



New Mexico Passenger Plates 1910-2020

SEE PAGE 17



In this 1910 photograph Santa Fe pre-state plate #3SF is seen on an automobile from that city.



Raton pre-state 100 R registration card and plate.

New Mexico Passenger Car License Plates

1910-2020

By Bill Johnston #4302

Pre-State Era

When the first few horseless carriages began to trickle into the New Mexico Territory in 1901, the Territorial government made no move to either regulate or license motor vehicles, but by the end of that decade four of the Territory's largest towns had done so on their own. The story of New Mexico's pre-state licensing is told in complete detail in the October 2013 issue of *PLATES Magazine*, so in this article we will recap only the basics.

Albuquerque's 1910 Municipal Ordinance 432 required licensing of motor vehicles operated within the City of Albuquerque. A license fee of \$2.00 was paid to the City Clerk for registration of automobiles and motorcycles, who in turn issued a permanent license number. The number was required to be displayed upon, or attached to, the rear of cars or the rear of the seat of motorcycles. Since the ordinance said nothing about the issuance of actual license plates by the City Clerk, it can be inferred that the owner was required to make his own plate, or arrange for someone to make it for him.

Automobile licensing ordinance No. 349 became effective in Las Vegas upon its publication in the Las Vegas Daily Optic newspaper on August 13, 1910. The principal requirement was for the display of a single license plate, to be supplied by the City Clerk after payment of an annual fee of five dollars. Both

automobiles and motorcycles were required to be licensed.

A few days later the paper related that the license plate design most favored was of white enameled metal on which dark letters and numbers could be attached, and further remarked that the tags would bear the letters "L.V." followed by the number of the license. The owner was given the option of mounting the city-supplied tag on his car, or having the number painted thereon at expense of the owner, if it was impracticable to attach the tag.

The Santa Fe City Council on November 1, 1910, enacted a motor vehicle licensing ordinance designated Municipal Ordinance Section 279, with the requirement that motor vehicles operated within the city of Santa Fe be licensed not later than ten days thereafter, i.e., by November 11, 1910. A fee of \$8.00 (\$4.00 for motorcycles) was to be paid to the City Clerk, whereupon the Clerk would issue a license bearing a number. It was then the duty of the vehicle's owner to cause to be placed, at his own expense, upon his car the corresponding number of such license with the letters "S.F."

The Raton Daily Range for February 1, 1911, reported that ordinance No. 169, requiring the licensing of motor vehicles, had been passed the previous evening, January 31, and publication of the ordinance took place in the February 1 and February 2 editions of the Daily Range. The ordinance states that it was to become effective "five days after its passage and publication," in other

words, on February 7, 1911. The Raton ordinance does not itself stipulate the use of the letter "R" on the license plate, but merely states that the City Clerk shall issue the numbers. Raton plate #100 R shown in the accompanying photograph was issued to Raton resident W.A. "Chip" Chapman, and its registration receipt, also illustrated here, clearly shows the plate number as "100 R."

The End of City Plates

When the state of New Mexico enacted its first automobile licensing law in 1912, the legislation included a provision which permitted cities which licensed autos on a municipal basis to continue to do so, but only for residents of their own cities. That authority was canceled the following year by the 1913 motor vehicle law, which prohibited local governments from requiring an additional license. Consequently, the various municipal pre-state plates could have remained in use until the effective date of the new law, March 15, 1913.

Though none of the municipal registration records are known to survive today, these city registrations overlapped by a full year the state registrations which began with statehood in 1912. Consequently, by using the earliest state records, we can estimate the number of municipal pre-state registrations in each of these towns with a high degree of accuracy. In round numbers, by the time of their demise, there was a combined total of about 300 pre-state automobile and 100 pre-state motorcycle license plates among the four cities which issued them. Of these, only three are known to survive today, all of them from Raton.

New Mexico's State-Issued License Plates

New Mexico attained statehood on January 6, 1912, and the work of the First Regular Session of the New Mexico State Legislature came to be known as the 1912 Laws of New Mexico. Within those statutes, the state's first vehicle licensing law was embodied in Chapter 28. This was not a motor vehicle licensing law, but an automobile licensing law, as no kind of vehicle other than automobiles was mentioned in the statute. In 1912, therefore, the only type of license plate that existed was a passenger car plate.

This changed with the 1913 Laws of New Mexico, Chapter 19, effective March 15, 1913, which was a motor vehicle licensing law requiring (with a few exceptions) that all motor vehicles be licensed. In other words, trucks, motorcycles, and other motorized vehicles now had to have a license.

Nonetheless, even with this change, only two new kinds of license plates were introduced, and those were for motorcycles and dealers. Trucks, meanwhile, were issued the same license plates as were being issued to cars, and the only way to differentiate between vehicle types is to look up the license number in the registration

records and see what kind of vehicle received a particular plate. To summarize, all 1912 plates, plus all 1913 plates issued from January 1 through March 14 of 1913, were passenger car plates, while all plates issued from March 15, 1913, through December 31, 1929 (after which trucks received separate plates of their own), were passenger/truck plates.

Under the 1912 law, automobile owners were required to make application to the Secretary of State and pay an annual fee of ten dollars. The Secretary in turn issued "consecutively numbered" state licenses ("registration certificates"), and "furnish[ed]" to the licensee one metal tag or plate bearing the initials 'N.M.' and the number corresponding to that license." For this purpose, the office of the Secretary of State supplied a single embossed (but undated) green-on-white 5 1/2" x 12 5/8" license plate, which had been manufactured by the S.G. Adams Co. of St. Louis, Missouri. The layout of the plate was fairly simple, consisting of the embossed serial number followed by a rather large embossed, stepped "NM" at the right side. It is known from at least three surviving examples that plates with 3-digit numbers had a hyphen (dash) between the number and the initials, but we can only guess as to the arrangement of 1-digit and 2-digit plates, as none are known to exist today.

The first registration, for license plate #1, was recorded on August 16, 1912, with that plate going to Louis C. Ilfeld of Las Vegas, New Mexico, for his Velie automobile. By year's end, 904 of these 1912 plates had been issued. For new registrations in 1913, the license numbering sequence continued from where the 1912 licenses left off, so the first number for 1913 was 905, issued on January 2, 1913. The last license for the year, #1898, was issued on December 22, 1913. If a vehicle was sold, the plate went with the vehicle. Consequently, the last license issued in 1913, i.e., #1898, is a good indicator of the total number of automobiles in the state at the end of 1913.

The 1912 law originally established the annual license period as November 1 through October 31 of the following year. (The license plates were placed on sale earlier, on August 16, 1912.) The 1913 law changed the term to run from January 1 through December 31. Registrations paid under the 1912 law, in other words, those purchased through March 14, 1913, and which were set to expire on October 31, 1913, were given a free extension to December 31. As a result, the plates numbered 1 through 904 could technically be called 1912/13 plates, while those 905 and higher would be strictly 1913 plates.

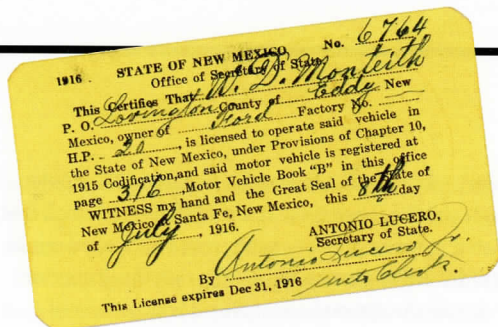
The 1913 law also brought about a change in the way fees were charged for licenses. Previously a flat ten-dollar fee, from this point forward fees would be based on the horsepower of the vehicle. (This would last until 1929 legislation changed the basis to the weight of the vehicle.)



3-digit 1912/13 plates have a dash after the serial, while 4-digit numbers do not.



1918 plates made of thin steel, medium blue on gray (Type 1); and made of thick steel, dark blue on olive green (Type 2).



1914-1919

At some point it was realized that using the same undated plate for multiple years was an error, as there was no way to tell by looking at the plate itself if the renewal fee had been paid. The 1913 law rectified the problem by directing that "The Secretary of State shall adopt a different color each year for the number plate." A fortuitous effect of this provision is that a run of New Mexico license plates is considered by many to be the most colorful of any state. In compliance with the law, the Secretary reversed the 1912/13 colors, making the new 1914 plates white on green.

The same law mandated the inclusion of the state's initials and specified a minimum size for the plates (5" x 10"), but said nothing about including the year. Beginning in 1914, though, the two-digit year was added in the lower right corner, beneath a stacked "NM". The serial number occupied the center of the 1914 plate, embossed in large, bold, artistically-designed numerals. Another innovation for 1914 was the introduction of an embossed rim, which enhanced both the appearance and the rigidity of the plate. Heavier-gauge steel was also used, with all of these features being improvements over the 1912/13 plates. The size chosen for 1914 was approximately 6" x 12". By year's end 3,090 of the 1914 tags had been issued to cars and trucks, with the last one going out on December 4. This relatively small number easily places 1914 in the very-difficult-to-find category.

Except for the colors and the year designation, the 1914 design remained essentially unchanged through 1919, with one glaring exception: The Secretary of State's office bought two distinct types of plates for 1918, commonly referred to as the "thin" variety and the "thick" variety. The first of these were stamped on sheet steel blanks that were little more than half as thick as

the state's other plates, either before or after. The embossing on these plates is quite shallow; that is, the numerals and letters have little relief. Colors are medium blue on battleship grey, which provides little contrast and renders the plates virtually unreadable at other than close range. This thin variety began at plate #1 and is known for plates up to approximately #14000.

The thick variety is pretty much conventional in both materials and embossing, with the colors being very dark navy blue on olive grey. On a few known unissued specimens, the navy blue is so dark as to appear black without close inspection. The serial numbers of this variety pick up where the former leave off, and are believed to run from approximately #14000 to 19000.

1920s

In early 1919, a determination was made to introduce multi-year license plates as a means of saving money. Under a strict interpretation of the earlier motor vehicle law this was not possible, as the 1913 Law mandated that the plate be a different color each year.

Thus, implementation of the plan required new legislation, which was codified in the 1919 Laws of New Mexico, Chapter 150. In that law, Section 9 said, "... the Secretary, without additional charge, shall ... cause to be issued to the owner of such motor vehicle, with the first registration only, one metal number plate and a distinguishing seal of suitable material of such size and form as the Secretary shall determine, which seal shall be of a distinctly different color for each calendar year, and there shall be at all times a marked contrast between the color of the letters and figures and the background of the seal; Provided, however the same Combination of colors may be repeated after five years. Seals to be furnished each year thereafter upon payment of the annual license fee."

This paved the way for New Mexico's relatively short-lived porcelain era from 1920 through 1923. The annual revalidation seals (what we today often refer to as "tabs") complied with the law by virtue of their change in color each year, which were red



Three types of 1920-23 porcelain bases - Dated 1920 (#1 - c. 22500), Undated with tab holes (c.#22501 - 47500), and Undated without tab holes (c. #47501 - 49000).



Porcelain bases issued to new registrations in 1921, 1922 and 1923 came with matching-number seals, while renewals received seals whose serial numbers did not match.

for 1921, silver for 1922 and yellow for 1923. The letter of the law required a seal for the initial year 1920 as well, and this was met by the blue "1920" baked into the porcelain base plate itself. The layout of the porcelain plates was governed by their unusual shape - a long, narrow 4 1/2" x 14 1/2". The "1920" at the left end was surrounded by three small rivet holes for attachment of the revalidation tabs in subsequent years. The center portion of the plate was occupied by the serial number, with space for up to five digits. At the far right was a stacked "NM". All characters were dark blue on a white background.

The original plan was for the porcelain plates to be used for five years, but for a variety of reasons (primarily because of rampant theft of the revalidation seals, and the difficulty other than by observation at close range of verifying that a plate had a current seal), the system proved to be objectionable and the porcelains were dropped a year early. Dissatisfaction with multi-year plates brought about a return to standard embossed steel plates for 1924, 6" x 12", in black on orange. Across the bottom appears "N.M. 1924", with the remainder of the plate reserved for the serial number.

And for 1924, New Mexico for the first time issued plates in pairs, with the requirement that a plate be mounted on both the front and back of the vehicle. Whatever the intentions might have been, this turned out to be an additional source of grief for motor vehicle officials, who already were dealing with a citizenry disposed to evasion of licensing fees, which itself was one of the major reasons for abandoning the porcelain plates in the first place. Some residents who owned two cars took to mounting one plate of the pair on each car, thereby avoiding registration fees entirely on the second vehicle. These wealthier two-car owners, the ones most able to pay, seemed to be the ones most inclined to cheat the state's coffers, but there would be a fix for this in the coming year.

Stung by the cheats of 1924, the state had the two plates of each 1925 pair embossed separately with the words "FRONT" or "REAR". If the trick brought in any additional revenue, information on the fiscal result has not been found. In any case, the experiment lasted only one year, with the designations being permanently dropped the following year.

New Mexico's 1926 plates are another one of those anomalies that mystifies many collectors. Aside from measuring a rather bizarre 4 1/2" x 12", the plates are painted a virtually unreadable red on grey. The unusual size is attributable to the 1926 tags having been stamped at the Oklahoma State Prison. Perhaps there was some attractive financial incentive to induce the state to forfeit conventionality for monetary savings.

In mid-1926, the news was announced that plates for the coming year of 1927 would for the first time bear the Indian sun

symbol, or "Zia". Not mentioned was the fact that "27" would be placed inside the Zia, or that the name of the state, which had been abbreviated in every previous year, would be spelled out in full. And little did anyone know at the time that this important event was to dictate the appearance of New Mexico's license plates for decades to come. Other than the partial abbreviation "NEW MEX" used in 1932, not a single year has since passed without the inclusion of both the Zia and the full spelling of the state's name.

The rather unconventional dimensions of the 1926 plates were discarded in favor of a 6" x 12" tag for 1927, a size which would be used through 1931, and which itself was a harbinger of what was to eventually become a permanent size in 1956.

1930s

As motor vehicle department officials would soon learn, New Mexico motorists had become strongly attached to the Zia symbol, which had been introduced on their license plates five years earlier. When it was made known that the Zia would be omitted in 1932, the state's motoring public pitched a fit. After this chastisement, the decision was made to reinsert the Zia, but in a reduced size that was too small to incorporate the 2-digit year. Instead, it was used only as a separator between numerals to improve readability on plates having 4- and 5-digit numbers, coming just before the final three digits.

On the other hand, to the delight of motorists then and collectors today, the double-Zia format was introduced on passenger plates for the first time in 1932. All passenger plates having three or fewer digits, i.e., those numbered from 1 to 999, got two Zias, one on each side of the serial number. This popular innovation would last until the advent of county number prefixes in 1947.

New Mexico's 1932 plates were of a distinctly different design than those of any other year. Measuring about 5 1/2" x 12 1/2", these white-on-green plates carried the state's nickname, "SUNSHINE STATE", horizontally across the bottom. At far left was a stacked "NEW" over "MEX" over "32". Some of these changes were unquestionably brought about by the switch to a different manufacturer for this year alone. The plates were made by the Shwayder Trunk Company of Denver, and the similarity to Colorado's 1932 and 1933 plates is seen in the dies used for both states. (Shwayder Trunk, then primarily a manufacturer of steamer trunks, later changed its name to Samsonite, ultimately becoming the largest and best-known manufacturer of luggage in the world, but in 1932 it would fall victim to a kickback scandal that would cost both the New Mexico State Comptroller and the Motor Vehicle Commissioner their jobs.)

Another major change that came about in 1932 was the introduction of the debossed (recessed) - and therefore unpainted - outer rim. New Mexico would retain this design characteristic for 21 years, until the raised and painted border was reintroduced in 1953.

1933 was to be the last year for many decades that New Mexico's license plates would be made by a commercial manufacturer. Nonetheless, the size, design and layout



Matched pair of 1925 plates, the only year to feature "Front" and "Rear".

established a pattern that would last with essentially no change through the end of the 1930s, and with but little change for another 16 years beyond that.

With a large Zia encircling the 2-digit year, and three-quarter-inch-tall block letters proclaiming "NEW MEXICO" across the bottom, these roughly 6" x 13 1/2" red-on-golden-yellow plates provided a large piece of real estate for the serial number. (And the Zia's horizontal rays were made the same length as the vertical rays.) The plates were ordered, however, in quantities that turned out to exceed the state's requirement for the year. Registrations actually decreased as compared to the previous year, a manifestation of the deepening Great Depression, and this was one of only a couple of occasions other than World War II when there was such a decline. As a result of the over-production, hundreds of pairs of the excess plates survive to this day, still in their original envelopes, and most of them pretty much unscathed. Many of these are in the #62-000 series, but other blocks of numbers are known as well.

In the summer of 1933, at the recommendation of Warden Ed Swope, and the passing of necessary legislation, equipment was purchased and installed at the New Mexico State Penitentiary for the manufacture of the state's license plates and road signs. As the 1933 plates had already been made by the Gopher Stamp & Die Co. (in St. Paul, Minnesota) through a contract let in 1932, the prisoners set about making 1934 plates for the coming year. All of the design traits were retained from 1933, but with two barely noticeable changes. First, the dies are a bit wider and bolder. Second, two elongated bolt slots were added at the bottom edge of the plate (but not aligned with the top slots), for a total of four slots, and the colors were reversed from the previous year.

According to Bureau of Public Roads statistics, 1936 was the first year that New Mexico exceeded 100,000 total registrations, though passenger cars accounted for just 77% of this overall number. John Bingaman, Commissioner of Revenue, announced

in mid-1936 that the plates for 1937 would be "Navajo red on turquoise blue." Bingaman further stated that the state colors, red and yellow, were going to be "preserved for the state cuarto centennial year, 1940."

1940s

For some years, tourism officials had been planning state-wide activities and celebrations to take place in commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the journey through New Mexico by Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado y Luján. There was considerable advance publicity during the preceding several years, with the goal of attracting tourists in large numbers. One of the actions taken was to add the words "CORONADO CUARTO CENTENNIAL" (Coronado Fourth Centennial) across the top of the 1940 license plates, though in order to make room for the slogan it was necessary to reduce the height of the serial number digits from their former 3 1/2 inches to 3 inches. For this one year, the arrangement of the dated Zia symbol was modified as well. Instead of the date being in the center of the circle, the date 1540 was split into "15" and "40" with these two halves placed at the upper left and upper right corners of the sun's rays, and the numerals of the current year also split and placed at the lower left and lower right corners of the Zia's rays. The colors were golden yellow on bright red.

During the latter half of the 1930s, as plans were being formulated for the Cuarto Centennial, tourism officials decided that New Mexico's longtime nickname of "Sunshine State" should be discarded. Replacing the former sobriquet would be "The Land of Enchantment". This slogan was placed on license plates for the first time in 1941, where it has remained ever since. The wording was the same size as, and occupied the same space across the top of the plate as the previous year's Coronado slogan. Hence, it was necessary that the serial numbers remained at the same reduced 3" height since the slogan was here to stay.



Complete 1932-46 double-zia run, only issued on numbers 1 to 999.

(Florida didn't pick up new Mexico's discarded Sunshine State slogan to use on its license plates until 1949.) Colors were the reverse of those for 1940 and the 2-digit year was returned to the center of the Zia. Automobile registrations reached 97,127 this year.

It was not just America's own combat years in World War II which created shortages of strategic materials and foodstuffs. For a couple of years running, prior to America's direct involvement in the war, the U.S. had been shipping vast quantities of raw materials and manufactured war goods to her allies. The shipments accelerated with the passage of the Lend-Lease act in March 1941. So severe were the shortages of steel that in early November of that year, Antonio C De Baca, Chief Clerk of the Motor Vehicle Division, announced that in all probability there would be no metal license plates made for 1943. (The 1942 plates had already been manufactured and were ready for distribution, so it was too late to do anything about the coming year.)

The December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor which thrust America directly into the shooting war sealed the fate of metal plates for 1943, and the decision was finalized that paper windshield stickers would be used in lieu of metal plates. The Motor Vehicle Department solicited bids for manufacture of the stickers, and on October 13, 1942, Mr. C De Baca released a statement announcing that the state had accepted a bid from the Meyercord company of Chicago for approximately 100,000 stickers at a price of \$29.90 per thousand, bringing the total order to about \$3,000. The company's bid was described as the "lowest and best" of five bids received.

For 1943, New Mexico motorists were instructed to keep their 1942 metal plates on their cars and apply the 1943 sticker to the inside, lower right corner of the windshield after writing the 1942 metal plate number in the designated space on the sticker. Once applied, there was no way to remove these stickers intact, making them among the rarest of all New Mexico registration items. Because 1942 plates continued to be issued in conjunction with 1943 windshield stickers for new registrations during 1943, plate numbers surpassed 99-999 and continued from 100000 to at least 101747 without a hyphen.

By mid-1943, America's industrial production had increased to the point where steel could be spared for domestic consumption,

and metal license plates were reinstated. A significant step was taken in the name of conservation, however, in that the practice of using two plates was suspended. Single plates, therefore, were issued for 1944. The design was the same as prior and subsequent years, with one interesting difference: The Zia was made larger this one year, which made it necessary to partially lop off the symbol's top rays to make it fit. The Zia returned to its pre-1943 size in 1945 on another single-only plate.

Facing a continuing shortage of steel, while seeing increasing availability of aluminum, New Mexico began making license plates out of the latter for 1947, but for this one last year the state continued its austerity measure of issuing just one plate per vehicle. The economic and manufacturing boom that followed the war drove New Mexico's passenger car registrations over 100,000 for the first time in a single year during 1947. (Counting trucks and other vehicles, the grand total was over 165,000.)

Meanwhile, state officials who had long discussed the idea of having some feature on license plates which would identify the county of residence of the vehicle's registered owner, finally implemented such a system in 1947 by numbering the counties from 1 to 31. Santa Fe County, the location of the state capital, was given #1. All the remaining counties were numbered according to the total number of motor vehicle registrations for the last full year for which complete statistics were available, that is, for 1945. (Remember that the 1947 plates were manufactured in 1946, before complete numbers were known for that year.) The county number became a prefix on the plates, followed by the Zia with the 2-digit year in the middle. The serial number then followed the Zia. Otherwise, the 1947 plates were identical to those of other recent years.

An ever-increasing supply of raw materials for manufacturing heralded a return to two license plates in 1948. These aluminum plates were white on blue, and were in other respects the same as the preceding year except for the date. A fly in the ointment was that the county number prefix system now in place dictated that the counties be numbered according to the total number of motor vehicle registrations for the last full year for which complete statistics were available, which this time was for 1946. Because several counties had changed rank on the list as compared to 1945, the list was thrown out of whack and a new list had to be drawn up. Hence, though Santa Fe County was kept at the top of the list, the county prefixes changed for many other counties and the license plates were renumbered accordingly.

The layout from the previous several years remained unchanged, with only the year and the colors altered. There was a dramatic difference in the aluminum blanks from which the 1949 plates were stamped, however. Instead of the smooth sheets of aluminum used in the past, the blanks for 1949 were stamped with a three-dimensional grid-like texture, commonly referred to as "waffle aluminum."

After the previous year's fiasco of stirring up the prefix numbers after just one year of use, it was realized that changing the county numbers every year entirely defeated the purpose of having the prefixes in the first place. As a result, a decision was made to leave them alone and use the 1948 county number ranking indefinitely. One interesting development, however, was the formation of Los



1942 bases with and without hyphen. When 6-digit numbers were reached in 1943, the hyphen was squeezed out.



1943 windshield sticker along with its matching-number 1942 base plate.



Alamos county on March 16, 1949. Starting in 1950, Los Alamos residents received a new county code prefix #32.

1950s

After using leftover aluminum blanks in early production runs for 1950 plates, a return to steel was made, probably as a matter of both price and increasing availability. Except for the date and colors, all other design hallmarks remained the same. A major change came about in 1951 with the introduction of significantly thinner dies, though a relatively few late 1950 plates were also made using them.

Virtually unknown to aficionados of New Mexico license plates is the fact that steel shortages similar to those experienced during World War II reappeared in 1951, this time triggered by the Korean War. The result was that the plate factory at the State Penitentiary ran out of steel at mid-year, halting production of metal plates. Instead, paper windshield stickers like 1943 were issued to some 5,500 vehicles beginning in late July. The 1951 stickers were issued in pairs, as compared to the wartime stickers which were issued as singles. A few months later, sufficient steel was obtained to not only meet the need for plates for the rest of the year, but to replace the stickers on the 5,500 vehicles which had not received metal plates earlier. On October 28, it was announced that all of the vehicles which had been issued stickers now had their metal plates. As rare as 1943 windshield stickers are, there is not a single surviving example known of the 1951 windshield sticker other than a few samples, making it possibly the most scarce of all New Mexico registration items!

For 1951, the four bolt slots which had been in use since 1934 were dropped, leaving only the four bolt holes. And the bolt holes, which had always been in the corners since 1914, were moved a couple of inches inward, to positions close to where the slots had been. (Bolt slots were reinstated on a few late-production plates.)

1952 saw a drastic change when the 2-digit date was taken out of the center of the Zia symbol and moved to the upper left corner of the plate. This brought to a close a quarter-century run of having the date inside the Zia (excepting 1932). Though we have found nothing in the historical record to explain this,

a likely scenario is supported by the ongoing worries over steel shortages affecting supplies even for 1953 and 1954, and proposals that plates be kept for five years, with renewals being accomplished with metal tabs covering the original embossed "52" date. This would be far more practical to do with the date in the corner than if it were in the Zia. In order to fit the 2-digit date in the new location it was necessary to eliminate the word "THE" from the slogan, resulting in just "LAND OF ENCHANTMENT", this shortened version prevailing for nearly 70 years now.

When the 1953 plates went into production, slightly thicker dies (as compared to 1951-52) appeared, but not as wide as the 1950 and earlier versions. A 21-year run of having a debossed rim was broken with the reintroduction of an embossed, painted border. The length of the plate was slightly increased from the longstanding 13 1/2" to 13 3/4". Colors were white on red, but identical plates in red on white were issued to trucks in 1953. Unmarked reverse-color plates continued for trucks from 1953 through 1959, resulting in some being repainted in the wrong colors by plate or antique car collectors.

Two major benchmarks were passed in 1953, with passenger registrations exceeding 200,000 for the first time, and total registrations for all vehicle types reaching above 300,000 for the first time. And all the hand-wringing over steel shortages proved to be for naught, as the nation's steel production caught up with demand. Multi-year plates and date tabs were not implemented after all.

1955 would prove to be the last year for long plates. Every jurisdiction in North America standardized its license plates to 6" x 12" beginning with the 1956 license year. (A few states didn't complete the transition until 1957.) The change was brought about in part at the urging of auto manufacturers who were able to reduce costs by having uniform license plate mounting areas on their bumpers. The two-digit date "56" appeared twice on the plate, in each of the lower corners. (The same double-dating scheme would be used in 1957.)

Just three years after passing the 200,000 mark, passenger car registrations shot past 250,000 in 1956.

In the county number prefix system, those counties with two-digit numbers had space for only four digits to the right



1952 plates with normal dies (#4-3), or 1953 dies for very late issues (#2-50010).



1957 plates with normal dies (#26-910), or 1958 dies for very late issues (#15-8427).



1958 plates illustrating the different format used for 2-digit counties.



1959-60 plates showing the first use of "A" series in Bernalillo county after #2-99999.

of the Zia symbol, allowing for 9,999 plates in each county at most. This was fine until some of those counties reached 10,000 or more registrations, a condition which first occurred in 1957. Among the earliest to reach this milestone were counties 16 and 17 (San Juan and Rio Arriba, respectively). The solution was to reduce the size of the two county number digits and stack them vertically at the left side. This freed up space for one more digit, allowing up to 100,000 registration numbers in each of the respective counties before the plates would again run out of room. A side effect of this layout was that it was necessary to eliminate the extra "57" that was in the lower left corner on those plates with a stacked county number, and shift the top slogan over to the right slightly. New 1958 dies also appeared on these late 1957 plates.

Plates for 1958 were similar to the previous two years except for the new dies and a switch to "19" and "58" in the lower corners instead of repeating dates. On all plates issued in counties 10 to 32, the county prefix was stacked, the "19" part of the date was omitted, and the slogan was at far right, not centered. The same varieties continued in 1959. For the first time in 1959, passenger car registrations in Bernalillo County (Albuquerque) alone exceeded #2-99999, necessitating the use of a letter series on numbers 2-A-1 to 2-A9999. For the state as a whole, passenger car registrations surpassed the 325,000 mark.

1960s

In spite of all the talk in the early 1950s of having to resort to multi-year plates and renewal tabs, the event was staved off until 1960. A small metal tab with a flat surface, on which a 1960 validation sticker was pre-affixed, was issued to cover up the embossed "59" in the lower right corner of the plate. The renewal stickers themselves, having red printing on a reflective white background, had their own serial numbers, which did not match the original plate's serial number.

Only one tab with sticker was issued to each vehicle. Car and truck owners were instructed to keep both 1959 plates on the vehicle and attach the tab to the rear plate. Motorists were cautioned that even though a tab was used only on the back plate, the front and rear plates had to match each other. New

registrations - of which there were about 15,000 in 1960 - would have been issued 1959 plates to go with the tab.

The metal tab was found to be a somewhat clumsy way to implement a multi-year plate, so for 1961 a red-on-white undated plate was issued with both of the lower corners unencumbered by embossed dates, the first undated base since 1912-13. This left a smooth surface for placement of self-adhesive renewal stickers in subsequent years. For the first time, a fully reflective background was used on plates (although certain state government vehicles were issued reflective plates as early as 1953), and it was at this point that the state made an unambiguous and permanent switch from two plates to a single plate to be carried on the rear of each vehicle.

The undated 1961 base plate was renewed in 1962-64 with annual stickers. New registrations during these years still received an undated 1961 base with the current year sticker on it. Popular belief has long held that New Mexico issued two styles of undated base plates concurrently in 1961, namely reflective white and painted white, and did so through 1964. In reality, the reflective bases were introduced first in 1961, but were dropped in late 1962 as a cost-saving measure and entirely replaced by painted plates. The reflective coating was 3M's proprietary (and very expensive) Scotchlite which then cost 46 cents per plate, vs. 16 cents for regular paint. Once the decision was made and the existing supply of Scotchlite was exhausted, the switch was implemented, taking place very late in 1962. With a half million plates to be manufactured each year, the savings was substantial. Both varieties were renewed through 1964.

A new reflectorized red-on-yellow base was introduced for 1965 as a general reissue, replacing the 1961-64 series. Plates for 1-digit counties were given an embossed "65" in the lower left corner, with the lower right corner left blank for application of renewal stickers. On those made for 2-digit counties, the lower left was partially encumbered by the stacked county number and therefore had no date appearing there. Instead, in the lower right corner was a red-on-yellow sticker bearing a large printed "65" which was pre-applied before the plates were clear-coated. This sticker was then covered in subsequent years by the revalidation stickers for 1966-71.

One small but notable event was the introduction of the



1961-64 baseplates depicting the change from fully reflective to non-reflective paint in late 1962.



Letters continued in Bernalillo Co. in 1961-64, using A, B, C, E, G, J and K, with numbers under 1000 using a hyphen while 4-digit numbers had no hyphen.

1965 bases with an embossed date for 1-digit counties or a pre-applied sticker for 2-digit counties.

"USA" was added on new bases issued starting in 1969.

letters "USA" following the state name, beginning in 1969. This was done in an attempt to educate the astonishing number of geography-challenged Americans who had no idea whatsoever that New Mexico is one of the fifty U.S. states, thinking instead that it's a foreign country. Alas, after more than fifty years of this back-bumper teaching effort, there is no clear indication that the population at large has gotten any smarter.

1970s

With Bernalillo county reaching #2-Y9999 in 1971, and coming close to running out of numbers, the most substantial change to New Mexico's passenger plates in the modern era was the abandonment of the county number system beginning with the 1972 plates. It was at this time that the 3-letter, 3-numeral serial format was introduced, initially issued on a red-on-reflective-white base bearing an embossed "72" in the lower left corner, with a blank space in the lower right for renewal stickers.

The initial issue from #AAA-001 to AZZ-999 used the letters I, O and Q in the second position, and U and V in second and third positions. After that, I, O, Q, U and V were omitted altogether on passenger plates.

Through a combination of material shortages and bureaucratic bungling, the state ran out of steel license plate blanks in early 1974 and found itself forced to issue paper license plates dated "74". Two months later, the prison was finally able to obtain a supply of aluminum blanks, and vehicle owners were mailed metal plates bearing the same number as that on the corresponding paper plate, these replacement plates bearing an embossed "74" at the lower left. After this batch, the "72" date returned on subsequent bases issued from 1974 to 1977.

The raised and painted border was eliminated in October 1976, accompanied by a repositioning of the state slogan from above the plate serial to below it. This redesign also introduced for the first time both a debossed renewal sticker box in the lower right corner, and a debossed county name sticker box along the top edge. The embossed "72" date remained, but the "USA" designation disappeared on this final version of the red-on-white base, issued from #BTN-001 to CCW-999.

The following year, 1977, brought about a change of color back

to red on yellow, along with the permanent abandonment of embossed dates on passenger plates. From 1977 on, plates have been dated only with stickers showing the year of expiration. This embossed 1977 base was issued from #CCX-001 to EGZ-999.

From the time of New Mexico's first issue, the state used a "plate-to-car" procedure whereby the vehicle's license plate remained with the car when sold. Effective April 1, 1979, a "plate-to-owner" system was implemented in which the seller kept the plate, and the vehicle received a new plate upon registration by the new owner.

1980s

Beginning with New Mexico's earliest license plates, expiration of the registration period was set at December 31. In later years, motorists were allowed a 60-day grace period ending March 2 of the following year. Either way, having all annual renewals come due on the same date imposed a huge and onerous workload on the motor vehicle department's staff, all within the span of just a few weeks. This problem was resolved with the introduction of staggered registration on April 1, 1982, whereby all new registrations would expire each year in the same month as the initial registration. Plates issued under this system received validation stickers bearing both the month and year of expiration, starting with "APR 83".

Registrations already in force retained the December 31 expiration, and for several years these vehicles continued to be issued stickers bearing only the year of expiration. This resulted in two types of stickers from 1983 through 1988. Starting in 1989, "DEC" stickers were issued for these old renewals. Once sold, a vehicle under the old calendar year schedule was automatically folded into the staggered system upon registration by the new owner. Renewals were never formally brought into the staggered system but have done so through attrition based on the average length of time motorists keep their vehicles.

Coinciding with implementation of the new registration scheme was the introduction of a new graphic design, the state's first, using a larger sticker box, necessitated by new stickers which had grown in size to accommodate the month as well as the year. The redesign also included much thinner and taller



Bernalillo, the only county to use letters, reached "Y" by the final year of the 1965-71 base. Some late issues in the "X" series had "71" embossed in error, but the sticker was still required.



Original 1972 base, first year of the AAA-000 system, in heavy galvanized steel.



Paper plates were issued in early 1974 during a metal plate shortage at the prison, later replaced by matching-number aluminum plates with an embossed "74".



Final version of the red-on-white 1972-77 base, and the first style of the new red-on-yellow base begun in 1977.



Two types of stickers issued in 1983-88. New registrations received month/year stickers while renewals of registrations issued before 1983 were issued year-only stickers to expire on December 31. In 1989 and thereafter, the latter switched to "89 DEC" stickers.

serial dies (which increased in height from 2 1/2" to 3"), and a change in the state name and slogan from embossed to screened characters to free up the extra half inch for the serial. These new plates, starting at #EHA-001, went only to new registrations, while existing registrations continued to use their old plates (dating as far back as 1972) until the vehicle was sold. Prefixes FAA-FZZ were omitted.

In 1988, it was decided to reinstate the geography lesson by adding "USA" after the state name once again, starting at #KAK-001. This time, it has remained ever since, except for the Centennial bases issued from 2010 to 2016.

1990s

In 1991, a general reissue was finally begun, with the plate serial numbering scheme reversed to a 3-numeral, 3-letter configuration starting at #001-AAA. This change coincided with the introduction of graphics incorporating both Native American artwork and a silhouette of the yucca, New Mexico's state flower. All of the old 1972-91 base plates were gradually replaced during the period January 2, 1991, through June 30, 1993. Also beginning in 1991, truck plates as a unique type were eliminated, and trucks since then have been issued the same plates as passenger cars, reverting to a practice last in place in 1929. The list of omitted letters now included E, I, O, Q, U and V, which continues to the present. This base is still valid and, now in its 30th year, is still being issued today.

Before the new base began issuance in 1991, the last 20,000 or so plates of the previous base issued in 1990, from #LKM-001 to LLL-999, carried the new graphics and in every other respect but the serial number look exactly like a new 1991 base!

On July 1, 1995, county stickers were discontinued. Some batches of plates in the KDA-KHZ range issued in 1997 used Trailer sheeting which omitted the Yucca graphics and the slogan. The next year, plates had to be made in Arizona, identified only by

their round bolt holes instead of the usual obround slots.

After more than 65 years of continuous operation, the license plate manufacturing plant at the New Mexico State Penitentiary was permanently shut down at the end of 1998, and production was contracted out to a private company, Waldale, Ltd., in Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada, effective January 1, 1999. These plates started at #001-MAA and are now in the W series.

Optional 2-year registration became available as of January 2, 1999; registrants who opt in receive a small discount (about \$2) for the longer registration period, and the Motor Vehicle Division saves time, labor and postage by having to process and mail out registration certificates and renewal stickers only half as often.

2000s

The extremely popular hot air balloon graphic plate was made available as a no-extra-cost option (vs. the standard red-on-yellow plate) in the spring of 1999. Initially planned as an extra cost optional plate, a low capacity numbering system was devised, but when the extra fee was removed just before issuance, sales were so high the numbering combinations and their variations were quickly exhausted. The starting numbers of the five initial sub-series were NM0001, 0NM001, 00NM01, 000NM1 and 0001NM. A new format was then started, from AA 001 to BZ 999. It soon became apparent that even this scheme had to be abandoned and a more conventional system beginning at CAA001 was implemented, finally ending at LGP999 upon introduction of the turquoise Centennial issue in 2010. By that time, about three million Balloon plates had appeared on New Mexico's highways.

Since their inception in 1960, the serial numbers on renewal stickers had no direct relationship to the serial numbers of the plates themselves. In 2001, the serial numbering on the stickers was changed such that the sticker serial matched the plate serial. This was done for all types of plates, not just those for passenger cars.



First graphic design of 1983, and two identical-looking "Yucca" plates, but from two completely different bases - LLB-049 was the last variety of the 1972-91 series, while 322-ADT is the new series started in 1991.

1998 plate 055-KHH on trailer base.

2010s

In connection with the celebration of the upcoming 2012 centennial of New Mexico's statehood, a completely redesigned yellow-on-turquoise graphic "CENTENNIAL" plate was introduced in 2010, as an option alongside the traditional red-on-yellow plate. Motorists are given the choice of which style they receive at the time the vehicle is registered.

Despite a lot of complaints about the turquoise bases being difficult to read at other than close range, they have become wildly popular with New Mexico motorists, and were the recipient of ALPCA's 2010 Best Plate Award. Over one million plates were issued from #LGR-001 to NZT-499.

The Centennial slogan at the top of the turquoise plates was removed in 2016 because it was no longer timely. Turquoise plates are still available, though, now with the Land of Enchantment slogan moved up from the bottom of the plate to take the place of the Centennial slogan. Additionally, the letters "USA" which had not previously been used on the turquoise tags, have been added after the state name. This version began at #NZT-500 and is now in the late P series.

On July 10, 2017, the New Mexico MVD released the long-awaited Chile plates which tout the state's world-renowned status as the "Chile Capital of the World", and which became New Mexico's second plate to receive ALPCA's Best Plate Award. These are regular-issue plates available at no extra cost for automobiles, trucks and motorcycles. The passenger plates started at #AAAA00 while mail-order series began at WAAA00. Vanity plates in the Chile style are available for the same vehicle types at nominal extra cost. Given the enormity of their initial demand, the Chile plates may turn out to be the most popular design yet in New Mexico. Meanwhile, the yucca and turquoise plates both remain available to those who prefer the earlier designs.

2020

Now more than a hundred years on, New Mexico no longer changes her license plate colors every year, but offers a colorful selection of regular-issue designs for the motorist to choose from, two of which were voted by ALPCA members to be North America's best new plates in the years of their introduction! 🌮

Acknowledgments

This article is based on the author's book, *Early New Mexico License Plates*, and the website *NMplates.com*. Scores of people contributed to research for these projects, far too many to list here, but special thanks go to ALPCA members **Michael Breeding, Greg Gibson, Phil Hill, Richard Miller, Corb Moister, George Sammeth and Eric Tanner** for their contributions to this article. An extensive list of acknowledgments for many other contributors is given at: [NMplates.com/acknowledgments.htm](https://nmplates.com/acknowledgments.htm). Our thanks again to all of you!

Santa Fe pre-state photo: "Automobile on dirt road near Santa Fe, Sangre de Cristo Mountains in background," Image No. 9239, Jenny M. Avery photograph collection, courtesy of the New Mexico State Archives, Commission of Public Records.

For Further Reading

New Mexico - Land of Enchantment, by Michael C. Wiener, ALPCA Newsletter, June 1987

New Mexico, USA - Land of Enchantment, by Michael C. Wiener, ALPCA Newsletter, October 1976

For those interested in reading beyond the above book and website, a bibliography of over 600 citations or original source material can be found at: <https://nmplates.com/Bibliography.htm>



Seven types of 2000-09 Balloon bases - all five configurations of "NM" were issued first, followed by AA to BZ, and finally, CAA to LGP.

Two versions of current turquoise plates - the Centennial slogan, issued from 2010 to 2016, was removed after the anniversary ended.

Current Chile Pepper plate.

New Mexico Passenger Plate Run 1912-2021



1912



1913



1914



1915



1916



1917



1918



1919



1920



1921



1922



1923



1924



1925



1926



1927



1928



1929



1930



1931



1932



1933



1934



1935



1936



1937



1938



1939



1940



1941



1942



1943



1944



1945



1946



1947



1948



1949



1950



1951



1952



1953



1954



1955



1956



1957



1958



1959



1960



1961



1962



1963



1964



1965



1966



1967



1968



1969



1970



1971



1972



1973



1974



1975



1976



1977



1978



1979



1980



1981



1982



exp. 1983



exp. 1984



exp. 1985



exp. 1986



exp. 1987



exp. 1988



exp. 1989



exp. 1990



exp. 1991



exp. 1992



exp. 1993



exp. 1994



exp. 1995



exp. 1996



exp. 1997



exp. 1998



exp. 1999



exp. 2000



exp. 2001



exp. 2002



exp. 2003



exp. 2004



exp. 2005



exp. 2006



exp. 2007



exp. 2008



exp. 2009



exp. 2010



exp. 2011



exp. 2012



exp. 2013



exp. 2014



exp. 2015



exp. 2016



exp. 2017



exp. 2018



exp. 2019



exp. 2020



exp. 2021