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THE CHACÓN ECONOMIC REPORT OF 1803

MARC SIMMONS

A SURVEY HISTORY of New Mexico's colonial economy is yet to be written. That such an obvious need has not been filled can probably be attributed to the lack of detailed monographic studies treating the main branches of economic endeavor—farming, stock raising, cottage industries, mining, hunting, and trade. But until more is known about ways of making a living on the colonial New Mexican frontier, researchers concerned with the political, social, military, or religious history of the province will be laboring at a disadvantage. That is merely to say, of course, that economic matters impinge upon all other aspects of daily life.

A brief but highly useful report on the state of the provincial economy was prepared in 1803 by Governor Fernando de Chacón. On 14 February of that year, his immediate superior in Chihuahua, Commandant Gen. Nemesio Salcedo, had written a letter directing Chacón to assemble information on New Mexico's agriculture, industry, manual arts, and trade and forward it to the *consulado*, or merchant guild, of the Mexican port city of Veracruz. The task of compiling economic data from all the regions of the viceroyalty of New Spain originated with a royal order of Charles IV, dated 21 June 1802.¹

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, the royal government had enacted a series of new regulations and trade reforms in a bid to stimulate what had hitherto been a stagnant economy almost everywhere in Spanish America. Duties were lowered or abolished on certain products, innovations were made in agriculture and manufacturing, and a so-called "free-trade" system was established (in 1789), opening more ports to commerce. An important part of

the larger design to invigorate the Spanish economy was a continuing effort to collect and disseminate reliable data, both statistical and descriptive.²

In that undertaking the New World consulados assumed a major role. The consulado, whose origins traced back to the late Middle Ages in Spain, was in essence an association of merchants, in character and purposes not unlike a modern chamber of commerce. But it also acted as an arm of the government, collecting duties on trade, sponsoring construction of roads and bridges, and encouraging improvements in agriculture and industry, for example. Collection and publication of trade information was another of its chief functions.³

The first, and for long the only, consulado in New Spain was the chamber at Mexico City established in 1592. Over the years its membership became rich, powerful, and complacent, in short, a focus of conservatism. During the era of commercial reform, however, the king chartered in 1795 two new consulados for New Spain, one in Guadalajara and the other in Veracruz. The latter rapidly became an innovative and aggressive body, obliging the hidebound consulado of Mexico City to adopt a more progressive attitude.⁴ It was, no doubt, the Veracruz consulado's reputation for energy and efficiency that prompted the king to place in its hands the duty of gathering raw data on economic affairs from throughout New Spain.

In response to the royal order of 21 June 1802, mentioned above, that consulado solicited from the intendants and other district officials of the viceroyalty reports on local geography, administrative affairs, and the economy, "for the purpose of enlarging the understanding of social and economic conditions in the country as a way of devising means that ought to be applied in resolving problems and promoting agriculture, industry and commerce."⁵ This was the assignment Commandant Gen. Salcedo, early in 1803, passed on to New Mexico's Governor Chácon and to the other governors of the Internal Provinces.

Fernando de Chácon served an eleven-year tenure (1794-1805) as chief executive at Santa Fe. He was one in a string of able and forceful governors who managed New Mexico's political affairs in this period. His economic report, translated below, contains keen observations on provincial life and offers pointed suggestions for

improving those spheres of public and private endeavor that were unquestionably retarded. Some of the governor's words that show him impatient with the local people and their customs contain an echo of similar complaints made by several of his predecessors. Withal, the tone of Chacón's report confirms that he was dedicated to amelioration of the economic ills besetting New Mexico.⁶

His document was apparently prepared and dispatched promptly to the consulado in Veracruz. Soon afterward that body submitted another request, dated 18 April 1804, for an even more detailed survey of provincial economies. That too, together with a tabular questionnaire, was sent to Governor Chacón by Salcedo.⁷ But the governor's reply in this instance has disappeared from the Spanish Archives of New Mexico. Replies from Texas and from the Sonoran presidios of Tubac and Tucson, however, have been recently translated and published.⁸

Chacón's economic report of 1803 has long been known to and cited by authors dealing with colonial New Mexican subjects. Pedro Bautista Pino referred to it in his famous *Exposición* delivered to the Spanish Cortes in 1812.⁹ Bancroft in 1889 quoted several of its statements pertaining to New Mexico's export and import trade.¹⁰ And, more recently, the distinguished Mexican scholar Silvio Zavala summarized (in Spanish) much of the report in his *Los esclavos indios en Nueva España*.¹¹ Other authors who have had occasion to draw upon Chacón's work are David J. Weber, Max Moorhead, Carmen Espinosa, Ward Alan Minge, Oakah L. Jones, Jr. and Marc Simmons.

It is hoped that this first complete translation of the report, offered here, will make it accessible to an even larger circle of writers and students. Its merits will be readily apparent to those who have any passing acquaintance with colonial New Mexico.

THE REPORT

By virtue of what was called for by the Señor Commandant General of the Internal Provinces, Don Nemesio Salcedo, in an official letter of May 2 which [came] as a result of His Majesty's Royal Order of June 21, 1802, directing the following: that the Tribunal of the Consulado of Veracruz be provided with the

information it requests and needs regarding agriculture, industry, arts, and commerce of the various territories of this kingdom, in this case as pertains to the province of New Mexico, which presently is in my charge, the assignment is carried out in conformity with what I know about such matters.

The Province of New Mexico is the most northerly of all the Provincias Internas. It enjoys a very healthful climate with high mountains in the northern part and in the other directions. Also there are great open spaces, particularly to the east where the plains are expansive. Its sky is clear; the air pure and very cold in winter. Its fine and healthful waters that bathe it [come from] springs, some of them thermal, and different rivers among which the most important is the one called the Rio del Norte. Though it passes seventy leagues through the province, it does not carry much water upon crossing it as is believed. [New Mexico's] extent from north to south is sixty-seven leagues and from east to west eighty, leaving apart the Jurisdiction of El Paso which is separated from the interior of the province by a distance of ninety leagues. The major part of the population is located along the Rio del Norte, on one bank or the other, with the capital at the villa of Santa Fe situated in the center upon a little stream of no consequence and distant three leagues from the aforementioned Rio del Norte.

The number of souls of both sexes, including the Jurisdiction of El Paso del Norte, comes to, a little more or less, thirty-five thousand seven-hundred and fifty-one persons.

Agriculture in said Province does not appear in the best state owing to a lack of know-how. Nevertheless, the most common grains are sown, like wheat, corn and barley, and all kinds of vegetables in limited quantity, there being no practical way to export them to other provinces because of the great distances intervening between all of them. As a result the majority of its inhabitants are little dedicated to farming, in particular the Spaniards and *castas* who content themselves with sowing and cultivating only what is necessary for their sustenance. [Living] by luck through the scarce years, like the current one, they experience great need which is met by resort to wild plants, roots, milk, beef and mutton. As a consequence the development of these last two pursuits [that is, cattle and sheep raising] has not been more rapid. On the contrary the Pueblo Indians who compose a third of the population, develop large fields that are cultivated in common, so that they can take care of widows, orphans, the sick, the unemployed and those who are absent. By doing this and by reserving [part of] the harvest from one year to the next, they never feel the effects of hunger. Furthermore, they apply themselves to the cultivation of gardens, orchards and vineyards. In the same manner they are the ones best able to bring in a planting of cotton with which they make cloth (*mantas*) for their own use.

Tobacco is cultivated through careful handling by all the citizenry in general. But in spite of the effort required, one can profit nicely. The major part of the clergy smokes it or dips it as snuff.

In view of what has been said, it would be well if the superior authorities would vouchsafe to send to this Province, it being an easy matter and of small cost,

books on agriculture illustrating for the residents everything pertaining to planting; methods of controlling insects which greatly reduce the harvests; the method of planting trees and grafting; the treatment of different illnesses affecting cattle, sheep and horses; knowledge of the use of herbs; or other innumerable things, etc., all of which they have here only the remotest idea.

Although the Province possesses sufficient oxen for farming, what is most in abundance is sheep. Without counting what is consumed locally, there is exported to [Nueva] Vizcaya and the lesser [frontier] presidios from one year to the next from twenty-five to twenty-six thousand head of sheep. Of swine there exists no great number because the natives of this country are more accustomed to the use of fat from beef than from hogs, and there is no one dedicated to the manufacture of soap. The raising of horses and mules is little encouraged because of the continual raids by the enemy [Indians]. But annually more than 600 animals of each kind are brought in from Sonora and Vizcaya, not counting the herds of mustangs (*mesteñada*), which the citizenry are in the habit of hunting whenever they go out on the frontier.

At different points in the Province have been found deposits of minerals such as silver, lead, tin, and copper. The last is very abundant and seems to be of a rich grade. There is also another copper, less fine, that is blue and green, which can serve as paint, but it is not utilized. For the smelting of said metals, there is also much coal of the best quality, which I believe is not common in all of New Spain. And in case silver should ever be smelted by means of the mercury process, there will be found nearby copious salt deposits, that being one of the principal ingredients of said operation. Of alum, jet, and ochre, which are easily found in great abundance, no use is made on account of there being no one to identify and take possession of it. Neither [do they exploit] soapstone which is useful in extracting the grease from woolen cloth in fulling mills. Mica or gypsum (*yeso*) occurs, of fine quality and so transparent that in all the Province it covers windows in place of glass panes. It is also used to whitewash walls. The only use made of limestone is in the preparation of *nixtamal* (corn dough) through the hulling of corn kernels [by soaking in lime water]. The use of cement is not known to these people in the raising of their buildings, construction being performed with mud [mortar] and unfired adobe bricks.

With regard to arts and crafts it can be properly said that they do not exist in this Province because of the unavailability in those areas of apprenticeships, official examinations for the office of master, organized guilds and all the rest that is customary everywhere else. But by necessity and the natural ingenuity of these people, some trades are practiced, for example, those of wool weaver, shoemaker, carpenter, tailor, blacksmith, and mason, in all of which they are skilled. The first [that is, weavers] produce, on narrow loom combs, cloth for coats, serge, blankets, serapes, baize, sackcloth, and carpeting, which cloths they dye with indigo and brazilwood imported from outside, urine [as a mordant], and herbs that they are familiar with. From cotton they make a kind of cloth (*manta*) of twisted cord more closely woven and stronger than that from Puebla. Textiles for altar cloths and

stockings [are also made]. Although the present government has furnished the said wool weavers with design plans for fulling devices and presses, it has not been practical to build either of these machines, the excuse being they cannot stand the cost. And for the same reason, or on account of laziness, carpenters will not use the two-man frame pit saw (*sierra bracera*), and as a result there is much wasting of wood.

Besides wool, of which there is an unlimited abundance in the Province, skins of rabbit, of several kinds of squirrel, and of beaver, for making hats, are also common. But this trade is not practiced because ability and inclination are lacking, and the same is true for the trades of tanner, leather dresser, saddler and others which make use of all kinds of pelts and hides. These last are found in great numbers and of many kinds, to wit: elk, common deer, bucks, wild sheep, buffalo, bear, mountain lion, wolf, fox, and coyote.

The abundance of copper, which can be extracted with little work, offers opportunities for the occupation of coppersmith, if there were artisans of this class and someone who knew how to smelt said metal. The trade of potter which produces ordinary wares as well as jars, crocks, cooking pots, flat bowls, etc., is pursued by the Pueblo Indians who make everything patiently by hand, instead of using a wheel, which is their way. Afterwards they fire it with manure and without using anything for glaze because they are not familiar with this material.

Commerce with the outside which this Province undertakes once each year with Sonora, Vizcaya, and Coahuila consists in oxen, sheep, woolen textiles, and some raw cotton, hides, piñons, which being much esteemed for their quality are easily sold, and wines that until now have only been produced in the Jurisdiction of El Paso del Norte. However, in the interior of the Province they are propagating the planting of vineyards and the production of some wine and brandy. Still it will be quite some time before the demand will be such that there is anything like common consumption. We are able to reckon the value of all the aforesaid at 140,000 pesos [annually].

The products mentioned are carried out by mule trains accompanied by 500 men, some of whom are merchants and others packers. They depart in the month of November with a military escort. They remain together as far as the town of El Paso, at which point they divide. About a third of them head for Sonora, Coahuila, and several of the lesser presidios. The remainder continue to Vizcaya with some of them stretching the journey on to the capital of Durango and its environs. Those stopping in the villa of Chihuahua conduct business to provision themselves with necessities.

The products brought back consist of horses, mules, linen goods, cotton textiles of all kinds, without excluding first and second grade cloths and [those from] Querétaro, baize, serge, scarlet, *chalonas*, silk cloths with both twisted and loose [threads], chocolate, sugar loaves, soap, rice, iron in merchant bars and plate, general hardware, spices, hats, leather goods of all sorts, pelts, tanned leather, paper, drugs, and some money, all of which assortment not only is sufficient to

meet the expectations of the Province, but many of the aforementioned products are left over from one year to the next.

The internal commerce [of New Mexico] is in the hands of twelve or fourteen [local] merchants who are neither properly licensed nor well versed in business matters. Of these, only two or three are operating with their own capital. Among the rest everything they handle or bring into the Province is on credit. And they distribute and sell in the same way from one year to the next, with the result that only once a year do they get money in hand. And there are many losses and arrears in the collection of credit accounts, since these are regularly extended to the poorest people and at excessive rates. All of this is exacerbated by the lack of money in circulation which has begun to be experienced over the last three years. The situation still affects many [people] and in particular the Indians who do not have much use for it [that is, money] anyway.

The rest of the citizenry are so many petty merchants who are continuously dealing and bartering with whatever products they have at hand. Territorial magistrates are forced to mediate these exchanges [which are attended by] malicious and deceitful behavior and bad faith. Only does formality prevail in the trading carried on with the nomad Indians (*Naciones gentiles*), that being a give-and-take business conducted in sign language.

The products traded by the Spaniards to said nomad Indians are horses, saddlebags, *anqueras* (leather skirt covering the horse's rump), bits, hatchets, war axes, lances, knives, scissors, scarlet cloth, serapes, cloaks, woolens, indigo, vermilion, mirrors, [illegible interlinear word], loaf sugar, native tobacco, corn in flour and on the ear, bread, and green or dried fruit. In exchange, the nomads give Indian captives of both sexes, mules, moccasins, colts, mustangs, all kinds of hides and buffalo meat. The result is that the balance of the trade between the two parties always comes out in favor of the Spaniards.

The common woods in this Province are cottonwood, oak, and pine, the last occurring in great abundance. Its extraction by means of rafts on the Rio del Norte is not difficult. But these people do not know of any place or destination where they can take it and by which they can profit. For that reason no one is engaged in this branch of industry.

The description of New Mexico that I have given to this point, although succinct owing to the fact that my instructions did not require me to delve deeper and to speak authoritatively about all matters, perhaps will suffice to give a small idea [of the fact] that the Province is not really so poor as is [generally] supposed, and that its [seemingly] natural decadence and backwardness is traceable to the lack of development and want of formal knowledge in agriculture, commerce, and the manual arts. Through the charity of the King, [New Mexico] enjoys a ten year exemption from paying the sales tax (*alcabala*) with the result that not only has it failed to contribute anything to the Royal Treasury since the time of the Reconquest, but it annually costs His Majesty from 54 to 55 thousand pesos in stipends for the missionaries, salaries of the governor and lieutenant-governor, soldiers' pay, and annuities for the allied Indian nations.

Another clear proof that the Province is not poor can be found in the excessive display of luxuries, as compared to the rest of the Internal Provinces. They [the New Mexicans] don't experience famines, even though they get no relief aid from elsewhere, because they are able to augment their diet with an abundance of meat in those years when there is scarcity of grains and vegetables. One sees [here] no nakedness or begging. But in spite of the opulence, [the Province] will continue to decay by necessity, if you overload it with taxes before extending assistance to those [aforementioned] areas where it is deficient, including the discovery and processing of its metals.

Santa Fe, New Mexico
28th August of 1803

NOTES

1. Commandant Gen. Nemesio Salcedo to Governor Fernando de Chácon, Chihuahua, 14 February 1803, doc. no. 2, 1644, Spanish Archives of New Mexico (SANM), State Records Center and Archives (SRCA), Santa Fe.

2. For example, see Enrique Florescano and Isabel Gil, comps., *Descripciones económicas generales de Nueva España, 1784-1817* (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1973).

3. Herbert Ingram Priestly, *José de Gálvez, Visitor-General of New Spain (1765-1771)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1916), pp. 70-74. See also Robert S. Smith, *The Spanish Guild Merchant, A History of the Consulado, 1250-1700* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940).

4. Florescano and Gil, *Descripciones económicas*, p. 227; and Colin M. MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Forging of the Cosmic Race, A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 273.

5. Robert S. Smith, "José María Quiros: 'Balanza del Comercio Marítimo de Veracruz' e Ideas Económicas," *El Trimestre Económico* 13 (October 1947): 692.

6. Report of Governor Fernando de Chácon, Santa Fe, 28 August 1803, doc. no. 2, 1670a, SANM, SRCA.

7. Tabular form of the consulado, Veracruz, 18 April 1804, doc. no. 2, 1718, SANM; and Commandant General Nemesio Salcedo to Governor Fernando de Chácon, Chihuahua, 18 April 1804, doc. no. 2, 1728, SANM.

8. C. Norman Guice, trans., "Texas in 1804," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 59 (January 1955): 47; and Kieran McCarty, ed. and trans., *Desert Documentary, The Spanish Years, 1767-1821* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1976), pp. 82-92.

9. H. Bailey Carroll and J. Villasana Haggard, eds. and trans., *Three New Mexico Chronicles* (Albuquerque: Quivira Society, 1942), p. 27.

10. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530-1888* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1889), p. 301n.

11. Silvio Zavala, *Los esclavos indios en Nueva España* (México: El Colegio Nacional, 1967), pp. 298-300.