

1-1-1948

## Missionary Aspects of the Founding of New Mexico

Agapito Rey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rey, Agapito. "Missionary Aspects of the Founding of New Mexico." *New Mexico Historical Review* 23, 1 (1948). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol23/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu), [lsloane@salud.unm.edu](mailto:lsloane@salud.unm.edu), [sarahrk@unm.edu](mailto:sarahrk@unm.edu).

## MISSIONARY ASPECTS OF THE FOUNDING OF NEW MEXICO

By AGAPITO REY \*

SOON AFTER Cortés established himself in Mexico City, many captains proceeded to explore and conquer the neighboring land. By 1531 Nuño de Gusmán had reached Sinaloa and founded the city of Culiacán. Founded about that time were also Compostela and the first Guadalajara. The brothers Juan and Diego de Alcaraz explored beyond Culiacán as far as the region of Petatlán. It was they who in 1536 welcomed Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions on their arrival in Mexico after one of the epic marches in history. Shipwrecked on the coast of Florida in the disastrous Narváez expedition of 1528, Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions wandered over the southwest for eight years before they reached Spanish settlements in Mexico. On his arrival at the Aztec capital Cabeza de Vaca reported his experiences to the viceroy before he set sail for Spain, where he gave an elaborate account of it all in his *Naufragios*. Cabeza de Vaca did not see the New Mexico pueblos, but he told of information he had received of the existence of rich Indian cities.

Cabeza de Vaca reached Mexico at a very opportune time. The first viceroy, Don Antonio de Mendoza, had arrived in his new post only the year before, 1535, eager to undertake big things. After some preliminary explorations, the viceroy decided to send someone into the northern regions to verify Cabeza de Vaca's information and the rumors it had originated.

A roving Franciscan father named Fray Marcos de Niza was living in Mexico at the time. The viceroy chose him to go to the distant north, giving him as companion and guide a young Moor named Estevanico, who had been shipwrecked with Cabeza de Vaca and had made his way to

---

\* Professor of History, Indiana University.

Mexico with him. They traveled north as far as the present Zuñi in southern New Mexico. There the Moor was killed by the Indians, and Fray Marcos after looking at the pueblo from a nearby hill returned to Mexico post haste. There he presented a written report or *Relación* to his superiors and the viceroy. A certified copy, dated September 2, 1539, was forwarded to Spain.<sup>1</sup>

Fray Marcos was an earnest pious friar, but too credulous of Indian yarns. Not satisfied with his written report he began to gloss in his conversations, and even from the pulpit, the fantastic riches of the Seven Cities of Cibola. Although his fanciful accounts raised some doubts in the minds of the intelligent, they were nevertheless enthusiastically repeated.

In a letter addressed by Bishop Juan de Zumárraga to his nephew on August 23, 1539, he writes: "The land is as you left it, peaceful. Fray Marcos has discovered a much greater one four hundred leagues beyond where Nuño de Guzmán is now, near the island visited by the Marquis [Cortés]. Many people are stirred to go there. The Marquis claims the right to the conquest and the viceroy is undertaking it for the Emperor. He wants to send ahead unarmed friars, and that the conquest be a Christian apostolic one and not a butchery. The people there are more advanced both in buildings, with many wood terraces, and in the clothes they wear. They have no idols other than the sun and the moon which they worship. They have only one wife, and if she dies they do not remarry. The father says he saw partridges and cattle [buffalo], and that he was told of camels and dromedaries and other cities bigger than this Mexico."<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Upon his return to Mexico, Fray Marcos retired to the convent of Xochimilco. In 1546 he wrote to Bishop Zumárraga asking for some wine to fortify his failing health due to "deficiency in blood and natural warmth." The bishop readily granted his request in any amount he needed (*Códice franciscano*, ed. García Icazbalceta, Mexico, 1889, p. 273).

A sympathetic narrative of Fray Marcos' hike to Cibola is given by Mildred Farnun in her *The Seven Golden Cities*, Milwaukee, 1943. An English translation of his report or *Relación* is found in G. P. Hammond and A. Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, Albuquerque, 1940, pp. 58-82.

2. *Códice franciscano*, p. 265.

On October 9, 1539, Father Gerónimo Ximénez writes: "Last September it was a year since a Franciscan friar, French by birth, left this city of Mexico in search of a land of which the governors of these regions had reports. He was unable to find it. He traveled five hundred leagues over settled land and finally after crossing a desert extending over more than sixty leagues he came upon a land inhabited by people highly developed who dwell in walled cities and big houses; who wear leather shoes and moccasins. Many of them wear silk clothes down to their feet. I will not write concerning the wealth of the land, because he tells so much it does not seem credible. The friar himself told me he saw a temple of their idols with the walls covered with precious stones inside and out. I believe he said emeralds. It is also reported there are camels and elephants farther inland. Men who moved by greed of gold wandered over this South sea claim they discovered close to that land very rich islands with people in the same high state of development."<sup>3</sup>

With such alluring reports it was not difficult to find people for an expedition to those rich lands. As indicated in the letter by Bishop Zumárraga and other contemporary documents, both Cortés and the viceroy claimed the right to explore and conquer the northern territories. The viceroy prevailed by virtue of authority granted to him from Spain. So in 1540 he sent an expedition under the leadership of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. This army made up of some four hundred Spaniards and about one thousand Indians marched to the Rio Grande valley, established its headquarters in the vicinity of present Bernalillo, and from there small parties explored the country in all directions. Coronado himself with twenty-five picked mounted men traveled as far as the Kansas plains in search of elusive fabulous Quivira. After two years of privations and troubles the army returned to Mexico. However, the friars who accompanied the expedition, fathers Fray Juan de Padilla and Fray Luis de Escalona, refused to go back and remained among the

---

3. *Cartas de religiosos*, ed. García Icazbalceta, Mexico, 1889, p. 188.

Indians to preach the gospel and to receive the palm of martyrdom soon after the soldiers left.<sup>4</sup>

Coronado did not succeed in establishing permanent colonies in New Mexico, as he had been instructed to do by the viceroy. The reasons for this failure are many. The main cause may be ascribed to false notions regarding the geography of the land. The prevailing belief then was that the country formed a narrow peninsula extending to China and that a land expedition could be easily supplied by sea. Coronado's heavy equipment, seeds and farming supplies, were sent by ship to the Gulf of California and up the Colorado river in a fleet under Hernando de Alarcón. Unable to establish contact with Coronado's forces, who were thirty days' travel away, Alarcón distributed his seed and chickens among the Yuma Indians, planted crosses among them and returned to Mexico.<sup>5</sup>

The real cause for the failure was the poverty of the land. The New Mexico Indians did not have enough food to support a large body of visitors, and the distance from Mexico was too great to permit quick relief. The Coronado expedition was useful in that it helped to dispel the myth of the Seven Cities of Cíbola and the fabulous riches of the land.

It established that the land was rich in human element; a fertile field for the missionary.

The first friars to come among the natives died in their noble attempt of converting them. Their martyrdom was a constant reminder and inspiration to their Franciscan brothers who wanted to follow in their footsteps. These pueblo Indians were not savages, but people who lived in well-organized communities, who farmed the land, wove fine blankets and made good pottery. The natives wore no gold or silver ornaments, a proof that these metals were not found among them. Their wealth consisted of not very valuable turquoises.

---

4. See Hammond and Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, pp. 10-11.

5. An English translation of Alarcón's report is found in Hammond and Rey, *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition*, pp. 124-155.

We have seen from Bishop Zumárraga's letter that Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza wanted the conquest of New Mexico to be apostolic and not a butchery. In his oral and written instructions to Coronado and Alarcón the viceroy insisted that he wanted a peaceful exploration and conquest of the vast Cibola land. Animated by this same apostolic spirit some friars wanted to reenter the land abandoned by Coronado. Fray Jacinto de San Francisco tried in 1559 to plant the gospel in those regions, according to a letter he addressed to Philip II in 1561, from which I cite the following passage:

"Thus, most Christian King and master, eager to see in my days another conversion similar to the one in this land, I set out from this city in the company of two friars, over two years ago, in search of New Mexico, of which there have been reports since we came to this land, although the truth has not been verified."

He said they traveled 150 leagues inland, but as the viceroy Don Luis de Velasco could not send them aid, the Provincial of the order did not allow them to go any farther. Fray Jacinto was anxious to go back to those lands. He said that all he needed to accomplish it was one hundred Chichimec friendly Indians and a Christian captain. With them: "Without wars or deaths or taking slaves a road could be opened from here to Santa Elena and to the new land reached by Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, and many leagues beyond, in a short time and at small cost, in which could be employed one or two thousand Franciscan friars in the conversion of the natives, and establish the truth regarding New Mexico."<sup>6</sup>

He suggested the sending of one hundred picked Spaniards under a captain. For such post he recommended Doctor Alonso de Zurita, judge in the Audiencia of Mexico. Friars and soldiers must all be paid by the king and must

6. *Códice franciscano*, pp. 222-228. This is one of the first instances we know of the use of the term "New Mexico" to designate the newly explored land. It is not used in the documents pertaining to the Coronado or Chamuscado expeditions. The term is used somewhat loosely in the early chronicles. The late L. B. Bloom, *N. M. Hist. Rev.*, XV, 102, believes the first use of the term "New Mexico" with the present connotation came with Francisco de Ibarra in 1562.

not go moved by greed of riches, "nor titles to ennoble their lineages, social climbing or worldly vanity."

The Franciscans never forgot that in those distant lands lay buried two of their brothers. The yearnings of the friars did not find satisfaction until 1580. At this time Fray Agustín Rodríguez obtained permission to send a small exploring expedition into New Mexico. The party, composed of nine soldiers and two friars, under the leadership of Francisco Sánchez Chamuscado, explored the various regions of New Mexico for over a year. But Chamuscado, who was an old man, became ill and died as the expedition was on its way back to Mexico, and he was buried by the roadside. Fray Francisco López and Fray Agustín R. Rodríguez refused to return with the party and remained among the pueblo Indians to continue with their apostolic labors. They were soon killed by the natives, as had been their predecessors in the Coronado expedition.<sup>7</sup>

With the purported pretext of rescuing these two friars, another expedition was sent to New Mexico in 1582 under Antonio de Espejo. Like the preceding one, this expedition was small, consisting of twelve soldiers and one friar, Fray Bernardino Beltrán.

They arrived too late to rescue the friars. Espejo's real aim in coming to New Mexico was to explore the country for valuable minerals. With this aim in mind, he brought along some experienced mining men. Ore samples from various localities were assayed with disappointing results. None of the samples showed any silver, and without some mineral wealth, it would prove difficult to attract colonists. Espejo had one ore sample assayed both in public and private. To the sample assayed in public, he added a certain amount of silver so the people would feel encouraged. Despite his failure to find rich metals, Espejo continued to seek the right to colonize New Mexico. He sailed for Spain hoping to overcome the resistance of the Spanish authorities. But he never

---

7. See G. P. Hammond and A. Rey, *The Gallegos' Relación of the Rodríguez Expedition*, Santa Fe, 1927.

reached Spain, as he became sick on the way and died at Havana.<sup>8</sup>

Several unauthorized incursions into New Mexico took place during the next few years following Espejo, while colonizing proposals were being made to the crown. The initiative now comes from "criollos" who have become wealthy and want to devote their riches and energy to undertakings that will bring them prestige and titles to grace their family names.

The successful aspirant was Don Juan de Oñate, grandson of Christobal de Oñate, founder of Guadalajara in 1542, who in the middle of the century moved to Zacatecas and became wealthy as a mining operator. In 1595 Don Juan de Oñate signed a contract with the crown for the conquest and colonization of New Mexico. After many long delays and inspections imposed by the Spanish authorities to see if he carried the goods stipulated in the contract, Don Juan finally was allowed to proceed. He arrived in New Mexico in the fall of 1598. This was no longer a military foray but a true colonizing expedition composed of whole families. In search of rich lands to establish new homes, they carried their belongings, farming implements, and cattle. There were also ten friars to start the preaching of the gospel among the natives.

The Spaniards established their first capital at San Juan in the fall of 1598; later they moved to San Gabriel; then in 1609 they founded Santa Fe, which has been the capital of New Mexico ever since.

No sooner had they established themselves in the new land when difficulties began, due mainly to the scarcity of provisions and the little promise of betterment. There was no wealth to reward the settlers already in the country or to attract others. It was apparent from the start that the undertaking was too big and too costly for a private enterprise. Without help from the royal treasury it would fail.

In 1599, Oñate made a trip to the Gulf of California in

---

8. The details may be found in G. P. Hammond and A. Rey, *Luzán's Narrative of the Espejo Expedition*, Quivira Society Publications, Vol. I.

the hope of finding pearls or some other riches among the Indians there. He heard some yarns of great wealth "farther on," but came back empty-handed. On the way they explored some mineral deposits of no particular value. Nevertheless, Oñate continued to send flattering reports to Mexico City, always telling how he had information of wealth and expected to locate it. But in Mexico City they already knew what to believe of all these florid accounts of riches in the new lands. The viceroy had ordered the gathering and study of all the accounts of the previous expeditions by Coronado, Rodríguez and Espejo and had a digest made of what they told concerning the resources of those lands. This study was embodied in a report, a copy of which the viceroy sent to Spain together with his opinion about maintaining the New Mexico colonies. The viceroy acknowledged that the land was poor and that there was no great hope of finding silver or other rich metals to attract colonizers. Just the same, he was of the opinion the colonies should be maintained, even if it was at the cost of the crown. He told the king he could not think of an undertaking that would bring greater benefits and honor to Spain and to the conscience of his majesty.<sup>9</sup>

When desertions and the demand of the governor to abandon the colonies threatened their existence, the friars insisted on their being maintained. The viceroy submitted the solution of this thorny problem to a committee composed of theologians and jurists. Their decision was that the colonies should be maintained even if only as missions. The Spaniards could not withdraw and abandon the Indians already converted to Christianity, since if left to themselves they would soon revert to their former idolatry. Besides, they would be in danger of vengeful persecution by the heathen Indians who had become their enemies. The alternative would be for the Spaniards to take along the Christianized Indians as they withdrew. This was not possible for practical reasons; besides, it would be cruel to remove

---

9. Such is the thought expressed in a letter to the king by Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco, dated March 7, 1608 (Archivo General de Indias, 58-3-16). A similar view is expressed by Fiscal Don Francisco de Leoz, who was asked to render an opinion on the matter (A. G. I., 58-5-12).

them from the land of their birth, where their forefathers lay. The decision of the friars prevailed, and the New Mexico colonies were continued through the aid of the royal treasury.<sup>10</sup> This aid came in yearly supply trains, which also were the means of contact with Mexico and Spain.

The colonies in New Mexico, like those of California later, were in reality missions. The new settlers devoted themselves to agriculture and cattle raising. The Indian pueblos continued to be for a long time the centers of population and commerce. There the friars built their churches and convents. The poverty of the land together with the enormous distance from Mexico hindered the development of profitable commerce and the raising of big cities. Santa Fe is the only original city established by the Spaniards that survived and prospered. The churches built by the early missionaries of New Mexico were quite humble when compared with the sumptuous temples we find everywhere in Mexico.

If material development suffers by comparison with Mexico, the missionary zeal displayed by the missionaries in New Mexico has not been surpassed anywhere. The period of greatest activity was between 1620 and 1640. In this period were built many of the best churches, and some attempts made to teach the natives. These churches were destroyed in the general Indian revolt of 1680; some were rebuilt later. Religious teaching in New Mexico was entirely in the hands of the Franciscan friars. No other religious order worked there until after the American occupation. Oñate tried to open New Mexico to all orders but without success.<sup>11</sup>

10. In a communication of September 13, 1608, the king advised the viceroy to submit the decision of abandoning New Mexico to a committee composed of judges from the audiencia, jurists, learned men from the university, and theologians, both secular and from the religious orders. The opinion was rendered in writing by Fray Francisco de Velasco on January 31, 1609. He sets forth seven reasons why New Mexico must not be abandoned. The main argument is that the Indians who in good faith have accepted Christianity cannot be abandoned lest they relapse into paganism (A. G. I., Audiencia de Mexico, legajo 123).

A similar opinion had already been rendered on January 31, 1602, by the Jesuits Pedro Diez, Pedro de Ortigossa, and Pedro Morales (A. G. I., Audiencia de Mexico, legajo 26).

11. Oñate wanted New Mexico open to friars of all orders who cared to labor there. The Council of the Indies authorized only Franciscans and barefooted Carmelites (A. G. I., 58-3-13).

The isolation of New Mexico which was such an obstacle to development was also a hindrance to the missionaries in matters of ecclesiastical administration. They were under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Zacatecas. In 1634 favorable action was taken both in Rome and Spain for the creation of a bishopric at Santa Fe. Unfortunately, the crown decided to consult the viceroy and the archbishop at Mexico City before reaching a final decision, and nothing was ever heard of the matter again.<sup>12</sup> It was only after New Mexico became a part of the United States that the bishopric of Santa Fe was established, with Father Lamy as its first bishop.

---

Some twenty years later the Dominicans also sought permission to extend their activities to New Mexico, but they were refused because of the opposition of the Franciscans. See F. W. Hodge, G. P. Hammond, and A. Rey, *Fray Alonso de Benavides' Memorial of 1634*, Albuquerque, 1945, pp. 131-132. Alonso de Oñate, brother of Don Juan, is very critical of the Franciscans because of their tendency to exclude native friars from important posts (A. G. L., 59-1-2).

12. See Hodge, Hammond, and Rey, *The Benavides' Memorial of 1634*, pp. 150-158.