

# “What’s in a Name?”



by Jill Lane

## The A to Z’s of New Mexico’s Spanish Place Names.

There is perhaps no better way to spell out the colorful history of this state we today call New Mexico than through its names. These names give explanation to our land, our peoples and our territories. They validate why the cities, rivers, mountains, and settlements are named what they are. And there is no better indication of the strong influence the Spanish heritage played in the state’s development than through this land’s names.

The Native Americans first assigned names in the region more than 10,000 years ago. Most took on a descriptive aspect of the area. But around 1540 when the Spanish began their exploration into this territory, they set about in earnest naming these places. The origins and stories are many times buried with the early pioneers of our state, but the remaining tales continue to intrigue us today.

**Names were given based on several criteria.**

## Adopted Names

Some of the time, the Spanish accepted the Native American name, like Chama, Gila, Pecos. They adapted the Indian name and the understanding of that word, and gave that name a Hispanic spelling. Chama, originally a Tewa name, was probably spelled Tzama or Tsama. The meanings of the name are also a mystery in many instances. Does the name Chama come from the Tewa word that means, “Here they wrestled” or from their word meaning red and referring to the color of the river’s waters? Since there is no written documentation of these early names, the answers to the origin of the name will always remain somewhat a mystery with multiple explanations.

## Descriptive Names

Like the Native Americans, the Spanish also assigned descriptive names to many places. As there were no maps then, the easiest identifier was a descriptive name with reference given to the geographic setting or usage of area. Examples of this are: Rio Grande (big river), Corrales (corrals), and Placitas (little plaza). These early descriptions became permanently embedded into the states’ names.

## Religious Names

Perhaps the greatest influence of names in New Mexico is derived from the strong Catholic faith of the Spanish explorers. Names like Sangre de Cristo (blood of Christ), Belen (Spanish for Bethlehem), and Sacramento (most blessed sacrament) attach a religious significance to the territory. Names beginning with San or Santa abound here, like Santa Fe (city of holy faith). This strong influence of saints is apparent with 43 names beginning with San and 11 names beginning with Santa. The most common saint name in New Mexico is San Antonio, with more than thirty-six designations in towns, settlements, rivers and mountains.

## Family Names

Another factor for town appellations were family names, like Los Lunas (the Luna family), Bacaville, and even Bernalillo, named after the Bernal family. A land grant designation and the influential family on that land grant determined many of these names.

## Incident Names

Names also resulted from incidents occurring at a site. One example is Ojo del Perillo, which means ‘spring of the little dog’. This name originated on the Jornada del Muerto, when a dog in a Spanish caravan discovered a small water spring, thus saving the travelers from death. Another example is Fra Cristobal Range, derived from the place where a pioneer Franciscan died on the route.

## Honorary Designations

Interestingly enough, while the largest city in New Mexico, Albuquerque, is an honorary designation named after the Duke of Alburquerque in Spain, it is the only city in New Mexico named after Spanish royalty. This was not a common practice at that time. Today’s spelling of the name ‘Albuquerque’ is actually misspelled from the Duke’s name as it had an extra R in it. This settlement was named by the Governor Cuervo y Valdes to gain favor with Don Francisco Fernandez de la Cueva Enriquez, Duke of Alburquerque, then a resident in Mexico City. The word Alburquerque originates from the Latin, *Albus Quercus*, which means white oak, although it has no descriptive significance for the New Mexico town.

***The name origin of the state, New Mexico, is as multi-cultural as are the peoples who have occupied these lands for thousands of years. As Robert Julyan, author of The Place Names of New Mexico, so aptly stated: “A blend of Native American, Spanish, and Anglo-American elements, the name New Mexico is an appropriate paradigm for the state itself.”***

The roots of the name come from (old) Mexico back to the Aztec Indians. Their capital was Mexitli, and when the Spanish first arrived there, they referred to this former Aztec empire as Mexico. In 1539, early explorer Fray Marcos de Niza called the newly explored region to the north “Nova Hispania”. By 1563 it was referred to by Don Francisco de Ibarra, Governor of the Mexico territory as *Nuevo Mexico*. In 1598, Onate referred to himself as the “governor, captain general, and adelantado of Nuevo Mexico and its kingdoms and provinces”. By 1912, it had been translated into the English name version and New Mexico became the 46<sup>th</sup> U.S. state. After much formal name discussion (one recommendation was Acoma—to dislodge Alabama as the first state name alphabetically), it was formally named. The territorial representatives prevailed with *New Mexico*.

***Here is a short list from thousands of our state’s names, along with their translations, designations and reasons. It also is a snapshot of how deeply rooted the Spanish language and heritage are in New Mexico.***

**A**-Algodones, means cotton, so named for the early cotton fields here.





**B**-La Bajada Hill,  
formerly known as 'la majada'  
means sheep fold or place where  
shepherds keep their flocks.

**C**-Cerillos,  
descriptive for 'little hills'.

**D**-Datil,  
named after a date, perhaps locally  
referring to the fruit of the yucca  
plant.

**E**-Española,  
means Spanish woman, possibly re-  
ferring to a woman who worked at  
a restaurant in this area frequented  
by railroad workers.

**F**-Frijoles Canyon  
named after bean fields

**G**-Guadalupe,  
named after Jesus' mother, hon-  
oring *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe*.  
There are 44 designations with this  
name in New Mexico.

**H**-Hidalgo  
County,  
named after Miguel Hidalgo y  
Costilla, often called the George  
Washington of Mexico. He led the  
1810 revolt that ended wit Mexico's  
independence.

**I**-Isleta,  
means little island. So-named by  
the Spanish explorers in 1550 for  
the Tewa pueblo, physically located  
on an island in the Rio Grande.

**J**-Juan Tabo,  
this legendary name has a number  
of speculations: named after the  
canyon area, *Canada de Juan Taboso*;  
or named for an Indian shepherd-  
er who grazed his flocks in the can-

yon; or the name of a priest. Still a  
mystery as to the name's real origin.

**K**-Kuaua,  
an archaeological site (Coronado  
State Monument) named after a  
Tiwa pueblo, believed to be where  
Coronado and his conquistadors  
spent the winter of 1540-41.

**L**-Las Cruces,  
varying possible name origins. Per-  
haps referencing crosses marking  
the graves from an Indian mas-  
sacre; another explanation is 'the  
crossroads'.

**M**-Madrid,  
Is it a family name from the Span-  
iard, Francisco de Madrid, or is it  
named after Spain's capitol city?  
And what is the correct pronuncia-  
tion? Depends on whom you ask!

**N**-Nacimiento,  
Spanish for Nativity, birthplace.  
Also means source of a river.

**O**-Ojo Caliente,  
hot springs.

**P**-Placitas,  
a Spanish derivative of plaza, the  
word placitas in the southwest is  
synonymous with a small cluster of  
homes.

**Q**-Quien Sabe  
Creek/Canyon.  
In Spanish it means 'who knows?'  
and that is exactly right. No one  
knows why these two places were  
so-named.

**R**-Rio,  
Spanish for river, there are 84 dif-  
ferent place names with Rio in  
New Mexico. Most are descriptive,  
like Rio Arriba (upper river) or Rio  
Blanco (white river).

**S**-Sandia  
Mountains,  
Spanish for watermelon, so-called  
for the sun's colors on the moun-  
tain resembling an inverted slice of  
watermelon.

**T**-Tijeras,  
Spanish for scissors. Named pos-  
sibly for two canyons that come  
together, or for two roads crossing  
here.

**U**-Una de Gato,  
Spanish for cat's claw. Possibly re-  
ferring to the curved thorns of the  
Catclaw Acacia plant.

**V**-Vega,  
Spanish for meadow as in Las  
Vegas.

**W**-Wagon  
Mound,  
its origins come from the Santa  
Fe Trail for the butte resembling a  
covered wagon.

**X**-Xacates,  
a settlement also spelled Zacates on  
an 1828 map.

**Y**-Yeso,  
Spanish word for gypsum, mined  
in the area.

**Z**-Zia,  
Spanish spelling of Indian word,  
also spelled Cia, Chia, Tsia, and  
Tria. Zia Pueblo is possibly best  
known for its sun symbol-synony-  
mous with New Mexico.

Yes, it's a bit like Alphabet Soup, with a story be-  
hind every letter and a piece of history tucked into  
every name. Indeed it is all about the name! The  
next time you pass by a place with a name you don't  
know, take a moment to stop and reflect on the  
people who lived here long ago. These ancestors  
and early travelers named each and every place for  
a reason. It truly is a part of our heritage here in  
New Mexico.