For thousands of years, the Mesilla Valley was inhabited by ancient Native Americans called the Mogollon. The warm climate was ideal for survival, and the river provided a steady supply of food and water. But over time, the Mogollons disappeared, leaving only traces of their existence etched in rocks and canyon walls. Their culture was soon replaced by a new generation of New Mexicans led by Don Juan de Oñate.

In 1598, working on behalf of the King of Spain, Oñate and his men made their way up from Mexico through the Great Pass of the North (modern-day El Paso) and through the Mesilla Valley, en route to what was to become Santa Fe. Their route became known as El Camino Real (the royal road), and it quickly became the preferred way to travel between Mexico and Santa Fe. Oñate’s expedition marked the first major European colonization of North America, and the Camino Real helped establish southern New Mexico.

By the mid-19th century, southern New Mexico was becoming a popular stop for travelers on their way to the West Coast and Mexico. At the end of the Mexican American War in 1848, the United States took control of southern New Mexico. A rush of settlers looking to claim a portion of the undeded land poured into the new territory, forcing local leaders to call upon the U.S. Army for assistance. The Army sent Lt. Delos Bennett Sackett and a team of men to help protect and organize the emerging communities. Sackett and his men plotted out 84 city blocks, each containing four plots of land, and residents were required to draw for their new home site. Soon enough, Las Cruces was on its way.

As the town grew, so did the need for a name. No one knows exactly how Las Cruces was selected, but most historians conclude it is derived from the Spanish translation for “the crosses.” The coming of the railroad in the late 1800s brought even more prosperity to the up and coming town. In April 1881, the first train arrived in Las Cruces, and by 1900, the town population had tripled to nearly 3,000 residents.

In 1888, the New Mexico College of Agriculture & Mechanic Arts opened its doors, and in 1893 it graduated its first class of five students.

In 1907, Las Cruces was officially incorporated as a town, and in 1912, New Mexico was awarded statehood, becoming the country’s 47th state. By this time, Las Cruces had its first water system, electric power, an ice factory, cold storage factory, cannery and steam laundry. Las Cruces also had a superintendent of

Did You Know...

Army Lt. Delos Bennett Sackett used rawhide rope and wooden stakes to plot out Las Cruces’ original 84 city blocks over 150 years ago...

Sheriff Pat Garrett, the man who shot Billy the Kid, is buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Las Cruces...

The New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum chronicles the 3,000-year history of farming and ranching in New Mexico...
By the 1920s, Las Cruces’ population was close to 4,000 residents, and by 1940, it was almost 9,000. But the United States’ involvement in World War II dramatically affected life in Las Cruces. More than 2,000 New Mexicans died in the war, many of them on the Bataan Death March, and many of them were from southern New Mexico.

Another consequence of the war was a shortage of farm labor, leading to the establishment of the Emergency Farm Labor Program, which brought more than 900 German and Italian POWs to New Mexico to help farmers battle the labor shortage.

Ultimately, Las Cruces benefited from the war. The Tularosa Basin, east of Las Cruces, became one of the army’s most important weapons testing grounds, and the Trinity Site, located at the basin’s north end, was the site of the first atomic bomb exploded on Earth. By 1945, the Army Corps of Engineers declared White Sands Proving Ground an area of military necessity.

Today, both New Mexico State University (formerly New Mexico College of Agriculture & Mechanic Arts) and White Sands Testing Facilities are key components of southern New Mexico’s economy. Both facilities have helped make Las Cruces the city it is today, and will hopefully continue to be a source of security and stability for the area’s future.