

The Long Road Home: Pecos Pueblo Repatriation

BY FRANCES LEVINE

*I am dirty, ragged and sunburnt, but of best cheer.
My life's work has begun at last.*

— Adolph F. Bandelier, early September 1880,
after his first days of fieldwork at Pecos Pueblo

*It was believed that the remains would there be found so
stratified as to give a cross-section . . . of the development
of Pueblo arts and . . . enable students to place in proper
chronological sequence the many hitherto undatable ruins
that occur in such abundance in the valleys and on the
mesas of the region.*

— Alfred V. Kidder, April 1916, explaining the
importance of archaeological excavations
at Pecos Pueblo (*El Palacio* 3 [3]: 43)

*The people of Pecos are very grateful to have the
ancestors come home.*

— Ruben Sando, Pecos governor, at Jemez Pueblo,
May 20, 1999, on the repatriation of human remains
from the Peabody Museum, Harvard University

*I rise today to commemorate a truly historic event that
took place in my state of New Mexico . . . the nation's
largest act of Native American repatriation. The Jemez-
Pecos Repatriation—the reburial of nearly 2,000 human
remains and artifacts unearthed from what should have
been their final resting place.*

— Congressman Jeff Bingaman (*Congressional
Record* 145 [8, May 1999])

In the 119 years between Adolph Bandelier's discovery of his life's work while visiting the ruins of Pecos Pueblo and the 1999 repatriation of 2,067 human skeletons and associated funerary objects from Harvard's Peabody Museum to the grounds of Pecos National Historical Park, Southwestern archaeology developed into a rigorous science. During the same period, the relationship between Native peoples and archaeologists changed enormously. Over the century that archaeologists were honing their techniques and observational skills, Native peoples became more assertive about their rightful place, not simply as subjects of study, but as participants in the investigation of their history.

For all that time, Pecos Pueblo occupied a unique position among the thousands of magnificent archaeological sites in New Mexico. Presently, the Archaeological Records Management



Section (ARMS) of the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division (also a part of the Department of Cultural Affairs) maintains files on more than 176,000 archaeological sites. Pecos, known in the ARMS records as LA 625, is where some of the fundamental techniques of excavation and chronological placement were defined by archaeologists working in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They worked under the auspices of the Museum of New Mexico and the Phillips Academy of Andover, Massachusetts, and many of the early reports of their fieldwork appeared first in *El Palacio*. History recorded the last moment Pecos was occupied, giving archaeologists a firm date from which to work backwards through stratified archaeological remains using stylistic and technological indicators in ceramics to establish a relative time sequence that they could compare to other sites in the region.



From Trade Center to Ruin: Pecos History in Brief

In 1540, when the Francisco Vázquez de Coronado expedition first entered the pueblo, the expedition's chronicler, Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera, called it Cicuye. He described a massive, four-story building set around a great plaza. Its population included 500 fighting men, widely feared through the lands explored by Coronado. It was the largest of the Pueblo villages they encountered. Modern scholars estimate the Pecos population at contact as 2,000 people in residence. Initially Spanish explorers were welcomed as potential trade partners by the Pecos. The Spanish hoped that the lands and peoples of this far northern frontier would provide access to riches, spices, and trade networks that would be mutually beneficial.

Both the Pueblos and the Spanish were to be disappointed. Subsequent, seventeenth-century expeditions also noted the

Adolph Bandelier at Pecos Mission ruins, Pecos, New Mexico, ca. 1880.

Photograph by George C. Bennett. Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 040589.

powerful place that the Pecos occupied in native trade networks, but it was more than half a century before a colonizing expedition established a Spanish foothold near the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Chama. From 1540 to 1838, Pecos declined to about 1 percent of its size at contact. By then, only about twenty people remained in the village.

My analysis of sacramental records from the church and bioarchaeological studies of the human remains conducted by several generations of scholars show that a complicated series of events and reactions led the Pecos people to emigrate to Jemez. The sacramental records of those Pecos people baptized, married, or buried by the priests who served the area between 1696 and 1838 show the many stresses that the Pecos villagers endured

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over the centuries. Epidemics of measles, typhus, smallpox, and seasonal respiratory ailments as well as raids by the Apaches and Comanches all took a toll on the village. The biological analysis shows that food stresses increased in the historic period as the population of the village declined through higher death rates, low birth rates, out-migration, and likely the demands made by European encroachment on Pecos lands and resources. Pecos, like the other Pueblo Indian communities in New Mexico, held title to some 18,000 acres in a grant made to them by Spain.

With the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, and the change from Spanish to Mexican political control, Pecos was exposed to new threats. Mexican-period political reforms protected the rights of each person as a citizen but also removed the protected status of Pueblo lands. Throughout New Mexico, Hispanic and new European settlers of New Mexico began to encroach on the sanctity of the old Pueblo grants. Pecos was the easternmost Pueblo grant in the early nineteenth century and in many ways the most vulnerable. Its declining population strongly abetted the incursions of new settlers to their lands. On March 9, 1829, Rafael Aguilar and José Cote described themselves as native residents of the Pueblo Pecos in their appearance before the Mexican Territorial Deputation in Santa Fe. They pleaded eloquently for the recognition of title to their lands that settlers had moved onto between 1824 and 1829: “Nothing can be worse than to see ourselves despoiled of our land in which the oldest down to the youngest of our pueblo have shed the sweat of their brow in order to make it provide our subsistence.”

The deputation ultimately decided in favor of Pecos Pueblo's title to the land, but by then the community itself was too small to maintain their hold on the pueblo's ancestral lands. A spurious land sale from José Cota to speculator Juan Estevan Pino in the 1830s and then the migration to Jemez set in motion more than a century of devastating losses for Pecos people.

The composite picture from archaeological evidence, historic documents, and ethnographic sources shows that the population may have declined to a point where there were too few people to fill the economic and social positions required to maintain the pueblo. Some Pecos individuals seem to have chosen to live among the growing Hispanic communities settled on the Rio Pecos after about 1790. Others emigrated to Santo Domingo and Cochiti, where the surname Pecos continues. The last group, some seventeen to twenty-five people depending on the source, emigrated to Jemez Pueblo.

While Pecos emigrants living at Jemez were alive, they told their tribal history to a series of anthropologists. They also told those



Jose Victoriano Marin, governor of Jemez Pueblo, and his wife, Maria Rey, New Mexico, ca. 1880. Photograph by John K. Hilliers. Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 073899.

stories to their descendants, while they continued to practice some of their customs and ceremonies. When Edgar Lee Hewett, then director of the Museum of New Mexico, declared the Pueblo of Pecos extinct in 1904, he seemingly failed to recognize that although the village was not occupied at that time, Pecos elders and their descendants were carrying on their cultural traditions in their new, perhaps temporary, home at Jemez. Santa Fe Trail-era writers and travelers paid little attention to Pecos when it was occupied by that small group of Pueblo people, but once it began to fall into ruins, it inspired some astounding folklore as a place inhabited by Montezuma, or a race of red-headed giants, or pygmies, and even a Native American-inspired version of Romeo and Juliet.

By 1880 Pecos was an archaeological site to some and an ancestral site to the Jemez people of Pecos descent. The land on which the pueblo stood suffered considerably throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a series of spurious sales, fraudulent paper titles, and lawsuits that lasted most of a century. But Pecos descendants continued to fight for recognition and protection of their ancestral lands and cultural

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identity. The Museum of New Mexico received title to the pueblo and church ruins from Archbishop Albert Daeger in 1921. Congress formally joined Pecos and Jemez as one descendant group in 1936, based on a 1933 tribal resolution acknowledging that nearly half of the people then living at Jemez were of Pecos descent, and that the two groups were thoroughly commingled through marriage and residence. In joining the two groups, the Pecos title to the majority of lands in the Pecos Valley was extinguished, but they then became eligible for other forms of federal recognition and support. It was a mixed blessing.

In 1935 the site was set aside by the state land commissioner to become a state monument under the protection of the Museum of New Mexico. The museum staff made sporadic attempts to stabilize the fragile walls and interpret the site for the public. But with too few staff and many competing priorities, Dr. K. Ross Toole, director of the Museum of New Mexico, began negotiating with the National Park Service to transfer the site. Pecos became a national historic monument managed by the NPS in late June 1965.

The Archaeological Importance of Pecos

Bandelier's life work was short-lived at Pecos, although he spent about a decade in the American Southwest, publishing widely on topics in archaeology and ethnology. His travels, recorded in a series of published diaries, are a fascinating glimpse of the region through the eyes and ears of a trained observer. Bandelier assembled an overview of Pecos history from archival documents, oral histories, and archaeological materials found on the site, and tried to place these in relative sequence with other sites that he recorded nearby and in the region at large. Without a temporally controlled comparative framework for organizing the information he collected from sites throughout the region, his synthesis was impressionistic at best.

Hewett supported subsequent archaeological studies at Pecos, believing that its history was critically important to understanding Southwestern archaeology. He commissioned a model of the pueblo for the San Diego Exposition in 1915, and he created the collaboration among archaeologists from the Museum of New Mexico, the School of American Research (then the museum's sister school), and the Phillips Academy to conduct research at Pecos.



Interior of the old temple at Pecos ruins, ca. 1875. Photograph by Henry T. Hiester. Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 038023.

Alfred Vincent Kidder was a newly minted PhD from Harvard, but he had been seasoned by several years of fieldwork in the rugged canyons of the Four Corners, where he met Museum of New Mexico archaeology staff photographer and restoration specialist Jesse L. Nusbaum in the summers of 1907 and 1908. They worked together in the first years of the Pecos project. While Kidder excavated the archaeological deposits on the east side of the large pueblo mounds, Nusbaum directed the excavation, repairs, and stabilization of the mission church. The stabilization of the massive church walls was necessary because of the extent to which they had been undermined by rain, the lack of a roof on the structure, and the quarrying of the site for building materials by neighbors. Readers of the January 1916 issue of *El Palacio* were among the first to see Nusbaum's photos of the process and results of the stabilization project, and to read Kidder's earliest thoughts on the Pecos excavations.

From June 1915 to 1929, not including the war years (1917 to 1919), Kidder excavated trash middens at Pecos using the methods and techniques of stratigraphic analysis. Through these studies he defined an ordered ceramic series that permitted archaeologists to cross-date archaeological sites based upon the comparison of potsherds and other artifacts. Kidder confined his first field season, in the summer of 1915, to the trash middens on the east side of the pueblo. He thought this was an area

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where he would quickly find bedrock and place rock and rubble removed from the rooms excavated elsewhere on the site. But the unexpected depth of the deposits, in some places as much 20 feet, made the excavations more complicated. In this first area of excavations alone, workmen found more than 200 burials, and Kidder quickly had to abandon his promise of a quarter for each burial they found and excavated. He noted that the orderly progression of pottery in the excavations showed black-on-white and corrugated wares at the base of the midden, and at the top he found modern wares then being made at Cochiti, San Ildefonso, and Santo Domingo.

Through the years the Pecos excavations expanded to include several mounds and the mission ruins. In all, more than 2,000 human burials and their associated mortuary goods were unearthed from a variety of contexts at the site. At the time, the burials were treated as an impediment to Kidder's goal of completing the excavation of the ruin, but importantly, they also aligned archaeology closely with scientific studies in biology and medicine.

In the winter of 1919–1920, Kidder transferred the excavated human remains to Dr. Ernest A. Hooton of Harvard's Peabody Museum. Hooton was an early pioneer in physical anthropology whose analysis of the human remains shed light on Pecos diet, life span, health, and epidemiology, as well as mortuary practices. Hooton also conducted fieldwork at Jemez to collect comparative anthropomorphic and metric data.

During Kidder's fifth and sixth field seasons at Pecos (1921–1922), Elise Clews Parsons initiated an ancillary study to enhance the interpretation of the Pecos history. She expanded her research on Pueblo Indian communities of the Rio Grande to include ethnographic studies at Jemez Pueblo, recording detailed genealogies of Pecos descendants and their Jemez relatives. Her work showed that Pecos identity remained strong, and that while Pecos people were recognized as Jemez, they retained distinct ceremonies, ritual organizations, and naming patterns, and were highly cognizant of the ties to their ancestral lands.

While Hooton and Parsons' studies were seminal works in the anthropology of Pueblo people, they also created a gulf between anthropologists and Pueblo people over the invasiveness of anthropological studies. Those families living at Jemez Pueblo, reckoning their descent from both Pueblo groups, spent decades in negotiation with universities, museums, and the federal government to gain recognition of their cultural affiliation and their right to seek repatriation of the artifacts and human remains excavated from Pecos.

Pecos Repatriation

Kidder's excavations at Pecos produced such an enormous volume of material that he was able to assemble type collections of pottery and other tools that he distributed to other museums. When the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in November 1990, there was some fear among archaeologists that all excavations would cease. Some museums were similarly concerned that the threat of repatriation would empty museums of important and valued artifact collections.

In the case of Pecos, the evidence needed to establish the descendants' cultural affiliation with the human remains and artifacts was readily available in the historic record. It was found in the same historical and archaeological sequence that made Pecos attractive to archaeologists a century ago. That same unbroken line of descent served them well in negotiating repatriation with museums. Jemez Pueblo was able to prove their singular connection to Pecos and to negotiate for the return of their ancestors and their possessions.

The tribe took some unusual and forward-thinking steps in negotiating with Harvard for the return of the bones of their ancestors. Before that emotional reburial in May 1999, tribal representatives gave archaeologists the opportunity to compile into a scholarly publication the many scattered reports and analyses, some of which had never been published. The result, *Pecos Pueblo Revisited* (2010), reexamined previous studies of the material, in some cases drawing new conclusions about the health and mortality rates of the Pecos people, and about the impact of history on them. It is an important volume for the scientific information it contains as much as for the way it demonstrates the trust that grew between the Jemez tribal representatives and Harvard museum staff.

Today, Jemez Pueblo continues to elect a Pecos governor and to hold the ceremonial canes that Spanish kings and American presidents gave to Pecos Pueblo governors (as they did to governors of other pueblos) in recognition of their indigenous sovereignty. Pecos feast day is still observed in August at Pecos National Historical Park and at Jemez Pueblo. That Pecos descendants were able to receive repatriated objects and welcome back their ancestors is a powerful lesson about the endurance of Pueblo identity across nearly five centuries of contact and interaction with other cultures.

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