

# Acequias

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On August 11, 1598, the first Spanish-inspired irrigation ditch, or acequia, was dug near present-day San Juan Pueblo in northern New Mexico. The workers were 1,500 Pueblo people, and the overseers were the Spanish conquistadores in Don Juan de Oñate's expedition. Basing their design on Pueblo practices and those of their own agricultural tradition, the Spanish settlers built acequia systems in every new settlement. By the late 1800s there were hundreds of acequias in the area.

In most communities, irrigation was so important that the system was begun even before the houses, public buildings and churches were finished. People usually lived clustered together in towns surrounded by cultivated fields and pasture land. Most families depended upon their small, irrigated tracts of land to supply them with almost all of life's necessities.

Physically, the acequia system includes a diversion dam with a moveable headgate for releasing or stopping the water, a main ditch channel (usually called the *acequia madre*, or "Mother ditch"), lateral ditches leading from the main channel to irrigate individual parcels of land, and a wasteway channel to return surplus water from the system back to the stream. Acequias are usually dirt ditches, and the diversion dams may be built of almost anything, from brush to native rock to plywood covered with old carpet.

Socially, an acequia association is composed of owners (*parciantes*) of the lands irrigated by a single main ditch channel. Owners pay dues to the association, and every spring they are responsible for cleaning the ditches and restoring the



**Acequias (irrigation ditches) were often dug before houses and other buildings were completed. Today, the acequia is a recognized political subdivision of the State. Photo courtesy Harvey Caplin Estate**

channels. You know it's spring in New Mexico when you see the workers cleaning ditches. Each association has three commissioners and a *mayordomo*, all elected by the membership. Their responsibilities are to make sure that each *parciante* receives his or her proper amount of water at the proper time.

There are at least 1,000 acequia associations in New Mexico today, most of them in north central New Mexico. The farms served by these acequias range from less than one acre to over 500 acres, with the majority less than 20 acres. Acequias that bring water to small dry fields are still often compared to the veins and arteries that bring blood to all parts of the human body, so essential are they to the continued existence of a very important part of New Mexico.

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