

Religious Place Names in New Mexico

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THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS of the peoples in New Mexico embrace everything from animistic cults among the American Indians, deifying natural forces, to twentieth century Anglo-American groups born of Utopian theories and practices. Consequently, the religious place names survive both from the older pre-Spanish period and from modern times, and they have been preserved in oral as well as in literary records. "Religion," then, as applied to the names in this paper, is a general term, not limited to any organized sect or church, but associated both with the historic church institutions and with the smaller groups professing individual faiths, or with the little known Indian rituals and ceremonies. Terms dealing with theological concepts or abstract words expressing feelings associated with religion have also been included. It might be well to begin with names drawn from Indian ritual and ceremonies, since these names are the most limited in number, and yet they are the earliest names which designate religious convictions associated with areas in New Mexico. In order to show the general location for the names, the county where the place name appears is shown in parentheses following its mention.

Indian religious experiences are frequently the result of activities at topographical landmarks, for Indian rites, in general, were celebrated out of doors. The Taos Indians, of the Tanoan language group, have a sacred lake, which at certain periods is guarded by sentinels who prevent any visitors from coming to this spot. In English, the lake is called *Blue Lake* (Taos), and it is located behind the sacred mountain of the Taos Indians. A mesa near Acoma Pueblo, which is a Keres speaking community, is known as *Katzimo* or "Enchanted Rock" (Valencia), because the Indians believe that their nature gods lived on top of its towering eminence. Another somewhat similar geographical formation, called *Black Mesa* (Santa Fe), in the neighborhood of the San Ildefonso Indians, also a

Tanoan group, is said to be the home of a giant called Tsaveeyo, who was slain by the twin sons of the Sky Father, after he had swallowed them and they were able to use their arrows on the giant's unprotected interior. Two other mesas bear the Spanish name, *Mesa Gigante* (Valencia), "giant mesa," derived from its background in Indian myth. *Mount Taylor* (Valencia) named for General Zachary Taylor, the twelfth president of the United States, is known to the Navajo Indians as *Tzil Dotlizee*, "Turquoise Mountain," and is considered their sacred mountain of the South. The holy mountain of the Zuñi Indians, to the east of the Navajo country, is called *Toayalone* or *Taaiyalone* (McKinley) "corn mountain," and has Indian altars and shrines on the summit. Zuñi myths associate this mountain with the House of the Gods and the making of rain, lightning, and thunder. The Anglo-Americans call it *Thunder Mountain*, from its religious mythology.

As is apparent, topographical monuments have been a source for religious place names among the Indians. In much the same way, landmarks like these have appealed to Christian traditions, both Catholic and Protestant, for the use of name patterns. In north-eastern New Mexico, there is a hill with a deep depression in it, causing the height to resemble an open book: the result is *Bible Top Hill* (Union County), which was once a lookout for the Comanches. *Capilla Peak* (Torrance) means "hood or cap" in Spanish, and is descriptive of the shape of the pinnacle, like a monk's cowl. *Church Rock* (McKinley) resembles a church with towers. *Graveyard in the Sky* (Harding) is a stone formation where the pioneers climbed to make a cemetery, and *Twin Angels Peak* (San Juan) was so-named by the stockmen in the region because of two small points on top which resemble figures that must have had wings to travel there. *Wedding Cake Hill* (Union) is a round mound rising about 300 feet from the floor of a canyon near the Oklahoma line. The grass covered slope is topped by red, white, and brown layers of sandy rock, giving it the appearance of a big layer cake, like those used at weddings.

There are also topographical features which may be associated with Specters and Spirits. *Arch of the Devil* (Luna) is one of these, a peak in the Florida Mountains of southern New Mexico. This natural window-like opening in the mountain was named by the Spanish *Arco del Diablo*. *Devil's Creek* (Catron) and *Devil's Lake* (De Baca)

are two more designations commemorating the chief specter of evil. *Devil's Race Track* (Chaves) describes a high igneous dike in the caprock of southeast New Mexico; it resembles a low jagged race track. There is a *Satan's Pass* (McKinley) in the northwestern part of the state, and a *Spirit Lake* at the head of *Holy Ghost Creek*. The *Phantom Banks* are in the southeast corner of New Mexico near the Texas line.

The names of Roman Catholic Saints are the largest single category in the religious place names of New Mexico. These, of course, belong to the pattern of commemoration. There are some seventy commemorative titles¹ applied to several hundred separate communities and field localities, i.e., land grants, lakes, arroyos, creeks, rivers, mountains, peaks, passes, mesas, and plains.

It will be possible to illustrate by citing just the more unusual circumstances regarding these commemorations. Saint Anthony of Padua, the famed disciple of Saint Francis of Assisi, rivals his master for preeminence among the saints' names. There are 18 place names honoring St. Anthony and only 12 in memory of the founder of the Franciscan Order. St. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, stands third in commemoratives, with 10 place names. Then follows San Miguel, "Saint Michael, the Archangel," with 8 place names.² The largest number of place names honoring the Mother of Christ are the eight localities identified as Guadalupe, part of the title, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, "The Virgin of Guadalupe," patroness of old Mexico. Saint Mary Magdalene has been identified with a range of mountains and a settlement, *Magdalena* (Socorro), because of a story that Spanish refugees were surrounded by Apaches and were saved by the appearance of a face in the rock, which frightened the Indians away.

¹ The generic term *san* appears 152 times in *The New Mexico Place Name Dictionary*, honoring forty-one individual saints. *Santo* and *Santa* add some fifteen more holy personages whose names are applied to both communities and topography, and the Virgin Mary, as *Nuestra Señora* appears under fifteen different titles, some of which are only parish names and have not been included in the collection.

² One of these commemoratives is *San Miguel Mountain*, which is often referred to as *Big Mike* (San Miguel), because of the profile of a face which appears in the stone of the peak. Mythology surrounding this stone giant makes a pygmy of Paul Bunyan. A confusion between the saint and a human namesake tells of a man reputed to be 27 miles tall who carried as walk-around money the 10 billion pesos in gold ransom received by Cortez, the conquistador, for the release of Montezuma.

San Juan, "St. John the Baptist," was the first religious figure to be honored by Europeans in the history of New Mexico. When the general, Don Juan de Oñate, colonizer of the region, arrived on the Upper Rio Grande, July 11, 1598, he called an Indian pueblo there *San Juan de los Caballeros* (Rio Arriba), or "St. John of the Spanish Knights," commemorating both the adelantado's patron saint and the soldiers who accompanied him to the new colony. There are seven other place names honoring this follower of Jesus. The practice of Spanish explorers to select a saint's name for a locality as both personal and religious commemoration is illustrated by *San Francisco de Alburquerque*, honoring both the Governor of New Mexico, who founded the villa in 1706, the Viceroy of Mexico who authorized the settlement, and the patron saint of both men.³

Not all the religious personages commemorated in New Mexico belong to the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. A leader of the Mormon Church, Luther W. Burnham is remembered in the name of a community in San Juan county, near the border of Utah. *Saint Ann's Mission* (Lincoln) is an Indian community sponsored by the Protestant Episcopal Church. *Venus* (Santa Fe), quite obviously an alien in the Southwest, was sponsored not by paganism but by a mercantile company which conferred that name upon the community. A Catholic commemorative of importance and interest is that of *Lamy* (Santa Fe), named to honor the first American bishop and later archbishop, John B. Lamy, who entered New Mexico in 1851, three years after the territory had passed into the jurisdiction of the United States. His name has been given literary immortality by the novelist Willa Cather, whose book *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a somewhat fictionalized biography of the distinguished educator and churchman. The three kings of the Epiphany are recalled by the place name *Reyes* (Harding), "kings," but since this is also a well known Spanish surname there may be less religious than personal significance involved.

A substantial group of place names commemorate theological concepts. The site of a pre-Spanish Indian village is known as *Animas*, which may refer either to the *animas benditas*, "blessed souls in Purgatory," or the *animas perdidas*, "lost souls in Hell." The

³ T. M. Pearce, "Spanish Place Name Patterns of the Southwest," *Names*, 3 (December 1955), p. 207.

Animas River (San Juan) seems to be definitely a reference to the lost souls caught in the quicksands of the river crossings. *Ave Maria* (Rio Arriba), the salutation of the Angel to the Mother of Christ, was the name of a now abandoned colonial Spanish settlement. *Concepcion* (San Miguel) and *Corazon* (San Miguel) spell out the dominance of religious cult names among the Spanish settlers.⁴ *Florida* (Luna), which names a trading point and a range of mountains, may be a descriptive name, "flowery," but it may be a transfer name from the state of Florida, where the association was both with flowers and with the Easter season, or *Pascua Florida*, when the territory was first found by Spanish explorers.

Along with the inspiring concepts celebrated by place name records comes the Anglo-Saxon term *Hell*, which is employed in half-a-dozen localities for canyons, mesas, and passes. All these designations appear in rugged terrain, and one of them, made up almost entirely of rocks and unexplored caves, is called *Hell's Half Acre* (Grant). Perhaps the prevalence of so many hospitable sites for his majesty Satan is countered by *Salvation Canyon* (Catron), *Sanctuario* (Santa Fe), "Sanctuary," and *Sangre de Cristo Mountains*, "Blood of Christ," where a flagellant cult called, in English, the *Penitentes* built its meeting houses and still holds Easter ceremonies commemorating the passion of Jesus.

The positive side of religious truth is evidenced by both Protestant and Catholic place names, drawn from the sphere of faith. *Beulah* (San Miguel) recalls an old hymn, "Beulah Land." *Las Cruces* (Doña Ana), "The Crosses," describes the cemetery where survivors of the Indian raids in the early nineteenth century were buried. *Holy Ghost Creek* empties from Spirit Lake (San Miguel), and *El Ojo del Espiritu Santo* (Sandoval), "The Spring of the Holy Spirit," is said to have been named by a peon who stood guard one night and saw two wraith-like spirals rising from the ground. He rushed toward the camp crying "*El Espiritu Santo!*" Others followed and discovered the spring. Other Catholic symbols commemorated in place names are: *Nacimiento* (Sandoval), "The Birthday of our

⁴ *Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion Imaculada*, "Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception," titles of two seventeenth century pueblos (Cuarai and Hawakuh), and of parish communities at Alameda in 1776 and of a community today in San Miguel County. *La Sacra Corazon de Jesus*, "the Sacred Heart of Jesus," names a community, creek, and peak all in San Miguel County southeast of Las Vegas.

Lady"; *Nombre de Dios* (Doña Ana), "Name of God"; *Rosario* (Santa Fe), "Rosary"; *Sacramento* (Otero), shortened from of *El Santísimo Sacramento*, "The Most Blessed Sacrament"; *Santa Fe* (Santa Fe), "Holy Faith"; *Santo Niño* (San Miguel), "Holy Child."

A miscellaneous group of names associated with religious traditions are:

Shalam (Doña Ana). A religious colony founded in 1885 by Dr. John R. Newbrough, of New York City; the name was taken from the cult's religious book, *Oahspe*. With the death of their leader in 1891, the land and property were sold or abandoned. The name is a synonym for Hebrew *salem*, "peace," and is identified with *Jerusalem*.

Sunday Cove (Sierra). A peak in southwestern New Mexico, which may be related to a family name.

Swastika (Colfax). Sanskrit, "good fortune." Formerly a coal mining town owned by the St. Louis Rocky Mountain, and Pacific Company.

Trinity (Otero). The lonely, treeless site on the White Sands Proving Ground over which the first atomic bomb was detonated, July 16, 1945. Prayer services for peace are held there annually by worshippers of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths. According to Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, past director of the Los Alamos laboratory of nuclear physics, the name has no technical content, but was inspired by lines of the English poet, John Donne:

*As East and West in all flat maps — and I am one —
Are one, so death shall touch the Resurrection.*

(Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness)

Amistad (Union), Spanish, "friendship." Founded in 1906, by the Rev. H. S. Wannamaker, a Congregational minister, who named it as a token of his hope for the enterprise. A number of the early settlers were clergymen from the east.

In every settlement area there are always transfer names, recalling the places where the colonists lived, or where others known to them have lived. A number of these names appear in New Mexico, recalling Biblical place names chiefly. Illustrative are *Belen* (Valencia), "Bethlehem," where one section of the town is named *Jerusalem*, "Jerusalem" and the other *Nazareth*, "Nazareth."

Cumberland (Chaves) was settled in 1908 by a Reverend C. W. Lewis, and named for the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. A college was located at this site but failed of development with the outset of World War I. Three more Biblical names of interest are:

Pool of Siloam (Otero). Recalls the pool to which Jesus directed the blind man and from which the man recovered his sight.⁵ The pool in New Mexico, however, is seepage from oil deposits.

Salem (Doña Ana). Hebrew, "Peaceful." A settlement established in 1908 by New Englanders. The name appears in the Old Testament as an identification of the city of Jerusalem.

Shiloh (Otero). Hebrew, "tranquil." The settlement was close to the Texas line, and the assumption warranted is that the name honors not only the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant in ancient Israel, but the site of the Battle of Shiloh in the Civil War, April, 1862.

So the story ends, having covered a good deal of territory in both the physical and the spiritual world. Perhaps the central meaning in both areas of experience is that the steps taken by mankind, in both soul and body, do not differ so greatly as the sounds of the languages which express them.

⁵ *The Gospel According to St. John*, 9:7.