Chapter 3
The Spanish Colonial Period

Settlement came in 1598. Not unlike the English colonies of the United States, the early Spanish colony had to learn some hard lessons in survival. New Mexico was the only true landlocked colony established in the Americas during this period. All other colonies—Spanish, English, French, Dutch, and Portuguese—had quick and easy access to water transportation. And there was another difference. Even with the successful Pueblo Indian Revolt, New Mexico’s Indians fared better with the early Spanish colonists than did the Indians on the East Coast with English colonists.

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And, since Don Luis de Velasco, my viceroy, has discussed and contracted with you, Don Juan de Oñate, concerning this project, and you have accepted it with the conditions and stipulations which will be delivered to you, signed and attested by a notary, therefore, in conformity with them and the ordinances which relate to new discoveries and pacifications, I order them delivered to you so that you may keep and observe them, and, since I approve and ratify the said capitulations, as I do, I give the contract my approval. Therefore trusting in you and that you will carry out this discovery and pacification in a Christian spirit and with complete loyalty, in the form and manner set forth in the contract, I appoint you as my governor, captain general, caudillo, discoverer, and pacifier of the said provinces of New Mexico and those adjacent and neighboring, in order that, in my royal name, you may enter them with the settlers and armed forces, baggage, equipment, munitions, and other necessary things that you may provide for the purpose. You will endeavor to attract the natives with peace, friendship, and good treatment, which I particularly charge you, and to induce them to hear and accept the holy gospel; you will explain our holy Catholic faith to them through interpreters, if they can be obtained, so that we may have communication with them in the various languages and seek their conversations, let it be done at the opportunity which the friars find most suitable. You will see to it that the latter are respected and revered, as ministers of the gospel should be, so that, with this example, the Indians may attend and honor them and accept their persuasions and teachings. Experience has demonstrated this to be very important, and also that all the people in your company act gently and kindly, without committing excesses or setting bad examples, or irritating those we seek to attract lest they adopt an unfriendly attitude toward the faith. You are to direct everything to this principal aim, which is, as you see, a matter of importance, arrange all details with good sense and judgement to the service of God and the increase of our Holy Catholic faith. 13

— Appointment of Don Juan de Oñate as governor and captain general of New Mexico, King Felipe II, October 21, 1595

If in the said provinces, any seaports should be found on the North Sea which might be utilized without the harmful results that either by becoming infested with enemies and by opening a gate through which the profits might be lost, as soon as any such harbor is discovered, you shall notify the viceroy of New Spain, telling him the news and giving an accurate report of the configuration of the coast and the capacity of each harbor, in order that he may take suitable measures. Until this is done you are not to make use of these harbors or consent to anyone’s doing so. 14

— Viceroy Luis de Velasco to Governor Don Juan de Oñate, instructions of October 21, 1595
Gaspar Pérez de Villagran, age fifty-five, from the original edition of Historias de la Nueva España, published in Alcala, Spain, in 1610. Original edition in History Library, Palace of the Governors. (NMIV 152880)

Petroglyph of a Spanish rider, Cerro Gordo. Photo ca. 1925-1930. (NMIV 27437)
Because we are zealous of our honor and sign complaints, we are labeled as traitors. The fact is that we are all depressed, cowed, and frightened, expecting death at any moment. We are not masters of ourselves or of our children. We find ourselves in the most harrowing position of servitude ever endured by Spaniards, and threatened with the loss of our rights. Who can help but complain about matters here, being unfortunate subjects of your lordship? We had all come so eagerly to save you in this conversion at our own expense. but, after spending many thousands from our estates, we did not have the fortune to be governed by a person such as you, but instead by one whose treatment is such that unless his majesty sends relief, we shall doubtless all perish with our women and children.
— Captain Luis Gasco de Velasco to the viceroy, March 22, 1601

The Council of the Indies has studied what you tell me in a letter of March 7 of this year in regard to the present state of the entrada and discovery of New Mexico, the scanty harvest of souls that has been reaped thus far and that may be expected in the future, the difficulties or insurmountable obstacles and excessive cost in preserving or extending it, and the little benefit that the land offers both to my royal treasury and to those who settle there, because of its limitations and poverty and other matters which you set forth.

upon consultation, it has seemed fitting to order you, as I do order and command, that you order the suspension of the discovery and exploration of New Mexico.
— Phillip III, the King of Spain, to his viceroy, September 13, 1608

The sergeant and his men then went forth into the plain where they saw immense herds of these cattle. They are about the size of a Castilian bull, extremely woolly, hump-backed, black-horned, and have splendid meat. They yield great amounts of lard and tallow. They have beards like billy-goats, and are as fleet of foot as deer. They go together in great herds of as many as twenty or thirty thousand.
— Gaspar Pérez de Villagrán, describing the American bison, 1610
Enrique Martinez's sketch map of New Mexico, ca. 1602, reflecting Oñate's exploration of the plains. The Pueblo de los Pecos is no. 16. Courtesy of the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. (MNM 105661)
It is understood that that country [New Mexico] is settled by various languages very difficult and barbarous which cause many inconveniences for the good administration and consolation of the ministers as well as of the natives. The said Governor is requested to act with great care consulting with the religious in such a manner so that the main thing shall be to teach all the Indians and especially the children and ignorant persons so they may learn the Spanish language and in the event that they cannot learn the same generally an effort must at least be made that those who have no natural fitness to learn the Spanish language must be taught the language most generally spoken in that country so that they may be better administered.
— Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco to Governor Pedro de Peralta, 1609

Because it is most necessary to look to the conservation, comfort and good treatment of the said Indians: I command you that the allotting which you may have to make of them be only that of tilling and herding and for no other purpose, and even this you shall make from the pueblos that which may be convenient to it so that the Indians be not molested, and the number that you may have to apportion shall be at the ration of two percent of those who may be in each pueblo in ordinary time, which is when they are not sowing or reaping, and in time of double [work] when there is the said reaping and sowing you shall make the said apportionment at the rate of eight percent, giving orders that the said Indians be paid one real for each day, and you shall take great care that good treatment be done them, and to those Spaniards who may not do nor pay them for their work you shall not allow any more Distribution of Indians from that time forth.
— Don Diego Fernández de Córdova, Marqués de Guadalcazar, to Governor Don Juan de Eulate, regarding Indian labor, July 29, 1620

For this blessed province of the Holy Gospel has, as it has always had, religious of very great spirit who desire to go among those infidel and barbarous nations, to lay down their lives among them, in imitation of the One who for our love gave up his life on the tree of the cross.
— Fray Gerónimo de Zárate Salmerón, 1626
Ruins of Quarai Pueblo mission church, ca. 1940. Photo by Hector de Castro (MN 58326)
Arched doorway, Pecos Pueblo mission church ruins, ca. 1915.
Photo probably by Jesse L. Nusbaum. (MNM 12925)
Ruins of mission church of San José de las Jemez, Gualewa Pueblo, ca. 1922
Photo by Wesley Bradfield (HNM 12391)
I, Fray Alonso de Benavides of the Order of St. Francis, Custodian of the Missions and Custody of New Mexico, declare that the events and affairs of that kingdom or, better said, of that new world, which during these recent years we friars of my father St. Francis have converted and pacified unto God our Lord and brought under obedience to Your Majesty, are so numerous and of such a nature that I shall find it impossible to describe them at one hearing and in a summary manner. The reason is that, with the royal assistance and protection of Your Majesty, we have discovered such great treasures, both spiritual and temporal, which the divine Majesty has seen fit to confirm with so many wonders and miracles, that the Viceroy of Mexico and my order thought it best to instruct me, as the one who has for many years governed and administered that country, to come in person to describe and represent them to Your Majesty.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630

But today, after so few years, all that region is covered with churches and with crosses set on pedestals, and its inhabitants greet one another aloud in words of praise for the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar for the Most Holy Name of Jesus Christ. God left it and entrusted it to Your Majesty, so that through these Catholic means and through your royal expenditures you might enjoy many spiritual and temporal blessings.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630

The weather is of either extreme, for in the winter it is very severe, with so much snow, ice and cold that all the rivers, esteros and even the Rio del Norte freeze so hard that loaded wagons pass over them, and immense herds race across them as if over dry land... for since the rivers are frozen, they have a glassy and slippery surface that occasions terrible falls whether one be traveling on horseback or on foot. The remedy for this is to scatter some earth on top, so that a good foothold can be obtained. But it is impossible to find any earth, because everything is frozen so hard that even to dig a grave at the church a fire must first be kindled on top of the ground in order to thaw it... Every winter a great number of Indians out in the country are frozen, and many Spaniards have their ears, feet and hands frozen.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630
Cross at sunset, Pecos Pueblo, ca. 1912. Photo by Jesse L. Nusbaum. (MNM 12929)
View across Pecos Valley toward Pecos Pueblo mission ruins, 1915. Photo by Jesse L. Nusbaum. (MNM 12944)
We asked the Indians why they were so zealous in asking for Baptism and for friars to go to instruct them in Christian doctrine. They replied that a woman, similar to the one whose likeness we had there painted, used to tell them, each in his own language, to come without delay and summon the priests that they might teach and baptize them.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, describing Indian sightings of Maria de Agraña, 1630

At dawn the holy woman spoke to each one of them separately and told them not to leave, because the friars they had sent for were already drawing near.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, describing Indian sightings of Maria de Agraña, 1630

These people [the Pueblos] have always had a government and republic, the old men assembling with the chief captain to deliberate and to decide what things were most desirable for them.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630

The natives are very fond of them [the friars] and of things pertaining to the church, which they attend with extraordinary love and devotion. Ample evidence of this is their many churches and friaries, all built by the women and by boys and girls taking Christian doctrine, although this may seem an exaggeration since these structures are so sumptuous and ornate. It is the custom among these nations for the women to build the houses, while the men spin, weave blankets, go to war and do the hunting; and if we compel any man to work on building a house, he runs away and the women laugh at him. In this way, there have been erected more than fifty churches, whose ceilings are attractively carved with interlaced flowers, and whose walls are very well painted. This is possible because of the wonderful mountains containing every kind of wood, and also because we fiers have taken such pains in training the Indians of the doctrine that there can be found among them skilled carpenters and craftsmen of every kind.
— Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630

In the course of the year that I have unworthily served as guardian of this convent, I have not seen the said governor or any minister of justice punish any fornicator, idolator, or sorcerer in this pueblo; what I have seen is that they [the officials] punish them [the Indians] because they do not bring in salt, because they do not promptly cut wood.
— Fray Nicolás de Freitas, June 18, 1660

To this the said General Don Diego de Peñalosa replied: "If the custodian excommunicated me, I would hang him or garrot him immediately, and if the Pontiff came here and wanted to excommunicate me or actually did so, I would hang the Pontiff, because in this kingdom, I am the prince and the supreme magistrate."
— Fray Alonso de Posada, May 16, 1684

Six years before [the 1680 Pueblo Indian Revolt], a girl of ten, the daughter of the High Sheriff, and who was in great pains, commended herself in her paralysis to an Image of N.S. del Sagrario which she had before her. Instantly she found herself cured. And in describing the miracle with wonder, she said that the Virgin had told her: "Child, arise and announce that this Custody will soon see itself destroyed because of the poor regard that it has for my Priests, the people must make amends for the fault if they do not wish to undergo the punishment."
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*On the miraculous prediction of the 1680 Pueblo Indian Revolt, made by a statue of the Virgin that became known as Our Lady of the Macana, Fray Agustín Vetancurt, 1698, in Theatre Mexicano, 4th part, treatise 3, number 64*
Sixteenth-century Franciscan monk of New Mexico, from Atlan: The History, Resources and Attractions of New Mexico by William G. Ratch. 1885. (MNM 87254)

Spanish inscriptions left at El Morro by Agustin de Ynojos and Juan Gonzales in 1629.
Photo by George Grant, 1934. (MNM 57377)
Title page of Fray Alonso de Benavides's *Memorial*, originally published in Madrid in 1630. From the Ayer edition of 1916. (MNW 152684)

Maria de Jesus de Agreda, the Lady in Blue. From Benavides's *Recited Memorial*, published in Madrid in 1644. (MNW 152582)
Nuestra Señora de la Macana, the statue that miraculously predicted the 1680 Pueblo Indian Revolt to a young girl. The statue is in the Convento de San Francisco in Mexico City. From "The Lady from Toledo" by Fray Angelico Chávez, 1960. (MVM 1526/3)
Before entering upon this government I received information of the general uprising of the Indians of the provinces of New Mexico. According to the autos [official hearings], reports, and documents which were remitted to this government, on the thirteenth day of August of the past year 1680 the rebellious Indians, by prearranged conspiracy, fell upon all the pueblos and farms at the same time with such vigor and cruelty that they killed twenty-one missionary religious-nineteen priests and two lay brothers—and more than three hundred Spaniards, not sparing the defenselessness of the women and children.

— Viceroy Marqués de la Laguna, February 25, 1681

I asked him [Pueblo leader Luis Picuri, also known as Tupatu of Picuris Pueblo] to enter the said tent, where affectionate words were showered upon him and where he was served chocolate, which he drank with the fathers, with me, and with others present.

— Governor Don Diego de Vargas, journal entry, September 15, 1692

The Pueblos and people who would not believe and obey me and carry out all that which I told them, and which his majesty, the King, our Lord, ordered them, those I would consume immediately; and that for this reason the others who had obeyed me and rendered obedience should not change their minds, for all those who were good I would hold near to my heart and esteem greatly.

— Governor Don Diego de Vargas, journal entry, September 16, 1692

It is my wish that with those with whom I enter, that they should first and foremost, personally build the Church and holy temple, setting up in it before all else the patroness of the Kingdom and Villa, who is the one that was saved from the ferocity of the savages, her title being Our Lady of the Conquest.

— Governor Don Diego de Vargas to Viceroy Conde de Galve, El Paso, January 2, 1693
Diego José López de Zárate Vargas Piñero, López de Zárate y Luján Ponce de León Cegada. Álvarez Contreras y Salinas, Marqués de Villanueva de la Sagra y de la Nava de Bracillas (1643-1704), captain general of New Mexico and twice governor of New Mexico (1691-1697, 1703-1704), from a painting.
Title page from Carlos de Sigüenza y Gongora's Mercurio Volante, published as a tribute to Diego de Vargas on the occasion of his "reconquest" of New Mexico in 1692. From The Spanish Southwest, 1937 (MNM 152671)

Spanish document signed by Diego de Vargas in 1696. (HSN/MNM 15035)
Detail of Segesser II, an early eighteenth-century hide painting of the ambush of the 1720 Pedro de Villasur expedition. Collections of the Palace of the Governors. (MNM 152690)

Detail of Segesser II. Villasur lies dead in the foreground. Collections of the Palace of the Governors. (MNM 152690)
It is the saddest, the most lamentable, and the most fatal event that has happened in New Mexico since the time of its conquest... in the villa of Santa Fe, thirty-two widows and many orphaned children, whose tears reach the sky, mourn the poor ability of the governor, pray God for his punishment, and await the remedy of your justice.

— Former Governor of New Mexico Felipe Martinez to Viceroy Baltasar de Zúñiga, Marqués de Valero, Duque de Arión, Mexico City, October 8, 1720

In detail he refers to the third day of November of the year just passed, when more than three hundred Comanches attacked the pueblo of Galisteo, notwithstanding that during the previous month of July, they had been admitted and entertained by the governor in the pueblo of Taos. There they held and participated in the fair, where they are accustomed to ransom their kinsmen for hides.

— Marqués de Altamira to Governor Tomás Vélez Gachupin, April 26, 1752

I am enclosing the printed Franciscan almanac which they [the Navajos] brought. When you understand the reason, your lordship will have sufficient cause to appreciate the fine strategy of the Navajo Apaches and to laud the worthy actions of friendship of the Utes. The case is as follows: The Utes attacked the Pueblos of the Navajos with such force that the Apaches found the action bloody for them; some were killed, others captured, with no danger to the Utes, who strove for a complete victory by closing in to reach the top of the mesa. Then the Apaches came out, after stacking their arms, carrying a wooden cross above which was this said almanac on a pole. They told the Utes, ‘The great chief of the Spaniards sent you this letter and the cross and ordered you to be our friends.’ Thereupon those who before were lions became lambs, surrendered their arms, and received the cross and the false letter. The chiefs held their council there and agreed that since your lordship punished the Comanches severely and after pardoned them benignly when they sought peace by carrying another similar cross, it was but proper that they should do the same, both to imitate their action and not to displease your lordship, who, if angered by their ignoring your letter, might take up arms against them.

— Juan Joseph Lobato to Governor Tomás Vélez Gachupin, August 17, 1752

Most excellent Sir [the Viceroy]: On the 6th of August last, two French traders arrived at the pueblo of Pecos from the province of Canada or New France, which lies to the north-northeast of this Kingdom of New Mexico... As soon as I learned of it from the reverend father missionary by letter, I ordered the alcalde mayor of those pueblos, who at the moment was in this villa, to go at once to Pecos, arrest the two Frenchmen, seize the goods they were carrying, and bring the men in person to this villa [Santa Fe].

After this was done, I proceeded to examine them as far as the limited understanding of the interpreter, the only one in this region, permitted. Through him I learned... that, with permission of the commander of the presidio of Illinois, they set out under orders to discover this kingdom and to inform themselves of the route and the distance. They brought with them a small quantity of goods to test whether this government would permit the opening of trade with that of Canada... They showed themselves unaware of the prohibition against free trade as well as of the arrival in the past year of the four French men from New Orleans with the same purpose.

— Governor Tomás Vélez Gachupin to Conde de Revilla Gijedo, September 18, 1752

For about thirty years the governors have collected the tithes; all the tithes from down the river are collected in the Villa of Albuquerque (a Spanish villa), the alcalde mayor of which has the duty of receiving them. The Indians haul them gratis, and at the proper time take their own in wagons to the Villa of Santa Fe.

— Fray Juan Sanz de Lezain, 1760

On May 29, 1760, I went to the pueblo of the Pecos Indians... I finished my visitation of that kingdom and I left for the outside world in July. During the month of September those Indians of Pecos arranged a function similar to my reception and to other ceremonies I celebrated there. The originator of this performance was one of the Indian principal men of that pueblo... He made himself a bishop, and, in order to present himself to his people as such, he designed and cut pontifical vestments...
Early nineteenth-century adarga, or bullhide shield. Collections of the Historical Society of New Mexico Museum of International Folk Art HSNM/MOFA (MNM 149 (09))

Chimayó with its Plaza del Cerro, built in 1730. Photo by Haddon-Branham, ca. 1960. (MNM 59115)
Map of New Mexico by Don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, 1750-1756. Oil on canvas original Collections of the Palace of the Governors.