

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

EL TIRADITO

HALS NO. AZ-8

Location: 418 South Main Avenue; One lot south of the southwest corner of Main Avenue and Cushing Street, south of the Tucson Convention Center;

Tucson, Pima County, Arizona;

Located within the Barrio Libre National Historic District and the Barrio Historico City Historic Preservation Zone;

Lat: 32.21617 Long: -110.97477 (taken at the center of the site between the adobe wall and main candleholder, Garmin Colorado 300, NAD27)

Significance: The El Tiradito shrine is significant for its role in the development of the rich Hispanic folklore and folk customs that developed in what is now the American Southwest between the time of Spanish contact with indigenous populations in the late sixteenth century to the present day. El Tiradito was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971.

The shrine was founded upon the site marking the resting place of an individual who died a sudden and violent death. Initially only those who came to pray for the soul of the individual buried there visited the site. However, the burial site soon became popular, as the individual called El Tiradito was thought to possess the ability to answer personal prayers. The tradition of leaving an offering along with a prayer developed and has continued to today. The shrine remains an important landmark, as petitioners continue to seek solace and memorialize departed loved ones there.

The Hispanic folk customs represented by El Tiradito are an example of Sonoran Catholicism, a term used to describe the blending of Catholic doctrine with local customs within the Arizona-Sonora borderlands, resulting in local saints and rituals.¹

The customs and circumstances associated with the shrine are similar to others located in northern Mexico, but El Tiradito is the only known example of its kind remaining in the United States.² The shrine maintains a high level of integrity regardless of the aesthetic changes that have occurred over time (see *History* below), as it still functions according to its original intention.

El Tiradito is an important element of the surrounding Hispanic cultural

¹ Thomas Sheridan, *Los Tucsonenses* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 151-152.

² El Tiradito National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form.

landscape that is preserved in Barrio Libre, a historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The district, while home to a diversity of ethnicities, was historically the predominant Spanish-speaking district within Tucson. It was only in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Arizona was established as a territory of the United States, that the non-Hispanic population in the area increased. The cultural landscape preserved in Barrio Libre includes vernacular architectural forms, based on the adobe Sonoran rowhouse. Additional folk elements include colorful wall murals and yard shrines.

El Tiradito's role within the community evolved and gained meaning as a focal point for activism against the destruction of historic, predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods as a result of urban renewal programs implemented by the City in the 1960s and 1970s.

Description: El Tiradito is located on a City-owned lot at 418 South Main Avenue. The shrine is situated on the west side of the street, just south of the parking lot for the El Minuto Café located on the southwest corner of Main Avenue and Cushing Street. A chain link fence lined with ocotillo branches separates the El Tiradito property from the parking lot to the north. The south side of the shrine abuts the wall of the neighboring adobe building to the south, occupied by the La Pilita Foundation and owned by the City of Tucson.

The shrine is set back from the street toward the western part of the lot. The north and south edges of the lot are landscaped with various species of prickly pear and agave, as well as several medium-sized mesquite and palo verde trees. Several large tamarisk trees, noted in historic photographs of the shrine, are located to the west of the lot.

The major structural element of the shrine consists of a U-shaped wall with a central niche. The section of wall toward the back of the lot measures 25' north-south, with arms extending 12' 6" to the east at both ends. The wall measures 12' 6" tall at its highest point at the center of the back portion of the U-shaped wall. This wall is composed of exposed, unfired clay (adobe) bricks with coarse sand, pebble and straw temper and capped with 4" x 8" fired brick coping. The backside of the wall, which is not visible from the street view, is finished with mud plaster. The adobe wall has a concrete footing, which is partially exposed on the northern extension of the U-shaped wall. The segments of the wall perpendicular to the street have adobe bricks of slightly different composition on their eastern faces. This is the result of repairs were made in 2010.

A *nicho*, measuring 6' 8" in height and 5' 10" in length and finished with white lime plaster, extends out from the bottom-center of the back wall. The *nicho* has a central recessed arch that forms an alcove where offerings can be placed against the wall. Two attached adobe pilasters measuring just over 2' in height flank the *nicho*. A wrought iron cross stands directly in front.

The U-shaped wall incorporates Mission Revival architectural elements with the curved pediment, as does as the arch within the *nicho*.

A secondary adobe wall, ranging from one to five courses thick, extends off both sides of the U-shaped wall. This smaller structure adjoins with the wall of the neighboring La Pilita building to the south and runs along a portion of the lot boundary to the north. Behind this secondary wall and extending off of the north and south edges of the U-shaped wall, there is metal fencing that secures the west end of the lot.

Against the northwest and southwest corners of the U-shaped adobe wall, there are two semi-circular arrangements of cobblestones that delineate space for two cross-shaped wrought iron candleholders, measuring approximately 5' in height. Five cobblestone rings form a base for smaller wrought iron candleholders that form a north-south alignment just east of the back wall. An additional wrought iron candle stand measuring 5' north-south by 4' 7" east-west and 4' 7" in height is located at the center of the shrine.

Numerous candles, flowers, photographs, trinkets and prayer flags are placed around the shrine within the niche, on the walls, upon the wrought iron fixtures and on the ground. Offerings have even been hung from the trees on the lot. Small niches have been carved into the wall to hold letters and written prayers left at the shrine. Short prayers and memorials have been written on the white plaster of the central niche.

The ground surrounding the candleholders and U-shaped wall has absorbed the grease from the candle wax. Grease from candle wax has also been absorbed into the base of the adobe wall the area around the central niche.

The shrine is situated within Barrio Libre, one of Tucson's oldest neighborhoods and a nationally recognized historic district. The architecture in Barrio Libre was characterized by closely spaced or attached Sonoran adobe row houses. The row houses were built directly adjacent to the street, with little to no setback. The facades often were simple, with few openings for doors and windows. Rooflines were originally flat, and later hipped or gabled roofs became more prevalent. Often neighboring units shared walls and formed a square block with a central, communal courtyard. The density of the neighborhood was highest prior to 1900, when other styles became more prevalent, and was put on private spaces.³

Prior to the arrival of the railroad in 1880, the Sonoran row houses were based on a vernacular style founded upon indigenous and Hispanic traditions. With the expansion of the Anglo population in the late nineteenth century, as well as the increased availability of manufactured materials and architectural styles made

³ Ibid.

possible by the railroad, new architectural elements and forms were adopted within Barrio Libre. Queen Anne, Bungalow, and Mission Revival style buildings have been incorporated into the neighborhood, adding increased variability in the streetscape.

History: In the Arizona-Sonoran borderlands, shrines are commonly built to mark the location of a sudden death. Because an unexpected death does not allow for the individual to receive his or her last rites, it is believed the soul is in limbo. Folk custom suggests that the soul may be helped out of limbo with prayers from the living. Markers, ranging from rock piles to wooden crosses to elaborate structures are often erected at the site of the death to alert others to stop and say a prayer or leave an offering.⁴

The legends associated with El Tiradito, which translates as “the castaway,” are diverse and range from tales of revenge for a murdered family member, to many sordid love triangles that resulted in the death of one or more of the individuals involved.⁵ While many versions exist, the common themes described in the legends include a sudden, violent death that results in the individual being buried in unconsecrated ground. An “official” version was adopted by the City of Tucson in 1927, when the shrine was formalized as a City property. This version recounts:

As told by Mrs. C.B. Perkins whose pioneering father, Dr. F.H. Goodwin, employed on his sheep ranch the young murdered man. Juan Oliveras was the young shepherd at the Goodwin Ranch. He, his wife, and father-in-law all worked at the Goodwin Ranch, but his mother-in-law worked in Tucson. Juan was infatuated with his mother-in-law and often visited her. One day the father-in-law followed Juan to Tucson and surprised his wife and her young lover together. A struggle followed and Juan fled the house, but his father-in-law seized an axe from a wood pile and killed Juan. The grave marked with only shrubs. Mexicans call the spot “EL TIRODITO,” [sic] or lying dead. Devout Mexican women thought that there should be prayers said for Juan’s soul. They slipped through the spiny shrubs at night to light the candles beside the grave. Among them there grew the belief that their own personal wishes, made after prayers were said for Juan, came true. The superstition spread through the village. More and more candles guttered through the nights, protected from winds by shields of tin cans and scraps of iron.⁶

As the legends state, the shrine honors the burial site of a common person, some

⁴ James S. Griffith, *Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimería Alta* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 101.

⁵ For several accounts of the legend associated with El Tiradito, please see Griffith, *Beliefs and Holy Places*, 105-108.

⁶ James Garrison, El Tiradito National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, 1975.

would even say a “sinner,” rather than a saint. The individual has become a type of folk saint due to the supernatural powers said to be associated with his or her shrine. While the shrine is not officially recognized by any official religious institutions, such as the Catholic Diocese, it holds religious value to the petitioners who prayer at the site. As mentioned above, the religious values represented at the site are an example of Sonoran Catholicism, a blending of traditional Catholic principles with local customs.

The shrine and its associated legends date to approximately 1870. The original location of the shrine was near the center of what is now Simpson Street, just west of Meyer Avenue. The shrine stood in Barrio Libre near the entrance of the former Carrillo Gardens, a public park with verdant gardens watered by a natural artesian well.

While the original structural components of the shrine remain unclear, the oral histories suggest that the shrine began as a mound of earth surrounded by a few candles protected with tin cans.

In the 1920s, road realignment and construction in Barrio Libre forced petitioners to move the shrine. The location of candles and other devotional materials was moved a short distance to the northwest corner of Simpson Street and Main Avenue. There is no documentation suggesting that the remains of deceased were moved before Simpson Road was extended across the site.

In 1927, Teofilo Otero deeded a lot on the west side of Main Avenue to the City of Tucson, specifically for the shrine. The shrine was moved at this time to the location where it still stands today. The northwest corner of Simpson and Main, the former documented location of the shrine, was developed into residential housing.

Upon relocation to its current location, Barrio residents and the City of Tucson formally rebuilt the shrine. While the location of the shrine has been moved several times, the spiritual intercession and religious value does not appear to have been lost. Although the physical remains of the deceased honored by El Tiradito are said to be buried a short distance away, the significance of the shrine appears revolve around the legend and practices associated with the shrine rather than the burial site itself.

In 1940, National Youth Administration Workers built a U-shaped adobe wall that continues to be the predominant structural element of the shrine.⁷ The wall was built to provide a more pleasant setting for the shrine, which prior to construction was “surrounded by broken down automobiles and junk.”⁸ The wall

⁷ The National Youth Administration was a New Deal Program.

⁸ *Tucson Citizen*, January 16, 1940. Available at the Arizona Historical Society archives.

resembles a curvilinear parapet or pediment that was popular among California Mission Revival architecture.

The attention given to the shrine by the City administrators, the National Youth Administration and community at large indicates that it had become a significant landmark. The City and Chamber of Commerce may have had economic motives behind the “beautification” of the site, as a way to promote tourism. California Mission Revival elements added in 1940 reflect an association of the shrine with romanticized Spanish Colonial history.

The significance of El Tiradito took on a new dimension in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as urban renewal programs threatened to destroy the shrine and surrounding neighborhoods. In 1966, 80 acres of historic, primarily working class Hispanic neighborhoods and popular businesses were leveled directly north of the shrine to make way for a complex of governmental buildings, a civic center and shopping district. The destruction of the neighborhoods symbolized a major blow to the Hispanic heritage of Tucson and to the diverse society that had been uprooted from the area.

In 1971 a proposal was made to build an expressway through Barrio Libre, which would destroy additional private residences and the El Tiradito shrine. A group of barrio residents of Mexican-American background formed the El Tiradito Committee to block the construction. Their efforts centered around listing El Tiradito on the National Register of Historic Places, which they successfully completed in 1971. The new status of El Tiradito as a nationally recognized historic site was a major factor in success of the activism against the expressway, which prevailed and blocked the construction.

As a result of the shrine’s central position in the activism to save endangered neighborhoods in the urban core, El Tiradito, already a symbol of Hispanic folklore, became a symbol of ethnic and social identity.⁹

In 1982, Arnolfo Trejo, a professor at the University of Arizona and former president of El Tiradito Committee, helped write a proposal that resulted in a \$5000 block grant to restore the shrine. Architect Eleazer Herreras, who had been involved in the relocation and reconstruction of the shrine at its current location in 1927, guided the restoration of the damaged adobe walls.¹⁰

In 2010, the City of Tucson funded restoration work on the shrine and the neighboring property, known as La Pilita. The La Pilita Foundation, who now occupies the restored building abutting the shrine, was a protagonist for the restoration work on both properties. The Tucson Historic Preservation Office

⁹ *Beliefs and Holy Places*, 109.

¹⁰ John Spagnoli, “Short trips: El Tiradito Preserves Tradition,” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 11, 1984.

formed a team of professionals to complete the restoration from Sellers & Sons general contractors, Oden Construction, and Poster Frost Mirto architects.

The site was regraded to allow for more efficient drainage of water away from the adobe wall foundations. The collapsed east ends of the U-shaped wall were rebuilt and brick coping was replaced. A steel plate was installed over a crack in the foundation on the northwest side of the wall to provide structural reinforcement. The backside of the wall was finished with mud plaster over stucco netting to protect the adobe from further deterioration and the white lime plaster of the central niche was replaced.¹¹

The restoration was conducted following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and was nominated for an Arizona Governor's Award for Historic Preservation.

The shrine's role in the community has further developed more recently, as it was chosen as the site for a weekly vigil honoring the migrants who have perished attempting to cross the United States-Mexico border. Members of various Christian parishes and the activist organization Derechos Humanos have gathered at El Tiradito every Thursday night since 2000 to light a candle and pray for the migrants who have died, as well as discuss issues of immigration. El Tiradito is a fitting venue for the vigil, as the migrants who are honored have also died without receiving the last rites of the Church and are often buried or left where they perished.

The evolution of the shrine as a community landmark continues today. Its significance is widespread and crosses social, cultural, and religious boundaries; however, it remains a landmark of the Hispanic cultural landscape within the city of Tucson.

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¹¹ Corky J. Poster, "Annotated Site and Floor Plan" (CAD drawing, Poster Frost Mirto. Tucson, Arizona, 2010).

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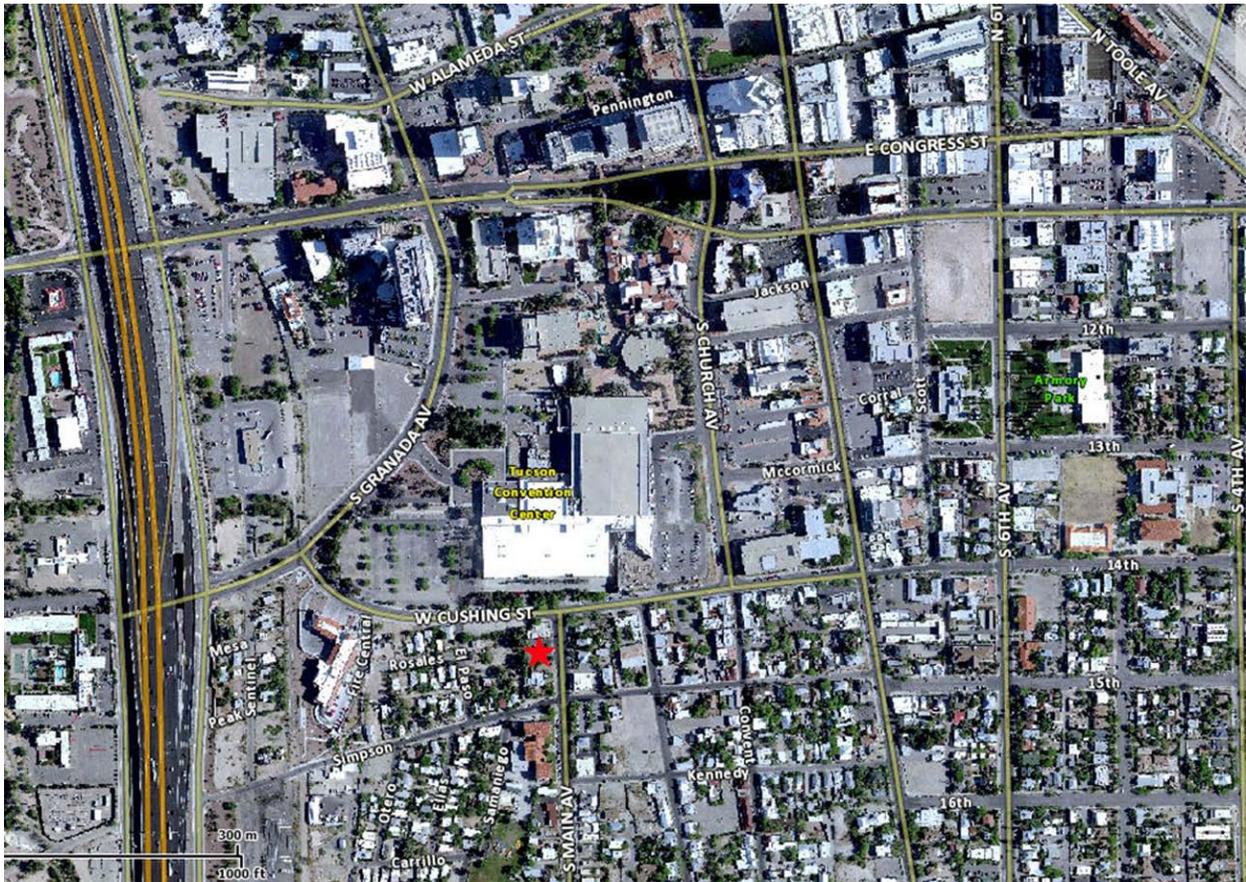
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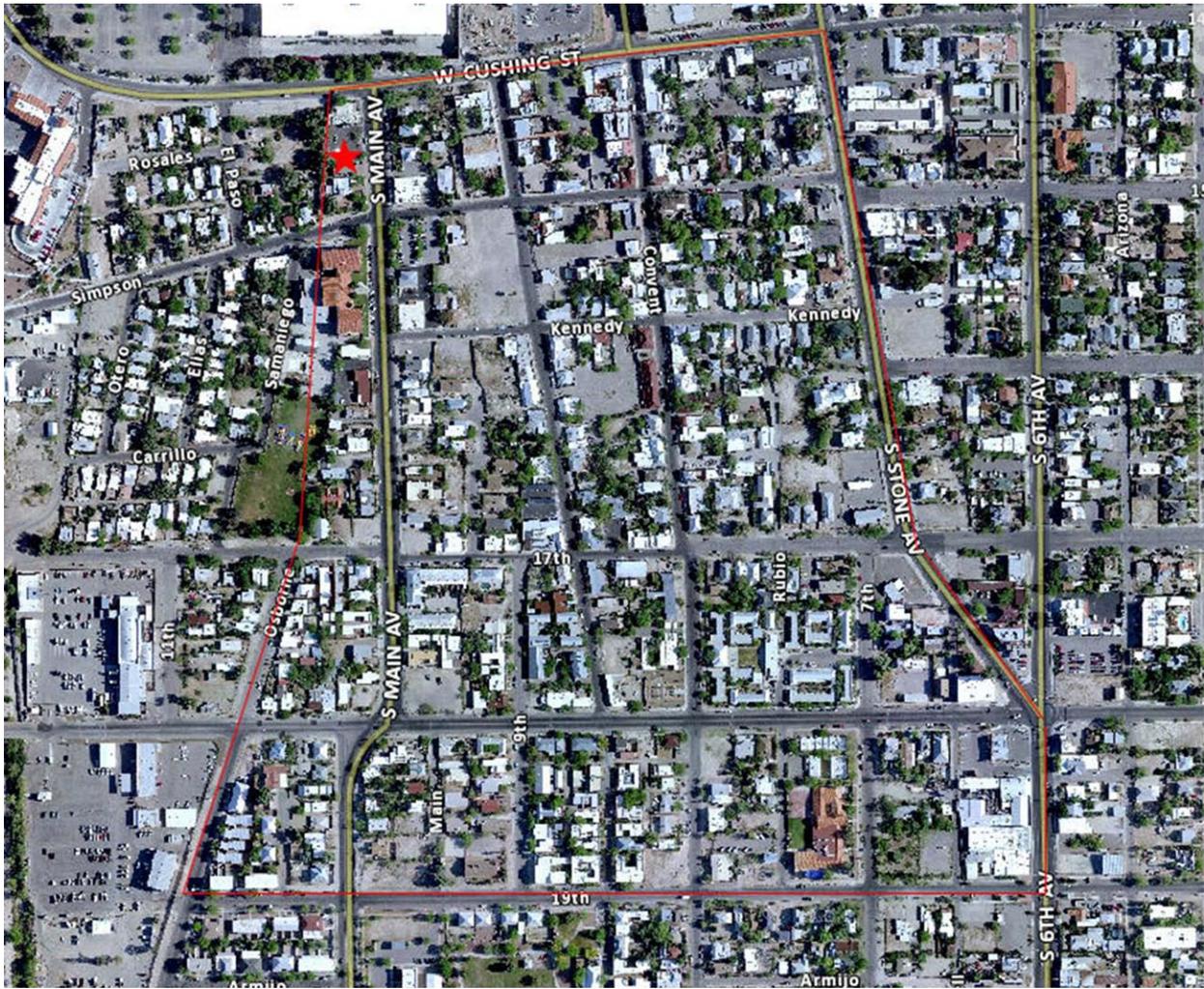
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July 13, 2012



Location map showing the shrine's position within downtown Tucson; El Tiradito is indicated with a red star (adapted from the City of Tucson GIS website, 2010 aerial data, <http://maps.tucsonaz.gov/pdsd/index.html>).



Location map showing the shrine's position within Barrio Libre; El Tiradito is indicated with a red star and the boundary of Barrio Libre, as listed in the district's National Register of Historic Places form, is outlined in red (adapted from the City of Tucson GIS website, 2010 aerial data, <http://maps.tucsonaz.gov/pdsd/index.html>).



El Tiradito shrine with neighboring adobe building to the south, looking southwest from the northeast corner of the lot (Barry Price Steinbrecher, July 2012).



El Tiradito as seen from the southeast corner of the lot, looking northwest; note chain link fence with ocotillo branches separating the parking lot of the El Minuto Café from the shrine's grounds (Barry Price Steinbrecher, July 2012).



El Tiradito with lit candles, as seen from the neighboring La Pilita garden, looking northwest (Barry Price Steinbrecher, April 2012).



Detail of plastered *nicho*, iron candle holders, and offerings left at the shrine. Offerings include candles, flowers, prayer flags, photographs, jewelry, and letters (Barry Price Steinbrecher, April 2012).



Detail of plastered *nicho* with candles and cross (Barry Price Steinbrecher, April 2012).



Detail of offerings left at the shrine (Barry Price Steinbrecher, July 2012).

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