

The Home Away From Home:
El Quartejejo Pueblo Ruins, Scott County, Kansas

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By the mid 17th century Spain had established itself as a dominant player in the settlement of what is now the American Southwest, in particular, northern New Mexico. Even before the famous Pueblo Revolt of 1680 countless numbers of Pueblo Indians at Taos concealed certain hostilities towards their Spanish overlords. Many of the Pueblo Indians were angry with the Spaniards because they were denouncing and prohibiting their ancient religious practices, imposing Christianity upon them and forcing the Indians into labor.¹ But what do oppressed Indians in northern New Mexico during the mid 17th century have to do with a pueblo site discovered in rural Scott County, Kansas in 1898? It is believed that these oppressed Taos, and later Picuris Indians (located near Taos), were the builders and tenants of the El Quartejeo pueblo ruins in northern Scott County. These fleeing Indians were not alone once they arrived on the Great Plains; they encountered many Plains Indians groups such as the Apaches and Pawnees whom they lived amongst and fought against. The flight of the Indians from Taos and Picuris also, eventually, led to their recapture by Spanish Lieutenant Juan de Archuleta and Sergeant-Major Juan de Ulibarri. After this eventful period in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, El Quartejeo pueblo became dormant for nearly 200 hundred years, other than the occasional use by Apache Indians and Spanish explorers such as Lieutenant Colonel Don Pedro de Villasur who camped at the site while scouting for French forces in the area.² It would not be

¹ Robert W. Preucel, *Archaeologies of the Pueblo Revolt* (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 214.

² Frank W. Blackmar, *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, Etc., Vol. 2* (Chicago: Standard Publishing Company, 1912), 846-847.

until 1898 that early Scott County pioneer Herbert L. Steele would stumble upon the pueblo ruins by accident. There are still many speculations as to how Steele actually discovered the ruins, which were located several hundred yards north of his own home.

As mentioned above, the Spanish overlords of the northern New Mexico region ruled their newly conquered province with an iron fist. The Spaniards prohibited the Pueblo Indians from following their old religious practices, attempted to convert the Indians to Christianity through coercion, and forced the Indians to work in labor camps.³ It would become very important, almost necessary, for the church, which was very powerful during this time, to convert the Indians to Christianity because it was their opinion that once converted, the Indians belonged to the Spanish.⁴ If the Spanish believed these newly “converted” Indians belonged to them, then who’s to stop them from using the Indians as slave laborers?

The Spanish oppression of the Pueblo Indians eventually became too much for some Taos Indians to handle and around 1664 a small group fled to the Great Plains region, specifically between the Arkansas and Platte Rivers.⁵ It is believed that this first group of runaway Taos Indians, who had taken refuge with a group of Plains Apache Indians (also known as the Quartejeo Apache), built the dwelling, which was of Pueblo style. The Apache Indians, who were already living in this area, frequented the pueblo site in order to farm certain crops, but they would stay only long enough to harvest and then make their winter camps elsewhere.⁶ The Taos Indians were not able to avoid recapture though and less than a decade after their flight

³ Preucel, *Archaeologies of the Pueblo Revolt*, 214.

⁴ Clyde Blackburn, "Trailway of the Past," *Kansas Territorial* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1980).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Thomas, *After Coronado: Spanish Exploration Northeast of New Mexico, 1696-1727* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 11-20.

Spanish government officials sent Lieutenant Juan de Archuleta to collect and escort them back to Taos.⁷

In 1696 another group of Pueblo Indians, the Picuris, which was a pueblo near Taos, eluded their Spanish rulers, for the same reasons as before, religious persecution and forced labor, and went to live amongst the Quartejejo Apache. However, their experience with the Quartejejo Apaches was much different than their Taos predecessors. The Picuris Indians lived amongst the Apache for about a decade, just like the Taos. Unlike the Taos Indians however, the Picuris had, more or less, become slaves of the Apaches and desired to go back to their home pueblo in New Mexico.⁸ Don Lorenzo, who was the chief of these runaway Picuris, sent a message and a petition back to the Spanish governor in Santa Fe, pleading for rescue from the Apaches.⁹ In 1706, Sergeant-Major Juan de Ulibarri and 132 men, including a priest, were sent northeast to retrieve the Picuris Indians from the plains and return them back to New Mexico.¹⁰ When Ulibarri arrived, in what is now northern Scott County, Kansas, he noted in his diary that Don Lorenzo, the chief, and the other Picuris' were living in little houses or huts. Ulibarri also noted in his diary that he "brought back 62 persons, small and grown of the Picuris, who were living as apostates, slaves of the devil and as captives of the barbarity of the Apache."¹¹

Although Ulibarri's prime intention during this expedition was to rescue and return the Picuris Indians to New Mexico, he was assigned another task as well. His other task was to scout for and gain information about French who were possibly in the area and allied with other Indian tribes such as the Pawnee. Ulibarri also believed the French had given or traded guns to

⁷ Robert Hoard, "El Quartejejo," *Kansas Heritage* (Spring 2006): 8.

⁸ Blackburn, "Trailway of the Past."

⁹ Thomas A. Witty, "Archeology and Early History of the Scott Lake State Park Area," *Kansas Anthropological Association* Vol. 1 (1971): 2.

¹⁰ Blackburn, "Trailway of the Past."

¹¹ Thomas, *After Coronado: Spanish Exploration Northeast of New Mexico, 1696-1727*, 21.

the Pawnee.¹² It is thought by some that, after the departure of the Picuris Indians back to their homeland of New Mexico, that the French may have taken over and utilized these little houses or huts. However, there is no strong evidence to support this theory.

For nearly 200 years the pueblo lay dormant, other than the occasional use by Spanish explorers, such as Lieutenant Colonel Don Pedro de Villasur, and Apache Indians.¹³ During this 200-year period the pueblo began to disintegrate from the harsh Kansas winds, thunderstorms and winters. Eventually the whole building would succumb to the elements and be buried by the dirt carried by Kansas' powerful winds. It would not be until 1898, when early Scott County pioneer Herbert L. Steele, would come across the pueblo ruins. Steele was the epitome of a pioneer, as seen in attachment 1. He had a big bushy beard, he built his own home out of native sandstone found in Scott County and he farmed his own land. Steele also moved quite extensively, as many early pioneers were known to do. He was originally from the state of New York but was enticed to move to Dickinson County, Kansas after modifications were made to the Homestead Act, and he eventually would follow his parents west across Kansas where he filed a land claim in Scott County in 1888.¹⁴

How Steele came across the ruins is still speculated today. There are many different sources that all have different stories. One source said Steele was plowing in the area and noticed ground squirrels were bringing up charred kernels of corn from the ground. Another source claims Steele noticed the outline of a mound on his land, being aware that Indians had once lived in the area, he assumed this had to be one of the early Indian campsites. Yet another source

¹² Ibid., 68-75.

¹³ Don Pedro Villasur, *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society 1909-1910*, XI, George W. Martin (Topeka: State Printing Office, 1910), 405-410.

¹⁴ Maxine Callender, "Herbert L. Steele," in *History of Early Scott County*, by Scott County Historical Society Book Committee (Shakopee, MN: Scott County Historical Society, 1977), 233.

claims that he was plowing his land and came across so many arrowheads, beads and pottery shards that he had no doubt in his mind he had discovered an Indian camp.¹⁵ Whatever the case was for Steele to stumble upon the pueblo ruins, he was immediately aware of the historical importance of the site and contacted archaeologists S.W. Williston and H.T. Martin, from the University of Kansas.¹⁶

In the summer of 1898 Williston and Martin made the almost 350 mile trek from Lawrence, Kansas to the pueblo ruins in northern Scott County. The excavation of the ruins took close to three weeks and in that time they were able to thoroughly excavate the ruins as well as document a wealth of tools, pottery and other artifacts found inside the pueblo's foundation. Both archaeologists were positive that the ruins were of pueblo origin, most definitely not made by the Spanish or French. Evidence suggests that either of the two groups may have occupied the pueblo at one point in time. The evidence to support this theory was the finding of an iron ax, as well as other artifacts that clearly show the use of metal saw teeth.¹⁷ Williston and Martin both agree that, "there is no other place so well suited for a settlement within 100 miles or more of the Beaver Creek in Scott County."¹⁸ This is because of the spring-fed creek that runs through this area, which would supply the Indians with drinking water, irrigation water for crops as well as an extensive cache of fish, for food, and beavers, for pelts.

While excavating the pueblo site extreme caution was taken, of course, in order not to damage the structure itself as well as the plastering, which covered the walls that remained. The walls were about two and a half feet in height and made from stone acquired from the

¹⁵ Ibid., 234-235.

¹⁶ H.T. Martin and S.W. Williston, "Some Pueblo Ruins in Scott County, Kansas," *Kansas University Quarterly* (1899).

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

surrounding hills.¹⁹ Once the site was completely exhumed Williston and Martin were able to measure the pueblo's size. It was 53 feet by 35 feet, including seven rooms of varying sizes and two pits were found near the pueblo which were believed to be used for the mixing of the adobe that was applied to the walls of the structure.²⁰ A floor plan of the pueblo can be seen in attachment 2. There were also pairs of holes found in many of the rooms, which indicates the use of ladders, which were used to get in and out of the pueblo via the roof, as there were no ingress or egress doorways or windows. The charred kernels of corn that Mr. Steele, supposedly, saw ground squirrels bringing up from the area in which the pueblo was discovered would be confirmed during the excavation. Charred corn was found in almost every room, in some areas it was 4 or 5 inches deep, Williston and Martin also note that the pueblo "presents evidence of having been destroyed by fire, whether as the result of some accident or by Indian foes, one cannot say."²¹

Many artifacts were found during the excavation of the pueblo, some are typical of what one would expect to find, others are very interesting, and some almost cement the fact that this pueblo was built by a group of Indians from the Taos and Picuris pueblo regions. As one might expect there were many arrowheads, stone tools, bone needles, scrapers and fleshers, corn hoards, grinding stones and pottery fragments. Two items are very interesting in that they appear to come from the Taos and Picuris region of northern New Mexico. This would be the pottery, which was glazed and decorated in a similar fashion as pottery discovered in New Mexico and the discovery of the obsidian stone, which is a volcanic glass used to create other stone tools because of obsidian's strength and sharpness. Obsidian was readily available in Taos and

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 12.

²¹ Ibid., 12-13.

Picuris.²² Some of the more interesting pieces found during the excavation included a musical instrument, similar to a flute, made of the wing bone of some type of large bird, possibly a golden eagle, the iron ax head, probably left by later European occupants, and a small pipe which had been decorated with markings.²³

Nearly 300 years after their original ancestors had built and occupied the El Quartejejo pueblo a group of Picuris Indians visited the site. Their goal appears to be very similar to their ancestors who fled from Spanish rule three centuries earlier, to preserve their heritage.²⁴ Picuris Pueblo Governor Red Eagle explains to Scott County residents that, “You are the caretakers. We all share the responsibility to see that the site is protected and that we learn more about it.”²⁵ Both the Picuris Indians and the Scott County Historical Society plan on working cooperatively in order to secure funding from the national government to protect the site. They also hope to have artifacts returned to Scott County that were collected during the excavation and display them locally. Today the pueblo site is listed as “at risk” due to deterioration from exposure to the elements; many of the walls are in need of repair and stabilization. The extent of damage can be seen in attachment 3. To many it is still amazing that an ancient Indian pueblo has been discovered and excavated in Kansas, El Quartejejo is the only known Indian pueblo in Kansas and is thought to be the northernmost pueblo ever discovered.

²² Hoard, "El Quartejejo," 9.

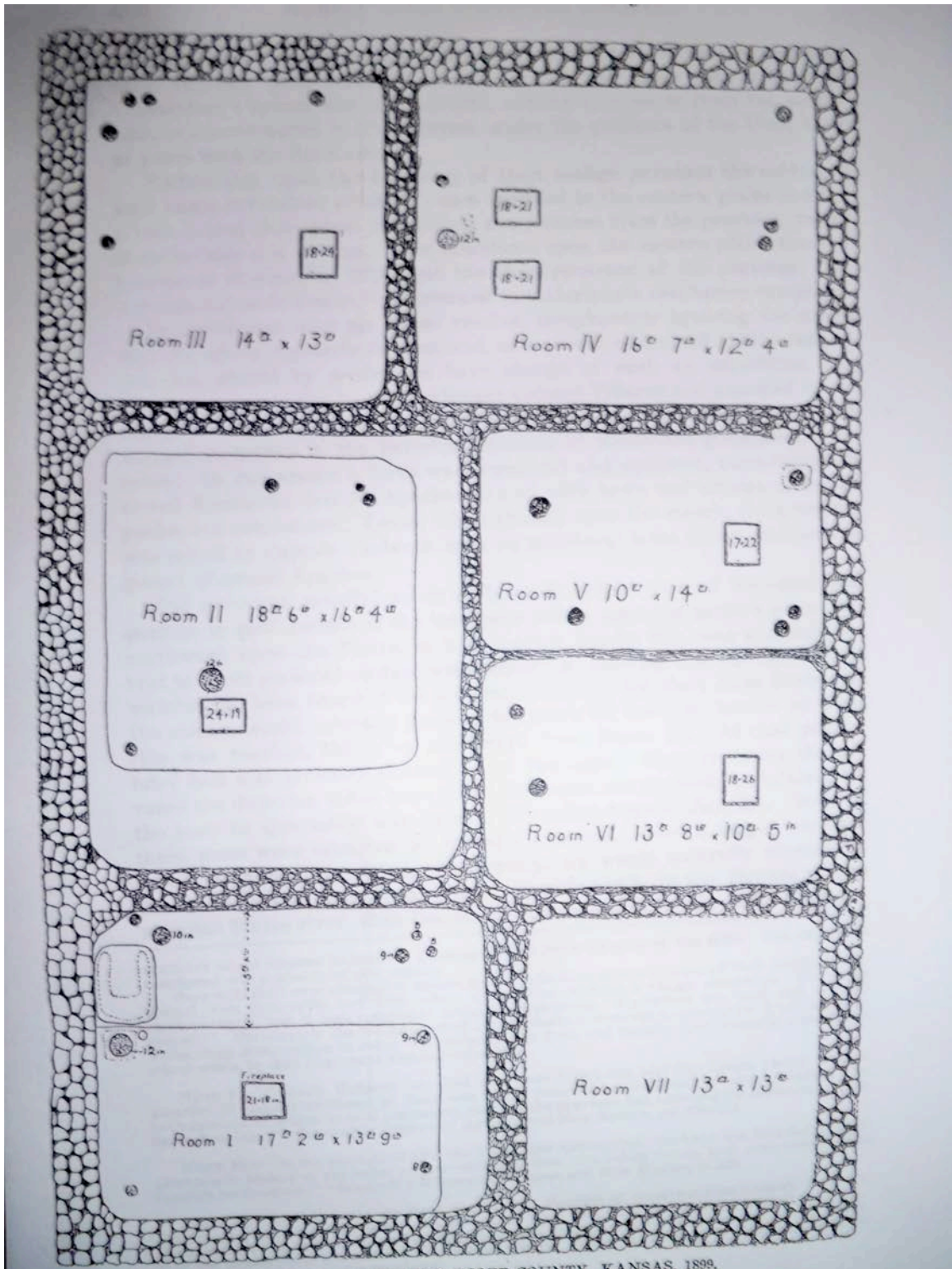
²³ Martin and Williston, "Some Pueblo Ruins in Scott County, Kansas," 14-15.

²⁴ "You are the Caretakers," *Scott County Record*, November 30, 2000, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*



Attachment 1: Photograph, Steele Family Home, Scott City KS, Scott County, c. 1910, Herbert (middle), his wife Eliza and, possibly, his son Roy on the saw horse, SOURCE: History of Early Scott County, 234.



Attachment 2: El Quartejeo Floor Plan, Scott City KS, Scott County, SOURCE: History of Early Scott County, 398.



Attachment 3: El Quarteletejo ruins today, in dire need of conservation and protection. SOURCE: Author.

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