

Guanajuato

Geography, history, and points of interest

David Charles Wright

Text published in the *Field trip guide, 1989 Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers*, Austin, Department of Geography, University of Texas at Austin, 1989, pp. 125-154.

Copyright © 1994 David Charles Wright.

Updated May 4, 2013.

Introduction

The city of Guanajuato is the capital of the state with the same name. It is located in the northwestern part of the Bajío region, draped over a ravine among rugged mountains. Its irregular urban design is atypical for a Colonial Mexican city, most of which were laid out on a grid plan following Italian Renaissance theory and pre-Hispanic practice. Guanajuato's *haciendas de beneficio minero* (mineral processing factories), where the gold and silver ores were processed, were located next to the Guanajuato River because of the need for water. When the mining camp grew into a town, the bottom of the ravine became the center, with disordered mazes of residential barrios covering the slopes on both sides. This gives new meaning to the English term “downtown.” Despite the confusing labyrinth of alleys, one needs only to descend to reach the few major streets of the city.

Geographic notes

Guanajuato is located in the tropics, at 21° 01' 01" north latitude and at 101° 15' 20" west longitude (6H 45M 01.3S west of Greenwich meridian). Its altitude is 2,008 meters above sea level. The climate of Guanajuato is temperate, like the rest of the Bajío, because of this fortuitous combination of geographic position and altitude. Median annual temperature is 17.9° C. Maximum and minimum registered temperatures are 19.5° and 6° C. Rainfall averages 659.2 mm a year.¹ Most of the precipitation occurs during the rainy season, from June to September.

The city is set within the Sierra de Guanajuato. The highest mountains of this range are slightly less than 3,000 meters above sea level. The Sierra is a massive sedimentary formation of black argillaceous slate, called by local miners *pizarra de libro* (“book slate”) because of the way pieces flake off in thin layers. There are different opinions regarding the age of this formation, although all suggest some time within the Mesozoic era. Some have considered it to be from the pre-Cretaceous (*sic*; Jurassic?) period, while others note that its petrographic characteristics are

¹ Eduardo Domínguez Corona and Miguel Izaguirre Mendoza, *Actualidad y geografía del municipio de Guanajuato*, 2nd. ed., Guanajuato, H. Ayuntamiento, 1984, pp. 10, 17, 21. The geographic location was taken at the bell tower of the Church of La Compañía. Altitude was calculated on the train tracks at the station.

very similar to those of the sierra de Zacatecas, which has been assigned to the late Triassic period. Volcanic flows, mostly of basalt, may be found at various locations near the city. These are recent, originating in eruptions during the Pleistocene. Other common mineral deposits are the fine-grained, light green sandstone called *losero* (“slab stone”), seen frequently in the monuments of Guanajuato, and the conglomerate called *frijolillo* (“little beans”) because of the shape of the pebbles, which occur in a bed of reddish clay.²

The Sierra de Guanajuato is not completely stable. Inhabitants of the city have noted loud underground noises in 1874 and 1977.³

This mountain range is laced with veins of silver and gold. Also present are lead, copper, iron, tin, and mercury. The main source of the city’s prosperity was the rich *veta madre* (“mother lode”) of silver, discovered in the mid-sixteenth century.⁴

The Sierra was once covered with oak forests. The fuel requirements of the mining industry and the urban population caused the destruction of these forests. Today the mountains around the city are bare. Intact forested areas are found in the sierra de Santa Rosa to the northeast of the city.⁵

The Guanajuato River crosses the city from northeast to southwest. It originates in the Arroyo de Cata, the Arroyo de Durán, and other streams. Several dams have been built in and around the city since Colonial times. In the eastern part of the city of Guanajuato is the *Presa de la Olla* (“Olla reservoir”), fed by the San Antonio and Peregrina streams, and regulated by the San Renovato reservoir located immediately above it.⁶ The east side of Guanajuato, joined to downtown by the avenue called *Paseo de la Presa*, is a pleasant sequence of green parks and imposing monuments.⁷ South of the city several rivers join the Guanajuato River to form the Irapuato River, which drains into the Lerma, eventually reaching Lake Chapala and the Santiago River on its journey to the Pacific Ocean.⁸

A settlement which hugs a river at the bottom of a ravine is bound to have serious problems with floods, particularly during the rainy season, when water cascades down the mountains. A

² *Ibid.*, pp. 26-31. “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” in *Enciclopedia de México*, vol. VI, Mexico City, Enciclopedia de México, 1978, columns 61-63.

³ Domínguez and Izaguirre, *loc. cit.* “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *loc. cit.*

⁴ Domínguez and Izaguirre, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 98, 99.

⁸ Domínguez and Izaguirre, *loc. cit.*

catastrophic flood afflicted the city on July 27, 1780, after which part of the city (in and around the plaza called *Jardín de la Unión*) was intentionally filled in to a depth of three to four meters, burying the lower portions of many buildings, including the San Diego church and the adjoining Franciscan monastery.⁹ Another flood occurred on July 1, 1905. Plaques registering the high-water level may still be seen along *Avenida Juárez*, Guanajuato's principal artery. After this the Coajín Tunnel was dug under the supervision of local engineer Ponciano Aguilar, taking advantage of the skills of local miners. It receives the flow of the Pastita River, carrying the water into the Guanajuato River southwest of the city.¹⁰

During the Colonial period much of the bed of the Guanajuato River was built over with houses and bridges. During the 1960's a deeper channel was dug and the old riverbed was converted into the Subterranean Avenue, relieving traffic problems and creating a unique experience for visitors and residents.¹¹ A network of underground roads has been developed by tunneling under the city, again deploying Guanajuato's miners, from the early 1980's to the present.

Historical sketch

During the pre-Hispanic era the Bajío (southern Guanajuato and Querétaro) sat astride the fluctuating frontier of Mesoamerican civilization. To the north was Chichimec country. ("Chichimec" is a generic term used to describe the nomadic hunters and gatherers of northern Mexico, in contrast to the advanced cultures to the south.) South of the Bajío lived the civilized Mesoamerican peoples, who cultivated corn, beans, squash, and other plants, developing urban settlements with impressive monuments. The present states of Guanajuato and Querétaro have many archaeological sites of Mesoamerican character, dating from the Late Preclassic, Classic, and Early Postclassic periods (c. 500 B.C.-1200 A.D.). During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. Chichimecs pushed southward and the frontier of native civilization contracted. The northern limits of Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish Conquest were essentially the same as the northern borders of the Mexica and Tarascan "empires," barely reaching into the southern edge of the state of Guanajuato (Yuriria and Acámbaro). The state of Querétaro was

⁹ "Guanajuato, ciudad de," *op. cit.*, columns 86, 87.

¹⁰ Domínguez and Izaguirre, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

entirely in the hands of the Chichimecs in the early sixteenth century.¹²

When the Spaniards arrived in the 1520's, natives on the northern frontier of Mesoamerica began a gradual penetration and colonization of the Bajío. Groups of Otomí Indians, a very ancient farming people from the central highlands of Mexico, settled in the valleys of the Bajío, hoping to avoid Spanish domination. This early penetration was for the most part peaceful. The Otomí established friendly relations with their rustic Chichimec neighbors. Beginning in the early 1540's the Iberians showed an increasing interest in the region, establishing livestock ranches and exacting tribute from the Otomí farmers, who had little choice but to comply.¹³

This situation changed in 1546 when silver was discovered in Zacatecas. Within a few years a wagon road was functioning, and the precious metal began to flow to Mexico City. Livestock ranches and inns sprang up along the rapidly expanding network of roads. In 1550 the Chichimecs, alarmed, began to defend their ancestral territories. Armies of Indians and Spanish soldiers fought to maintain the recently founded settlements. The Chichimec War had begun. This bloody conflict lasted until the 1590's in the Bajío region. Finally, the viceregal administration realized that the conflict with the nomads could not be won through violence. A policy of coaxing the Chichimecs into submission with gifts of cattle, clothing, and other goods was adopted. Within a few years they had been congregated in agricultural towns and placed under the vigilant care of the mendicant friars, with Mesoamerican Indians, particularly Tlaxcalans, brought to serve as an example of civilized behavior for the newly sedentary Chichimecs.¹⁴

Guanajuato was founded during the early years of the conflict. A cattle ranch at or near the site of the future city had been granted to Rodrigo Vázquez in 1546; others followed. A Spanish captain in the Chichimec War, Juan de Jaso el Viejo, discovered the mining potential of the site

¹¹ "Guanajuato, ciudad de," *op. cit.*, columns 96, 97.

¹² Luis Felipe Nieto and Donald Patterson, *Atlas arqueológico, región norte de Guanajuato, informe no. 5 al Centro Regional Guanajuato del INAH* (manuscript), San Miguel de Allende, 1986; Ana María Crespo Oviedo, "Un planteamiento sobre el proyecto constructivo del recinto ceremonial de El Cerrito," in *Heraldo de Navidad, Querétaro, Patronato de las Fiestas*, 1986, pp. 31-36; David Wright, *Querétaro en el siglo XVI, fuentes documentales primarias*, Querétaro, Gobierno del Estado, 1989; David Wright, *Investigación documental y guión museográfico para la Sala "Contacto de las culturas" del Museo Histórico de Querétaro* (manuscript), 1988-1989.

¹³ Wright, *Querétaro en el siglo XVI, op. cit.*; David Wright, *Conquistadores otomíes en la Guerra Chichimeca*, Querétaro, Gobierno del Estado, 1988.

¹⁴ Philip Wayne Powell, *La Guerra Chichimeca (1550-1600)*, translation by Juan José Utrilla, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977; Philip Wayne Powell, *Capitán Mestizo, Miguel Caldera y la frontera norteña, la pacificación de los chichimecas (1548-1597)*, translation by Juan José Utrilla, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980; Wright, *Conquistadores otomíes en la Guerra Chichimeca, op. cit.*

around 1552-1553. He kept the find secret. In 1556 Pedro Muñoz officially registered the mines on his cattle ranch. The next year fortune seekers poured into the mining camp, which was given the name *Santa Fe y real de minas de Cuanaxhuato*. The boom had begun.¹⁵

According to the linguist Eréndira Nansen, Guanajuato is derived from a Tarascan word meaning “place of the hill of the frog.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Angel María Garibay gives an Otomí etymology: “Guanahuato [...] ‘Stone where frogs are caught.’ (Roots. *gué*: frog, *-na-*epenthetic infix, *hua*: to fish (to catch), and *to, do*: stone).”¹⁷ Perhaps both readings apply; the Otomí and Tarascans were among the early inhabitants of the settlement.

During the seventeenth century a relatively self-sufficient economic system evolved in the Bajío. The hacienda emerged as the principal unit of agricultural and livestock production, to the detriment of the communal system of the Indians. The mines of Guanajuato, together with those at Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí, fueled this regional economy. The fertile valleys of Celaya, Salamanca, Irapuato, Silao, and others produced grain and other agricultural products to sell in the mining centers and in the capital of New Spain. The hills around the Bajío were covered with *estancias* or livestock ranches with cattle and sheep. Textile production centers such as Querétaro and San Miguel el Grande processed the wool into cloth in *obrajes* or textile factories and sold it at a handsome profit. Commerce thrived at all levels. The Bajío enjoyed a period of prosperity in the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁸

Society was organized along racial lines in New Spain. At the top were the *gachupines* or natives of Spain. Next were the *criollos*, or people of “pure” Spanish blood, born in the New World. The Indians were gradually relegated to a position of inferiority, although they managed to retain some degree of autonomy during the Chichimec War and the decades that followed. At

¹⁵ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 63-66; “Guanajuato, Gto.,” in *Enciclopedia de México*, vol. 6, Mexico City, Enciclopedia de México/Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1987, pp. 3596-3598; Wigberto Jiménez Moreno, “La colonización y evangelización de Guanajuato en el siglo XVI,” in *Cuadernos americanos*, vol. 13, no. 1, January-February 1944, pp. 125-149; Peter Gerhard, *Geografía histórica de la Nueva España, 1519-1821*, Stella Mastrangelo, translator, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986, p. 124; Carlos Martínez Marín, “El Santuario del Santo Señor de Villaseca en Cata, Guanajuato,” in *Retablo barroco*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1974, pp. 129-130.

¹⁶ Eréndira Nansen Díaz, *Elementos de fonología y morfología del tarasco de San Jerónimo Purenchécuaro, Michoacán*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1985, p. 52.

¹⁷ Angel María Garibay K., “Morfemas nominales en Otomí, contribución a la morfología de esta lengua,” in *Sabiduría del Anáhuac*, Toluca, Gobierno del Estado de México, 1985, pp. 119-176.

¹⁸ D. A. Brading, *Mineros y comerciantes en el México borbónico (1763-1810)*, 1st reimpression, translation by Roberto Gómez Ciriza, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983; Jonathan I. Israel, *Razas, clases sociales y vida política en el México colonial, 1610-1670*, translation by Roberto Gómez Ciriza, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980; Martínez, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-133; David Wright, “La vida cotidiana en Querétaro durante la

the bottom of the social hierarchy were blacks and people of mixed blood: mestizos, mulattos, and more complex racial blends. Colorful and often racist terms were coined to classify people according to their genetic mix. Blacks were imported as slaves. They mixed with the other groups until they disappeared as a distinct race. Irving Leonard has called this Colonial class structure a “pigmentocracy.”¹⁹

The political status of Guanajuato can be traced over the centuries, reflecting its development. In 1557 Guanajuato was a mining town under the control of royal officials in Pátzcuaro. In 1559 or 1560 the Viceroy appointed an *alcalde mayor* or regional governor with his seat in Guanajuato. In 1679, at the beginning of a period of growth which was to last until the end of the Colonial period, Guanajuato became a *villa*, which was a rank second only to *ciudad* or city. Royal confirmation was granted five years later. In 1741 Felipe V named the settlement *Ciudad de Santa Fe y Real de Minas de Guanajuato* (“City of the Holy Faith and Royal Mines of Guanajuato”).²⁰ In 1786, as part of the Bourbon reforms, the city became capital of an intendancy, with jurisdiction over most of the present state of Guanajuato.²¹

There are several interesting descriptions of Guanajuato and its mines dating from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Villaseñor y Sánchez gives us a fairly complete portrait of the city in the 1740’s. Following is an excerpt from his monumental description of New Spain entitled *Theatro americano*:

The town is composed of perfect buildings and houses, although the streets are not very well planned due to the poor characteristics of the terrain [...]. It has three convents of friars: San Pedro de Alcántara, of Barefoot Franciscans; that of the Society of Jesus; and that of the Hospital order of Bethlehemites [...]. It also has a parish church, spacious and well decorated, and in it is venerated a miraculous image of the most holy Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Guanajuato [...].

Besides the mining industry there is commerce of clothing, silk, and goods from Castile, in eighty stores, and over forty with regional products [...].²²

época Barroca,” en *Querétaro ciudad barroca*, Querétaro, Gobierno de Estado de Querétaro, 1988, pp. 13-44.

¹⁹ Israel, *op. cit.*; Wright, “La vida cotidiana...,” *op. cit.*; Irving Leonard, *La época Barroca en el México colonial*, translation by Agustín Escurdia, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974, pp. 46, 47.

²⁰ Gerhard, *Geografía histórica de la Nueva España*, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125; Jiménez, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-141; Martínez, *loc. cit.*

²¹ “Descripción de la ciudad y real de minas de Guanajuato” (1788), Archivo de la Marina, Museo Naval de Madrid, ms. 563. Published in *Descripciones económicas regionales de Nueva España, provincias del Centro, Sureste y Sur, 1766-1827*, Enrique Florescano and Isabel Gil Sánchez, editors, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1976, pp. 15-31.

²² Joseph Antonio Villaseñor y Sánchez, *Theatro americano*, vol. 2, Mexico City, Imprenta de la viuda de don Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1748, pp. 38-42.

In 1772-1774 officials of the *Real Caja* (“Royal Treasury”) of Guanajuato answered an “instruction” sent by the Viceroy Bucareli to obtain precise information on the mining industry. According to this document there were four fully operating silver mines in the city, two partially operating silver mines, and one abandoned mine. In the jurisdiction of Guanajuato there were sixty-three mines in full operation, forty partially operating mines and seventy-seven that had been abandoned.²³

The commandant of the last of the royal fleets to sail to the Indies, Antonio de Ulloa, visited Guanajuato in 1777. He provides detailed information on the mines, especially La Valenciana, reopened and registered in 1760, the richest of the jurisdiction at that time. The following quote refers to the city.

There are very fine buildings in the city. Generally the houses are of two stories with balconies, and since there are many merchants, there is a corresponding quantity of stores of all sorts. There is only one parish church with one parish priest. There are two auxiliary parishes, those of San Roque and San Juan [...]. There is a convent of San Diego, and another of Bethlehemites for the curing of the sick [...].²⁴

A description from 1788 gives us an idea of life in Guanajuato at that time:

Guanajuato has a huge population, full of Spanish families native to New Spain (*criollos*) as well as many Europeans who at the cost of their industry and determination have formed large fortunes, some through laborious mining activities [...] and others through commerce [...].

One may ponder and admire its rugged location, sunken among cliffs and ravines; but in spite of such well known difficulties, one is satisfied by the monumental buildings of stone and mortar, tall and well designed and adorned, some of modern style, very costly [...]. Its streets are infinite; the most important [...] are capable of carriage traffic [...].

There is a main plaza where, surrounded by rich and showy commercial establishments, many loads of exquisite and varied fruit are brought in daily [...]. There are other minor plazas of different sizes [...].²⁵

Alexander von Humboldt provides us with statistics compiled during his visit to New Spain in 1803-1804. Of great interest is the population density of the Intendancy of Guanajuato,

²³ Francisco Tineo and Bernardo González del Campillo, “Noticia de las minas de la Real Caja de Guanajuato (1772-1774),” (Archivo General de la Nación de México, Minería, vol. 11, ff. 1-47.) Paleographic version in Alvaro López Miramontes and Cristina Urrutia de Stebelski, *Las minas de Nueva España en 1774*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1980, pp. 11-39.

²⁴ Francisco de Solano, *Antonio de Ulloa y la Nueva España*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1979, pp. 57-61.

approximately two times greater than that of Puebla, which ranked second. Clearly the Bajío was among the most prosperous regions of New Spain. The population of the city was 41,000. If the neighboring mining towns (Marfil, Santa Ana, Santa Rosa, Valenciana, Rayas, and Mellado) are included, the total population reached 70,600.²⁶

There were eight revolts in the city during the eighteenth century. The last two, in 1766 and 1767, were violently repressed by local authorities.²⁷ The grossly unequal distribution of wealth was the underlying source of the conflicts. During the first decade of the following century certain *criollos*, frustrated by their lack of access to the highest positions in government, Church, and commerce, influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and the revolutions of the United States and France, plotted to overthrow the Colonial administration. The conspirators were from urban centers in the Bajío: Querétaro, San Miguel el Grande, and Dolores.²⁸

In mid-September, 1810 these rebels were denounced to the authorities. The famous *Corregidora* (“governor’s wife”), Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, wife of the highest authority in Querétaro, managed to send a message of warning to Juan de Aldama in San Miguel. He in turn warned the parish priest of Dolores, Miguel Hidalgo. In the early hours of September 16 Father Hidalgo rallied the masses to march on San Miguel, beginning the War of Independence. On the 28th Hidalgo attacked Guanajuato with 20,000 improvised soldiers. A massacre took place when the insurgent mob took the *Alhóndiga de las Granaditas*, the royal granary where the Spaniards had taken refuge, after which Guanajuato was sacked.²⁹

The War of Independence had a devastating effect on Guanajuato. The mines were abandoned. The city was partially depopulated. In 1815 only 6,000 inhabitants remained. After 1821 the city began to recover. In 1825 there were 33,000 inhabitants; by the middle of the century the population had grown to 40,000, close to its pre-war peak.³⁰

The mines again produced wealth for the city during the *Porfiriato* (period of rule by

²⁵ “Descripción de la ciudad y real de minas de Guanajuato,” *loc. cit.*

²⁶ Alejandro de Humboldt, “Tablas geográficas políticas del reino de Nueva España, que manifiestan la superficie, población, agricultura, fábricas, comercio, minas, rentas y fuerza militar (enero de 1804),” en *Descripciones económicas generales de nueva España, 1784-1817*, Enrique Florescano and Isabel Gil, editors, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1973, pp. 128-171; Alejandro de Humboldt, *Ensayo político sobre el reino de la Nueva España*, 4th. ed., Juan A. Ortega y Medina, editor, Mexico City, Porrúa, 1984, pp. 38, 40, 162.

²⁷ Martínez, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

²⁸ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 80-82.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; *La Alhóndiga de Granaditas, Museo Regional de Guanajuato*, Guanajuato, Gobierno del Estado/Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1984, p. 5.

³⁰ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 83-85.

President Porfirio Díaz; 1876-1910), this time with foreign capital. Guanajuato was transformed by the erection of elegant monuments, eclectic in style, influenced by the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. The colonial plazas were converted, here and throughout Mexico, into French-style *jardines*, with trees, cast iron benches, and bandstands.³¹

Decadence again followed the Revolution of 1910-1917, until the fifties, when Guanajuato emerged as a bureaucratic, educational, and tourist Mecca, proud of its cultural and monumental heritage, and striving to preserve the aesthetic values of its historic center.³² The city's population in 1982 was 48,981.³³

Guanajuato's interest in the preservation of its heritage is seen in the Master's Program in Architecture Specializing in the Restoration of sites and Monuments, of the University of Guanajuato, one of a few in the Americas and the only school of its type in Mexico outside the nation's capital. The city is famous for its renowned *Festival Internacional Cervantino*, held each fall, when streets and theaters teem with cultural events of notable quality.

Selected points of interest

1. *Avenida Juárez* (shown on map) and *Calle Subterránea* (shaded)

The *Avenida Juárez*, or Juarez Avenue, is Guanajuato's main street, at the bottom of the ravine. It follows the course of the Guanajuato River. Its western extreme is located a few blocks from the ex-*Convento de Belem* ("Bethlehem Covent", originally a hospital) and the *Mercado Hidalgo* ("Hidalgo Market"), which face each other across this artery. A few steps beyond, one passes in front of the green sandstone columns of a peaceful plaza called *Jardín Reforma*. *Avenida Juárez* continues to wind through downtown Guanajuato, passing the southern side of the *Plaza de la Paz* ("Peace Plaza") and the *Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato* ("Parish Church of Our Lady of Guanajuato"), reaching the *Jardín de la Unión* ("Union Garden") near its eastern terminus.

The *Calle Subterránea* ("Subterranean Street") follows approximately the same course as the

³¹ *Ibid.*, columns 85-103.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ "Guanajuato, estado de," in *Enciclopedia de México*, vol. VI, Mexico City, Enciclopedia de México/Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1987, p. 3579.

Avenida Juárez. This was the bed of the Guanajuato River until the decade of 1961-1970, when a deeper channel was dug and the street was built over it. Covered by arches, vaults, and beams for most of its length, driving through this artery is an aesthetic experience. Attentive observation of the constructions flanking and covering the street provides insights into the relationship between the city and the river over the centuries.

2. *Alhóndiga de las Granaditas* (Regional Museum of Guanajuato) (map no. 5)

The *Alhóndiga* was originally a public granary. Previous granaries were built in 1696 and 1735. In 1792 the *Intendente* or Governor of Guanajuato began planning the new granary, with a capacity adequate for the growing city, at the site called *Granaditas* (“little pomegranate trees”). Plans were drawn by master mason José Alejandro Durán y Villaseñor in 1796. These were “corrected” by José de Maza y Avilés, Director of Architecture at the recently established *Academia de San Carlos* in Mexico City. The austere Neoclassical monument, contrasting with the exuberant Baroque architecture of the city, was inaugurated in 1809.³⁴

When the insurgent forces under the command of renegade priest Miguel Hidalgo approached the city in 1810, the Spaniards took refuge in the recently constructed granary, with as much of their wealth as they could carry. The rebels, joined by local miners, attacked the building. They gained access when a man known as *El Pípila* (“The Turkey”) burned down the door of the north entrance, with a stone slab tied to his back to protect himself from the fire of the soldiers defending the building. (A statue of *El Pípila* looks down on the city from a terrace above the *Jardín de la Unión*.) The Spaniards were slaughtered. Mobs sacked Guanajuato. Hidalgo was captured and executed the next year. His head, with those of the insurgents Ignacio Allende, Ignacio Aldama, and Mariano Jiménez, were placed in iron cages and hung from the corners of the granary, where they remained until the end of the war in 1821.³⁵

Following the war the *Alhóndiga* served various purposes: storage, education, cigar factory, apartment house, barracks, and jail. During the early 1950’s it was restored and converted into the Regional Museum of Guanajuato. Today one may admire the building’s architecture, with an

³⁴ La *Alhóndiga de Granaditas*, *loc. cit.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

ample central patio surrounded by Roman Doric colonnades sustaining flat arches. The stairway on the north side has an exquisite fresco painted by José Chávez Morado in 1955. The theme is “The Abolition of Slavery,” with scenes depicting the Conquest, the Colonial period, and the War of Independence. Chávez Morado integrated influences from Mexican muralists like Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros with his own remarkable drawing skills and spatial conception. Chávez Morado’s mural in the east stairway, executed in 1966 with acrylic or vinyl paints, lacks the power of his earlier work. Titled “Song for Guanajuato,” it is a visual synthesis of the city’s history.³⁶

The Museum contains important collections. There are galleries dedicated to pre-Hispanic ceramic art, history, regional crafts, folk painter Hermenegildo Bustos (1832-1907), photographer Romualdo García (1852-1930), and a Hall of Heroes, where large bronze masks of Independence leaders are revered.³⁷

3. *Ex Convento de Belén* (map no. 6)

The Bethlehemite friars founded a convent and hospital here in 1727, on the site of an *hacienda de beneficio*. Some sources claim that this complex was finished by 1775. Ulloa, however, visited Guanajuato in 1777 and remarked that the church was still unfinished. Antonio López de Santa Anna is credited with the construction of the temple. Maybe the architect and Bethlehemite friar José de la Cruz had some role in the project. He collaborated with Felipe de Ureña on the Jesuit church during the previous decade.³⁸ The facades of both temples have *estípites* decorated with purely geometric motives, instead of the more usual phytomorphic and anthropomorphic adornments. The *estípite* was the support favored in the religious architecture of Guanajuato during most of the second half of the eighteenth century. It usually consists of a base, a shaft in the form of an inverted obelisk, an ornamented die or similar element, and a Corinthian capital.

Today the University of Guanajuato occupies the ex-hospital. Engineering programs surround the large southern patio. Three smaller patios to the north are home to the Department of Architecture.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-98.

4. *Mercado Hidalgo* (map no. 7)

This imposing construction was built by the engineer Ernesto Brunel, on the site of a bullring, as the main commercial center for Guanajuato during a period of prosperity fueled by a mining boom. Begun in 1905, it was inaugurated on September 16, 1910, the centennial of the beginning of the War of Independence.³⁹ It reflects the desire of the upper class during the Porfiriato to be “modern,” which then meant to keep up with French styles. The exterior is a huge mass covered with cut stone, brick, and mortar, topped by a bell tower with a spire. Inside one can see the iron structure, apparently inspired by railroad stations in Europe. The lower level is filled with food products of all sorts, while in the upper gallery, surrounding the central space, a wide assortment of regional crafts is offered.

5. *Plazas and Callejones*

***Jardín Reforma* (between map nos. 6 and 8)**

The approach to this tranquil, shady park from *Avenida Juárez* is impressive. At the top of a stairway is a green sandstone colonnade marking the limit between street and park. These are the last remains of the old market building called *Mercado Reforma*, built in 1875 by the architect José Noriega and converted into a park after the inauguration of the *Mercado Hidalgo*.⁴⁰

***Plaza de San Roque* (map no. 8)**

Climbing a flight of stairs on the east side of the *Jardín Reforma*, one happens upon this triangular urban space, dominated by the Church of San Roque. This handsome temple has a restrained facade, with Classical pilasters, although Baroque whimsy is manifest in the “pot-bellied” pedestals of the lower story. San Roque was dedicated in 1726.⁴¹ It served as an auxiliary parish during the late eighteenth century, relieving some of the workload of the priest in

³⁸ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 75, 78, 89, 90; Solano, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

³⁹ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 75, 78, 89, 90.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, cols. 75, 89.

charge of the main parish church.⁴² During the *Festival Internacional Cervantino* and at other times the plaza becomes an open theater, with the facade of the church as a backdrop.

Plaza de San Fernando (map no. 9)

Two alleys communicate this pleasant space with the *Plaza de San Roque*. A fountain, trees, benches, and restaurants contribute to the relaxed environment of the plaza. Two alleys provide access to the bustling *Avenida Juárez*.

Callejones (alleys)

An irregular system of *callejones* lead from any of the three urban spaces described above, up the hill to Pocitos Street, which despite its narrow width is one of the main arteries of downtown Guanajuato. These alleys give the visitor an idea of the unplanned nature of Guanajuato's residential neighborhoods, much like medieval European cities.

6. *Museo Casa Diego Rivera* (Pocitos no. 47) (map no. 11)

This is the house where the renowned muralist Diego Rivera was born on December 8, 1886 (the inscription on the plaque on the facade is off the mark by five days). Diego's father, a schoolteacher, was Mayor of Guanajuato then. Seven years later, following the political defeat of the liberal Mayor, the Rivera family had to move to Mexico City. At the age of ten, Diego began studying visual arts at the Academy of San Carlos. He studied in Europe on scholarships from 1907 to 1921. The following year he painted his first mural in the National Preparatory School. From the early 1920's until his death in 1957 he covered an extraordinary quantity of walls, canvasses, and sheets of paper with carefully crafted images born in his fertile imagination.⁴³

The lower floor of the museum is furnished with pieces from the time of Rivera's infancy. The upper floors house a permanent exhibition tracing Rivera's stylistic evolution from

⁴² "Descripción de la ciudad y real de minas de Guanajuato," *loc. cit.*

⁴³ María del Pilar Rivera Barrientos, *Mi hermano Diego*, Mexico City, SEP/Gobierno del Estado de Guanajuato, 1986; Bertram D. Wolfe, *La fabulosa vida de Diego Rivera*, 2nd reimpression, translation by Mario Bracamonte C., Mexico City, SEP/Diana, 1986.

Academic Neoclassicism, Impressionism, and Cubism to the very personal nationalistic style that began to congeal in the mid-twenties, when his career as a muralist was beginning.

7. *Universidad de Guanajuato* (map no. 28)

The University was established in 1945 on the foundations laid by earlier institutions of higher education going back to the early eighteenth century. The main building was designed by the architect Vicente Urquiaga and was dedicated in 1955, adapting a preexisting 19th century structure and incorporating 18th century structures which housed a Jesuit school. It has been criticized as overly ostentatious, its colossal neo-Baroque mass demonstrating a lack of sensitivity to the harmony of its urban context. Instead of respecting the prevailing height of the older buildings around it, the University building strives to appear even taller than it is, adding a false front to give the impression of an additional story. Function is sacrificed to form in other ways as well: the monumental stairway devours precious space, obliging many of the University's departments to seek lodging in other parts of the city. One wonders why, after climbing part of the grand stairway, it is necessary to descend several steps to reach floor level after entering one of the side doors of the main building. In spite of the clumsy design, the overall effect is one of monumentality and the building has become one of the landmarks and tourist attractions of Guanajuato.⁴⁴

8. Church of *La Compañía de Jesús* (map no. 13)

The Jesuits founded a school in Guanajuato in 1732. King Felipe V elevated its rank to that of a *Colegio* in 1744. Around 1760 a new building was constructed for the institution. Meanwhile, from 1747 to 1765, a grandiose three-naved church was built, in the latest style, with estípites and pilaster-niches framing the portals of the main facade. The Jesuits only had two years to enjoy their new temple; in 1767 King Carlos III expelled the Society of Jesus from the Spanish Empire. There was a vigorous protest in Guanajuato, squelched by the recently reorganized

⁴⁴ "Guanajuato, ciudad de," *op. cit.*, column 96; Víctor Manuel Villegas, *La iglesia de La Compañía y la Universidad de Guanajuato*, Guanajuato (private edition), 1975.

military forces.⁴⁵

In 1785 the school reopened as the Royal College of the Most Pure Mary, under the care of priests of the Oratorio de San Felipe Neri, a pious union of secular clergymen. They offered, in addition to the college, four free schools: two for boys and two for girls. From 1807 to 1820 the city government sustained the school. After Independence, in 1828, it became the College of the State of Guanajuato.⁴⁶

The original dome collapsed in 1808. A new one, apparently inspired by the seventeenth-century dome of *Les Invalides* in Paris, was erected by the architect Herculano Ramírez from 1869 to 1884.⁴⁷ Its weight seems to have put stress on the older architectural members that sustain it; this is particularly evident in the pendentives.

9. *Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato* (“*La Basílica*”) (map no. 15)

The *Basílica*, Guanajuato’s main parish church (*parroquia*), was erected at the beginning of a long period of sustained economic and demographic growth in Guanajuato and the rest of the Bajío. Begun in 1671, it was dedicated in 1696. The carpentry –altarpieces, doors, etc.– was installed a few years later. The present interior decoration is from the remodeling of 1864.⁴⁸

In the apse is an image of Mary, called Our Lady of Guanajuato, on an ornate *repoussé* silver stand dating from 1737. Legend has it that a royal official brought this statue from Granada in the sixteenth century. Remnants of the eighteenth century Baroque decoration can be seen in the organ in the choir loft and in the gilt wood altarpiece in a chapel to the west of the presbytery.⁴⁹

10. *Plaza de la Paz* (shown on map)

In front of the *Basílica*, this long, triangular urban space used to be the main plaza, bustling with vendors. Today it is merely a zone of transit because of the invasion of the automobile. The

⁴⁵ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 75, 76, 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, col. 95; “Descripción de la ciudad y real de minas de Guanajuato,” *loc. cit.*

⁴⁷ *Álbum gráfico de la República mexicana*, Mexico City, Müller Hermanos, 1910, caption, plate 281.

⁴⁸ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 73, 74; Patricia Campos Rodríguez, *Catálogo del Archivo de la Basílica Colegiata de Guanajuato (1605-1977)*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1980, pp. 11-42; Victor Manuel Villegas, *Guanajuato, la Basílica*, Guanajuato (private edition), 1974.

⁴⁹ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 66, 67; Villegas, *Guanajuato, la Basílica*, *op. cit.*

statue of Peace was created by the talented sculptor Jesús Contreras from 1895 to 1898, according to the inscription on the pedestal. It symbolizes the relative political tranquility of the Porfirian era.

Two buildings on the northeastern edge of the plaza are particularly noteworthy. The first, to the right, is the *Casa de los Condes de Rul y Valenciana* (“House of the Counts of Rul and Valenciana”). Built in the Neoclassical style around 1800, it has been attributed to the famous architect Francisco E. Tresguerras, from Celaya, as has much architecture in the Bajío region from this period, often without firm evidence. The interior is a treat for those who enjoy the subtle harmonies of classicism in architecture. Humboldt stayed in this house during his visit to New Spain in 1803-1804. He mentions it in his *Essay*:

The house of colonel Don Diego Rul, who is one of the owners of the Valenciana, could adorn the finest streets of Paris or Naples; its facade has columns of the Ionic order and its architecture is simple and distinguished by its great purity of style.⁵⁰

The monument to the left of the house of the *Casa de los Condes de Rul y Valenciana*, today the *Palacio Legislativo* (“Legislative Palace”), was erected as a government palace from 1897 to 1900 by Louis C. Long.⁵¹ A comparison of the two monuments gives one a deeper understanding of the difference between the robust colonial Neoclassical style of 1800 and the more elegant, refined Porfirian Neoclassicism that flowered a century later.

11. *Jardín de la Unión* (shown on map)

The *Jardín de la Unión* was called the *Plaza de San Diego* in Colonial times, because the southwest side of the plaza was occupied by the *Convento de San Pedro de Alcántara*, home to the barefoot *Dieguinos*, an especially ascetic branch of the Franciscan order. According to a document from 1788 there was a very active commerce in this triangular open space; some days it was difficult to walk through the plaza. At night it was illuminated; food and drink were sold at portable stands, while musicians offered songs to the public. Today, over two centuries later, a very similar scene can be experienced here. On special occasions a wooden bullring, lashed

⁵⁰ Humboldt, *Ensayo...*, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

⁵¹ Inscription on a dedicatory plaque in the entrance of the building.

together with rope, was erected in this plaza.⁵²

The barefoot friars arrived in 1663; royal approval was granted four years later. In 1696 they rebuilt their cloister and church. After the catastrophic flood of 1780, the level of the plaza was raised three to four meters. The floor of the church was raised a corresponding height and the present Baroque facade was added.⁵³ The first story presents estípites and pilaster-niches side by side, while the whimsical “supports” of the second story are so unique that they defy any effort to name them.

The original cloister, buried in the 1780s when the level of the plaza was raised, has been excavated by archaeologists and now functions as a museum. The newer cloister was demolished in 1861, when church property passed into the hands of the government after the Laws of Reform. It was replaced with the *Hotel Emporio*. This in turn was torn down in 1872 to build the *Teatro Juárez* (“Juárez Theater”). José Noriega drew up the initial plans. Funds ran short and the project halted until 1892, when work resumed following modified plans by Antonio Rivas Mercado and Alberto Malo. President Porfirio Díaz personally dedicated the theater in 1903.⁵⁴

The *Teatro Juárez* is impressive, reflecting the Francophile tastes of the elite class of Porfirian Guanajuato. The exterior is Neoclassical, with eight bronze Muses standing atop the balustrade over the entablature and two lions of the same material flanking the stairway (the diminutive ninth Muse is held in the hand of one of her companions). The auditorium is decorated in a lavish Neo-Moorish style. Innovated constructive techniques can be seen: iron stairways, metal and glass roofs, etc.

12. *Presa de la Olla* (“Olla reservoir”) (map no. 25)

The Olla dam was built from 1741 to 1749 to provide drinking water for the city. The San Renovato dam, a short distance above the Olla reservoir, was added in 1838. Each June there is a lively fiesta as the floodgates are opened.⁵⁵ The bus ride from downtown Guanajuato, through the Subterranean Street and along the *Paseo de la Presa* to the reservoir, is a pleasant way to experience the eastern end of the city.

⁵² “Descripción de la ciudad y real de minas de Guanajuato,” *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵³ “Guanajuato, ciudad de,” *op. cit.*, columns 72, 74.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, columns 73, 92, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, columns 76, 99; Rivera Barrientos, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-78.

13. *Panteón de Santa Paula* (“Cemetery of Saint Paula”) and *Museo de las Momias* (“Mummy Museum”) (shown on map; west side of the city)

Without doubt the most famous tourist attraction in Guanajuato is the *Museo de las Momias*, located in the cemetery, where the visitor can see what we all would be like without water and the spark of life. Amazingly well preserved because of local geological conditions, the mummies are displayed in glass coffins. The first mummy was exhibited here in 1870.⁵⁶ Careful observation provides insight into daily life and folk beliefs of the ancestors of today’s inhabitants of Guanajuato.

14. Monument to *El Pípila* (shown on map; south of the *Jardín de la Unión*)

A colossal stone sculpture of *El Pípila* overlooks the city from the southern slopes of the ravine, holding the torch with which he burned down the door of the *Alhóndiga de las Granaditas* in 1810. *Pípila* means “Turkey”, the nickname of this hero from the War of Independence, whose bravery facilitated the horrific massacre of Spaniards who had taken refuge in the granary when Hidalgo’s hordes invaded the city. The statue was inaugurated in 1939. It was designed by the sculptor Juan Olaguíbel (1889-1971) and built by the engineer Antonio Gutiérrez.⁵⁷

15. Church of La Cata (map no. 2)

The mine of La Cata, to the north of the city, is located directly over the *veta madre* or “mother lode” of silver. It had two bonanzas. The first was from 1724 to 1735. The church of La Cata, officially titled *Santuario del Señor de Villaseca* (“Sanctuary of the Lord of Villaseca”) was inaugurated in 1725. The facade is later, probably from the period 1770-1790 judging by its ornate facade with estípites and pilaster-niches. Its rich decoration is full of scenes from the

⁵⁶ *Guía turística de la ciudad de Guanajuato*, Guanajuato, Talleres Gráficos del Gobierno del Estado, 1979, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Lily Kassner, *Diccionario de escultura mexicana del siglo XX*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1983, pp. 247, 248; *Guía turística de la ciudad de Guanajuato*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

passion of Christ.⁵⁸

The second bonanza began in 1790. A decade later the mine was flooded because of a lack of adequate pumping mechanisms.⁵⁹

The life-size crucifix known as the *Señor de Villaseca* was brought to the mine in 1618 by a descendant of the mining magnate Alonso de Villaseca, who had brought the statue from Spain. Its miraculous character is testified to by thousands of votive paintings, some of which are exhibited in a side chapel, the walls of which are covered with rock crystals from the mine.⁶⁰

16. Church of San Cayetano, La Valenciana (map no. 3)

The Valenciana mine and church are located on a mountain northeast of the city. Sparsely inhabited today, it was full of life during the bonanza of the mine (1760-1810).⁶¹ Ulloa describes the scene in 1777:

Where the riches are manifest is where most of the people go. Because of this there is such a large population that it has not been counted. The hill is covered on all its sides with huts, inhabited by an extensive number of families of all sorts, because everyone is employed and make some living: some for wages; others in the exploratory tunnels that they are permitted to make with the purpose of finding veins. Thus it has been considered that this mine, in 1777, maintained more than ten thousand people of both sexes and all ages, apart from many others that work in the *haciendas de beneficio*.⁶²

Another estimate from 1810 puts the population of the town at 20,000. Shortly afterward it was nearly abandoned.⁶³

The best preserved architectural remain of the golden age of La Valenciana is the church of San Cayetano. Modest in scale, the quality of its design and the richness of its decoration lend it a vibrant monumentality. The temple was begun in 1765, paid for by the workers and the owner of the mine, Don Antonio de Obregón y Alcocer, Count of La Valenciana. The architect was

⁵⁸ Martínez, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-144.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Víctor Manuel Villegas, *Valenciana*, Guanajuato (private edition), 1974.

⁶² Solano, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶³ Lucas Alamán, *Historia de México*, (cited in Armando Nicolau, *Valenciana*, Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1961, pp. 9, 10.)

Andrés de la Riva. Don Antonio died in 1786, two years before the dedication of the church.⁶⁴ Perhaps for this reason the monument was not finished. Still missing are one of the bell towers, the statues for the niches of the main facade, and the details in the carving of the upper part of the lateral facade. The interior is exquisitely ornamented, with emphasis on the three gilt wooden altarpieces in the presbytery and the two transepts.

Behind the church is a cloister originally intended for Theatine friars, although the foundation of the convent never took place. There was a college here from 1867 to 1875, but it was closed down because of the ruinous condition of the building. In 1962 President López Mateos decreed that the monument should be restored and given to the University of Guanajuato for the schools of Architecture and Engineering. In 1966 the freshly restored cloister was inaugurated as a summer school, since the Architects and Engineers preferred the Bethlehemite convent downtown. In 1968 the School of Philosophy and Literature moved into the cloister.⁶⁵ Today (2013) there are undergraduate programs in Philosophy, Spanish Literature and History, as well as master's programs in the same three disciplines and Ph.D. studies in Philosophy.

17. The Valenciana Mine (south of the Church of La Valenciana)

The mine of La Valenciana was first registered in 1557 by Diego Valenciana. It was not notably successful until 1760, when it was again registered by Antonio de Obregón y Alcocer.⁶⁶ From 1774 we have this description:

The mine called Animas –alias Valenciana– property of Don Antonio Obregón, Don Pedro Luciano de Otero and Don Juan Antonio de Santa Ana, is functioning perfectly [...] and with a considerable number of salaried workers. It produces [...] between 800 and 1000 loads of rich ore weekly, and the fruits of this mine are ground and processed in many of the principal haciendas of this jurisdiction. A shaft is being concluded at great cost to increase production, on which work is carried out night and day, with the fortunate circumstance that not a drop of water interferes, despite its great depth, and this mine is the one which is currently in a renowned bonanza.⁶⁷

Around La Valenciana the ruins of several *haciendas de beneficio* may be seen. Ulloa saw

⁶⁴ Villegas, *Valenciana*, *op. cit.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Tineo and González del Campillo, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

establishments of this sort in operation in 1777. From his technical notes is drawn the following summary of the “amalgamation” or “patio” process: the silver ore was pulverized through a mechanical process, and then ground with water to make fine slurry. Salt was mixed with this suspension to separate acids and other substances. The slurry was extended on the floor of the patio –hence the name “patio process”– where mercury was added. After several days the impurities were rinsed away; the resulting substance was an amalgam of mercury and silver. This was heated until the mercury ran off, part of which was recovered for reuse. The “pineapple” thus formed was then fired in an oven. Bars of silver were the end product. These were brought to the *Caja Real* (“Royal Treasury”), where their purity was determined and the royal fifth (or tenth, depending on the circumstances) was charged.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Solano, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-78.

