

# The El Paso Texas Mission Trail: Four Centuries of Immigration, Trade, and Cultural Exchange



Author's Note: The El Paso Texas Mission Trail, near the border where El Paso in Texas rests side by side with Juarez in Mexico, provides a fascinating glimpse into the long history between the two countries.

By Lee Foster

Immigration, trade, and cultural exchange flourished for four centuries along El Paso's Mission Trail and will be important here in the future.

This Mission Trail is a few miles in the 1,500-mile road from Mexico City north to Santa Fe and Albuquerque in the current U.S. state of New Mexico, beyond Texas.

Four stops on this road, all near El Paso, tell a traveler the cultural story. Moreover, a group of locals, focused on helping travelers understand the scene, may be able to arrange a guided tour. In short, such a tour can be illuminating. The group is the El Paso Mission Trail Association (See If You Go, below, at the end of my write-up.) I was fortunate to have one of their leaders, James Wright, explain the many nuances of the scene.

## **Prominence of El Paso, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow**

The importance of El Paso in U.S. history, today, and in the future, can't be overstated. The full name of the area is The Northern Pass, meaning the route between Mexico and what became the U.S. states of Texas and New Mexico.

Today, each day, El Paso and its neighbor Mexican city of Juarez see legal crossings of about 4,000 containers of goods, valued at \$18bil/year. There are 2.7mil people in this trade zone. Mexico is the second largest trading partner with the U.S. About 20K people and 35K vehicles cross this border legally each day for education, commerce, and family visits. Many families have branches on both sides of the border.

I was pleasantly impressed with the efficiency of the U.S. border re-entry when I went to an early-evening event outside Juarez at their lovely and scenic Samalayuca Dunes to catch the sunset. Coming back, about midnight, there were plenty of U.S. border agents on hand to check passports and facilitate U.S. re-entry. Always carry your passport with you if you want to cross between El Paso to Juarez.

I hope to get back to El Paso for the things I did not have time to see. One would be the boot makers showing their craft at Rocket Buster. El Paso is a boot-making capital, with plenty of options at all price levels. Another would be several famous restaurants, such as the L & J Café. The downtown sparkles with five newer hotels, including two historic rebuilds. The spirit of El Paso is youthful and exuberant.

# Mission Ysleta

The first stop in my Mission Trail guided tour with James Wright of the Mission Trail Association was the Ysleta Mission.

The Spanish came north to this area from the Mexico state of Chihuahua in January 1598. They planned to settle a new land, a “new” Mexico. The expedition had 500 colonists and thousands of head of livestock in a caravan two miles long. They arrived at the banks of the Rio Grande River on April 20, 1598. The leader, Don Juan de Onate, called for a rest. It is said that the local Indians, named by the Spanish the Manso, a Spanish word for “quiet” or “tame,” participated in the first ceremonies.

The crossing of the river was called El Paso del Rio del Norte, or The Pass Across the River of the North.

Caravaners continued north into what is now New Mexico at Santa Fe.

All this needs to be understood to comprehend the Ysleta Mission

## **Our 2020 Perspective and the 1680 Indian Revolt**

Our perspective from year 2020 and beyond is unlike the world view of 1600. In 2020, Columbus Day is now celebrated with putting Christopher on trial for genocide. There is some truth in the assertion. It is also correct that the Spanish inadvertently killed far more New World citizens with microbes than with bullets, including in the El Paso region.

Moving forward, a Franciscan father established a presence in 1659 in the El Paso area (now in Juarez), converting the Manso and Suma Indians.

Nevertheless, the brutality and retribution of the Spanish-led era, combined with the stress of drought and food shortages in the New Mexico pueblos, led to a massive 1680 Revolt, the biggest Indian revolt in the history of the Americas.

The 1680 revolt showed clever execution by the Indian leaders. Young runners, the

12-15 year-old boys, were sent out to the 24 pueblos with long strands of cotton string. The string had 24 knots. Untie one knot per day, and revolt after the final knot. The Revolt was successful. The Spanish fled.

About 2,000 Spaniards and hundreds of Tigua and Piro Indians retreated south from New Mexico to the relative safety of El Paso. The Indians, at various times, traveled south on this Mission Trail as hostages or as escapees. Ysleta became one of the new communities, populated by New Mexico pueblo Indians. The Spanish mounted a reconquest of New Mexico in 1692.

## **Mission Ysleta on the Mission Trail**

One ironic aspect of the entire area is that the great river, the Rio Grande, had a mind of its own. The missions, churches and presidio of Ysleta, Socorro, and San Elizario were south of the river initially. But in a major flood in 1829 the Rio Grande changed its channel and left the settlements on the north side of the river.

Mission Isleta began after the 1680 Revolt as Tigua Indians from New Mexico settled here.

As might be expected, architecture that you see today is of a later time. All the missions experienced fires and floods, destroying earlier versions of the buildings. Today's structures are architectural achievements of their specific time.

## **Tigua Indian Cultural Center**

The next stop on the Mission Trail is the Tigua Indian Cultural Center, constructed in the style of a pueblo.

This is the place to see the material side of the Tigua Indian culture. The Cultural Center is an enclosed adobe-brick one-story structure with a tile roof. The Indians grew the "three sisters" of food crops, meaning corn, beans, and squash. They dried the crops under the roof line. A pueblo might typically save enough food for a 3-7-year period, storing the dried food in large clay pots. The Indians knew they might sometime need to survive drought.

In the Cultural Center you'll see many artifacts illustrative of pueblo life, such as the large clay pots used to store food and water. The prize artifact is the buckskin shirt of the great grandfather of Center Director Rick Quezada. If Rick is present, he may be able to explain the buckskin shirt to you and the skills that his great grandfather possessed as a scout for the Texas Rangers.

Great Grandfather Quezada could look at the imprint that a horse's hoof left on the ground and tell you the following: how long ago the horse had stepped here, whether the horse was bearing a burden or not, how rapidly the horse was moving, whether the horse was well or stressed and ill. This was the tradecraft of the Scout of the day.

The Cultural Center is at 305 Yaya Lane in the pueblo of Ysleta.

## **Mission Socorro on the Mission Trail**

Socorro, meaning "help" in Spanish, took its name from Socorro in New Mexico. Piro Indians fled from there in the 1680 time of troubles. By 1691 there were about 60 Piro Indian families and about 15 Spanish families in the area.

The architecture of Mission Socorro is special because of the "vigas," the wood beams that span the ceiling and hold up the roof. The long wood vigas of Socorro are especially lovely. Length and size of the beams, plus the ornate wood carvings at the ends, are remarkable. One can't help but marvel at the human energy needed to locate, bring to the site, and carve the massive wood beams required. The adobe walls, with a plaster surface, and the painted interior make this building one of the architectural treasures of the El Paso Mission Trail area.

## **San Elizario Presidio Historic District**

While all the elements on the Mission Trail have National Historic Site status, the density of 17 historical structures in the San Elizario Presidio Historic District, dating from as early as 1598, tops them all. The name refers to a French patron saint of soldiers. Spain arranged to have a presidio to protect its missions and agricultural colonization efforts.

You can walk around the site and click the QR codes on signage to get an audio presentation on your device. There is a jail, one of the first in Texas, which Billy the Kid broke INTO to free a buddy. The Main Street, the original El Camino Real, is America's oldest highway and the oldest Main Street in the U.S. A handsome church for the Presidio soldiers complements the churches that were missions

San Elizario became a major population center and farming community, of about 2,000 people, with a Butterfield Stage stop. A visitor Center helps orient the traveler. Outreach is at [www.sanelizariohistoricdistrict.org](http://www.sanelizariohistoricdistrict.org).

For today's visitor, San Elizario is also a lively artist colony with noted artists, such as Alberto Escamilla, showing their works for purchase in studios.

If a traveler visits these four mentioned sites, the determined influence of Spain in what is now the U.S. becomes better understood. Certainly, there were Franciscan missions in California, at a later period. Moreover, there were Jesuit Father Eusebio Kino's missions in Sonora, Mexico, spilling over to Tucson. However, the El Paso Texas Mission Trail was the earliest and most major route of commerce and colonization between Mexico City and Santa Fe, now part of the U.S. state of New Mexico.

## **If You Go: El Paso and the El Paso Mission Trail**

For more information on the El Paso Mission Trail Association, see <http://visitelpasomissiontrail.com/>, 915-851-9997.

For details on the city of El Paso, see <https://visitelpaso.com/>, 915-534-0600.