

Gallup's Home of History

In the city of Gallup, New Mexico — a community known for both hosting the Red Rock Balloon Rally, and its heritage (often referred to as “The Indian Capital of the World” thanks in part to its creation of Native American jewelry and being in the heart of Native lands) — there lies a building that has stood its ground for well over a century: the Rex Museum. Resting comfortably on the historic Mother Road and being within eye line of both another Route 66 favorite, “The Dude Man” muffler man, and the rolling hills of the New Mexico landscape, the Rex has served many purposes in its life, and has passed along through many owners, but stands as a reminder of the history of the ville that’s been granted the title of “America’s Most Patriotic Small Town.”

Built around 1900 on the original Gallup townsite, the Rex Museum was surveyed and platted by Alex Bowie, a surveyor for the Calcedonia Coal Company. Italian stonemasons would construct it out of locally quarried sandstone.

While it’s believed that the original purpose of the building was to be used as a hotel, early Sanborn Maps (circa January 1893) shows a building on the plot that stated it would be a drygoods store, and then by April 1893, it was open for business. It wasn’t until 1902 that the building as we know it today had a second floor added that would be used for lodgings. When it comes to the original owners of the location, that’s also something of a blind spot. “We don’t know who the original proprietor of the hotel was,” said Alaina Noland, Exhibitions and Public Programming Curator of the Historic Rex Museum and Red Rock Park Museum. “The farthest back we can trace records is the early ‘20s. Fred Cavaggia was that owner. His parents were immigrants from Italy who opened a mine nearby. He owned a variety of businesses around Gallup between his World War services.”

Cavaggia would run the lower level of the hotel, the Angelus Billiard Parlor, while the upper level, the Angelus Rooms, was run by George Manoplovich. Over the decades, and especially throughout the ‘30s and ‘40s, the hotel changed hands and had many different titles, such

as the Angelus Hotel, the Angelus Club, the Rex Hotel, LaCopota Liquors, and by around 1958, Tom’s Variety Store & Hobby Shop. This closed in the late 1970s. While there isn’t a definitive answer on why it changed owners so frequently — though the Great Depression and World War II were more than likely to blame for causing havoc on Gallup’s local economy — Noland believes that it was still a prosperous location for most of its life. “Lodging has always been at a premium in Gallup, and I can’t imagine people would have continued operating as a hotel if it wasn’t viable. The 1947 directory states that the property was vacant, and that’s the first time that I can find it was.”

The location eventually went derelict and was donated to the City of Gallup on December 16, 1986, by C.P.S Associates (the Caviggia, Petranovich, and Smith families) to become a police substation (after \$600,000 worth of renovations). On November 30th, 1987, it was inducted into

the National Register of Historic Places. By November 5th, 1993, there were discussions about the building being used as the offices for the New Mexico Council of Governments but for one reason or another, nothing ever came of it. While there’s no definitive date on when the location opened as the Rex

Museum proper, it’s estimated to be around 1995 because the Gallup Historical Society inventories state that items were transferred to the Rex in August 1995.

As of today, the museum isn’t currently open to the public, but plans are in motion for an art installation in collaboration with Silver Stallion Bicycle and Coffee (a local non-profit) that’s planned to be open by April 2024. It’s a trying effort, but one that Noland believes to be worthwhile. “The Rex building and the Rex Museum are long-lasting parts of the community. We’re looking forward to pursuing funding to restore the exterior of the building and establishing it as a first-rate museum that provides compelling stories about the area’s history and engaging programming for the community.” Though it may be over a century old, the sun still shines brightly on the sandstone structure, just as it does over Gallup.

