

History of Diego de Vargas

Diego José de Vargas Zapata Luján Ponce de León y Contreras was born in Madrid, Spain, in 1643. His parents were of Spanish nobility: father, Alonso de Vargas and mother, María Margarita Contreras y Arráiz. Diego married Doña Beatriz Pimentel de Prado, the daughter of neighbors of the Vargas estate at Torrelaguna, a town about 30 miles north of Madrid. By 1670, the couple produced five children in six years.

In 1666, Diego learned of his father's death; Don Alonso de Vargas died at the age of 43, while serving at an imperial post in Guatemala. Although Diego de Vargas inherited his father's estate, he experienced financial problems and extreme debt due to a large family. In 1673, he embarked upon a political career as *justicia mayor*, or chief judge, in the jurisdiction of Teutilain, in what is now the Mexican state of Oaxaca.

In 1674, Diego de Vargas learned his wife died unexpectedly at home in Spain. His brother-in-law assumed guardianship of his children with continued financial support provided by Vargas. By 1679, six years after taking a political position in Mexico, Vargas accepted a higher position of Justicia mayor of Tlalpujahua, and had started a family with Nicolasa Rincón in Mexico City. They had at least three children, even though Vargas intended to marry someone of his same class when he returned to Spain.

In his application for the governorship of New Mexico, Vargas assured the Crown that he was capable of restoring Spanish control after three failed attempts to reoccupy the region made by other Spanish leaders. During this period, Spain was in competition with France and other European countries for land bases and riches, and thought it would be advantageous to retain the land base of New Spain. Although Vargas was granted governorship of New Mexico in 1688, he did not take office until 1691, leaving behind his family with Nicolasa in Mexico.

The claim that Don Diego de Vargas led a "bloodless" reconquest, reclaiming the capital of Santa Fe in New Mexico without the use of force and establishing peace in the region thereafter, is a false narrative. After spending 18 months in El Paso, Vargas took a fleet of 200 soldiers and Indian allies on an expedition to Santa Fe in August 1692. He found pueblos located along the Rio Grande abandoned, their people sought refuge in mountains and on top of mesa in anticipation of the Spanish return.

In a special presentation on October 22, 2014, Joseph (Woody) Aguilar spoke publicly about his research titled, "The Archaeology of the Pueblo Revolt at Tunyo, San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico" stating:

"Only recently have archeologists begun to examine the Pueblo Revolt era (AD 1680–1696), a critical time in the history of the American Southwest that links the pueblo past with that of the pueblo present. The post-1680 period in particular was a key formative time for the modern pueblos, as we know them today. The period was characterized by multiple population shifts and relocations in response to the anticipated return of the Spaniards. Archaeological investigations at Tunyo, an ancestral San Ildefonso home occupied during this period, allows for an examination of the anthropological phenomena of resistance through a study of material culture, ethno-historic records, and oral histories. Furthermore, collaboration with San Ildefonso will give insight into how the revolt is memorialized by, and characterized in the identities of, contemporary Pueblo peoples. This re-evaluation of the revolt adds new and essential dimensions to

our understanding of the narratives of Spanish conquest and the dynamics of colonialism and resistance among the Native peoples of the western hemisphere."

In mid-September, Vargas reached Santa Fe, which was occupied by an estimated 1,000 Pueblo people. According to some Pueblo accounts, Spanish soldiers aimed cannons at the Pueblo people and threatened to fire at them if they did not allow the reentry of the Spanish. After a brief verbal exchange, Pueblo leaders refused to submit to Spanish rule Vargas then threatened to cut off their water supply. After hours of more dialogue, Pueblo leaders demanded that certain specific settlers not be allowed to return to New Mexico, which Vargas consented to this request and further threatened that if the pueblos did not fully submit they would be attacked and only those that agreed to peace would be pardoned. After deliberation, two unarmed Pueblo men left the town peacefully, later the others followed.

The next day, September 14, 1692, Vargas, proclaimed victory in a self-congratulatory speech, accompanied by a formal ceremony of submission and absolution, reportedly performed in the plaza. The following day, friars accompanied him to perform Catholic baptisms on 122 Pueblo children that were born during the period of Spanish exile. Over the next month, Vargas and his force visited each of the 12 pueblos of northern New Mexico, issuing absolution and performing a ceremony of submission to Spanish rule.

Rumors of another revolt and discord among the pueblos ensued shortly thereafter, which prompted Vargas to return to El Paso in 1693 to bring back more soldiers and settlers that would battle the pueblos for control. Upon their return, a bloody battle occurred and the capital was taken. As a punitive action, Vargas ordered 70 of the Pueblo men who had fought in the battle to be killed. Women and children were distributed as servants to the colonists, and again the Spanish pillaged Pueblo stocks of corn and other supplies, to sustain their struggling colony, which fueled animosity and resentment among the Pueblo people.

During 1695 and early 1696, sickness and disease spread through the region, and an illness brought Vargas close to death. Another revolt occurred from June to November 1696, in which all but five of the pueblos fought against the colonists. From November until the onset of winter, Vargas led unrelenting military campaigns, during which time many Pueblos fled the province, some permanently, which effectively ended resistance by the Pueblos to Spanish political control in New Mexico.

Pedro Rodríguez Cubero became governor between 1697 and 1703, when Vargas was placed under house arrest for charges including the misuse of royal funds, provoking the Pueblo uprising, and favoritism toward some of the colonists. From 1697 until 1700, Vargas remained in Santa Fe until he was called to stand trial in Mexico City. His first son Juan Manuel traveled from Spain to see him there; it was the first time in 27 years, but Juan died on his journey home. The other children that Vargas had with Doña Beatriz Pimentel de Prado, never saw their father after he left Spain in 1673.

While in Mexico, the king of Spain bestowed Diego Vargas with the title, "Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas," and granted him a reward of 4,000 pesos for his battles against the Indians. In 1702, Vargas was cleared of charges and allowed to serve a second term as governor, arriving back in Santa Fe, November 1703.

Colonists and Pueblos complained to the Spanish government about repeated raids by parties of Apaches, and in the spring of 1704, Vargas launched a punitive campaign within the Rio Grande Valley.

Many soldiers fell ill and returned to the military headquarters located in the capital of Santa Fe. Governor Vargas also became gravely ill, most likely from dysentery, and was taken to a home of Fernando Durán de Chaves in Bernalillo, where he died, April 1, 1704, just seven days after arrival; he was 60 years old.

Diego de Vargas governed New Mexico from 1691 to 1697, and for four months between 1703 and 1704. He is most known for his leadership in the return of Spanish colonists to Santa Fe after a 12-year exile following the successful Pueblo revolt of 1680. The “bloodless reconquest” of 1692, led by Vargas, became the premise of an annual commemorative event during the Santa Fe Fiestas, every September.

Santa Fe Fiestas

During the 1990s, the Santa Fiesta Council, which organizes the annual event, was criticized for not including the threats upon Vargas’ arrival in the City’s reconquest event, nor the history of brutal wars over the course of years, which resulted in executions and enslavement of Pueblo Indians by the Spaniards.

The Fiesta de Santa Fe, is said to be the oldest continuous annual community celebration in the United States. In September 2015, Mayor Javier Gonzales’ written response to protests over the inaccurate reenactments of the “bloodless reconquest” during fiesta events said, “As proud as I was to participate in this important community tradition, I do believe it’s time that we be truthful about the actual events that occurred during the resettlement. Vargas by all accounts was a religious man of peace but force was still used to resettle Santa Fe and the indigenous people were forced to adopt Christianity as their religion. To imply something other sends the wrong message that the Spaniards were welcomed. We can be honest about what happened, and through truth and respect of historical events, become even more united.”

Controversy over the statue

On June 3, 2007, a bronze statue of Diego de Vargas was dedicated by the fraternal organization Caballeros de Vargas, that raised funds for its creation. The statue, modeled after a copy of a portrait of the Spanish general in the Palace of the Governors, was created by sculptor Donna Quasthoff and placed at the west end of Cathedral Park, next to the Basilica in August.

On June 15, 2020 the statue of Oñate in Alcalde, New Mexico was temporarily removed by Rio Arriba County workers at the direction of officials in order to protect it from damage or destruction, and placed in a safe location until a final decision on the statue's future is made.

During the summer of 2020, a movement to topple controversial monuments and remove statues that promoted slavery and genocidal practices, was seen across the United States and world-wide. In the early morning hours of June 18, 2020, a crane removed the Vargas statue from its concrete base in Cathedral Park, following an aborted attempt to remove the Plaza obelisk. Both the statue and Soldiers’ Monument were at risk of damage and continued vandalism, and were to be removed to a protected location by order of Mayor Alan Webber. After the statue’s removal, former Santa Fe mayoral candidate Ronald Trujillo expressed interest in the statue being donated back to the Caballeros De Vargas, so they could redisplay it on their own property. This request has been supported by multiple members of the city council.

While the Soldiers' Monument obelisk on the Plaza was pulled from its pedestal on Indigenous Peoples Day, October 12, 2020 after a three-day protest by Native American activists and their allies, the Vargas statue remains an ethical and controversial dilemma — its fate is currently being determined. Supporters of the statue's removal view its place in the city as public art that condones the actions of Vargas and a celebration of conquest and genocide. Others view the statue as an expression of pride in their Spanish and Hispanic heritage.

The name of Diego de Vargas is commemorated in other ways across the city of Santa Fe. The Oldest House and Museum is located on De Vargas Street, the De Vargas Center is an enclosed shopping center located at the north entrance of Santa Fe, and De Vargas Skateboard Park is situated downtown. A four-sided monument located in front of the Santa Fe Hilton hotel, also commemorates Diego de Vargas, Franciscan padres, La Conquistadora, and Pueblo Indians of New Mexico.

Sources:

1. [The Journals of Diego de Vargas | National Archives](#)
2. [Diego de Vargas – New Mexico History.org](#)
3. Video: [MIAC - Woody Aguilar Presents on San Ildefonso Archaeology - YouTube](#)
4. Weigle, Marta; Frances, Levine (editor). Telling New Mexico History. Museum of New Mexico Press; Illustrated edition (February 16, 2009), Chapter 16: Diego de Vargas, Reconqueror, Governor, by Rick Hendricks.
5. Chacón, Daniel J. (2020-06-23). "[De Vargas statue removed; overnight attempt to move Plaza obelisk fails](#)". *Santa Fe New Mexican*. [Archived](#) from the original on 2020-07-14. Retrieved 2020-06-23.
6. [List of monuments and memorials removed during the George Floyd protests - Wikipedia](#)
7. [If These Walls Could Talk, Hilton History.pdf \(connectionology.com\)](#)

Local stories:

1. [Fiesta lecture: The two families of de Vargas | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)
2. [De Vargas left record - Albuquerque Journal \(abqjournal.com\)](#)
3. [Debate heats up over annual Fiesta's one-sided story | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)
4. [New Mexico Grapples With Its Version of Confederate Tributes: A Celebration of Spanish Conquest - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)
5. [Fiesta drops divisive Entrada pageant in Santa Fe | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)
6. [De Vargas statue installed in park | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)

Videos:

1. [Folkstreams | Gathering Up Again: Fiesta in Santa Fe](#)
2. [History of The Santa Fe Fiestas Pt. 1 - YouTube](#)
3. [Uncovering/Recovering History - Part 2 - YouTube](#)
4. [Reconsidering La Entrada - YouTube](#)

La Conquistadora:

1. La Cofradia de La Conquistadora: The Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi: La Cofradia de La Conquistadora (cbsfa.org)
2. [History of La Conquistadora | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)

3. Houser, Sue. *La Conquistadora, The Story of the Oldest Statue of the Virgin Mary in the United States*. Sunstone Press; Illustrated edition (August 25, 2011)