

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro

El Camino Real had its earliest beginnings as Native American trails and ancient trade routes. Later, sections of the paths were traversed by Spanish Conquistadors. In 1598, Juan de Oñate brought a group of Spanish settlers into *Nuevo México* and established the area as a colony of Spain. The trail became the main route for exploration, conquest, colonization, trade, and communication between Spain and New Mexico. It was also a conduit for cultural exchange and change.

The trail was about 1,500 miles long stretching from Mexico City to the Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh in Northern New Mexico. For nearly three hundred years it was used to bring people, objects, and ideas in and out of New Mexico. The trip was a challenging and difficult one. The trail extended through desolate and rugged terrain. The road was as close to the river as possible to provide travelers with basic necessities like water, forage, and wood. In New Mexico the “royal road” follows the course of the *Rio Grande* River. Along the route campsites (*parajes*) were established and named. Later some of these *parajes* became settlements.

Franciscan priests accompanied the first Spanish explorers into New Mexico and later, priests were assigned to each pueblo and mission settlement along the trail. Friars soon put Native Americans to work building churches and converting them to Catholicism. Official caravans that supplied the missions came up the trail every three years or so linking the missions and early settlements to the heart of Mexico.

In 1680, the Pueblo People in New Mexico, objecting to the brutality of Spanish rule, devised a plan to remove the Spanish. In the uprising, the missions and settlements were attacked killing 21 priests and 400 colonists. About 2,400 Spaniards and their allies fled south along *El Camino Real* to *El Paso del Norte*. New Mexico was later re-conquered by Don Diego de Vargas who traveled back up the trail in 1692.

In the 18th century the *Rio Grande* and *El Camino Real* lay at the heart of New Mexico. They nourished and supported its settlement and its economy. After Mexican Independence in 1821, the area continued to be an important trade route but a second route opened heading west from Santa Fe to Missouri. This created an international trade route and changed the course of history along the trail. Known as the Santa Fe Trail, the route brought manufactured goods, more settlers, and Anglo-American businessmen to the trail trade. *El Camino Real* also had a strategic role when war broke out between the U.S. and Mexico in 1846.

During the Territorial Era stagecoach lines, wagon trains, and caravans all used the trail. During the American Civil War it became the path for the Confederates as they attempted to seize New Mexico. When the railroads came to New Mexico in the 1880s they followed the path of *El Camino Real* through the territory and the old trail lost most of its importance as a major economic, political, and cultural route.

El Camino Real was officially designated a National Historic Trail in 2000. Today, as you travel through El Paso and New Mexico along I-10 and I-25 you are following close to the original route which creates an important reminder of our state’s long and significant past.