

HISTORY OF THE ELEPHANT BUTTE SEGMENT OF THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

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Abstract—The history of the segment of the Rio Grande that is now Elephant Butte Reservoir is reviewed. This history of the Elephant Butte area begins with the Spanish entrada in the 16th century and culminates with the Bureau of Reclamation's involvement and construction of Elephant Butte Reservoir early in the 20th century.

The history of the settlement of New Mexico is largely the result of distribution of natural resources and their utilization by many diverse groups of people. Water is by far the most important resource in the arid Southwest, and it has always been the main factor determining settlement patterns and land use there. The Rio Grande, winding its way through the Basin and Range country of south-central New Mexico, has been controlling human activities for many thousands of years. The earliest prehistoric inhabitants were nomadic hunters-gatherers whose territories were dictated by the plant and animal communities along the Rio Grande. Later prehistoric Puebloan groups began to settle down and practice agriculture. These people's lives were very much controlled by the distribution of water. There were also many nomadic Indian groups that preyed on the sedentary village Indians living along the river. This is basically how things were when the Spanish came to New Mexico in the 16th century.

At the time of the Spanish arrival, there were very few village Indians living along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico. Raiding by hostile Indians had left the region virtually uninhabited by agricultural peoples. The historic period in southern New Mexico begins with the first Spanish entrada in 1581 by the Chamuscado-Rodríguez expedition. This party found an abandoned pueblo near the river, south of present-day Socorro. This village, called San Felipe (possibly the recorded archeological site of LA 597), was the southernmost pueblo at that time (Wilson 1985: 5-6). The fact that the southern Rio Grande was devoid of Pueblo Indian villages in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries is important to understanding Spanish activities in New Mexico.

For over two centuries, Spanish interest in New Mexico was mainly limited to christianizing the existing Puebloan peoples. Since these groups were concentrated in northern New Mexico, Spanish activities in southern New Mexico were almost entirely related to transportation back and forth to the northern missions. The Chamuscado-Rodríguez expedition established the route of the famous "Camino Real," or "Royal Road." The Camino Real followed the course of the Rio Grande through New Mexico except for a 145 km stretch which became known as the "Jornada del Muerto," or "Journey of Death" (Marshall & Walt 1984: 235). Early travelers preferred staying close to water; but in the vicinity of what is now Elephant Butte Reservoir deep gullies dissect the land west of the Rio Grande and the river butts up next to the rugged edge of the Caballo Mountains and Fra Cristobal Range in the east. At this point, most travelers preferred to go out across the Jornada del Muerto desert area east of the mountains. The route of the Camino Real is still visible in many places, although no systematic study of this important feature has been attempted (Marshall & Walt 1984: 238).

The Camino Real played an important role in the region's history during the Spanish period. Oñate's expedition of 1598 followed this route; and during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the Camino Real was extensively used as an escape route by Spaniards fleeing from New Mexico. It may have been during the Pueblo Revolt that the desert stretch of the Camino Real was named Jornada del Muerto (Marshall & Walt 1984: 237). The Camino Real was again used extensively during the Spanish reconquest of New Mexico in 1692 and was used continually thereafter. The Fra Cristobal Range was named for Fray Cristóbal de Salazar, a priest who was traveling with Oñate in 1598. Fig. 1 shows the Jornada del Muerto area during the Spanish period.

Many place names are intimately associated with the Camino Real

in the Spanish period. Places such as Robledo, San Diego, Perillo, El Alemán, Laguna del Muerto, and the Paraje de Fra Cristobal were important stopping places on this route (Marshall & Walt 1984: 235-244). Although no actual physical remains of these important Spanish period sites have been investigated, their locations are well documented and many of the sites could probably be located.

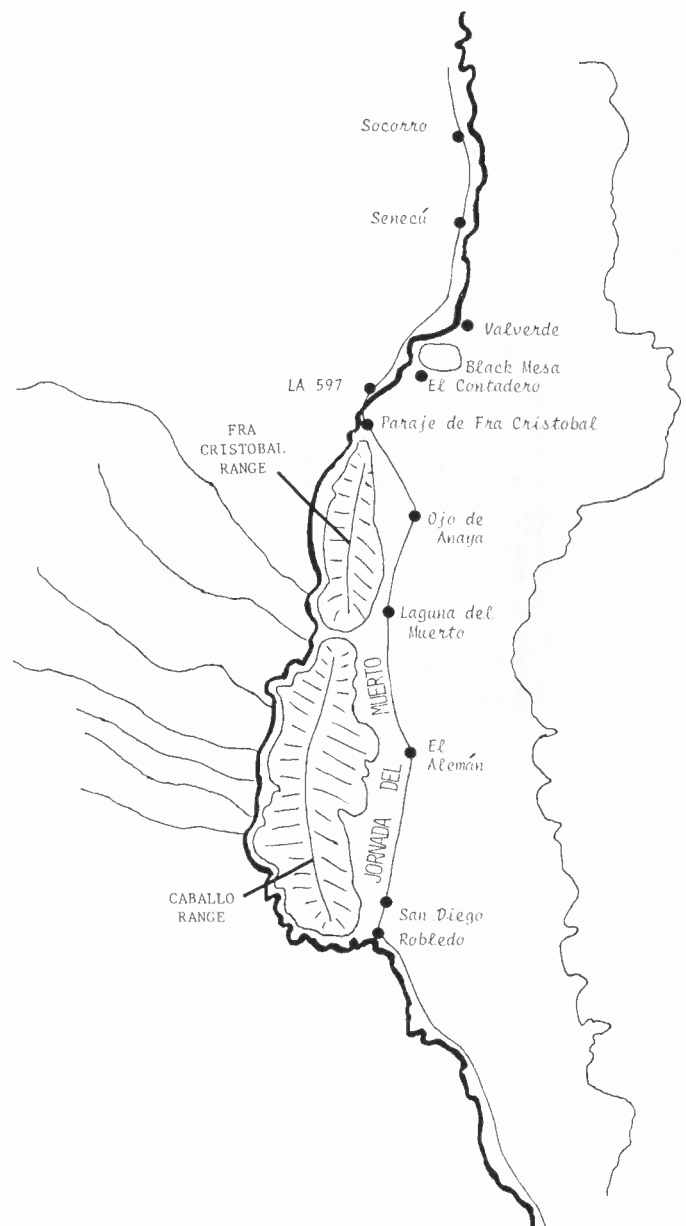


FIGURE 1—Jornada del Muerto area during the Spanish period, showing the most commonly traveled route.

The southernmost Spanish missions before the Pueblo Revolt were Nuestra Senora de Socorro, near present-day Socorro, and the mission at San Antonio de Senecú, near present-day San Antonio. Both of these missions were to the north of the Fra Cristobal Range. The Spanish abandoned Senecú just before the Pueblo Revolt and Socorro during the Revolt. This left the stretch of the Rio Grande south of Socorro uninhabited until late in the Spanish period.

During the latter part of the Spanish period, the government began to encourage settlement along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico, an area known as the "Rio Abajo," or "Lower River" (Marshall & Walt 1984: 262). The old settlement at Socorro was re-established in about 1815 and there were plans to re-establish Senecú, but they were never completed (Jenkins & Wilson 1985). Many Spanish land grants were also given to encourage settlement in the Rio Abajo. In 1819 and 1820, Pedro Armendariz was given two large tracts of land south of Socorro. Armendariz settled on one of these tracts and established a hacienda at Valverde, near the Black Mesa area. The small settlement did not last long, however. Armendariz was forced to abandon Valverde in 1824 because of raids by hostile Indians (Surveyor General 1887: frames 36–39). The Caballo–Fra Cristobal stretch of the Rio Grande was again uninhabited.

Mexico declared its independence from Spain in 1821. The Mexican government released the ban on foreign trade which had been in force throughout the Spanish period and encouraged trade with the United States. The Mexican economy became dependent on the tax money that the trade brought in. In the 1820's, the Santa Fe Trail was opened. American merchandise began to pour into Santa Fe and then south along the Camino Real and into Mexico. American entrepreneurs and investors became very interested in New Mexico during this time. As American interest in New Mexico grew, so did trouble between Mexico and the United States. When the Mexican War broke out, United States troops marched into New Mexico and declared it to be a territory of the United States. When the war ended, the United States found itself in possession of a remote territory which was being rapidly settled by American citizens. Much of the territory, however, was still controlled by hostile Indians. To contend with the problem, the United States established military posts throughout New Mexico.

A series of forts was established in southern New Mexico in the 1850's. These posts provided the first organized protection from the Indians. During this time, small towns began to spring up around the forts. In the Elephant Butte area, Fort Conrad (LA 4464) was established in 1851. It was closed and Fort Craig was opened to replace it in 1854. Fort Craig was located southwest of Black Mesa, not far from where the Camino Real intersected the Rio Grande at Fra Cristobal. The post played an important role in protecting travelers and settlers in the area for about 30 years (Grinstead 1973). Today Fort Craig lies, badly vandalized but now protected on federally owned land, a few kilometers east of Interstate 25.

The earliest towns along the Elephant Butte stretch of the Rio Grande were settled in the late 1850's. The village of Paraje was settled in 1857 at the site of the old camping spot at Fra Cristobal. This townsite (LA 1124) has recently been investigated by the Bureau of Reclamation (Boyd 1984 and in preparation). Marshall & Walt (1984) recorded many other historic townsites in Socorro County which were settled in the early part of the Territorial period. Towns such as La Mesa, Contadero, San Pedro, San Antonio, and Valverde were settled before 1860. Wilson (1985) recorded a similar situation for Sierra County, with towns such as Las Palomas and Alamosa being settled under the protection of Fort Thorn and Fort McRae. By the 1870's, many small towns were settled in the Elephant Butte area. Fig. 2 shows the Elephant Butte area during the Territorial period.

The economic emphasis during this period of early settlement was on agriculture and stock raising. "Acequia" irrigation systems were used to divert water to irrigate crops in the floodplain (Simmons 1972). The dominant livestock raised in southern New Mexico were sheep, although cattle became an important resource later in the Territorial period.

The Civil War provided a short but exciting series of events which involved the people in the Elephant Butte area. Confederate forces

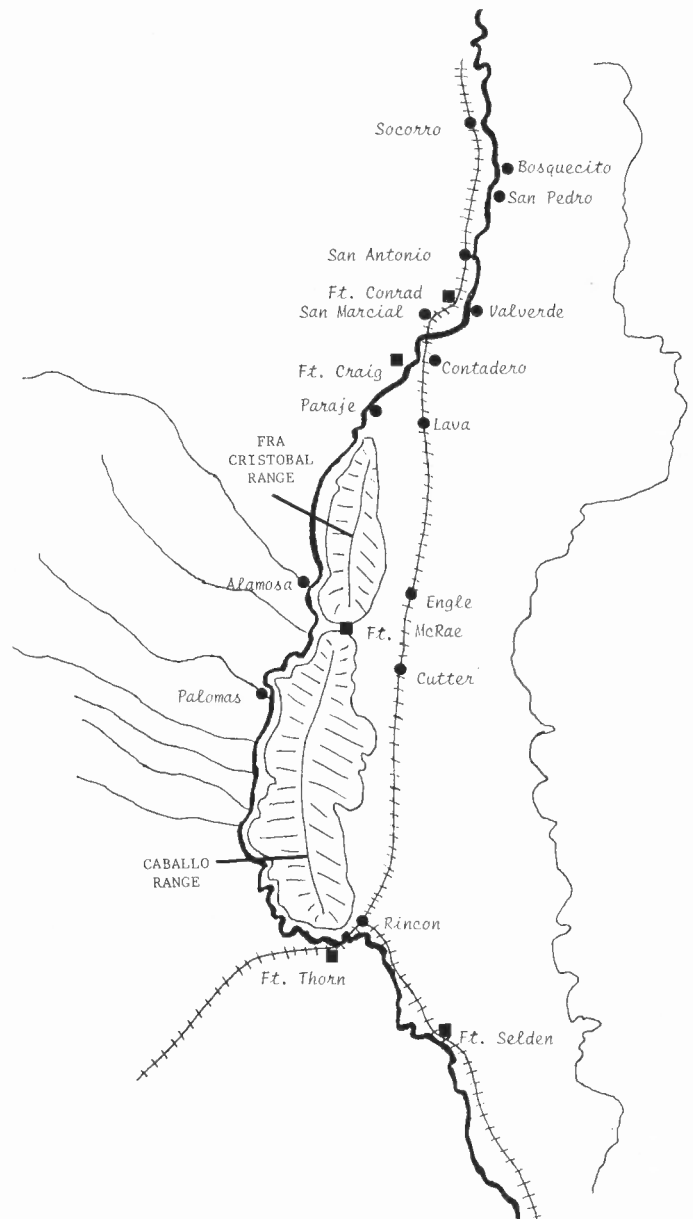


FIGURE 2—Elephant Butte area during the Territorial period.

invaded New Mexico in 1862. They headed from El Paso north to Fort Craig, capturing Fort Fillmore near Mesilla and passing through many of the small villages along the way. Many of the local males from these small towns were probably enlisted temporarily as soldiers and participated in the fighting that was inevitable (Miller 1979). Federal and Rebel forces finally met just north of Fort Craig and fought the Battle of Valverde near the village and the ruins of the old hacienda. Strategically, the Battle of Valverde was a Confederate victory, but the glory was short lived. The Confederate supply train was destroyed at the Battle of Glorieta Pass and Confederate troops were forced to leave New Mexico, retreating back through the Elephant Butte area. Many campsites of both Confederate and Federal troops from the Civil War period are scattered throughout the area.

After the Civil War, Indian problems became considerably worse. While all of the regular United States troops were back east fighting, the local New Mexicans were left to contend with the uncontrolled Indians. Many volunteer campaigns were made against the hostiles and there were many minor incidents in and near the Elephant Butte stretch of the river; but by the late 1870's to early 1880's things were returning to normal and the Indian problem was being brought under control.

The railroad came to southern New Mexico in 1881. It radically changed the area because it bypassed most of the small villages along the river. The grand old Camino Real lost its distinction of being the most important route of transportation. Almost overnight the railroad town of New San Marcial was born. It became the major population center in the area, while many of the small towns began to dwindle. The railroad allowed for agricultural products and livestock to be easily transported to markets and made mass-produced goods readily available throughout the region. The railroad also brought new settlers to southern New Mexico.

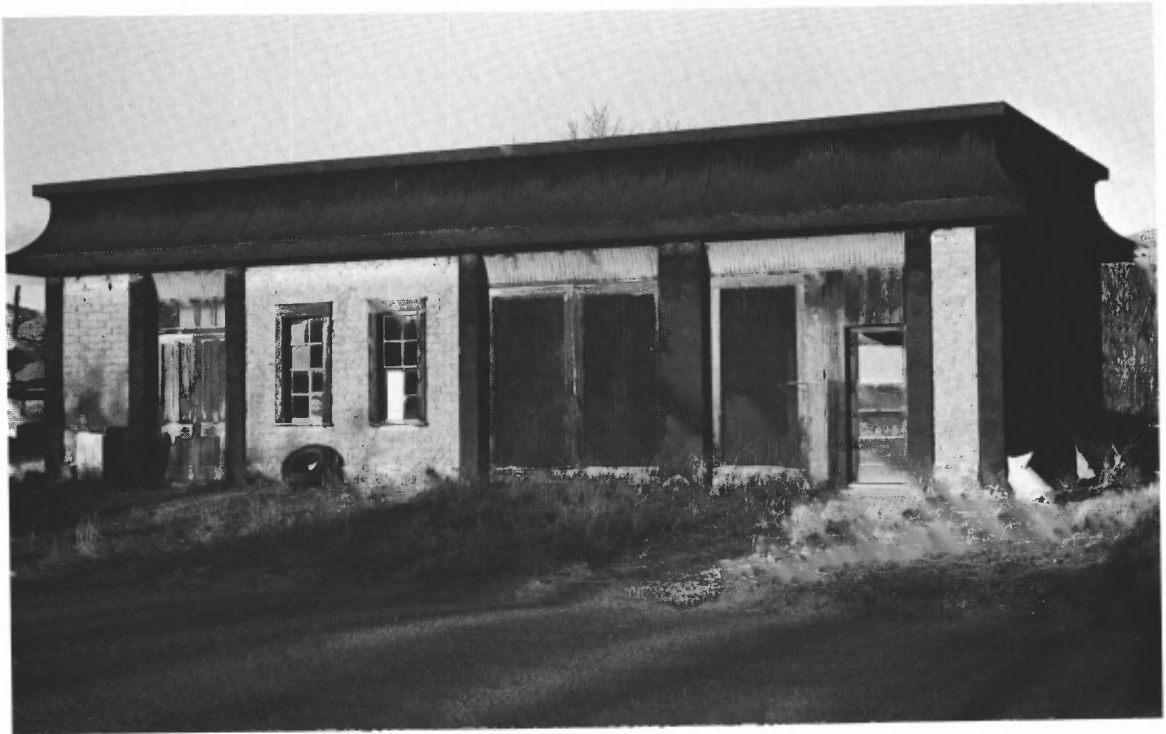
Mineral resources played only a minor role in the population of the Elephant Butte area. Socorro experienced a rapid population increase during the mining boom of the 1880's (Marshall & Walt 1984: 264). The many small towns in the Elephant Butte area, however, were dominantly agricultural in their economics, and small-scale mining in the Caballo Mountains and Fra Cristobal Range never had significant impact on the population.

As New Mexico was working toward statehood, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation became interested in southern New Mexico. Once again, the all-important resource, water, was controlling the situation. In the period between 1909 and 1916, the Bureau of Reclamation planned and built the Elephant Butte Reservoir as part of its Rio Grande Project. Many of the towns along the river fell within the reservoir area. The people in these small towns were relocated, many of them moving to the larger towns like Socorro and San Marcial. The same water which provided a livelihood for many of these small communities ultimately ended their existence. The presence of Elephant Butte Reservoir has

greatly impacted the immediate area. Today, irrigation from the reservoir and the tourism it brings are still changing the area.

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Carriage House(?) on main street in Winston. Photo G.R. Osburn 1981.