

Acequia Madre

New Mexico's history of communal irrigation and flood-control agricultural practices dates back to ancestral Pueblo people of the Four Corners region circa 800 A.D. By the time that Spanish explorers arrived in the 1540's, both the Pueblo and Navajo people had developed irrigation practices. Historical records show that Acequia Madre was in use at the time of the Pueblo Revolt in 1680 and was likely created during Spanish occupation of Santa Fe, as early as 1610.

Spain, like New Mexico, has an arid climate and a long history of centralized, community-based irrigation practices. Water laws written by the Spanish recognized the primacy of communal rights to water resources, and the need to supply surrounding Pueblo communities with water for irrigation purposes as part of their allocation system.

Early settler communities were built adjacent to rivers with irrigation ditches in place often before houses were built. Homes were clustered together in small town settlements that were surrounded by cultivated fields and pasture land. The survival of these early settlements depended on the careful allocation of water resources by way of a system that operated with mandatory community responsibility for the maintenance of canals and ditches. This community-based network of irrigation ditches, or acequias, remained part of the culture of New Mexico until the arrival of the U.S. government in 1848.

In a paper, "Iberian Origins of New Mexico's Community Acequias," written by José A. Rivera of the University of New Mexico and Thomas F. Glick of Boston University, one of the first tasks undertaken by Juan de Oñate's expedition was to dig an irrigation ditch, "sufficient to irrigate the fields to be cultivated in the fertile valley between the two rivers." The ditch that Oñate established fed from the Chama River and predates the Acequia Madre; it is likely to be the first acequia built by Spanish colonists.

The Acequia Madre was considered public property by the Spanish government, thus responsible for its management and water apportion for domestic use and irrigation. According to the Urrutia map of 1760, a northern acequia followed the path of present-day Hillside Avenue in Santa Fe. Water for the Palace of the Governors came from two acequias flowing from springs located in the east; one flowed down present Palace Avenue in front of the building, the other irrigated gardens behind the Palace.

Acequia Madre receives water from the Santa Fe River above the intersection of Alameda Street and the river near the Los Cerros Reservoir. The acequia runs in a westerly direction, from higher elevation to the lower valley, flowing through the city for over 2 miles. The river flowed along Acequia Madre Street and then East Manhattan. Most of the acequia is stone-lined to prevent erosion and control flooding with a range of width from 4' to 5'. Although the acequia is not used regularly, it does carry water when the river is at a high level.

The historic route of the *Acequia Madre de Santa Fe* flowed downhill starting from the headgate east of the East Alameda Street bridge through the downtown neighborhood, into the Railyard Park, behind the New Mexico School for the Deaf and the Santa Fe Indian School, through the Casa Alegre neighborhood, past Maez and Harrison roads, to the Wofford property (Keith Wofford was a longtime president of the Santa Fe Basin Water Users Association), then to the Montoya's property located west of the former Agua Fría Elementary School campus.

In 2017, Phillip Bové, Acequia Madre Commissioner reported to the Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper, “We operate nearly seven miles of ditch, including the laterals like the Acequia Ranchitos and the Acequia de Analco. The Analco used to go to the Barrio de Analco; now it goes as far as Gerald Peters Gallery, which uses the water for irrigation. In 1907, the State Engineer’s office was created, and their job was to find out who owns what water and give them legal rights. In 1913, more than 300 people signed a petition to the State Engineer to do a hydro study of the Santa Fe River system and determine who had rights. That was finished in 1919, and was sent to the attorney general to start hearings on adjudication, but they never did it. Then in 1977, there was a new lawsuit, but in the meantime more than 90 percent of the water rights of individuals were gone and most of the people had given up.”

After the city water utility company brought the convenience of water to homes through modern infrastructure during the twentieth century, many residents gave up their rights to acequia water. Historically, water overflowed from the ditch; the volume and intensity of stormwater flowing from storm drains during intense flash flood events caused mass erosion of the acequias and was prone to harbor contaminants. Rock Gabions, induced waterfalls, and concrete lined storm drains were mitigation measures erected by the city along the Santa Fe River to slow down the flow of water and prevent erosion.

Through a permit issued by the state engineer, some of the Acequia Madre water rights are leased to individuals who want to use the water from the acequia but do not possess the water rights. Starting in 2012, individuals not using water along acequias were able to put it in a water-bank. According to Commissioner Bové, 43 *parciantes* held water rights holders on the Acequia Madre in 2017.

Presently, Acequia Madre is maintained by a mayordomo de la acequia and three commissioners who supervise its upkeep. All property owners along the ditch who still hold water rights, pay an annual fee and have a duty to help clean out the acequia annually each spring and during the irrigation season.

Sources:

1. [New Mexico Tells New Mexico History | History: The Politics of Water \(nmartmuseum.org\)](http://nmartmuseum.org)
2. [Acequia Madre of Santa Fe, Extends 2 miles west beginning near the Los Cerros Reservoir, Santa Fe, Santa Fe County, NM | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](http://loc.gov)
3. [Acequia Madre — Historic Santa Fe Foundation](http://historic-santa-fe.org)
4. [New Mexico Acequia Association protects our water \(lasacequias.org\)](http://lasacequias.org)
5. [Acequia Commission | New Mexico Department of Finance and Administration \(state.nm.us\)](http://state.nm.us)
6. [Rite of spring: Phillip Bové lectures on the Acequia Madre | Pasatiempo | santafenewmexican.com](http://santafenewmexican.com)
7. [Iberian Origins of New Mexico | PDF | New Spain | Spain \(scribd.com\)](http://scribd.com)

Photos: [Acequia Madre irrigation ditch, Santa Fe, New Mexico - Palace of the Governors Photo Archives Collection - CONTENTdm Title \(unm.edu\)](http://unm.edu)

[Old mill on Acequia Madre above Manhattan Street, Santa Fe, New Mexico - Palace of the Governors Photo Archives Collection - CONTENTdm Title \(unm.edu\)](http://unm.edu)

[Robert Moya at Acequia Madre, the irrigation ditch that dates to 1706, Santa Fe, New Mexico - Palace of the Governors Photo Archives Collection - CONTENTdm Title \(unm.edu\)](#)