edges). The few ground stone artifacts encountered were pieces of unprepared cobble with striations denoting only light or moderate use. This wear level combined with the use of cobble raw material suggests that many of these tools were used quickly and then discarded (Figure 8 and Wening 2011:98-100).



Figure 8. Hornblende cobble polishing stone.

Lastly, the nine hand-wrought nails, metallurgical slag, and a piece of cut mica, presumably used for window glass or as a decorative embellishment on some furnishing, were of limited interpretational value but could represent metallurgy and construction/renovation activities occurring nearby at the time of deposition. Perhaps the pit was initially used as a borrow pit for mining sands and clays for construction of the Palace of the Governors prior to being filled in with kitchen waste.

Conclusions

Archaeological monitoring and excavations of the four test units needed to install light posts along the northern boundary of the Santa Fe Plaza provided the opportunity to increase our knowledge of this culturally important and enigmatic location. The majority of deposits encountered and characterized could not be associated with one another or with

archaeological findings elsewhere on the plaza. The preservation and accumulation of cultural strata varied significantly across the four test units and suggests at least some discontinuity or irregularities in the depositional sequence. However, small portions of the stratigraphic sequence, particularly the late nineteenth clinker-rich deposit and the possible Pueblo Revolt Plaza surface, coincided with previously published descriptions by Cross Cultural Research Systems and the OAS.

Certainly, many of the questions regarding the plaza cannot be addressed by the current archaeological data set and are outside the realm of this small study. However, the documentation of the strata, coupled with detailed analysis and interpretation of the artifacts and food bone from Strata 3.5 and 3.6, contributes in meaningful ways to our understanding of the past. It underscores the need to both conserve and protect Santa Plaza as a valuable archaeological resource. ❧

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