

Latino Americans: Foreigners in Their Own Land

Excerpts from a PBS documentary and Washington Post article compiled by the
Very Rev. Bob Scott

Latino history in the United States started very early (1500s) in the colonization of the Americas. Spanish explorers and settlers established some of the earliest European communities in what is now the U.S.—in places like St. Augustine, Florida, and the Southwest, long before English colonization. These settlers built thriving societies centered on farming, ranching, trade, and faith, creating a lasting cultural legacy. However, as the young United States expanded westward during the 19th century, these Spanish-speaking inhabitants found their lives transformed by conquest and shifting borders.

Bigotry against Latinos can be traced back to the early republic: for example, founding-era leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams made disparaging remarks about Latin American peoples and culture.

At the conclusion of the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848), Mexico lost nearly half its territory under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Although the treaty guaranteed citizenship and property rights to Mexicans remaining in the newly annexed lands, the promises were largely broken. Mexican Americans—who had once been the region's political and economic leaders—were gradually stripped of land, influence, and opportunity through legal manipulation, violence, and racism. Key figures such as Mariano Vallejo in California and Tejano leaders in Texas, are examples of how people who once held status under Mexican rule were recast as foreigners in their own homeland.

Despite widespread discrimination and economic hardship, Mexican Americans resisted erasure. They formed new communities, defended their cultural traditions, and asserted their rights through activism, education, and the church. The myth of Manifest Destiny and the ideology of white supremacy shaped U.S. attitudes toward Latino populations, turning former citizens into outsiders in a land their ancestors had helped build.

This dynamic has manifested in overt violence (lynchings of Hispanic Americans), institutional discrimination (segregated schools, English-only laws, denial of jury service) and social exclusion (migrant workers valued for labor but excluded from community life). These historical injustices are connected to present-day patterns of prejudice and stereotyping—suggesting the notion that “they don’t belong” remains embedded in the national consciousness.

In conclusion, Latino populations are not recent additions to the American story—they were often here first. Understanding U.S. history requires confronting the deep roots of anti-Hispanic bigotry.

This is only one of the many themes and stories explored in the Episcopal Church series called Sacred Ground. If you would like to view the entire PBS documentary, it currently is only available for free viewing through the Sacred Ground curriculum. You can learn more about Sacred Ground and how to sign up for the entire series of sessions by using this link: [EDNC Beloved Community webpage](#)