

LOS ALAMOS

Historic Homestead Tour

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DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTION

GEORGE LYTLE BEAM, CIRCA 1909

Walk in the footsteps of pioneers...

Imagine Los Alamos without its neighborhoods, shops, parks, and world-class laboratory. Think back to a time of isolated log homes, fields planted with pinto beans, families tending their crops, wagons laden with produce bound for the valley before winter sets in—everyday life for the homesteaders who lived here before the dawn of the nuclear age that brought Los Alamos to international attention.

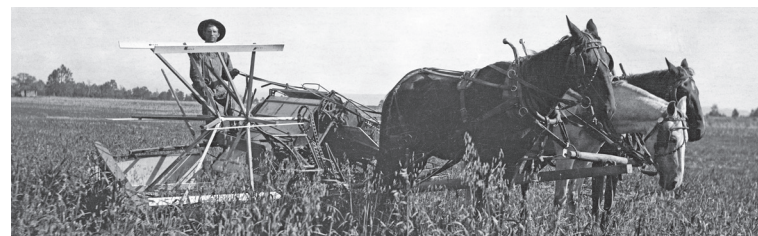
This tour will introduce you to seven sites that indicate where 17 of the homestead families established their farms.



Homestead Act

On May 20, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act, which provided up to 160 acres of free land to any eligible United States citizen. The years-long process required applying formally for a homestead site, building a home, planting crops, submitting paperwork for ownership, and paying a few fees. Successful applicants received a deed for the land free and clear.

Of the people who applied for a homestead on the Pajarito Plateau, 36 completed the process. The Garcia Canyon and Chupadero Canyon Homesteads were located in the northern-most part of the County. Many were located on current Los Alamos National Laboratory land. Of all the homesteads, 19 were still owned by the original homesteader or their families when the army acquired the Plateau for the Manhattan Project.



Courtesy of H.H. Brook family

Homestead Life

Farming on the Plateau was difficult for homesteaders because of the rugged terrain, high altitude (above 7,300 feet), short growing season, and lack of water. They planted pinto beans and wheat as cash crops. Other crops included corn, squash, peas, pumpkins, potatoes, and kitchen vegetables. Some homesteaders worked for small, local sawmills on the Plateau. Cash was needed primarily for property taxes; otherwise, the homesteaders bartered for what they needed.

Of the 36 homesteaders, 6 were Anglos who lived year around on the Plateau. The remaining 30 were Hispanic families who lived nearby in the Rio Grande Valley, where they had permanent homes, irrigable farms, and a supportive community. They came up to their homesteads on the Plateau at intervals during the planting, growing, and harvesting seasons.

In 1908, progressive farmer H. H. Brook filed for homestead entry and by purchase and partnership eventually created a year-round, commercial farmstead of about 800 acres, and named it "Los Alamos Ranch." This property formed the core of the Los Alamos Ranch School when it was established in 1917. Both Brook and the school hired local men and the school bought produce from the homesteaders.

Homestead life on the Plateau was abruptly terminated, as was the Ranch School, in late 1942, when the army chose Los Alamos as the site for the Manhattan Project. Of all the homesteads, 19 were still owned by the original family when the Manhattan Project took over the area—17 of which are on this tour.



Zia Project, December 1942

Los Alamos National Laboratory

The current boundaries of Los Alamos County are essentially those of the area secured by the army, comprising approximately 46,000 acres of federal land and 3,600 acres of formerly private land. Many of the original homesteaders chose to stay in the area, and their descendants still live and work here.

Homestead Legacy

Few remnants of the homestead past remain on the Pajarito Plateau. The most prominent is the Romero Cabin in the downtown Historic District. This cabin was removed from its original location to make way for construction at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Restored and furnished in 2010, the cabin provides a glimpse into the construction methods used in this area in the 1930s. A few cabins still stood on Laboratory land and the surrounding Santa Fe National Forest until 2000, when the devastating Cerro Grande Wildfire swept through the county and destroyed nearly all evidence of the life the homesteaders created.

What remains is the rugged, dramatic landscape the homesteaders confronted when they chose to settle on these isolated mesas. In addition, a handful of old roads are left to speak to the past, some of which are listed on state and national registers of historic places. Many trails in the Los Alamos County Trail Network allow you to experience these historic places.

As you explore Los Alamos, think of the challenges these hardy people overcame to make the promise of the Homestead Act a reality in offering a better life for themselves and their families. If they had not come to the Pajarito Plateau, there would have been no Ranch School and almost certainly no Manhattan Project laboratory here.

A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WITH:

Los Alamos County, the Historic Preservation Advisory Board, and the Los Alamos Historical Society

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Los Alamos History Museum Campus

1050 Bathtub Row, Los Alamos NM 87544 • 505-662-4493

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See More of our City on the Hill

Los Alamos, known as the Atomic City, is an active and livable community. Although the focus of the Los Alamos Homestead Tour is its homesteading past, the route also traverses our business and residential districts.

The Tour wanders past our schools, through neighborhoods with playgrounds, past our golf course, and by our indoor swimming pool. The homesteading and Ranch School heritage lives on at the stables and rodeo grounds near an early stop on the trail. Interspersed along the route are trailheads accessing a well-used trail system winding its way around and through the town. The tour ends near Fuller Lodge, opened in 1928 and designed for the Los Alamos Ranch School by the noted Southwest architect John Gaw Meem.

To the west of Los Alamos rise the 10,000-foot volcanic peaks of the Jemez Mountains, the site of Pajarito Mountain Ski Area. In a shady canyon close to downtown is the state's only regulation-size, outdoor ice skating rink. Across the Rio Grande Valley to the east are the 12,000-foot peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the tailbone of the Rocky Mountains.

As you ride along, keep in mind that the homesteaders did not have smooth, paved roads crossing 300-foot-deep canyons on level bridges, with gas stations and restaurants to ease the journey. They had to build and travel on their own primitive wagon roads. Remember the 10 minutes it took you to climb onto the Pajarito Plateau on a modern highway? It took the homesteader families almost a full day to make the journey by wagon from their valley homes to their farms on the mesa tops.

Plan Your Visit

Stop by the Los Alamos Visitor Center and the Los Alamos History Museum to learn more about Los Alamos history and experiences.

LOS ALAMOS VISITOR CENTER

475 20th St., Suite A, Los Alamos

Hours: Monday-Friday: 9am-5pm

Saturday: 9am-4pm

Sunday: 10am-3pm

800-444-0707 | 505-662-8105 | visitlosalamos.org

LOS ALAMOS HISTORY MUSEUM & SHOP

1050 Bathtub Row, Los Alamos

Hours: Monday-Friday: 9am-5pm

Saturday: 10am-4pm

Sunday: CLOSED

505-662-4493 | losalamoshistory.org

LOS ALAMOS HOMESTEAD TOUR LOCATIONS



Carl Buckland 1945

Courtesy of Mary Ella Buckland

The complete Homestead Tour involves about 11 miles of travel, one way, and takes you to seven sites. Visit the sites in any order you wish, but it is recommended that you begin with Deer Trap Trailhead on Barranca Mesa and work your way back to Historic Fuller Lodge where you can enjoy some other amenities in town.

Deer Trap Trailhead on Barranca Mesa

Directions: Take Diamond Dr. to the roundabout and go left on to San Ildefonso Road. Once at the top of the hill, veer right onto Barranca Road. Follow Barranca past the school to its end. There is no defined parking; just pull up and park where the road dead ends. Walk around the left end of the guardrail and follow the trail to the east (right) a short way.

Three homesteads were on the mesa top near the site, and two are visible in the canyon below. This area best exemplifies the rough terrain the homesteaders faced in settling this Plateau.

North Mesa Tennis Courts

Directions: From Deer Trap Trailhead on Barranca Mesa, return to the roundabout and go straight across to continue on San Ildefonso Road. Follow San Ildefonso past the Middle School and then soccer fields on your left. Turn left onto North Mesa Park Road and follow to the tennis courts.

The Lujan family became a major influence in New Mexico politics. They managed both of these properties as a family venture until late 1942. One of their cabins remains, intact, near this site in the Los Alamos County Stables area.

Guaje Pines Cemetery

Directions: From the North Mesa Tennis Courts site, return to the roundabout and turn left onto Diamond Drive. Turn right (north) on Range Road, just before the fire station. Follow Range Road and turn right into the cemetery. The site is at the far side of the cemetery from the entrance.

This homestead passed through two owners before it was sold to Oattie O. Grant, who lived here year-round.

Los Alamos Golf Course

Directions: From Guaje Pines Cemetery, return to Diamond Dr. and turn right. Turn immediately into the Golf Course on your left. The signs are close to the building to the west of the north entrance.

These two properties were the second and third homesteads established in what became the townsite of Los Alamos.

Urban Park

Directions: From the Los Alamos Golf Course site, Turn left (west) on Diamond Drive. At the stoplight, turn right onto Arkansas Rd. This road will veer left and become North Road. Follow North Road past the stop sign to the tennis courts on your left. The sign is at the path into Urban Park, just before the tennis courts.

The homestead of Francisco Gonzales was the highest elevation homestead and the most difficult to farm.

Sullivan Field Parking Lot

Directions: From Urban Park, continue on North Road, through the canyon to Diamond Dr. Turn right and follow Diamond past the High School. Turn right into the Sullivan Field (stadium) parking lot just past the University of New Mexico entrance. The site is at the foot of the pedestrian bridge on your left, by the bus stop.

This site describes the first and fourth homesteads established in the townsite. They were each the maximum 160 acres. One extended across Los Alamos Canyon; the other into Pueblo Canyon—useless land for subsistence farming for which taxes had to be paid. Subsequent homesteaders learned the lesson and carefully chose only arable land.

Fuller Lodge Historic District

Directions: From Sullivan Field Parking Lot, exit the parking lot at the stoplight and go straight onto Canyon Road. Continue as the road veers right and becomes Central Ave. Turn left onto Bathtub Row and park at the Historic Fuller Lodge and the History Museum. The sign is just east of the buildings next to Romero Cabin.

Four homesteads are described here; all became part of the Los Alamos Ranch School.

