



NEVADA LATINO HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Latino History & Culture in Nevada

March 2024



PRESERVING LATINO HISTORY IN NEVADA

Latinos have a rich and diverse history in Nevada, but much of this history has been masked by discriminatory practices and a lack of sufficient documentation. It is our goal to preserve this history by identifying events, trends, people and locations that reflect the accurate and significant role of Latinos throughout Nevada's history.

To gain a culturally appropriate understanding of Latino history in Nevada, information was gathered from various online and in-person sources and included books, government documents, oral histories, newspaper articles, photographs, and student theses and dissertations. We also conducted research through community outreach and in-person interviews.



TIMELINE

Early 1800s

In the early 1800s, the Spanish colonized and controlled much of what is now Mexico, Central and South America, and the Southwestern United States. Of great importance during this era was the Old Spanish Trail, a series of routes that facilitated Spanish colonial trade and passed through the states of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and California. This brought numerous prominent Mexican trading parties to the southwestern part of what is now the United States, where many of them ultimately put down roots.



Map of the Old Spanish Trail.

Credit: National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

1864-1978

On October 31, 1864, during the midst of the Civil War, Nevada became the 36th state admitted to the Union. At the time most residents lived in the northern part of the state near present-day Reno and Virginia City. Determining how many of those residents were Latinos, as well as their numbers throughout the state's history, is challenging due to a combination of issues including skewed United States census data, as well as fluctuations in deportation efforts and immigration policies.

1978: Improving Representation

The most detailed account of the Latino population in Nevada comes from a study conducted by the Centro de Información Latino Americano (CDILA) in 1978. While limited to the northern part of the state, this study illustrates the dramatic underrepresentation of Latinos in other data sources.

A total of 1,164 Latino heads of households were interviewed to identify the size of the Latino community, their socioeconomic status, and their knowledge and use of community assistance programs and social services.

Researchers estimated the Latino population in Washoe County during the 1970s fluctuated between

11,000 – 15,000

with most individuals being Mexican or of Mexican descent.

This is a significant increase in representation compared to the 1970 census, which recorded only **1,500** individuals living in Reno who were born in Latin America and **3,293** people for whom Spanish was their mother language.

According to the CDILA survey, almost all Latinos interviewed were employed, with two-thirds working as laborers or service workers. The study also concluded that individuals with limited English Speaking abilities did not have the same job opportunities as those who possessed more advanced knowledge of the English language, and were often paid less as a result.

1980s-2000

Like other parts of the United States, Nevada experienced a surge in immigration from Mexico and other Central American countries in the 1980s. This had wide-reaching effects on demographics and radically changed the racial and ethnic makeup of both Southern and Northern Nevada.

Political and economic issues in many Central American countries during the 1980s resulted in mass immigration events to the United States. One country of significance was Cuba. Known as the Mariel Boatlift, thousands of Cuban immigrants traveled to the United States via Florida after Castro granted Cuban refugees the ability to leave the country. Between 1980 and 1990 the Cuban-born population of Nevada increased by 63%.

Immigration also increased substantially from other Central American countries, and included individuals and families from Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Mexico.

Mexico saw the largest migration to Nevada, which was a trend that continued into the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000, the Mexican-born population of Nevada leaped approximately 370%. During this time, the Reno-Sparks area in Washoe County experienced the greatest increase and had a larger number of permanent residents than seasonal workers.



*Boats carried thousands of Cubans to the United States during the Mariel Boatlift.
Credit: Dow Jones & Company, Inc.*



LATINOS AND NEVADA'S ECONOMY

Mining

The discovery of the Comstock Lode in present-day Virginia City is typically credited to brothers Ethan Allen and Hosea Ballou Grosch. However, some historians argue that it was a Mexican miner in the area named “Old Frank” who should be credited with the discovery, after he informed the white prospectors that the material they were discarding was rich in silver.

From the time of the Comstock Lode discovery, Latinos, specifically Mexicans and Chileans, were critical contributors to the industry in terms of innovation, technology, ownership, and labor. Unfortunately, most sources, including the Virginia City National Historical Landmark nomination, make little or no reference to Latino miners and their contributions to this critical industry.



*The Mexican Mine in Virginia City, 1866.
Credit: Lawrence & Houseworth*

Transportation

Mexican immigrants were closely tied to the success of the railroad industry in Nevada, bringing with them knowledge and experience from home. Mexicans who worked on the railroad line often experienced discrimination. They typically made lower wages than non-Mexican workers and were often required to perform “stoop labor” – tasks that were physically demanding and dangerous – which many other workers were unwilling to do. Ultimately, the railroad industry played a critical role in the growth of Las Vegas and was instrumental in bringing Latinos to the area and helping establish some of Nevada’s most important commercial centers.

Agriculture

Like other agricultural regions in the United States, farms and ranches throughout Nevada rely on and attract migrant workers, including Latinos. Since the early twentieth century, Mexicans participated in agriculture in the Moapa Valley through seasonal farm labor. These Mexican workers — along with laborers in railroad and mining — helped develop the area’s social and economic foundation.



Migrant workers from Mexico working in an onion field in Moapa Valley, NV, 1955. Credit: Las Vegas Review-Journal, Inc.

Casinos

The Wide Open Gambling Bill of 1931 legalized gambling in Nevada, spurring tremendous changes to the state's economy, image and demographics. The bill was discriminatory in its language, prohibiting non-U.S. citizens from owning or managing casinos, and banning them from working in any position related to gaming operations. While the bill discriminated against all non-U.S. citizens, it disproportionately affected Latinos, including those born in the United States.

In the late 1960s, multiple laws were passed to allow non-citizens to participate in gaming employment. However, the intent of this policy change was not about equalizing employment, but rather about accommodating major corporations, which often had non-U.S. shareholders. This spurred the growth of Las Vegas into what it is today, offering an advantage for many Latinos whose casino jobs allowed them to climb the economic ladder and utilize union benefits.

Construction

The construction industry experienced parallel growth to the tourism industry, with new casinos, mega-resorts, housing, and commercial complexes requiring more manual labor than ever before. Plentiful work, coupled with the lower cost of living – compared to other migrant destinations – drew in many Latinos. In addition to working as laborers in the construction industry, some Latinos opened successful construction-related companies.



*Co-owners Manuel Madrigal (left) and son Norberto Madrigal (right) of Lunas construction clean-up company in Las Vegas, NV.
Credit: Las Vegas Review-Journal, Inc.*

Latino-owned Businesses

The Latin Chamber of Commerce was established in Las Vegas on May 17, 1976, to support small Latino-owned businesses in Nevada. The chamber grew out of several grassroots organizations, primarily the Círculo Cubano. It supported the economic growth of Latino-owned businesses, disseminated information to local Latinos and small businesses, and advocated for social and political issues impacting their communities. It also attracted trade from Latin America to Las Vegas, positioning the city as a center of international commerce.

As the Latino population in the Reno-Sparks area increased in the 1990s, so did the number of Latino-owned businesses. These businesses were spread throughout Reno-Sparks, with a major congregation forming on South Wells Avenue in Reno, offering service to both Latino and non-Latino clientele.



THE LATIN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TODAY

Today, the Latin Chamber of Commerce serves both Northern and Southern Nevada. As of 2022 it served more than

1,500 MEMBERS

throughout the state and is one of the largest Latino Chambers of Commerce in the Southwest.



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SOCIAL HISTORY OF LATINOS IN NEVADA

With the growth of the Nevada Latino population came the establishment of several social organizations that addressed a variety of social needs. These included The Nevada Association of Latin Americans (NALA), El Centro de Información de Latino Americano (CDILA), Nevada Hispanic Services, the Mexican Patriotic Committee, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). All of these organizations were developed for Latinos, with a focus on providing bilingual services that addressed a variety of social needs.



Mariposa Mariposa Language and Learning Academy hosts cultural events that celebrate Latino heritage and history. Credit: Mariposa Language and Learning Academy



Dr. Ashton Ray Laurent, Director of ESL Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 1975. Credit: University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Education

As more Latinos began to arrive in Nevada, grassroots organizers became concerned with the poor educational opportunities available to Latino students, the lack of culturally relevant curriculum, high dropout rates, and the lack of job opportunities available after graduation. These concerns, to varying degrees, were addressed by organizations like the CDILA, NALA, and the Mexican Patriotic Committee, which sought to make higher education more obtainable. Other issues, such as a lack of minority representation within school employees, were often addressed by the Las Vegas Latin Chamber of Commerce.

Health

Nevada's Latino population has faced several major obstacles that have inhibited them from receiving the same healthcare and retirement options available to other members of the community. This is due to a combination of reasons, including educational, transportation and language barriers.

Before organizations like the CDILA appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s, medical information was only provided in English. Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, Latinos were still not accessing preventative medicine like their non-Latino counterparts. Another obstacle was that not everyone had medical insurance, especially if they were undocumented, which made obtaining medical care more risky and costly. After 2000, when Nevada's Latino population increased, more social institutions and health organizations were created to serve Nevada's Latino residents.



ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs became increasingly popular in Nevada in the 1980s and 1990s due to the significant statewide increase in the number of Latino residents. ESL programs, whether developed for adults or children, were important in providing Latinos in Nevada with more career choices and opportunities for advancement in a variety of different industries.

Modern Latino Influence in Nevada Communities

As the Latino population increased and gained access to resources throughout the 1980s to 2000s, their influence started to shift. Neighborhoods grew, businesses thrived and Latino voices became louder. While this is not an exhaustive list of all the ways in which Latinos have influenced modern Nevada communities, some of the earliest evidence of this shift in influence include religion, architecture and communications.

Religious Worship

Religious centers, specifically Catholic churches, have played an important role to Nevada's Latino population both as centers of religious life and as community gathering spaces. Places of worship were established as Latino populations grew in a particular area, primarily where settlement was permanent, rather than where Latinos resided for seasonal labor. The vast majority of Latinos in Nevada who practice religion maintain their Catholic heritage, and most places of worship associated with Latino history in Nevada are associated with Catholicism. However, some Latino families, after immigrating to Nevada, converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which remains one of the most popular religions practiced by Latino Nevadans behind Catholicism.

Communications

Media companies focusing on Spanish-language periodicals and broadcasting began to appear in Nevada in the 1980s. *El Mundo* was created by Eddie Escobedo Sr. and Eddie Escobedo Jr. as the first Spanish-language newspaper in Nevada to be directed toward Spanish-literate people. The newspaper was well received and became the predominant periodical for the Southern Nevada Latino community, while *Ahora Spanish News* was first published in 1983 and continues to serve Northern Nevada.



St. Anne Catholic Church in Las Vegas, NV. Credit: Roadside Architecture



Eddie Escobedo Sr. and son Eddie Jr. drafting "El Mundo." Credit: University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

1986

KREN in Reno was first broadcast by the Spanish International Network and served as the first Spanish-language television station in the area.

1993

Two Las Vegas-based television stations began broadcasting Spanish-language content: KBLR, a Telemundo affiliate, and KZIR (now KINC), a Univision affiliate.

Spanish-language programming on radio and television was not broadcast in Nevada until the late twentieth century due to high costs for setup and equipment.

The accessibility of Spanish-printed newspapers and broadcast of Spanish-language radio and television programs allowed more Latinos to be aware of local and national news and assisted in community mobilization efforts and the spread of vital information for Latinos in Nevada.



1970s view of the Thomas & Mack Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Designed by the Cambeiro brothers. Credit: University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas



Arturo Cambeiro viewing a model of the Thomas & Mack Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Credit: University Libraries, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Architecture

“Latino Urbanism” refers to an architectural style in which Latinos make changes to their urban and suburban homes, which were often built decades earlier for non-Hispanic whites. Some changes reflect attempts at reclassifying outdoor spaces, including privatizing and diversifying front yards using fencing and extended porches. Other changes include brightly colored exteriors, front yard structures and objects such as religious shrines or fountains, arched openings, and the construction of French-style double doors.

Brothers Arturo Cambeiro and Domingo Cambeiro – the Cambeiro brothers – were prominent architects in Nevada and continue to hold the legacy of the most well-known Latino architects in the Las Vegas area. They are known for designing many significant buildings in Las Vegas throughout the 1970s. After their partnership split in the early 1980s, both brothers continued their solo careers, each designing many more prominent locations in the Las Vegas area.



Arturo Cambeiro Elementary School in Las Vegas, Nevada. Designed by Arturo Cambeiro and named posthumously. Credit: CoStar Group



Clark County Government Center, designed by Domingo Cambeiro. Completed in 1995. Credit: Tutor Perini Building Corp.

