

HISTORIC LOS ALAMOS

**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 five-year process (later three years) required applying formally for a homestead site (“entry”), building a home, planting crops, submitting paperwork for ownership (“proving up”), and paying a few fees. Successful applicants received a deed (“patent”) for the land free and clear.

Of the people who applied for a homestead on the Pajarito Plateau, the region in which Los Alamos is located, 36 completed the process, and 2 obtained land by trade with the U.S. Forest Service, making a total of 38 landowners. Four of these families settled in the northern part of the county, outside the scope of this tour. The first applicant in the townsite (a Manhattan Project term distinguishing between the town’s living area and the laboratory) filed for entry in November 1892. Of all the homesteads, 19 were still owned by the families of the original applicant in late 1942 when the army acquired the plateau for the World War II Manhattan Project; 12 of the 19 were still owned by the original patentee.

The homesteads featured in this tour are the 17 that occupied the townsite; others are within the current boundaries of Los Alamos National Laboratory.

**HOMESTEAD LIFE:** Farming on the Plateau was difficult for homesteaders because of the rugged terrain, high altitude (between 7,300’ and 7,600’), short growing season, and lack of water (which mandated dry farming). They planted pinto beans and wheat as cash crops. Other crops included corn, squash, peas, pumpkins, potatoes, and kitchen vegetables. Some homesteaders augmented their income by working 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; 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. The Anglo homesteaders lived year around on the Plateau. Their valley neighbors came up to their homesteads at intervals during the planting, growing, and harvesting seasons.



Zia Project, December 1942 Los Alamos National Laboratory

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. 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 developing the atomic bombs that ended World War II. Homesteaders and Ranch School staff and students were quickly evicted, and property owners were eventually compensated by the government. 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.



Zia Project, December 1942 Los Alamos National Laboratory

**HOMESTEAD LEGACY:** Few remnants of the homestead past remain on the Pajarito Plateau. The most prominent is the Romero Cabin in the Fuller Lodge historic area. 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 a devastating fire 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. Many public hiking and biking trails in Los Alamos incorporate portions of homestead roads, and some of them are listed on state and national registers of historic places.

As you explore our town, 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.

SEE MORE OF OUR CITY ON THE HILL

Los Alamos, also 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 starts near Fuller Lodge, opened in 1928 and designed for the Los Alamos Ranch School by the noted Southwest architect John Gaw Meem. It wanders past our indoor swimming pool, schools housing our excellent education system, through neighborhoods with churches, city parks with playgrounds and busy tennis courts, and past our golf course. Our western heritage lives on at the stables and rodeo grounds. Interspersed along the route are trailheads accessing a well-used trail system winding its way around and through the town.

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.



Carl Buckland 1945 Courtesy of Mary Ella Buckland

**A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT WITH:**  
Los Alamos County, the Historic Preservation Advisory Board,  
and the Los Alamos Historical Society

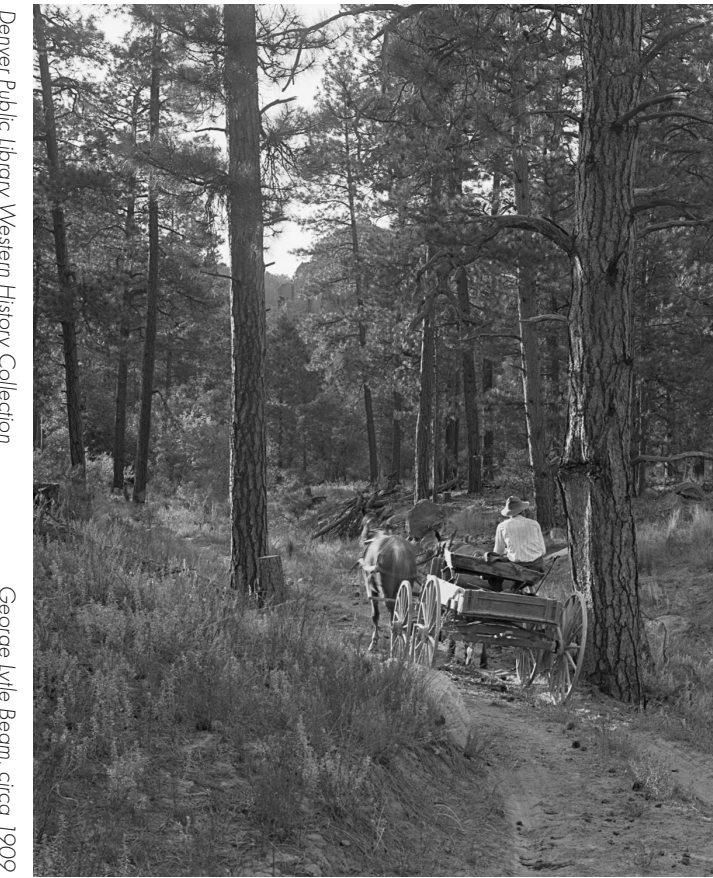
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**WWW.LOSALAMOSHISTORY.ORG**



Logo Design: Sean Lane Rev 02/20

Los Alamos Historic  
HOMESTEAD TOUR

Seven Sites Where the 17 Homestead Families Lived



Denver Public Library Western History Collection

George Lytle Beem, circa 1909

Try to imagine Los Alamos without its neighborhoods, shops, parks, and world-class laboratory. Imagine yourself back in a time of isolated log buildings, fields planted with pinto beans, families tending and protecting the crops, wagons laden with produce for the autumn trip to 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.





# 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. The sites are numbered sequentially for convenience in providing directions, but each is independent of the others, so feel free to visit them in whatever order you wish. When you arrive at a site, the signs you see are oriented so you will face toward the homestead being described, outlined in red on the map.

## SITE 1: FULLER LODGE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Site 1 is just east of Fuller Lodge and the History Museum. This is a good place to start because the Romero Cabin has been placed here and signage addresses the homestead era.

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

## SITE 2: SULLIVAN FIELD PARKING LOT

Directions: From Site 1, head west on Central Avenue, which merges with Canyon Road. At the traffic light (Diamond Drive), go straight across into the parking lot. Site 2 is at the foot of the pedestrian bridge on your right, 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.

## SITE 3: URBAN PARK

Directions: From Site 2, go left (north) on Diamond Drive and through the Sandia/Orange Street intersection with the traffic light. Shortly thereafter, turn left (west) on North Road, a difficult intersection to spot (no traffic lights). Follow North Road into and out of the canyon and look for tennis courts on your right. Site 3 is at the path into Urban Park, just past the tennis courts. If you miss the left turn off Diamond Drive onto North Road, continue along Diamond Drive to the left turn at Urban Street and continue to Urban Park.

The homestead of Francisco Gonzales, located here, was the highest elevation homestead and difficult to farm because of the short growing season.

## SITE 4: LOS ALAMOS GOLF COURSE

Directions: From Site 3, continue north on North Road; it will become Arkansas Avenue. At the traffic light, turn left (northeast) on Diamond Drive. Diamond goes through the golf course, and you will see the clubhouse on your right, where Site 4 is located. The signs are close to the building, opposite the parking lot entrance.

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

## SITE 5: GUAJE PINES CEMETERY

Directions: From Site 4, turn right (east) onto Diamond Drive and then turn left (north) on Range Road, just past the fire station. Follow Range Road and turn right into the cemetery. Site 5 is at the far side of the cemetery from the entrance, near the restroom.

This homestead passed through two owners before it was sold to Ottie O. Grant. While many of the neighbors retreated to the valley in winter, this was the Grant family’s permanent home.

## SITE 6: NORTH MESA TENNIS COURTS

Directions: From Site 5, return to Diamond Drive and turn left (east). At the roundabout turn right (south) onto San Ildefonso Road. Follow San Ildefonso past the lighted baseball fields and then soccer fields on your left. Turn left onto North Mesa Park Road, an access to the tennis courts where Site 6 is located.

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

## SITE 7: DEER TRAP TRAILHEAD ON BARRANCA MESA

Directions: From Site 6, return to the roundabout and go straight through it (northward), continuing on San Ildefonso Road. Once on top of the mesa, veer right onto Barranca Road. This is the primary traffic route, despite the name change. Follow Barranca past the school to its terminus. There is no defined parking; just pull up near the Road Closed sign. Walk around the left end of the guardrail and follow the trail to the east (right) a short way.

Three homesteads are on the mesa top near the site, and two will be visible in the canyon below. This spectacular site best exemplifies the rough terrain the homesteaders faced in settling this plateau. Sheer cliffs, high altitude, limited water sources, unpredictable weather—the homesteaders dealt with them all in trying to make better lives for themselves and their families.



- LOS ALAMOS TOWNSITE
- 1 Fuller Lodge

2 Sullivan Field Parking Lot

3 Urban Park

4 Los Alamos Golf Course

5 Guaje Pines Cemetery

6 North Mesa Tennis Courts

7 Deer Trap Trailhead

Trail Network