

Juan de Oñate

Born: 1550 - Died: 1626

Juan de Oñate was born circa 1550 in the frontier settlement of Zacatecas, Mexico, the son of Cristóbal de Oñate and Catalina de Salazar. His father was a prominent Zacatecas mine owner and encomendero. Juan de Oñate married Isabel de Tolosa Cortés Moctezuma, a descendant of the famous conquistador Hernán Cortés and the Aztec emperor Moctezuma.

By the time he was in his early twenties Juan de Oñate was leading military campaigns against the Chichimec Indians and had begun his early career prospecting for silver. He also aided the establishment of missions in the newly conquered territory of Northern New Spain.

On 21 September 1595, King Philip II of Spain awarded Oñate a contract to settle New Mexico, after receiving reports from the Franciscans about their growing missionary work in the area. Numerous delays held up the expedition, but in early 1598 Oñate finally departed from Zacatecas. After making a formal declaration of Spanish possession of New Mexico on 30 April 1598, Oñate continued ahead and forded the Rio Grande at the famous crossing point of El Paso del Norte in May. By late May he had made contact with the first of many Pueblos villages in the northern Rio Grande valley. In July 1598 he established the headquarters of the New Mexico colony near San Juan Pueblo at La Villa de San Gabriel, thus effectively extending the Camino Real by more than 600 miles. While awaiting the slow-moving main caravan of colonists, Oñate explored the surrounding area and solidified his position. Some of Oñate's men explored further east, moving beyond Pecos pueblo toward the present-day Texas border in search of buffalo; they likely reached the headwaters of the Canadian River, twenty-five miles northwest of the site of present Amarillo. Oñate visited Acoma Pueblo as well as the Hopi and Zuni villages far to the west. One party in Oñate's group even traveled as far as the San Francisco Mountains in Arizona, where they found silver ore and staked a claim.

The Franciscans also continued their own work, and began the construction of a mission at San Francisco and at San Juan. However, mutiny, desertion, and dissent plagued the new Spanish colony when the Spanish failed to find riches. Oñate dealt with these problems with a firm hand.

In December 1598, on their way to Zuni, Capt. Juan de Zaldívar and his soldiers stopped at Acoma for provisions. While there the Acomas accused one of Zaldívar's soldiers of stealing, and violating an Acoma woman. The Acomas proceeded to kill Zaldívar and nearly a dozen of his men, later claiming that the soldiers had demanded excessive amounts of provisions. A Spanish punitive expedition ascended on Acoma resulting in a three-day battle. When the fighting ended, several hundred Indians were dead, and hundreds of surviving Acomas were held prisoner and taken to Santa Domingo Pueblo to stand trial. Oñate severely punished the people of Acoma. Men over twenty-five had one foot cut off and were sentenced to twenty

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years of personal servitude to the Spanish colonists; young men between the ages of twelve and twenty-five received twenty years of personal servitude; young women over twelve years of age were given twenty years of servitude; sixty young girls were sent to Mexico City to serve in the convents there, never to see their homeland again; and two Hopi men caught at the Acoma battle had their right hand cut off and were set free to spread the news of Spanish retribution.

Spanish prospecting expeditions continued in an attempt to provide wealth and prosperity for the colony. The Spanish crown provided reinforcements for the colony in late 1600, but hardships continued, including persistent cold weather and a shortage of food supplies. On 23 June 1601, Oñate set out onto the Great Plains, to Quivira in search of wealth and an outlet to the sea. He headed northeast, following the Canadian River across the Texas Panhandle and near the Oklahoma border. In what is now likely the central part of Kansas, Oñate's expedition arrived at the first of several Quivira villages. However, the great settlements of Quivira proved disappointing to the soldiers who had traveled there in search of easy wealth and they soon turned back. While Oñate was away, conditions deteriorated in the New Mexico colony due to the poor quality of the land, continued Indian resistance, and failure to unearth silver. The colony was subsequently abandoned except by some of Oñate's most devoted followers. Upon their return to New Spain deserters spread news of the colony's failing conditions, and the government soon initiated an inquiry into the situation in New Mexico and Oñate's treatment of Indians. At the same time Oñate launched his last major expedition, starting from the Zuni villages down to the Gulf of California.

In 1606 King Philip III summoned Oñate to Mexico City, where he would stay until allegations against him could be investigated further. Unaware of the order, Oñate resigned as governor in 1607 because of the condition of the colony and financial problems. He remained in New Mexico to witness the establishment of the new capital at Santa Fe. King Philip III decided to continue his financial support of the colony, and appointed a new governor in 1608, and Oñate was once again called back to Mexico City. In 1613 the Spanish government accused Oñate of several violations including the use of excessive force during the Acoma rebellion, the hanging of two Indians, the execution of mutineers and deserters, and lastly adultery. He was fined, banned from Mexico City for four years, and banished from New Mexico forever. Oñate spent much of the rest of his life trying to clear his name, with some evident success. Eventually he went to Spain, where the king assigned him to the position of mining inspector. He died in Spain in 1626.

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