History of the Albuquerque region

Frank D. Reeve
1961, pp. 82-84. https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-12.82

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People have lived in the Albuquerque region for an unknown number of centuries. When the first Spanish arrived in 1540 they found about twenty villages, or pueblos, extending from Acoma on the west to the Piros of the Manzano Mountains, and along the Province of Tiguex (Tee-way) from the neighborhood of present Bernalillo to the pueblo of Isleta.

Don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, governor of New Galicia and commander of His Majesty’s forces in search of wealth and territory for the glory of God, the King, and himself, established headquarters in the flourishing pueblo of Alcanfor, now the ruins that constitute the Coronado State Monument on the right bank of the Rio Grande across from Bernalillo. Don Francisco’s search was fruitless, but two Franciscan missionaries laid down their lives for The Cross and became the first martyrs in the history of New Mexico: Fray Juan de Padilla and Fray Luis Escalona.

Don Juan de Onate, Governor, Captain General and Adelantado, made the first settlement in 1598 north of Santa Fe. In the course of time, the Albuquerque region became known as the Rio Abajo, or down river from Santa Fe, where settlers located on small ranches during the seventeenth century. The Camino Real ran parallel to the Rio Grande, bearing the traveler to Chihuahua on the south or Santa Fe to the north. The road to the west lay past the mouth of Jemez Canyon while on the east an Indian trail snaked its way through Tijeras Canyon, or Carnue as it was originally named.

The missionaries soon established The Cross in the various pueblos of the region; the oldest physical monuments to their labors are the church of St. Augustine at Isleta and St. Stephen at Acoma, dating back probably to 1618. Fray Alonso Peinado began spreading the gospel in 1613 among the folks at the pueblo of Chilili where the church was dedicated to La Navidad de Nuestra Senora. The mission of San Gregorio was established at Abo about 1622, some ten miles west of present Mountainair; San Isidro at Gran Quivira seven years later, twenty miles to the south as the crow flies; and Nuestra Senora de la Concepcion at Quarai, a few miles to the east. Another mission might have been located at Tajique as early as 1629.

During the seventeenth century, the settlers and Pueblos were occasionally harassed by Indians from the east and west. Apache and Navaho; and friction developed between the Pueblos and Spanish to the point where the former rebelled against their masters in 1680, driving them southward to El Paso. Some of the Isleta folk migrated with the Spanish and established the pueblo of Isleta del Sur downstream from El Paso (Juarez), Mexico.

Don Diego Jose de Vargas Zapata y Lujan Ponce de Leon Contreras, scion of an illustrious Spanish family, ventured into New Mexico in 1692 with a small troop of soldiers and made a peaceful reconnaissance of Puebloiland. The following year he returned with settlers and reoccupied Santa Fe. Others located in the Bernalillo area by 1693. Since the frontier folks were still hostile, Don Diego was forced to fight them, and while on a punitive campaign toward Abo Pass in 1704, he fell ill and returned to Bernalillo where he soon died.

Along the western frontier of New Mexico, the Spanish took official recognition in 1699 of some Pueblos who had settled at the Laguna near the south end of Cebolleta Mountain. The mission was dedicated to San Jose; the name also came to be applied to the stream that flows eastward through the village to join the Rio Puerco of the East. The Navahos frequented Laguna and Jemez Pueblos, sometimes for peaceful trading and occasionally as enemies. Since the Pueblos were intimately interlocked with the Spanish, it was impossible for the frontier foe to draw any clear line between the two groups, so both suffered from their attacks.

The Navahos had a fortified stronghold on Big Bead mesa, an elongation on the north end of Cebolleta Mountain. When Captain Rocque de Madrid campaigned in 1706, he pursued them southward from the San Juan region to this site but was unable to surmount the difficulties of the terrain and failed to punish the foe. Several campaigns were launched against this western enemy during the first two decades of the century, setting forth from Sia Puebla or farther north via the Chama Valley.

Peace reigned between the Navahos and Spanish-Pueblos for a half century, beginning about 1720. Missionaries moved into Navaholand in the San Juan country in 1744 and eventually persuaded a group to move southward in 1748 to form a settlement at Cebolleta Canyon which drains from the southeastern side of Cebolleta Mountain. Another mission was established a few miles to the west at Encinal for other Navahos, but both of these ventures were shortlived. These folks were not habituated to a settled way of life, and the acquisition of livestock from the Spanish, especially sheep, turned them into a seminomadic people.

Beginning in 1753, the Governors of New Mexico granted sizeable tracts of land to various and sundry New Mexicans that soon encircled Cebolleta Mountain. These...
were an outlet for the expanding population and livestock in the Rio Abajo. The grants were always made with the proviso that the rights of the Navahos should not be violated; that is, the authorities recognized the Indians' usufructuary to the land, and were even willing to grant titles in fee simple. However, relations between these near neighbors finally led to hostilities because of competing needs for land and water. The New Mexican's contempt for the Indian was met by pride and a rebellious spirit against the intruders.

Increasing population led to settlements elsewhere in the Albuquerque region during the eighteenth century. Governor Francisco Cuervo Valdes founded Albuquerque in 1706, naming it in honor of Don Francisco Fernandez de la Cueva Enriquez, Duque de Alburquerque, one-time viceroy of New Spain. The site had been known in the previous century as the Bosque Grande de San Francisco Xavier, so the name of this Saint was attached to the church in the new village. However, in deference to King Philip V of Spain, San Felipe de Neri was soon substituted officially, although the change in local usage came about slowly. The church building on the north side of the plaza was erected in 1793.

Other small settlements came into existence in the years following the founding of Albuquerque. On the south side lay Atrisco with a name derived from the Aztec word Atlixco, the name of a valley near Puebla, Mexico. Farther along the placita of San Isidro de Pajarito developed on the land granted to Captain Antonio Baca; then came Los Padillas, established about 1718. A group of genizaro families who were hispanicised Plains Indians settled in 1740 at Valencia, the site of the seventeenth century ranch of Captain Francisco Valero, and at Tome where Captain Dominguez de Mendoza, distinguished military leader of the latter part of the same century once held title to the land. Governor Don Tomas Veles Cachupin responded favorably to a petition for land in 1764 for the village of San Gabriel de las Nutrias, south of Tome, and other settlers moved onto the land across the river at Belen.

Northward from the Duke City, New Mexicans spread along the valley to Alameda where Francisco Montes Vigil, corporal in the presidial troop of Santa Fe, was a pioneer land owner. The nearby pueblo of Sandia, abandoned in the rebellion of 1680, was resettled in 1748 by refugees induced to return from Hopiland by Franciscan missionaries. The church was dedicated to Nuestra Senora de los Dolores y San Antonio. The site of Las Huertas, east of Bernalillo, better known today as Placitas, was occupied by settlers in 1767, and about mid-century a few settlers were located at Los Corrales west of the Rio Grande. Some time past mid-century, a few families located at San Isidro near the mouth of Jemez Canyon and also north of Bernalillo at the sites of Algodones and Angostura. Vallececo in the Jemez Mountains was occupied in 1768 with the folks looking to Santo Toribio as their patron Saint.

To the east of Albuquerque, Governor Cachupin granted permission in 1763 for settlers to locate in Carnue (Tijeras) Canyon. However, the site was too exposed to attacks by Apaches and was abandoned in 1770. One more attempt was made the following year, but an overnight stay convinced the men that they should not remain. Their predicament was illustrated more sharply about 1774 when the Navahos erupted on the western frontier and drove away the land grant folks. Los Nutrias to the south and Las Huertas to the north were also abandoned.
The economic history of Albuquerque, 1880-1893: now the most prominent settlement on the northern side of the Albuquerque region.

Transportation was essential for the development of New Mexico, and the dreams of those who wanted to join the Orient and Occident in bonds of trade soon brought the railroad to the Rio Abajo. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad won the contest to serve the region, and the first train rolled into Albuquerque on April 5, 1880. Swinging southward on the way westward to take advantage of the easy gradient extending westward from Los Lunas, new towns were born along the way, among them Grants, now the capital of the uranium industry.

Albuquerque boomed and the population increased during the 1880’s from 2,600 to 6,100 in round numbers. “Progress was evident... as early as 1882 in the graded streets with good sidewalks, three miles of street car line in operation, a telephone exchange with twenty-five miles of wire connecting all parts of the town [the telegraph arrived in 1876], gas lighting on the streets and in residences and business places, blocks of business houses with iron and glass fronts, two banks, two daily newspapers, the Morning Journal and the Evening Review, five churches, and hotels, stores, and offices necessary to accommodate the public”...and about ten houses of prostitution along with the ubiquitous saloon.

The railroad era witnessed the continued rise of population in New Mexico, and the appearance of various institutions that, in addition to church and school, were common to the American scene. The original Grant Opera House served the public in Albuquerque from 1883 until its destruction by fire in 1898. The University of New Mexico opened its doors in the summer of 1892, and gradually became a center of regional studies dealing with the rich and varied cultural heritage of the Southwest. An early symptom appeared when the pueblo style of architecture was adopted for the University in 1906.

The development of the automobile, and highway improvement following World War I, made U. S. Highway 66 a main east-west route and Albuquerque became a crossroads for the region which helped to continue its status as a trade center for the surrounding country. World War II ushered in the Atomic Age and a marked increase of population. Albuquerque alone grew from 35,000 to 200,000 between 1940 and 1960 with the big increase occurring after the War. The great stimulus came from the expenditure of Federal money with the establishment of Sandia Base, Manzano Base, and the Special Weapons center, to the discomfiture of jackrabbits and patrons of Lovers’ Lane.

With jet-powered war planes patrolling the skies to ward off a surprise attack from an enemy, the Albuquerque region has experienced a revolution in appearance from the days when Spanish soldiers with sword and breastplate stormed the walls of sun-dried mud in the face of flying arrows tipped with a hard rock—from the age of stone weapons and animal power to the atomic bomb and a new power scarcely yet harnessed for civilian use.