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Racism as an Impediment to Statehood

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Celebrating
New Mexico Statehood



Racism As An Impediment To Statehood

Racism As An Impediment To Statehood

New Mexico spent an unusually long period as a territory, 62 years in total. For comparison, consider the length of territorial status for other states in the West: Colorado-15 years, Nevada-14 years, Utah-46 years, Montana-25 years, Wyoming-22 years, Idaho-44 years. A small population and an underdeveloped economy were two common reasons given at the time to explain the delay in admitting New Mexico. Although New Mexico did lag at times behind other territories in the growth of its population and economy, by the late nineteenth century it had more people and a larger economy than many older states had when they were admitted to statehood.

Why then did Congress not admit New Mexico as a state sooner? Many historians have identified racism as a key factor in the delay. In 1848 when the Mexican North was ceded to the United States, New Mexico contained the highest Mexican population in the whole region. Because the population grew slowly in the state, it maintained a majority of Hispano and Native American residents into the twentieth century. The territorial government was designed to handle this multi-lingual and multi-cultural reality. The legal system, for example, provided Spanish interpreters and published all laws in both English and Spanish. Members of Congress and the American population at large worried that such a “foreign” people would not make good American citizens. Senator C.K. Davis of Minnesota suggested so in an **1892 letter** (http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/Manuscripts&CISOPTR=6032&CISOBX=1&REC=6). Many agreed that New Mexico would have to wait until the population of Protestant, English-speaking “Americans” grew higher.

In our time, we see this reluctance to admit New Mexico as a state based on the language and culture of some of its residents as blatant discrimination. Nonetheless, it was a real problem for those who wished to make New Mexico a state. Some New Mexico politicians thought placing restrictions on the citizenship and voting rights of Hispanos and Native Americans was the best way to curry political favor and achieve statehood. That idea was suggested in a **letter** (http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/Manuscripts&CISOPTR=6033&CISOBX=1&REC=3) replying to Senator Davis.

Others, like Albuquerque attorney Frank Clancy speaking in a **newspaper interview** (http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/Manuscripts&CISOPTR=5819&CISOBX=1&REC=12), acknowledged the fact that many New Mexicans were illiterate or spoke only Spanish. However, he argued that, despite these shortcomings, the people of New Mexico were morally upright, law-abiding, and eager for education and democracy.

Former Territorial Governor L. Bradford Prince expressed his opinion in a **letter to the editor** (http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/nmsulib&CISOPTR=1367&CISOBX=1&REC=18) of the *New Mexican*. In it he pointed out that many of the worries about race came from outside of New Mexico and that all New Mexicans were American citizens (by being born in a U.S. territory) and should be treated as such.

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