

# Alternative Practices: A Case Study of African American Construction

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Neglected and abandoned buildings populate the landscape. Many of them remain standing because they have deep meaning to the citizens of a community who have neither the resources to restore the structures, nor the heart to destroy them. This paper looks at a case study of what can be learned from the careful and considered disassembly of one such structure. The study reveals construction practices of African Americans during the post-Civil War period as a continuation of building practices carried forward from slave practices of the plantation era through the Reconstruction era.

The study began from the necessary removal of a building that, although once a vital part of the community, had fallen into disuse and was scheduled for demolition. Through our offer to remove the building for the community, we were able to perform the research communicated in this paper, provide a valuable learning experience to the students, and celebrate the life of the building as we discovered it through our slow process of dissecting and disassembling the building.

Very few comprehensive surveys of African American building stock have been conducted so our study had to draw largely on observations and first hand accounts of community members. [Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery](#) by John Michael Vlach provided most of the background information for the research. The results of our research are somewhat speculative in nature but provide a starting point for future investigations on the topic. The unorthodox methodology of actually performing a building dissection provided conclusive evidence of the additive and adhoc building practices employed by African Americans in the early twentieth century. While it is not the objective of

this paper to demonstrate far-reaching patterns, it could be argued that such building practices are typical in many self-reliant communities of the post-industrial world.

Vlach points to an African American plantation landscape created in a deliberately adhoc manner as a form of resistance to the power structure of the more orderly plantation owners. He states, "Their domains, consisting mainly of rough and un-gainly dwellings together with their cluttered yards, reflected not a lack of ability but their material poverty. Denied the time and resources needed to design and build as they might have wanted, they simply appropriated, as marginalized peoples often do, the environments to which they were assigned."<sup>1</sup> Based on this reading of African American building culture, we assumed that the decisions made in the construction of the Keese Barn, while perhaps not overtly political, were a continuation of the slave culture from which Ben Keese and most of the African Americans in Pendleton, were descended. The construction techniques and material appropriations described in this paper can be seen not just as a reflection of need and poverty, but conscious acts based on a value system that privileged expediency and economy over order and beauty.

## THE PROJECT

Our primary charge was to remove the building.<sup>2</sup> Our goal was to turn this project into a learning experience for our students and a research project that would contribute to a larger body of knowledge about architectural production. The site and project of the Keese Barn, were located on a small plot of land in Pendleton, South Carolina, just one block from the historic town square. The town square had been in continuous use as the center of the

white community since it was the meeting site for local plantations owners in the pre-Civil War era. The Square, as it was known, had at its center the Farmer's Hall, a two story columned structure, of course, painted white. The segregation of the Square continued through the time of enforced segregation when African Americans were forbidden from owning property on the Square and were discouraged from conducting anything but the most rudimentary business transactions in the surrounding stores and restaurants.



**Figure 1** An early photograph of the Keese Barn, approximately 1950.

Alternatively, the Keese Barn, known as the Keese Store until the Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture took it over, served as a reminder of a time when the African American community was vibrant and lively, despite segregation laws. The café was purported to be the only restaurant in town that would serve a hot, sit-down meal to people of color. Mr. Ben Keese, the owner and "architect" of the building, loaned money to individuals and families throughout the community who would have been unable to receive credit from any bank or business in town. He hired young people to work for him in the store and taught them the ways of a successful businessperson. In that capacity, he served as a role model of an extremely successful African American man in a time that most people would have found that impossible. Finally, the site of the Keese Store itself became a focal point for the community, a place where local African Americans could gather freely, outside of church, to celebrate community events and strengthen their ties to one another. Mr. Ben Keese owned this property but it also operated as a community place and host to many gatherings.

Mr. Ben Keese went to Philadelphia as a young man and learned the possibilities of entrepreneurship. He returned to his hometown and began a

small business known as the Keese Store out of a one-story structure that he rented. Over time, his business grew and Mr. Keese began to operate a café and rent apartment space in the structure. As the business grew, so did the building with Mr. Keese and his associates adding on with makeshift materials to the makeshift structure. In a major addition to his business and the structure, Mr. Keese built a second story and a third story attic on the existing one story structure. In this he housed an extremely profitable antique business (with antiques he returned to Philadelphia to purchase), attracting customers from the white and African American community. He effectively created one of the only racially integrated experiences for all members of community.

Over the decades since Mr. Keese passed away and the Pendleton Foundation for Black History and Culture took over the property, different groups made many efforts to save the structure, now known as the Keese Barn, or the Hundreds. Unfortunately, no effort succeeded in raising the funds necessary to save the Barn and the Town scheduled its immediate demolition. The Barn and site no longer functioned as the center of the community, except in memory.



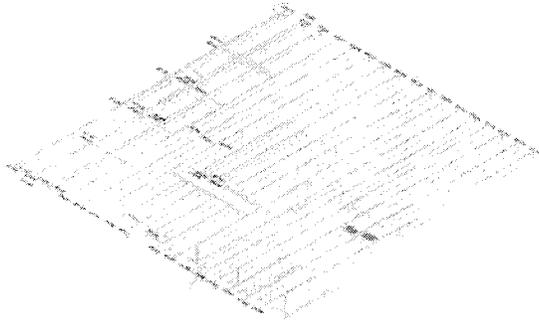
**Figure 2** Studio South meeting with community leaders

The erasure of the structure studied was an inherently politic act and one that was undertaken with serious respect for the community affected. Prior to our project we met with numerous community leaders to inform them of our intentions and respond to any objections raised.

## METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTATION

The Keese Barn provided an example of African American vernacular architecture. We learned from various members of the community that the

structure had grown through a series of additions to its peak size and in later years begun to shrink through a series of collapses and removal of spaces. The additions had been made using materials appropriated from resources all over the community including other structures that were being demolished or removed.



**Figure 3** Example of framing plan documentation.

The structure as we observed and documented it was a two-story wooden building with a crawl space below and pyramidal roof that housed a third-story attic space. The structural system was wood frame with clapboard siding set on a foundation that included stone, brick, and concrete as well as heavy timber piers supporting the interior spans. Three chimneys penetrated the structure from ground to roof. The roof was constructed of tin shingles and tin sheeting over wooden roof joists. The interior finishes included wood flooring and various types of wallboard. Windows and doors were of various types and dimensions but were primarily wooden.

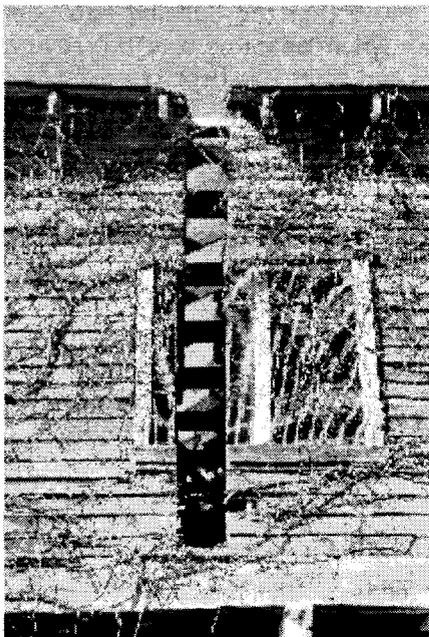
The main floor level had four major structural divisions running in a shotgun pattern from front to back of the building. The first bay was one open space that had been the most public part of the building at one point as it housed a combination café space and small general store. The center bay of the structure was divided perpendicularly to the main structure with a wall and had housed an office and kitchen in its two rooms. The third bay contained a staircase and hallway leading to the second floor. At the rear of the hallway was the only bathroom within the structure. The last bay consisted of three rooms, again arranged in shotgun house fashion from front to back. The room at the back of the building had been extended to one side

with an addition that projected over the stone and brick foundation wall. The addition was supported on several columns that appeared to be much newer than the foundation wall. The foundation walls were very well constructed and it was known that many member of the community were expert brick masons which may have misled us as to the dating of the columns.

The second floor and attic space, which we knew from oral accounts had been added in the 1940's, completed the majority of the structure as we found it. Photographs, oral accounts, and existing wall penetrations showed that the building had been even larger than when we came to it but several exterior porches and stairs had been removed over the years as they deteriorated. The second floor space was primarily open except for an office space enclosed in the front half of the third bay. The open space was interrupted with an uncovered stud wall located over the wall below separating the café bay from the office/kitchen bay. Additional intrusions included the two interior chimneys, the stair coming from below, and a stair leading to the third floor attic space. The attic space had a roof hatch of undetermined necessity and a small gabled window. The only finishes in the second and third floor were the flooring. Mr. Keese had used this space to sell antiques, a practice that grew in scope over the years prior to his retirement in 1980.

Although the second floor addition followed the basic structural footprint of the first floor, an eight foot projection of the second floor created a porch on the street front of the building. Six columns probably purchased by Ben Keese from a local plantation formed the structure under the projection and created an arcade/porch on the main floor. The later addition of a sunroom on the residential end of the structure enclosed part of the arcade but was removed prior to our project. The second floor and roof additions connected the many additions and changes made to the first floor over 30 years. When we came to the Barn in 2002 we did not know of the many additions and alternations that occurred early in the building's life as the roof and second floor had the effect of monumentalizing the building. With the exception of the small protrusion off the residential bay, the building as we found it was approximately 70 feet across the front dimension and 50 feet in depth.

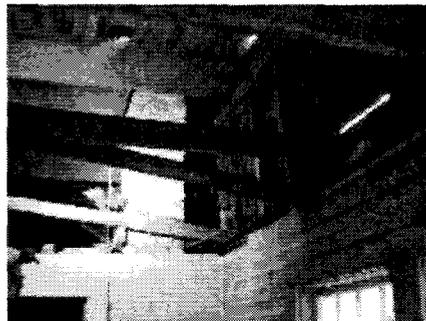
After a series of design workshops with professional engineers and construction experts, we developed a strategy we called disassembly. Our methodology appropriated the scientific analogy of dissection, making a series of cuts through the building to reveal the section of the building. The section not only allowed us to study the spatial condition of the structure, but also the way the building was put together. Another part of the methodology involved removing layers of the existing building fabric to reveal the aggregated nature of additions.



**Figure 4** Dissection cut through the building leaving structural members intact.

Through the removal of layers within the interior of the structure we were able to begin to speculate about the buildings additions. After fully documenting the existing conditions, we began to strip away the layers of finishes in the most dense part of the structure, three rooms that had been the residence within the building. As we pulled off the layers of wallboard of a dropped ceiling, we discovered joists that had clearly been part of another structure or at least had been using in another type of building section. The ceiling joists were arrayed parallel to one another with an average spacing of 24". But on the top of the joists were bird's mouth notches located at the outside wall. The other end of the joists were cut at an angle which immediately indicated that they had been used previously as part

of a roof structure. The removal of the dropped ceiling revealed the interior of the wall's framework above the line of the ceiling. Within this space we could clearly see the original framework of the wall studs. Further evidence was revealed as disassembly continued at a chimney where we discovered roofing sealant at the first floor level and new brick construction above.



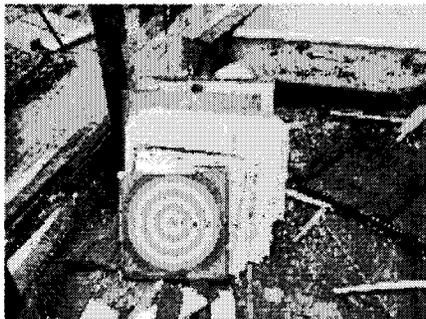
**Figure 5** Roof/ceiling joists and chimney, evidence of a previous one story structure.

Our continued stripping of interior finishes revealed further clues as to the evolution of the building additions. The rooms where we discovered the notched roof joists also had many layers of material on the interior wall separating the rooms from the stair hallway. As we stripped the layers it became evident that the wall had once been on the exterior of the building. Original clapboard siding had been covered with interior wallboard and the paint patterns indicated that several additions and changes had been made over the years. In addition, the flooring patterns and marking indicated that the three room arrangement had originally been one room at the front of the site but had added onto in the rear to match the depth of the rest of the structure.

Our findings about the evolution of the structure are inconclusive but we finally resolved that there were two possible scenarios as to the accretion of the structure as we found it. We learned through property records searches that Mr. Ben Keese had begun renting the property as early as 1910 for his residence and had probably immediately begun running a business out of his home. Mrs. Anna Keese had purchased the property in 1936 with records showing there were two structures on the property at that time. There were no plat drawings of the site so the location and disposition of the structure

remained for us to speculate on. One theory places the two structures within the footprint of the existing structure. One structure would have been a single room with a shed roof at the end bay where we discovered the notched ceiling joists. The second structure would have been larger, at first only including the café end of the structure but quickly added to, encompassing the first two bays but would also have been a single story. The second theory we developed placed one of the structures listed as the office/kitchen bay as original, and speculated that the second structure listed could have been one of numerous, no longer extant, outbuildings. Although the evidence proved inconclusive regarding the siting of the original structures, we did prove that the original structure(s) had been one story and that there had been many alterations to the main floor over the years.

Our stripping of interior finishes revealed many instances of the adhoc nature of the construction. In the bathroom located on the main floor we discovered that the wall covering was created from squares of particle board printed with targets and painted over. This moment of whimsy in an otherwise sober and relatively barren building provided us with additional insight into the mind of the builder and the community. The appropriation of the targets for use as wallboard was only located in the bathroom and no where else in the building. While there may have been some functional or practical reason for their use, we preferred to credit Mr. Keese with a sense of irony and sly wit.



**Figure 6** Targets used as wallboard in bathroom.

Our dissection methodology revealed more unorthodox construction techniques employed in the making of the Keese Barn. As the structure grew from one to two stories, Mr. Keese had simply spliced wall studs onto one another vertically making the struc-

ture into a shaky balloon frame. The diaphragm loading created when the studs were covered with clapboard and interior finishes account for the structural integrity of the building. As we stripped away finishes, we often created conditions of buckling and sag that would not be part of a traditionally constructed wood structure with continuous balloon framing or platform framing.

## MATERIALS

The wood framing shows evidence of Mr. Keese's appropriation of materials for reuse in the construction of additions and alterations to the building. One of our consultants on the project provided us with a history of wood milling techniques in our region from which we observed that the wood in the building had come from sources all over the region. The sawing patterns that remained on the wood gave us the ability to date the wood, some of which must have been milled prior to the Civil War and certainly prior to the time they were used in the building. Our conclusions from this evidence were that Mr. Keese had probably purchased wood from other structures, probably plantations that were being demolished in the early 1900's. The four milling patterns observed on the wood demonstrated the following techniques: hand-riven and pit sawn; water driven band-sawn; steam driven circular sawn; and combustion engine circular sawn.

Hand-riven and pit sawing were common milling techniques used throughout the U.S. prior to 1810. These timbers were typically very wide and thick and would be classified as heavy timbering. We found several examples of hand-hewn timbers used as piers in the crawl space. Again, this indicates that Mr. Keese probably acquired this wood from very early structures in our region and used it as he needed to reinforce the base structure throughout his renovations.

Much of the wood that framed the roof and second story provided examples of the water driven band saw milling technique. This technique would have been used in our region primarily in the 1810's to the early 1850's. Perpendicular saw marks left on the wood indicated this type of milling. Again, the time period this marking indicated points not to the origin of the construction on the Keese Barn structure, but rather to the owner's proclivity to re-use materials from other sites.

The primary milling technique found in the construction of the first floor was the steam driven circular saw. This technique was most common from 1850 to 1920. The markings left by this technique were similar to the marking left by the combustion engine circular saw which came into preeminence in the 1920's and is still used today. Both processes leave arc shaped markings on the wood but the steam driven saw markings are approximately one inch apart due to the slow motion of the saw blade. We found examples of these techniques throughout the building. The location of this wood on the first floor may indicate that it predates Mr. Keese's interventions on the structure and therefore much of it may be original to the structure.

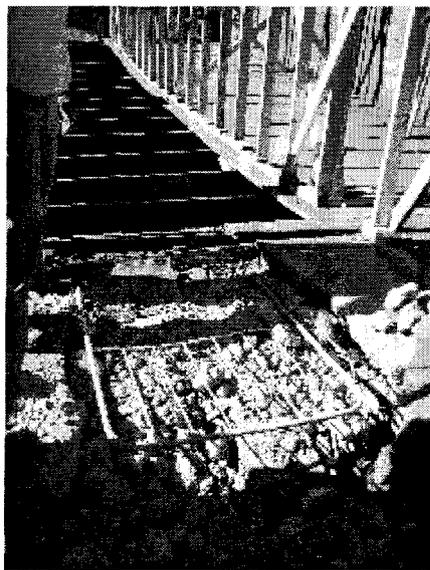


**Figure 7** Circular sawn wood.

From the evidence of much circular sawn wood we could also speculate that Mr. Keese purchased wood directly from a mill. However many oral accounts of community members suggest that even this wood may have been reclaimed from other structures. Although we could never verify the accounts, we heard that some wood had been reclaimed from the demolition of old barracks at the local college. Other accounts tell of Mr. Keese buying or simply being given wood from barns, houses, and plantations from all over the area. The final confirmation of previous use lay in the wood itself. We found nail holes or embedded nails in virtually every piece of structural wood we salvaged from the structure. We know that some of the wood may have been used previously in the structure itself as in the case of the roof/ceiling joist condition described earlier. Mr. Keese's ability to salvage and reuse materials provided us with great insight into his character and thrift, but also point to more general attitudes prevalent in poorer communities such as efficiency and economy.

## OTHER DISCOVERIES

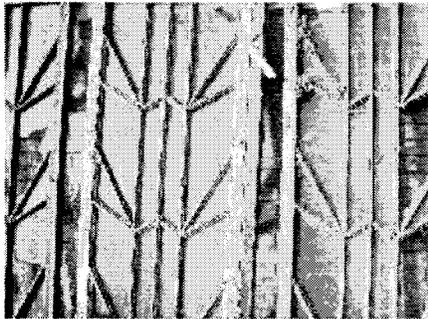
The targets found in the bathroom were just one example of Ben Keese's use of unorthodox materials in the construction of his building. He was not above using the objects of his antiques trade for building materials. While the targets in the bathroom were one humorous example, in other places we found pieces of furniture used as structure. A metal Orange Crush sign was reformed to become the door to the roof hatch in the attic space. Unearthed footings in the crawl space were revealed to be a broken marble vanity or table top. We were able to piece the entire top together so it remains uncertain if Mr. Keese actually broke the top himself to use under the piers, or if the top was already broken and therefore fodder for construction. Upon breaking up a section of the concrete porch, we discovered that Mr. Keese had used an old metal baby crib as reinforcing in the slab. The pieces were turned perpendicular to one another to form a close approximation to contemporary heave gauge reinforcing mesh. The construction indicated an understanding of the principle of concrete construction; it was simply in the execution that we found the adhoc.



**Figure 8** Baby crib used as concrete reinforcing.

We were able to piece together a more complete story of one of Mr. Keese's unorthodox constructions. The sunroom located at the front of the residential bay was no longer part of the structure

at the time of our disassembly however we found the original pieces of the room within the building itself. The enclosure of the sunroom was evident in many of the pictures we had of the Barn so we were certain of its location and disposition. In addition, many narrative accounts from community members showed that the sunroom was one of the most memorable features of the structure itself. Mr. Keese had constructed the room with windows or doors (we assume the majority of them were windows as we could find no indication of door hardware) with a very usual mullion pattern that could best be described as an abstracted tree form. From the community we also learned that many members recalled the day the windows arrived (as they would have been young children at the time, this would have been a remarkable day for them).



**Figure 9** Keese Barn sunroom window with unique mullion pattern.

As I described previously, Mr. Keese had learned the antiquing trade in Philadelphia and made trips North throughout his life collect goods for his business. Apparently he purchased the windows on one of these trips and had them shipped to Pendleton on the train. As was typical for this time, he had to recruit men to help him pick them up from the station so they hitched up a team of mules and picked them up. Thus the impact on the children of the community as this created a festive, parade-like quality to the event. Upon telling this story to one of our consultants from Philadelphia, we learned more about Ben Keese and the community. Our consultant informed us that many African American churches in Philadelphia had attempted to education young men from the South by bringing them North to learn business skills. We have assumed that this was the case with Ben Keese. Unfortunately we were not able to place the fabricator of the windows although we consulted with several dealers and

experts in architectural detailing.

## THE CONCLUSIONS

The construction of the Keese Barn was both unique and typical. The appropriation and reuse of materials evidenced in the Barn followed a trajectory extending forward from the history of the community as descendants of former slaves. As Vlach and many new scholars have realized, we can not continue to tell the history of this society or any other if we refuse to recognize all of the members who contributed to the culture. The Keese Barn study revealed many peculiarities of Ben Keese and those who worked with him to construct the building but it also reveals a larger story about the community and the building culture of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century.

The disassembly of the Keese Barn was only one of many losses experienced by this and other communities as buildings age and outlive their usefulness. We hoped that our slow dissection of the building brought back memories for the community and once again allowed the structure to become the lively and vibrant building it had been throughout the life of Ben Keese. While we thoroughly documented the structure for posterity, we also reversed the construction cycle as we took the structure down piece by piece.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), p. 16.

2 The Keese Barn Project was undertaken by myself and a colleague as well as a diligent and trusting group of graduate students called Studio South. Particularly acknowledgement should be given to a thesis student who provided much of the documentation used in this paper through his manuscript. We were ably advised by a panel of national and local experts in various fields throughout the disassembly.

3 The project continued as a design and construction project on the site. The site was renamed The Hundreds in honor of its role as a gathering space for the community. The design was significantly influenced by the discoveries made during the research, documentation, and disassembly phase of the project.

## Encounters in Mostar: Historic Architecture Before and After the Bosnian War

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### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2004 thousands of Bosnians and foreign visitors flocked to the historic city of Mostar, the principal city of Herzegovina, in the new Balkan country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to celebrate the reconstruction of that city's famous Ottoman bridge. Destroyed in 1993, it symbolized the cultural rift that exploded in Bosnia with the breakdown of civil society during the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. Along with the Old Bridge, most of the historic city core then lay in ruins, and the once-mixed Serb, Croat and Bosniak (Muslim) population either fled the country, or hastily relocated, Croats to the west and Bosniaks to the east. After the first wave of fighting, Mostar's Serbs departed altogether, and a divided city has persisted up to the present.

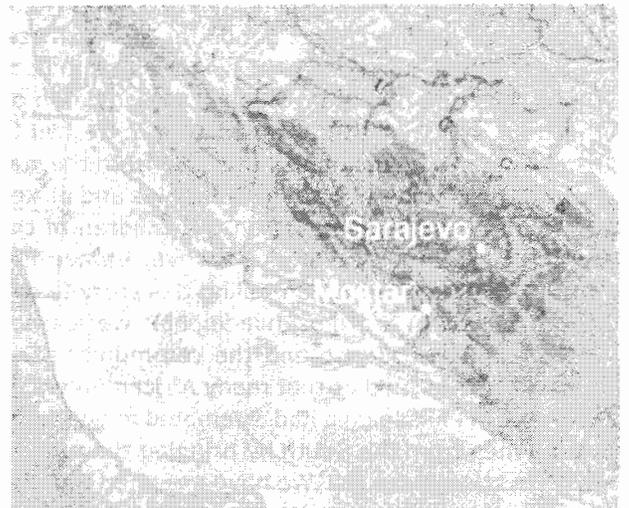
The history of the war in Bosnia has been told in many forms, in newscasts and journal articles, and finally books.<sup>1</sup> The war's aggressions were played out throughout Bosnia, but the resulting physical damage pales beside the "ethnic cleansing," the policy of genocide enacted by the Serbs and Croats (and Serbians and Croatians) who vied for control of the newly formed country. Mostar's own war story has been amply documented, especially among experts who have worked on its reconstruction, including educators involved in the annual "Mostar 2004" international summer workshops.<sup>2</sup> What has not been clearly revealed is the extraordinary shift in values in the reconstructed city. This paper will compare Mostar's pre-war architectural environment with the post-war conditions of 2004, and explore how the reconstruction process and results demonstrate the uncertainties of a very different political, economic and social context from



*Bridge Celebration, July 2004*

that of the former Yugoslavia.

### HISTORIC BACKGROUND



*Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina*

The name Mostar means "bridge-keeper," and the town grew up around the first bridge across the Neretva River, built in 1452, which opened a route leading west from the ancient road on the river's eastern bank that linked the Adriatic with the Danube.<sup>3</sup> Slung between two fortified towers, the first bridge was constructed of timber and chains. When the Ottomans conquered the territory of medieval Herzegovina in 1463, they took control of this river crossing and developed Mostar as the administrative center of the Herzegovina region of the Empire's province of Bosnia. Within a century a more durable bridge was needed, and by 1566 the high, single-arched stone bridge for which the city became famous was in place.<sup>4</sup> Around it Mostar expanded along the riverbanks, its commercial core surrounded by residential neighborhoods, and farmlands in the broad valley to the west. The population was mixed: Bosnian Serbs and Croats (many having converted to Islam), Sephardic Jews, and Ottoman administrators and military forces. In time, Mostar acquired prestige as a center for education and culture.

As the Ottoman Empire declined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, western ideas mixed with older traditions, and religious constraints relaxed for Mostar's non-Muslims. Administration of Bosnia was ceded to the Hapsburgs in 1878, and the Austrians created new districts on Mostar's west side, also adding western-style civic and commercial buildings within the urban core. Hapsburg rule ended with World War I, and in 1918 Yugoslavia emerged as a nation, the short-lived Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The German-Italian conquest of Yugoslavia in World War II was countered by Yugoslav resistance to the Axis occupiers. Internal conflicts divided resistance factions -- in Bosnia, pitting Croats against Serbs -- and the estimated one million war deaths in Yugoslavia are credited mainly to internal conflict. Memories of that period were manipulated by warmongers of the 1990's to incite the ethnic animosities that endure today.

Under the charismatic leadership of Josip Broz Tito, a communist government emerged after the war, and from 1950 to 1980, Federal Yugoslavia enjoyed peace and increasing prosperity, while ethnic conflicts were firmly suppressed. Mostar expanded under Tito's programs for modernization, expanding to the north and south along the Neretva valley with industrial development and military installations. The city gained a university campus, new

sports facilities, and high-rise residential zones. Distinctions between east and west were blurred as citizens moved into new job-based apartments. Younger generations looked ahead, appreciated the new prosperity, and put aside their religion-based differences. But as the city grew and modernized, the historic center fell into disrepair.



*View of Old Bridge and historic city core, 1988*

Concerned about Mostar's vulnerable heritage, a group of architects and urban conservationists developed a novel plan for urban conservation and economic development to protect and revitalize the historic center. Taking advantage of free-enterprise opportunities in Yugoslavia's "self-management" economy, small businesses brought life to the old market district in restored structures. In 1986, the success of this project achieved international recognition with the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture. The old center reclaimed its focal role in Mostar, especially as the setting for the traditional evening promenade leading to the Old Bridge. Youths resumed their ritual claim to manhood by diving twenty meters from its apex into the icy waters. Again, new romances were initiated with an embrace on the bridge, and again, newborn infants were brought here to be inducted as "keepers of the bridge." It was as if Ivo Andric's bridge in Visegrad, another Bosnian town, were one with Mostar's: "Thus the generations renewed themselves beside the bridge and the bridge shook from itself, like dust, all the traces which transient human events had left on it and remained, when all was over, unchanged and unchangeable."<sup>5</sup>