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America's Greatest Places of Worship

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Introduction

The United States has been shaped profoundly by the presence and evolution of its places of worship. Born from aspirations of religious freedom and enriched by centuries of immigration and change, America's sacred sites echo with the prayers, hopes, and histories of countless people. They stand not only as places for spiritual reflection but also as testaments to cultural diversity, architectural innovation, and the ongoing story of the nation itself.

Defining America's "greatest" places of worship is no easy task. Their significance is measured not just in bricks and mortar, spires and domes, but in the stories they tell and the lives they touch. Some are known for their architectural grandeur—soaring Gothic cathedrals anchoring cityscapes, meticulously carved Hindu temples, or futuristic glass chapels nestled in forests. Others hold their greatness in history: as the oldest bastions of faith, the seedbeds of revolutionary ideas, or as sanctuaries that sparked movements for justice and inclusion.

American places of worship span a breathtaking array of traditions. Christian churches, from humble colonial meeting houses to awe-inspiring basilicas, trace the growth of communities across the continent. Synagogues—some as old as the nation itself—bear witness to the struggle and success of Jewish Americans. Mosques, temples, and stupas, built by successive waves of immigrants, reflect deep devotion and the enduring importance of identity carried from distant homelands. Sacred lands honored by Native American tribes remind us that spirituality on these shores predates the arrival of Europeans by millennia.

Crucially, these sites are more than just architectural landmarks. They are vibrant centers of community life—sites where families gather, where rites of passage are marked, and where neighbors find solace and support. Many have played pivotal roles in shaping American history, from hosting the bold debates that sparked revolution to serving as meeting places for landmark civil rights activism. Others have become symbols of hope, resilience, and the ongoing quest for justice and compassion in society.

This book, "America's Greatest Places of Worship," is a journey through twenty-five of the most influential, beloved, and fascinating sacred sites in the country. Each chapter is devoted to a single place, chosen for its lasting impact on the spiritual and cultural landscape of the United States. While no single list can capture the vastness of America's religious heritage, these selections offer a window into traditions both ancient and emerging, and invite readers to explore the many ways faith and community shape the American experience.

As you turn these pages, you will encounter stories of visionaries and architects, of congregations held together in adversity and those flourishing in diversity, of buildings that survived centuries and others still shaping the future. Whether you approach these places with reverence, curiosity, or the spirit of discovery, may you find renewed appreciation for the richness and variety of faith in America—and for the vital role that places of worship have played in making this nation what it is today.

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CHAPTER ONE: San Miguel Chapel (Santa Fe, New Mexico)

Tucked away on a quiet street in Santa Fe, New Mexico, stands a structure that whispers tales of centuries past, a place of worship that holds the distinction of being the oldest church building in the continental United States. This is the San Miguel Chapel, a humble adobe edifice that has witnessed the ebb and flow of history since the earliest days of European settlement in the region. Its thick, earthen walls and simple form stand in contrast to the soaring spires of later cathedrals, yet its longevity and resilience are a testament to the enduring faith of those who built and have maintained it for over four hundred years.

The story of San Miguel Chapel is deeply intertwined with the founding of Santa Fe itself. The Spanish established Santa Fe as their capital in 1610. While the exact construction date of the first chapel is debated, oral tradition and some historical accounts place its origins around this time, possibly even predating the official founding of the city. It was built in the Barrio de Analco, an area across the Santa Fe River inhabited primarily by Mexican Indians, particularly Tlaxcalans who had journeyed north with the Spanish colonists. The name "Analco" itself comes from the Nahuatl word meaning "on the other side of the water," distinguishing this neighborhood from the main plaza area where Spanish officials and more prominent citizens resided.

Under the guidance of Franciscan friars, the Tlaxcalan Indians, who had allied with the Spanish, undertook the labor of constructing the chapel. They utilized the readily available material of the Southwest: adobe. This method involved shaping sun-dried earth bricks, creating thick, sturdy walls that were remarkably effective at insulating against the extremes of the New Mexico climate. The initial structure was likely modest, with a rectangular footprint, a dirt floor, and a roof made of wood planking covered with a foot or more of dirt, supported by vigas – the exposed wooden beams typical of regional architecture. It served as a community church for the soldiers, laborers, and the indigenous people living in the Barrio de Analco.

The earliest surviving written record mentioning the chapel dates to 1628, referring to it as the Hermita de San Miguel, or Hermitage of San Miguel. This confirms that the church was in active use by this time, solidifying its claim as a truly ancient place of worship in the North American landscape. Despite its early establishment and importance to the burgeoning community, the chapel's history is marked by periods of destruction and rebuilding, reflecting the turbulent times of the Spanish colonial era in New Mexico.

One significant challenge arose around 1640, stemming from escalating conflicts between the Spanish governor and the Franciscan missionaries. This power struggle led to the expulsion of the Franciscans from Santa Fe, and the San Miguel Chapel was partially or completely dismantled during this period. However, the Franciscans eventually returned, and the mission was repaired, though the extent of this restoration is not fully known.

A more devastating event occurred during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. This coordinated uprising by the Pueblo people against Spanish rule resulted in widespread destruction across New Mexico, and Santa Fe was a focal point of the conflict. San Miguel Chapel was significantly damaged during the revolt; its roof was burned, and the interior was likely destroyed. However, the thick adobe walls, a testament to their robust construction, largely survived the conflagration. The Pueblo Revolt successfully drove the Spanish from New Mexico, leading to a twelve-year period of Pueblo control.

In 1692, Don Diego de Vargas led the Spanish back to New Mexico, eventually retaking Santa Fe. Upon his return, de Vargas found San Miguel Chapel still standing but in disrepair, lacking a roof and with its interior ravaged. Recognizing the need for a place of worship for the returning Spanish settlers, he ordered that the chapel be repaired immediately. A more thorough rebuilding effort commenced shortly thereafter, completed around 1710. The building that stands today largely dates from this 1710 reconstruction.

While the 1710 rebuilding utilized the original foundations and maintained a similar layout, some changes were made. The apse, or the semicircular or polygonal termination of the choir or aisle of a church, was apparently changed from a rectangular to a trapezoidal shape. A prominent wooden beam supporting the choir loft bears an inscription in Spanish, naming the governor and his ensign and stating that the building was erected in 1710. This inscription has sometimes led to the belief that the entire church was built from the ground up at this time, but evidence suggests the original walls, or at least portions of them, were incorporated into the new structure.

Following the 1710 reconstruction, San Miguel Chapel served as Santa Fe's military chapel for a period. By the mid-1700s, the Barrio de Analco had become a more mixed neighborhood, home to a variety of residents including soldiers, artisans, tradesmen, farmers, and laborers, both Native and non-Native. This diverse community likely continued to utilize the chapel as their local place of worship.

In 1798, Mayor Don Antonio José Ortiz funded a significant renovation of the chapel and commissioned the creation of a beautiful altar screen, known as a reredos. This wooden reredos, believed to be the work of an artist known as the "Laguna Santero," is a notable example of Spanish Colonial art and remains a central feature of the

chapel's interior today. It features intricate carvings and paintings, including a wooden statue of Saint Michael the Archangel, which is thought to date back to at least 1709 and was likely brought to Santa Fe by Franciscan friars.

The 19th century brought further changes to San Miguel Chapel. Around the 1830s, a bell tower was added to the front of the church. However, this addition proved vulnerable to the elements. In 1872, the top levels of the tower collapsed during a storm, and by the 1880s, the entire structure was in poor condition.

A new chapter began in 1859 when the Archdiocese of Santa Fe transferred ownership of the chapel to the Christian Brothers, who were establishing St. Michael's College nearby. The chapel then served as the college chapel for many years. Under the care of the Christian Brothers, restoration efforts were undertaken in 1887, which included rebuilding the bell tower and stabilizing the adobe walls with stone buttresses. The bell tower that stands today was rebuilt in the California Mission style.

Inside the chapel, several historic treasures can be found. Beyond the stunning reredos, there is a large bell on display. While a legend persisted that this "San Jose Bell" was cast in Spain in 1356, historical research in the early 20th century debunked this claim, revealing that the bell was actually cast in Santa Fe in 1856. Despite the corrected date, the bell remains a significant artifact and a part of the chapel's rich history. The interior also features other religious art, including animal-hide paintings representing early forms of religious art in New Mexico and the fourteen Stations of the Cross added in 1956. Excavations in the 1950s uncovered remnants of the original dirt floor and sanctuary steps, which are now visible beneath protective coverings.

San Miguel Chapel continues to serve as an active place of worship, holding Mass regularly, including a monthly Mass in Latin. It is also a significant historical and cultural site, attracting visitors from around the world who come to experience its ancient walls and reflect on the layers of history embedded within them. Owned and cared for by St. Michael's High School, a non-profit organization, the chapel relies on donations for its ongoing preservation and maintenance, a continuous effort due to the nature of adobe construction and the effects of time and weather.

The chapel stands as the centerpiece of the Barrio de Analco National Register Historic District, an area recognized for its historical significance as one of the oldest residential neighborhoods of European origin in the United States. Its location at the crossroads of the Old Santa Fe Trail and the Camino Real underscores its historical importance as a waypoint and gathering place over the centuries. Beyond its role as a religious site, San Miguel Chapel has served the community in various capacities throughout its history, including as an infirmary for missionaries and a venue for cultural events such as concerts, utilizing its unique acoustics.

Recent preservation efforts have focused on restoring the chapel's exterior to

traditional mud plaster, a process that involves ongoing maintenance. There have even been initiatives to incorporate modern sustainability practices, such as the installation of solar panels, a project carefully undertaken to meet the requirements of Santa Fe's historic preservation ordinance while ensuring the chapel's continued viability. These efforts highlight a commitment to preserving this ancient structure for future generations, ensuring that the whispers of history within its walls continue to be heard.

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