



BLACK HISTORY AND NEW MEXICO'S PLACE NAMES

by Monroe Billington

NEW MEXICO IS FAMOUS for its tricultural traditions. The four best-known general histories of the territory and state include much material on the region's three major ethnic groups: Indian, Hispanic, Anglo.¹ The authors of one history of New Mexico admit that their narrative "attempts to interpret the story of New Mexico within the framework of...the state's unique tricultural history."² Another volume stresses these ethnic groups in its title, and the book itself is divided into three parts: "Indian," "Spanish," "Gringo." In the preface of this volume, the author writes: "In New Mexico the peoples of three cultures have successfully worked out a life together...."³ No doubt this emphasis is warranted, considering the tremendous influence these groups have had upon the region's politics, economics, and society. Throughout the state today, the presence and influence of the Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo cultures—and the intermingling of them—is everywhere apparent. One of the more obvious manifestations of these groups is in New Mexico's place names. The Indians have contributed many place names including Nambe, Zuni, and Taos; the Hispanics have given names to places such as Hondo, San Felipe, Azotea, as well

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George McJunkin on his horse "Headless." (Photo courtesy Museum of New Mexico, Neg. No. 50884)

as hundreds of others; and the Anglos have named specific places like Andrews, Four Mile Draw, Rip Lake, and so on.

Not to be overlooked in New Mexico's cultural heritage is its black population. During the early exploration and colonization periods, literally thousands of free blacks and black slaves migrated or were taken to New Spain.⁴ While the great majority of these blacks lived and worked in present-day Mexico, a few of them made their way to New Mexico, the northernmost outer limit of New Spain. Some of these blacks and their descendants continued to live in New Mexico while that region was under the control of an independent Mexico. When the United States took over New Mexico in 1846, some of the progeny of these blacks lived there, although they were difficult to identify because of racial mingling over many years. Those residents were joined by other blacks who migrated to the area from the more eastern portions of the United States.

In 1850, when New Mexico was organized as a formal Territory of the United States, a census revealed that 22 free blacks lived in the Territory, most of them in Santa Fe.⁵ Ten years later that number had increased to 64.⁶ Neither the 1850 nor the 1860 census counted any black slaves in the Territory, although other sources indicate some slaves either lived in or passed through the Territory between

1840 and 1865.⁷ By 1870 the numbers of blacks had increased to 172.⁸ Significant numbers of blacks moved into the Territory in the 1870s and 1880s, attracted to New Mexico because of jobs associated with the booming mining industry. By 1880 New Mexico's black population had grown to 1,015, and by 1890 those numbers had increased to 1,956.⁹ When the mining industry fell on hard times during the economically depressed years of the mid-1890s, a slower in-migration plus an out-migration reversed this growth trend so that by 1900 black numbers had declined to 1,610.¹⁰ During the next decade the Territory's black population increased ever so slightly, the Census Bureau in 1910 reporting 1,628 blacks.¹¹ New Mexico Territory's black population was small compared to the Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo population; nevertheless, blacks were a part of the region's multicultural society, and they had their proportionate influence.

The presence of this fourth racial group can be seen in some of New Mexico's place names. Of approximately 5,000 New Mexico place names, at least seven have the term "Negro" or "nigger" in them. How these places came to be named reveals not only the presence of blacks but also the role of blacks¹ in New Mexico's history, especially its labor force.

Three of these place names were related to the mining industry. When a young black, whose name is unknown, migrated to Elizabethtown in Colfax County during the boom years between 1865 and 1890, he lived apart from the rest of the society on a little creek which flowed into the Moreno River in the north end of Moreno Valley. That creek came to be called Nigger Creek. It is unknown how Nigger Digger, 13 miles southeast of Dusty in Socorro County, acquired its name, but it may have evolved because blacks lived and worked in that mining region. The same probably can be said for Nigger Head, a place in the western portion of Socorro County north of the Gallinas Mountains.¹²

For years historians, novelists, and movie-makers overlooked black cowboys, but in recent times they have begun to give that group its due attention.¹³ While most of the black cowboys herded cattle on the Great Plains, some of them lived and worked as far west as New Mexico. Famous among these was an ex-slave named Frank, an all-round cowboy who for years worked for John Simpson Chisum, widely-known cattleman who owned a veritable empire stretching over 100 miles along the Pecos River in the south-

eastern part of New Mexico Territory.¹⁴ Even better known was George McJunkin, a bronc-buster and trail-drover, who became foreman of the Crowfoot Ranch in Union County. While riding up Wild Horse Gulch near Folsom in 1908, McJunkin discovered some large, bleached bones which, when called to the attention of scholars, proved to be those of extinct giant bison. With the bones were some curious flint points of exquisite workmanship, offering proof that man had lived and hunted there during the Ice Age, some 10,000 years ago. McJunkin had discovered the now famous Folsom site, the first recognized Early Man site in North America.¹⁵

The presence of black cowboys and blacks associated with white cowboys in New Mexico was behind the naming of Nigger Mesa in Union County between Folsom and Branson, Colorado. Cowboys designated the tableland's name after a fight between a black and a white cowboy occurred at the foot of the mesa in the early 1880s.¹⁶

Dead Negro Draw, a small valley west of Elida in Roosevelt County, received its name because of a black who was associated with the cattle industry. When Dr. Caleb Winfrey went to the Pecos River country in the early 1880s, he took a black servant with him. After living on the banks of the Pecos for a few years, the doctor bought the H Bar Ranch near present-day Portales. When a cold winter blizzard caused his cattle to drift south, Dr. Winfrey sent his black servant to ride with the cowboys to drive the cattle back home. While on this assignment, the servant, complaining of being cold, got off his horse. The cowboys put the black man back on his horse and tried to laugh him out of his chill, but they failed. Shortly thereafter, the black man died, whereupon the cowboys carried him on a pack horse to the home ranch. Another version of this story indicates that the storm occurred in the summertime and that the cowboys made the "Winfrey Negro" get off the horse and walk to keep his blood circulating. Then they helped him back on the horse and rode on each side of him to hold him up. When they all reached the ranch, the black man was dead. Dr. Winfrey buried his servant on his ranch, building a fence around the grave and planting a willow tree to shade it. For many years this was the only marked grave in Roosevelt County.¹⁷

From 1866 to 1899, a significant number of black soldiers were periodically stationed at one or more of eleven of New Mexico Territory's some two dozen forts. From 1866 to 1869 parts of the 38th, 57th, and 125th Infantries (colored) were stationed at Forts Bascom,



Ninth Cavalry Band on the Plaza, Santa Fe, New Mexico, July 1880. (Photo by Ben Wittick, courtesy School of American Research Collections in the Museum of New Mexico, Neg. No. 50887)

Bayard, Craig, Cummins, McRae, Selden, Stanton, and Union. From 1875 to 1881 companies of the 9th Cavalry (colored) were stationed at all of the above forts except Bascom, as well as at Tularosa, Wingate, and Camp Ojo Caliente. Between 1886 and 1892 units of the 10th Cavalry (colored) were located at Fort Bayard, and from 1888 to 1896 a part of the 24th Infantry (colored) was there. Also, units of the 24th Infantry were at Fort Selden from 1888 to 1891

and at Fort Stanton for the month of July 1896. The 25th Infantry (colored) was stationed at Forts Bayard and Wingate in 1898 and 1899, joined at Bayard by troopers from the 9th Cavalry in 1899. Finally, men from the 9th Cavalry were at Wingate in 1889 and 1899.¹⁸ Black troops helped rid New Mexico Territory of the Indian menace, being instrumental in subduing the infamous Chief Victorio and his lieutenant Nana. Furthermore, they escorted trains and stages, built roads and telegraph lines, guarded water holes, protected supply lines, drove cattle, and watched over settlers who migrated from the east. In short, they aided in bringing civilization to this vast frontier region.¹⁹

Nigger Hill in Roosevelt County was named for a group of soldiers from the 10th Cavalry, who died of thirst there while hunting a band of hostile Indians. The story goes that when the cavalry sighted the Indians, many of the black troopers began chasing them without first filling their canteens. After tailing the Indians for an entire day, after which they rested for one night, they then pursued the Indians until mid-afternoon of the second day, at which time they interrupted the chase to search for badly needed water. At this point some buffalo hunters who had joined the chase left the cavalry to seek a lake to the northeast. After reaching the lake, some of the hunters returned with water for those who still needed it. Most of the soldiers finally reached a small body of water, but before they did, legend has it that they killed and drank the blood of 22 of their horses. Five of the soldiers died. A group of the black soldiers became stranded on Nigger Hill, and they either died of thirst or the Comanches slaughtered them.²⁰

The naming of Dead Negro Hill, which rises about 100 feet above the surrounding terrain and covers about 150 acres of land in Roosevelt County, also involved black soldiers. The most common version is based upon the transferral of a detachment of black soldiers from Fort Sumner to Colorado City, Texas.²¹ The soldiers, who were probably infantrymen, walked along the old military road which passed close to Portales Springs. Suddenly a plains blizzard struck, causing the soldiers to wander many miles south of the road. Weary, hungry, and cold, they huddled on the south side of this hill, despite their white commanding officers' attempts to keep them moving. Many of the soldiers froze to death, but the officers and a few men survived, making their way to civilization with the story of their tragic experience.²²

Blacks in the United States have never approved of the term "nigger" as an appellation, and today even "Negro" is not acceptable to many blacks. But in the late nineteenth century when all or most all of New Mexico's black place names were designated, those terms were quite common among the Anglo population, and members of that dominant group had little or no sensitivity to blacks' feelings. Unacceptable though the terms may be to blacks today and whatever implications of inferiority they may have carried in the past, in fact these place names are a reminder of an often ignored but important racial minority in the history of New Mexico.☆

NOTES

1. Warren A. Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (Norman, Okla., 1962); Marc Simmons, *New Mexico: A Bicentennial History* (New York, 1977); Ralph Emerson Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1911-17), 5 vols.; Frank D. Reeve, *History of New Mexico* (New York, 1961), 3 vols.
2. Myra Ellen Jenkins and Albert H. Schroeder, *A Brief History of New Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1974), iii.
3. Erna Fergusson, *New Mexico: A Pageant of Three Peoples*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1964), vii.
4. R.R. Wright, "Negro Companions of the Spanish Explorers," *American Anthropologist*, vol. IV (1902), 217-28; J.I. Israel, *Race, Class and Politics in Colonial Mexico, 1610-1670* (London, 1975).
5. Bureau of the Census, *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850* (Washington, 1853), 990-91.
6. Bureau of the Census, *Population of the United States in 1860; the Eighth Census* (Washington, 1864), 568. Until Arizona became a Territory in 1863, it was a county of New Mexico. In 1850 no blacks lived in Arizona, and in 1860 that county had 21 black residents who are not included among these 64 residents in New Mexico, since they lived outside the present boundaries of New Mexico.
7. See Allan Nevins, *Fremont: Pathfinder of the West* (New York: 1939, 1955), 129, 304, 320-21; David S. Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Lincoln, Neb., 1954), 171, 266, 313, 319; Alvin R. Sunseri, "A Note on Slavery and the Black Man in New Mexico, 1846-1861," *Negro History Bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 7 (Oct.-Nov., 1975), 457-59; Martin Hardwick Hall, "Negroes with Confederate Troops in West Texas and New Mexico," *Password*, vol. 13 (Spring, 1968), 11-12; Martin H. Hall, "Historical Notes," *Password* vol. 13 (Fall, 1968), 104-105.
8. Bureau of the Census, *The Statistics of the Population of the United States from the Ninth Census: 1870* (Washington, 1872), 608.
9. Bureau of the Census, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census: 1880* (Washington, 1883), vol. 1, 402; Bureau of the Census, *Census Report on Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, 1895), pt. 1, 422.
10. Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900* (Washington, 1901), pt. 1, 549. For a brief account of New Mexico's rising and declining mining fortunes, see Paige W. Christiansen, *The Story of Mining in New Mexico* (Socorro, N.M., 1974).
11. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Vol. III, Population* (Washington, 1913), 171.
12. T.M. Pearce, ed., *New Mexico Place Names: A Geographical Dictionary* (Albuquerque, 1965), 109.
13. For example, see Philip Durham and Everett Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York, 1965).
14. Harwood P. Hinton, Jr., "John Simpson Chisum, 1877-84," Part 2, *New Mexico Historical Review*, vol. XXXI (Oct., 1956), 326, 327, 335, 336.

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