

# MEXICAN AMERICANS

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*A Historical Perspective*

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# Mexican Americans

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There are more than 15 million Mexican Americans living in the United States today. They may live in the bustling *barrios* (Mexican neighborhoods) of Los Angeles, in remote villages of New Mexico or in the wealthy suburbs of cities such as Dallas. Census data from 1990 revealed that the Mexican-origin population constituted nearly 60 percent of the 22 million Hispanics in America. Although Hispanics represent a diverse population group, they are often treated as a homogeneous people with a common historical heritage. In this chapter the focus is on the Mexican-origin population that resides largely in the Southwest and Midwest.

The roots of Mexican Americans date back to a time when the United States did not exist and to native cultures thousands of years old. When the Spaniards arrived, Mexico was a land of centuries-old and, in some instances, complex societies, including the Aztec, Toltec, and Zapotec. Like the earlier Indian civilizations of the Maya and Olmec, these civilizations enjoyed highly developed architecture, astronomy, mathematics, arts, medicine and religion. Territorial expansion—through war, ingenious land use and social organization—helped powerful clans establish trade advantages and strong cultural traits—distinct languages, religion and arts.

Spain renamed the vast region—reaching from Panama to the southeast Atlantic Coast and northwest to the Rio Grande and beyond—“New Spain.”

Awareness of these deep native cultural traditions is one reason many Mexican Americans prefer not to be called Hispanic or Spanish, terms that recognize only their European component. The term Latino, while less specific, also emphasizes only the Mediterranean element of Mexican Americans’ ethnic heritage. What to call the people who emerged from the intermingling of bloods that followed the conquest of Mexico has been debated frequently, but no consensus has been reached. However, Mexican American and Mexican are the terms most often used by this group.

The story of the Mexican-origin people begins in a region once considered uninhabitable and forbidding. The United States Southwest was a land subjugated not by *conquistadors* (Spanish soldiers or conquerors) but by well-disciplined farmers, ranchers and miners of Spanish and Indian heritage. After several attempts to find cities of gold proved unsuccessful, the Spanish monarchy

acquiesced to actually establishing colonies in this region. Thus, before English travelers landed at Plymouth Rock, Hispanos had founded Santa Fe and Spain had undertaken the exploration of other western portions of the North American continent. Even though aided by thousands of soldiers, priests and civilians, colonization of this vast region required nearly two centuries. In the establishment of New Mexico, the Juan De Oñate party sought mining opportunities. Spaniards would have little to do with the *entrada* into New Mexico or other territories in the frontier. They advanced in small wagon caravans followed by horses, mules and cattle. First Texas then California, Arizona and Colorado followed the example of the colonization of New Mexico, but each in a distinct way.

To this land came the sons and daughters of mixed marriages in Mexico. Like the European newcomers landing on the Atlantic Coast, the Spanish/*mestizo* (people of combined Native American and European ethnicity) travelers came in search of new opportunities and to begin new lives. From the Spanish government they received promises of supplies and military protection; most often, they received little of either. They endured hardship and isolation. Their experiences in the *pueblo* stronghold of New Mexico, in the magnificent Sierras of California and among the Tejas Indians allowed them to form different communities from those of their Spanish compatriots in the interior of Mexico or their European counterparts in colonial New England.

Spain held great power over its colonies, and taxes from the Americas paid for numerous long and bloody wars in Europe and the Middle East. To the Spanish census takers who came to the frontier every ten years, these Southwest colonists would not have dared call themselves Spaniards; in the eyes of the Spanish law and by custom, they were *mestizos* and *Indios* (Indians). By the mid-eighteenth century, they occupied small and large *ranchos* north of the Rio Grande and served as frontline soldiers in defense of marauding Indians and intruding Yankees and Southerners. The latter, however, came in increasing numbers during the early nineteenth century. These hardy colonists rarely saw a priest, seldom encountered a doctor and understood that in the frontier, perseverance and strength counted for more than knowledge and luck.

Both Spain and Mexico left an indelible imprint on the American Southwest. Spanish missions and name-places mark the early impact of conquest and colonization. The region's largest towns, Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, San Antonio, Santa Fe and Tucson, are only a few of the many cities established by Spanish and Mexican colonists. The early borderland colonists developed agriculture and mining in all of the southwestern states and introduced wine and citrus to California, sheep and textiles to New Mexico and cattle and cotton to Texas. Many of the region's present water, land and mineral laws were influenced by Spanish and Mexican legal codes. Spanish colonization, however, was checked by the presence of a large number of Indians; thus, Spain and Mexico only partially controlled the economy and society of the borderlands.

## ***La Raza Mestica: Indian, Spanish and African***

The meeting of Europeans and Mexican Indians began in 1511, when 18 shipwrecked Spanish adventurers landed on the Yucatán coast of Mexico. When Fernando "Hernán" Cortés landed on the island of Cozumel in 1519, he rescued one of the survivors, Jeronimo de Aguilar, but Jeronimo's companion, Gonzalo de



*Fernando "Hernán" Cortés*

Guerrero, had assimilated thoroughly into Mayan society and thus rejected all offers to return with the Spaniards. Guerrero had married the daughter of the Mayan chief Nachan Can and had assumed a position of power in the Mayan community. It is believed that the intermarriage of Europeans and Native Mexicans began with the de Aguilar and de Guerrero contact. Cortés' soldiers also fathered children with Indian women, and their children continued to mix Spanish and Indian genes.

By 1510 Spanish colonists had introduced enslaved Africans to the Caribbean islands as labor to replace the native population being decimated by European diseases. Following the conquest of Mexico, Spaniards introduced enslaved Africans to that region, thus adding a third racial stock to middle America. This mixing of Spaniards (themselves of varied ethnic stocks), Native Americans (the primary group) and, at times, Africans, produced a new people in Mexico, now often called *la raza*, the race.

Death accompanied the birth of *la raza*. When Spain and its Indian allies conquered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, renamed Mexico City in 1521, approximately 2 million lived in the vast Valley of Mexico, and 28 million lived in the surrounding regions that form Mexico today. More than 20 million Mexican Indians would die before 1550, with disease rather than war being the primary cause of death.

Smallpox, which swept in as early as 1520, probably acted as Spain's unseen ally in the conquest of Tenochtitlán. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a grim panoply of epidemics, including yellow fever and malaria, attacked the Indian population. By 1580 only about 2.5 million Indians remained, and by 1646 that number had fallen to little more than 1.2 million. (These epidemics were caused by European diseases previously unknown in America.)

To replace the dwindling labor supply during this era, the Spanish brought in 100,000 enslaved Africans, the majority of those imported during the colonial era. Many owners gave or sold freedom to the enslaved Africans, and many of their children never had slave status because they were born to Indian and *mulatto* mothers. Over many generations the African heritage tended to be integrated into the other populations.

Only in the last part of the eighteenth century did the Indian population regain its level of 1580, and by then it formed approximately two-thirds of the total population, with the great majority of the remainder being mixtures of Indian, African and European groups. (See the following chart, "Population Changes in Mexico: 1646–1793.") Around 1800 Mexico's caste lines were hardening into such groups as *peninsulares* (Spanish-born Spaniards), *criollos* (Mexican-born Spaniards) and *mestizos*, which had several subcategories.

### Population Changes in Mexico: 1646–1793

	1646		1793	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
European	13,780	.8	7,904	.1
African	35,089	2.0	6,100	.1
Native American	1,269,607	74.6	2,319,741	61.1
Euromestizo	168,568	9.8	677,458	17.9
Afromestizo	116,529	6.8	369,790	9.8
Indomestizo	109,042	6.0	418,568	11.0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,712,615</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>3,799,561</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Data compiled by William Mason.

## The Northern Thrust of Hispanic Culture: 1519–1800

By 1536 a few shipwrecked Spaniards under Cabeza de Vaca had struggled across what is now the southern United States and returned to Mexico. In 1540 Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's expedition, seeking fabled riches, reached what is now Kansas. In 1565 a group fortified a site named San Agustín (St. Augustine) on the coast of Florida to protect ships carrying American treasures to imperial Spain. At that time missions in present-day Georgia sought to convert Indians to Catholicism. Spain claimed much of North America from Canada south to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. Below lay Central and South America, with lands claimed by Spain and Portugal.

Spain occupied what is now the southwestern United States through three basic thrusts north between 1598 and 1769. In 1598 a group from New Spain tried to colonize in what is now known as northern New Mexico. Led by Juan de Oñate, a wealthy heir to a silver mining family of northern Mexico and a grandson of the daughter of Moctezuma, Spanish, *mestizos* and Mexican Indians, including soldiers, colonists and priests, established a capital next to a *pueblo* Indian village on the Rio Grande. In 1610 the Spaniards moved the government seat into the hills to a place they called Santa Fé (Holy Faith).

New Mexico, like Florida, was a region where Spain's early efforts to colonize had some success, in part because Spaniards and *mestizos* forced local Indians to supply food, labor and equipment. Spain was set on finding rich mines, converting Indians to Christianity and teaching them to live like Europeans. Despite ongoing racial mixing, Indian revolts in Georgia and New Mexico in 1680 indicated the depth of native resentment of the newcomers. In the 1700s, however, Spanish colonists

and Indians increasingly accommodated each other in trade and daily encounters.

Between 1720 and 1770, Texas and the coast of upper California provided similar opportunities for Spanish colonization based, again, on Catholic missions, defensive *presidios*, Indian labor, agriculture and a little trade. Spanish and Mexican *mestizos* build several cities in Texas at this time, including the city of San Antonio in 1718. By 1800 the vast frontier region of northernmost New Spain was inhabited largely by Indians and people of mixed blood who had established a wide variety of interrelationships. The frontier attracted many *euromestizos*, those who may not have been classified as Spaniards in central Mexico but received that status in northern Mexico's more liberal atmosphere. Only in New Mexico did Hispanics come to outnumber Indians, yet only 16 of those considered to be Spaniards in 1790 were born in Spain. The pattern of racial mixing resulted in Mexican Americans who might consider themselves primarily Spanish, *mestizo*, Indian or, simply, *mejicano*.

## Colonial Battles for Independence

By the 1750s Spain was keenly aware of French and English competition for North America. In a political move in 1779, the Spanish government raised troops and monies in its American colonies to support independence for 13 British colonies on the Atlantic Coast.

Meanwhile, New Spain's opposition to colonial rule grew steadily. In part, this response reflected European "Enlightenment," the belief in national self-determination that had already encouraged revolutions in British America, Haiti and France.

With Indian and *mestizo* support, Father Miguel Hidalgo and other "liberals" launched the Mexican fight

unskilled workers, moved to the Southwest in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Immigration scholar Alejandro Portes writes: “Hence, contrary to the conventional portrait of Mexican immigration as a movement initiated by the individualistic calculations of gain of the migrants themselves, the process had its historical origins in North American geopolitical and economic expansion that first restructured the neighboring nation and then proceeded to organize dependable labor flows out of it.”

These new immigrants had a pronounced loyalty to Mexico, and though they despaired at the segregation and discrimination they encountered, they were unable to do much to combat the racial attitudes of the dominant population. Historian Thomas C. Wheeler explains that every immigrant had a price to pay along the path to becoming mainstream Americans. He remarks: “For the America of freedom has been an America of sacrifice, and the cost of becoming American has been high. For every freedom won, a tradition [is] lost. For every second generation assimilated, a first generation in one way or another [is] spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity [is] lost, an uncertainty [is] found.”

Almost by instinct, European Americans equated Mexicans with Indians. Professor Rodolfo Alvarez argues that the new wave of Mexicans entering the United States in the post-1900 era encountered a social situation very different from that of immigrants from other lands. Like McWilliams, Alvarez asserts that the experience of Mexicans “upon entering the United States was predefined by well-established social positions of pre-1900 Mexican Americans as a conquered people (politically, socially, culturally, economically, and in every other respect).”



*Mexican workers picking oranges in Los Angeles County, c. 1905–1910*

Meanwhile, in the United States the development of the Southwest, the Chinese Exclusion Acts and World War I intensified the need for cheap labor. Consequently, a great emigration began in Mexico, a combination of Mexicans being recruited by American agribusinesses and a need to escape the violence at home. No one knows how many Mexicans entered the United States after 1910, or how many of those who came stayed, but in 1916 the Commissioner of Immigration said that more than 1 million Mexicans were in the United States. The number of Mexicans in Texas alone leaped from approximately 71,000 in 1900 to 252,000 in 1920. Many Mexicans came on their own, but thousands of others were recruited to fill labor shortages and break strikes.

The Mexican immigration era of 1900–1930 qualifies as one of the most important population shifts in southwestern annals. Slightly more than 10 percent of Mexico’s population—approximately 1.5 million people—emigrated to the United States during these years. The significance of this period is shown by the fact that 94 percent of the foreign-born Mexican population in the United States in 1930 had arrived after 1900. Some 62 percent of them arrived after 1915. (United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1930)

The new arrivals far outnumbered the Mexican American population already in the United States. A tendency developed to call those who had been born in the United States Spanish Americans, while the newer arrivals remained Mexicans. Much folklore has developed about how the population of the American Southwest was “Spanish” as opposed to “Mexican.” After the war between Mexico and the United States, these designations helped differentiate the local residents, who frequently were tied to one another through marriage, from the Mexican enemy. Later the concept became a cudgel with which to beat newer immigrants from Mexico as being somehow racially different from the “Spanish Americans.” The difference lay more in culture than in caste. Most pre-1910 inhabitants of the American Southwest were bilingual and well indoctrinated in the American pattern by the time Mexican immigration began again in earnest after 1900. Confusion of culture and race was a constant condition of European American thinking, especially after 1920, when immigration from Mexico peaked. Understandably, problems between the established and new groups arose, and these problems continue today. Many younger Mexican Americans, keenly aware of their complex ethnic roots, call themselves *chicanos*.

The later-arriving Mexicans worked mostly as agricultural laborers in the Southwest. But by 1925 half lived in urban areas, and new Mexican Americans could be found in northern cities, from Alaska to Pennsylvania. In steel



*Emma Tenayuca on the steps of San Antonio's City Hall in Texas, c. 1938*

mills, copper mines and meat-packing plants, Mexican Americans filled all types of poorly paid jobs. Bad working, housing and sanitary conditions led to grim statistics; for example, the infant mortality rate of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles was significantly higher than that of European Americans.

Mexican American workers went on strike repeatedly in the early 1900s but won few real economic gains. Beginning in the 1890s, they formed *mutualistas*—mutual-aid or welfare associations—and protested racist policies, especially school segregation. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was born in the 1920s to defend Mexicans against racism and to help them gain economic and political power. In 1928 *La Union de Trabajadores del Valle Imperial* (The Union of Imperial Valley Workers) formed and called a strike against cantaloupe growers in California. This marked an important transition to more permanent forms of trade union associations. In 1938 one of the longest and most bitter conflicts of the Great Depression, the pecan shellers' strike, took place in San Antonio, Texas. Activist Emma Tenayuca participated in that disruption, one of the last major strikes before Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act and set minimum wage rates. In 1948 the American G.I. Forum was founded by a Mexican American doctor to combat discrimination against Mexican American veterans. Since 1950 numerous new organizations have been set up to help protect the civil rights of the growing Mexican American minority.

Moreover, as the historical development of Mexican American communities is examined, the active role of Mexican Americans in contesting civil rights violations is evident. Between the 1890s and the 1960s, the notorious segregation statutes of the Southwest governed interracial contacts in public places or facilities in such a way as to exclude Mexican Americans, African Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans from most accommodations available to European Americans. As *mestizos*, Mexican Americans experienced a distinct racism because of their Indian background, Catholic religion and skin color. Mexican Americans ended up with their own social and economic institutions and the “separate but equal” doctrine resulting from numerous decisions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries meant observance of social behavior where European Americans decided what privileges to extend to citizens of Mexican descent. These decisions served to limit integration and thereby increase social and economic disparities. For Mexican Americans, Jim Crow legislation and social custom included school segregation, denial of access to restaurants, hotels and theaters and exclusion from many well-paying jobs.

Finally, it is vital to recognize the importance of women in Mexican American history. They have played essential, complex roles as the nuclei of families and protectors of tradition. Moreover, *mejicanas* have worked in labor and human rights battles, in numerous artistic endeavors and in redefining social roles in relation to the traditional Hispanic male posturing called *machismo*. Their skills now sustain border factories (*maquilas*), cure physical and spiritual ills and increasingly define their society. The image of Mexico's patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe, though sometimes secularized, continues to focus the concerns of *mejicanas* on both sides of the border.

## A Revolving Door

The depressed conditions following World War I resulted in American workers wanting Mexicans and other immigrants kept out of the country. Government officials, however, were not so eager to restrict Mexican immigration; major employers testified before congressional committees that Mexicans had been vital in developing American agricultural and industrial enterprises valued at \$5 billion. Of the nation's vegetables, fruit and truck-delivered crops, 40 percent came from the Southwest, where Mexicans provided approximately 75 percent of the labor force. The Southwest had been transformed, in great part, by *Anglo* manipulation of water resources (following and enlarging the earlier Mexican pattern) and the labor of Mexicans.

The Immigration Act of 1924 marked the end of an era for all immigration to the United States. The first border patrol was established that year. Up to then, Mexicans had gone back and forth relatively freely. In 1926 the first bill to put Mexican immigration on a quota basis was introduced in Congress; exclusionist feeling was growing rapidly. After 1929, with the nation in the grip of a deep depression, at least 500,000 Mexicans were deported, but Mexican Americans participated in courageous strikes. Since then, Mexican immigration has depended on a “revolving-door” policy, with in or out being determined largely by the American economy.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, 500,000 Mexican Americans joined the United States Armed Forces. Thousands of Spanish-speaking men and women contributed to the Allied victory; however, the battlefields of Asia and Europe took the lives of many young men from the *barrios* of the Southwest. In some instances, those who returned home safely found that their service for their country entitled them to new opportunities to change or better their lives. For example, thousands of Mexican Americans entered colleges and universities with GI Bill support. Many others were able to buy their first homes with GI Bill veterans’ benefits. Certainly one of the most significant changes came in the determination of these veterans to establish new political organizations, such as the American G.I. Forum founded by Dr. Hector Garcia. A veteran of World War II, Dr. Garcia opened a medical practice in Corpus Christi, Texas, upon his return home from duty in the Italian campaign.

Veterans like Dr. Garcia returned to find many unsolved social and economic problems in their communities. Throughout the Southwest, many Mexican Americans lived in segregated communities, attended segregated schools and were denied the use of many public facilities. In Three Rivers, Texas, a small southern ranching community, European Americans had even prohibited the burial ceremony of Felix Longoria, a Mexican American member of the Army who had died of war-related injuries in the Philippines. The case of Felix Longoria became a rallying cry for Dr. Garcia and his American G.I. Forum. The forum had joined this cause when it learned that the Longoria family had been denied the use of the local funeral home on the basis that the funeral director did not want to do business with Mexican American clients. The newly founded American G.I. Forum sprang into action. Unable to work out arrangements in south Texas, Dr. Garcia and the veterans’ group arranged with the young Texas Senator Lyndon B. Johnson to have Longoria buried at Arlington National Cemetery near the nation’s capital. The Longoria incident represented one of the first successful efforts of the Mexican American community in its battle



*Wedding procession leaving a church in Córdova,  
New Mexico*

against segregation. Indeed, as a consequence of more organized efforts, Mexican Americans experienced success after success in challenging segregation.

The post-war reconstruction of Europe and the Cold War increased the level of emotional stress in many United States communities. In the late 1940s, Mexican Americans also began a drive to improve their social and political status. Throughout the late 1940s and the 1950s, LULAC and the American G.I. Forum challenged segregation policies in public schools, residential neighborhoods and public accommodations. The most successful school desegregation challenge came in Southern California in 1946, when a federal court found the segregation of school children a violation of rights protected by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

The large urban *barrios* of the West are a consequence of this economic revolution in the Southwest. During the past 50 years, Spanish-language newspapers and patriotic societies have flourished. Scholars recognize that there has been a great deal of cultural persistence among the Mexican-origin population, which can be attributed to several factors. One factor is that the Southwest was Spanish-Mexican for three centuries and, as such, native customs and values remained long after United States annexation. A second factor is that the region has been absorbing new migrants in substantial numbers during the last three generations. These new groups constantly reinforce aspects of Mexican culture that survive today in the *barrios* throughout the Southwest. Third, proximity





This map contains some locations and trade routes that are important in early Mexican American history. Many of these locations are cited in this resource book; others are provided for geographic perspective. Where a date follows the location, it refers to the first Spanish establishment of that site, either as a *misión*, a *presidio* (fort) or a *villa* (town).