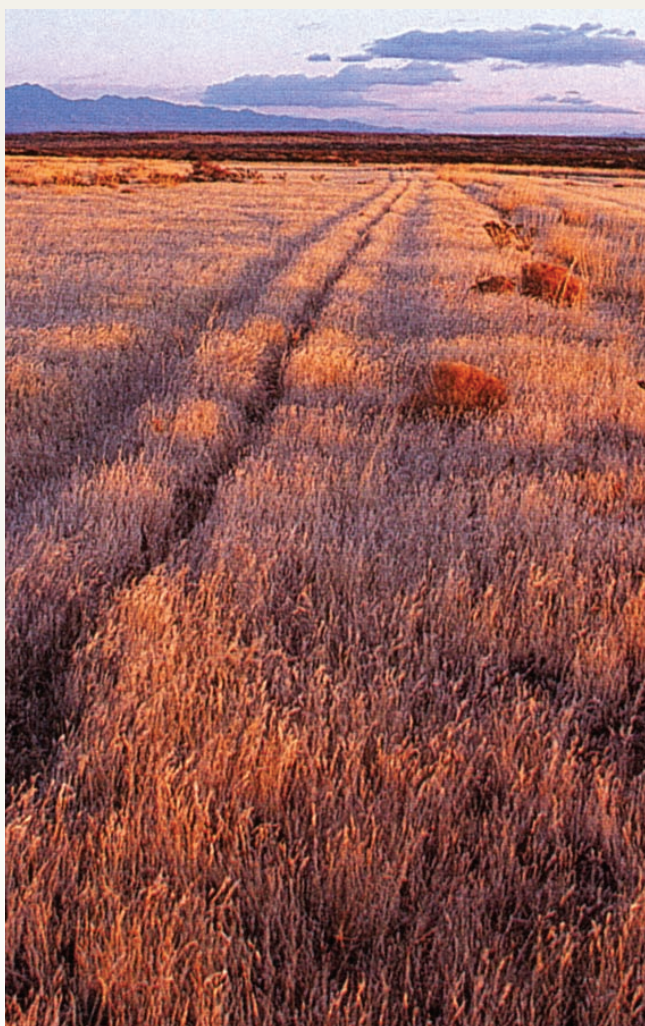


A Road Over Time

El Camino Real and America's New Mexican Roots

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Trail ruts photographed by Christine Preston from *The Royal Road: El Camino Real from Mexico City to Santa Fe* (UNM Press, 1998).

All of us who were born in the United States, or who are naturalized citizens, have learned about the history of the Mayflower, Jamestown, and the thirteen original colonies. The story of the nation's founding and history is forever imprinted on our consciousness. Few books, however, are written in English about the role of the Spanish explorers and settlers in what is now the United States, or of the legacy they provided to the development of the Southwest and nation.

By the time the English settled at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, the Spanish had been in the Americas for more than 100 years. The English were not the first European colonists in what would become the United States, for the Spanish had created a settlement in New Mexico in 1598. This fact, long ignored in our nation's history books, has led to a gross misunderstanding of the important role played by the Spanish and Mexican settlers as well as their culture, religion, language, and ideas in the development of New Mexico and the Southwest. More often than not, we have internalized the myth of the Wild West popularized by Hollywood movies. The truth reveals another history.

In his wonderful book, *Forgotten Founders*, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall debunks the Hollywood myth of the Wild West in favor of the more accurate portrayal of the Mormon, Protestant, Jewish, Spanish Catholic, Mexican Catholic, and other pioneers who settled New Mexico and the West. By the time the

first traders and eastern settlers traveled the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and Santa Fe in 1821, the Spanish had been in New Mexico for more than two centuries. Towns, churches, civil government, schools, legal systems, and other institutional infrastructures were already well established.

Apart from Udall's book, and *The Last Conquerors* by historian Marc Simmons (the only popular book in English devoted to Don Juan de Oñate and his colonists, who created the first European settlement in San Juan de Los Caballeros, north of Española), the history of *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* is relegated to the pages of Hispanic history or "ethnic history"—not American history.

Despite its neglect, El Camino Real was probably the most significant of all the early trails on the North American continent. It was the first European road on the continent, and for more than 100 years, it was the longest. The 404-mile portion of the El Camino Real from El Paso, Texas, to San Juan de Los Caballeros was designated a National Historic Trail in October 2000.

Although not widely recognized, El Camino Real was actually a more important trade route than the Santa Fe Trail, which made its appearance in 1821. What is less well known is that the more important market for goods lay to the south, so eastern traders following the Santa Fe Trail continued along the Camino Real to Chihuahua, where the real money was to be made. By that time, Mexico was an important source of trade on the continent as well as internationally. Chinese porcelain from as far away as the Philippines arrived in Santa Fe via Mexico on Spanish ships. The Moorish and Spanish architectural influences we see today in the Southwest also came via the Spanish.

Today, New Mexico continues as a unique and culturally diverse state proud of its Spanish/Mexican/Indian heritage—the result of El Camino Real and centuries of trade, cultural exchange, and immigration.

The Road's Impact on U.S. History

Not only did some of the earliest European settlers in the United States come northward from New Spain (Mexico) along this trail, they also brought a rich written language, culture, and a new religion—Christianity—perhaps the most important idea to traverse the Camino Real.

The silver boom in New Spain created tremendous wealth and, of course, the desire to seek more silver in *la Tierra Adentro*, the lands to the north. Don Juan de Oñate led the first settlement expedition into New Mexico in 1598. The

The Camino Real



Map from the exhibit catalog for El Camino Real: Un Sendero Histórico, copyright 1990, Camino Real Project. Courtesy Museum of New Mexico.



"Rio Grande to Gulf," 17th-century map showing California as an island, by Robert Morden, 1687. Courtesy of Map and Geographic Information Center, Centennial Science and Engineering Library, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Spanish brought the first breeding horses to the American West, as well as Dos Passos and Spanish Barb horses, cattle, and sheep via this trail. They brought the wheel, gunpowder, and iron to the American West as well.

There was another objective behind the desire to explore and settle new territories—the desire to convert native peoples to Christianity. Franciscan friars created missions along El Camino Real to convert the Indians and to teach them weaving, tinwork, husbandry, and a new form of irrigation based on the acequia system.

In 1680, when Pueblo Indians in New Mexico revolted, attacked Santa Fe, and drove the Spanish out of New Mexico, it was the Camino Real that became the lifeline for retreating Spaniards. And it was the Camino Real that carried Don Diego de Vargas and his soldiers back into New Mexico to re-conquer the province for Spain in 1692.

Near the close of the eighteenth century, the people of

New Spain began to rebel against their government. In 1810, Creoles (Spaniards born in Mexico), supported by the Indians and mestizos (people of Indian and Spanish blood), started a revolution for independence similar to America's a few decades earlier. It was fought until its successful conclusion in 1821. The Mexican period lasted until 1848.

If the road could talk, it would tell of its profound impact on the later history of America. The U.S. Army used the Camino Real to invade Mexico, driving its men all the way to the capital of Chihuahua and taking the city before moving on to Mexico City, thus inciting the Mexican-American War of 1846–1848. West Point cadets Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, who would later lead opposing forces during the Civil War, fought side-by-side in Mexico City.

In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the war, Mexico lost fifty-five percent of its territory to the United States, including California, Arizona, Colorado, New



Water jug set (Apache), basketry/pitch/horsehair, courtesy of the Amerind Foundation Inc., Amerind 1641. Photo by Blair Clark, 2005, courtesy Museum of New Mexico.

Mexico, Texas, and parts of Utah and Wyoming.

The southern portion of New Mexico was later sold to the United States as part of the Gadsden Purchase, again arbitrarily making thousands of Mexicans into residents of the United States with the stroke of a pen.

During the Civil War a decade later, the Confederacy lost its dream of capturing the West because of the Camino Real. One might say the Camino Real has changed the history of the United States and Mexico as no other trail has before or since.

Even today, Interstate 25, which parallels the original historic trail, cuts through New Mexico to Chihuahua, serving as a modern day trade route for the era of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Thousands of people cross the border each day to work, shop, or engage in business and cultural and human exchange. The historic trail has thus morphed into a modern day highway, spurring economic growth on both sides of the Rio Grande.

As the economic boom in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California continues, the U.S.-Mexican border has



Escopeta (rifle), iron and wood, late-18th century. ECRHC purchase, CR.2005.2.

Photo by Blair Clark, 2005, courtesy Museum of New Mexico.

In the footprints of time...

El Camino Real commemorates three centuries of trade and commerce that linked New Mexico, Spain, and Mexico. Later traders who came west in 1821 on the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri to New Mexico, also used Camino Real to expand U.S. trade into Chihuahua and Mexico City. This timeline provides a panoramic view of the major events taking place elsewhere in the Western world from the time of the first Spanish settlements in North America to the arrival of the first railroad.

1598 ↑ EL CAMINO REAL ↓ 1880s	1565	Founding of St. Augustine, Florida
	1588	Spanish Armada sails against England
	1598	Don Juan de Oñate expedition settles at San Juan de los Caballeros
	1607	Founding of Jamestown, Virginia
	1608	New Mexico becomes a Royal Province
	1609–10	Pedro de Peralta establishes the capital of Santa Fé
	1643	King Louis XIV begins his reign in France
	1680	The Pueblo Revolt
	1692–93	De Vargas re-conquers New Mexico
	1706	Founding of Albuquerque
	1763	Treaty of Paris—France loses her foothold in continental North America
	1775–83	The American Revolution
	1776	The Declaration of Independence
	1778	De Anza makes peace with the Comanche
	1789–97	George Washington is U.S. President
	1789–98	The French Revolution
	1793	School text printed in New Mexico for first time
	1805	Lewis and Clark explore the West
	1821	Mexico declares independence from Spain
	1821	William Becknell opens the Santa Fe Trail
1829	United States builds its first railroad	
1846	Mexican American War—	
1848	Kearny raises the U.S. flag in Santa Fe	
1848	Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo cedes 55 percent of Mexico territory to U.S.	
1853	Gadsden Purchase finalizes continental U.S. borders	
1861–65	The Civil War	
1863-67	Navajo Long Walk and incarceration of Mescalero Apache	
1865	Assassination of President Lincoln	
1878	Railroads come to New Mexico	
1886	Geronimo captured and Southwest Indian hostilities cease	
1912	New Mexico granted statehood	



The modern day trail, here passing by a Native American casino, continues to reflect varied influences. Photo by Blair Clark, 2005, courtesy Museum of New Mexico.



View of El Camino Real International Heritage Center at the time of its public opening, November 19, 2005. Photo by Kirk Giddings, 2005, courtesy Dekker, Perich & Sabatini Architects.

spawned its own culture. Now instead of Spanish spoken with the soft “th” sound of Carlos V, a crisp Mexican Spanish dominates both sides of a border that seems more transparent than real as emigrants from the south seek better opportunities in the U.S., and American and Mexican businessmen and tourists seek cheap labor as well as new markets and experiences.

When eastern settlers began their trek westward to colonize (and gradually outnumber the Spanish/Mexican/Indian residents), they took on many of the customs, celebrations, foods, ideas, and mores of the earlier Spanish/Mexican settlers (the first cowboys were actually Mexican *vaqueros*), creating a gente and unique culture that is easily distinguished from that of the Northwest, Midwest, and Eastern Seaboard.

Early Indian Traders

Little known is the fact that trade along what became El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro actually began thousands of years ago as a series of Indian footpaths. For centuries prior to first contact with Europeans in the sixteenth century, Mesoamerican tribes in Mexico conducted exchange with Native American tribes to the north.

Somewhere in that maze of faint Indian footpaths, Don Oñate and his settlers had to find a route that would accommodate hundreds of people, horses, heavy-wheeled carts, and several thousand livestock. Oñate was looking for a

direct route to the far north, hoping to find the silver that had enriched his family in Zacatecas. The need for a passage to accommodate the carts, people, and hundreds of animals he brought with him required Oñate and the settlers to cross the treacherous Jornada del Muerto.

Oñate established the first settlement in New Mexico on the Rio Grande at San Juan de los Caballeros, north of present-day Española. A couple of weeks later, the Spanish settlement was moved a short distance across the river to San Gabriel. It was there that Oñate was installed as the first Governor of New Mexico. It was not until 1609 that the Spanish moved the capital to a river valley rustling with cottonwoods at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. They called the new capital Santa Fé, or Holy Faith.

For the next 200 years, the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro that Oñate blazed would be the only link between New Mexico and the outside world. Within twenty years of the Spaniards’ arrival, however, the Indians were no longer using the trail as a major artery for commerce, although Indian trade did continue on El Camino Real well into the nineteenth century.

Presidios and the Military Fort Period

These oft-ignored, fascinating, and historic tidbits help weave a clearer picture of the birth of our nation and make sense of the expansion of the United States to California. The infrastructure, roads, trade, settlements, and churches creat-



Students prepare adobe (*above*) and a Truth or Consequences student in a Spanish Conquistador's suit of armor (*right*) during Public Lands Day 2004 at the Heritage Center site. Photos by Hanson Stuart, courtesy Museum of New Mexico.



ed by the Spanish all facilitated movement westward after the Mexican-American War, even at the expense of the Indian, Spanish, and Mexican residents whose roots went back centuries in the Southwest.

When the Treaty of Guadalupe was signed, an estimated 75,000 Spanish-speaking people lived in the Southwest, with 60,000 of them in New Mexico. Spanish was the dominant language in the Southwest and Spanish, Mexican, and Indian cultures dominated the region. Indeed, the artificial border established in 1848 after the Mexican-American War and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 left Mexican residents in the United States, often without their realizing it. In the years following the Civil War, the trail slowly lost its importance.

By the end of the nineteenth century, railroad tracks were built along sections of the trail, and the Camino Real was only a memory and a series of almost invisible wagon ruts. Culture and ideas, however, often live beyond the bounds of time. The history and lore of El Camino Real live on in first-person stories, art, artifacts, and photographs. Captain Gaspar Pérez de Villagr a, who accompanied O ate to New Mexico, recorded their journey in poetic form, the Spanish equivalent of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*:

*I sing of arms and heroic man,
The being, courage, care, and high emprise
Of him whose unconquered patience,*

*Through cast upon a sea of care,
In spite of envy slanderous,
Is raising to new heights the feats,
The deeds, of those brave Spaniards who,
In the far Indian of the West,
Discovering in the world that which was hid
"Plus Ultra" go bravely saying
By force of valor and strong arms,
In war and suffering as experienced
As celebrated now by pen unskilled.*

(From *La Historia de la Nueva M xico*, Canto 1, 1-13)

The arrival of the Spanish in La Tierra Adentro marked a new chapter in the history of the Age of Discovery and in the development of these United States that continues more than 400 years later. Language, culture, lifestyle, and religion brought to this continent by the Spanish continue to affect the populations that move freely back and forth across the border with Mexico, as well as the region and the nation. It is a living culture that invites discovery and rediscovery, and as such, the new El Camino Real International Heritage Center promises to inform, educate, and inspire all who visit. ■