Discoveries Along the Way.
Archaeology of Historic San Luis Obispo

M. Colleen Hamilton, M.A., RPA
Applied EarthWorks, Inc.

In 1999, AE’s historical archaeological team began a most remarkable journey into San Luis Obispo’s past. Inspired by the Copeland brothers’ transformative project for downtown San Luis Obispo, AE teamed with Copeland Properties to explore the historic core of the city. In the fall of 2002, the City Council certified the Project’s EIR as “a vision for the future inspired by its past” and the first full-scale archaeological investigations began. This work recently culminated in excavations in 2016. We have created this symposium to explore the discoveries made along the way and the relationships forged with the local San Luis Obispo community.

In March 2015, Applied EarthWorks, Inc. (AE) staff initiated archaeological monitoring and data recovery excavations in conjunction with the Monterey In Fill Project in the downtown area of San Luis Obispo. The Project focused on development of vacant lots between the Blackstone and Muzio buildings and in the adjacent Bello lot along Monterey Street (Figure 1). At the start of the Project the Bello’s building was extant but was to be demolished, and the Blackstone and Muzio buildings were slated for restoration. The project was to construct retail offices and commercial space on the first story of these historic structures and residential units on the second floor. This pattern of first story commercial/second story residential is curiously reflective of mid to late nineteenth century building use in commercial sectors of communities elsewhere. Storekeepers resided above their shops or had houses at the rear of the lot.

In September 1999, Copeland Properties presented a conceptual design for the redevelopment project to the City of San Luis Obispo entitled “Chinatown-Court Street. A Vision for the Future of Downtown San Luis Obispo, California, Inspired by its Past” (Nettles 2006:1). After its acceptance in the fall of 2002 the plan was put into motion with the certification of the Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR; AMEC 2007), and AE’s team of archaeologists were instrumental in moving this transformative project forward.

Initial archaeological excavations preceded development of the Palm/Morro lot – initiating the first phase of the plan (Nettles 2006). Due in part to the economic recession of 2008, the next phase of work did not occur for 13 years. Then the former Shanghai Low building was demolished to develop a temporary municipal parking lot in the Yung lot (Hamilton et. al 2014a). This work was followed closely by archaeological investigation below the extant Blackstone and Muzio buildings (Hamilton et. al 2014b). In 2015, actual development along Monterey Street began. The first phase of the Monterey In Fill Project proposed to build 37 residential units on the second story of the newly renovated Muzio and Blackstone buildings, as well as adding 50,000 square feet of new retail space and 2,800 square feet of office space either side of the Muzio building and in Bello’s lot. Construction of an adjacent 80 room boutique hotel facing Palm Street would follow. A pedestrian plaza in the center of the block was to connect the two phases of development.

Archaeological investigations between 2002 and 2012 revealed high archaeological sensitivity in historic block 372 (later renumber as Block 14), having recovered both mission-era and mid to late nineteenth century artifacts amid archaeological deposits (Nettles 2006; Hamilton et. al 2014a,b). The site was first designated the Palm Street Historic Site, or Chinatown, in 1986, in conjunction with the construction of a mid-rise parking structure on the north side of Palm Street. Subsequent archaeological investigations occurred in the Kozak lot in 1995, also for a parking structure (Heritage Discoveries 1995); in the Palm/Morro Street lot (on the east side of Morro) in 2002 (Nettles 2006); in the Yung lot in
Figure 1. Monterey In-Fill Project Area, San Luis Obispo, California (highlighted numbers 1-16 indicate structures previously evaluated for historic significance).

September 2011 (Hamilton et al 2014a); and in the Blackstone, Sauer, and Muzio lots in February 2012 (Hamilton et al 2014b). All excavations exposed mission-era deposits and remnants of Chinese and Anglo-American occupation dating to the 1800s.

The level of previous disturbance in the Project area varied. Several buildings along Monterey Street had been moved back 12 to 14 feet in the early 1900s so the street could be widened to accommodate the new state highway along Monterey Street. Historic maps show street widening occurred from the Muzio building east to the corner of Monterey and Morro streets (Figure 2).

Widening, however, did not occur on the lots between the Muzio and Blackstone buildings. It was here archaeologists found mission-era structural remains. The north end of each lot was undisturbed and the historic grade was buried beneath eight feet of fill. In 2015, at the back of the lots along Monterey Street, construction removed the steep-incline, bringing the entire lot down to street grade (Hamilton et al 2017).

Æ’s historical archaeology team has dealt with the difficulty of performing phased archaeological investigation in an urban setting before. The presence of deep fill confounds scheduling, and logistics can delay construction. Further, it was necessary to remove the Bello’s building before archaeological
excavations could ensue. AE’s team, therefore, combined the discovery, evaluation, and mitigation phases of the Monterey In Fill Project into a single operation. This streamlined approach emphasized the gathering of detailed background information and archival data in advance of fieldwork, identifying target areas most likely to contain archaeological remains. This strategy allowed identification of a variety of feature types (midden, pit features, wells, structural remains, stone walls, etc.) dating to different time periods (mission-era, early Native American, and Anglo-American commercial and residential). Features and strata meeting predefined significance criteria were identified, evaluated upon exposure, and excavated under a program of controlled data recovery. Based on the archaeological deposits found, a picture of mission site usage and the transition to historic commercial district began to emerge.

AE’s archaeologists performed data recovery excavations within the heart of what once was the mission pueblo. Between 1845 and 1900 the pueblo faded from view beneath the evolving commercial district of San Luis Obispo. Archaeological deposits exposed in the Bello and Sauer/Little lots included mission-era structural remains and domestic midden deposits, late 1800s privy pits, an early 1900s pharmaceutical bottle concentration, and an extensive 1910s kitchen midden (Figure 3).

Two privies exposed in the Bello’s lot appeared to have been abandoned and filled between 1880 and 1886. Their association was with a restaurant fronting Morro Street and an associated residence at the rear. This establishment was an oyster bar offering expedient meals and ample libations perhaps catering to the San Luis Obispo red light district situated half a block to the north. The houses of prostitution operated at the corner of Palm and Morro Streets between the 1880s and the early 1900s. Also found in the Bello lot was a bottle concentration associated with the Eagle Pharmacy, which occupied a lot along Monterey Street between 1876 and 1922. Bottles recovered provide a unique seriation of patent medicines manufactured over a period of 32 years. Around the corner and down the street at the back lot of the Little-Sauer Adobe, excavators found a dense kitchen midden containing refuse, bottles, broken ceramics, and personal artifacts. This deposit appears to be linked to a kitchen/saloon and/or popular French restaurant in operation on Monterey Street during the early 1900s.
Buried below layers of historic fill and countless rebuilding episodes lay hidden the Indian village which developed outside the mission quadrangle between 1772 and 1835. Here lay stone walls terracing the steep slope between Palm and Monterey Streets and two parallel stone walls forming an aqueduct channeling water from the Morro Street reservoir to a cistern found in the Sauer lot. A mid-1800s newspaper reported the discovery of a “smelter” near the entrance to E. M. Payne’s plumbing shop, later the Blackstone Hotel, and a 1935 mission retrospective spoke of Indian housing on both sides of Chorro Street (Weber 1985:163). AE’s 2012 excavation revealed elements of this housing, and the Kozak report described mission-era kitchen midden to the east. In 2012, excavations beneath the Blackstone and Muzio buildings revealed contemporary structural remains and an irrigation ditch running perpendicular to Monterey Street. In 2015, excavators found a series of rock foundations at the former site of the Sauer/Little Adobe extant from at least late mission times (1830s) and finally demolished in the 1910s. Below its expanded floor plan was the deep well pit that once provided water to the Indian village.

When the Chumash inhabitants of the valley traveled to the dedication of Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa in 1772, they were greeted by the Franciscan fathers eager to share their visions of Christianity and Spanish global commerce. The missionaries brought metal tools, glass trade beads, new technology, and exotic foods – specifically red sugar (Webb 1985:116). The event must have seemed familiar to the Chumash, who conducted trade fairs and festive gatherings of their own where exotic goods were exchanged and alliances were cemented or renewed through the exchange of shell beads.

The mission site selected in 1772 sat on the summit of a low hill between two arroyos (Palou 1926:361). Here an aqueduct was built to supply the mission orchards situated to the northwest, a mill at the reservoir to the north, another to the south along Arroyo San Luis Obispo, and the vineyards beyond. The Chumash lived at or near the mission, acquiring farming skills, procuring food from a communal kitchen, and attending religious services (Kocher 1972:15). The mission population peaked in 1805 when it briefly reached 961 individuals (Weber 1985:19). While the Chumash experienced an unimaginable number of deaths from European diseases, the mission fathers proclaimed those years an “age of prosperity,” and many construction projects ensued (Kocher 1972:27–31). At that time, the church, outbuildings, and adobe houses were constructed. The mission Indians lived outside the mission walls.
along Chorro Street within the limits of Block 327. As early as 1801, six adobe houses measuring 20 by 17 feet stood outside the mission walls. The roofs were tiled and had windows; they “marked the first solid housing for Indian families” (Kocher 1972:27–31). The year 1802 saw the building of 28 more homes of the same sort, while succeeding years brought the addition of others. At the same time older buildings received updates and repairs (Weber 1985:21). By 1810, some 80 adobe structures occupied the blocks bordering the mission. Previous archaeological excavation in the Kozak, Yung, and Palm/Morro lots supports this contention (Hamilton et. al 2014a and b). Investigations in the Blackstone, Sauer/Little, and Bello lots revealed that other activities occurred outside the mission walls, characterizing life during those early years (Hamilton et. al 2017).

Unlike excavations to the north, the mission-ERA deposits along Monterey Street were largely structural in nature and were not as clearly residential as those found in the Yung and Kozak lots. The only known residential structure on this portion of the site was the Sauer/Little Adobe. Mission-era midden was present in these lots but was much more limited and concentrated along the aqueduct stone walls, stone terraces, and in the drainage ditch beneath the Blackstone building. Mid nineteenth century newspaper article reported construction along Morro Street reported and the exposure of “smelters” in the general vicinity of the Blackstone building (Nettles and Price 2006:28). Here is where Æ archaeologists found a stone foundation that required use of a jackhammer to remove (Cut 1), an earthen ditch filled with mission-era artifacts (Cut 2), and a compacted historic surface (Hamilton 2014b). Architectural similarities in construction of Cut 1 and the aqueduct stone laterals (Cuts 17 and 18), stone terraces (Cuts 4/24 and Cut 9) and the stone well/cistern (Cuts 13 and 14) suggest they were all built at the same time and use collectively (Hamilton et. al 2017).

The aqueduct channel passed through the Yung lot and into the Sauer/Little lot. It appears to have continued past Cut 13, the well found in 2015 (Figure 4). Nearby Cut 14, built of small, tightly packed rounded stones may have been a jetty that channeled water into the well. Midden was concentrated at the juncture of Cut 17, the eastern wall of the aqueduct, and Cut 24, the stone terrace wall that stretched east. This midden contained food refuse, shell and glass beads, and a few pottery vessel fragments. Unlike the midden found in the Yung and Kozak lots, this deposit more likely accumulated as a result of daily chores (Hamilton 2014a; Heritage Discoveries 1995).

Archaeologists in 2012 characterized Cut 1 (found below the Blackstone building) as a long, flat surface stretching at least 26 feet in length. Its width is not known, but it lay west of the well/cistern. Speculatively, Cut 1 represented a work surface. Similar structures have been found associated with lavanderias such as were found at the Santa Barbara pueblo. Here, on either side of the aqueduct channel, smooth stone surfaces sloped away from the water source. At Mission Santa Inez, the narrow lavanderia basin was spanned by an arched walkway similar in appearance to the arched walkway found adjacent to Cut 13 (Figure 5). This walkway, positioned along the northern edge of the well, would have provided sure footing and access to the water within the feature. These structural remnants, the flat work surface (Cut 1), drainage ditch (Cut 2), well and archway (Cuts 13 and 14), aqueduct lateral walls (Cuts 17 and 18), and smelters formed an industrial work area located outside the mission quadrangle at the edge of the Indian village.

The mission population peaked in 1805. By this date the church, outbuildings, and adobe houses with red tile roofs had been built, as had 80 permanent Indian houses and a communal kitchen (Kocher 1972). Æ’s test excavations in the Yung lot in 2012 prior to the building of a parking lot revealed complex site stratigraphy representing the various building and occupation phases of the center of the block. Stratum V exposed in the Yung lot (Figure 6) appears to represent the contact period when the missionaries first appeared on site (Hamilton et. al 2014a). The first mission structures burned in 1776, were rebuilt, and burned again in 1788 as seen in Stratum IV. Stratum III represented the period of extensive building between 1798 and the 1810s. Weber (1985:1964) and others set the decline of the native village at between 1834 (secularization) and 1845 (sale of the mission lands).
Figure 4. TA-2 South Excavation.

Figure 5. Cut 13 – Arched Walkway over the Well in the Sauer-Little Lot.
Figure 6. Stratigraphy Exposed in the Yung Lot.
By 1841, when Duflot De Mofras visited the mission, it was in ruins and only a few Mission Indians remained in the “tumble-down houses that surround the mission” (Weber 1985:36). The following year the Mexican Governor decreed that the Mission of San Luis Obispo “was raised to the rank of pueblo” and that the remaining Indians were to be freed. The lands of the Indians were not to be sold until their owners and their heirs abandoned them in death or otherwise when they would revert back to Mexico. The “emancipated” Indians and other settlers were to care for and keep in good condition the church, the corrals, the water ditches, the dams, and the rodeos (Weber 1985:39).

Much knowledge has been gained about Mission San Luis Obispo and the associated Native American village. At all times during excavation in this sensitive area, AE staff worked closely with Native American monitors who guided recovery of information important in the lives of their ancestors. The city residents and visitors to San Luis Obispo in 2015 showed keen interested in the excavations. This research focused on the mission-period deposits found, but much evidence of the later transitions to San Luis Obispo’s commercial district was also discovered. A discussion of that component awaits later exploration and is summarized in AE’s 2017 report (Hamilton et al. 2017).

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