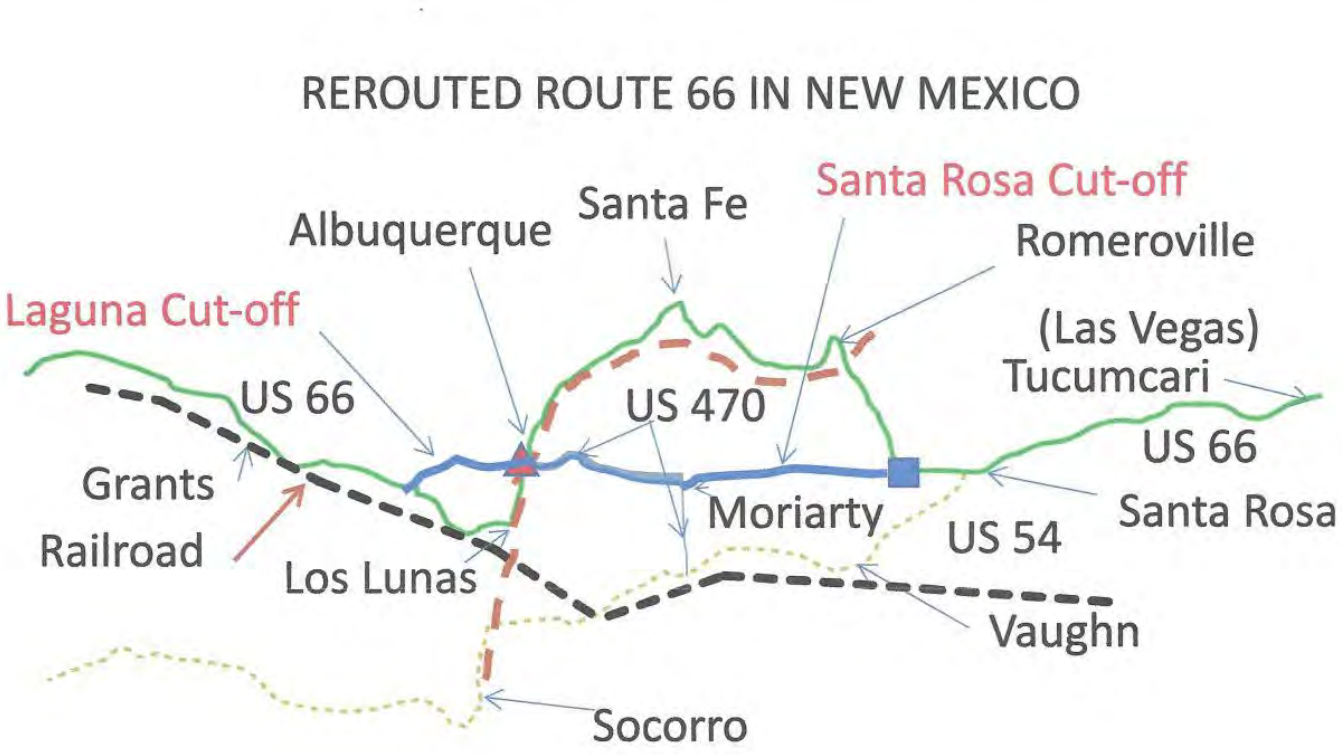
New Mexico

Realignment of Route 66 in central New Mexico: Santa Rosa Cutoff and Laguna Cutoff

Throughout its length from Chicago, Illinois to Santa Monica, California the alignment of Route 66 changed as the years passed. Changes were made to shorten the mileage, improve roadway geometrics, and to serve different cities and towns. Re-alignments (re-routings) were not unusual. The most significant re-alignments in terms of mileage reduction and geographical change were the Santa Rosa Cutoff and the Laguna Cutoff in New Mexico.

(this paragraph is from Wikipedia)

> From west of Santa Rosa, New Mexico, to north of Los Lunas, New Mexico, the original route of Route 66 turned north from current I-40 along much of what is now US 84 to near Las Vegas, New Mexico, then followed (roughly) I-25—then US 85 through Santa Fe and Albuquerque -- to Los Lunas, and then turned northwest along the present New Mexico State Road 6 (NM 6) alignment to a point near Laguna. In 1937, a straight-line route was completed from west of Santa Rosa through Moriarty and east–west through Albuquerque and west to Laguna. This newer routing saved travelers as much as four hours of travel through New Mexico.



Route 66 alignment from 1926 to 1937 shown in green
Shown in blue are the Santa Rosa Cutoff and Laguna Cutoff that formed the post-1937 alignment

Both the original Route 66 alignment and the Santa Rosa and Laguna Cutoffs are shown on the National Park Service map of Route 66 on the cover page of this nomination package.

(the remaining paragraphs authored by Roger Zimmerman)

When Route 66 in New Mexico was designated in August of 1926, it was a 506-mile alignment of existing dust or gravel covered roadways going from Glenrio, a small town located astraddle the Texas/New Mexico border, to the Navajo Indian Reservation located on the Arizona state border to the west of Gallup. This route crossed the Pecos River three times, the Rio Grande, from one to three times depending on local traffic needs, and the Rio Puerco in two locations. The Rio Puerco flows from Northern New Mexico into the Rio Grande south of Albuquerque.

The first fully paved alignment of Route 66 across New Mexico came 11 years later and it was only 399 miles long. Politicians, government agencies, technicians, and civil engineers had made their contributions to the shortening of this historical highway.

The shorter route bypassed Santa Fe, Bernalillo, Los Lunas, and some Native American Pueblos, much to the disappointment of small businesses in those locations. The new alignment went east-west along Central Avenue through Albuquerque and this rerouting transformed the city from being a linear city with a north south major axis to a cruciform shaped city with north-south and east-west axes. Central Avenue , which was 20 feet wider than other downtown streets was the logical street for handling the significant amount of transcontinental traffic that would eventually swamp the downtown area.

The savings in length over these 11 years was accomplished with two cut offs: the Santa Rosa Cutoff and the Laguna Cutoff. The Santa Rosa Cutoff went from a point 7 miles west of Santa Rosa directly west toward Moriarty, which was a distance of 69 miles. Most of this distance was ranch land in 1926 when the new roadway was first cleared and graded. From Moriarty, the cutoff joined US 470 and went another 45 miles into Albuquerque, terminating at the intersection of Central Avenue and 4th Street. This cut off saved 90 miles of travel for Route 66 travelers. The Laguna Cutoff went from 4th Street and Central, along Central Avenue and across the Rio Grande to a point west of Atrisco, where it was aligned up Nine Mile Hill to eventually join the original Route 66 alignment near the village of Correo, some 32 miles westward towards Laguna. By bypassing Los Lunas, the Laguna Cutoff saved 17 more miles for Route 66 travelers.

Re-routing Route 66 via these cutoffs was not just simple roadway construction on new alignments. Implementing the cutoffs included three significant engineering projects. They were the Rio Puerco Bridge, a new Central Avenue bridge over Rio Grande River in Albuquerque, and a new Central Avenue underpass under the Santa Fe Railroad in Albuquerque.

The shortened alignment of Route 66 crossed each of the Pecos, Rio Grande, and Rio Puerco waterways only one once, but with differing degrees of difficulty. The Pecos had its headwaters in Northern New Mexico and the watershed was not large. It did not provide abnormal challenges to bridge designers. The Rio Puerco also had headwaters in Northern New Mexico . The Rio Puerco had large sand deposits where the Route 66 alignment was planned and this provided a challenge to bridge designers. The solution – the first significant engineering project - was a 250-foot long Parker through truss bridge that was designed and constructed in 1933. The Rio Puerco Bridge is further described in a following section of this nomination package.

The Rio Grande provided a much greater engineering challenge. The Rio Grande comes from the mountains of Colorado and has a large drainage area. Until 1973, no dams had been constructed between the headwaters and Albuquerque. To make things worse, downtown Albuquerque is located in a flood plain of the river. The second significant engineering project was to bridge the Rio Grande. To cross the Rio Grande,

a new 1350 long Central Avenue bridge with fifty-four 25 ft. spans having a 20 ft. wide road way and 6 ft. sidewalk was successfully built and finished in 1930, composed of a concrete deck, steel girders, and timber piles.

The third significant engineering project – the last hurdle to be addressed – to complete the shortcut, was the separation of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway (AT&SF) from the east-west Route 66 traffic in Albuquerque. This was accomplished by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) providing the funds, AT&SF engineers designing the structure, and the New Mexico Highway Department supervising the construction. The underpass was completed in 1937 and was the final structure that was needed to make the Santa Rosa and Laguna shortcuts fully functional. It should be noted that the AT&SF engineers raised the tracks 7 feet to provide underpass dimensions that facilitated east-west Route 66 traffic through downtown Albuquerque.

The Laguna Cutoff, New Mexico Route 6 really got going in 1930 when the Central Avenue Bridge was completed and travelers could get through downtown Albuquerque and across the bridge. It took until 1931 for the federal government to decide to make the Santa Rosa and Laguna Cutoffs a federal highway and bypass the original route through Santa Fe. When this happened, the final alignment was decided and Federally sponsored construction monies were devoted to making the shortcut a part of Route 66. With the completion of the Rio Puerco Bridge in 1933, transcontinental travelers could take the full shortcut across the state on an all-weather basis, and this became a popular route even though it wasn't completely paved until 1937.