

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Sacred Places of the Southwest

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9r27s69f>

### Journal

Places, 7(1)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

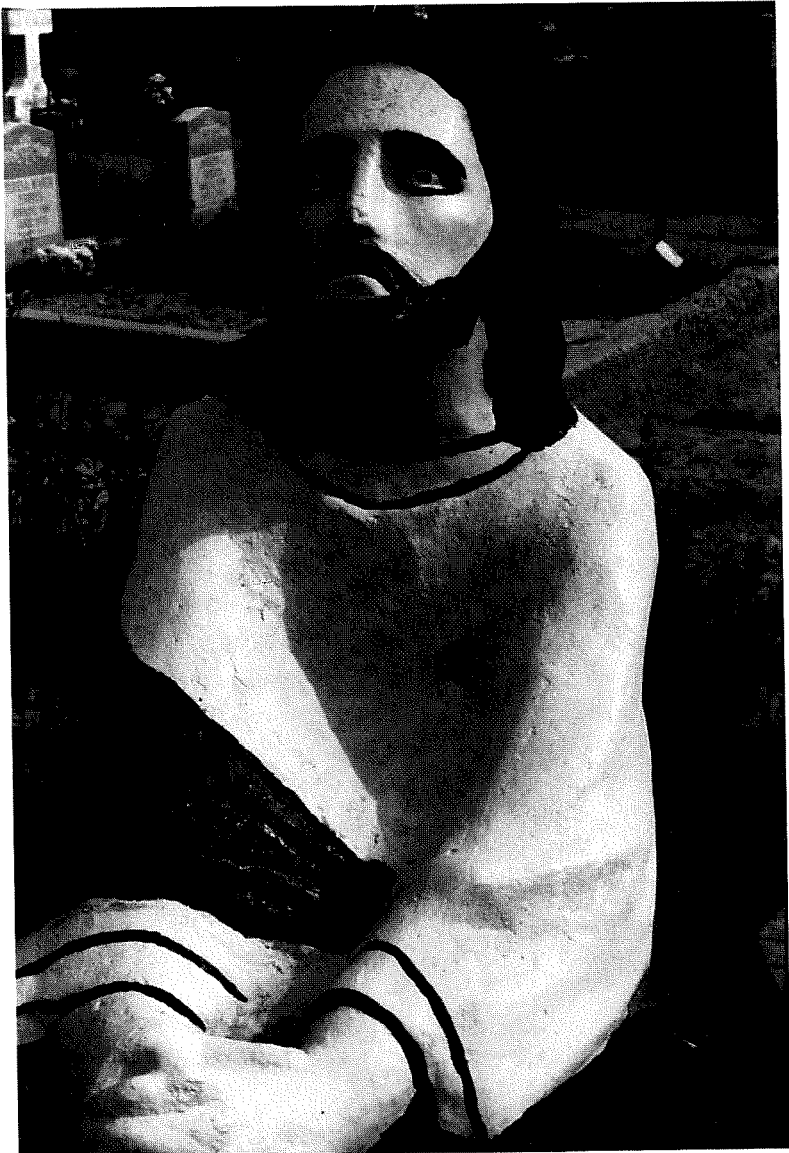
Sanborn, Laura Sue

### Publication Date

1990-10-01

Peer reviewed

# Sacred Places of the Southwest



Not far from our house in New Mexico was the village burial ground of Hispanic Catholics, called a *camposanto*, or “field of the saints.” The *camposanto* is different than the cemeteries most of us know. Here, people are allowed to express freely their emotions by creating personal, handmade grave markers that constitute a unique collection of religious folk art.

Tranquil in its harmony with nature and yet a vibrant and colorful portrait of its people, both living and dead, the *camposanto* is full of human drama and filled with poignant expressions of emotion. It is a place of change where wind shifts sand against sandstone, softening sculpted lines; where paint blisters and peels, only to be repainted by those who play for time against the forces of nature; and where seasons and holidays are celebrated.

As you approach a *camposanto*, you notice the vegetation there is indigenous — there is no manicured turf, no irrigation. The desert *camposanto* may be covered with fragrant sage and dotted with dark green junipers, or filled with cacti whose bright pink spring flowers further enliven the place. In the mountain *camposanto*, long grasses grow with piñon pine, and boulders jut up among the grave markers. Visitors to a rural *camposanto* often find themselves completely cradled by nature, alone with no reminders of civilization other than the messages of the markers. Even those *camposantos* now surrounded by urban development retain their native vegetation, which harmonizes with the larger landscape of mountains and mesas.

All *camposantos* are enclosed in some way, and you enter through a gate or portal. Some have both entry and exit gates for funerals, symbolizing the passage of life from one point to another. Often a massive cross, erected in the center of the *camposanto*, serves as the focal point and symbolizes the sanctity of the place.

Painted concrete Jesus,  
Espanola.

Photos by Laura Sue Sanborn.

Amid the native landscape inside the enclosure, you find the graves. Frequently, not only the grave marker but also the rest of the grave site is a work of art. Graves may be surrounded by handmade *cerquitas* (fences) commonly crafted out of wood, wrought iron, or metal pipe. One *cerquita* had wrought iron horses prancing at its four corners; another displayed the names of the deceased's children intricately carved on wooden side panels. Old, very ornate cast iron *cerquitas* were ordered by the wealthy from St. Louis and brought in by railroad.

The variety and ingenuity of the grave markers seem endless. You feel compelled to walk past each so as not to miss some new form of handicraft and creativity. The range of materials used to create the grave markers and by the exuberance of color and texture are amazing to a visitor.

The primary grave marker materials are wood, metal, stone and concrete, although re-used objects are also commonly incorporated. I have found grave markers made of or decorated with concrete blocks, patio stones, logs, wood rounds, bricks, large tiles, mosaic tiles, wrought iron, water pipe, PVC pipe, horseshoes, a floor grate, a sewer grate, appliance parts, automobile chrome, radiator parts, baby crib parts, ball bearings, glass blocks, marbles, shells, jewelry, a tackle box, earrings, rosary buttons, ashtrays, candlesticks, beer and pop cans, bottles, metal drums, jars, vases, pottery, pictures, picture frames, crucifixes, plastic flowers, silk flowers, paper flowers, flower boxes, egg cartons, Styrofoam, plastic, rope chicken wire, barrel rims, saw blades, paint, paint cans, cloth, yarn ribbon, plastic beads, glass beads, tacks, nails, pins, metallic letters, chunks of turquoise, cogs, gears, pebbles, lava rock, garden fence,

broken colored glass, small toys, pie pans, tin cans, a garden hoe, aluminum foil, Astroturf, carpeting, Popsicle sticks, sheet metal, shingles, wind chimes, light sockets, buckets, hood ornaments, padlocks, chains, flags, banners, wooden crates, silverware, door knobs and baby bottles.

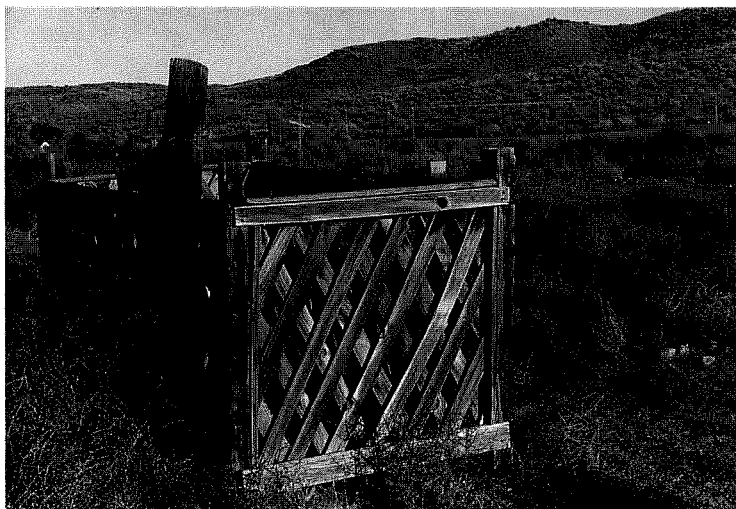
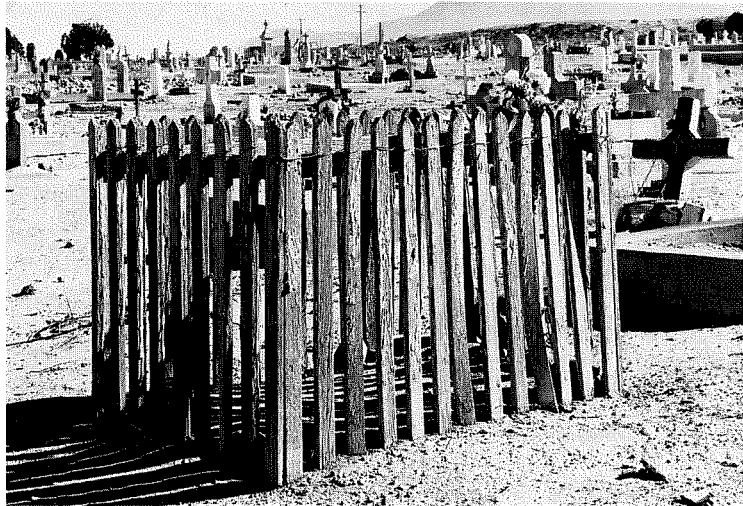
The ways in which these materials are used are as fascinating as the range of objects. One grave marker was created by embedding in a concrete cross a sealed Coke bottle in which a statue of Christ had been placed by sawing off and then re-gluing the bottom of the bottle. One woman had made a grave marker for her husband by centering her favorite glass candlesticks in the rectangular opening of a formed concrete cross so that the evening light shone through the glass, illuminating the entire marker. A whimsical child's grave marker was created out of pink and green patio blocks to look like a giant Easter basket, complete with colored, concrete eggs. Sunshine's grave had been marked by torching her name into a large circular saw blade that was welded to some machinery parts for a base.

Individually, such personalized grave sites may lead us to speculate upon the character of the maker or that of the deceased. Collectively, the markers—their materials, colors, forms, symbols, words and spatial arrangement—provide clues to a people's history and culture.

The earliest *camposanto* grave markers, which were made of wood, date back to the mid-1800s. Before them the poor were buried in unmarked graves and the wealthy beneath the church floor, with the church building providing a monument of status. Although the King of Spain ordered a halt to church floor burial in 1798 due to the unhealthy conditions it caused, New Mexicans were reluctant to com-

Wood *cerquita*, Albuquerque.

Metal pipe *cerquita*, Peralta.



ply since they thought unprotected grave sites would be prey to scavenging animals and raids by hostile Native Americans. But with the reduction of these threats, *camposantos* were created on the outskirts of villages, and grave marking became more important as wealthier members of the community were relegated to burial there.

Early wood grave markers became more elaborate when traders arrived in New Mexico with improved wood-working tools. Two of the most remarkable wood markers I found stood like Easter Island sentinels; these giant slabs of wood, a precious commodity in the desert, has weathered a silver gray and showed the patterns where plaques had once been. No names or dates were discernible—the markers stand as a mute testament to the status of those interred in their shadow.

Traders also imported iron, which artisans formed into more durable crosses and *cerquitas*. Stone grave markers didn't become popular until the 1880s when the railroad arrived in New Mexico, along with a new wave

of settlers. Among these were French and Italian stonecutters, who were brought in to embellish public buildings, but who also carved marble headstones for the wealthy. Local people copied this art in the local sandstone and limestone.

Grave marker materials continue to reflect the material culture of the time. Concrete remains most popular because it is easy to form and decorate and is relatively durable. Grave markers made in the 1950s use large glass ashtrays, chrome car parts, hood ornaments and white and black enameled appliance parts. An influx of 1960s hippie culture is evident on markers decorated with peace signs and love beads. The use of other decorative materials is rooted in ancient traditions: The colored tile mosaics covering some grave markers represent a Moorish art brought over from Spain.

The *camposantos* are colorful places, not only because of the materials used, but also because many markers are brightly painted. Light blue, pink, green, red-orange and silver are the most popular colors. Murals or religious scenes are sometimes painted on markers or on concrete slabs covering the entire grave. Paint brightens gray machine-made markers, with the etched figures filled in like drawings in a coloring book.

In the *camposanto* religious symbolism abounds. Almost all grave markers are either in the form of a cross or are decorated with crosses and crucifixes. Often, three or four crosses are stuck in the grave mound along with rosaries, statues and framed pictures of Christ, Mary and patron saints. Other common *camposanto* symbols include the heart, long a symbol of love; the



**A recent cross made of glass candle holders, Peralta.**

Paschal Lamb, often seen on children's markers; the dove, representing the soul's peaceful ascension into Heaven; and, in one village *camposanto*, a death's-head design, similar to those on early New England headstones.

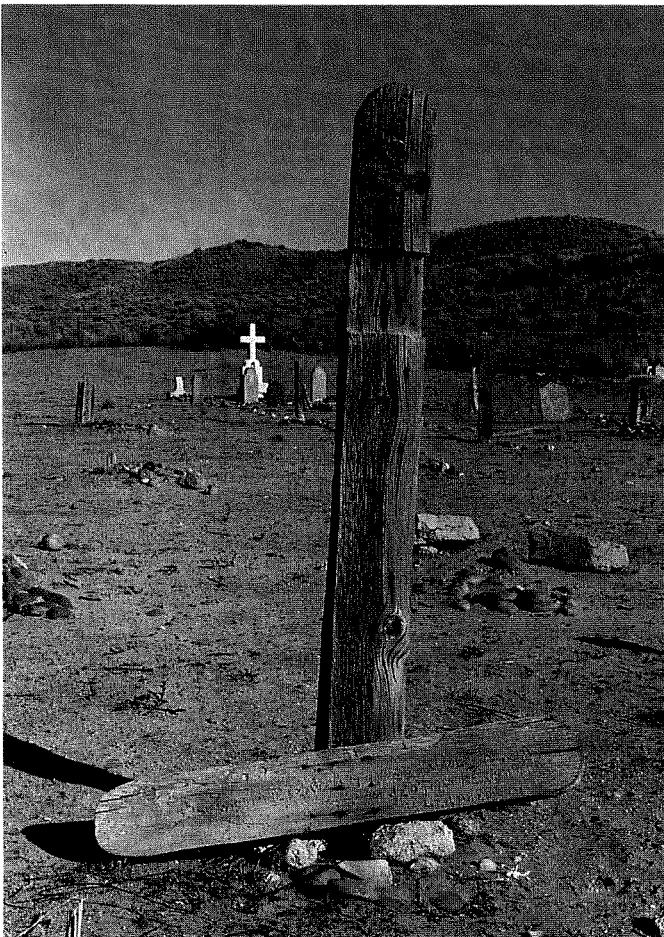
A fascinating gesture found in some *camposantos* stems from old Navajo and Pueblo traditions. The grave mounds are either completely covered with the deceased's dishes and pottery, which have been deliberately broken over the grave to symbolically break the chain of death in a family, or covered with dishes and pottery intact, placed there so the deceased will have something with which to eat in the afterlife. Even the contents of the deceased's refrigerator sometimes appear.

Other symbolic gestures suggest intriguing possibilities for their meaning and origin. A door plate and knob found on one grave may be a symbolic door to Heaven, or perhaps it is just the doorknob from the deceased's home. A light socket found embedded in a concrete marker may have contained a bulb that symbolically lights the deceased's way to the afterworld (just as some Swiss hang lanterns on graves for that purpose today), or it may be a sign of status for a family that was fortunate enough to have electricity.

Symbols and decorations are used more extensively than words, especially on older markers, which sometimes have no more than a cross, name, or date. The abundance of misspelled words and backwards letters indicates difficulty with written language, especially English. I couldn't help but smile at the carefully carved child's stone that read, "For My Little Angle."

The spatial organization of the *camposantos* stresses the individual rather than the family. Curbed or fenced family plots with large family markers, common in Anglo

**Early wood gravemarker, Peralta.**



**Simple stone marker, Galisteo.**





Grave decorated for the holidays, Albuquerque.



cemeteries, are rarely found in the *camposanto*. Instead, the individual's grave is curbed or fenced. Husband and wife do not necessarily lie side by side, and children are often relegated to a separate section. A particularly disturbing section of some *camposantos* is the "limbo" area—an array of small concrete blocks marking the graves of unbaptized babies whose souls can go to neither Heaven nor hell.

Grave alignment is important in many religions, with "feet to the east" the most common Christian burial pattern, reflecting a belief in Christ's resurrection in the east. The Hispanic Catholic burial, however, doesn't favor any particular alignment. I have found *camposanto* graves aligned with all compass directions as well as facing the main road, the central cross, the down slope on a hill, or secondary lanes within the *camposanto*. Susan Hazen-Hammond writes that the lack of a distinct orientation may reflect the belief that "since life is not orderly, why should death be?"

*Camposantos* are places where life is celebrated, not forgotten. Anna Marie kneels in the parted sage repainting her grandfather's name under the hot noon sun with the only tool she has—a toothpick. Mr. Romero brings a favorite baseball and places it on his son's ten-year-old grave. The Martinez family has gathered to braid bright new ribbons through the iron bars of a child's *cerquita* and to whitewash the boulders outlining family graves. Nearby, a new banner on a grave-mound is printed with the words, "I love you Grandpa."

During the Christmas holiday, decorated Christmas trees, garlands, wreaths, ornaments and toys are placed at some headstones. One Christmas I saw two small, red, toy-filled stockings propped up against the headstones of a baby brother and sis-

ter. At Easter, new crucifixes appear, lilies are planted and ceramic Easter bunnies and eggs are left on graves. Styrofoam hearts covered with red plastic roses are left for deceased wives and sweethearts on Valentine's Day. And attached to the *cerquita* of Maria Teresa were the shriveled remains of a pink balloon on a string and a "Happy Birthday" party napkin.

But something dismaying is happening to some *camposantos*: They are being destroyed. *Camposantos* in urban areas are falling victim to land use pressures and the lure of higher economic returns. *Camposantos* have been paved over for parking lots and built over for condominiums and commercial development. I watched as bulldozers ravaged one *camposanto*, destroying hundreds of handmade grave markers so the area could be turned into a manicured cemetery. Rows of wooden, stone and wrought-iron crosses were gouged from the places once sanctified by their presence. By the time the workers finished, 1,500 graves had been scraped bare.

The native vegetation of this *camposanto*, which was home to a wealth of urban wildlife, has been replaced with sod, which must be mowed and irrigated. Instead of the highly personal handmade markers, only uniform machine-made markers that lie flush with the grass are allowed. The *camposanto*, with its unique Southwestern landscape, has been replaced with a generic memorial park.

One day while photographing this destruction, I asked the cemetery superintendent why it was happening. He answered, "Money," and went on to explain that "once we've got sod and water in here, people have to pay for it, you know, perpetual care. And they have to buy the headstones too." Then, pointing to a few remaining handmade crosses laying in the sage-

brush, he added, "you can't make any money on this stuff."

Unfortunately, little or no protection exists for the *camposantos*. The National Register of Historic Places recognizes only those cemeteries with significance derived from association with historic events or persons of national renown (such as Arlington National Cemetery), or of exceptional architectural design (such as the mausoleums and crypts of New Orleans). The New Mexico Historic Preservation Division recognizes the cultural significance of the *camposantos*; however, it has not had the funds to document them systematically. Consequently, destroyed grave markers are lost without any public record of their existence.

Should we preserve *camposantos* for the future just as they are now? Or should the traditional pattern continue with nature, time and changing customs all taking their toll. To insist on preservation of the *camposantos'* existing qualities would put an end to their value as cultural indicators. Yet the loss of such highly personal, meaningful traditions would be lamentable.

Fortunately, there are several hundred rural *camposantos* where change takes place more slowly. Probably the best we can do is to recognize and document these jewels in the landscape. The *camposanto* will also be carried on in the minds of those who experience them. For those who witness the dramatic melding of land and people, for those who see the tiny stuffed bear tied with ribbons to little Maria's wooden cross or the eyes of Reyes as he stares from his picture across the field of saints, there will be no forgetting these sacred places.