

Tucson History Series

This is the fifth of a six-part series on the history of Tucson. Author Bob Ring challenged himself to capture the “what,” “when”, and “how” of the important events that shaped Tucson’s development. Here’s the series schedule:

Part 1: Tucson’s First Residents: Hunter-Gatherers to Farmers

Part 2: The Hohokam and Descendants

Part 3: Spanish Missionaries

Part 4: The Spanish/Mexican Presidio

Part 5: Tucson in U.S. Territory

Part 6: Tucson in the State of Arizona

Part 5 - Tucson in U.S. Territory

1854 to 1912

On June 29, 1854 the U.S. Congress approved the Gadsden Purchase in which the U.S. acquired southern Arizona, including Tucson, from Mexico for \$10 million. The new lands were added to the New Mexico Territory, created in 1850 following the Mexican-American War. Mexican troops remained in Tucson to keep peace until United States troops took charge in 1856.

New Mexico Territory

According to Tucson historian C. L. Sonnichsen, “Tucson was still a Mexican village in the late 1850s.” But, the Americanization of Tucson was about to pick up the pace. Starting before the Gadsden Purchase, in 1853, and continuing through 1855, American surveyors crisscrossed southern Arizona through Tucson looking for suitable paths for a transcontinental railroad. By 1857 Texas-California stagecoaches started traveling through Tucson, truly putting the village on the American map.

American prospectors rediscovered old Spanish and Mexican mines along the new border with Mexico. Big ranches operated successfully in the Santa Cruz Valley.

The “great transition” of Tucson was beginning. Business was good and the village was growing with an 1859 inventory that included three stores, two butcher shops, two blacksmith shops, and at least two drinking establishments. The 1860 census counted 623 people including newcomers from all sections of the U.S. and 12 foreign countries. The walls of the old presidio were rapidly being dismantled, although the final standing portion lasted until 1918.

But the 1860s brought violence to southern Arizona and Tucson. Apache raids against ranches suddenly increased. American reprisals made things worse as 25 years of “Apache wars” began. The U.S. Civil War also started in 1861; the U.S. was forced to withdraw soldiers from Arizona to fight back East. This left Arizona defenseless against the fierce Apache.

Turbulence increased when the Confederate States of America claimed that southern Arizona was part of Confederate territory in mid-1861. Confederate troops actually “captured” Tucson in early 1862 and later that year skirmished with Union troops at Picacho Peak, before withdrawing from Arizona in mid-1862, leaving Tucson in federal jurisdiction.

Tucson, with all of Arizona, remained part of the New Mexico Territory until February 23, 1863 when President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation creating a separate Arizona Territory by splitting the New Mexico Territory along a north-south line (instead of an east-west line). Southern Arizona and southern New Mexico were thought to favor the Confederacy so this action would break up a potentially hostile bloc. Prescott, not Tucson, was the first capital of the new Arizona Territory. Tucson was regarded as too supportive of the Southern Cause.

Arizona Territory

After the Civil War ended in 1865, Tucson resumed a major role in campaigns to fight the Apache. A military supply depot formed in 1862 near the center of town, was expanded and reestablished as Camp Lowell in 1866, and then in 1873 moved to a new location a few miles east of town at the confluence of Pantano and Tanque Verde Creeks, and commissioned as Fort Lowell. The installation provided supplies and manpower to outlying military installations.

Hundreds of Tucson militia served in expeditions against the Apaches. In 1871, a group of Tucson citizens became so upset with the deaths from Apache raids, that they took matters into their own hands in what became known as the Camp Grant Massacre to attack a peaceful group of Apaches about 50 miles northeast of Tucson, killing 130 people, mostly women and children. The debilitating wars with the Apache continued until 1886, when Apache leader Geronimo finally surrendered.

In a political war, in 1867 Tucson successfully lobbied the governor of the Arizona Territory to move the Arizona capital from Prescott to Tucson. This was in exchange for Tucson supporting the governor’s ambition to be a delegate to Washington. The territorial capital remained in Tucson a decade until 1877, when unhappy Prescottians succeeded in recovering “the coveted prize.”

By 1870, transcontinental stagecoach service through Tucson, which had been discontinued during the Civil War, was resumed between the East and California. Tucson also became the hub for local stagecoaches and freight wagons trading with Mexico and serving mining communities within a hundred miles of town.

Tucson was incorporated in 1871, becoming a municipality with a mayor and four councilmen. For the first time land titles were issued; property ownership became certain.

The 1870s saw Tucson’s first public schools; the first public library, the debut of the *Tucson Citizen* and *Daily Bulletin* (forerunner of the *Arizona Daily Star*) newspapers; and the development of several mercantile stores.

Sonnichsen wrote, “by 1877 [Tucson] had two hotels, a county courthouse, a United States depository [document library], two breweries, two flour mills, four feed and livery stables, and ten saloons. ...

Tucson had become the largest and most important community in Arizona Territory.” Census records record the growth of Tucson from 3,224 in 1870 to 7,007 in 1880.

Much of Tucson’s business growth in this period was due to Mexican immigrants who became some of Tucson’s leading citizens and whose entrepreneurial efforts resulted in prosperous freighting, stagecoach transportation, and merchandizing businesses.

As anthropologist Thomas E. Sheridan wrote, “Underlying everything ... was the pervasiveness of Mexican culture. ... The strongest representatives of Mexican culture in this fragile bicultural society were the Mexican woman who married Anglo men.”

Meanwhile the population of relatively peaceful Native Americans in and around Tucson was dwindling due to disease and mistreatment by the increasing numbers of Anglos and Mexicans. U.S. policy was to concentrate the natives on a few reservations. In 1859 a reservation for the Akimel O’odham (Pima) was established to the north of Tucson, along the Gila River. In 1872 a reservation was finalized for the Apache in the White Mountains. And in 1874 a Tohono O’odham (Papago) reservation was established south of Tucson, west of the Santa Cruz River, encompassing Mission San Xavier del Bac.

The southern route of the transcontinental railroad reached Tucson in 1880. Tucson was on the “main line” and was in good position to support expanded mining and ranching efforts in southern Arizona. Settlers were now able to reach Tucson in large numbers – effectively ending the southern Arizona frontier.

As anthropologist Sheridan put it, “Prior to the railroads, Arizona looked south [to Mexico] for much of its business and many of its goods. ... People could almost hear the axis of money and power shifting from north-south to east-west.”

Tucsonans experienced more “firsts” in the 1880s, including Saint Mary’s Hospital, gas lighting, electricity, the telephone, the Tucson Fire Department, the University of Arizona, the Tucson Water Department, and the Arizona Historical Society.

Water was about to become a big problem for Tucson. For centuries the Santa Cruz River had flowed almost year round. Reservoirs were built to impound river waters for farming, gardening, and to power flour mills. New, deep ditches for irrigation and four years of natural flooding in the late 1880s and early 1890s effectively ruined the old irrigation system. Soon, wells to tap ground water were being dug all over metropolitan Tucson; this would have far reaching consequences.

An economic depression began in Arizona in the late 1880s and lasted for ten years. All major industries were affected, including mining and cattle ranching. Sonnichsen described the difficult times, “Business was so bad in Arizona that the population of Tucson, its largest city, declined in 1890 to a little over 5,000 ... Tucson was actually for the moment, shrinking.”

The difficult time was made worse by a sustained period of lawlessness in the form of stagecoach and train robberies, gunfights on the streets of Tucson, murder, rape, robbery, and out of control gambling.

A slow economic recovery and reform efforts improved the situation in Tucson. In the late 1890s, the first locally owned automobile appeared on Tucson's (still) dirt roadways, and streetcars pulled by mules were in service. New residences and businesses were built along an ever-widening perimeter around Tucson. By 1900 the population of Tucson had recovered to over 7,500.

Tucson's growth continued in the early 1900s. A new industry – the health industry – was blossoming. There was a rush of health-seekers to Tucson, looking to the warm, dry climate to heal tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. And tourists were discovering Tucson and its fabulous weather! Guest ranches and resorts were born. By 1910 Tucson's population reached just under 14,000.

On February 14, 1912, President William Howard Taft signed the documents that admitted Arizona as the 48th U.S. state. Even though Tucson had more people, Phoenix was designated as the state capital, because of its central location.

In 58 years, Tucson had transitioned from a Mexican village of a few hundred people to a sizeable American town. The population mix in 1912 was about 55% Anglos (proportion growing rapidly) and 40% Mexicans.

But, Tucson's most significant growth was yet to come.

Sources: Arizona: A Cavalcade of History (Marshall Trimble, 1989), Arizona: A Celebration of the Grand Canyon State (Jim Turner, 2011), Arizona : A History (Thomas E. Sheridan, 2012), Cultural History of the Tucson Basin (J. Homer Thiel and Michael W. Diehl, 2004), Historical Atlas of Arizona (Henry Walker and Don Bufkin, 1979), Images of America: Early Tucson (Anne I. Woosley, 2008), A Thousand Years of Irrigation in Tucson (Jonathan B. Mabry and Homer Thiel, 1995), Tucson: The Life and Times of an American City (C. L. Sonnichsen, 1982)