



Isabel de Olvera Arrives in New Mexico

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historical records of the U.S. Southwest are replete with examples of persons of African ancestry who accompanied Spanish explorers and colonizers. The Juan de Oñate party, which established a colony along the upper Rio Grande near Santa Fe in 1598, included at least five blacks and mulattoes, two of whom were soldiers. Most of those explorers and settlers were men. However, in 1600 one black woman, Isabel de Olvera of Querétaro, daughter of a black father and Indian mother, accompanied the Juan Guerra de Resa expedition to Santa Fe, sent to strengthen the Spanish claim on the region. Her arrival predates by nineteen years the landing at Jamestown, Virginia, of twenty persons of African ancestry in British North America. De Olvera, who was a servant for one of the Spanish women, was concerned about her safety and status in the frontier region and gave the following deposition to the *alcalde mayor* (mayor) of Querétaro. To buttress her claim, Olvera presented three witnesses, Mateo Laines, a free black man living in Querétaro, Anna Verdugo, a mestiza who lived near the city, and Santa Maria, a black slave of the *alcalde mayor*.

In the town of Querétaro in New Spain, January 8, 1600, there appeared before don Pedro Lorenzo de Castilla, his majesty's *alcalde mayor* in this town, a mulatto woman named Isabel, who presented herself before his grace in the appropriate legal manner and declared:

As I am going on the expedition to New Mexico and have reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individual since I am a mulatto, and as it is proper to protect my rights in such an eventuality by an affidavit showing that I am a free women, unmarried, and the legitimate daughter of Hernando, a negro, and an Indian named Magdalena, I therefore request your grace to accept this affidavit, which shows that I am free and not bound by marriage or slavery. I request that a properly certified and signed copy be given to me in order to protect my rights, and that it carry full legal authority. I demand justice.

The *alcalde mayor* instructed her to present the affidavits which she thought could be used and ordered that they be examined in accordance with this petition and that she be given the original. He so ordered and signed. Don Pedro Lorenzo de Castillo. Before me, Baltasar Martinez, royal notary.