

12-1-1940

Where is the Oldest University in the New World?

Donald Brand

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nm_anthropologist

Recommended Citation

Brand, Donald. "Where is the Oldest University in the New World?." *New Mexico Anthropologist* 4, 4 (1940): 61-63.
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nm_anthropologist/vol4/iss4/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Anthropologist by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

WHERE IS THE OLDEST UNIVERSITY IN THE NEW WORLD?

DONALD D. BRAND

The two most commonly encountered candidates for the position of oldest institution of higher learning in the New World are the universities of Mexico and San Marcos de Lima. Before attempting to decide between these two, we must define some terms and we should survey the field for other possible candidates.

In sixteenth century Spanish *escuela* was seldom more than an elementary or secondary school; a *colegio* was normally a preparatory school, but could be a normal school, or even *college* in the modern sense of an institution of higher learning with limited offerings; and an *universidad* was definitely an institution of higher learning, qualified to grant degrees in various subjects according to the faculties represented. An institution in Spanish America was *real* if a royal cedula had approved its charter or had accepted the responsibility of endowment or upkeep (*patronato*). An institution became *pontificia* if a pontifical or *papal* bull had approved it or provided for its maintenance. Institutions of learning in the New World of the sixteenth century, although often endowed and supported by private parties, as well as by king, pope, municipality, or religious order, were invariably staffed by priests and friars since education was synonymous with religious education.

The earliest educational institution in the New World was the elementary school for Indians founded by the Franciscan friar Pedro de Gante in 1523 at Texcoco, Mexico. This was followed by other schools including the *Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco*, in the Valley of México (suggested by Bishop Sebastian Ramirez de Fuen Leal in a letter of 1533 to Charles V; and founded by the viceroy Mendoza, and Zumárraga, first bishop of Mexico), which was probably chartered or approved in 1534 and opened in 1536. In any case, the College of Santa Cruz was the first institution of higher learning to be chartered and to actually open in the New World. In point of date of charter, this college was succeeded by [2] the *Universidad Pontificia de Santo Tomás de Santo Domingo* (established by papal bull of Paul III in 1538), which did not open until 1558; [3] the *Colegio de San Juan Bautista de Tiripitio* (often incorrectly called Universidad de Tiripitio), charter date unknown but founded by the Augustinian friar Alonso de la Vera Cruz, in 1540, at Tiripitio in Michoacán, México; [4] the *Real Colegio de San Nicolás Obispo de Mira*, which was founded by Don Vasco de Quiroga, first bishop of Michoacán, in Patzcuaro in 1540, but whose *patronato* was not accepted by the emperor Charles V until May of 1543; [5] the *Colegio de San Juan de Letrán*, in the Valley of Mexico, founded by Mendoza and Zumárraga for the education of mestizos about 1547; [6] the *Universidad Mayor de Lima* (which became the Universidad Mayor de San Marcos de Lima in 1574), royal charter from Charles V

published May 12, 1551, but papal charter not issued until 1571; and [7] the *Real y Pontificia Universidad de México*, whose royal cedula of charter and endowment was made public in September of 1551, but whose papal charter was not obtained until 1595.

Of the above listed institutions, Santa Cruz (domicile of the great priest-ethnologist Sahagun, and of the philologist and grammarian Olmos) and Santo Domingo (called the Athens of America) lasted into the nineteenth century; Tiripitio and San Juan de Letrán closed their doors earlier (Tiripitio was moved to Mexico City, and reputedly merged with the University); and only San Nicolás, San Marcos de Lima, and México have persisted to this day. Of these three, San Nicolas is oldest actually and by date of charter. In inception San Nicolás was only a *colegio* for the preparation of priests, but neither the University of Mexico nor the University of Lima had much more than a faculty of theology at the start. San Nicolas changed both name and location during its four centuries of existence, and had periods of closure—but all this was equally true of the two great viceregal universities.

When Bishop Quiroga moved the Cathedral of Michoacán from Tzintzuntzan to Pátzcuaro in 1540 he founded the *Colegio de San Nicolás Obispo de Mira*. Through the influence of Quiroga and that of his friend the great viceroy Mendoza, the king of Spain accepted the *patronato* by cedula of May 1, 1543, and the college became royal in name. In 1580 the cathedral was moved from Pátzcuaro to Valladolid (now Morelia—1834—after the liberator Morelos, who was born there and attended the College of San Nicolás), where in October of 1580 it was united with the *Colegio de San Miguel de Valladolid*, which had been founded in 1566 or earlier by the Franciscan friar Juan de San Miguel. As time progressed through the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, courses in arts, philosophy, law, and medicine were added to those offered by the faculty of theology, and the college became a university in all but name. However, because of the local opinion that the college was the oldest in the New World, by 1790 the name had become *Real y Primitivo Colegio de San Nicolás*. Towards the end of the 18th century Padre Hidalgo, often termed the Washington of México, was rector of San Nicolás, which after the Revolution from Spain became a national instead of royal college, and which in January of 1847 became the *Colegio Primitivo y Nacional de San Nicolás de Hidalgo*. Somewhat later San Nicolás became the core and foundation of the *Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo*, which thus can claim origin four hundred years ago.

Between the Universities of Lima and Mexico, we find that Lima was chartered a few months earlier, but Mexico opened its doors in 1553 while Lima did not actually commence as an university until 1571. Lima, however, had been operating for several years as a Dominican seminary in the convent of San Marcos, until ordered secularized by Philip II in December of 1571. It was not separated

from the Dominican monastery until 1575. The *Real y Pontificia Universidad de Mexico* lasted without much interruption until the period of the French Intervention. Then it was closed for many years; became the *Universidad Nacional de México* in 1910; and in 1929 was chartered as the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. The University of Lima became the *Universidad Mayor de San Marcos de Lima* in 1574, and has continued ever since, with major interruptions only during the War for Independence and again just a few years ago.

In final summary one can say that, of the New World institutions of higher learning, the College of Santa Cruz was first founded and opened; the University of Michoacán has had the longest history; the University of Lima probably has been open the most years, has been at her present site longest, and has retained present form of name longest; and the University of México has had the greatest number of students, graduates, and faculty members and was the first to actually open of the formally constituted universities. The most famous internationally of old New World institutions have been: Santo Domingo (1538, 1558), México (1551, 1553), San Marcos de Lima (1551, 1571), Bogota (1571, 1573), and Quito (1596). Nevertheless, the palm for antiquity goes to Michoacán. Incidentally, the Mexican government has recently issued a set of stamps commemorating the founding of the Michoacán institution. Among these stamps are five-, twenty-, and forty-cent airmail, and the ten-cent regular—all of which bear the inscription "IV Centenario del Primitivo y Nacional Colegio de San Nicolas de Hidalgo. El Mas Antiguo de America 1540-1940."

A NAVAJO MYTH FROM THE CHACO CANYON

GRETCHEN CHAPIN

A short myth, basic to Chaco Canyon and so located whenever and wherever it is told over the Navajo Reservation, is the Gambler story. When the Navajo relates with what finesse Gambler won all bets but one, and how the pueblos were built to pay off gambling debts, it can be imagined that the old ruins of Pueblo Alto, Pueblo Bonito, Peñasco Blanco, Shabik'eshchee, Chetro Ketl, and Wiji are repeopled. That the Gambling God is an important figure in Navaho mythology is evidenced by the space accorded him in Washington Matthews' Origin Legend.¹ "Some time before, there had descended among the Pueblos, from the heavens, a divine gambler, or gambling god, named Nohoilpi, or He Who Wins Men (at play); his talisman was a great piece of turquoise. When he came he challenged the people to all sorts of games and contests, and in all of these he was successful."² The

1. Washington Matthews, "Navaho Legends," *Memoirs of the American Folk-lore Society*, vol. 5, 1897. E. Stechert and Co., New York, pp. 81-87.

2. *Ibid.* p. 82.