

Buried Treasure Tales

"There's gold in them there hills"

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From Victorio Peak to the Lost Adams Diggings, New Mexico is filled with buried treasure stories. Are such stories fact or fiction? Spanish gold, and other treasures, have been found by archaeologists, prospectors, and treasure hunters over the years. According to legend, there's a lot more out there to find. Here's a few of the popular stories and some clues to consider. Good luck!

Spanish Gold

There are many legends of Spanish gold in New Mexico. In 1540, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado searched New Mexico in vain for Quivera, the "Cities of Gold," and other treasures. He returned to Mexico empty handed and disgraced.

Nearly 60 years later, Juan de Oñate and his colonists arrived in New Mexico. Oñate, and his father, were wealthy Spaniards from their successful silver mines near Zacatecas, Mexico. Arriving in New Mexico, Oñate was convinced he could find what Coronado could not. As the first governor of New Mexico, Oñate spent much of his time searching for gold and silver – and with some measure of success. Using the local pueblo Indians, he located and mined some gold and silver, though apparently not in any great amounts.

Under Spanish law, one-fifth of all gold and silver mined belonged to the King of Spain. Called the "Royal Fifth," this required full disclosure of the amount of gold and silver mined. It was then smelted, made into ingots, with the Royal Fifth

shipped to Spain for delivery to the king.

The Spanish galleons sailing from Mexico to Spain were filled with gold ingots. Caribbean hurricanes sent hundreds of these ships, and their treasures, to the bottom of the sea. Today, these sunken galleons are the playgrounds of treasure hunters seeking hidden fortunes.

Most of the gold sent to Spain came from the mines in Mexico, carefully weighed and measured, the Royal Fifth paid, and thus well documented. The miners in New Mexico were not so honorable, being located far from Mexico City. To avoid having to pay their Royal Fifth, most mines were worked under a great cloak of secrecy. The King of Spain saw scarcely an ounce of Zia gold.



Courtesy Fisher Salvage Expeditions

Here's what you're looking for – a 75 ounce ingot of Spanish gold, forged in Mexico City. One would be worth about \$150,000 today. The markings indicate the assessor, the mint, weight, and that the Royal Fifth has been paid.

To avoid discovery by the Spanish soldiers at Santa Fe, the miners would often hide their riches in caves or buried them near some recognizable landmark for later recovery. And thus, the source of legends of Spanish buried treasure. Due to the secrecy and lack of records, how many stories of these Spanish mines, hidden caches of gold, and buried treasure are true is difficult to determine.



Courtesy of Treasure Hunter Magazine
Gold from Mexico and New Mexico were minted into Spanish coins in Mexico City. Various legends claim stolen coins were buried in New Mexico for later recovery, some along the Camino Real.



Courtesy Franciscans in the Southwest
New Mexico was well served by the dedicated Franciscans, who walked from pueblo to pueblo in their ministerial work. The Franciscans at Socorro mined silver - but solely for the purpose of adorning the church. They were easily recognized for their characteristic robes and hats, and often clean shaven. There are still Franciscan friars in New Mexico today.

San Miguel Silver

One of the earliest legends of silver and buried treasure in New Mexico was at Socorro. Documentation and timing is sparse, but historians do know that in 1598, two Franciscan friars, and possibly a family or two of colonists, were left at the Piro Indian pueblo named Socorro by Oñate.

We also know that in the very early years of the 1600s, working with the Piro Indians, the Franciscans and the handful of Spaniards developed rich silver mines near Socorro. The mines were presumably on Socorro Peak. The New World visitors taught the Piro how to mine the silver, and building a crude smelter, melted and formed the silver into almost any shape.

Around 1615-1620, the first mission church was built, called de Much of the Piro silver was used to adorn the church. Stories prevail of the silver communion rail and sacred vessels used in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Some stories claim even the 12 stations of the cross were made of silver. The Socorro mission must have been quite a sight to the occasional visitors traveling along the dreary Camino Real.

These well known stories are not just legends. When Fray Alonso Benavidez departed New Mexico in 1629, he wrote lengthy descriptions of the missions under his charge.

Of the Socorro mission, he wrote in part, *“Well, all this land is full of great treasures – namely, very rich and prosperous silver and gold mines. As His affectionate chaplains and vassals, we customarily ask God for things like this. ...”*

“We give Him endless thanks for this in the name of Your Majesty – in particular for the range near the pueblo of Socorro, which is the principal and primary settlement of this province of the Piro. ...”

“The ease with which silver may be taken from this range is the greatest in all the Indies. It would be wiser to extract eight ounces of silver here than many more ounces from other places, as elsewhere mining materials and supplies must be hauled from great distances to a source of water, which is certainly necessary to extract silver anywhere. But in these Socorro mines everything needed for the job is right at hand.”

What a glowing report of the riches of Socorro and her mission. And, not just rumor or myth, but



Photo by Paul Harden

Ladron Peak, north of Socorro, is also home to numerous stories of hidden treasures, from old Spanish mines to the buried loot of outlaws. Very little is known to yet have been found.

penned by a most qualified source. The famous Padre, known as the “Apostle of Socorro,” clearly described the mines and high quality of the silver at hand.

The Socorro mission continued to flourish until 1680. In that year, the northern pueblo Indians revolted against the Spaniards, driving them 250 miles south to El Paso.

When news of the uprising reached Socorro, the Franciscans had the Indians disassemble the communion rail and collect all of the other silver, gold, and other valuable items.

Since these valuables were the property of the church, the Padre had them buried, likely near the Socorro mission church for safekeeping. With the expectation they would soon return, the Padre made a map where the cache was secreted for its ultimate recovery.

The people of Socorro did not soon return. Socorro was not allowed to be resettled until about 1800 – 120 years and several generations later. The Padre's treasure map had long since disappeared; memories of the hiding place forever lost.

The buried silver treasure has never been found, in spite of several known attempts, and likely dozens of unknown endeavors.

Somewhere around Socorro, and perhaps near the San Miguel mission, is buried treasure, a fortune estimated at \$1 million or more today. However, if you find it, remember, it belongs to the church. Father Andy Pavlik, today's Padre, would appreciate it's return!

Fra Cristobal Mine

The first documented mine in New Mexico, recognized by historians, is that of Pedro de Abalos. He applied for a mining permit on March 26, 1685. This was only five years after the Pueblo Revolt and several years before New Mexico was reoccupied by Spanish colonists.

During one reoccupation expedition, several men departed the Jornada del Muerto for the Rio Grande to water their thirsty horses. Riding along a canyon in the Fra Cristobal mountains, one of the men, Pedro de Abalos, noticed rock outcroppings laced with gold. Returning to El Paso, where the New Mexico government was temporarily headquartered, he applied for a mining claim permit.

This application is one of the documents at the Spanish Archives in Santa Fe. It reads in part, “*I, Pedro de Abalos, town of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de El Paso. Before Don Domingo Cruzate, Governor and Captain-General: Registration of a mine, situate forty-five leagues from the said town in the little sierra called Fray Cristobal. Name of mine Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Zaragoza.*”

When New Mexico was reoccupied in 1692, settlement along the Rio Abajo, including Socorro, was prohibited. What mining was done, and the amount of gold recovered, was obviously kept secret to avoid prosecution by Spanish authorities.

Many have searched for Abalos' mine. It is believed to be located between Engle and Truth or Consequences, likely somewhere along Cañon de



Photo by Paul Harden

Cañon de Muerto, in the Fra Cristobal mountains, was a popular trail from El Camino Real to reach the water of the Rio Grande. Pedro de Abalos registered the first gold mine in New Mexico in these mountains in 1685.

Muerto or near old Fort McRae. Today, Canyon del Muerto is called McRae Canyon.

The Lost Padre Mine

In 1797, an old dying Spanish soldier told his priest, Father LaRue, of a large vein of gold in the mountains north of El Paso del Norte, today's El Paso. When the soldier died, Father LaRue organized a small expedition to find the gold.

Following the old man's instructions, they traveled north from El Paso until three small peaks could be seen. From there, they crossed the Jornada del Muerto to the San Andreas mountains. After many days of exploration, they finally found a spring at the base of the solitary peak, just as the old soldier had said. On the far side of the peak, a rich vein of gold in a deep canyon, southwest of the springs, was located.

The men dug and followed the vein downward. The deeper they went, the richer the ore became. LaRue, a Jesuit priest, summoned monks and Indians from the monastery at Chihuahua to help mine the gold. So plentiful was the yellow ore, they built a smelter to shape the gold into ingots and crude coins. They were stacked along the wall of the mine tunnel, accumulating an impressive cache.

After many weeks working the mines, the men were running low on food and supplies. Padre LaRue and some of his monks traveled to Mesilla to stock up on supplies. As they bought items from one store and another, purchasing their goods with their gold coins, it raised a red flag. Spanish law prohibited the Jesuits from owning gold or a mine. Furthermore, one need proof that the Royal Fifth had been paid. Padre LaRue was guilty on both counts and was reported to the nearby Spanish Royal Guard.

As LaRue and his men were making their way back to the mine across the Jornada del Muerto, a thick cloud of dust many miles to the rear told them they were being pursued by Spanish

soldiers. Hastening their travel, they arrived at the mines just before sundown.

Father LaRue ordered the mine to be concealed. The men worked feverishly throughout the night to seal the entrance to the mine shafts, sealing their large cache of gold inside to be retrieved later. Before the sun rose, they moved their camp several miles down the mountain to further conceal the location of the mine and their buried cache of treasures.

As the soldiers approached Father LaRue's camp, many of the monks and the Indian laborers scattered. When the soldiers arrived, they demanded to know where the gold came from that was used to purchase the supplies in Mesilla. They also demanded the Royal Fifth owed to the throne. Padre LaRue and his monks refused to cooperate.

After several hours of harsh treatment to learn the location of the gold mine, Padre LaRue and several monks died during the torture. The Spanish soldiers searched for the mine to no avail and returned to Mesilla empty handed.

Treasure hunters have searched for the Lost Padre Mine for years. Some claim the mine was actually located in the Organ Mountains east of Las Cruces, or the Caballo Mountains near Truth or Consequences. Most, however, search in the San Andreas

mountains. Most of the clues have been found – everything so far except the gold.

Not all the lost gold in New Mexico is Spanish gold. From the 1800s onward, arriving prospectors and soldiers caught gold fever as well.

Red Hill Treasure

In the early 1830s, shortly after the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, explorers poked around the Gila country searching for a suitable wagon route to California. They didn't find a good route, but they did discover placer gold north of today's Silver City. A small mining town cropped up around the discovery, later called Pinos Altos.



Courtesy Pedro Aguiar Collection
The Jesuits were the dominant order in Mexico with a rocky history with the Spanish throne – and the Vatican. Many in Mexico spent more time mining gold and searching for treasures than performing church duties. They were expelled from Mexico in 1767 and disbanded by the Pope in 1773.

In 1838, an old prospector named Adams (not the same as the “Adams Diggings” fame 25 years later) staggered into the mining camp bleeding from arrow wounds. The miners took the wounded man to the closest thing they had to a doctor – but it was too late. Adams had lost too much blood.

On his death bed, Adams explained how he found placer gold in a stream by a red colored hill and nuggets farther upstream. While stuffing his saddlebags with the gold, he was attacked by a dozen Indians and barely made his escape.

With his failing voice, he tried to explain where the Red Hill was located, about two or three days travel, pointing to the north. Then, Adams breathed his last.

The handful of men around Adams contemplated the story, rationalizing it was another “lost gold story” of a delirious man.

A bit later, a couple of the men went to retrieve Adams' horse and found the saddlebags stuffed with gold nuggets. The nuggets were assessed at \$7,000 when gold was about \$16 per ounce, indicating a haul of about 25 pounds of gold – enough to make any skeptic a believer.

The gold nuggets of Red Hill have never been found, though many have searched for it up to the present day.

In the late 1920s, several families homesteaded between Quemado and Springerville, Az. A small community arose. In 1930, the ranch road from the homesteads to Springerville became part of the “Coast to Coast” highway, later called U.S. 60. One local rancher built a small store and gas station to serve the nearby ranchers and the

occasional auto traveler down the highway. In 1934, they applied for a post office, calling their small town Red Hill after the red lava colored hill north of town.

Water was scarce at Red Hill. They waited for rain that would pour water off the lava flows and into hand-dug reservoirs and dirt tanks. It is said while digging the reservoirs, small gold nuggets were found. The word spread and soon larger nuggets were found at the edge of the lava bench near Red Hill.

In 1938, new U.S. 60 was built, bypassing the town about a mile to the south. Soon, the town of Red Hill sat empty – her people gone, and with them, the secret of the gold nuggets.

Today, there is a small sign announcing “Red Hill” on U.S. 60 near the New Mexico-Arizona state line. There is nothing around. The ghost town of Red Hill is located about a mile to the north, out of view.

Is this Adams' Red Hill of gold nuggets? Even today, people prospect around Red Hill and the nearby lava. Some say there's nothing to be found; others say nothing but return now and again. Hmm...

Datil's Box Canyon Gold

While the Civil War was being fought in New Mexico, a prospector named Jacob Snively found a rich deposit of gold west of Socorro. He described the location as a narrow box canyon in the Datil Mountains, from which the Magdalena Mountain could be seen in the distance. He built a sluice box and a cabin in the canyon to mine his gold. He would alternate selling his gold in



Photo by Paul Harden

Buildings still stand in the ghost town of Red Hill, north of U.S. 60. Using the plentiful supply of rock from nearby Red Hill, the Ruyle family built the town store (left) in 1934, which also served as the Post Office until 1941. The WPA built the rock school house (right) in 1936. Stories of small gold nuggets being found in and around Red Hill have persisted since the 1830s.



Photo by Paul Harden

There are many rocky, craggy “box” canyons in the mountains around Datil. Do any contain gold?

Socorro, Silver City and Pinos Altos to not raise suspicion.

In 1870, after working about \$10,000 of gold, he was run out of the region by the Warm Springs Apache. He temporarily went to Arizona to avoid getting killed by the Indians, with full intentions of returning. His plan didn't work very well, as he was killed by Arizona Indians in the Picacho Mountains a year later.

Was Snively's gold in the Datils fact or fiction?

In the summer of 1872, a soldier from Fort Cummings, named Schaeffer, ventured north scouting for game to supply the remote army fort with fresh meat. He found plenty of deer and elk in the Datil Mountains. He also found an intriguing box canyon, which he explored, discovering an exposed vein of gold. He wore out a knife and a shovel chipping pieces of gold out of the vein.

Did Schaeffer find Snively's gold?

About out of food, he struck out for the Rio Grande instead of returning to Fort Cummings. After a couple of days on the trail in the blazing heat, with no food or water, he arrived at Fort Craig with his sack of gold and in a half-crazed condition. Regaining his health, he returned to Fort Cummings via Doña Ana, where he cashed in his gold for \$3,000 – about \$50,000 today.

At every chance, he made numerous trips back to the Datil Mountains looking for the box canyon. He was never able to locate the hidden canyon of gold.

In 1874, his duty in New Mexico came to an end and he returned to Virginia. Before leaving, he told a couple of trusted fellow soldiers of his find, giving them fairly precise instructions: *“Ride north along the Datil Mountains, across the*

Plains of Agustin, until you see the Magdalena Mountain. Then, due north into the mountains. There you will find a very narrow box canyon. You will have to dismount from your horse to enter it.”

These soldiers, and those who came later, searched in vain for the gold. At least most. It was reported a black soldier from Fort Craig stumbled upon the gold in a box canyon while on patrol. Upon his discharge, he returned to the canyon and recovered some of the gold before being run out by the Apache.

The Apache Indians considered the San Mateo mountains to the Black Range, and the Plains of San Agustin, their hunting grounds. Stumbling across the white man, the Apache would often give a stern warning to leave and never return. It was a death sentence if they got caught again.

Oddly, the more famous gold of the “Lost Adams Diggings” has a similar description. Adams called his narrow canyon the “Zig Zag” canyon, located somewhere around the Socorro-Catron county line. In later years, Reserve rancher James McKenna found the narrow canyon, but no gold, and clearly wrote in his memoirs it was in sight of the Magdalena Mountain to the east.

Thousands of people since the mid-1800s have searched for the gold in the hidden box canyon in the Datil mountains. No one has claimed to have found it. Then again, if you were to find it, would you tell?

Cooney's Sycamore Mine

When Army soldiers got paid and had a few days off, many ventured into nearby towns to



Courtesy of New Mexico Gen Web

The tomb of James Cooney east of Alma, NM, located near where he was killed by Indians in 1880 near his Silver Bar Mine.

gamble, get drunk, and party. Others went prospecting for gold or silver. One such soldier was Sergeant James Cooney, stationed at Fort Bayard. In 1870, he discovered silver ore east of Alma.

Cooney began mining his claim in 1876, which he called the Silver Bar Mine. In 1880, while working his mine, James Cooney was killed by Apache warriors led by Victorio.

His brother, Captain Michael Cooney, came from Louisiana to settle his dead brother's affairs. He quickly got bit by "gold fever." Living and working in Socorro, he would disappear for weeks at a time hoping to strike it rich.

In 1883, a prospector, known only as Turner, arrived in Socorro with rich gold ore he found somewhere along Sycamore Creek in the Mogollon mountains. Captain Cooney befriended Turner, grubstaked him with a small pack train of mules to bring back more ore. If it assayed as rich as his samples, Cooney would partner with Turner. Turner agreed. After the handshake, Turner disappeared into the Mogollons, never to be seen again.

When the prospector failed to return, Cooney began the search for him, and his lode of gold, in Sycamore canyon. Year after year he searched, but no Turner, and no silver or gold, was found.

In 1889, some cowboys found a skeleton, later identified as Turner, by the sheriff. Evidence showed he died in a furious gunfight. Cooney traveled to the W-S Ranch near Alma and tracked down the cowboys who made the find. Cow hands, never turning down a gift of cash, led Cooney to the spot where they found Turner's body – deep in Sycamore canyon.

Cooney spent the rest of his life searching for Turner's Sycamore Mine, as well as searching for the Lost Adams Diggings, Snivley's box canyon, and other lost gold. Cooney was very secretive about his expeditions, always traveled alone, though some of his treasure hunting trips were reported in the Socorro Chieftain at the time.

Michael Cooney served as Socorro's mayor 1901-1904. Still, he would disappear for weeks at a time deep in the mountains – somewhere. Some say he spent more time in the Mogollons than at City Hall. After his stint as Socorro mayor, Cooney continued to search for the lost Sycamore mine – a serious case of gold fever.



Sgt. James Cooney

In the autumn of 1914, Cooney returned from an expedition by entering San Marcial. There, he sold a quantity of gold ore for an undisclosed amount of money. Did he finally find the Sycamore mine? Returning to Socorro, he immediately readied for another trip. His family cautioned that winter was fast approaching, but the warnings fell on deaf ears.

On October 26, 1914, at age 76, Cooney once again departed for the mountains with his pack train of mules. He failed to return. The deep

winter snowfall in the Gila region made a rescue trip out of the question.

The next spring, Cooney's son, Charles, hired Bob Lewis to escort him in an attempt to find his missing father. Lewis, the Magdalena Marshall, was an accomplished tracker and "always found his man." Lewis did not let Charles Cooney down; he found the frozen body of Captain Cooney deep in Sycamore canyon, not far from where Turner's body was found 25 years before. Cooney was apparently overtaken by a snow storm and died of exposure. His badly decomposed body was returned to Socorro and buried at the Protestant cemetery. Captain Cooney's cozy brick house still stands at 309 McCutcheon.

Over the years, others from Socorro, and elsewhere, have searched for the Turner and Cooney treasure in Sycamore canyon. Some never returned. The hidden treasure, if there, is well hidden. Turner once told Cooney, "You can only take the mules so far. From there, it is a three mile hike to the mine." In the Gila, that covers a lot of rough, rugged, and secluded country.

According to the myths and legends, there's tons of silver and gold out there to be found. Buried Spanish gold knee deep is waiting to be discovered. How hard can it be to find? Buying a lottery ticket is probably easier – and with higher odds! Good luck.

Some of the references used in this article:

"New Mexico Mining History" by Jerry Simmons;
"New Mexico Treasure Tales" by W. C. Jameson;
"Apache Gold and Yaqui Silver" by J. Frank Dobie;
"The Lost Adams Diggings" by Jack Purcell; various issues of the Socorro Chieftain; and field work by the author.