

An Archaeological Survey of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, Las Cruces—El Paso

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## **An Archaeological Survey of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, Las Cruces—El Paso**

**Edward Staski<sup>1</sup>**

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*Archaeologists from New Mexico State University surveyed El Camino Real, the earliest long-distance trail established by European colonists in North America, from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to El Paso, Texas. Our goal was to determine the location and condition of this historic trail within a strip of land that has witnessed significant agricultural, suburban, and urban development in recent years. Due to this development, many scholars have assumed that all physical traces of the Camino Real have been destroyed. Results of our research, however, suggest that not all remnants of the trail and related campsites have been lost.*

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**KEY WORDS:** camino real; survey; preservation; cultural tourism.

Archaeologists from New Mexico State University conducted a survey of the original Camino Real from Las Cruces to El Paso during the fall semester, 2002. Our objectives were to: (1) locate this ca. 35 mile segment of the Camino Real precisely, (2) determine the integrity of the resource in this rapidly developing, nearly urban corridor, (3) identify owners of the properties across which the Camino Real passes and involve these property owners in our project and preservation efforts, and (4) report our findings to the profession and to the public in order to help mitigate the impacts of future development activities.

The Camino Real was the first truly long-distance route established by European colonialists in the Western Hemisphere. It extended some 1600 miles from near Mexico City to near Santa Fe, New Mexico (Fig. 1), and was officially in use for about 300 years, from AD 1598 (when Don Juan de Onate established its northern extension) until ca. AD 1880 (when its utility was diminished by the construction of the railroad). The Camino Real was important, and has historic significance today, because it brought into contact and linked people with

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Fig. 1. The Camino Real, from near Mexico City to near Santa Fe (after Map 2, National Park Service/Bureau of Land Management 2002:2).

extraordinarily different cultural backgrounds and traditions. The linkage of these diverse cultures, broadly defined as European and American yet exhibiting much greater cultural diversity than this bifurcation suggests, had a profound impact on how our unique New Mexican heritage was forged (Hockman, 2004; Levine, 1999; for a general history of the Camino Real in New Mexico see Moorhead, 1958).

Segments of the Camino Real had been surveyed (e.g., Marshall, 1990) and excavation projects focusing on the Camino Real had been conducted nearby (e.g., Staski, 1998) before our survey started. Everyone agreed that the route ran east of the Rio Grande from El Paso to Las Cruces (Fig. 2), but this vague generality was all anyone knew for certain until our survey. No one knew the exact course of the route between the two cities and, more importantly, no one could agree on the nature of and extent to which significant archaeological materials remained

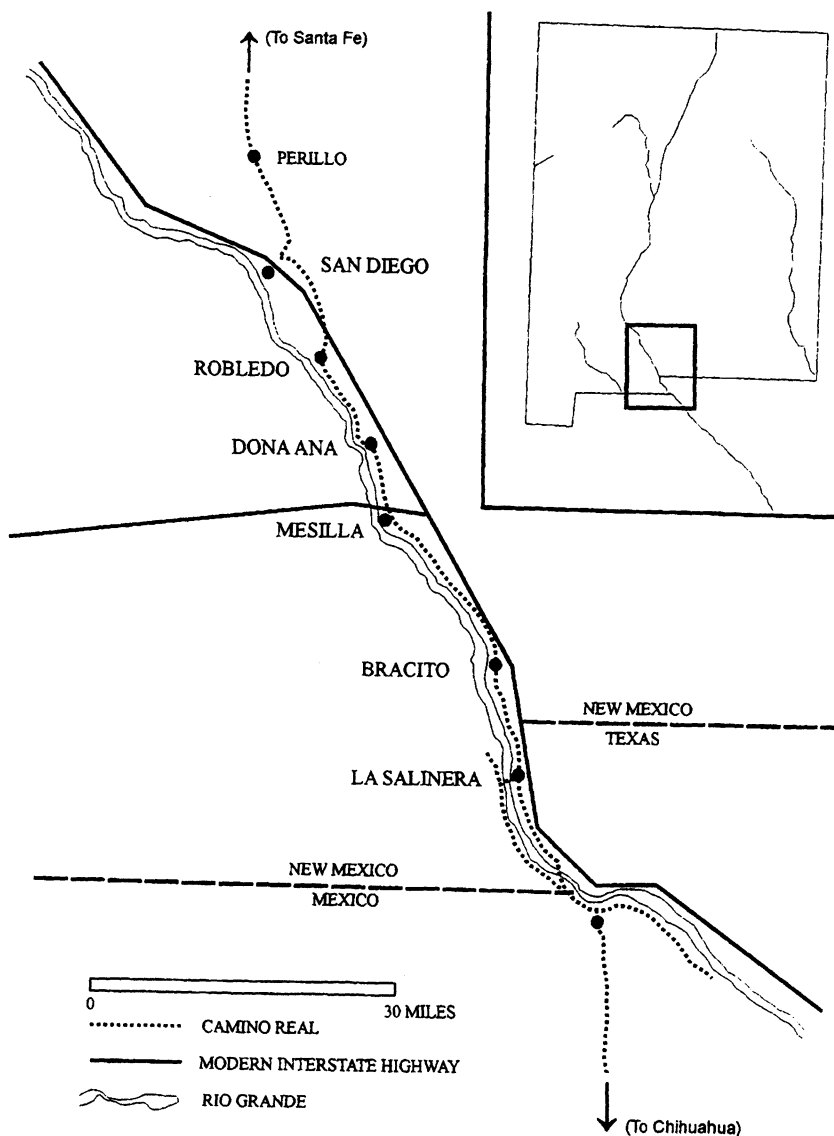


Fig. 2. The Camino Real in southern New Mexico, showing geographic and modern landmarks along with documented parajes.

intact at the time we started fieldwork. Since the area is rapidly becoming urban and suburban, as Las Cruces and El Paso merge along Interstate 10, the need to identify these materials soon and by doing so encourage their future preservation was compelling.

Preparatory field activities included preliminary archival research, the development of a research design, and initial contacts with interested colleagues, in order to include them in our efforts and to gain information about the location and condition of the resource. These activities occurred during the spring and summer, 2002. The survey was then conducted during the fall. It involved the efforts of about 20 New Mexico State University archaeology students who earned college credit for their participation. Actual fieldwork included in-depth archival research, a pedestrian survey of the Camino Real's supposed route and surrounding areas, and some limited oral history.

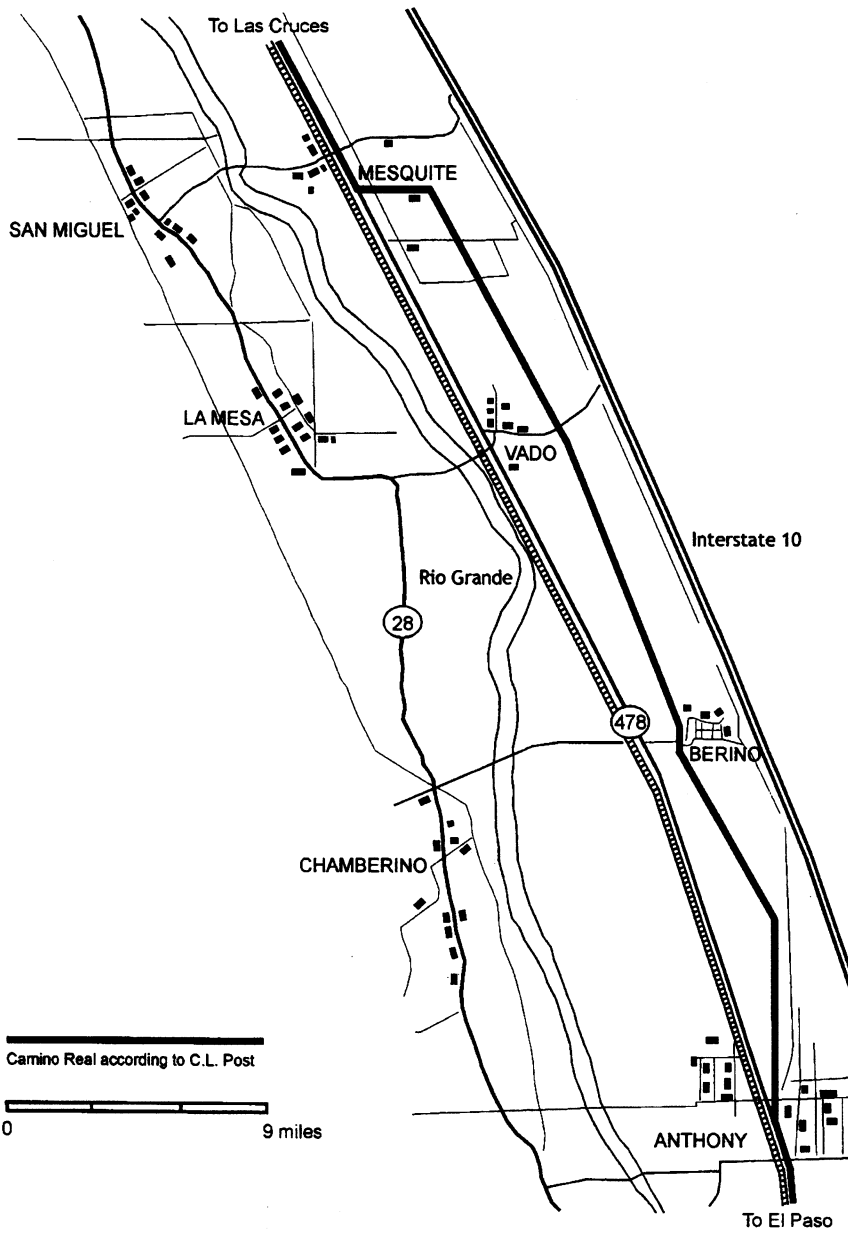
## BACKGROUND

Prior to our work, no one had attempted to locate precisely the Camino Real between Las Cruces and El Paso. Most scholars assumed that it was once located exactly where the present-day transportation routes exist, that is, under the present-day railroad tracks or under contiguous NM Highway 478/Texas Highway 20 (Fig. 3; see following discussion).

This assumption concerning the precise location of the Camino Real had no empirical support. Neither did it have much in the way of theoretical support. Rather, the assumption was based on the idea that all long-distance routes created by complex societies are roads; formal entities, the products of purposeful and considerable construction efforts. Accordingly, all roads exhibit tangible architecture and other physical characteristics that often defy the natural landscape and require great effort to remove. Roads, and the particular routes roads take, are thus relatively permanent phenomena. They persist even when their original functions or their original cultural contexts change. They persist even when their form is altered. Through time roads evolve, but they nevertheless remain in place, even when the reasons for their construction, the nature of their use, and the people using them vary.

Formal roads are often distinguished from trails or paths (Earle, 1991; Hyslop, 1991). The latter are described as informal, the products of simple use rather than purposeful construction. Trails exhibit few or no architectural characteristics and adjust to the landscape rather than impose themselves upon it. Trails are thus easily altered, moved, or even removed (often simply as a result of disuse). While formal roads are permanent, informal trails are fleeting and ephemeral. Roads are persistent entities even when the larger cultural context changes. Trails are responsive to such changes, themselves changing form, moving from place-to-place, or disappearing completely in reaction to shifting cultural realities.

Roads are often associated with complex societies, especially predatory colonial empires motivated by a desire to control various hinterlands through symbolic, economic, political, or military coercion (Earle, 1991; Trombold, 1991). Empires build roads into new territories in order to effectively exert power within them,



**Fig. 3.** Segment of the Camino Real, from Mesquite to Anthony, New Mexico, according to the 1907 plat "El Camino Real from Las Cruces to Anthony, Dona Ana County, New Mexico," by County Surveyor C.L. Post.

and to have power over indigenous people. Trails, on the other hand, occur in all societies, but are most prominent (indeed, often exclusive) among those exhibiting band- and tribal-levels of complexity (Earle, 1991; Trombold, 1991).

The Camino Real de Tierra Adentro was the product of a quintessential colonial Empire. Thus, we can understand the assumption that it currently is located under existing transportation routes. Yet, quite remarkably, it exhibited all of the characteristics of a quintessential trail. Throughout New Mexico, indeed along most of its entire route, the Camino Real exhibited very few formal, architectural characteristics, being nothing more than a trodden dirt path along almost the entirety of its 1600 miles.

Additionally, people who traveled the Camino rarely found themselves defying environmental conditions, but rather adjusting to them as best they could. The most obvious example of this type of adjustment in southern New Mexico was the direction the Camino Real took away from the Rio Grande and across the Jornada del Muerto (literally meaning “march of the dead man”) for some 90 miles, starting just north of Las Cruces. With little reliable water along its course, the Jornada was a dreaded part of everyone’s journey up and down the Camino Real. Why did people travel this barren desert and not remain by the river? They did so because the river channel became too narrow and deep for wagons and animals. They adjusted to the environment, reflecting that the Camino Real was more trail than formal road. If it had been the latter, someone would have constructed bridges or embankments or whatever needed to make the passage along the river possible.

Another example did not involve moving away from a natural obstacle but rather exploiting one without altering it. It nevertheless equally illustrates an attempt to adjust to and not defy the environment. At Mesa del Contadero, at the northern edge of the Jornada just south of Socorro, animals needed to walk in single file along a narrow passage between the mesa and the river. Rather than altering the landscape to make the journey easier, or locating the trail elsewhere in order to move faster, travelers exploited this narrow passage by making it a convenient place to count their herds (Contadero literally means “place of the count”).

These various observations belie simplistic evolutionary schemes regarding cultural complexity, regional integration and control, and the associated roles of road/trail networks. I will not attempt to address this complex issue here, except to note that it is not simply a permissive environment that allowed for the Camino Real to exhibit trail-like characteristics (cf. Hassig, 1991). The sand dunes just south of El Paso, Los Medanos de Samalayuca, were a nearly impassible barrier. Many attempted to avoid them by taking a long detour via San Eleacario. The aforementioned narrowing and deepening of the river channel in southern New Mexico was equally impassible. Nearly everyone found it necessary to cross the barren Jornada del Muerto. And the steep, rocky terrain of La Bajada, near the northern terminus of the trail, slowed travelers and made the passage dangerous.

These and other natural obstacles, along with the general harsh and water-starved environment, were anything but permissive. Surely, the natural surroundings would have encouraged the creation of a formal road if the Spanish authorities deemed it appropriate.

For whatever complex historical and cultural reasons, they did not. The Camino Real remained a trail, and never became a formal road despite the cultural complexity and predatory ambitions of the Spanish Empire. The resulting characteristics of the Camino Real have had profound impacts on its precise location and degree of preservation, as well as on our ability to locate relatively well preserved remnants of it during our survey.

The best example of these impacts involves the form and route taken by the trail and the previously mentioned assumption that all of the Camino Real from Las Cruces to El Paso was once located under the present-day railroad tracks or under contiguous NM Highway 478/Texas Highway 20. It is now clear that this assumption must be questioned. Clearly, being a trail and not a road made travel difficult in places, but it also allowed people to easily respond to local and immediate situations. The precise location of the trail was easily altered, resulting in a series of braided alternate routes in many areas. The varied alternative ways to travel between Albuquerque and Santa Fe are a good example. I suspect there might be similar braiding between Las Cruces and El Paso. Indeed, intriguing archival data seem to suggest this, most obviously in the form of a 1907 survey of the Camino Real from Las Cruces to the Texas border, conducted by then County Surveyor C.L. Post, which shows the route (or perhaps one of several alternative routes) well to the east of the railroad tracks and highway from Mesquite to Anthony (Fig. 3). These data raised our hopes and expectations for finding segments of the Camino Real accessible for further study.

## METHODS

Our survey was conducted over a roughly 35 mile  $\times$  5 mile rectilinear area within which it was known the Camino Real was located. The area chosen was delimited by Interstate 10 to the North and East, the Rio Grande River to the west, and Mesa Street in northern El Paso to the south (Fig. 4). This project area was then subdivided into roughly 1 mile  $\times$  2 mile survey units oriented to USGS map segments and located within the area by unique column and row designations (Figs. 5 and 6).

Crews of three or sometimes four students were assigned survey units to explore systematically and completely, as much as this was possible on private property that is developed and rather densely populated. Whenever appropriate and possible, landowners were asked permission to survey their property. The sensibilities of these landowners and of other residents in the project area were given priority over our desire for total survey coverage. Likewise, the safety



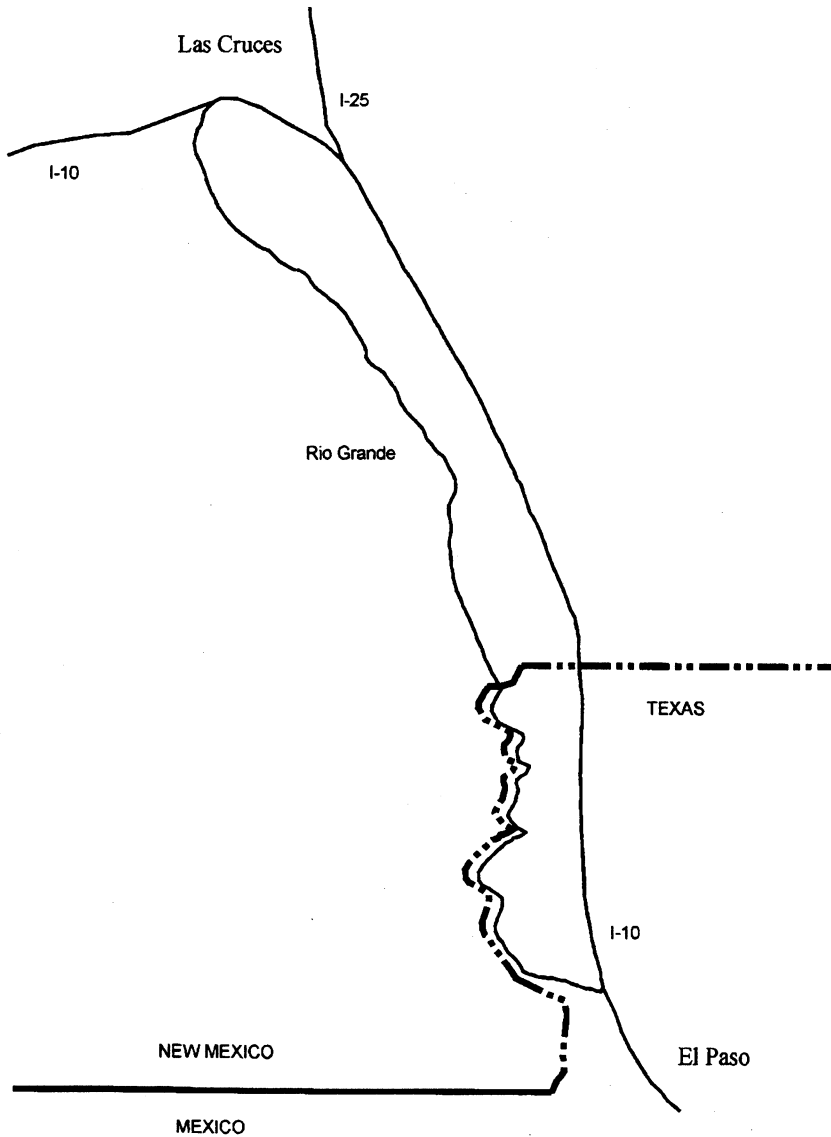


Fig. 4. The project area, 2002 archaeological survey.

of crew members was thought more important than data recovery in those rare situations that were potentially dangerous. Small parcels of the project area were bypassed so that packs of pit bulls could be avoided, for example.

Along with USGS map segments crews were issued 1994 aerial photographs to help pinpoint locations on the landscape. Crews recorded landscape

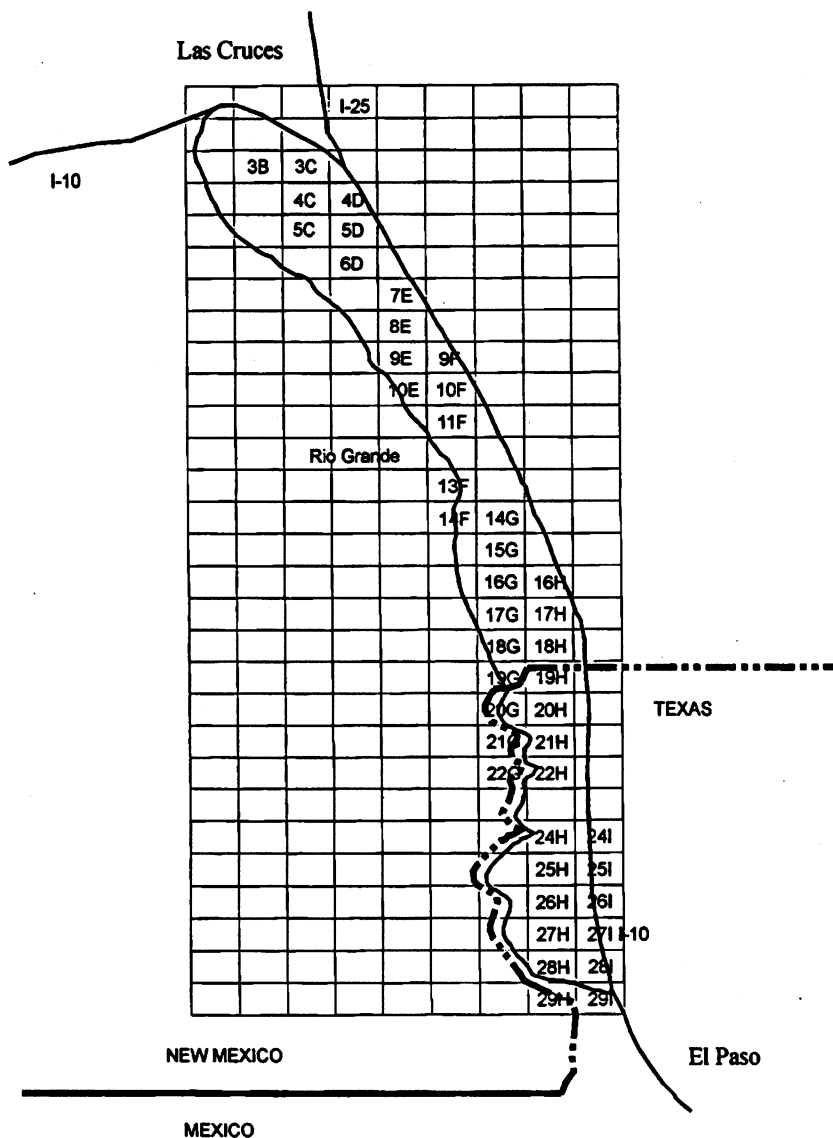


Fig. 5. The project area, 2002 archaeological survey, with superimposed survey unit grid. Those survey units that are labeled are those that were surveyed.

characteristics, current land use, and archaeological resources visible on the surface. Descriptions were recorded on specially designed survey forms. All archaeological resources, including trail segments, features, and artifacts, were mapped and photographed in the field. No collections were made and no archaeological resource was in any way disturbed as a result of the survey.

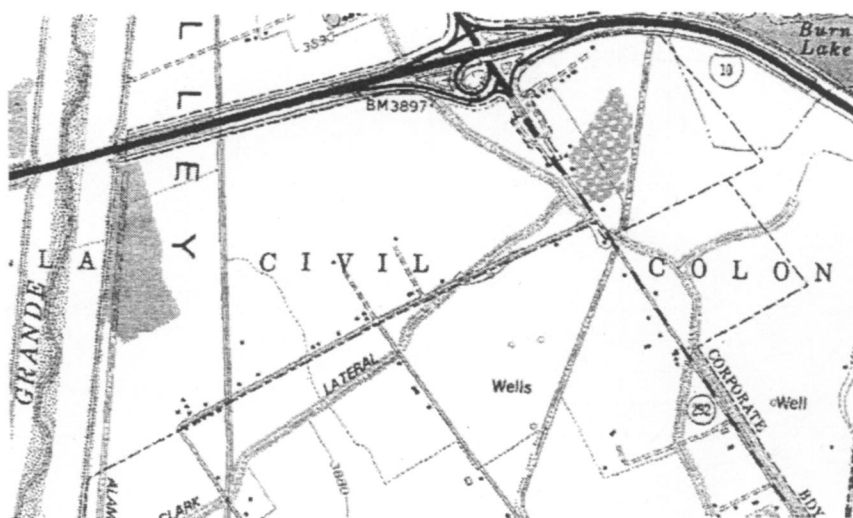


Fig. 6. An example of one survey unit grid (in this case 1A) with USGS map data.

At the same time numerous archives were searched for information on the precise location of the Camino Real in the project area, its use and condition up until the present time, and the details regarding property ownership. Repositories explored included (but were not limited to) the Dona Ana and El Paso County Court Houses, the Dona Ana and El Paso County Clerks' Offices, regional offices of the New Mexico and Texas Departments of Transportation, the Las Cruces and El Paso Public Libraries, the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division of the Office of Cultural Affairs, the Texas Historical Commission, and the National Archives.

Information on previous archaeological research in the project area was gathered from reports and records of the (now defunct) Cultural Resources Management Division and Center for Anthropological Research at New Mexico State University, the Archeological Records Management Section of the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, Office of Cultural Affairs, the Laboratory of Anthropology at the Museum of New Mexico, and from various pioneering archaeological survey reports authored by Herbert W. Yeo (e.g., Yeo, 1949a,b).

Finally, several local residents with ties to the Mesilla Valley stretching back multiple generations were interviewed for historical information and insight. These people were asked about the location of the Camino Real, its use after the time of its official abandonment (ca. AD 1880), general developmental trends over the past ca. 100 years, and other matters. It is our hope that this preliminary exercise in oral history will be expanded in the near future.

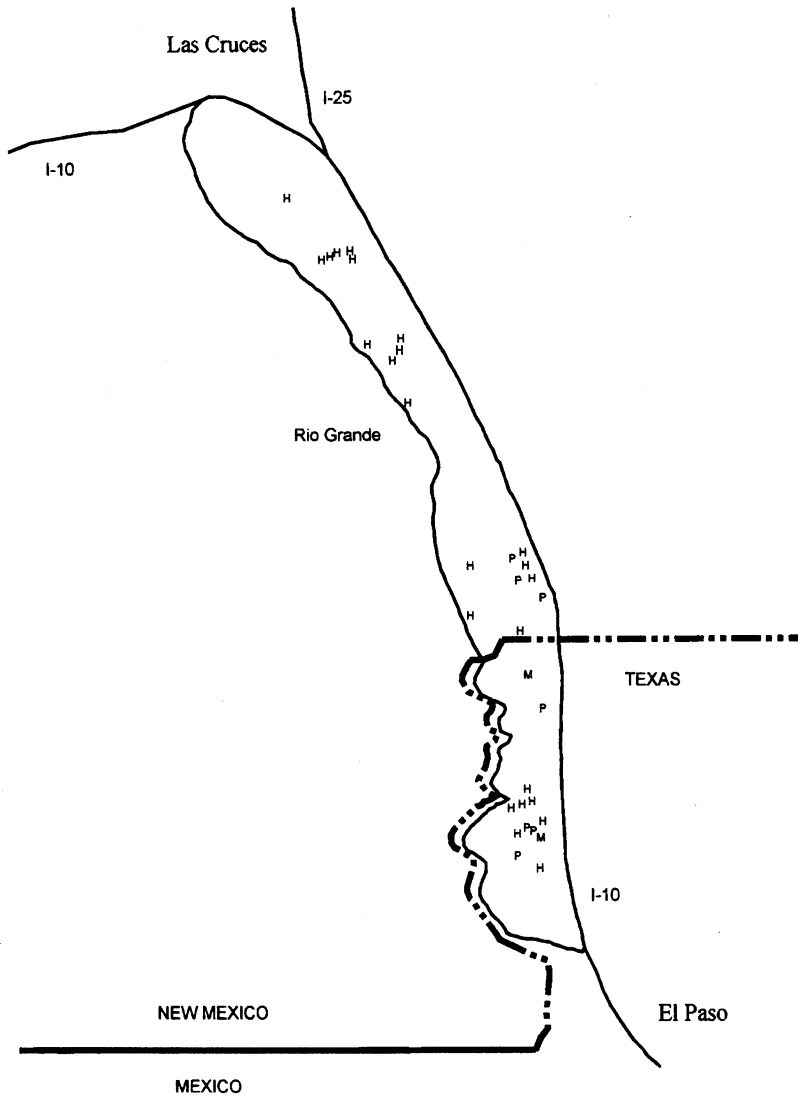


Fig. 7. The project area, 2002 archaeological survey, showing historical (H), prehistoric (P), and multi-component (M) sites identified during the survey.

## RESULTS

Survey crews identified and recorded 7 prehistoric sites, 24 historical sites, and 2 multi-component (i.e., prehistoric and historical) sites (Fig. 7). The term “site” is here used broadly, in most cases signifying relatively large and dense artifact concentrations (10–50 artifacts/m<sup>2</sup>), though in a few cases signifying

small low-density scatters of material ( $<5$  artifacts/m<sup>2</sup>). Evidence of features or structural remains was observed at only five of these sites, all historical. Site size ranged from less than 4 m<sup>2</sup> to more than 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> (and perhaps, in some cases where site boundaries were unclear, significantly larger). As best we can tell, none of these sites were previously identified or recorded by anyone. All modern material remains, including refuse concentrations and what can be best described as random litter less than 50 years old, were ignored.

Of greater significance for this project, three (and possibly four) segments of the original Camino Real were identified and recorded. These segments are linear depressions 3–5 m in width and ranging from approximately 80 m to nearly 300 m in length. Their north-south orientation is the direction once taken by the trail in this area, and they almost always run through relatively dense desert scrub yet contain very little plant life within them. These characteristics are similar to vast stretches of the Camino Real identified and recorded elsewhere, e.g., in undeveloped desert throughout northern Mexico and New Mexico where identification is incontrovertible (e.g., Marshall, 1990; Staski, 1998).

Bolstering our confidence that these features are indeed segments of the Camino Real is the fact that two of them are contiguous to sites dating to the use of the trail (AD 1598 to ca. 1880). In one case in particular, the trail segment is associated with a relatively large site (25,000–30,000 m<sup>2</sup>) containing several very dense concentrations of historical artifacts and what appear to be several structural remains. These data and related archival information make this locale especially interesting and potentially significant.

The trail segment and site in question are found in the village of Vinton, Texas, and might be the remains of the paraje commonly known as “La Salinera,” the first paraje (or campsite) north of El Paso and a place where the Camino Real crossed the Rio Grande. While identified in contemporary documents and on maps, La Salinera has not previously been described archaeologically. It is our intention to conduct limited excavations at this locale in the near future in order to determine better whether our identification is correct.

Parajes were established roughly every 10 miles along the Camino Real as places to rest temporarily before continuing onward. They were not final destinations, though they were visited repeatedly for nearly 300 years as groups of people moved up and down the trail. As a result, and generally speaking, few of the material manifestations of permanent or even long-term occupation were ever constructed or deposited, or otherwise formed at these places. The archaeological record of them is the result of complex formation processes that cause them to be ephemeral and sometimes inscrutable. The resulting archaeological sites tend to be obscure, difficult to find, and very difficult to study.

La Salinera might be somewhat different, however. This particular paraje was located at the upper of two fords across the Rio Grande to the immediate north of El Paso. The lower ford, La Salineta, was the more commonly used through the

centuries. It was the site of several failed attempts to bridge the river (Scurlock, 1999) and is well known as the place where nearly 2,000 refugees fleeing the Pueblo Revolt remained for almost 2 months (September and October, AD 1680—Hackett and Shelby, 1942; Sonnichsen, 1968, pp. 32–33; Walz, 1951, pp. 30–34). Still, La Salinera, just a few miles north of La Salineta, was and is significant. Its greatest archaeological significance is that it was a place where groups of people traveling the Camino Real would wait, sometimes for substantial periods of time, until conditions allowed the river to be crossed safely (see discussion in Gregg, 1954, p. 272). As a result, the archaeological record at this paraje must be considerable, more extensive and diverse relative to what might be found at many of the other parajes along the trail. We anticipate a fruitful excavation.

### CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, significant archaeological resources related to the Camino Real exist along that segment of the trail running between Las Cruces and El Paso. Some of these resources have been identified and recorded, and the potential information they contain encourages us to investigate further the most significant among them. We can only conclude that the general assumption shared among historians and archaeologists, that this segment of the trail has been completely destroyed by development activities, is false.

Why does this matter? There are at least two good reasons. First, the results of our survey show that the potential for fruitful research exists along this segment of the trail. This is a remarkable result, given that historians and archaeologists did not even look at this ca. 35 miles of the Camino Real before our work. The widely held assumption was that material remnants of the trail between Las Cruces and El Paso are gone, destroyed completely by development. What we did was empirically evaluate this assumption, and to the astonishment of many found it to be incorrect. The methodological implications are far reaching and significant for professionals tasked with evaluating the nature and extent of archaeological resources anywhere (see Staski, 1982 for a general statement on archaeological resource integrity in developed areas).

Second, and perhaps more important because it is significant to a greater number of people, the results of our survey suggest that opportunities exist in the project area for developing cultural or heritage tourism and educational outreach programs related to the Camino Real and New Mexico. These opportunities are greatest in the village of Vinton, where a trail segment and site, possibly the remains of the paraje known as La Salinera, are located. Since these archaeological resources were previously unknown, the opportunities for cultural tourism and outreach were unrecognized. Thus, in the National Park Service/Bureau of Land Management Draft Comprehensive Management Plan/Environment Impact Statement For El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (2002) there is no mention of

La Salinera, Vinton, or anything else in the immediate vicinity. When discussing “high-potential historic sites,” by which is meant “those historic sites related to the route . . . which provide opportunity to interpret the historic significance of the trail during the period of its major use” (p. 151), the text moves seamlessly from a discussion of Keystone Dam (south of Vinton and La Salinera) to a discussion of Brazito and the Bracito Battlefield and paraje (north of Vinton and La Salinera—see p. 152). Surely, the results of our archaeological survey should encourage amendments to this text and to the plans of the Park Service/BLM.

Developing cultural tourism and outreach results in cultural enrichment, which is important but not nearly everything people need (Brown, 2000). Fortunately, developing cultural tourism and outreach also results in economic enrichment, a very real need in the economically deprived communities of the Mesilla Valley. It is both reasonable and appropriate to take advantage of Vinton’s historic resources in order to bolster the local economy.

Vinton will never be a major tourist destination. But it could easily be a place people visit while touring the region, which is full of related points of interest. Vinton is, after all, along the El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro National Historic Trail, and La Salinera could be an additional stop for tourists traveling the related Auto Tour Route (National Park Service/Bureau of Land Management, 2002). This possibility significantly enhances the potential for local economic development.

Transforming the archaeological remains of La Salinera into an attraction worth stopping for will require careful planning and coordination so that the interests of various stakeholders are not jeopardized. This outcome can be reached. In the words of Edward H. Able Jr., President and CEO of the American Association of Museums, “Cultural tourists are an appealing and growing market, and there is emerging an extraordinary opportunity for local communities, cultural organizations, and the tourist industry to work together towards mutually beneficial goals” (Able, 2002). For scholars, the greatest shared interest is in maintaining the integrity of the resource while presenting an authentic and accurate picture of the past. I believe this interest can be satisfied while meeting the economic needs and social concerns of everyone else.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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