

Populating the North The Janos Presidio

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Drawing by Luis Arnal

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the construction of presidios in northern Mexico was part of a policy to support both Spanish and indigenous settlements beleaguered by the continual attacks by rebel tribes who inhabited the area. The presidios (fortified settlements or military outposts) and missions were an important part of the processes of populating and pacifying New Spain's North, an area, because of its distance from the centers of colonial

power, at the mercy of nomadic tribes and rebel indigenous groups who rejected the imposition of Catholicism and the colonial way of life.

As the Spaniards extended their range of action throughout the territory conquered in the North, resistance became more severe and violent. The idea of building presidios came into favor fundamentally in order to have a place that could protect roads, caravans, farms and mining towns. They were always located in strategic places no longer than one day's journey from each other. Although it was not a regular practice, some sol-

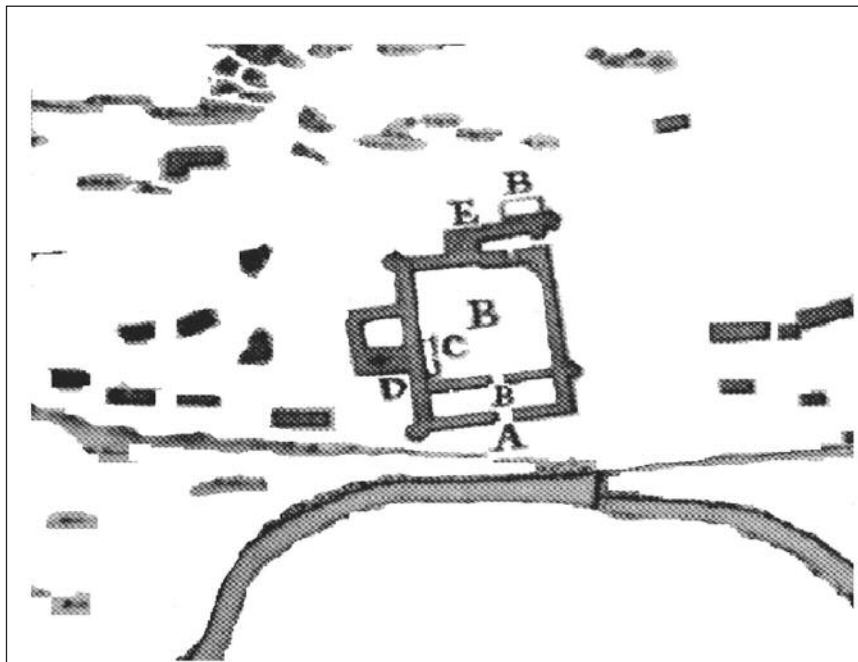
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diers were assigned to guard the missions in the so-called “Chichimec” area to protect the missionaries. In the mid-sixteenth century, these small garrisons, guarded by a handful of men, were maintained with the support of the crown, but also with contributions from the miners and farmers themselves, who thus protected their own goods and persons, above all along what was called the “Silver Road” that led to the Zacatecas area, where the haciendas and ranches that fed the mining centers were located.

In time, these establishments became towns and *villas* since traders, muleteers and farmers gathered around them, gradually building permanent settlements outside their walls.

The presidio (from *pre-sedere*, meaning “to go before,” “to head up”) were constructions of different sizes built in the military fashion with adobe or stake walls around them. Inside the walls was a plaza where the horses were kept and around the inside of the wall were a series of rooms: the commandant’s house, barracks for the troops, storerooms, a chapel and rooms for seed and tools. Groups of pacified indigenous under the fort’s protection from the continual attacks of other tribes might live in arbors or in the open air outside its walls. The presidio even had kitchens and sometimes a school for the indigenous children; all of this was part of the policy to assimilate the nomads and train them in the customs, hygiene and diet of the mestizo.

Groups of Tlaxcaltec indigenous, already converted to Catholicism, were also sent to pacify and people the arid lands; they went to the presidio and *villas* of the North with the idea that they would serve as examples for the nomads, who, by imitation, would take these groups as models and introduce



Janos Presidio, 1766, by José de Urrutia
B.M. map room, folio A. K.

- A. Main entrance and guard room
- B. Patios
- C. Cemetery
- D. Church
- E. Captain's house

Note: The entire construction is adobe, and the rest is almost in ruins, except the Church and the Captain's house that was recently rebuilt.

The presidios were part of a policy
to support both Spanish and indigenous
settlements from attacks by rebel tribes.

the food, colors and habits of the highlands. However, pacification was achieved neither easily nor rapidly. Given the rebel tribes' mobility, the presidio often had to be moved or would simply disappear when no longer useful for the defense strategy. This also happened when the population of a settlement grew enough to permit self-

defense. Thus, little by little, some of the presidios became small settlements and the nomad frontier was pushed further and further north.

In the eighteenth century, the basis was laid for a military organization with Bourbon influence; by that time, the border of the theater of war was practically at the Rio Grande.

THE JANOS PRESIDIO

One of the presidios vital in border defense and emblematic of the history of all the forts was the San Felipe and Santiago de Janos Presidio. It was founded in 1686 after the Pueblo Indian rebellion of 1680 that led to the momentary loss of New Mexico, including Santa Fe and the missions and towns in the Rio Grande Valley. In the judgement of the Royal Council of the Indies, this uprising occurred because of an inappropriate system of presidios; therefore, they ordered the expansion of the presidios and their reinforcement with flying companies of highly mobile mounted troops who could rapidly and efficiently respond to any provocation. The rebellion was started by several tribes, including the dangerous Apache. By 1683, the Manso, Suma and Jano had joined them, having destroyed the Franciscan chain of missions in New Mexico. Shortly thereafter, with the aid of the Julim, the Concho, the Toboso and the Tarahumara, they threatened the Jesuit missions and all the towns and mining centers along the border, from Sonora to Coahuila and as far south as Cuencame in Durango.

Given these dangers, which put the entire Viceroyalty at risk, the authorities decided to build a chain of presidios like those that had been set up in the sixteenth century. First they founded the presidio in Cerro Gordo, Pasaje, San Pedro del Gallo, Conchos and Our Lady of Pilar del Paso on the northern river in what is today Chihuahua, and others in what today is Sonora, such as Fronteras, that defended the indigenous passageway to what is now Sinaloa. With these strategies and more troops, the rebellion was put down in 1693, but the chain of presidios con-

tinued to be decisive in the pacification and protection of the border. By 1725, there were 22 presidios from Sonora to Texas, manned by a total of 905 soldiers.

In 1723, Pedro de Rivera was sent to inspect the forts, even out the distance between them and regulate the number of troops needed for them to function, as well as institute other disciplinary measures. In 1729, based on his recommendations, the authorities issued the "Regulations for All Presidios of the Inland Provinces,"¹ which established the presidios' defensive priorities and the territories they were assigned to guard, as well as the internal regimen and use of each one, pointing to the ones that should be relocated or closed.

By that time, the Janos Presidio had become the largest of the "line" and one of the most important, since it was in charge of the repression of the Apache, Gila, Mescalero, Salinero and Nataje, who were to be dealt with "astutely, by flattery or by force, without killing them."²

Thus, the presidio's strategic position turned it into a vital weapon for defense. In 1745 and in 1749 visits were made to the area to explore the possibility of eliminating some of the presidios considered of no use, but Janos was never moved from its original location: situated on a small bluff over the left bank of a stream of the

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same name it protected the entrance to the San Buenaventura Valley and Chihuahua, populated areas that had to withstand enemy attacks that penetrated the area between the Janos Presidio and El Paso.

In 1760, another evaluation was made of the line of presidios in the inland provinces, but it was not until 1765 that General Juan de Villalba was sent at the head of a regular army structured in the European fashion, who intended to carry out an orderly, efficient defense. To this end, regiments were recruited from the peninsula and Central Mexico and provincial militias were also sent, many made up of pacified indigenous. With all this support, Don José de Gálvez, named inspector by the viceroy, sought to reorganize the entire fort system.

Among other things, it was decided to build a new fort between the Janos and El Paso Presidios in the San Buenaventura Valley to reduce the number of attacks on Chihuahua.

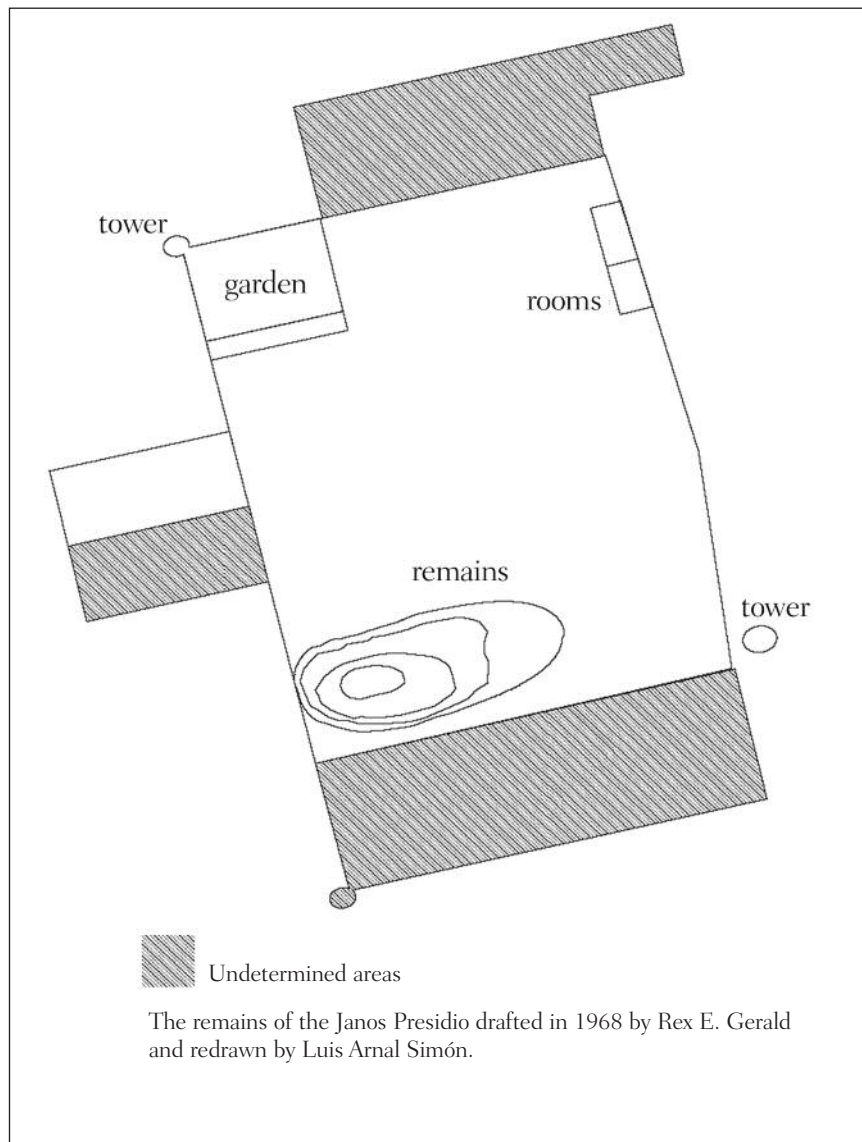
One of the members of Villalba's team was the Marquis de Rubí, sent to inspect the presidios along the northern border, repair them and propose improvements to adapt to the new times of military effectiveness and order. Some of the reforms aimed at getting the soldiers to settle along the border; one of the orders said, "The captains shall supply the soldiers with arms, gear and uniforms and the other half

in cash. This way they will be able to save money and settle that country.”³

During 1766, Rubí traveled throughout the border region, from Sonora to Texas, visiting among others, the Janos Presidio, which he found to be well fortified and with a plan to build a square with two plazas, a cemetery, a church, the captain’s house and barracks for the troops along the wall. One of the patios was smaller than the other and was used as a corral for the horses, since each soldier had between four and six horses, in addition to pack mules that were kept inside the fort. According to a map made by military engineer José de Urrutia, outside were fields with irrigation canals and “150 families of mestizos and mulattos, including those of the company, which came to 455 people.”⁴ These people lived in adobe houses, although “some of them were threatening to fall down in some parts and in others, had open holes; most of the houses were of no use.”⁵ This confirms that the fort began to take on the shape of a town and despite having to face attacks, the inhabitants stayed on tenaciously.

Rubí and military engineer Nicolás LaFora proposed unifying the frontier and ordered the spaces between some of the presidios be closed; to this end, they changed the location of the forts that were no longer of any use, particularly bringing them closer to the Rio Grande to make sure the attacks could not go beyond that point. This was because in the five years prior to Rubí’s visit, the Apache had killed more than 800 colonists (both indigenous and mestizo), forcing the closure of many mines in the region. By 1760, there were 1,161 soldiers guarding the line of presidios.

Among other things, this visit produced the Regulations and Instructions



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for Presidios, signed by Viceroy Francisco de Croix in 1770 and approved by the king two years later, as well as the creation of the General Command of the Inland Provinces. This simplified the relationships among the different commands and established local authority, necessary because of the danger of attacks. This dynamic put into prac-

tice the idea of moving the presidios, among them Altar, Tubac, Terrenate and Fronteras in Sonora; San Buenaventura, Paso del Norte, Guajuquilla, Julimes and Cerro Gordo in Nueva Vizcaya; Santa Rosa and Monclova in Coahuila; and San Saba in Texas. They would all be moved to more appropriate sites, since all of them had turned

into towns. Nevertheless, once again, the Janos Presidio was not moved, since it closed off the province and through it, communication with Sonora was possible; it was even reinforced with more troops when it suffered several Apache and Gileño attacks in 1773.

In 1779, the postal service was established to link the presidios with the headquarters, located in the city of Chihuahua. Riders traveled from presidio to presidio with orders and other papers, linking the entire territory from California to Texas. Despite this, the Apache attacks continued and the Janos Presidio would be one of the places that came under the fiercest onslaughts. Its horses were stolen several times and the little town around it burned on more than one occasion. But, finally, the tribes had to give up on their attacks because, although they were always more agile on the offensive, their defenses were weaker and their numbers smaller.

Many expeditions were mounted against the Apache settlements and peace began to be made with the Mescalero, Lipan, Patul and others, whose chiefs —among them Cosindede, Black Blanket, Rooster, Snake, Golden Eyes and Tasquenelte— came to Chihuahua to sign peace treaties.

In 1780, the Janos Presidio had a garrison 95-strong and was one of the strongest forts. By that time, Teodoro de Croix was commander general; he began a policy of encouraging the creation of towns near the presidios since he understood that only with permanent settlements could the frontier be pacified. He aimed at establishing 28 of these towns; in addition to increasing the number of inhabitants who farmed, the presidios would have food and supplies close at hand, which would

save on transportation costs to supply the troops.

By that time, the Janos Presidio had a small group of colonists who worked the land, a number increased by the indigenous population, the result of regiments of Opata Indians who were recruited to be support troops. They did not have a fixed abode, but functioned as a mobile company, coming and going along the border, although some were headquartered at Babispe, San Ignacio and in the Janos Presidio itself. The fort commander was the authority who regulated work and ruled over activities in the little township: “[He] will not allow the houses to become dilapidated, but will cause them to be repaired, making sure that those who build new ones do so on the land given to them 30 paces from the wall, next to the fields, and that they make a plaza.”⁶

Finally, the frontier was pacified toward the end of the eighteenth century; between 1790 and 1795, several tribes made peace and moved into the presidios to make permanent settlements when they were given gifts, food, clothing and land so they could begin a sedentary existence: “So the occupants will be encouraged to work, seeing that they are looked upon with love, [the commandant] will send the appropriate person who, when he goes through Chihuahua, will bring with him 500 or 600 pesos in common effects and edibles, and the aforementioned occupants will be given cash.”⁷

Eight Mimbres and Gila chiefs, with nearly 500 people, settled in Janos, and other groups of Faraon and Mescalero settled in other presidios of the area, such as San Eleazar, Carrizal and Paso del Norte. Although many did not accept this change of life and ran

away, others did stay to make permanent communities.

With the independence of Mexico, the presidio system disappeared; the missions, semi-abandoned, could also do little to retain and help local inhabitants. The Apache attacks resumed, with the result that many of these incipient towns that had grown in the shadow of the presidios disappeared.

Janos is today a town where the adobe remains of what was once one of the most important military centers and settlements in this region are still visible, where cultures merged and the settlement of a hostile territory took root. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Luis Arnal, *Arquitectura y urbanismo del Septentrión novohispano I* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1999), pp. 26.

² Luis Navarro García, *Don José de Gálvez y la Comandancia General de las Provincias Internas del Norte de la Nueva España* (Seville: Instituto de Estudios Hispánicos de Sevilla, 1964), p. 76.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴ Nicolás LaFora, *Relación del viaje que hizo a los presidios internos de la América Septentrional* (Mexico City: Porrúa Editores, 1939), p. 115.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Instrucciones para el comandante del presidio de Janos,” 12 October 1778, *Records of the Janos Presidio*, Box 2, Fol. 3, Sec. 1, Benson Collection, University of Austin.

⁷ *Ibid.*