

# COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES NOMINATION FORM

**SECTION I**

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**Name of Property**

Historic Name St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church

Other Names \_\_\_\_\_

**Address of Property**

[ ] address not for publication

Mailing Address: Holy Name of Mary Parish, P.O. Box 97, Del Norte 81132

Street Address 5615 West County Road 5 N

City Del Norte vicinity

County Rio Grande

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**Present Owner of Property**

(for multiple ownership, list the names and addresses of each owner on one or more continuation sheets)

Name Bishop Arthur N. Tafoya, Diocese of Pueblo

Address 1001 North Grand Avenue

Phone 719-544-9861 / 800-354-2729

City Pueblo

State Colorado

Zip 81003

**Owner Consent for Nomination**

(attach signed consent from each owner of property - see attached form)

**Preparer of Nomination**

Name Virginia McConnell Simmons

Date October 4, 2001

Organization St. Francis of Assisi Nomination Committee

Address 550 Cherry Street, Apt. 3

Phone 719-657-2923

City Del Norte

State Colorado

Zip 81132

**FOR OFFICIAL USE:**

Site Number 5RN532

\_\_\_\_ Nomination Received

Senate # 5

House # 61

2/2002 Review Board Recommendation

3/13/2002

CHS Board State Register Listing

X Approval \_\_\_\_ Denial

X Approved \_\_\_\_ Denied

**Certification of Listing:** President, Colorado Historical Society

Date

**COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

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**SECTION II**

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**Local Historic Designation**

Has the property received local historic designation?

no

yes ---  individually designated  designated as part of a historic district

Date designated \_\_\_\_\_

Designated by \_\_\_\_\_ (Name of municipality or county)

**Use of Property**

Historic Religion/religious facility

Current Religion/religious facility

**Original Owner** [of land] Juan Pio Valdez

Source of Information Oral tradition; Los Valdezes, 1881-1981; 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Jubilee of Holy Name of Mary Parish and Missions

**Year of Construction** circa 1881 with 1925 addition

Source of Information Oral tradition; Los Valdezes, 1881-1981; 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Jubilee of Holy Name of Mary Parish and Missions

**Architect, Builder, Engineer, Artist or Designer** unknown

Source of Information \_\_\_\_\_

**Locational Status**

Original location of structure(s)

Structure(s) moved to current location

Date of move \_\_\_\_\_

**SECTION III**

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**Description and Alterations**

(describe the current and original appearance of the property and any alterations on one or more continuation sheets)

# COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

Property Name St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church

## SECTION IV

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### Significance of Property

#### Nomination Criteria

- A** - property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to history
- B** - property is connected with persons significant in history
- C** - property has distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction or artisan
- D** - property is of geographic importance
- E** - property contains the possibility of important discoveries related to prehistory or history

#### Areas of Significance

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Economics                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape               |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Architecture                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Education                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology –<br>prehistoric             | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Law                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology –<br>historic                | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/<br>Recreation     | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art                                      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ethnic Heritage       | <input type="checkbox"/> Military                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Exploration/<br>Settlement       | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing Arts         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Geography/<br>Community Identity | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics/<br>Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community<br>Planning and<br>Development | <input type="checkbox"/> Health/Medicine                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation                             | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Science                 |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Social History          |
|   |   | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation          |

### Significance Statement

(explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

### Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

## SECTION V

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### Locational Information

Lot(s) N/A Block \_\_\_\_\_ Addition \_\_\_\_\_

USGS Topographic Quad Map Del Norte

### Verbal Boundary Description of Nominated Property

(describe the boundaries of the nominated property on a continuation sheet)

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**SECTION VI**

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**Photograph Log for Black and White Photographs**

(prepare a photograph log on one or more continuation sheets)

**SECTION VII**

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS TO ACCOMPANY NOMINATION**

**Owner Consent Form**

**Black and White Photographs**

**Color Slides**

**Sketch Map(s)**

**Photocopy of USGS Map Section**

**Optional Materials**

**For Office Use Only**

Property Type:  building(s)  district  site  structure  object  area

Architectural Style/Engineering Type: Territorial Adobe

Period of Significance: 1881-1952

Level of Significance:  Local  State  National

Acreage 5.49

P.M. N.M. Township 39 North Range 7 East Section S SE SW of 6 and N NE NW of 7

UTM Reference: Zone 13 Easting 389560 Northing 4167220

Site Elevation: 7800 feet

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## DESCRIPTION and ALTERATIONS

The nominated property is 1.2 miles east of the junction of County Road 5 North with U.S. Highway 160 (approximately 5-1/2 miles southeast of Del Norte). A wire fence surrounds the property, with access being through a chain link gate which is topped by a wooden sign reading "St. Francis of Assisi 1881." The irregularly shaped 5.49-acre parcel on a gently sloping hill contains a church near the northeast corner and a cemetery at the northwest corner. A few hundred feet southwest of the church are the foundations of a two-room adobe building, which once provided housing for the caretaker. The adobe church has plastered white walls, a green asphalt shingled roof topped with a belfry, and a T-shaped plan with a slightly rounded back wall to accommodate the apse. The cemetery (sometimes listed in guides to Colorado's cemeteries as "Valdeses" or "Sevenmile Cemetery" and still in use) occupies about two acres and is higher on the gentle hill than the church. According to oral tradition, the first burial took place in the 1870s, although the earliest existing marker is dated 1889. The majority of the early grave markers were handmade from native rock, wood, or in a few cases, pieces of concrete. Agricultural acreage adjacent to the nominated parcel is being sold, and homes are being erected nearby. Conscientious *mayordomos* watch over the building, but swallows continue to nest in the eaves and weeds are a perennial problem. The stained glass window in the dormer is bulging, apparently due to slight settling of the wall. There are also cracks in the walls and a few water stains on the interior walls indicating leaks.

St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church faces east. Its T-shaped plan is created by the original elongated portion (oral tradition provides an 1881 construction date) and two smaller cross-gabled transept additions built off the north and south walls at the west end in 1925. These additions continue westward with shed roof extensions that flank the rounded drum-like projecting apse. On the north and south junctures of the main roof and these eaves are small shed roofs that cover the ends of the apse wall. Two very small gabled roof dormers break the eaves of the slightly pitched roof of the apse. Green asphalt shingles cover the resulting multi-planed roof. A square, shingled-sided belfry straddles the main roof's ridgeline at the east end marking the front entrance. The belfry's wood-shingled hipped roof is topped with a wooden cross. The walls of the church are adobe, plastered inside and out. Although recently painted, several cracks in the walls are evident. The rubble stone foundation is faced with concrete. The exterior walls are 30 inches thick (most likely adobe bricks in double tiers with a narrow space between tiers). Some of the interior walls are 14 inches thick. Nine rectangular, wood frame, fixed sash windows pierce the exterior walls. These 29" x 58" openings are filled with stained glass and protected by translucent Lexan panels. In addition, there is a small rectangular fixed sash stained glass window in the south dormer of the apse and a diamond-shaped fixed sash window of clear glass on the east façade illuminating the choir loft.

The east façade has a centrally positioned entry that is recessed into the thick adobe walls. The double leaf entrance is comprised of modern, wood paneled doors. The only other opening on this east wall is the small diamond shaped window (*choro*) above the entry that illuminates the choir loft. The north side has two windows piercing the wall of the original portion of the church (illuminating the nave) and one window piercing the gabled end of the addition/transept. There are two windows on the west (rear) wall flanking the curved wall of the apse. A metal stovepipe extends from the shed roof at the northwest corner. The south side, repeating the fenestration pattern on the north, also has two windows illuminating the nave and one window illuminating the transept. However, there is an additional window on the wall of the shed roofed extension, and an east-facing, single leaf wooden door allows access to the south transept.

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The interior of the church has a cruciform plan that is slightly altered by the two small rooms flanking the apse—one is used as a sacristy, the other is used as a furnace/storage room. The sacristy has plywood paneling and wooden built-in closets and cupboards. The main altar and serving altar are in the apse. Religious statues are positioned on the west walls of the transepts. Two rows of wooden pews flank the central aisle, and there are several rows of pews in each transept facing the center. A confessional occupies the northeast corner of the church near the entrance, while a storage room and the stairs to the choir loft are opposite. The concrete floor is covered with tile, while carpet covers the center aisle, sacristy, apse, and the stairs to the choir loft. The angled ceilings are covered with composition tile and simple overhead fluorescent lighting illuminates the nave.

St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church and the cemetery are located on what was originally part of the Juan Valdez homestead parcel. While there is no written description of the building at the time of its construction, oral tradition consistently indicates that the adobe church was built in 1881. Informants differ in their opinions as to whether the church had an apse at the time of its construction. The floor was dirt and followed the natural slope of the land, rising slightly toward the west. Benches, rather than pews, were used for seating and a wood stove for heat was on the north side of the nave. (Parishioners each brought a chunk of firewood to Mass.) Doors at the main entrance were wood, with overlays on each side forming a cross. The manufacture of adobe bricks and all construction was performed and paid for by the local parishioners, as would be the case in later work on the building. Two burials took place in the floor near the altar in the 1880s and a bell was donated in 1889.

A reference to the removal of the original roof in 1903 indicates that the pitched roof was metal, probably corrugated. This metal roof was replaced with wood shingles, and re-roofing took place again in the 1920s. The wood shingles were replaced with asphalt in the 1970s and again in the 1990s. (The metal roof may have been noisy in bad weather, while the wood shingles attracted very busy woodpeckers.) The belfry blew off in the 1950s and was replaced.

More significant alterations took place in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although most of the original structure remained intact. The alterations reveal considerable skill and ingenuity on the part of the local craftsmen. A major change in 1925 was the addition of the ells (transepts) that created a cruciform interior plan. Two adjoining corner rooms with shed roofs were added at the same time (or within a year or two, as one informant has proposed). All the new walls were adobe. The original adobe walls, where the ells were constructed, were removed. Wood flooring covered the dirt floor at some time during this period. Concrete next replaced wood, with the floor being leveled. The interior steps at the west end accommodated the natural incline in elevation. Stained-glass windows with names of donors were installed.

The 1940s brought several more changes, the most important being the addition of a new main altar from Spain. (The priest, who was serving the mission, was from Spain.) Because the new altar proved to be too high for the existing roof and ceiling in the apse, a new roofline behind the apse was needed. The result was a higher, curved roofline that extends from behind the apse to the ells. The dormer on the north side was boarded up at this time. Electric lines first came to the church and to the area in the 1940s, and German prisoners of war did the work. Propane heat was introduced, and the concrete flooring was covered with tile. Changes to conform to Vatican II took place in the 1960s. A new serving altar was installed, while the main 1940s altar was retained. The new serving altar is wood with marbled paint, similar to others in the San Luis Valley. Isaac Manzanares, a local parishioner, performed much of the carpentry done in the 1940s and later. The main doors and carpet in some areas of the floor were installed in the 1970s. The pews came from Monte Vista's old Catholic church in the 1970s.

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**Floor Plan of Church**

(Exterior adobe walls are 30 inches thick. Interior walls are 14.5 inches thick.)

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### SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church meets Criterion C for its architectural significance, as it illustrates a type and method of construction. The building is an unusual example of an Hispanic Adobe church with a cruciform plan and an apse. St. Francis is believed to have been built in 1881, and the original portion of the church is representative of the type of religious structures built by the predominately Spanish-speaking, Catholic villagers of Southern Colorado in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was built modestly and effectively, extracting the prime building material from the earth just as previous generations had done. The building lacks many of the characteristics that would make it a good example of Territorial Adobe—such Anglo-European elements as Gothic (pointed-arched) windows or a Romanesque bell tower. This simple, thick-walled adobe building is in many ways a very Hispanic Adobe church. Its builders were quite pragmatic in what they “borrowed” from the Anglo/European architectural tradition—a peaked roof, a belfry, and nothing more. In 1925, smaller north-south transept additions at the west end created a cruciform interior plan. The building grew again a short time later with the construction of two small rooms that would obscure most of the apse. However, in the 1940s, the apse would again become evident due to the drum-like roof projection that was built to accommodate a new altar. Local people, not professionally trained, constructed and altered this adobe building in ingenious, successful ways.

St. Francis deviates from the rectangular plan of the typical Hispanic adobe church in Southern Colorado. A search of the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation’s Colorado State Inventory database identified three other adobe churches in the San Luis Valley with cruciform plans. Immaculate Conception Church in Chama, Costilla County [5CT.201] was rebuilt after a fire in 1935, utilizing much of the original church’s adobe walls. This building has Gothic-arched window and door openings, and a bell tower capped with a hexagonal cupola that serves as a narthex. St. Peter and St. Paul Catholic Church in San Pedro, Costilla County [5CT.183] was constructed in 1915 after a fire destroyed an earlier church on the site. (Another fire in 1941 would destroy the roof and cause minor damage to the walls forcing the reconstruction of the roof and the shortening of the nave walls.) Like the other Costilla County church, this one also has a prominent bell tower/narthex and pointed arched window and door openings. The only other identified church with a cruciform/apsidal plan is also in Rio Grande County. San Jose Mission Church in Agua Ramon [5RN.533] was built in 1926. The churches share another similarity as they both have an open belfry straddling the ridgeline. However, unlike the straight-headed openings of St. Francis, San Jose has round-arched window and door openings, and a round window above the entry. While additions have somewhat obscured the curved back wall of St. Francis, the apsidal plan of San Jose Mission Church is intact.

The property also meets Criterion A for its association with the state’s ethnic heritage, specifically the Hispanos who settled the San Luis Valley. Churches were both centers and symbols of Southern Colorado Hispanic communities. The Catholic Church and religion had a central, social and cultural place in the lives of the Hispanic people who settled in the southern portion of the state. Villages were not fully established until a church was built and a priest had visited. No institution was as central as the church. While almost all the holidays were in some degree religious, they were also important social occasions. The church was a focus of community life as it celebrated not only everyday life, but also significant events such as births, deaths, and marriages. This is in contrast to most Anglo settlements, where the lack of religious and cultural homogeneity usually resulted in the construction of a schoolhouse as the community’s first public building.



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### Historical Background

The neighborhood of St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church, often called Plaza de Los Valdeses (also spelled Los Valdezes) is an example of settlement by Spanish-speaking farmers and ranchers in southern Colorado. Plaza de Los Valdeses represents the history and culture of families who emigrated to the San Luis Valley in the 1870s from northern New Mexico, augmented by dispersal from the original nearby La Loma de San Jose (1859). The church at Los Valdeses represents not only the religious life, but also the culture of the people who made up the closely-knit community. This cohesiveness remains strong because of intermarriage among local families, devotion to the Roman Catholic faith which permeated daily life, Penitente affiliation in earlier years, cultural traditions, language, and proprietary feelings about St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church.

Farming in the area was possible following the construction of irrigation ditches (Silva, Atencio, and Lucero Ditches, 1866) which diverted water from the Rio Grande east of present-day Del Norte. A few settlers of La Loma de San Jose and other newcomers from New Mexico began to occupy land along the Rio Grande in "Loma de Abaja," an area of farms and homes that extended for roughly four miles, beginning from about five miles east of Del Norte. By 1870 Conejos County's tax records for "Loma de Abaja" included several names. Among them were Juan Valdez and Juan's second son, Tomas. (Juan Valdez and his wife Nestoria also appeared the same year in the 1870 census at "La Costilla" in Costilla County [later Taos County, N.M.]. Other important names at "Loma de Abaja" were Jesus Maria Alarid and Jose Pablo Martinez, who had moved down river from the earlier settlement of La Loma de San Jose. Manzanares families, who were second-generation descendants of original settlers at Plaza De Los Manzanares (adjacent to Costilla), where they undoubtedly knew Juan Valdez, soon joined these people. The Manzanares family had originally come from El Rito, N.M., and the Valdez family's origins also were in Rio Arriba County, N.M.

By 1872 Jesuit priests, headquartered at Conejos, recorded that they had celebrated Mass at Plaza de Taoses, home of Don Hilario de Atencio, another early settler at "Loma de Abaja." The first school also met in 1872 with Jesus Maria Alarid as teacher. Until 1919 school was conducted every year thereafter at various locations in the area, including a two-room schoolhouse on the Valdez property next to the church. In 1877, as the Roman Catholic Spanish-speaking population continued to grow in the region, Jesuit fathers from Conejos established the San Juan Parish, administered at El Carnero (today's La Garita), whence priests rode out on horseback to several widespread settlements. By 1880 or earlier, the names Valdez Plaza, Plaza Valdez, Plaza de Los Valdeses (or Valdezes), and Loma de Los Valdeses were being used for the neighborhood near the property of Juan Valdez and his family. The first burials at Plaza de Los Valdeses, in Valdez Plaza Cemetery, took place in the 1870s according to oral tradition, although the oldest marker now standing is dated 1889. In 1881, when there were 75 Spanish-speaking families in the area, the people constructed their own adobe church, St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church, near the cemetery on land belonging to Juan Valdez. The church was dedicated by a priest of San Juan Parish, the Rev. John B. Pitival, with faculties of the Bishop of the Diocese of Colorado, the Rev. Joseph Machebeuf. Because nearly all, if not all, the men in the neighborhood were Penitentes, belonging to the Third Order of St. Francis, it is possible that their Roman Catholic church was dedicated to St. Francis as a result of associations with the Third Order. Del Norte, five and half miles west of Los Valdeses, became the center of population for the area during the 1870s, and parish headquarters were moved from Carnero to Del Norte in 1889, with its priests thereafter serving St. Francis of Assisi as one of its mission churches.

Construction of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway's branch from Monte Vista to Del Norte in 1881 seems to have spurred activity around Plaza de Los Valdeses. The right of way passed through Juan

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Valdez's land. The Freeman Switch, the Freeman store, a potato storage structure, and pens for lambs and hogs were located on the east side of the railroad tracks, and the railroad shipped a great deal of produce and livestock from the area. In the early 1900s, Juan Valdez's grandson Gavino, who had become the patriarch of the Valdez family, was raising fruit in an irrigated orchard on the old homestead, adjacent to the railroad and Freeman Switch. Since a daily train stopped at the Freeman Switch, pupils attending school in Monte Vista and other passengers used the train to commute. About a mile east of St. Francis de Assisi, a bridge was built across the Rio Grande in the 1890s, and this bridge encouraged business at another store at what was called Seven-Mile Plaza. Baseball games and other social life began to center there, and the name of Seven-Mile Plaza gradually superseded that of Plaza de Los Valdeses for the entire area. In the early 1900s the population of the area was about 300. Many residents were trying to provide for their families on about 20 acres of land, "not trying to get rich, just trying to survive." About half of the population had moved away by 1975. By the late 1900s most original adobe buildings, except St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church, had disappeared, and newer rural homes now comprise Seven-Mile Plaza, or simply "Plaza" as the area often is called today.

Juan Pio Valdez, one of the early settlers in the "Loma de Abaja" area, was the principal leader and the patriarch. Although his legal documents are signed with an "X," he was an intelligent man with strong leadership ability and great religious faith. He was born in 1806 in Rio Arriba County, N.M. His wife, Maria Nestoria Salazar, was born in 1815 at "Abiquiu paso blanca," N.M. They are listed in the census of 1860 in the precinct of Plaza de Los Luceros, which lies between Espanola and Taos., N.M. Juan and Nestoria had eleven children, eight of whom were still living in 1886. Some oral reports say that Juan served in New Mexico's militia during the Civil War and that he was an officer, but this report could not be verified in military records. Juan Valdez is listed in the census of 1870 at "La Costilla" (today's Costilla, N.M.), but he and his family presumably moved to "Loma de Abaja" soon thereafter. The census of 1880 places the family at Plaza de Los Valdeses and reports that Juan was suffering from rheumatism, at age 74. Maria Nestoria died on March 18, 1886, at age 71. Her obituary states that she left "five daughters, three sons, fifty grandchildren, and about fifteen great grandchildren, and was related to nearly two-thirds of the Mexicans [sic] in Rio Grande County." The obituary also says that the funeral took place at "the Valdez cemetery" and was "largely attended." Juan Pio Valdez died on March 6, 1888, at age 82. His obituary states that he was "well-known by every old-timer to the San Luis valley and was one of the highly-respected Mexican [sic] citizens of this section. Quite a number of Del Norters attended the funeral." Although no marker exists, oral tradition consistently reports that both Juan and Nestoria are buried near the altar in the floor of St. Francis of Assisi Church, a privilege granted by the bishop because of the gift of land for the church. (Machebeuf retired in 1887, so permission may have been granted earlier or by his successor.) Through intermarriage in the area of Plaza de Los Valdeses and Seven-Mile Plaza, several people in the region today claim Juan Pio and Maria Nestoria Valdez as ancestors.

The Valdez family and others established homes on the area's public land, not as part of a land grant. Oral tradition says that they built their homes wherever they wanted. The site of Plaza de Los Valdeses was on the south side of the Rio Grande. (Sources that locate it on the north side of the Rio Grande are incorrect, some of these errors deriving from an incorrect sketch map of C. E. Gibson, Jr., 1934, CWP Doc. 349 18). Plaza de Los Valdeses consisted of several adobe homes scattered in the area, notably those of the Valdez family. The cemetery and the adobe church that was constructed in 1881 provided a hub, but the settlers occupied dispersed properties, not a plaza with a grid plan. The original road between Del Norte and Monte Vista served this area, swinging a little farther east of St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church than does the present county road.

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Formal filing on land appears not to have begun immediately after occupation by original settlers, but land ownership soon underwent many changes due to inheritance, sale, failure to file, or loss because of sale for taxes. Juan Valdez filed a warranty deed in 1881, the same year that the railroad line came through, and his homestead patent was filed in 1883. Juan Valdez's homestead consisted of 160 acres, half of it in Section 7 and half in Section 6. The Silva Ditch ran through the homestead. West of the Silva Ditch in the portion in Section 6 lies the hill where the cemetery and the church are located. A warranty deed in 1885 refers to about two acres of Juan Valdez's property that was the railroad's right of way and "one acre for school house." A trust deed in 1886 also refers to a portion of land "heretofore conveyed and set apart for a cemetery", and a parcel [supposed to be about one acre] that was "conveyed and set apart for the building of a school house." However, the church is not mentioned in these legal documents. Although transfers of land from the original homestead began to take place soon after it was patented, the land upon which the church sits was not transferred to the church until 1893. Manuel Valdez, the eldest son of Juan, legally transferred the parcel occupied by the church to Bishop N. C. Matz of the Diocese of Colorado and his legal successors in office. A quit claim deed, dated June 1, 1987, confirmed that the parcel of land, "consisting of 5.49 acres more or less," was conveyed to Bishop Arthur N. Tafoya, Diocese of Pueblo, by one L. G. Mosley of Dallas, Texas, for ten dollars.

In 1908 through 1911, a school was conducted in a two-room schoolhouse on the Valdez property. The teachers were Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, a Catholic religious order that was also opening St. Joseph Hospital in Del Norte at this time. Subsequent teachers were secular. The adobe school building lay northeast of the church, a few hundred feet beyond present church property boundaries. This building may have become what a teacher later called the "Catholic recreation building," where she lived one year when a different school building was being used elsewhere in the district. Another two-room, adobe building provided housing for a caretaker, Tranquillino Martinez, and later was used by the United Workers. Demolished in the 1990s because its weakened walls had become hazardous, the caretaker's house was within the present church property, a few hundred feet southwest of the church building, and its foundations are still visible.

The cemetery is higher on the gentle hill than the church and pallbearers recall the difficult journey from the church to the cemetery. Coffins commonly were wood as late as the mid-1900s. It is recalled that people in the area took lumber to a man in the neighborhood, who made the simple coffins. According to oral tradition, the first burial took place in the 1870s, although the earliest existing marker is dated 1889. Either records of burials were not kept or they disappeared. In 2001, as an additional project during work for the nomination of St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church, several individuals cleaned the cemetery, removed weeds, and conducted a survey of burials. About 500 plots were located in the cemetery. The committee was able to record information from about 300 markers, the remainder being unknown. Because care of the cemetery has been irregular, due to lack of maintenance personnel and inattention by some families of deceased persons, weeds and broken markers are recurrent problems. The cemetery is in current use by neighbors as well as by people from communities such as Monte Vista and Center.

The closely-knit community of people who worshipped at St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church filled the building to standing room only in the 1930s, an informant recalls. In contrast, they "felt out of place" at Del Norte's larger church. Nevertheless, they cooperated in parish-wide activities, such as helping to raise money in 1936 to buy a Plymouth for a priest, Father Domingo, who had to travel from mission to mission. Led by Avelina Alarid, a music teacher who was the wife of Gavino Valdez, music was an important part of the services at St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church. Parishioners played various musical instruments, accompanied by a pump organ. Special feast days were observed with

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processions and other activities, especially honoring Corpus Christi Feast Day, San Isidro (patron of farmers) in the spring, and St. Francis in the fall. At various periods until the late 1990s, Mass was held weekly or monthly, but now only one Mass on the Feast of St. Francis (October 4) is celebrated, due to the shortage of priests. Many of the residents have become faithful worshippers and hard workers in the Catholic churches of Del Norte and Monte Vista, but St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church is still "their church." The small numbers of its community still take care of the maintenance and expenses for St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church. Men perform repairs, while women take care of cleaning, vestments, laundering linens, and other housekeeping duties. Family, community, and cultural ties remain strong, and St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church is symbolic of those intense loyalties.

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San Luis Valley Counties and Communities

(Source: *The San Luis Valley: Land of the Six-Armed Cross* by Virginia McConnell Simmons, © 1979 by Virginia McConnell Simmons)

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(Conjoined Del Norte and Sevenmile Plaza quad maps showing Valdez homestead)

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, misc. military and baptismal records.

Rio Grande Mineral Abstract Company records.

Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita (Kansas)

Valdez Plaza Cemetery Records, 2001, compiled by Cemetery Project Committee.

**Property Name** St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church

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**Individuals contributing valuable oral history:**

Roy Manzanares, Seven-Mile Plaza mayordomo

Juanita Valdez, Del Norte, retired clerk of county courts

Levi Manzanares, Seven-Mile Plaza

Marie Martinez, Monte Vista, great-great-granddaughter of Juan P. Valdez

Art "Archie" Sanchez, Seven-Mile Plaza, great-great-grandson of Juan P. Valdez

Gilbert Sanchez, Seven-Mile Plaza, great-great-grandson of Juan P. Valdez

John Valdez, Monte Vista, great-great-grandson of Juan P. Valdez



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**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

(excerpt from deed)

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**Survey Map**

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**Sketch Map**

**Property Name** St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church

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**PHOTOGRAPH LOG**

The following information pertains to all photographs:

Name of Property: St. Francis of Assisi Mission Church  
Location: Los Valdeses Plaza (Seven-mile Plaza)  
Photographer: Virginia Simmons  
Date of Photographs: August 2001  
Negatives: Virginia Simmons files, 550 Cherry St. #3, Del Norte

Photo No.                      Photographic Information

- 1 view of church through gate at county road; camera facing N
- 2 view from cemetery toward church; camera facing E
- 3 southwest portion of church; camera facing NE
- 4 south side of church; camera facing NW
- 5 east façade and north side of church; camera facing SW
- 6 rear (west end) of church with curved wall behind apse; camera facing SE

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**USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP**  
Del Norte Quadrangle, Colorado  
7.5 Minute Series (1966)