

Mission Nuestra Senora de la Purisima  
Concepcion de Acuna, Church  
807 Mission Road  
San Antonio  
Bexar County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-319-A

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

INDEX TO PHOTOGRAPHS

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Jet Lowe, photographer Summer, 1983

- TX-319 A-1 GENERAL VIEW, FROM WEST
- TX-319 A-2 FRONT TOWERS, LOOKING NORTHWEST. TAKEN FROM ROOF
- TX-319 A-3 FRONT TOWERS, LOOKING SOUTHWEST. ALSO NOTE PARAPETS
- TX-319 A-4 SIDE VIEW OF CHURCH WITH CONVENT IN FOREGROUND, LOOKING NORTH
- TX-319 A-5 DETAIL OF FRONT TOWER
- TX-319 A-6 DOME IN REAR PORTION OF CHURCH, LOOKING NORTH
- TX-319 A-7 DETAIL OF DOME, LOOKING EAST
- TX-319 A-8 DETAIL OF FRONTISPIECE
- TX-319 A-9 EAST END OF CHURCH. NOTE DOMED CEILING ABOVE
- TX-319 A-10 WEST END OF CHURCH
- TX-319 A-11 SACRISTY, REAR PORTION OF CHURCH, SOUTH WALL OF CHURCH
- TX-319 A-12 STAIRWAY OF SACRISTY
- TX-319 A-13 VAULTED CEILING OF SACRISTY
- TX-319 A-14 SACRISTY WITH PAINTED FLORAL PATTERN OVER DOOR ARCH
- TX-319 A-15 UPSTAIRS SECTION OF SACRISTY. NOTE UNUSUAL WINDOW
- TX-319 A-16 DETAIL OF WINDOW, SACRISTY
- TX-319 A-17 BAPTISTERY, SOUTH TOWER, FRONT PORTION OF CHURCH

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MISSION NUESTRA SENORA DE LA PURISIMA  
CONCEPCION DE ACUNA, CHURCH

HABS No. TX-319-A

Location: 807 Mission Road, San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas.

Present Owner: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio.

Present Use: Public museum and church.

Significance: The church is architecturally significant as physical evidence of building practices and techniques used during the Spanish colonial period. It is the least altered of all the Texas mission churches and has the only original dome of those in San Antonio. It is a unique example of the Spanish Baroque style as used by the Franciscan Fathers of the Texas frontier.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1743-1755. Dedicated December 8, 1755.
2. Original and subsequent owners: See Mission Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion de Acuna, HABS No. TX-319.
3. Original plans and construction: In 1755, when the church was completed, it was recorded by Padre Francisco de los Dolores as being 8 varas wide and 32 varas long, constructed of lime and stone with arches, a dome, and two towers complete with bells. "In the chapel was a mural painting of the five Senores, a gilded ciborium, and above, an altar piece in which was the image of the Purisima Concepcion in elegant sculpturing, with the Child in her arms and with a crown of silver. In the transept were two altars with various paintings, and two wooden images of Our Lady of Dolores, and Our Lady of Pilar. There were two confessionals, benches, and a pulpit. Beneath the two towers were two chapels, one dedicated to Senor, San Miguel, with its altar, which served as a baptistery, where there was a baptismal font with its copper covering, three chismeros, a receptacle for salt, and concha of silver. The sacristy was composed of only one room with a 12-vara vault, in which were kept three chalices with their patens, a large cup, some cruets, with their silver plate, an incense burner, a censer, oil cruet and the missal; and the vestments and other ornaments for service."

- B. Historical Context: The church remained in use until partial secularization of the mission in 1794, after which time it began to deteriorate. It was deserted and in a bad state of repair until renovated and opened for services by the Brothers of the Society of Mary on May 28, 1861. Another renovation and reconstruction occurred May 2, 1887. The church has also been renovated in recent years and is presently in use both as a church and as a public museum.

See also History section of Mission Nuestra Senora de la Purisima Concepcion de Acuna, HABS No. TX-319.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The church is cruciform in plan with a pair of towers, a vaulted roof and a domed crossing.
2. Condition of fabric: The church building is in good condition and is being well maintained.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The church measures approximately 55' x 95'.
2. Foundation: Apparently rubble limestone and lime mortar. There is no off-set where walls begin.
3. Walls: The walls are rubble limestone laid in lime mortar as are all of the San Antonio missions. These are carried above the vaults to form a ramped parapet which hides the view of the vaults from the ground. The ramps are of shallow curvature, somewhat irregular and appear to have a stucco "coping." Plain pinnacles appear at all corners, being doubled at inside corners and appear also at the mid-points of the east wall of the chancel, the north wall of the north transept and the south wall of the south transept, and, finally, over each of the nave wall buttresses. These buttresses are plain single stage masonry piers with weathering.

The drum-ring and its reinforcing pinnacled buttresses are also of rubble construction.

William Corner, writing of his observations to the church in his 1890 book, San Antonio De Bexar, A Guide and History, relates that the entire front facade was plastered and frescoed with yellow and orange squares simulating ashlar construction and with red and blue quatrefoil crosses. The fresco work was at that time very dim and is no longer visible.

The towers are staged with two off-sets, the first of which, occurring at the parapet level, is weathered but without molding. Above this point the second stage is defined by a simple molded cornice and sub-divided into two stages itself by a simple molded string course. The third stage, the belfry, is capped by a small molded cornice and with a string course just below. At the corners of the towers rise staged pinnacles with simple moldings.

4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing masonry walls are reinforced with buttresses. Tunnel vaulted nave has round arch rings. Dome on drum over the crossing has pendentives.

Arch rings are plain, and they spring from classical molded capital.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: At Concepcion the allocation of ornament is largely governed by the doorway, and sculptural enrichment elsewhere over the front facade is generally lacking. Here the frontispiece is a single variant of a medievalizing nature - consisting of a plateresque door panel over which is superimposed two engaged columns flanking the doorway and supporting an entablature. This composition is terminated by an over-door-panel of triangular or pedimented outline enclosing a sculpted wall niche centered in the tympanum.

The doorway, rather than the expected arch form, is instead a polygonal frame, in this case half of an octagon. The frame springs from plain, flush pilasters with incised panels and plain molded imposts or capitals (repeated on the rebated jambs). A sculpted escutcheon divides the frame in the center of the lintel at the point usually reserved for the decorative keystone.

Above the impost moldings, the frame is incised as is the pilaster below, thereby creating a polygonal field within the frame lettering has been carved. The inscription, "A SU PATRONA, Y PRINCESSA CON ESTAS ARMAS, ATIENDE ESTA MISSION, Y DEFIENDE EL PUNTO DE SU PUREZA," is interpreted by Corner as "With these arms be mindful to the Mission's Patroness and Princess, and defend the state of her purity."

The field defined by the frame, the entablature and the columns, is decorated by what Corner calls "the flagellum or knotted scourge of the order of St. Francis, realistically carved" which he viewed as "an uncanny suggestion of a hangman's noose."

The columns are centered on their respective portions of the door panel and stand on pedestals, heavily deteriorated, consisting of plinth and dado. Bases of the columns are crudely carved, being approximations of the torus, scotia, torus classical sequence. The lower two thirds of the column shaft is reeded while the upper is covered by simple low-relief floral patterns.

Flanking each column is a pilaster with rebated outer edge making possible a repeated-form return. The face of each pilaster has a plain border and slightly recessed panel. Arranged in a vertical row in each panel are six carved losenges containing a quatre-foil flora design. According to Corner this same design was repeated as an overall pattern on the front facade, in red and blue fresco, and superimposed over frescoed yellow and orange squares that simulated masonry blocks.

Unity between the door panel and columns is achieved by the roll-molding carried continuously across the top of the panel and forming the capitals of the respective pilasters and columns. On this rests a crude entablature composed of two thick roll-moldings encrusted with modeled detail.

Surmounting the entablature is a cornice composed of a fillet and ovolo which serves to define the upper edge of the door-panel composition and provides a base for the triangular over-door panel with its plain cavetto frame.

Centered in the tympanum of the over-door panel is a niche and its enframing panel. The panel rests on a plain base with a projecting foliate-sculpted decorative piece and has as a frame small unfluted Romanesque columns surmounted by plain pilasters and capped by a roll-molding and fillet entablature. The niche-head itself is a scalloped shell design. Over the entablature and extending to the apex of the frame is a cross in relief.

Completing the composition of the frontispiece is the choir-window oculus with plain stone frame that is centered above and touches the apex of the pediment. There are also two flanking window openings below the level of the oculus, these with plain square frames intersected at their lower inside corners by the pediment molding and having triangular headed openings with a concave interruption where the apex would ordinarily occur.

Doors are wood, paneled in the "Spanish" style and are later replacements.

- b. Windows: With the exception of the oculus over the apex of the frontispiece, the window openings are rectilinear. All are symmetrically placed. There is a square opening without decorative frame on the first level of each of the tower rooms. These have a four-light wood casement sash. Above them at the second level are small rectangular openings, one on each side.

The two windows flanking and adjoining the frontispiece have plain wide stone frames. The inner profile is like that of the doorway--polygonal. These have three-light wood casement.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Tunnel vaulted nave, chancel and transepts; dome on drum over crossing. Apparently all vaulting is masonry with exterior stuccoed with lime.
- b. Towers: Lower roofs are also apparently of stone. They rest on an octagonal base ring and are of octagonal pyramidal shape. They are terminated by small lanterns. All are apparently originally stuccoed.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Cruciform floor plan, including chancel, transepts and towers. At the west end is a choir.
2. Stairway: An exterior wood stairway with plain features is located on the east wall of the south towers, providing access to the choir.
3. Flooring: The original floor was packed earth. The current floor is of flagstone and cement mortar.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: White-painted walls and ceiling with a darker color dado.
5. Doorways: Plain round arch openings to baptistry and vestry.
6. Hardware: None of the original hardware in the church is visible.
7. Lighting: Modern electric fixtures.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces west. The mission site is located in the south part of the City of San Antonio.
2. Outbuilding: A restored convent adjoins the church at its southwest corner.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. Bibliography:

Corner, William. San Antonio De Bexar, A Guide and History.  
San Antonio: Bainbridge and Corner, 1890.

Prepared by: John C. Garner, Jr.  
Director, Bexar County Architecture Survey  
1969

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The San Antonio project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in the summer of 1968, and was made possible with funds from HABS and two sponsors, the Bexar County Historical Survey Committee and the San Antonio Conservation Society. Under the direction of James Massey, Chief of HABS, the project was carried out by Wesley I. Shank (Iowa State University), project supervisor, and by student assistant architects, Charles W. Barrow (University of Texas); Les Beilinson (University of Miami); William H. Edwards (University of Illinois); and Larry D. Hermsen (Iowa State University) at the HABS field office in the former Ursuline Academy buildings, San Antonio. John C. Garner, Jr., Director of Bexar County Architecture Survey, did the outside work on the written documentaries. Susan McCown, a HABS historian in the Washington, D.C. office, edited the written data in 1983, for preparation of transmittal to the Library of Congress.

The 1983 photographs of the church are part of the 1983 San Antonio Missions recording project, which was sponsored by the Southwest Regional Office, National Park Service. John Lowe of the HABS/HAER Office, Washington, D.C., took the photographs.



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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING  
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(Page 2)

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TX-319-A-1 through TX-319-A-17 were previously transmitted to the Library of Congress.

INDEX TO COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

All color xeroxes were made from a duplicate color transparency.

Jet Lowe, Photographer, Summer, 1983.

TX-319-A-18 (CT)      VAULTED CEILING OF SACRISTY

TX-319-A-19 (CT)      DETAIL OF DOORWAY