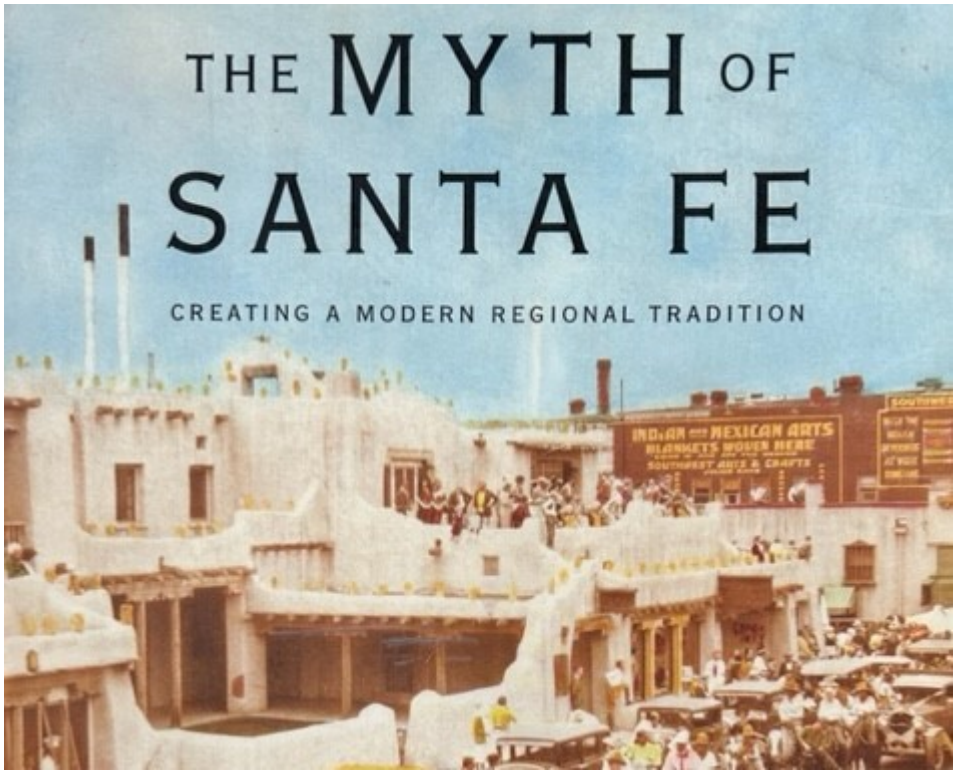
A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE: HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN SANTA FE (Part 2)

Description



Part 2: The â??Myth of Santa Feâ?•

In 1997, Chris Wilson published *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition*, his influential deconstruction of Santa Fe as the â??quintessential American tourist town.â?•[1] That bookâ??s thesis is stated in the introduction:

> Following the arrival of the railroad in 1880, the city had rapidly modernized its appearance, even as it declined economically after being left off the main rail line. Santa Feâ??s Plan of 1912 sought to reverse this decline by remaking Santa Fe into an exotic tourist destinationâ??a self-styled â??City Different.â?? In the teens, the Museum of New Mexico drew elements selectively from local building traditions to define the Santa Fe style. In time, this revival echoed back into the vocabulary of local vernacular buildersâ?¦. Santa Fe is an extreme and therefore instructive example of the invention of tradition and the on-going interaction of ethnic identity with tourist image making. The Santa Fe style of architecture, sometimes known as the Spanish Pueblo revival or simply the Pueblo style, emerged first and has continued to epitomize local identity. Since it was codified by the Museum of New Mexico between 1912 and 1916, this distinctive regional revival has provided a unifying civic identity for the city, a promotional image to attract tourists, and a romantic backdrop for Anglo-American newcomers.[2]

Wilson restates this narrative even more succinctly in a later book:

> After the main Chicago-to-Los Angeles rail line bypassed the city in 1880, the county government had to pay for the construction of a connecting spur line. Even as the business community sought to make Santa Fe into a modern city of Italianate business blocks and French Second Empire-style civic buildings, the disadvantage of being off the main rail line caused the cityâ??s economy to slump and its population to begin a steady thirty-year decline. In 1912, local business boosters and the staff of the new Museum of New Mexico devised a plan to revive the cityâ??s economy through the development of tourism.[3]

Ever since its publication, the key claims made in *The Myth of Santa Fe* have been repeated by virtually anyone writing on Santa Feâ??s architectural history. Here is one example from a popular book on Santa Fe:

> By the time New Mexico finally gained statehood in 1912, the city fathers had realized they needed to replace the lost commerce of the army and the Trail with a new economic engine and were seeking to establish Santa Fe as the center for tourism in the Southwest. They needed a theme, a cohesive appearance, a style that would attract visitors and distinguish the city from the Spanish Mission Revival then taking hold in California. They soon found it with the restoration of the Palace of the Governors and the construction of the Fine Arts Museum. Santa Fe would henceforth be known as the city of Spanish Pueblo Revival, some of its identity rooted in authenticity, much of it fabricatedâ?¦ While the charms survive despite a history of massive changes, in recent years a once vibrant and living city center has been tamed into an adobe theme park.[4]

And here is another example, found in a National Register nomination by the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office:

> In 1912, the mayor of Santa Fe appointed Hewett and Sylvanus Morley, also an archaeologist, to the Santa Fe City Planning board to assist in revitalizing Santa Fe by reversing its longstanding economic slump. Their solution to increase revenues was to promote tourism by reviving the local vernacular and thus creating a new architectural language for the city.[5]

The argument is made in somewhat measured language in *The Myth of Santa Fe* itself, but its critique resonated strongly in those years when Santa Fe style was taking the world by storm and soon became unrestrained, as in the 2017 PBS documentary, *Painting Santa Fe*. â??One hundred years ago,â?• Wilson says in that film, â??Santa Fe was in steep economic decline, and it was really in an economic and psychological funk.â?• According to the filmâ??s narrator, Santa Fe â??faced a bleak outlook: the hub of New Mexico for centuries, the spokes were now broken. El Camino Real â?? Spainâ??s royal road â?? and the Santa Fe Trail represented a bygone era. In 1880, hopes that the Santa Fe railroad, its namesake, would bring in desperately needed economic development were dashed when the railroad bypassed the city.â?• Cody Hartley, Director of the Georgia Oâ??Keeffe Museum, declares that â??suddenly, the entire city felt itself becoming irrelevant;â?• according to Wilson, â??people in Santa Fe said, â??we are drying up, and we are going to blow away.â??â?• The solution to this dire state came in the form of what the documentary describes as an â??economic hail Maryâ?• engineered by Edgar Lee Hewett: the building of the Museum of Fine Art and the cultivation of Santa Feâ??s image as an arts colony and romantic tourist destination.

There are several intertwined claims being made in this ubiquitous and now-canonical narrative. The first claim is that the transcontinental railroad bypassed Santa Fe and this caused Santa Fe to experience a precipitous economic decline. The second claim is that Santa Feâ??s leaders (typically personified as â??city fathersâ?•) engineered a solution to this economic calamity by remaking the city into a falsified tourist destination. The problem is that there is remarkably little evidence to support these claims, and much to refute them.

Santa Fe was not in fact a great commercial center prior to 1880. When the railroadâ??s representative visited New Mexico in 1875 to determine the potential benefits of rail construction through the territory, he reported back that Santa Fe â??is a place of no commercial importance geographically; it is sustained by territorial and Govt. patronage.â?• Santa Fe was a connecting point more than the destination of the trade routes of the Santa Fe Trail, the Camino Real and the Old Spanish Trail, and â??the entirety of Santa Fe Trail annual freighting business amounted to only about $2,000,000, which could by hauled by railroad in a week.â?•[6] For these reasons, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe did originally consider bypassing the territorial capital altogether when building its line into New Mexico.

Despite Santa Feâ??s lack of commercial importance, however, the railroad ultimately agreed to bring rail service to Santa Fe through a branch line from Lamy. That line was constructed and made operational at the very same time as the main line and trains arrived at the new train depot in Santa Fe in February 1880. The *Santa Fe New Mexican* celebrated the trainâ??s arrival in the city in an article headlined â??Santa Feâ??s Triumph! The Last Link is Forged in the Iron Chain Which Binds the Ancient City to the United States and the Old Santa Fe Trail Passes Into Oblivion.â?• The article recounts:

> Hundreds of Santa Feans came out to greet the Iron Steed. A procession formed on the town plazaâ??s west side, led by the 9th Cavalry band (a Buffalo Soldier unit), along with Gen. Edward Hatch and his staff from Fort Marcy. Federal and county officials, members of the territorial legislature, teachers and students of St. Michaelâ??s College, and citizens in carriages followed. At the newly constructed depot, speeches of welcome were delivered and the last spike was hammered down by Gov. Lew Wallace, amid the huzzas and loud applause of spectators.[7]

The celebrated arrival of the AT&SF railroad was almost immediately followed by other railroads that brought tracks and service into Santa Fe. The Denver and Rio Grande/Chili Line began operations in Santa Fe in 1880; the Texas, Santa Fe and Northern Railroad/Santa Fe Southern Railway was operating in Santa Fe by 1890; and the Santa Fe Central Railway/New Mexico Central Railway was operating in Santa Fe by 1901.[8]

Thus, despite the common claims that Santa Fe was bypassed by rail in 1880 (other than an implicitly insignificant spur line), Santa Fe was actually served by numerous railroads that connected to other railroads spanning the continent. As would be expected, this rail activity led to growth, not stagnation or decline. In 1880, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* wrote of the â??advent of railroad, and the consequent rapid increase in the population.â?•[9] In 1890, the paper reported that growth continued: â??The City of Santa Fe is making a steady modern growth; has now a population of 8,000, and has every assurance of becoming a beautiful modern cityâ?¦. Skilled labor of all kinds is in demand at good wages. The cost of living is reasonable, and real property, both inside and suburban, is steadily advancing in value.â?•[10] In 1892 the newspaper reported on development in the southeast part of the city following the railroad additions of the 1880s, noting that â??the sale of over $300,000 worth of Santa Fe city and suburban property during the past few months, most of which was purchased by our own well-to-do citizens, amply attests the home faith which exists in New Mexicoâ??s capital city, while the unsolicited investment of more than $100,000 of eastern capital sufficiently indicates the confidence which outsiders have in Santa Feâ??s future.â?•[11]

A number of significant buildings were erected in Santa Fe during this period. In the downtown and surrounding area alone, a partial list includes: the Loretto Academy on Old Santa Fe Trail in 1880; the Palace Hotel on Washington in 1881; the two Italianate-style buildings built by the Spiegelbergs on the south side of the Plaza in 1882; the Hayte-Wientge Mansion on Paseo de la Cuma in 1882; the Episcopal Church on East Palace in 1882; St. Vincentâ??s Sanitorium on Palace opened in 1883; St. Francis Cathedral, completed on the exterior in 1884; the Cuyler Preston house on Faithway in 1886; the domed First Territorial Capitol building in 1886; St. Catherineâ??s School in 1886-87; the County Courthouse on East Palace in 1888; the Hesch House on Read Street in 1888; the Digneo-Valdes House on Paseo de Peralta in 1889; the Federal Building, completed in 1889; the Italianate Catron Block built on the east side of the plaza in 1891; the Claire Hotel on the west side of the plaza in 1892; the Old State Capitol building in 1900; the First Ward School on Canyon Road in 1906; the Elliot Barker House on East Palace Avenue in 1907; the Greer House on Paseo de Peralta in 1909; the Elks theater on Lincoln in 1909; the National Guard Armory on Washington in 1909; the Digneo-Moore house on Paseo de Peralta in 1911; the Moorish Scottish Rite Temple in 1911; the Elks Club building on Lincoln in 1912; the Womenâ??s Board of Trade Library in 1912; and the neoclassical First National Bank building on the east side of the plaza in 1912. In a town of less than 10,000 people, this level of continuous and substantial building activity does not betoken an economy in decline or a desperate population.

Throughout this period, Santa Fe continued to serve as the administrative hub of the region, just as it had before 1880. Santa Fe remained the capital of the New Mexico territory with all important offices of the federal government located in the city. Santa Fe was also the site of the important Court of Private Land Claims. Created by Congress in 1891, the court maintained its headquarters in Santa Fe during the thirteen years of its operation until the conclusion of its business in 1904, and, in the words of Ralph Twitchell, â??proved itself one of the chief factors of the cityâ??s prosperity and consequence.â?•[12] When the territory became a state in 1912, Santa Fe was selected as the capital and all important state institutions were located in the city: the state capitol, the state supreme court, the state court of appeals, the governorâ??s mansion, and state executive offices.

What then is the basis for the claim that Santa Fe was in an economic crisis? Virtually everyone who repeats this claim cites *The Myth of Santa Fe*. That book in turn cites no actual economic evidence for this assertion, but instead relies on census figures for the population of Santa Fe before and after 1880. As reprinted in *The Myth of Santa Fe*,[13] those numbers are:

- 1880 6,653
- 1890 6,185 (-7%)
- 1900 5,603 (-9%)
- 1910 5,073 (-9%)
- 1920 7,236 (+42%)

These census figures purport to demonstrate that Santa Feâ??s population, which is implicitly held to be an indicator of economic well-being, steadily declined for three decades after 1880, followed by a dramatic reversal with the reinvention of Santa Fe as an exotic tourist destination in the mid-1910s.

These census figures, however, are questionable at best, given the difficulties in conducting a census in the territory in those years. The 1890 census in particular was specifically criticized by historian Ralph Emerson Twitchell as â??very unsatisfactory,â?• with the population count being â??far below the actual number of people living at the time in the territory.â?•[14] The territorial governor at the time, L. Bradford Prince, also criticized the 1890 census:

> The peculiar condition in New Mexico as to nationality and language; some communities speaking English and some Spanish, and some being divided in language, presents an unusual difficultyâ?¦ It cannot be denied that in a considerable number of districts the enumerators were careless and did not seem to appreciate the importance of obtaining a full record, if that required too much troubleâ?¦ The result was seen in returns manifestly imperfect in many respects, and in an enumeration far from completeâ?¦[15]

Thus, the 1890 census figure of 6,185, which *The Myth of Santa Fe* relies on to show a sharp decline in population after 1880, is almost certainly incorrect. All indications are that Santa Fe actually grew in population between 1880 and 1890. There is no reason to suppose that the census figures of 1900 (5,603) or 1910 (5,073) are any more accurate. Accepting those figures at face value would require us to imagine that Santa Feâ??s population, after years of decline, suddenly exploded by nearly fifty percent in the last years of the 1910s. It is much more plausible, as well as consistent with contemporaneous reports, that Santa Fe was instead slowly but steadily increasing in population throughout all those years.

By 1912, when *The Myth of Santa Fe* would have Santa Fe at its lowest ebb, the city was described as â??suffering from growing painsâ??beginning to sprawl out aimlessly over surrounding terrain, in formless sprawls. Six new subdivisions had recently been authorized by the City Councilâ?¦.â?•[16] Chamber of Commerce president H.H. Dorman reported â??an increase in bank deposits â?¦ postal receipts, railroad receipts, hotel registrations and building permits.â?•[17] City planning was a necessity, the Chamber of Commerce wrote on April 22, 1912, â??now that [the town] has begun a new quicker growth.â?• These are not descriptions of a community in â??steep economic decline,â?• in an â??economic and psychological funkâ?• or â??desperate.â?• The opposite appears to be true. The concern of what Nusbaum called the â??Old Santa Fe groupâ?• was not whether Santa Fe was going to â??dry up and blow away,â?• but rather whether Santa Fe, as it continued to grow, was going to â??pursue modern trendsâ?• and thereby lose its historic character.[18]

Those who opposed the loss of Santa Feâ??s character were not motivated to remake Santa Fe into something new, but rather to preserve what already existed. This was included in the charge to the 1912 planning board (â??the *preservation* so far as possible of the adobe houses and historic land marks which give Santa Fe its chief interestâ?•[19]); reflected in the planning boardâ??s report (â??it is the opinion of this board that the *preservation* of the ancient streets, roads and structures in and about the city is of the first importance and that these monuments of the first Americans should be *preserved* intact at almost any costâ?•[20]), and constantly referenced in the correspondence (the New-Old Exhibition â??is for the purpose of awakening public sentiment in the *preservation* of our historic buildings and for the education of the public to the appreciation of the Santa Fe style of architectureâ?•[21]; [t]he chief interest of the plan is that it emphasizes the necessity for the *preservation* of the old streets and structures of the most ancient city in Americaâ?•[22]).

Nor can those involved in this campaign be fairly described as â??city fathersâ?• or â??boosters.â?• Nusbaum described the group as â??largely comprised of artists, writers, historians, archaeologists, conservative business leaders, and citizens who were interested in preserving and perpetuating the cultural and architectural traditions of the pastâ?•[23] They were opposed by others in the city who were â??equally vigorous in promoting a far more extensive modernization of Santa Fe, streets and housing in particular.â?•[24] The Santa Fe ring, one of the most notorious political machines in American history, was at its peak of power at the time and was not part of the campaign; indeed, their bank, First National Bank of Santa Fe, was erecting a neo-classical structure right on the plaza at the very time this movement was underway. Thus, unlike the imaginary â??city fathers,â?• the people living in Santa Fe at the time were anything but unified.

Hewett himself was far from a simple city booster. He argued, for example, that the term â??New-Old Santa Fe styleâ?• was erroneous and should correctly be called â??New Mexico Styleâ?• or â??Rio Grandeâ?• style, because â??it belongs to all the towns of New Mexico: Albuquerque, Taos, Las Vegas, and dozens of others.â?•[25] He also engaged in a bitter fight with the chamber of commerce when it tried to claim Santa Fe as the oldest city in the United States. Hewett and Morley very forcefully rejected this claim as historically inaccurate, causing Dorman and other influential Santa Feans to seek, unsuccessfully, Hewettâ??s removal as Director of the School of American Archaeology and the Museum of New Mexico.[26]

Hewettâ??s conduct is thus not that of a provincial booster trying to save a dying town through tourism. On the contrary, Hewett was an advocate for the entire state, and indeed the entire Southwest. In dedicating the New Mexico Museum of Art (first called the Museum of Santa Fe, and later the Museum of Fine Arts), Hewett noted that the â??this remarkable workâ?• was due to the master builders â??whose hands produced the result you see hereâ?• and the contributions of â??a small group of men and women residents of, or interested in the state who desire in this manner to attest their loyalty to New Mexico.[27] Twitchell also noted that the same individuals who promoted and protected Santa Feâ??s historic heritage also promoted preservation throughout the state, and â??succeeded in creating a public opinion which has stood for the promotion of all meritorious movements having as an objective the advancement in knowledge of and interest in the southwestâ??s historic past.â?•[28] And Hewettâ??s activities were backed by Frank Springer of Cimarron, who was not even a resident of Santa Fe and derived no personal or business benefit from promoting the city.

In addition, neither Hewett, Morley nor any other member of the â??Old Santa Fe groupâ?• had the power to dictate Santa Feâ??s architecture. All they could do was attempt to persuade. The planning commission recommended that the city enact legislation protecting Santa Feâ??s historic architecture and regulating new construction, but this recommendation was never adopted into law. Every property owner remained free to build in whatever style they desired.

To be sure, appeals to the benefits of tourism were made by many of the proponents of preservation. The planning commission report of 1912, for example, opined that Santa Feâ??s future should be as a â??tourist and residence city.â?•[29] Artist Carlos Vierra also frankly appealed to tourism as a reason for preservation of Santa Feâ??s historic buildings:

> We can make our efforts at â??boostingâ?? in the interest of the tourist ineffectual if we destroy what we have left. We could on the other hand make our advertising automatic-each tourist adding to its value. They would not forget Santa Fe and would advertise it everywhere as the one city in the United States that was different-and perhaps, after-the oldest.[30]

The economic benefit of tourism is an age-old appeal. Preservationists have always had to invoke hard-headed economic benefits in order to persuade others that preservation need not be opposed to economic development. As Thompson M. Mayes of the National Trust for Historic Preservation has observed, â??preservationists often jump right to the argument that saving old places is economically beneficial, assuming that the economic argument is the only one that decision makers want to hear.â?•[31] This seems to describe what Santa Feâ??s preservationist vanguard were doing in the early part of the century. A particularly transparent example is Morleyâ??s letter to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad extolling the desire to make Santa Fe â??the Tourist Center of the Southwestâ?• â?? leading to a request for a â??generous checkâ?• from the railroad to defray the expenses of the New-Old Santa Fe exhibition.[32] However, such appeals were not aimed at *inventing* something artificial to appeal to tourists, but rather at *preserving* an existing asset that would result in benefits that included revenues from tourism. As Vierra noted, â??We should long ago have appreciated the value of these things to ourselvesâ??for their own sake because of their beauty and practical utility and not alone because of their power

of attraction to the tourist.â?•[33]

These early advocates, â??conscious of the loss that was impending,â?•[34] were at the vanguard of historic preservation practice and policy. The historical evidence does not support the claim that Santa Fe was in â??severe economic declineâ?• after 1880 or that â??city fathersâ?• remade Santa Fe into a falsified tourist trap as a â??hail Maryâ?• to save a dying city. Instead, the evidence indicates that Santa Fe was undergoing rapid growth and in danger of losing its unique historic character. Mobilizing against those who wanted Santa Fe to follow the Albuquerque model of aggressive Americanization, a group of concerned individuals, mainly archaeologists, artists, historians, and progressive businesspeople, labored to persuade the citizens of Santa Fe that they had a significant architectural heritage that should be preserved and perpetuated. They succeeded in raising consciousness, but with no laws protecting historical structures or regulating new construction, whose vision would prevail remained in doubt.

Next: Part 3: 1917 to 1956

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[1] â??Chris Wilson bio,â?• https://saap.unm.edu/people/faculty/chris-wilson/index.html.

[2] Chris Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Regional Tradition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1997), 3-8.

[3] Chris Wilson, *Facing Southwest: The Life & Houses of John Gaw Meem* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 8-9.

[4] Kingsley Hammett, *Santa Fe: A Walk Through Time* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 2004), 14-15.

[5] National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for 460 Camino de las Animas, Santa Fe, NM (2019), https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwj5hrnH9a__AhXzIX0KHF pending-nominations%2FNM_Santa%2520Fe%2520County_NordfeldtHouse.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0d4mnGK0BvoZ0mB7y6a , last accessed June 6, 2023.

[6] Fred Friedman, â??Tracks Through Time: Part 1: Confessions of a Trespasser,â?• *El Palacio*, Winter 2021, 41.

[7] Ibid., 43.

[8] Fred Friedman, â??Tracks Through Time: Part 2: The Lamy Branch Line 1880 to Present,â?• *El Palacio*, Spring 2022, 40.

[9] â??Our Greeting,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, February 27, 1880, quoted in Oliver La Farge, *Santa Fe: The Autobiography of a Southwestern Town* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959), 97.

[10] â??The City of Santa Fe,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, January 2, 1890, quoted in La Farge, *Santa Fe*, 139.

[11] â??Highland Addition Sale,â?• *Santa Fe Daily New Mexican*, October 22, 1887.

[12] H. H. Dorman to Frederick Law Olmstead, 10 February 1913, Santa Fe City Planning Board Records, Fray Angelico Chavez History Library, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

[13] Wilson, *Myth of Santa Fe*, 330.

[14] Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexico History* (Cedar Rapids: The Torch Press, 1911), 514.

[15] Ibid., 515n.

[16] Jesse L. Nusbaum, â??Vay Morley and the Santa Fe Style,â?• in *Morleyana: A Collection of Writings in Memoriam Sylvanus Griswold Morley â?? 1883 â?? 1948* (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico, 1950), 167.

[17] H. H. Dorman, â??Meaning of City Planningâ?• (read before the Santa Fe Womanâ??s Club), Planning Board Records.

[18] Jesse L. Nusbaum, â??Vay Morley and the Santa Fe Style,â?• in *Morleyana: A Collection of Writings in Memoriam Sylvanus Griswold Morley â?? 1883 â?? 1948* (Santa Fe: The School of American Research and the Museum of New Mexico, 1950), 163.

[19] Chamber of Commerce letter (copy for New Mexican), 22 April 1912, Planning Board Records; â??Planning a Santa Fe Beautiful,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, April 24, 1912 (emphasis added).

[20] Report of the Planning Commission, Santa Fe City Planning Board Records (emphasis added).

[21] H. H. Dorman to Fred Harvey, 9 September 1912, Santa Fe City Planning Board Records (emphasis added).

[22] H. H. Dorman to R. E. Grant, 2 June 1913, Santa Fe City Planning Board Records (emphasis added).

[23] Nusbaum, â??Vay Morley,â?• 165.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Hewett, Santa Fe in 1926,â?• 24.

[26] Chauvenet, *Hewett and Friends*, 109-120.

[27] Quoted in Chauvenet, *Hewett and Friends*, 131.

[28] Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *Old Santa Fe: The Story of New Mexicoâ??s Ancient Capital* (Santa Fe: Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Corporation, 1925), 459n849.

[29]â??Proceedings of the City Council,â?• *Santa Fe New Mexican*, December 24, 1912.

[30] Carlos Vierra, â??Our Native Architecture In Relation to Santa Fe,â?• *El Palacio* 4, no. 1 (January 1917): 10.

[31] Thompson M. Mayes, *Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect Our Identity and Well-Being* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 103.

[32] Sylvanus Morley to W. H. Simpson, 9 September 1912, Planning Board Records.

[33] Vierra, â??Our Native Architecture,â?• 6.

[34] Edgar L. Hewett, â??Santa Fe in 1926,â?• 24.