

SOUTHWESTERN MONUMENTS  
SPECIAL REPORT

NO. 9

TUMACACORI ALCOVES  
OR TRANSEPTS



BY

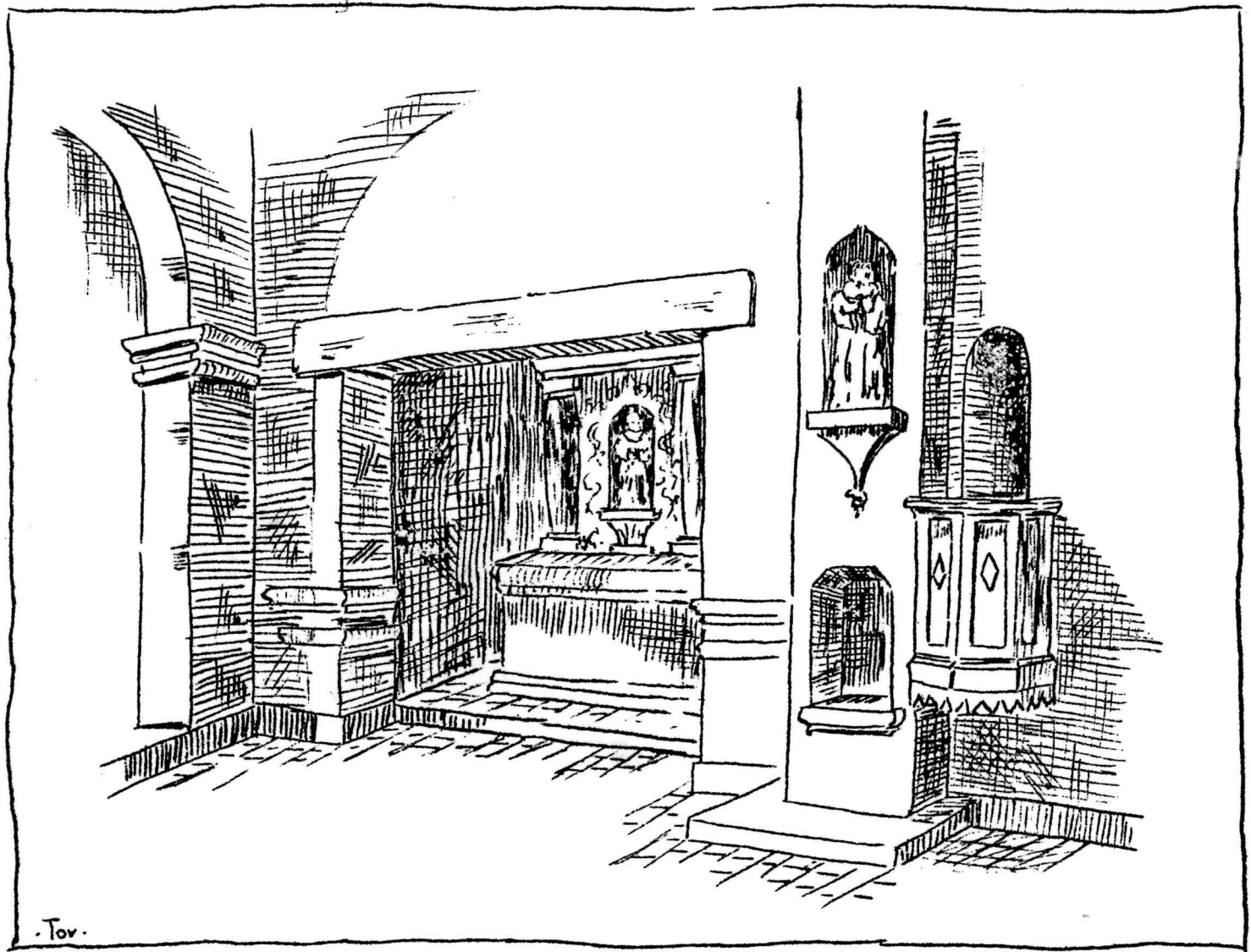
J. H. TOVREA  
AND

FRANK PINKLEY

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK

SERVICE



· TUMACACORI · ALCOVE ·

# TUMACACORI ALCOVES OR TRANSEPTS

By J. H. Tovrea  
and Frank Pinkley.

For many years we puzzled over certain non-bonded wall joints in the nave of the Tumacacori church. It might be well to put the problem down here and let others see if they can add to our information or develop any new theories.

Tumacacori was abandoned about a century ago. The beamed roof of the nave fell into ruin, partly due to vandalism and partly due to weathering. The interior walls of the nave were thus left open to the elements for several generations and the interior plaster broke away in large patches revealing the construction of the wall.

Not quite half way down the length of the nave from the entrance doorway are two pilasters, one against each wall, running the full height of the nave. Just in front of these pilasters some three feet the plaster being broken away exposes an unbonded joint in the wall which runs up about seven feet from the floor before the adobe bricks begin to bond across. About twelve feet farther along the walls we find another of these unbonded joints in each wall running to the same height before the adobes begin to bond across.

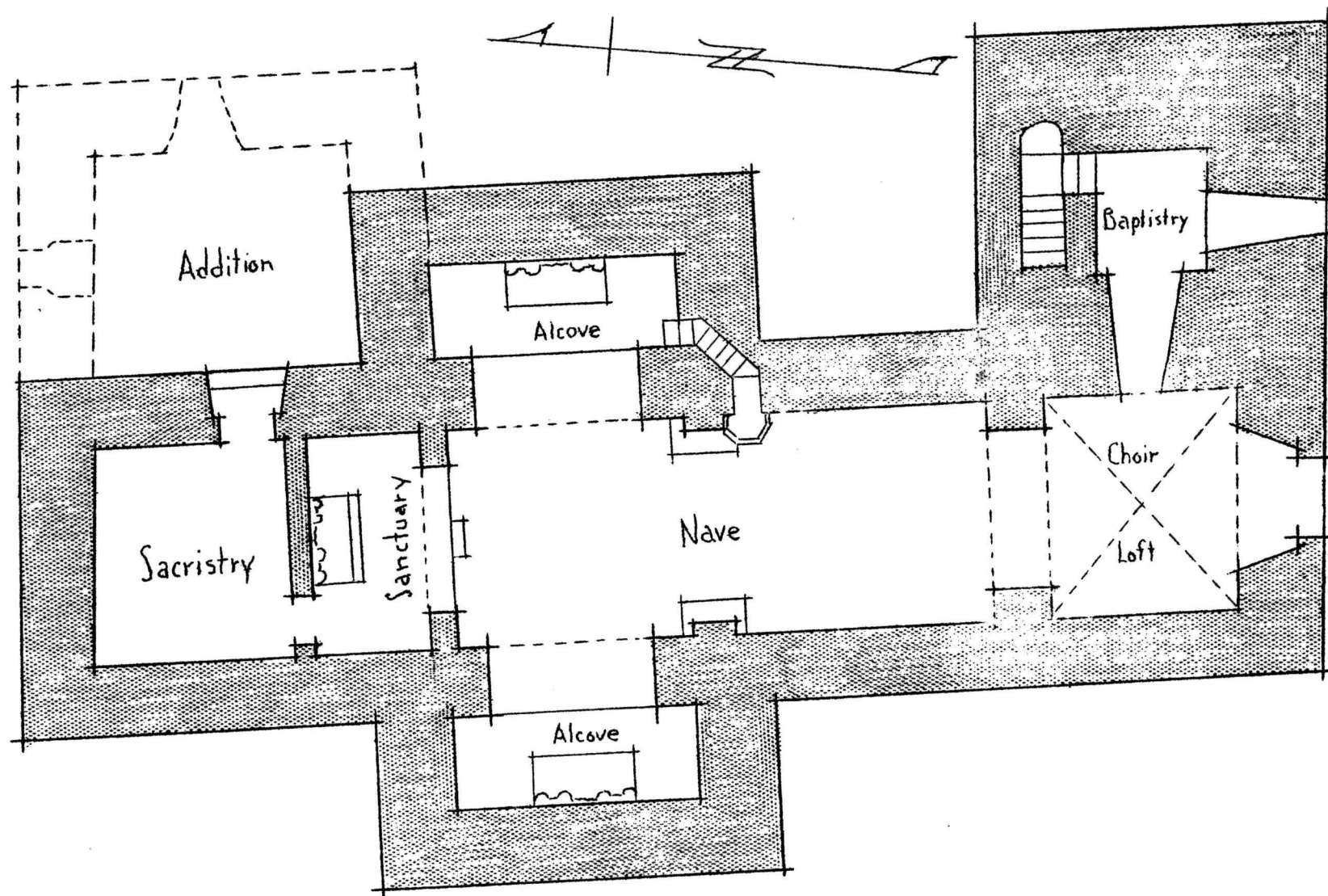
As we walk up the nave from the entrance doorway, just before we come to the pilaster on the right, the broken plaster shows, at a point several feet above the floor of the church, what appears to have been an entrance, window, or opening of some kind into the wall, which has afterward been filled with adobe bricks. Only the bottom of this supposed entrance or opening is visible, the plaster just above still clinging to the wall and preventing one from seeing whether or not the top of the opening might have had a wooden header or adobe arch.

The above were all the facts we had for some years and upon them we built many theories. One of the best of these theories was that the Padres had designed this church to have a cruciform plan; that the unbonded lines in the adobe walls marked the width of the openings into the transepts and that the opening or entrance in front of and near the east pilaster was the opening into the pulpit. We presumed that something had happened to make a change in the plan; that after the walls had been built some six or eight feet high the idea of constructing transepts was abandoned; that the workmen were ordered to fill up the transept openings and brick up the entry way which they had partly constructed leading from the east transept up through the wall into the pulpit which would have stood in the nave of the church.

This theory, given above, would account for the non-bonded joints in the walls of the nave and for the making of the so-called "pulpit entrance" which was then filled up and plastered over. It would also account for

---





· POSSIBLE PLAN-EARLY TUMACACORI ·

---

the bonding over of the adobes above the joints in the walls. The whole thing was just a change of plan while the church walls were under construction.

One time when Mr. George L. Boundey was Custodian of the Tumacacori National Monument, in doing some clean-up work and re-grading along the west side of the mission, he exposed the foundation of the supposed west transept. He opened it up and we looked it over and he then closed it up again.

One startling thing about this foundation, which developed in this examination, was that there were a few inches of the original wall still standing above the rock foundation and these few inches of the adobe wall CARRIED THE ORIGINAL STUCCO PLASTER WITH THE CHARACTERISTIC RED AND BLACK DECORATION SUCH AS THE WHOLE LOWER SECTION OF THE CHURCH ONCE CARRIED.

It does not appear reasonable to us that they would put the plaster on the inside or the stucco on the outside of a partly built wall. As we view it, then, the importance of this bit of stucco on the outside of this wall was to prove beyond reasonable doubt that this transept or alcove had once been completed; in other words our theory of a change of plan during construction and an abandonment of this part of the structure before it was completed would not fit this fact of the stuccoed exterior face of the wall.

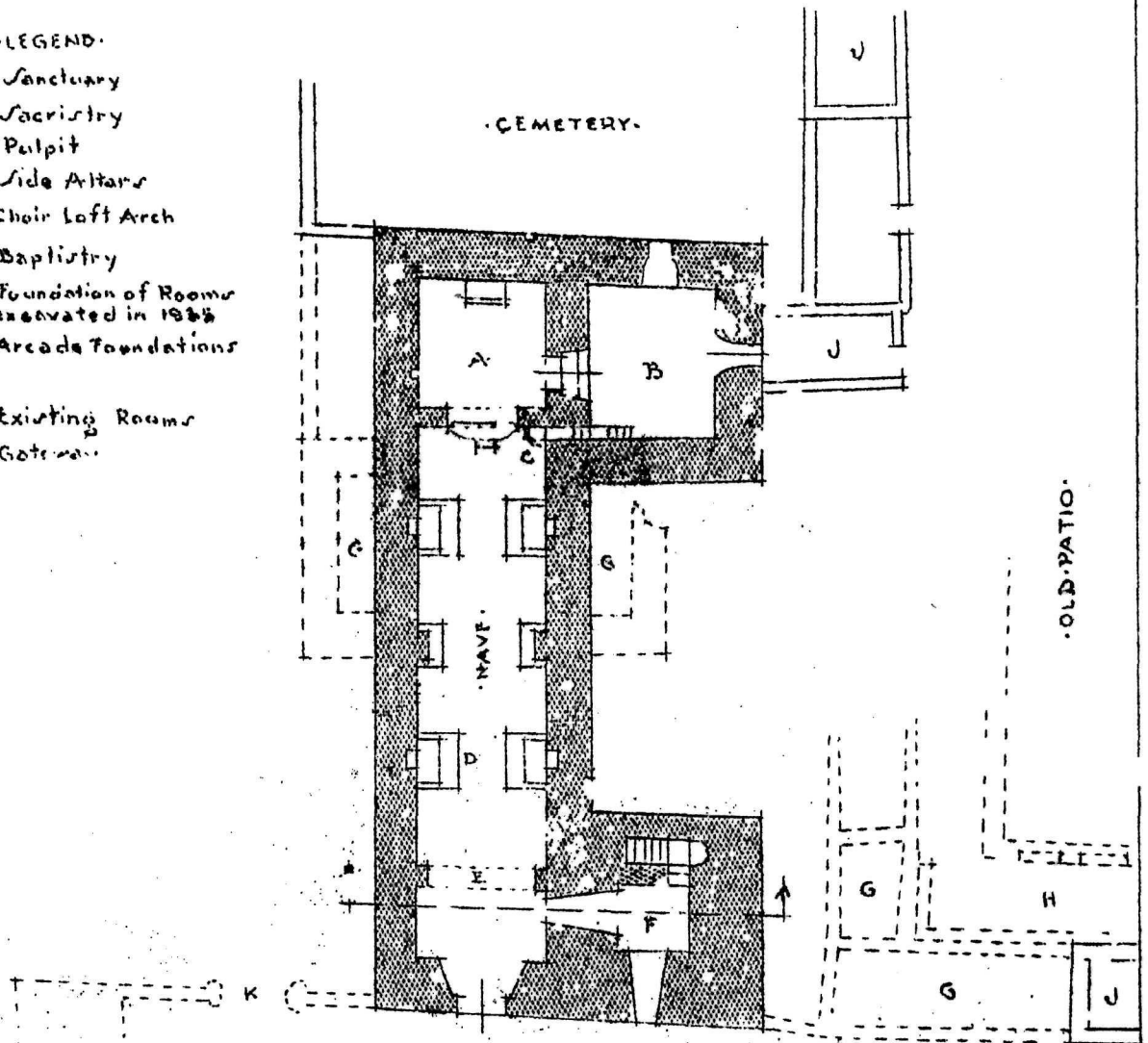
The study of a sister mission across the border, San Ignacio de Caborica, shows a plan somewhat similar to Tumacacori with two alcoves opening off the nave. The walls of these alcoves do not extend as high as the church walls and the alcoves have flat roofs. The east alcove has a pulpit entrance starting upward from the floor of the alcove, turning to the right and coming up through the wall of the nave, opening into the pulpit several feet above the floor of the church. Here we have in actual use precisely the same arrangement which we thought had been in effect at Tumacacori. The alcoves at San Ignacio each have an altar at the back and we think the same arrangement would have been effected at Tumacacori.

We are now of the opinion that these two alcoves or transepts at Tumacacori were at one time completed and in use; that in a later reconstruction period the walls of the nave at these points were torn down to a point some eight feet above the ground, the alcove or transept walls were removed down to ground level, the former entrance opening into the alcoves or transepts were bricked up and the walls of the nave were then carried back up to roof height. This would also entail closing up the pulpit entrance and the present pulpit entrance was then cut through farther along toward the rear of the church. It is also possible that the present sacristy was constructed at the time of this reconstruction and the present arch erected between the nave and the sanctuary, but these are problems which are outside the scope of this paper and will be treated later.

---

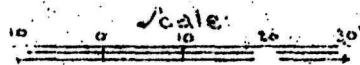
·LEGEND·

- A- Sanctuary
- B- Sacristy
- C Pulpit
- D- Side Altar
- E- Choir Loft Arch
- F- Baptistry
- G- Foundation of Rooms  
excavated in 1936
- H- Arcade Foundations
- J- Existing Rooms
- K- Gate-way



·PLATE 4·

·TUMACACORI FLOOR PLAN·



d. H. Tourea

---

As the facts now stand it seems probable to us that the nave walls of the present church might have been built before 1760. At that time these alcoves or transepts were complete and were in use. We have some reports of the church being attacked and at least partially destroyed by the Apaches in the 1760's and at this time the roofs of the nave and those transepts or alcoves were probably destroyed by fire and the walls left open to the elements. Nothing seems to have been done until 1781 when we have a notation that the church had been rebuilt or restored and was again in use. We think it is entirely probable that it was in this reconstruction of 1781 the decision was made to abandon these side structures, because of their ruinous condition, possibly because the fire had destroyed the lintel beams which may have carried the walls across the openings, or because they had been too badly desecrated to be used again, and so the present arrangement of the interior of the church dates from about 1781.

Attention should be called, at this point, to the fact that the four large altars in the nave of the present church are not bonded into the nave walls. The plaster of the nave walls runs unbroken behind the altars. Now, since the extensive reconstruction as set out above would probably entail a replastering of the interior walls of the nave, we might suppose the present altars in the nave to date from 1781 or later.

This would fit well into our theory for with the high altar in the sanctuary and the two side altars in the alcoves or transepts, no others would be needed, whereas, upon the abandonment of the alcoves or transepts the Padre might decide to relieve the plainness of the nave by introducing the present altars.

We present this study of the problem of the alcoves at Tumacacori for better heads than ours to puzzle over and to point out to the research men who are now working over the ancient records the need of looking carefully through all the reports around 1781 to see if any documentary evidence can be found which will corroborate these guesses of ours as to a reconstruction and if there was one just how extensive it was.

---

