

The Trail Yesterday

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro is the earliest European American trade route in the United States. Tying Spain's colonial capital at Mexico City to its northern frontier in distant New Mexico, the route spans three centuries, two countries, and 1,600 miles. El Camino Real was blazed atop a network of indigenous footpaths that connected Mexico's ancient cultures with those of America's Southwest.

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro began in Mexico City. The historic road runs from there to Queretaro, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi, Zacatecas,

Durango, and Ciudad Chihuahua. As the "Royal Road of the Interior Lands," the road was the economic, social, and political lifeline between Mexico City and its northern provinces, and ultimately the wagon road brought Spanish colonists into today's New Mexico.

Once travelers crossed the arid plains of northern Chihuahua, they followed the Rio Grande Valley north into New Mexico. Many of the historic parajes (campsites) and early settlements created by the Spanish colonists became today's modern cities in the Rio Grande Valley. In the United States, the trail stretches from the El Paso area in Texas, through Las Cruces, Socorro, Belen, Albuquerque,

and Santa Fe to Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan Pueblo), the first Spanish capital in New Mexico.

The trail fostered exchanges between people from many backgrounds, including American Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, New Mexicans, and Americans.

From 1598, when the first Spanish colonizing expedition made its way up the Rio Grande, through the mid-1880s, the wagon road was the main thoroughfare between Mexico and New Mexico. The trail corridor is still very much alive, more than 120 years after the railroad eclipsed its commercial use.

The Trail Today

The trail corridor nurtures a lively exchange of ideas, trade, traditions, customs, and language between Mexico and the American Southwest. Recognition as an international historic trail commemorates a shared cultural and geographic heritage. It helps eliminate cultural barriers and enriches the lives of people living along El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro.

Added to the National Trails System in October 2000 by the US Congress, El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail extends 404 miles from south of El Paso, Texas, to Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, New Mexico. Visit some of the places featured here to experience the trail today.



The historic route of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro

Tomé Hill

This distinctive conical hill has served as a natural landmark for travelers from prehistoric times into the present. Petroglyphs carved into its flanks and crosses at the top attest to its significance for Indian peoples and Catholic pilgrims alike.

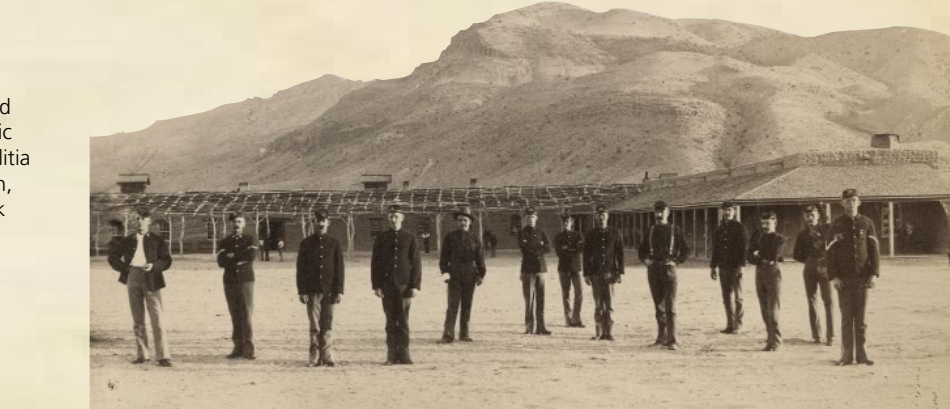


Mesilla Plaza

Mesilla, New Mexico, began its life following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Mexican citizens who did not want to become US citizens after the Mexican-American War traveled south to found Mesilla in Mexican territory. Those same settlers found themselves officially part of the US after the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, which made Mesilla part of the US. The new town became a commercial crossroads for the Mesilla region. The Butterfield Overland Stage stop was adjacent to the plaza, and travelers on El Camino Real could stop in Mesilla on their way to Chihuahua and Santa Fe.

Fort Craig Historic Site

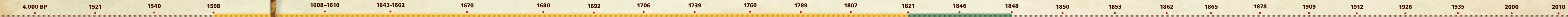
Fort Craig, active between 1854 and 1885, was home to Buffalo Soldiers from the 9th Cavalry and 38th and 125th Infantry. Hispanic New Mexican volunteers and militia also served there, and Kit Carson, Rafael Chacon, and Captain Jack Crawford spent time there.



J.R. Riddle, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), 014523

Fort Selden Historic Site

Fort Selden was established in 1865 to protect settlers and travelers in the Mesilla Valley. Built on the banks of the Rio Grande in the vicinity of the Robledo paraje, this adobe fort housed units of the US Army's infantry and cavalry. The fort remained active until 1891, five years after Geronimo's capture and seven years after the railroad had taken over El Camino Real's role in commercial freight and transport.



4,000 BP
During the Archaic Period people were living in brush huts near the floodplain of the Rio Grande in what is now Keystone Park. Human occupation of the Rio Grande Valley dates to at least 12,000 years ago

1521
Aztec ruler Moctezuma II surrenders Tenochtitlan to Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. Mexico City is established on the site of the Aztec capital.

1540
Francisco Vázquez de Coronado and his army of 1,100 camp near the Tiwa pueblo of Kuaua, near modern Bernalillo.

Coronado Historic Site / Kuaua Pueblo
When Francisco Vázquez de Coronado arrived at Kuaua Pueblo in 1540, he was leading an expeditionary force of 300 soldiers and 800 Indian allies on a march to locate the fabled Seven Cities of Cibola. Instead of the golden city they expected, the Spanish found a thriving multistoried adobe pueblo with more than a thousand villagers.

1598
Juan de Oñate leads first Spanish colonists up the Rio Grande, blazing what would become known as El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro. Oñate settles on Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo lands, and the first Spanish capital is established at San Juan do los Caballeros.

1608-1610
The Spanish capital is relocated from San Juan do los Caballeros to La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis (Santa Fe).

Palace of the Governors
This modest, single-story adobe is the oldest continuously occupied governmental building in the US. Construction began in 1610. Over the years the palace has been converted to an Indian Pueblo, housed Spanish and Mexican governors, and served as a Territorial Capitol. Since 1909 the palace has been the heart of New Mexico's State Museum system. The palace sits on the north side of the Santa Fe Plaza.

1643-1662
Spanish ranches and villages are established along El Camino Real north of Isleta Pueblo, including Pajarito and Atrisco, independent communities now within the greater Albuquerque area.

1670
German trader Bernardo Gruber dies on the Jornada del Muerto after fleeing jail at Sandia Pueblo and the cruelties of the Spanish Inquisition.

1680
On August 10th, nearly two dozen pueblos and their allies revolt over the Spanish practices of extracting payments, forcing conversion to Catholicism, and brutally suppressing native religion. The Spanish flee south and the pueblos regained their homeland for 12 years.

1680
The Spanish return to New Mexico and begin rebuilding missions and settlements.

1680
La Villa de Albuquerque is established, with today's "Old Town" and plaza as its historic center.

El Rancho de las Golondrinas
Today a living history museum dedicated to telling New Mexico Hispanic lifeways, this was once an important paraje, or campsite, on El Camino Real. About 15 miles from the Santa Fe Plaza, the rancho offered travelers a chance to freshen up before reaching the capital city or to make repairs to gear following a jolting journey on the trail heading south.

1706
The Tomé grant is settled after the Rio Grande shifts west, creating an inner valley branch of El Camino Real through the Tomé Plaza.

1706
Still a rough camp in 1760, the paraje of Doña Ana is settled as a town in the 1840s.

1760
San Elizario is established as a military presidio to protect citizens of El Paso del Norte from Apache attacks.

1789
US Lieutenant Zebulon Pike illegally enters Spanish territory while exploring the West. Pike is captured and taken down El Camino Real to Mexico City.

1789
Mexico gains its independence from Spain. The Santa Fe Trail opens with the arrival of William Becknell's trading party from Missouri. El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro becomes known as the "Chihuahua Trail" for traders moving goods between Santa Fe and towns to the south.

1807
Missouri volunteers under Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan defeat a Mexican unit at the Battle of Bracitos, go on to take El Paso del Norte, and march into Chihuahua.

Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), 045011

1821
Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo establishes American control over about half of Mexico's lands, including the lands traversed by El Camino Real north of El Paso del Norte.

1821
New Mexico becomes an incorporated, organized territory of the US on September 9.

1846
American-Mexican border is redefined through the Gadsden Purchase, which for 10 million dollars brought nearly 19 million acres of land between Texas and California into American hands.

Signature page from the Gadsden Purchase treaty, 1853.
Source: Treaty Series #208 AC; Gadsden Treaty between U.S. and Mexico, December 30, 1853; General Records of the U.S. Government, Record Group 11, National Archives, Washington DC.

1848
Battle of Valverde, the first major battle of the Civil War in the Southwest, takes place north of Fort Craig in February.

1848
The region's first operational railroad, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway, enters New Mexico Territory by way of Ratón Pass; the rails reach El Paso, Texas, in 1881.

1850
New Mexico Territorial Highway Commission appropriates funds to reengineer La Bajada section of El Camino Real for automobile traffic.

1862
New Mexico achieves statehood; State Highway 1 incorporates many sections of El Camino Real.

1865
US Route 66 is built over parts of El Camino Real in central New Mexico, including the steep descent known as La Bajada.

1865
New Mexico's roadside historic markers begin to tell the trail's history. In 1992 many of the 82 El Camino Real markers are installed as part of the Columbus Quincentenary Commemorations.

1865
Fort Selden is established to protect the Mesilla Valley.

1865
El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro is added to the National Trails System on October 13.

1865
Sites on the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro in Mexico inscribed on the World Heritage List.

The rough trail jolted nails loose from wagons and carriages. Hundreds of cobbler's nails, farrier's nails, and upholstery nails tell the story of El Camino Real.

Keystone Heritage Park
Keystone Heritage Park, El Paso, Texas, preserves a remnant of the rich riverine environment of the Rio Grande. The Archaic pit house settlement, where small bands foraged for wild plants and animals in the rich marshlands adjacent to the Rio Grande, is 4,000 years old.

