

# EL CAMINO REAL DE TIERRA ADENTRO – Part 2

## The Royal Road of the Interior

### *The Jornada del Muerto*

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*El Camino Real was the umbilical cord connecting Mexico and Spain to the New World. Across this dusty trail, the early colonists settled New Mexico, and across this trail, ancestors of many of today's New Mexico families once traveled. Part 1 covered the first wave of settlers entering New Mexico from 1598 - 22 years before the Mayflower - until the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Part 2 covers the post-revolt history until the famous trail was replaced by the railroad and automobiles. It was during this post-revolt period of El Camino Real that the Rio Grande valley we know today took shape.*

### **The Pueblo Revolt**

In 1680, the northern Pueblo Indians revolted against the oppression of Spanish Rule, forcing the Spaniards, many of the colonists, and even the southern Pueblo Indians to flee New Mexico. Most fled to the south along El Camino Real, relocating along the lower Rio Grande around present day El Paso, Texas.

From Taos to Socorro, the colonists fled south. Many, with only the "shirts on their backs," assembled at Paraje Fra Cristobal, awaiting the arrival of Governor Antonio de Otermín before crossing the desert expanse. However, Otermín showed up pretty much empty handed. The exiled governor and staff had little food, water, wagons or horses for the 2,700 Spanish and Christianized Indian refugees. Otermín knew many would perish on the week-long journey across the desert, most being on foot. For many, it would be a "Journey of Death," or Jornada del Muerto. Indeed, about 400 to 600 people died before reaching the Rio Grande at Robledo. This is the earliest documented account of how the famous trail got its name. Peñalosa's 1680 map of El Camino Real shows the desolate desert route was still unnamed. Prior to Otermín's journey, the trail from La Joya to El Paso was called El Des poblado - the desolate or uninhabited area.

By the end of 1680, Socorro and the Rio Abajo were completely abandoned. The only exception seems to be some hearty Spanish colonists that remained in the villages of La Joya, Sabinal, and possibly Las Nutrias. Socorro and the mission was a ghost town.

### **Reoccupation of New Mexico**

Governor Otermín returned to New Mexico the following year on an exploratory mission. In November 1681, he found Socorro completely uninhabited, the mission roof and houses burned, the church desecrated, and skeletons of those who dared stay behind. Returning to El Paso, he was convinced Spanish rule could not be reasserted at that time.

Eleven years later, Don Diego de Vargas set out along El Camino Real on the first reconquest expedition. Entering Socorro, he too found it in ruins and uninhabited. On December 9, 1692, he recorded in his journal: "After traveling two long leagues, I entered it (Socorro). The walls of its church are standing, and they are very strong, more than two and a half (yards) in thickness. In one of the cells of its convent, I took lodging."

Due to his peaceful, light-handed approach, de Vargas was able to restore 23 pueblos to Spanish rule and the Catholic faith. Returning to El Paso, he announced that New Mexico, and El Camino Real, was again open for business. The first resettlement expedition left El Paso in 1693, bound for Santa Fe by way of the Jornada del Muerto. By 1694, caravans of colonists were again settling New Mexico.

### **Reoccupation of Rio Abajo**

The lower Rio Abajo, south of La Joya to Black Mesa (Mesa de Contradero), remained abandoned for another 100 years. The Spaniards did not have the resources to protect settlers from the Apaches along this part of the Rio Grande, including Socorro. Settlement was prohibited by law. During the 1700s, thousands of colonists traveled into the interior along El Camino Real, passing the ruins of Socorro in large caravans to insure their safety through "La Apacheria" country. Tomé, Las Lunas, Albuquerque, and dozens of other Spanish villages were founded during this period - while the Rio Abajo remained the forbidden zone for settlement by the King of Spain.



*Photo: Socorro Historical Society*

**One of the earliest known photos of Socorro's San Miguel Mission shows the rebuilt church circa 1880. The exact appearance of the Nuestra Señora de Socorro Mission in the 1600s is not known.**

By the late 1700s, the Spanish colonists had grown to such a size that good farmland was becoming scarce, creating food shortages. Finally, in 1800, Governor Fernando Chacón opened the fertile farmlands along the Rio Abajo for resettlement. Response was slow at first and the exact dates of reoccupation uncertain. However, it is known that mandatory relocation of families to Alamillo, Sevillita, Senecú and Socorro Pueblos had occurred by 1812-1815.

**Socorro** was rebuilt from the ruins of Pilabo Pueblo. The old Socorro mission had been repaired and expanded on the original site, renamed San Miguel Mission by 1816. The new town was built as long rows of adobe buildings, forming a large, fortified square around a central plaza. The J.J. Baca building (Plaza Cafe) and the Juan Nepomoceno Garcia house (Security Title and Abstract building) are remnants of this early style. Note their long, linear construction and internal placitas for protection. This was a common colonial approach, borrowed from the Pueblo Indians, to protect the village from attack. Originally, the walls facing away from the plaza contained no doors nor windows for defense.

With the ruins of Pilabo and old Socorro believed to be north and east of the mission, "Nuevo Socorro," and the new plaza, were built on the undisturbed land to the south. The new plaza was located south of the church, between today's City Hall and Security Title Co.. This relocated plaza explains why San Miguel mission is not located on the town plaza as in other colonial era towns. To add to the curiosity, many of the buildings around this plaza were destroyed by fires in the 1890s. The new plaza was moved farther to the south - and, farther away from the church - to where the town plaza is located today. It seems Socorro invented urban renewal.

Unlike Socorro, the resettlement of Alamillo, Sevillita and Senecú Pueblos were not successful. In the case of Alamillo,

perhaps this early report explains why: "(Gov. Chacón) ordered some sixty families described as day laborers, servants, gamblers, those living in concubinage, and incorrigible unlicensed traders to the heathens to move there." This was the attempted resettlement of Alamillo Pueblo, not today's present village of Alamillo.

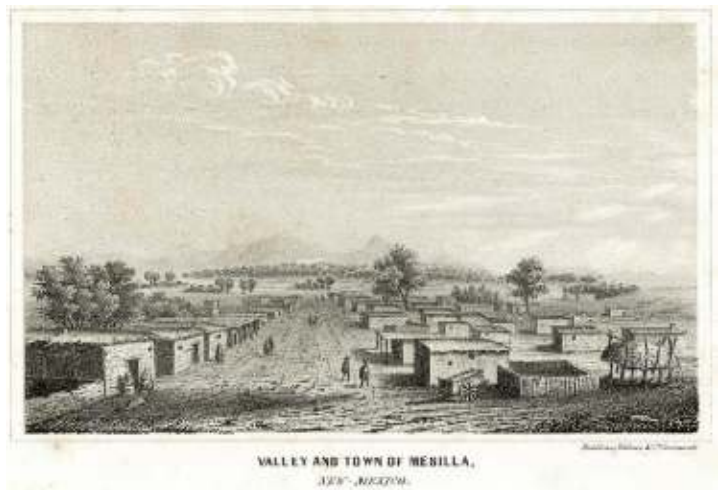
Apparently, Socorro was settled by a better ilk of people, most being established farmers and shepherders from Belen, Tomé and Los Lunas, and of course, arriving colonists along El Camino Real. In 1817, Socorro applied for, and received, Spanish Land Grant status as the "Provincia de Socorro."

When the region became part of Mexico in 1821, Socorro was the dominant town on the Rio Abajo, and a favorite stop on the re-established west branch of El Camino Real. Unfortunately, the Mexican military was not able to provide protection against the Apache any more than the Spaniards had. However, they did allow for the formation of local militias, which became quite effective protecting the new settlements and travelers along the trail.

With the Royal Road now running along both sides of the river, from Paraje to Las Lunas, the Rio Abajo quickly grew. By the 1840s, Luis Lopez, San Antonio, Lemitar, Polvadera, Alamillo and Abeyta were added to the map along the west side of the river. Other communities, such as Valverde, Don Pedro, Bosquecito, Parida and Veguita sprung up along the main branch of El Camino Real. By the time New Mexico became a U.S. Territory, the population of Rio Abajo south of Sabinal had grown from about zero to over 3,000 people.

## U.S. Territory

After only 27 years of Mexican Rule, New Mexico became a U.S. Territory in 1848 - marking the start of the Territorial Era and an end to the Colonial Period. And, with becoming a



**This old woodcut of Mesilla shows the appearance typical of many of the colonial villages along El Camino Real. Along the Rio Abajo region, windows were few, and located high, to afford protection from attacking Apache.**



U.S. Territory, came the familiar promises to protect travelers along El Camino Real - the same empty promises made by Spain and Mexico. However, General Stephen Kearny informed Washington that the territory could not grow to its potential without protecting travel along the main roads and subduing the attacking Indians. In short: send money. Surprisingly, Washington complied. As a result, garrisons of U.S. Dragoons were soon stationed at Lemitar and Socorro. Fort Conrad was built in 1851 and Fort Craig in 1854. Not only had the U.S. Army fulfilled its promise to protect El Camino Real, Socorro, Paraje, Don Pedro and San Antonio enjoyed the prosperity of becoming Army towns as well. The 1860 census showed the area's population had increased to about 5,000 people.

In 1862, the Confederate Army arrived in New Mexico for the Civil War. Marching up the Rio Grande from El Paso, they arrived at Fort Craig. Following the Battle of Valverde, the Confederates continued northward to occupy Albuquerque and Santa Fe. This is pertinent in that the Confederate Army was able to occupy New Mexico's major towns and travel about in relative ease by using the Royal Road. When they entered and occupied Socorro on February 27, 1862, they simply marched into town along El Camino Real, about where Cuba Road is today. On their way to Fort Union, when defeated at Glorieta, they came very close to having complete control of El Camino and Santa Fe trails, and thus, New Mexico.

From 1850 through the late 1870s, the military presence along El Camino Real was significant for another reason. Prior to the Civil War, all of the villages along the Rio Grande were "Mexican Villages," terminology used on the census records to denote that few, if any, Anglos lived in the towns. During and after the Civil War, some of the soldiers discharged from area forts remained and settled in and around Socorro. Since 1598, these were the first Anglos in Rio Abajo.

**West Bank Camino Real**

The first west-bank branch of El Camino Real was established about 1626 to reach the Nuestra Señora de Socorro Mission, though abandoned after the Pueblo Revolt. It was not until about 1817 that the west branch of the trail was again in use. By the 1830s, El Camino Real ran along both sides of the river from Black Mesa to Los Lunas. Many of the towns along today's I-25 through Socorro County were established during this era. Referring to the "Rio Abajo" map accompanying this article, most of the towns and villages built along El Camino Real during the Colonial and Territorial periods are shown.

Beginning in the far south, numerous farming villages were founded from the 1820s through the 1880s. These included Padercillos, San Albino, Cantarecio, Bosque Bonito, Milligan Ranch, and of course, Paraje at the site of Paraje Fra



Cristobal. Padercillos and San Albino were not, strictly speaking, on El Camino Real. However, the trail was extended south from the Paraje river crossing in the 1850s to connect the towns to the trail. The size of each town varied over the years from 100 people to several hundred.

In 1915, all of these towns were ordered abandoned by the Bureau of Reclamation for the construction of Elephant Butte Dam and Reservoir. While a few residents remained and worked the farms, they were forced to leave in 1924-25 when the rising waters of the reservoir overtook the land. All of these nearly forgotten towns are now submerged under the waters of Elephant Butte Reservoir.

**Fort Craig** played an important role to El Camino Real for the last 30 years of the trail's use. It was built near Mesa de Contadero, now called Black Mesa, specifically to protect the northern part of Jornada del Muerto, while Forts Thorn and Selden protected the southern portion. Fort Craig escorted caravans through the Jornada del Muerto, and north to Socorro, Los Lunas or Albuquerque as required, bringing a new measure of safety to traveling the trail.

Fort Craig also changed the overall character of the Rio Abajo. Before the fort, the main trail was along the east bank of the river. By the 1860s, the west branch became the main route, crossing the river at Paraje, as caravans preferred to camp at the safety and services of Fort Craig. This shift of the trail through Fort Craig was an immediate boost to Socorro and the west side towns, and a decline to those on the east. When the railroad also chose to follow the west bank, the demise of the east side towns became irreversible. As a result, numerous villages along the east side of El Camino Real are now of ghost town status, as shown on the map.

When Fort Craig was closed in 1879, travelers along the trail now camped at San Marcial, Paraje or the small village of Craig, located three miles north of the fort.

**La Mesa de San Marcial** was a small settlement on the north side of Black Mesa. The town was destroyed by a flood in 1866, forcing the occupants to move to the west side of the river to higher, more stable ground. The village was renamed Nuevo de San Marcial. Shortened over time to simply San Marcial, the settlement continued to grow, being an important stopover along El Camino Real.

The railroad arrived in 1882, and crossed the river at Black Mesa to traverse the Jornada del Muerto. San Marcial became a major town for both the railroad and travelers along the famous trail.

San Marcial was completely inundated by floodwaters in April 1929. Due to the relatively new Elephant Butte Dam and Reservoir, the floodwaters had no place to go. The houses, banks, stores and railroad yards remained under feet of water and silt for several months. Shortly thereafter, the water-logged buildings began collapsing under their own weight. Today, scarcely anything remains of San Marcial or the famous El Camino Real in the area. Only Black Mesa remains, looming over the Jornada del Muerto as an eternal marker of this once famous trail.

**Luis Lopez** was an early 1600s hacienda south of Socorro built by a Spanish colonist of the same name. Located near the Piro Pueblos of Teypama and Senecú, the Estancia de Luis Lopez became an early stop along the west branch. When the Rio Abajo was opened for resettlement, several families established farms on the old estancia around 1815, retaining the name Luis Lopez. Today, it remains a small unincorporated farming and ranching hamlet.

**Laborcito** and **San Antonio** came about around this same time as settlers spread further south along the river's fertile farmland. These are among the first Hispanic agricultural towns in today's Socorro County. In the 1830s, the San Antonio de Aquinas Mission was built on El Camino Real in San Antonio. This mission was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, and not to be confused with the present day San Antonio Catholic Church built nearby.

Highway 1, through San Antonio, Laborcito and Luis Lopez, is built over the west bank trail. The unpaved road north of Luis Lopez continues along the original trail, passing near the fairly well-known "Piro Indian Pueblo" of Penjeacú. From there, it wanders along the west side of today's diversion channel, eventually becoming Cuba Road, where El Camino Real entered Socorro.

The exact route from Socorro to Lemitar is uncertain. It obviously continued north and likely swerved towards the river, rather than climbing the steep and sandy Escondida Ridge. Did our early forefathers, in naming Socorro's north bound road "El Camino Real," know something we don't today?



*Photo: Paul Harden*

**Lemitar** was one of many towns that sprung up along El Camino Real. The village was founded in 1831 at a popular river crossing connecting the east and west routes of El Camino Real. The Sagrada Familia de Lemitar Church was built in 1835, serving the nearly 800 residents that lived there at one time.



**Escondida** is a farming village built on El Camino Real before it's excursion around Pueblito Point. The history of Escondida, meaning the "hidden place," is not well known. It seems to first appear in the 1840s, then absent from census records and maps until the 1880s. Noted Rio Abajo archeologist Michael Marshall suggests Escondida was the victim of the destructive flood of 1864. The village may have been abandoned for many years before being rebuilt. It is known many of the villages along the Rio Abajo were destroyed more than once by devastating floods.

North of Escondida was the popular Parida river crossing near Lemitar, connecting to the east-bank El Camino Real at Pueblito. In 1918, the first "Escondida Bridge" was built when this section of the old trail was resurrected into the "Road to La Joya." El Camino Real served as the first automobile "highway" from El Paso to Albuquerque until U.S. Highway 85 was built in 1937.

**Lemitar** was established on El Camino Real in 1831 with the Sagrada Familia de Lemitar church built by 1835. A fort was built by the New Mexico militia to protect the town and the trail into Socorro. El Camino Real, today's Escondida to Lemitar road, passed directly in front of the fort, now the home of the Griego family. By the 1850 census, Lemitar had 420 residents, of which only one was Anglo. The "Post at Lemitar" was occupied by U.S. Dragoons until Fort Conrad was built in 1851, and thereafter, manned again by the New Mexico Militia. This constant garrison was necessary, as the villages of Socorro, Lemitar and Polvadera were often the victims of attacking Apaches. Quick entry and escape through the canyon between Socorro and Strawberry Peaks made this stretch of Rio Abajo vulnerable to surprise attacks. Lemitar's population peaked with 793 residents in 1885, a special census taken for an unsuccessful attempt at statehood. From Lemitar, El Camino Real continued north to Polvadera, east of today's frontage road and closer to Olive Lane.

**Polvadera** became another colonial farming town about 1846. The town name, meaning "dusty," has been spelled Pulvidera, Pulvedero and other variations over the years. Lt. William Emory provided an interesting description of the village, writing in 1846, "Arrived at the town of Pulvidera, which we found, as it's name implies, covered with dust. We received full accounts of the attack made on the town by the Apaches the day before."

**San Acacia** and **Alamillo**, based on census records, seemed to come into existence around 1880, or at the very end of the trail's use. Both are agricultural and ranching communities. Alamillo was named for the Piro Pueblo of the same name several miles away on the east side of the Rio Grande (though the exact location is no longer known).

San Acacia, and San Acacia Butte, have been home to ancient Indians from about 800 A.D.. Like the early Pueblo



*Photo: Paul Harden*

**This old Post Office building is on El Camino Real passing through La Joya.**

Indians, Territorial settlers harnessed the waters of the Rio Grande between the two lava buttes to irrigate the surrounding fields. Many of the farming villages along the Rio Grande were built on turns in the river. Canals were dug from the river bends, filled from the flow of the river for irrigating the fields. This was an effective means of irrigating before the days of pumps and siphons, but disastrous for the villages when the river flooded.

**La Joya** is one of the oldest continuously occupied towns in New Mexico, inhabited since the early 1600s. It was a major staging point for travelers heading south into Jornada del Muerto, and a sigh of relief to those just completing the trail. Some of the best preserved sections of El Camino Real are



*Photo: Paul Harden*

**This old adobe building on El Camino Real was the church at the early Estancia de Contreras, and is believed to have been built before 1880. Note the hand-sculptured double doors. The new Contreras church was built in 1906.**



Photo: Paul Harden

Today, El Camino Real runs north of La Joya through Contreras as a seldom used dirt road. Socorro County road signs mark the old trail as “Camino Viejo.”

found around the La Joya and Contreras area. North of U.S. 60, the road through Bernardo, Abeytas and Sabinal into Belen follows the west branch of the trail, while the road through Las Nutrias and Veguita into Tomé follows the east side trail. The charm of these small villages in northern Socorro County has changed little since the days of El Camino Real.

### El Camino Real Today

Historians give the date 1885 as the death of El Camino Real, when the railroad effectively made the trail obsolete. However, the famous trail remains alive and well. Since 1598, it was the umbilical cord between Mexico and the New World. It was the main road along the Rio Grande, carrying supplies, food and people between El Paso and



Photo: Paul Harden

In the 1930s, El Camino Real was fortified with concrete through arroyos by the WPA for early automobile use.

Santa Fe - and, the lifeline for the towns along the trail. Today, I-25 serves this same purpose. And indeed, it follows the historic trail along the west side of the Rio Grande quite closely. From I-25, you can still visit the missions, plazas and New Mexico's colonial towns along El Camino Real, just as they did 400 years ago.



Photo: Paul Harden

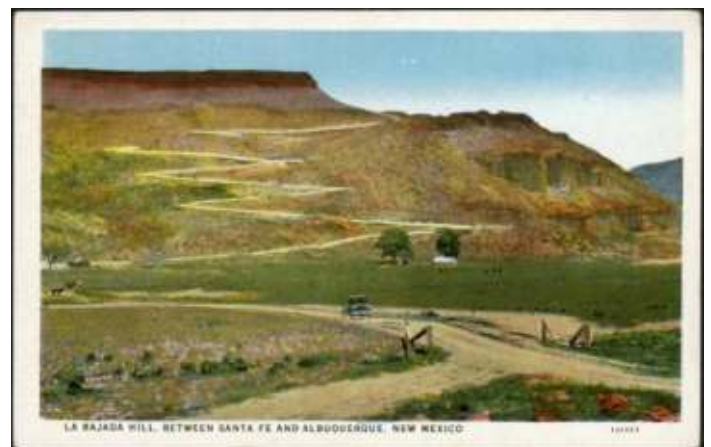
Ismael Tafoya, a native of Contreras, still lives on the “Camino Viejo,” the old El Camino Real, where it runs through the old village.

Note: If your family lived in any of the Rio Abajo towns now abandoned, such as Cantarecio, Valverde or Parida, please contact the author. The history of these forgotten towns will be documented in a future article.

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*Some of the references used in this article:*  
 "Rio Abajo" by Michael Marshall and Henry Walt, "The Royal Road," by Douglas Preston and Jose Esquibel, "Roadside History of New Mexico" by Francis and Roberta Fugate, SWCA Archeological Report No. 97-54, interviews with Albert Zimmerly, Benigno Barreras and Ishmael Tafoya, and field work by the author.

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This 1930 postcard clearly shows the route of El Camino Real up La Bajada hill south of Santa fe. Though bypassed today by I-25, portions of the original trail can still be seen.