

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro

The corridor between Mexico City and northern New Mexico was a route that was used to trade goods, share stories, cultural practices, and ideas with indigenous communities of the Southwest region for hundreds of years before the Spanish arrived. Across the arid environment of the state, finding water sources for herds of animals and large caravans of travelers was also a challenge, thus the trail closely followed the Rio Grande River which had a continuous flow from the Chama headwaters down to the Gulf of Mexico.

The trail route did not have a clear and defined path due to seasonal fluctuations of the Rio Grande. At times, the braided and free flowing river channel would be so deep and quickly flowing that it became impassable, therefore alternate routes were used. Wheels of wagons and carts would get stuck in the sandy washes of arroyos and rivers, or break after traveling over steep rocky terrain along the trail. Firewood, wildlife, and sources of food were also scarce along the route. Rattlesnakes, malnutrition, excessive heat, thirst, and attacks by Native American groups also made the passage perilous.

The route of Oñate's expedition in August of 1598, became known as, The Royal Road of the Interior Land, or El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro. Although the route was acknowledged for being the swiftest method of traveling north-south between the capitals of Mexico City and Santa Fe, the journey took months. This route was used by the Spanish, Mexican, and later Fort Selden soldiers who protected travelers along its way, well into the 1800s.

When Lieutenant Zebulon Pike left Santa Fé under Spanish escort on March 4, 1807, he followed a road which took the high ground between the Río de Santa Fé and Arroyo Hondo. Just past Agua Fria it forked, with both forks eventually reaching La Bajada and the Río Grande (Coues 1895:II.613-614). Years later, when Wislizenus prepared to leave Santa Fé for Chihuahua on 8 July 1846, he met the caravan that he was traveling with at their camp in Agua Fria. From there, the caravan took "the usual road, by Algodones, for the Río Grande" (Wislizenus 1848:29).

A new section of the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, located near the edge of the historic village of Agua Fria, opened June 2, 2018. This new section is located at Dead Dog Trailhead on Buckman Road, eight miles west of Highway 599 in Santa Fe, and is the longest stretch of publicly accessible, non-motorized trail along the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro connecting the Santa Fe River Greenway with the National Historic Trail.

Although the trail follows the historic route of the El Camino Real, it is currently utilized for hiking, biking, and horseback riding, and the surrounding landscape has changed over time. Residential housing and industrial developments are the primary land use for the area. A master plan for a mega housing development was approved by the City of Santa Fe in 1994. Since then, more than 2,300 homes have been built in the community of Tierra Contenta, with at least 40% of the dwelling units affordable to local home buyers and renters.

Throughout the area, many industrial storage facilities with heavy truck traffic create fugitive dust, which penetrates the airways with fine particulate matter that can cause negative health effects. Increased lead exposure from traffic along Highway 599 also impacts air quality. In 2021, many residents within the area expressed concerns about the disproportionate amount of polluting industries in low-wage communities of color, and opposed the consolidation of two asphalt plants located near

Santa Fe Regional Airport at the south end of town; calling the presence of the polluting plants “environmental racism”.

Communities of color in areas of increased air pollution are at greatest risk for adverse health impacts. Emerging research, including a study from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, found that breathing more polluted air over many years may itself worsen the effects of COVID-19. The study stated, “We know that air pollution can cause health problems, like heart attacks, strokes, diabetes and high blood pressure, that have been identified as the pre-existing medical conditions that raise the chances of death from COVID-19 infection”.

Another threat to the community is its close proximity to state highway New Mexico Road 599. The construction of this road occurred during the 1990s and was highly controversial. Most of the funding for the roadway was supplied by the United States Department of Energy. The primary use of the route was intended for vehicles transporting radioactive waste from Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) north of Santa Fe to the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) in southern New Mexico (near Carlsbad), so transport vehicles would not have to pass through the center of Santa Fe.

On February 14, 2014 a radioactive drum that traveled the Highway 599 route, exploded inside the WIPP facility resulting in its closure for three years. WIPP only accepted low-level waste such as plutonium-contaminated gloves and booties, but in the summer of 2021 changed its mission to now accept high-level concentrated plutonium. Nuclear waste is the most hazardous waste because it decays so slowly that it won't be safe for millions of years, and there is no safe way to store it. Only a few millionths of a gram of plutonium inhaled stays in the lung tissue continuously emitting radioactivity and has the potential to cause lung cancer.

Closure of WIPP was to occur in 2024, however a new plan would accept shipments of processed and diluted hazardous waste from LANL until the year 2080, and likely beyond with no set closure plan in place. According to the Dept. of Energy, the “dilute and dispose” method is a process that would see about 34 metric tons of plutonium presently held at the Pantex Plant in northern Texas and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina shipped to LANL for preparation and then back to Savannah River where it would be diluted before shipment and disposal at WIPP.

More frequent convoys of hazardous material are likely to occur with the new plan, which would increase traffic and the amount of highly radioactive nuclear weapons' waste that would travel through the Southside neighborhoods of Santa Fe. In November 2021, Santa Fe County Commissioner Anna Hansen told the Carlsbad Current Argus newspaper, “transporting the waste through New Mexico could put her community - and communities in 12 other states - at risk of exposure to dangerous radiation”. Hansen said the plan meant expanding the kinds and amount of nuclear waste allowed to be sent into New Mexico under the State's agreement with the DOE, a violation of federal and state law.

Sources of information:

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3. [Camino Real – New Mexico History.org](#)
4. [New Section of the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail Opens in Santa Fe, June 2nd. - National Trails Office - Regions 6, 7, 8 \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)
5. [El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail | Bureau of Land Management \(blm.gov\)](#)
6. [Southside residents oppose asphalt plant proposal - Albuquerque Journal \(abqjournal.com\)](#)
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8. [New Mexico Department of Transportation - NM 599 Final Report \(archive.org\)](#)
9. [Speak out on the future of WIPP | My View | santafenewmexican.com](#)
10. [Plan to send diluted plutonium to WIPP slammed before lawmakers \(currentargus.com\)](#)