



La Bajada

La Bajada is a prominent geologic and geographic landmark in New Mexico, rising like a wall that stretches out and runs down an escarpment towards the steppes below. Bajada translate to either “drop” or “downhill”. From the very earliest time people were compelled to find a way to reach the top. The traces of those transportation routes, from foot travel to horseback, carts, wagons, stages and finally automobiles, carry remnants of the story of this landscape. The arrival of the Spanish to a land where people were thriving, and their missionaries who tried to change that way of life; the pueblo revolts and subsequent re-conquest by the Spanish; war between Spain and the United States over the ownership of this land and eventually automobile tourism has added to a rich and diverse history of human settlement, transportation and use of La Bajada Historic Trails and Roads. The historical and cultural landscape of La Bajada has historically represented as a challenge to all.



The Earliest Trails



El Camino Real



Explorers



Military Road



National Old Trails Road



Route 66





The Earliest Trails



Today little remains to suggest the many routes that once traveled up La Bajada. Visitors will find a network of dirt tracks that crisscross the mesa, some evidently still used in recent times, others just a faint swale or distinct line of vegetation. Switchbacks that wound their way up the face of the escarpment can still be recognized by the rock alignments at their edges. The steel towers of an electric transmission line completed in 1929 and still in use today. These and a few references from the journals of those who scaled it in the past are all silent reminders of the human drama that once unfolded on La Bajada.

Some of the earliest human evidence at the top of La Bajada Mesa dates from the early Archaic Period (5500 BC-AD1), a time when cultures were shifting from reliance on now-extinct mega fauna to smaller game and wild plant gathering. The area provided high quality basalt for stone-tools and a diversity of useful plant and animal species. Archaeologists find evidence of small seasonal base camps and other short term use sites, which suggests mobile hunters and gatherers of plant materials.



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In the few centuries before European contact (AD1300-1600) the population increased dramatically and more elaborate material cultural objects are found dating to this period. The prehistoric petroglyphs, seen on the basalt boulders and cliffs of La Bajada escarpment, most likely date to this time. Archaeologists have identified and dated the remains of several residential sites, known as pueblos, at the base of La Bajada, along the western edge of the Caja del Rio Plateau, and large agricultural areas on top of the mesa. Agricultural evidence found on top of the mesa consists of grid gardens and isolated room features as well as cobble mulch fields.

While it may not seem like the top of the mesa would be a good place to try to grow crops, people from the pueblo below knew how to make the most of the little moisture they received by creating stone alignments that collected and channeled the rainwater. They also used stones to mulch or cover the dirt in which they planted, to minimize evaporation. It is possible that the people who walked across the plateau tending their fields followed a route similar to the historic trail and road alignments that later climbed the same hill.



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The late sixteenth century brought the Spanish to the Americas. In 1598, the wealthy Juan de Oñate, after receiving a contract to colonize the northern frontier, left Mexico and traveled north to establish colonies. Following the Rio Grande River, he established colonial outposts along El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (the Royal Road to the Interior Lands). This road became the lifeline for the Spanish colonists and missionaries.

In the early 1600's, supply trains of heavy wooden carts pulled by mules took six months to travel from Mexico City to Santa Fe. Upon reaching La Bajada, travelers had several options. The shortest route was the trail through Cañon de Las Bocas or the mouth of the Santa Fe River, southeast of the La Bajada escarpment. The alternatives were to head eastward through the gentler slopes at Cerrillos Hills and the Galisteo Basin, or attempt to scale the 600' escarpment.



The earliest documented Spanish use of the road which followed the valley of the Santa Fe River was by the founder of Santa Fe, Don Pedro de Peralta. He and Spanish settlers passed through the valley in 1610, probably following an Indian trail along the Santa Fe River (Cañon de Las Bocas) from above Santo Domingo Pueblo, through Las Bocas and up Cienega Creek, over to Cieneguilla and up the river to where the first capital of San Gabriel de Yunque-Owingeh was founded.

Click [Here](#) for more information.



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The canyon formed by the Santa Fe River was a natural corridor. This route followed the canyon floor winding its way along the stream, and meandering across open benches. Frequent fords across the rocky and boulder-strewn stream bed making wagon travel along this section of the Camino Real difficult. Floods often washed out the river crossings and cut or buried the road at side canyons, requiring frequent road repair. Large boulders on the canyon floor presented a major obstacle.

The Juana Lopez Road, which left La Cienega and passed south, across the western plains of the Los Cerrillos range and then southwest to San Felipe considerably reduced use of the Las Bocas road by wagon traffic. The construction of a wagon road down La Bajada escarpment around 1860 offered yet another alternative to the Las Bocas road.



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Route 66



Santa Fe National Forest





The Spanish presence abruptly ended in 1680 when several colonized pueblos revolted, forcing a Spanish retreat back to Mexico. Diego de Vargas, appointed the new governor, led a military expedition in 1692 that restored the colony to New Spain. The poor condition of the road after 12 years of disuse was lamented by Diego De Vargas. In an excerpt from his diary he describes the difficulties he faced at the Cañon de Las Bocas.

“The entire force was gathered in readiness at about five o’clock in the afternoon, at which time I sallied forth from the pueblo (Santo Domingo) with the said camp. After traveling less than a league, we found the road and slope so rough and washed away, due to continuous rains and a long period of disuse, that it was necessary to reopen the way, and by hand and the strength of strong arms we pulled through the two wagons and the gun carriages with the piece of ordnance and the large bronze stone mortar. For this reason I encamped at a place called Las Bocas. The entire camp arrived after dusk. And since the road was so rough and difficult, we were obliged to spend the night on the plain which surrounds the ridge or mountain there.”



Diego De Vargas

~ Diego De Vargas

After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, carts were discontinued and mule trains brought goods and replacement missionaries, soldiers and government officials. In 1695, “La Majada Land Grant” was awarded to Field Captain Don Jacinto de Palaez for his efforts in reconquering New Mexico. La Bajada Village was subsequently established at the base of the escarpment and first documented by the Franciscan Church in 1737. A paraje, or rest stop, had been established at this location as early as the pre-revolt colonization period. This paraje became a stage stop in the nineteenth century and a tourist camp and service station by 1925.



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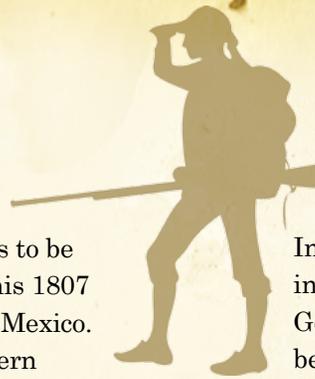
National Old Trails Road

Route 66





Explorers



The La Bajada Mesa route appears to be the road used by Zebulon Pike in his 1807 journey down the Rio Grande into Mexico. Pike had been exploring the southern reaches of the Louisiana Purchase when he strayed into Mexican territory in what is now Colorado. He was escorted by Mexican soldiers to Chihuahua where he was questioned by Mexican authorities. Eventually, he was escorted back to the Louisiana border.

The following excerpt from his diary of March 4, 1807, recounts his journey from Santa Fe to La Bajada village:

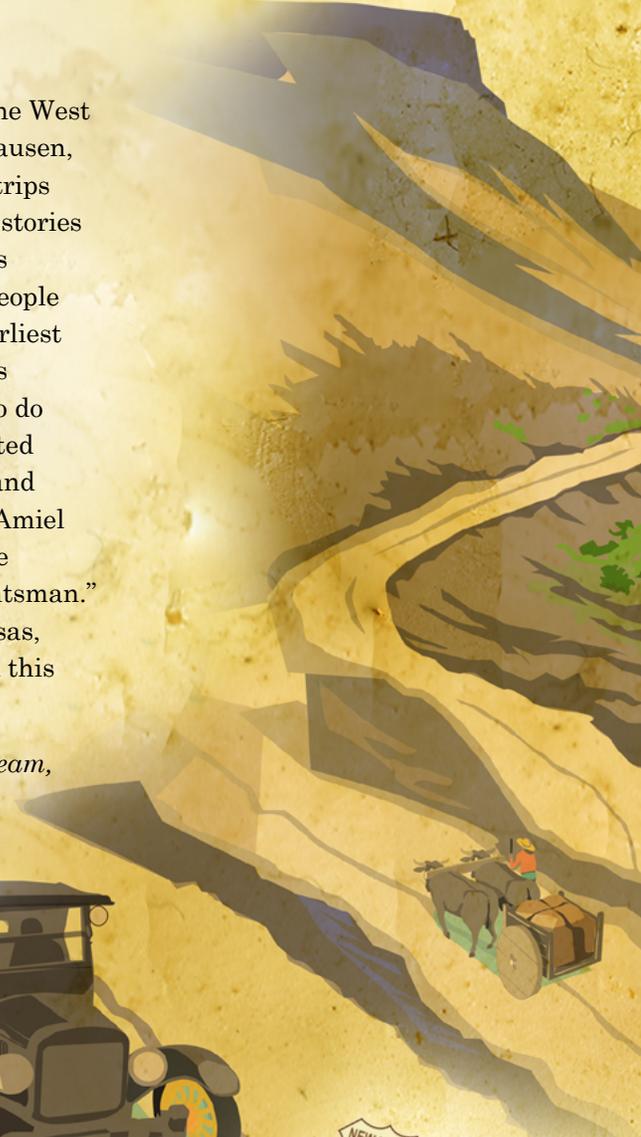


"We ascended a hill and galloped on until about ten o'clock; snowing hard all the time, when we came to a precipice which we descended, meeting with great difficulty (due to the obscurity of the night) to the small village (La Bajada) where we put up in the quarters of the priest, he being absent."
 ~ Jackson

Several other accounts survive that describe the difficult ascent and descent of the hill. In 1851, the Rev. Hiram Walter Read writes in his journal, "Today I ascended an almost impassable mountain, even for goats." He was on his way home to Santa Fe from Algodones by horse and had likely made his way up the steep La Bajada.

In the 1800's the mystique and adventure of the West intrigued Europeans. Heinrich Balduin Mollhausen, German illustrator and diarist, made several trips between 1849 and 1858 to gather material for stories for the German people. He produced numerous illustrations while he traveled recording the people and sites that he saw including some of the earliest images of the Grand Canyon. In writing novels and serials for the German people he sought to do more than just entertain and regularly consulted Smithsonian Institution reports for scientific and historic information. In 1853-54 he joined Lt. Amiel Weeks Whipple's Pacific Railroad survey of the Thirty-fifth parallel as "topographer or draughtsman." As the party traveled from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Pueblo de los Angeles, Mollhausen recorded this description of Las Bocas road:

"The waggons followed the windings of the stream, which were so short that we seemed to be continually in a rocky cauldron ..."



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Military Road



El Camino Real was used for travel from Chihuahua to Santa Fe through the Mexican period, the Mexican-American War, and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which created the Territory of New Mexico for the United States, for around 250 years. To protect its new lands and citizens, the U.S. military was dispatched and set about improving roads, including the route on La Bajada in 1860.

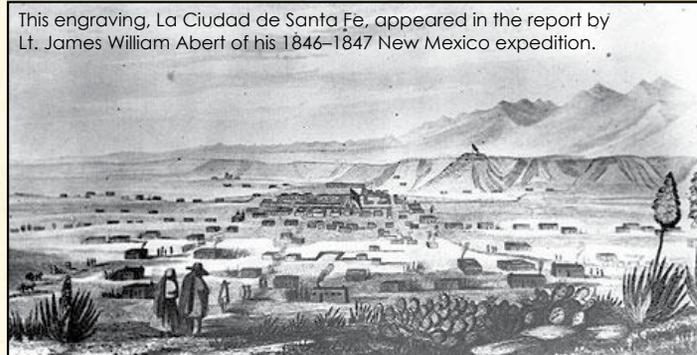
Reference to this improvement is made by Colonel John J. Abert, Commander of the U.S. Corps of



Topographical Engineers. During the 32 years Abert headed the Corps he helped turn a relatively unknown wilderness west of the Mississippi into an extensively surveyed, well-mapped, and increasingly settled landscape. Abert retired in 1861 and the corps was abolished in 1863.

“The sum of \$ 12,000 originally appropriated for this long road of some 300 miles (the road from Santa Fe to Dona Ana), was entirely too small. The small balance that came into the hands of the engineer in charge has been applied to that section of the road between Santa Fe and Albuquerque, and a party has been at work upon the descent into the valley of the Galisteo.”

~ Colonel John J. Abert



This engraving, La Ciudad de Santa Fe, appeared in the report by Lt. James William Abert of his 1846–1847 New Mexico expedition.

Although the road was improved it was still challenging. According to Capt. John G. Bourke’s field notebooks of 1869, the only safe way down the hill was for all passengers to disembark the wagon or stage at the top and walk down the slope, while the driver made the journey by applying a heavy brake on the wagon and slowly leading the mules or horses. One of Bourke’s stories tells of a Lieutenant O’Connor, who left his wagon at the edge of the precipice and walked down the hill, allowing his wife to drive his wagon and four mules down La Bajada alone. Once she arrived safely at the bottom, he introduced his wife to their fellow travelers and invited them all for a drink.



The Earliest Trails



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Route 66





NM1 / National Old Trails Road

As the twentieth century dawned, it was clear that a better commercial route was needed to connect Santa Fe with New Mexico communities to the southwest. In 1903 and 1909, the Territorial Highway Commission appropriated funds for the most significant realignment of La Bajada to date. These changes would open the road to the automobile by reducing the road's grade from an almost impassable 28 percent to 7.5 percent.



The La Bajada section, originally part of the highway designated NM1, was an important component of the State Highway Department's promotional efforts. The 1915 publication *Through New Mexico on the Camino Real*, for example, highlighted the engineering accomplishments on the La Bajada section.

Road construction up La Bajada spawned several innovations that would go on to become standard. The use of dynamite as a means to move tons of basalt was recorded for the first time on this route. This created the materials that would be used by Pueblo de Cochiti men and prison inmate labor to build a totally new roadway. The use of convict labor proved to be so successful at reducing construction costs that inmates would be used in other New Mexico road projects throughout the early twentieth century.



Aerial view of La Bajada, showing both the 1909 and 1926 alignments, ca 1930.




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National Old Trails Road

Route 66





After dynamiting, the large basalt boulders were used to create dry stacked retaining walls, some of which remain today. The rubble was used to build the roadbed and construct curbs on the outside of the roadway. Gutters were dug and sometimes lined with concrete to drain the road and catch falling rocks. Iron culverts were added below the roadbed to help with drainage, although there is no evidence of them today. The standard width for roads at the time was 18', which the Highway Commission followed, allowing a little extra room at the seven hairpin turns built just below the rim of the mesa.



The automobile proved to be the catalyst for continued improvements to this road. In the 1910's, several organizations, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Santa Fe-Grand Canyon-Needles National Highway association and the Good Roads Association lobbied for a transcontinental highway and improved roads.

In June, newly elected New Mexican Governor W.C. McDonald promised to do all he could to get the road through New Mexico and maintain it. Throughout the late 1910's and early 1920s, the state allocated annual funds for maintaining and grading La Bajada, which was essential since heavy summer rains regularly washed out sections of the road.

Extending from the Cumberland Turnpike in Maryland, following the National Road to the Mississippi River, then along the Boone Lick Road to Kansas City, Missouri, the newly named National Old Trails Road followed the Santa Fe Trail through eastern New Mexico, then turned west along an approximate route of the Spanish explorers who went west to California. The route followed the existing NM1 over La Bajada between Santa Fe and Albuquerque. The highway was never intended to be a means of moving freight. From the start, the National Old Trails Road was promoted as a touring road to pass through historical and scenic landscapes. The highway gained prestige in 1913, when it was proposed to Congress as an "interstate highway," and again, in 1914 when the Southern California Automobile Association mapped the entire route. In 1923, the Automobile Blue Book included the highway as only one of two New Mexico roads in its mile-by-mile road description.



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National Old Trails Road



Route 66





U.S. Highway 66/85

The old route up La Bajada Hill was barely 1.5 miles long, but it traversed tough volcanic rock; in the 20th century it included 23 hairpin turns and was the scene of countless frustrations and mishaps, from overturned wagons to boiling radiators. Residents of the village of La Bajada at the hill's base named a spot on the hill Florida because a truck carrying oranges overturned there.

In 1925, Herb and Wallace Walden opened a service station and later, a tourist camp, west of the Santa Fe River. They provided a variety of services, including towing and auto repair. In 1926 the Federal Highway system was created, and this new alignment became part of two major highways: U.S. Highway 85 (a north-south route from the Canada/North Dakota border to the Mexico/New Mexico border) and U.S. Highway 66 (the soon to be legendary route from Chicago to the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica, California). Though the road improvements brought increased traffic to La Bajada, the image of the road as challenging to vehicles and drivers remained.

Along the 1926 alignment, there is a faint outline of a sign on the basalt rock face for La Bajada Service shop. Although no records have been uncovered, this may have been an advertisement for the Walden brothers' shop. The buildings also remain from the brothers' compound, which is now a private residence. Other economic opportunities became available for locals at La Bajada. Some were hired by motorists to drive their cars up or

down the hill, while tourist camp operators hired others to hand out advertising flyers to motorists as they made their way around the turns. On the same rock face as the Service Shop sign is another sign for the Santa Fe Campground, which was located on West San Francisco Street in Santa Fe.



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Route 66



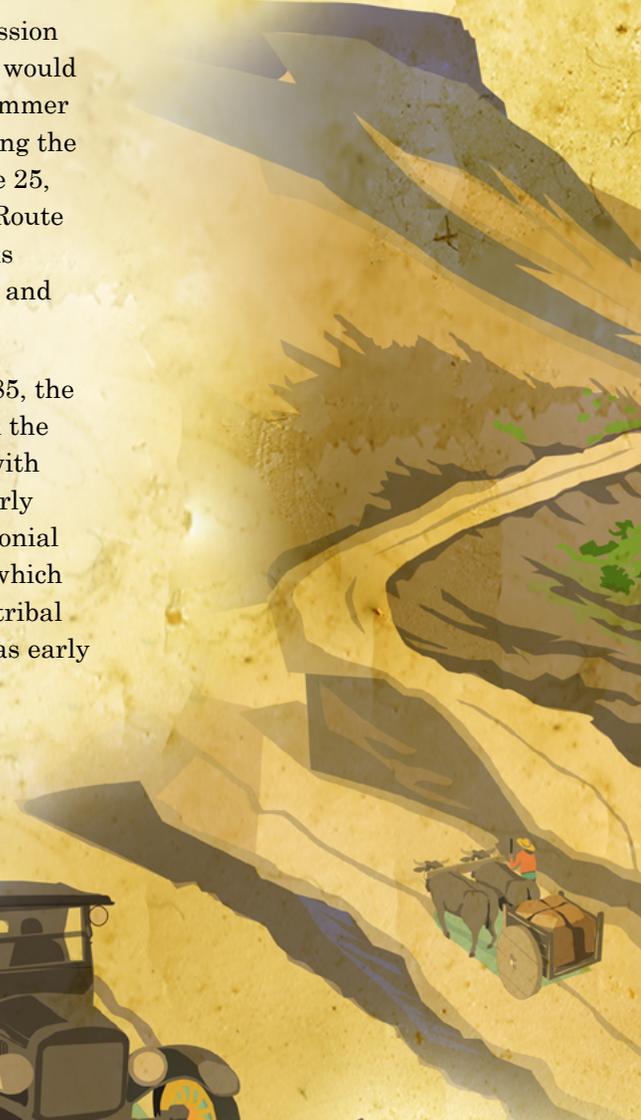


As traffic increased through the early 1920s, the New Mexico State Highway Department made plans to eliminate the eight hairpin turns that caused many tourists to hire locals to drive their vehicles up and down the escarpment. The new alignment began with a contract with the penitentiary to supply inmate labor in 1924. The new route would follow the 1909 road from the base to roughly 2000' up the roadway. At this juncture, the new road would bear north and east up La Bajada. The new alignment had lower grades, banked roadways and retaining walls. In 1926 the project was completed when the timber bridge, which is still in use, was constructed as a replacement to the 1918 concrete ford over the Santa Fe River.

One of the catalysts to the road improvement in 1926 was the Fred Harvey Indian Detours. The director of this venture, Maj. R. Hunter Clarkson, was concerned about the turning radii of the White buses that were to be used. New Mexico Governor Arthur T. Hannett quickly decided to support this effort to enhance the state's tourist industry and ordered crews to widen the hairpin turns.

In the fall of 1931, the State Highway Commission announced that a new alignment for US66/85 would be built 3 miles south of La Bajada. By the summer of 1932, the project had been completed, making the 1909 and 1924 alignments obsolete. Interstate 25, which followed the 1932 alignment, replaced Route 66 in 1970. Tourists no longer ventured on this stretch of road and the state no longer graded and maintained either alignment.

Due to drought and the re-routing of U.S. 66/85, the Village of La Bajada was nearly abandoned in the 1940s. By the 1960s it experienced a revival with the return of descendants from some of the early colonizing families. Some original Spanish colonial era structures remain, including the church, which was rebuilt in the 1970s. In addition, Cochiti tribal members, whose ancestors occupied the area as early as 1225 AD, took up residence in the village.



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Route 66





During the last two decades, renewed interest in La Bajada has come in several forms. In 1994, a uranium mine in the Santa Fe River canyon was reclaimed and remediated due to contamination concerns. Several forms of recreation are promoted by clubs and websites, most notably for off road vehicle usage, touring Route 66 and hiking. Recreational vehicles accelerate the deterioration of the historic roadbed, rock walls, and petroglyphs, and have the potential to negatively impact this historic landscape.

These unique features of the landscape are cultural resources protected by federal laws. Please enjoy them, but refrain from defacing, damaging or vandalizing them.



References

Jackson, Donald, ed. The Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike, 2 Volumes, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 1966



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