

NEW MEXICO HISTORY MUSEUM



GAMBLING SALOON IN SANTA FE

The Gambling Queen of Santa Fe

***Doña Tules built an 1800s empire as a hospitable madam
... and the shrewdest businessperson in town***

Welcome to the latest installment of our media-release series, “Telling New Mexico: Stories from Then and Now.” See the links below for previous releases, along with information about obtaining photographs to accompany your coverage.

Santa Fe, N.M. – In another place and time, she might have been prosecuted or even condemned to death for her chosen profession. But in the rowdy, rough-and-tumble gambling center that was Santa Fe in the mid-1800s, the legendary Doña Maria Gertrudis Barceló was an influential and respected member of the social elite.

How did a young, married Hispanic woman rise from poverty and obscurity to become the most famous (if not notorious) woman in Santa Fe history? As visitors to the New Mexico History Museum at 113 Lincoln Ave., will discover, the woman known as “Doña Tules” or simply “La Tules” had timing, skills, savvy – and plenty of attitude.

Madam and courtesan, monte dealer and mule trader, Doña Tules was a shrewd businesswoman and exceptionally skilled at separating men from their money. Without ever learning English, the Sonora, Mexico, native amassed a fortune as the proprietress of a popular gambling salon on the southeast corner of Palace Avenue and Burro Alley, near where the Santa Fe County Courthouse sits today. Between 1832 and her death in 1852, she was the confidante – and reportedly much more – to some of New Mexico’s most powerful political, military and religious leaders.

After losing two sons in infancy and adopting a daughter in 1826, Gertrudis Barceló decided to turn her gift for dealing cards and reading men into a career that would make her wealthy. Her strategy: Capitalize on the insatiable gambling habits of the traders who traveled from Missouri on the newly opened Santa Fe Trail. Adept at the Spanish chance game of monte, she was soon stripping both strangers and Santa Feans of their “accumulated property,” according to one observer who visited Santa Fe in the 1830s.

“She dealt night after night, often until dawn, with ‘skillful precision’ as the cards ‘slipped from her long fingers as steadily as though she were handling only a knitting needle,” wrote Mary J. Straw Cook in *Doña Tules, Santa Fe’s Courtesan and Gambler* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007). “With feminine bravado, Tules’s deft and beringed fingers swept away piles of gold, the result of perpetual practice, as she won time and time again.”

As many as 100 monte tables operated in Santa Fe during this time, with stakes as high as \$50,000. By 1838, town officials realized there was more money to be reaped by granting gambling licenses than collecting fines, and sanctioned the formerly illegal activity.

In her gambling hall, frequented by soldiers and traders, politicians and priests alike, Tules was privy to high-level intelligence that she supposedly used to benefit the U.S. during an extremely turbulent time. Her relationships with Governor Manuel Armijo, Prussian August de Marle of the Missouri Volunteers and other officials may have even changed the course of major events: for example, she is credited with alerting U.S. authorities of the Mexican-Indian conspiracy of December 1846.

Dofia Tules remained colorful and controversial up to her elaborately planned and executed funeral, presided over by the newly appointed Archbishop Jean Baptiste Lamy, the subject of Willa Cather's renowned *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Tules's lifelong charitable acts had granted her access to the highest social circles of Santa Fe – and she hoped this last gift, to the church, would grant her safe passport to eternal salvation, despite her questionable activities. She was one of the last people interred within the adobe walls of La Parroquia, the old parish church on the Plaza that was later replaced by the St. Francis Cathedral. What became of her remains during the construction is part of the mystery that shrouds this fascinating woman.

The New Mexico History Museum (www.nmhistorymuseum.org) includes artifacts recovered from Tules's estate – and other legendary characters in New Mexico's history. Within its 96,000 square feet are images, artifacts and multimedia displays – a mosaic of the people, places, events and cultures that, piece by piece, build a comprehensive picture of the state.

New Mexico History Museum

at 113 Lincoln Avenue, just behind the Palace of the Governors on the Santa Fe Plaza

For more information about the New Mexico History Museum, including a selection of user-ready high-resolution photographs, log onto <http://media.museumofnewmexico.org/nmhm>. More than 8,000 additional, high-resolution photographs illustrating the history of New Mexico are available by keyword search at <http://www.palaceofthegovernors.org> (click on "Photo Archives" then on "Digitized Collections"). Most requests for scans from this site can be delivered the same day, and usage is free for publicity purposes only.

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