

LA BAJADA COMMUNITY DITCH AND MUTUAL DOMESTIC
WATER ASSOCIATION, ACEQUIA
La Bajada
Santa Fe County
New Mexico

HAER NM-18
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

LA BAJADA COMMUNITY DITCH AND MUTUAL DOMESTIC WATER ASSOCIATION, ACEQUIA

HAER No. NM-18

LOCATION: La Bajada, Santa Fe County, New Mexico.
The acequia is located at latitude: 35.550964, longitude: -106.235504 (culvert at former Route 66 crossing near reservoir). This coordinate was obtained on March 7, 2013, by plotting its location on Google Earth. The accuracy of the coordinate is +/- 12 meters.

The acequia runs approximately 2 miles along the Santa Fe River from *La Presa* (diversion point) to the *Desague* (end drainage point) in the northwest corner of La Bajada.

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: ca. 1737

PRESENT OWNER: La Bajada Community Ditch and Mutual Domestic Water Association

SIGNIFICANCE: La Bajada village with its long lots and adjacent acequia, is a typical example of a New Mexican vernacular landscape.¹ The acequia system is perhaps the most significant feature of the village, as all other features exist in relation to it (see Figure 1, Appendix). This agricultural landscape with Spanish Colonial influences dates from 1737, when the Village of La Bajada was first documented by the Franciscan Church.² A decline in the acequia system occurred due to a severe drought and the Great Depression. Many residents abandoned the village in the 1940s during World War II as they followed the call to serve their country. The village had a small rebirth in the 1960s when resettlement occurred and the acequia system and associated fields were revitalized.

Although some modernization of the acequia is evident, the existing system, associated landscape, and settlement patterns still retain integrity and the characteristics that convey a sense of the historic agricultural development in the area. Erosion and the construction of a secondary acequia in the 1980s have caused some minor changes to the original

¹ La Bajada has been designated a Traditional Community by Santa Fe County. In 1974, the Santa Fe County identification of Traditional Communities established the criteria for their designation that would be incorporated into the 1980 General Plan and later reiterated in the 1999 Growth Management Plan and currently the Sustainable Growth Management Plan. In order for a place to receive a traditional community status it was required to meet the following criteria: continuous settlement since 1925; a historic pattern of diverse and mixed community land uses which carried through to the present; presence of historic structures; existence of a village center.

² Archdiocese of Santa Fe, *Uncatalogued papers pertaining to San Miguel Church at La Majada de Dominguez*, 1732, from Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Office of Historic-Artistic Patrimony and Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

alignment, but the *Acequia Madre* or “Mother Ditch” has essentially maintained a consistent configuration (see Figure 3, Appendix). It retains earthen-lined ditches, and the setting is still consistent with its historic period. Most importantly, the acequia continues to serve agricultural needs in the community as well as traditional cultural values and practices. Another significant contribution of the acequia is that it serves as the community’s form of government.

DESCRIPTION:

The acequia is located in the village of La Bajada, in the west, central part of Santa Fe County, New Mexico. The legal description for the project area’s location is approximately 1 mile east/northeast of intersection of State Highway 16 and Indian Service Road 841. The project area of La Bajada Community is approximately 80 acres on private property, surrounded by Cochiti land and the Santa Fe National Forest (see Figure 3, Appendix). The settlement was established at the *Las Bocas*, or “mouth of the canyon” of the Santa Fe River since that river could serve the critical needs of the village, especially that of the acequia system. The escarpment of the 600'-high La Bajada Mesa that extends south and east from the Rio Grande Valley towards the Galisteo Basin serves as wind protection for the village.

The acequia runs in a northwest-southeast direction and is a gravity-fed system that pulls its main source of water from the Santa Fe River at *La Presa* (see Figure 2, Appendix). Water is diverted from here into the La Bajada Ditch (*Acequia Madre*) where it closely parallels the river to the north, crossing a culvert under Historic Route 66 before entering a small reservoir or *tanque*. Water is stored for use during dry times and released from the reservoir in a regulated manner to a second segment of the ditch, where it follows the contour of the land into the village along the northeast edge of the fields. The fields are oriented in a linear northeast-southwest direction so that the northeast edge of each has access to the ditch. *Regadoras* or small diversion gates divert water from the ditch to the individual fields. The *Acequia Madre* is diverted in the center of the village. The main channel continues in a northerly direction, while the Sangria Acequia Diversion continues south. Both meet at the *Desague*, the end point where the water drains back into the river. Water flows through the fields in a southwest direction, following the contours of the land, and is then re-deposited into the Santa Fe River in a complete cycle. A series of diversionary ditches or sangrias have been built in the fields off the main ditch. Although a concrete/basalt stone headgate, flumes and sluices were added to the acequia system by the Soil Conservation Service in the 1940s, the acequia retains its original earthen form and a high degree of historic integrity.³

The acequia does not just serve the agricultural need of the village; it also serves as a form of local government. The La Bajada Community Ditch and Mutual Domestic Water Association is

³ Kaisa Barthuli, “La Bajada Village Landscape Reconnaissance Report,” report, Introduction to Historic Preservation and Regionalism, University of New Mexico, 2007, 9.

led by a *Mayordomo* and various members who serve to issue watering days to the villages as well as maintenance activities such as the spring cleaning of the ditch. The acequia also serves as a device for the cultural traditions of the village, such as with the celebration of St. Michael, the patron saint of the village, which takes place the last weekend of September.⁴

HISTORY:

The origins of the La Bajada village and acequia system stem from the establishment of Spanish colonies in 1598 and the Spanish land grants that followed. The Spanish first recorded the La Bajada area as “El Ojito” or “Little Spring.” The area then became known as “La Majada Land Grant” after 1695 and its boundaries were defined as follows: “From the bank of the Rio Grande del Norte to the house at El Ojito to the east as far as the Boca de Sanetu and to the south where it reaches the land grant line of the Santo Domingo Pueblo and then north to El Ojito.”⁵ (See Figure 4, Appendix.)

La Bajada village is located at “Las Bocas,” or mouth of the Santa Fe River. It was built in response to the increasing numbers of travelers using the corridor to move between the high grounds of La Bajada Mesa and the lower lands of La Majada Mesa. The corridor, referred to as *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* (El Camino Real), translated as “The Royal Road of the Interior Lands,” was a major transportation network between Mexico City and northern New Mexico and was the main corridor used by the Spanish while founding the colonies. Along with its use as a transportation corridor, it also served as a source of communication and trade. La Bajada was established as an area of rest before an exhausting trip through the river canyon to the northern communities, including Santa Fe. The area worked well for a settlement since the location of the river created a prime location for agriculture and the escarpment served as protection for the occupants. (See Figure 5, Appendix.)

In 1926, during the rise of the automobile era, the El Camino Real corridor became part of the Route 66 Federal Highway System. A tourist camp and service station were constructed adjacent to the acequia before the steep incline up the La Bajada mesa. Remnants of the camp are visible today as well as a dirt segment of the Route 66 switchbacks. (See figures 6 and 7, Appendix, and HAER No. NM-15, La Bajada Historic Trails and Roads for additional information.)

Rooted in Spanish Colonial tradition, the acequia system was implemented to irrigate fields in the arid New Mexico climate. In 1927 La Bajada Community Ditch, an organization of local property owners and farmers, filed a declaration of water right (0569) with the Office of the State Engineer. The declaration stated that the community owned approximately 300 acres of land within the exterior boundaries of La Majada Grant and that the appurtenant water rights

⁴ Personal communication between authors and the Mayordomo George Gallegos, April 30, 2011. The predecessor corporation was called the La Bajada Community Ditch, Inc.

⁵ *La Majada* (Case No. 89 and Miscellany in Series 303, 305 and 310), U.S. Attorney’s Report to Attorney General of the U.S., 1894, from the Thomas B. Catron Papers Collection, Number: MSS 29 BC, University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

amounted to approximately 600 acre feet. This constituted the entire normal flow of the Santa Fe River at the point of diversion. The extent of the fields and acequia can be seen in the 1947 aerial photo (see Figure 4, Appendix). Popular crops grown during this period included corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, chile and wheat.⁶ Although crops of corn, beans, squash and chile continued to be grown into the twentieth century, alfalfa became a staple crop and was used to feed village livestock as well as being bundled and sold.⁷ Gradually the irrigated lands begin to diminish with the condemnation of 135 acres north of the village by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in the 1960s for the construction of the Cochiti Dam (see figures 5-7, Appendix).

Today alfalfa remains the primary crop and has since the 1960s. Villagers also produce small crops of vegetables such as tomatoes, carrots, spring onions, asparagus and historic crops such as corn, beans and squash.⁸ (See Figure 8, Appendix.) Within the last five years an organic certified farm was established within the long lots and various produce is grown there for the local farmers market.⁹

Historic orchard crops included apples, peaches, pears, cantaloupes, watermelons and grapes.¹⁰ Peaches, plums, cherries and apricots were reestablished after the drought in the 1930s and a vine restoration initiative begun in the 1970s is still in progress.¹¹ Young orchards of various trees are present in the long lots fields and date from just the previous year.¹² (See Figure 9, Appendix.) Despite the continuance of agriculture over the years there was a significant decline in irrigated lands.

In 1975 the District Court for Santa Fe County issued an order to the State Engineer to conduct a hydrographic survey for claims on the use of water from the Santa Stream System. Declaration 0569 filed by Miguel Leyva, Valentin Montoya and Ignacio Romero, commissioners of La Bajada Community Ditch, with the State Engineers Office in 1971 reflects the 1827 priority. The total length for La Bajada Community Ditch is 1.7 miles from the diversion *presa* to the end of the village. The storage reservoir, constructed in 1918 to store water for irrigation, was measured at 1.2 acres. The crop irrigation requirements are 1.5 acre feet per acre per annum. Farm delivery requirements are 3.0 acre feet per acre per annum. The acreage under irrigation in 1976 was 32.6 acres.¹³ The fallow acreage from one to four years was 11.4 acres. This total acreage of 44 acres is approximately one half of the current land area of La Bajada village.

⁶ Joan and Hy Rosner, *Albuquerque's Environmental Story: Toward a Sustainable Community*, 3rd ed., Albuquerque Conservation Association, 1996.

⁷ Barthuli, "La Bajada Village Landscape Reconnaissance Report."

⁸ Personal communication between authors and Henry Barreras and George Gallegos, April 30, 2011.

⁹ Personal communication between authors and Henry Barreras, April 9, 2011.

¹⁰ Rosner, *Albuquerque's Environmental Story*.

¹¹ Barthuli, *La Bajada Village Landscape Reconnaissance Report*.

¹² Personal communication between authors and George Gallageos. April 30, 2011.

¹³ New Mexico State Engineer Office, Santa Fe River Hydrographic Survey Report, Volume 1, 1976.

SOURCES:

Archdiocese of Santa Fe. *Uncatalogued papers pertaining to San Miguel Church at La Majada de Dominguez. 1732.* Archdiocese of Santa Fe, Office of Historic-Artistic Patrimony and Archives, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Barreras, Henry. Personal communication with authors, La Bajada, New Mexico, April 9 and 30, 2011.

Barthuli, Kaisa. "La Bajada Village: Cultural Landscape Reconnaissance Report." Report, Introduction to Historic Preservation and Regionalism, University of New Mexico, 2007.

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Gallegos, George. Personal communication with authors, La Bajada, New Mexico. April 9 and 30, 2011

La Majada (Case No. 89 and Miscellany in Series 303, 305 and 310). From the Thomas B. Catron Papers Collection, Number: MSS 29 BC, University of New Mexico, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

New Mexico State Engineer Office. "Santa Fe River Hydrographic Survey Report." Volume 1. 1976.

Rosner, Joan and Hy. *Albuquerque's Environmental Story: Toward a Sustainable Community.* Friends of Albuquerque's Environmental Story, 2005.

HISTORIANS: Marissa Barrett, Jitka Dekojova, Bob Estes, and Claire Heywood

PROJECT

INFORMATION: Documentation of La Bajada Acequia, Water System, and Village was undertaken for the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), as part of the course "Cultural Landscape Planning" led by Arnold Valdez, Adjunct Associate Professor, during the spring 2011 semester at the University of New Mexico (UNM). The course is offered by UNM, School of Architecture and Planning, Historic Preservation and Regionalism Program, Chris Wilson, Director, and Geraldine Forbes Isias, Dean. Field recording and drawings were produced under the direction of Arnold Valdez and completed for transmittal by Christopher H. Marston (HAER Architect). The field team included UNM students Marissa Barrett, Jitka Dekojova, Claire Heywood, Amalia Kenward, Numair Latif, Jonathan Sampson, and Adam Sullins.

**RELATED
PROJECTS:**

La Bajada Historic Trails and Roads, HAER No. NM-15.

La Bajada Community Ditch and Mutual Domestic Water Association,
Pipeline, HAER No. NM-17.

ILLUSTRATED APPENDIX

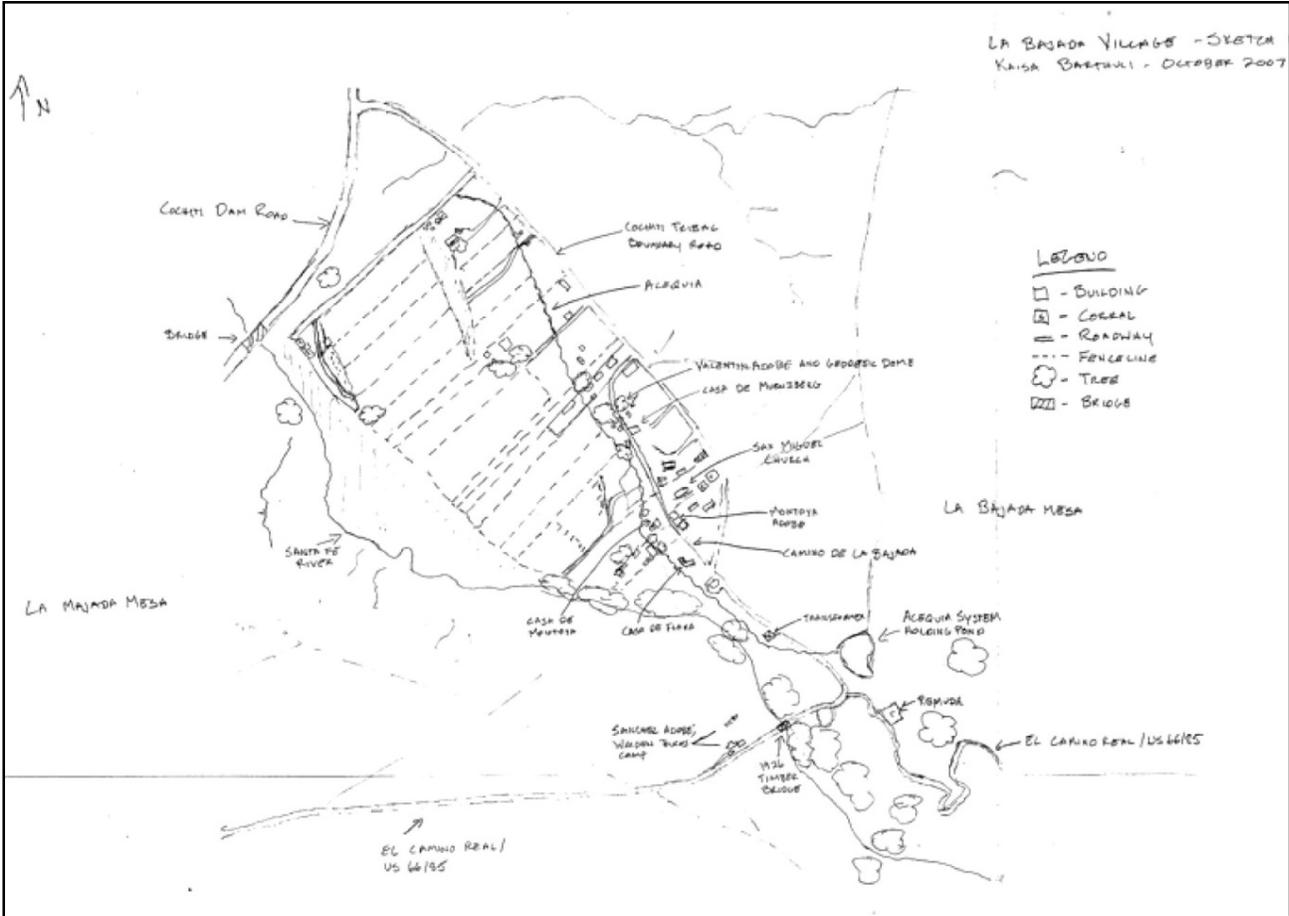


Figure 1: Sketch map of La Bajada village showing the spatial organization and settlement patterns of long lot fields and the acequia community ditch. Field sketch by Kaisa Barthuli, 2007.



Figure 2: *La Presa*, the main diversion structure from the Santa Fe River. Photo by Marissa Barrett, spring 2011.



Figure 3: The *Acequia Madre* or “Mother Ditch.” Photo by Marissa Barrett, spring 2011.



Figure 4: 1947 USGS aerial view of La Bajada village. Note extent of historic acequia system and fields to northwest, beyond current village boundaries; these northeast fields were condemned by the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1970s for construction of the Cochiti Dam. Source: UNM Earth Data Analysis Center.



Figure 5: 1951 USGS aerial view of La Bajada. Source: UNM Earth Data Analysis Center.



Figure 6: 1963 USFS aerial view of La Bajada. Source: UNM Earth Data Analysis Center.



Figure 7: 1975 USFS aerial view of La Bajada, reflecting current village boundaries after condemnation of northwest fields. Source: UNM Earth Data Analysis Center.



Figure 8: Sketch showing the lands condemned for the construction of Cochiti Dam Sketch by Jitka Dekojova, spring 2011.

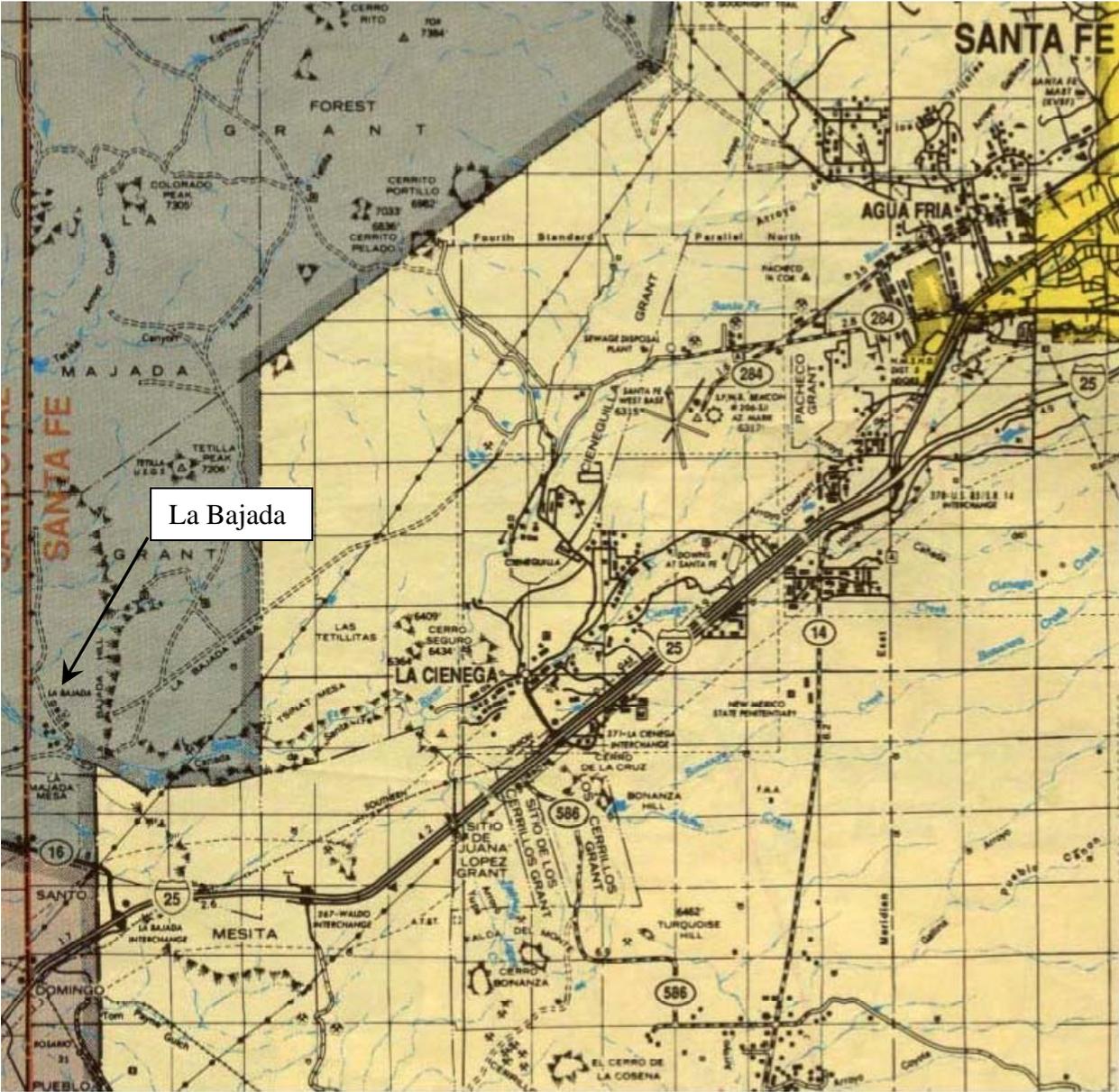


Figure 9: 1953 New Mexico Department of Transportation road map. Grey area shows boundary of original La Majada Land Grant.



Figure 10: La Bajada acequia and escarpment. Photo by field team, spring 2011.



Figure 11: The remnants of the tourist camp and service station adjacent to the acequia at the bottom of the mesa. Photo by field team, spring 2011.



Figure 12: A segment of the original dirt Route 66 climbing up La Bajada escarpment. Photo by field team, spring 2011.



Figure 13: Photo of a small mixture of vegetable crops fed by the acequia. Photo by field team, spring 2011.



Figure 14: Photo of a recently planted mixed orchard. Photo by field team, spring 2011.