

7-1-1990

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Chavez, Thomas E.. "Heartland of the Spanish Frontier: A Review Essay." *New Mexico Historical Review* 65, 3 (1990). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol65/iss3/4>

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Heartland of the Spanish Frontier: A Review Essay

THOMAS E. CHÁVEZ

No greater testimonial can be made to the fact that Spanish borderlands, southwestern, or even western history includes northern Mexico than this history of Nueva Vizcaya.¹ From its earliest explorations and subsequent settlements in the sixteenth century until Mexican independence in 1821, Nueva Vizcaya was the "heartland" of New Spain's northern frontier. A person unfamiliar with borderlands history can appreciate the significance of Nueva Vizcaya if the province is viewed in the way that the state of Missouri has been in the narrative of western migration of the United States. Like Missouri, Nueva Vizcaya became a "gateway" to the uncharted beyond, in this case the north, which for centuries was New Spain's frontier. All of the immigrants, explorers, missionaries, with their laws, customs, and attitudes traversed through or began in Nueva Vizcaya. Just as the Santa Fe Trail later connected Missouri to New Mexico, the Chihuahua Trail or Camino

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1. *Nueva Vizcaya: Heartland of the Spanish Frontier* by Oakah L. Jones, Jr. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988. xx + 342 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50.)



Oakah Jones is professor of history in Purdue University and the author of numerous books on the borderlands.

Real earlier connected Nueva Vizcaya to the same land. Other longer roads connected more distant places such as La Pimería Alta (northern Sonora and southern Arizona), Texas, and, very late chronologically, to the newly founded Alta California.

By Mexican independence, Nueva Vizcaya was larger than many Latin American countries. Varying in size and slightly different in its civil and ecclesiastical boundaries, the province eventually lost its name and was divided into the present Mexican states of Chihuahua and Durango. Because of its location and size in north-central Mexico, its history is a study of the frontier.

This book is the first general history of Nueva Vizcaya written in English. Other historians on both sides of the border have written about various aspects or personalities of Nueva Vizcaya's historical experience. Hubert Howe Bancroft researched and wrote about Nueva Vizcaya in separate chapters in his two volume study entitled *History of North Mexican States and Texas* published in the 1880s. Subsequent research has dated his important beginning effort. A number of later books focused on various regions of the province. José Ignacio Gallegos' two books, *Historia de Durango, 1563-1910* and *Durango Colonial, 1563-1821*, are major contributions to the study of the southern part of the

province and the city of Durango. Atanasio G. Saravia also focused his effort upon Durango in his *Apuntes para la historia de la Nueva Vizcaya*. Other books like Francisco R. Almada's *Resumen de historia del estado de Chihuahua* and Florence C. Lister and Robert A. Lister's *Chihuahua: Storehouse of Storms* emphasize the history of the province's most famous northern city. All these works provide invaluable information but, like most regional histories, a larger context is needed for better comprehension. This is especially so for Nueva Vizcaya because of its crucial importance to the exploration and settlement of the rest of the northern frontier.

A useful and rare resource of Nueva Vizcaya's administrative problems with Indians and the intricacies of maintaining a proper military force is Charles W. Hackett's *Historical Documents Relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, and Approaches Thereto, to 1773*. The scarcity of this three volume compilation and translation of documents published from 1923 to 1937 almost renders it inaccessible. Its use is limited, too, because it is not a narrative history for the casual reader but a compilation of documents through which the reader must comb to gather information about Nueva Vizcaya. Another limitation of Hackett's work is that the focus of the book finishes, as the title indicates, half a century before Spanish authority ended. More significantly, the book concludes before any consideration can be given to the Bourbon Reforms which reorganized the whole northern frontier and had a significant impact on Nueva Vizcaya.

Among the more recent contributions to Nueva Vizcaya's historiography, Peter Gerhard's 1981 history entitled *The Northern Frontier of New Spain* is the best. Although Gerhard wrote an overview of the whole northern frontier, he devoted a very lucid and encompassing eighty pages to Nueva Vizcaya. The reader will receive a good introduction to the province's government, social systems, demographics, religious affairs, and historical sources. Gerhard's contribution, based on primary and secondary sources, is a perfect primer for Oakah Jones' book. The reader also might want to thumb through John Francis Bannon's general text, *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513-1821*, published in 1970, which touches upon Nueva Vizcaya in various chapters.

Some more recent publications, like their predecessors, shed more light on particular aspects of Nueva Vizcaya. Historian Alfred B. Thomas has written two books that are pertinent to the topic. His earlier work, *Teodoro de Croix and the Northern Frontier of New Spain, 1776-1783*, essentially fills in where Hackett's compilation ended. Thomas' second book entitled *Tierra Adentro: Settlement and Society in Colonial Durango*

(1982) improves upon Gallegos' publications but still is limited geographically. A number of Mexican historians have mirrored their North American counterparts by writing about aspects limited to particular communities, topics, or periods of time. Only one Spanish historian has written about Nueva Vizcaya and the rest of the frontier provinces. Luis Navarro Garcia published his monumental work entitled *Don José de Gálvez y la comandancia general de las provincias internas del norte de Nueva España* in 1964. Although Navarro's book is impressive and based on primary sources available in Spain, he concentrated on a history of northern New Spain during the last half of the eighteenth century.

In an excellent preface and bibliography, Professor Jones delves into greater detail about the many historians who have contributed to the body of knowledge that as a whole, begins to focus a good picture of what surely was New Spain's most valuable frontier possession. After reading this history of Nueva Vizcaya the reader will enjoy reading Philip Wayne Powell's classic *Mexico's Miguel Caldera: The Taming of America's First Frontier (1548-1597)* that loosely uses a biographical sketch to convey an early history of the northern frontier. The book reads like a novel and is even more informative in light of Jones' book.

Significantly, a major contribution of this book is that it forces readers of English to look at an American Southwest including the northern half of present-day Mexico. The reader also must look at the area from the south to the north. Both of these poignant facts are accomplishments worth noting, for most borderlands histories still fall short in properly creating this perspective. The histories give the correct facts but usually convey a north to south perspective. Without directly making the point, the author subtly and firmly affixes this correct historical interpretation in the mind of the reader. The author's accomplishment is as much an artistic achievement in the use of his writing as a technical success in the discipline of his profession. Armed with the basic knowledge of these two obvious, but overlooked, precepts, perhaps borderlands history will take on more significance than a story of relative facts about which Europeans initially explored and settled, or had the first Thanksgiving (as was recently and wonderfully commemorated in El Paso) in the present-day United States. With a proper perspective maybe our countries' respective politicians and citizens will not be so surprised over the "recent" phenomena of northward migration into the southwestern United States from northern Mexico.

Ironically, the timing of this publication is opportune, for the recent publication of *Hispanic Arizona, 1536-1856* by James Officer chronicles the settlement and history of Pimería Alta, the impetus of which came

from Nueva Vizcaya. This book and Jones' tome are perfect companions and, as such, should indicate to all people interested in the history of borderlands that all these areas with their local geographical identities are important pieces to the puzzle of the history of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico.

Officer notes that once historians and their readers cut through all the "nonsense" of ancient cities, golden missions, lost treasure, and the common stereotypes indiscriminantly passed from region to region, the fact that each of the regions along the international border has a "distinct" history that has given it a flavor all its own will become obvious. All the distinct regions are parts that make up the whole picture. Nueva Vizcaya is a common denominator. Officer's book clearly demonstrates the facts of distinctness and historical connections. This message is especially obvious when the work of Jones and Officer are considered together.

An additional facet to Jones' study of Nueva Vizcaya is its role in establishing frontier communities within and beyond its borders. Only after this early frontier region's southern part became somewhat settled did the northern communities like Santa Barbara (1567), Parral (1631), and Chihuahua (1709) become established. Then places like New Mexico, Sonora, the northern part of which became Arizona, and Sinaloa received attention. The early settlement of New Mexico (1598) predated the many northern Nueva Vizcaya communities. Indeed, Nueva Vizcaya, for a majority of its history, proved to be a place where a person became acclimated to frontier living before moving beyond the region.

Natural wealth was the motive for settling in Nueva Vizcaya. The story of northern Mexico's mining frontier is closely attached to Indian relations. Discoveries of silver resulted in instant communities which, in turn, precipitated local Indian resistance. Among many themes, the history of Indian relations is most poignant, for the author is meticulous in differentiating between Indian groups while delineating when, why, and how Spanish authorities reacted to various forms of Indian responses to the new European culture.

For a couple of reasons, the eighteenth century is emphasized. First, many eyewitness descriptions of the province are available. Probably the most important account is a detailed two volume description of the overall viceroyalty of New Spain. Book six of the second volume is devoted to the "settlements, presidios, and missions" of the Bishopric of Durango. Prepared by José Antonio de Villaseñor y Sánchez in 1742, this now very rare set of books entitled *Teatro Americano: Descripción General de los Reynos y Provincias de la Nueva España y sus Jurisdicciones* is the primary source for Nueva Vizcaya in the first half of the eighteenth

century. This is especially important because of the proliferation of inspections and subsequent accounts when the church and state became more interested in the northern frontier in the last half of the century.

Because of Spain's King Carlos III's noteworthy reforms, a lot of research has been done on the northern frontier during his reign. His reforms included secularization of the church that culminated with expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries in 1767, the inspection and realignment of the frontier system under the *reglamento* of 1772 and, finally, the creation of the Commandancy General of the Internal Provinces of the North in 1776. This last reform organized the whole northern frontier into an intendency system that circumvented the Viceroy's authority. José de Gálvez, the subject of Navarro's work, was the King's primary mover of these reforms.

Nueva Vizcaya became, as the first commandant general Teodoro de Croix called the province, "the mother and center" of the Internal Provinces. With direct access to Spain, the continued subversion of church to state, and Spain's concern for a northern defense, the old province received unprecedented attention and an infusion of money. The southern settlements of the "Intendancy" had stabilized, while the northern districts still qualified as frontier communities. Apache depredations were a big problem, perhaps surpassed only by distance and harsh climate. Reflecting these internal differences, this "heartland" became a transition area between the older settled regions to the south and the remote untamed north.

This book delves into demographics and the social milieu of the people who lived in Nueva Vizcaya. Agriculture in the south and mining in the north are described. While desirable, a more detailed look at society as it evolved through the years would have made this book too extensive. Perhaps another tome is in process, begun in effect by the current book. An excellent contribution on mining is Peter J. Bakewell's *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico-Zacatecas, 1546-1700* published in 1971. Clearly, like many histories that "lead the way," several new avenues for further research have become obvious and that, in itself, is a contribution.

Throughout almost three centuries of existence under Spanish administration, Nueva Vizcaya served as the basis or "leading edge" of further Spanish frontier expansion and experience. To study and know the colonial history of Nueva Vizcaya is to have an improved comprehension of Spain's extensive northern frontier of New Spain and this understanding is integral for a complete view of North American history. In this sense, the work of historians like Oakah Jones will

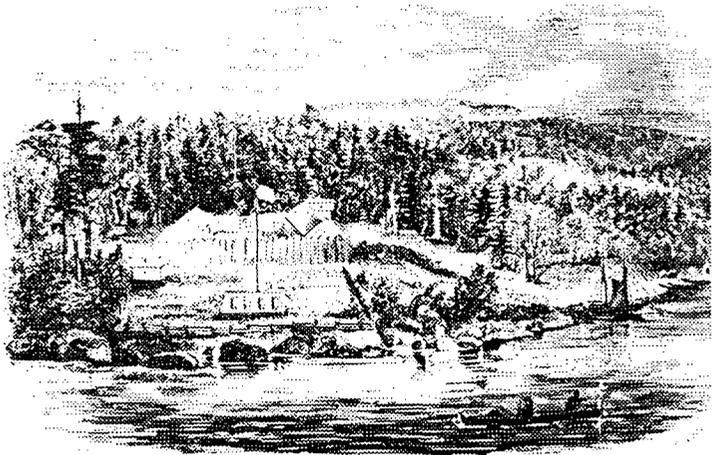
someday force "American" historians to grasp the reality that borderlands history is an important part of United States history.

Maps, strategically placed at the front of the book and a chronological chart in the back, help keep the reader focused. The footnotes supplement the text with good explanations as well as documentation. Indeed, the research is impressive and hints that there is more to come. Some printing problems are minor nuisances which are easily overlooked.

A better explanation of the ongoing jurisdictional dispute of Nombre de Dios would have pleased this reviewer. The site was originally settled and administered as a Franciscan mission from the neighboring "kingdom" of Nueva Galicia. The subsequent *villa* was established from Nueva Vizcaya by Francisco de Ibarra in 1563. A debate over which province should administer the town flared up. To settle the matter, the viceroy took over the administration of Nombre de Dios in 1569 and directly ruled the community until the eighteenth century when it was given to Nueva Vizcaya. The jurisdictional dispute is curious, for the community was the focal point of administrative confrontations for most of the colonial period.

Good historians will pique the curiosity of their audiences. Oakah Jones' book successfully entices the reader to look for more information. The case of Nombre de Dios is one of many instances where the author whets the reader's appetite for more. This fresh look at an important topic is a major contribution to North American history and cannot be overlooked.

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