



A Brief History of Los Alamos, New Mexico

Early Los Alamos

Los Alamos is built on the Pajarito (pah-ha-REE-toe) Plateau, between the Rio Grande and the Valles Caldera. It sits on volcanic rock created by multiple eruptions from 500 thousand to 1.25 million years ago.

The first people to live here were hunter-gatherers more than 10,000 years ago. By the 1100s. Ancestral Pueblo people began coming into the area, gradually moving together into large villages. They were skilled hunters, weavers, and potters, and grew corn, beans and squash. They built their homes of the local volcanic stone and carved rooms into the cliffs.

Around the middle of the 1500s, before the Spanish came into the area, the people on the plateau moved down to areas along the Rio Grande. Their descendants live in present-day pueblos including San Ildefonso, Santa Clara, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, and, far to the west, Zuni. Examples of the Ancestral Pueblo settlements on the plateau can be seen at Tsankawi (SAN-kah-wee) and Tyuonyi (QU-weh-nee) in Bandelier National Monument and Puye (PU-yay) on Santa Clara Pueblo.

In the 1880s the land on the plateau was offered for homesteading. Most homesteaders were local Hispanic families who built simple seasonal log cabins. They lived on the plateau during warm weather, raising livestock and farming, but often spent the winters in the Rio Grande Valley. One of the cabins from this era, the Romero Cabin, is now located downtown near Fuller Lodge and owned by the Los Alamos Historical Society.



Romero Homestead Cabin Today

Homesteader Harold H. Brook owned the piece of land that currently makes up much of our downtown area. His wife, Katherine “Cassy” Brook, named their property Los Alamos Ranch, a name which stuck! Part of their land and buildings were sold to Detroit businessman Ashley Pond II in 1917, where he founded the Los Alamos Ranch School, a prominent school for boys. The successful school combined a classical education with outdoor experiences and ranching responsibilities. Fuller Lodge, the houses along Bathtub Row, Camp May, and many local hiking



trails were originally constructed by the Los Alamos Ranch School. The Ranch School was closed when the government used its power of eminent domain to take over the school and all of the remaining homesteads in 1942 for the Manhattan Project.

Fuller Lodge (left) constructed by Los Alamos Ranch School, is currently a community building owned by Los Alamos County.

The Manhattan Project

Los Alamos is best known for its role as the site for the development of the world's first atomic bombs, known as the Manhattan Project. Los Alamos Laboratory, originally known as Project Y, was conceived during the early part of World War II in an office building located in New York. The project goal was for the United States to build an atomic explosive to counter the threat posed by the German nuclear program and end the war.

General Leslie Groves, military head of the project, and J. Robert Oppenheimer, scientific director, wanted the top-secret project to take place in an area that was isolated yet still accessible, a place with an adequate water supply, and a moderate climate. At the time, Oppenheimer envisioned bringing researchers together in an inspirational setting to work collaboratively on the project.

Contrary to widely accepted myth, neither Oppenheimer nor Groves attended the Los Alamos Ranch School. Oppenheimer, however, knew of Los Alamos Ranch School because he had spent time horseback riding in the Jemez Mountains, and his family owned a cabin near Pecos, NM.



Statues on Central Avenue

After touring the Los Alamos Ranch School, officials felt that the site met their criteria and would supply adequate housing for the estimated 30 scientists who would work on the project. Little did anyone at the time realize the project would grow to more than 6,000 residents during the war, causing housing and water shortages.

During the Manhattan Project, new residents to Los Alamos rode the train into tiny Lamy, New Mexico, checked in at 109 East Palace Avenue in Santa Fe, and then drove the 35-mile dusty winding road to the secret city on the mesa. Physicists, chemists, metallurgists, explosive experts and military personnel converged onto the isolated plateau.

The Army was charged with supporting the scientific work, building buildings, keeping the commissary supplied, and guarding the top-secret facility. Hurriedly, they constructed huge laboratory buildings that sprawled along the south side of Ashley Pond, rows of four-family apartments strung to the west toward the mountains, and dormitories for single residents and military support.

Manhattan Project Dormitory, right, is one of the few buildings remaining from the Manhattan Project era. Owned by Los Alamos County.



Los Alamos scientists worked feverishly for two years in fear that the Germans were developing a nuclear weapon and would have it ready before the United States. They carried out experiments in metallurgy and high explosives, while enriched uranium and plutonium were developed in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Hanford, Washington.

Unsure of whether the implosion device, nicknamed “The Gadget” would work, they decided to test it. On July 16, 1945 at 5:30 a.m. an incredible burst of light exploded over the desert in south central New Mexico. Trinity, as the test shot was named, answered many of the questions that the scientists had been asking. The bomb’s yield, equivalent to 18,000 tons of TNT, astounded even the scientists who had spent years making painstaking calculations.

President Truman made the decision to use the new bombs on Japan. Atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th and Nagasaki on August 9th. Five days later, the Emperor of Japan agreed to an unconditional surrender. World War II formally ended September 2, 1945, when treaties were signed aboard the USS Missouri. The Manhattan Project, a mission to end the war through the use of atomic weapons, accomplished its goal and kicked off the atomic age in the process.

Scientific work at the laboratory continued throughout the Cold War Era. The military base slowly turned into a town, with homes sold to private ownership. Finally, the gates to the Secret City came down in 1957, and the town was open to the public.

Los Alamos Today

Today, the 18,000 people who live in Los Alamos represent the most internationally diverse population in the state of New Mexico. Los Alamos National Laboratory, the county's main employer, hosts scientists from all over the world who continue to make technological advancements and ground-breaking scientific discoveries.

There are two communities located in the County: the town of Los Alamos and the community of White Rock. Lands belonging to the San Ildefonso and Santa Clara Pueblos, sovereign Native American tribes, are located within and adjacent to Los Alamos County.

Community life features small-town living with friendly neighbors, low crime and an excellent school system. Cultural and recreational opportunities abound, with a History Museum, Bradbury Science Museum, and the Manhattan Project National Historical Park, as well as plenty of hiking and biking trails, skiing at the local Pajarito Ski Area, and visits to nearby Valles Caldera National Preserve and Bandelier National Monument.

Learn more about Los Alamos History:

Bandelier National Monument, <https://www.nps.gov/band/index.htm>

Los Alamos Historical Society & Museum, www.losalamoshistory.org

Manhattan Project National Historical Park, <https://www.nps.gov/mapr/index.htm>

Atomic Heritage Foundation, <https://www.atomicheritage.org>

Valles Caldera National Preserve, <https://www.nps.gov/vall/index.htm>

You may also find books at Mesa Public Library and the History Museum Shop.