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## **The Archaeological Conservancy Acquires New Preserve Near Mission San Lorenzo de la Cruz**

**By April M. Brown, Southwest Regional Director, The Archaeological**



### **Conservancy**

**View from the preserve looking east toward the Mission San Lorenzo site. Middens are visible along the south and west fence lines and there is a potential foundation stone for the mission behind the shed located in the right of this photo.**

The Archaeological Conservancy (TAC) is a non-profit organization that acquires and preserves significant cultural sites across the nation, and they recently acquired property in Camp Wood containing archaeological deposits related to Mission San Lorenzo de la Cruz.

The property that comprises the main portion of Mission San Lorenzo de la Cruz is owned by the City of Camp Wood and managed by the Nueces Canyon Mission Restoration Organization (NCMRO). The preserve borders the mission property to the south and west, and contains important middens, features, and possible Apache camps that have not been previously recorded or researched. The property also includes a portion of the natural spring that has attracted people to this site for thousands of years.

Mission San Lorenzo de la Cruz was established for the Lipan Apache in 1762 by Franciscan friars who hoped to quell violent Apache raids across the frontier. Daily operations were overseen by Captain Felipe Rábago who was a wily and controversial character in early Texas history. Constructed in phases, the complex grew into an impressive wilderness outpost of 14 adobe and limestone structures that included a church, sacristy, granary, bastion, and residences, along with camps, agricultural fields, and irrigation features that extended beyond the walls of the complex. Historical accounts indicate that the mission eventually became a place of refuge for both the Apache and the Spanish who later faced a common enemy in the Comanche. After only nine years, the mission was decommissioned and abandoned. The ruins deteriorated rapidly, however, the site continued to be occupied well into historical times

by Indigenous groups, soldiers, and settlers. The site also served as the U.S. Military installation of Camp Wood from 1857 to 1861.

The new preserve was recommended by Dr. Tamra Walter of Texas Tech University who conducted excavations at the mission complex in 2019. During the project, Dr. Walter noted important archaeological deposits extending beyond the property boundaries, but she was unable to gain access to investigate further. In early 2023, Jan Prather and Jim Holder informed Dr. Walter that this property was about to go on the market, and she feared that, with new owners, the property would become fodder for the popular “pay-to-dig” programs that frequent this area of Texas. These programs often focus on deeply buried archaic deposits while destroying the later archaeological layers in the process. Paying participants are allowed to remove and keep the artifacts they find. Important archaeological information is lost forever. Dr. Walter reached out to TAC for help, and Southwest Regional Director April Brown worked closely with Dr. Walter, NCMRO, and the landowners for several months to negotiate a successful outcome that would preserve this property, extend the mission site boundaries, and protect it from such a fate.

TAC will continue to work in tandem with Dr. Walter and NCMRO to create a management plan for the site. Dr. Walter recently conducted shovel testing on the property in preparation for subdividing and selling the 1,500 square foot home. All 16 shovel tests produced artifacts related to the mission in addition to archaic deposits. The vacant land containing these important deposits will become an extension of the Mission San Lorenzo historical site in cooperation with NCMRO. Future work at the site will include trail and fence construction, clean-up, revegetation, and the installation of educational kiosks. With the help of NCMRO, the site will eventually be open for day use by the public and offer recreational and educational opportunities for tourists and the local community. Future research at this site will give us a better understanding of daily life at the mission and may reveal new details about the relationships between the Spanish and the Lipan Apache during a tumultuous time in early Texas history.

TAC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization headquartered in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 40 years, TAC has preserved over 600 sites across the nation. They currently manage 22 preserves in Texas including the historic Meyer Pottery Kiln outside of San Antonio, Gault Site just north of Austin, and now the Camp Wood Site near Mission San Lorenzo de la Cruz. These important archaeological sites are acquired through the generous support of our members. To learn more TAC and how to become a member, visit [archaeologicalconservancy.org](https://archaeologicalconservancy.org).

Additional Photos:



Spanish gunflint found during the recent shovel testing by Dr. Water and her crew.



Aerial Photo from the 2019 excavations at Mission San Lorenzo (foreground). The new preserve contains the house and the vacant lot located in the right of this photo.