

The Many Placenames of Jemez Springs



The mission church of San José de los Jemez, with the ruin mounds of Gisewa in the foreground covered by cholla cactus. Photo from NM Palace of the Governors Archive, 012905, unknown photographer, before 1910.

Placenames change over time, and that is certainly true of Jemez Springs. The Hemish people called their ancestral village, which is now in ruins at the Jemez Historic Site, “Gisewa.” [Pronounced Gee-say-wah.] The ruins of the Spanish mission church of San José de los Jemez is located adjacent to Gisewa at the north end of the modern Village of Jemez Springs. Gisewa has been variously translated from the Towa language as meaning the “place of boiling water” or “village by the sulfur.”¹ The history of Jemez Springs placenames, and the meanings and spellings of those names, came to mind recently when I noticed an announcement of a Christmas holiday event to be held at the old village and church ruins. The announcement listed the revised spelling of the placename “Gisewa.”²

I was puzzled because the spelling that the Jemez Historic Site previously used was Giusewa (with a “u”). This was the most common spelling used by archaeologists and historians over the past century (but also with an accented “í” in some cases).³ So, I asked the folks at New Mexico Historic Sites “What happened to the “u”?” This is what they told me (via a Facebook posting): “*That’s a good question. The spelling “Gisewa” is preferred, as the other spelling with the u comes from historic archaeological reference and was created without consultation with the Jemez Pueblo. As the language of Jemez is not written down,*

it's been spelled many ways. Two rangers at Jemez who are both from Jemez Pueblo have informed us that "Gisewa" is the preferred spelling."

As the NM Historic Sites folks say, the placename of the old village has "been spelled many ways." In fact, I found nine different versions of the name and spellings in historical documents going back to the Spanish colonial period of the early 1600s. This isn't too surprising because the Spanish were writing the name down as they heard it, using their alphabet with their peculiar transcription of the sounds of the name told to them by the Hemish. And later, English-speaking scholars tended to hear and spell the name differently, based on some combination of the sounds of the placename they heard from Hemish, or how they read and transliterated the Spanish written versions of the name.⁴

Adolf Bandelier's reading, hearing, and revision of the spelling of the village placename is probably what led to the most common spelling of the 20th-century placename -- Gíusewa. Bandelier was a first-rate scholar and the first ethnologist to study New Mexico documentary history in detail. In the 1880s and 1890s he spent years searching for and reading ancient Spanish and Mexican documents in Santa Fe, Mexico City, and in Spain. He also visited the Jemez Springs area and Walatowa (Jemez Pueblo) on two occasions when he spoke with Hemish people. From these interviews he wrote down the names (in his English transcription) of ancestral villages that were reported to him.

Here is what he said in 1892 about the name of the village by the mission church that is mentioned in Spanish documents, and notice how he changes the Spanish spelling in his use of the placename:

"In the bottom, about half a mile to the north of the baths, on a gentle slope descending to the river's edge from the east, lie the ruins of the old pueblo of Gin-se-ua, with the stately old church of San Diego de Jemez"... [Later scholarship has concluded that this mission church was called San José de los Jemez.]

"Ginseua is an historical pueblo. It first appears under the name of Guimzique in 1626. It seems that it was abandoned in 1622, on account of the persistent hostility of the Navajos, who had succeeded in scattering the Jemez tribe. In 1627 Fray Martin de Arvide obtained permission from his superior, the Custodian Fray Alonzo de Benavides, to attempt to gather the tribe again in its old home. The efforts of the monk were successful, and the Jemez Indians settled in two of their former pueblos, - at Ginseua and at Amoxiumqua. Chapels had probably been built at both these places previous to 1617, and the Jemez tribe reoccupied both sites in place of the numerous pueblos of small extent which it had inhabited previous to 1627."

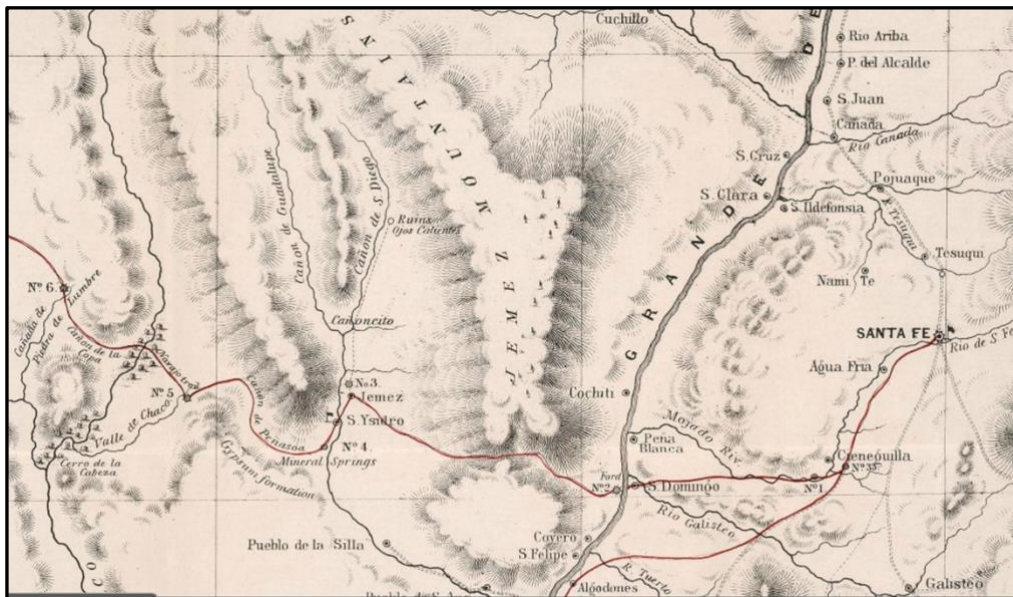
In the above passages Bandelier writes the name as "Gin-se-ua," but he says that the earliest name he could find in documents was "Guimzique." He provides no explanation for why he changed the spelling to "Ginseua," but it may have been based upon his hearing and transcription from the name of this ancestral village told to him on his visits to the area in the late 1880s. The "Gin-se-ua" spelling is how he reports this village name when listing all seventeen ancestral village names told to him by Hemish interviewees.

Bandelier may have been trying to replicate the sounds of the Gisewa placename as he heard it spoken. But it is also apparent that he was flexible on how he revised the original Spanish spelling of 1626. Here is the original quote below from the Spanish document, as included in Bandelier’s 1892 “Final Report.” Note that the spelling there was not “Gumizigue,” as Bandelier wrote, it was “Quiunzique”:

"Hice esta diligencia con los capitanes de la nacion Henex, y llamando al capitan mayor del pueblo de Amoxunqua, llamado Dn Francisco Guaxiunzi y al capitan mayor del pueblo de Quiunzique, llamado Dn Alonzo Pistazondi y Dn Gabriel Zanou su hermano y otros viejos." [Rough translation: I made this arrangement with the captains of the Henex [Jemez] nation and called the chief captain of the town of Amoxunqua [Amoxiumqua], called Don Francisco Guaxiunzi, and the chief captain of the town of Quiunzique [Gisewa], called Don Alonzo Pistazondi, and Don Gabriel Zanou his brother and other elders.]⁵

It is unclear (to me) how or why Bandelier’s spelling of “Ginseua” in 1892 was abandoned and replaced by Giusewa (also spelled Guisewa⁶). Perhaps it was a transcription error, with Bandelier’s “n” and “u” replaced by a “u” and “w,” respectively. An intermediate version of the name appears in William Henry Holmes 1905 report “Notes on the Antiquities of the Jemez Valley,” as “Ginsewa.”⁷ When the Jemez Historic Site still used the Giusewa spelling, their web page noted that the full name was Giusewatowa. So, while there were three “u” letters in the 1626 Spanish spelling (Quiunzique), the most recent spelling preferred by Hemish rangers at the Jemez Historic Site – Gisewa – has none.

In summary, including the most recent spelling, there have been at least nine different versions and spellings of the old village name: Quiunzique, Gumizigue, Ginseua, Ginsewa, Gíusewa, Giusewa, Guisewa, Giusewatowa, and Gisewa.

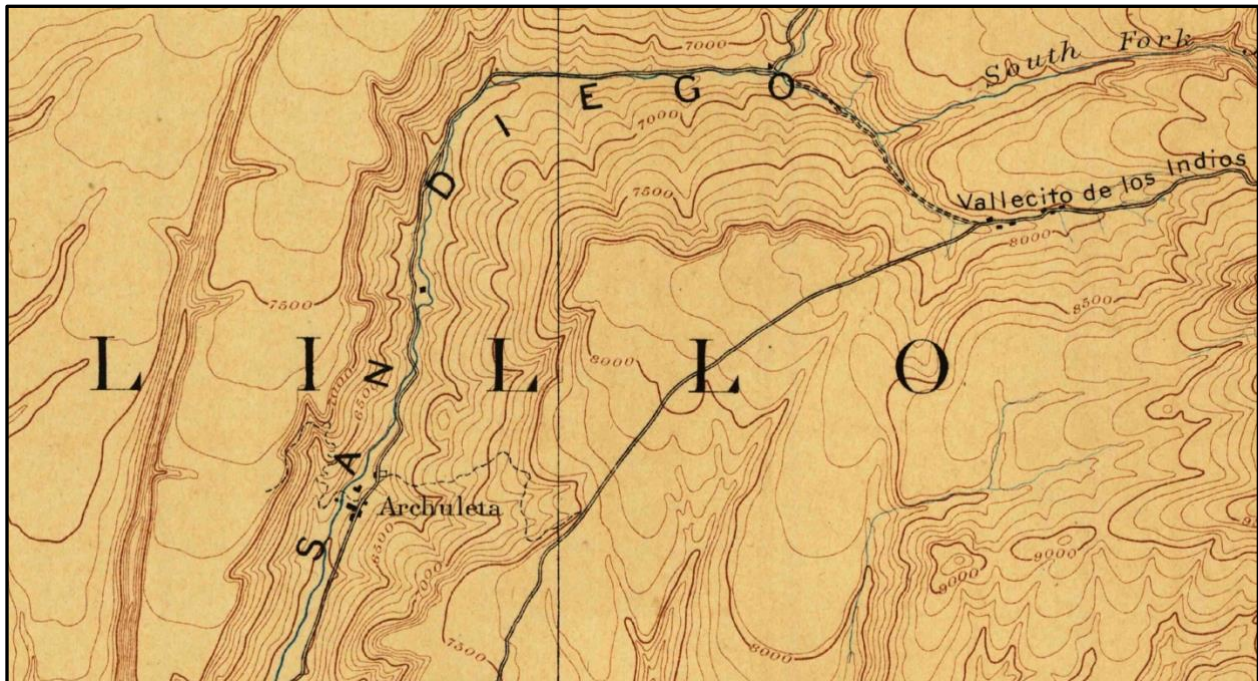


Clip from Lt. Simpson’s 1849 report showing his route from Santa Fe, and the placename of “Ojos Calientes.”

The first name of the Jemez Springs area that appears on reports and maps from the American era (i.e., after General Kearny and the U.S. Army arrived in Santa Fe in 1846) is “Ojos Calientes.” This name (and also “Los Ojos Calientes”) was used by Lieutenant James Simpson, who traveled by horseback to the hot springs from Jemez Pueblo in 1849. He reported ruins of abandoned adobe farmhouses in lower San Diego Cañon north of Cañoncito, but he said that no one was living in San Diego Cañon or at the hot springs at that time. He said that the abandonment of the few farms in the Cañon was due to attacks by Navajo raiders (see my essay about this history [here](#)).

Geologists with the U.S. Army’s Wheeler Survey visited San Diego Cañon in 1873, and their published maps of 1875 and 1882 label the Jemez Springs area simply as “Hot Springs.” The relatively detailed map in the 1875 geology report by Lowe, labels two groups of hot springs, “Lower” and “Upper,” referring to the springs that are now in the Village center and the springs at Soda Dam, respectively.

The first family to settle at the hot springs which are now at the center of the Village of Jemez Springs, were the Archuletas. Francisco and Maria Archuleta probably started farming here in the early 1850s. In 1857, a merchant-trader named Franz Huning from Albuquerque visited the Archuletas and took baths in their log-structure bathhouse. In 1888 a U.S. Post Office was established here, and it was named “Archuleta.” This old placename appears on a U.S. Geological Survey map of the Jemez Mountains published in 1893.



Clip from the 1893 U.S. Geological Survey map, showing a portion of San Diego Cañon, with the place name of Archuleta, which is now Jemez Springs.

The post office name was changed to “Perea” in 1894, undoubtedly because the postmaster at that time was the famous Col. Francisco Perea. He had moved to Archuleta in 1881 when he and Manuel Otero built the Stone Hotel as an investment for an expected

tourist boom, which never came. He managed the Hotel and served as postmaster for more than two decades.⁸ The Stone Hotel is now the old building on the Bohdi Manda Zen Buddhist campus in Jemez Springs. Although the post office was named Perea, and that placename appears on at least one map, it seems to have rarely been used except for the mail. Almost all Albuquerque and Santa Fe newspaper stories from the 1880s to early 1900s, for example, called the village “Jemez Hot Springs.” The village officially acquired its shortened name in 1907, when the post office was renamed again from Perea to Jemez Springs. By the 1930s most newspaper stories use that name, rather than Perea or Jemez Hot Springs.

Finally, it seems appropriate that “Hot” was dropped from the village name, given that one of the most historically remarked upon features of the springs in San Diego Cañon was the presence of both hot and cold springs, sometimes within a few yards of each other. This was particularly the case at Soda Dam, where early visitors described dozens of variable temperature springs from which bathers could pick and choose.

This characteristic of hot and cold springs in the valley is reflected in the first known description of San Diego Cañon by Juan de Oñate, who visited with a small party of soldiers on August 3, 4, and 5, 1598. They had traveled down through the Valle Grande from the first capital of San Juan, located on the Rio Grande near the mouth of the Chama River. After visiting one of the Hemish pueblos on the mesas to the east of San Diego Cañon, they descended the old trail that still exists today, from Cat Mesa down into Church Cañon, and then to the village of Gisewa and the nearby springs. Here is the original quote from Oñate describing this visit and the springs:

"A quatro, bajamos a otros pueblos de los Emmes, que por todos son honce, vimos los ocho, ... a cinco, bajamos al hultimo pueblo de la dicha provincia, y vimos los maravillosos banos calientes que manan en muchas partes y tienen singulares maravillas de naturaleza, en aguas frias y muy calientes; y muchas minas de azufre y de piedra alumbre, que cierto es, mucho de ver." [Rough translation: On the fourth [of August], we went down to other towns of the Emmes [Jemez], which in total are eleven; we saw eight, ... On the 5th [of August], we went down to the last town of the said province, and we saw marvelous hot baths that flow in many places and are singular wonders of nature, with cold and very hot waters; and many mines of sulfur and alum stone, which it is true, are very much to see.] Bandelier said this about Oñate's statement: *"This is the first description, to my knowledge, that was ever given of the San Diego hot springs, and of the mineral springs and other wonders of the Cañon."*⁹

I think Oñate's description of the Valley more than 426 years ago, is indeed, still quite true -- *"...que cierto es, mucho de ver."*

The known chronology of placenames in the modern Jemez Springs area was as follows:

Gisewa (1300s CE? to present), Los Ojos Calientes (circa 1798 to 1850s), Archuleta (1850s to 1894), Perea (1894 to 1907), Jemez Hot Springs (1870s to 1920s), and Jemez Springs (1907 to present).

¹ The Jemez Historic Site web page says the Towa translation is “Village by the Sulfur,” and they say the full name of the site is “Giusewatowa.” But this page was apparently prepared before the re-spelling of the name, dropping the “u”: <https://nmhistoricsites.org/jemez/vr/briefhistoryofjemez> ; A National Park Service web page on the history of the site says the name "Giusewa" is a Towa word that in English means "place at boiling water..." <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/travelspanishmissions/san-jose-de-los-jemez-mission-and-giusewa-pueblo-site.htm> ; The Jemez Pueblo official website still uses the spelling with an “i”, no accent, and the “u” (as of 11/19/24), and they say, “The name Giusewa refers to the natural springs in the area.”: <https://www.jemezpuablo.org/places/jemez-historic-landmark/>

² Apparently the revised spelling of Gisewa (dropping the “u”) has been used by the Jemez Historic Site at least since 2023, but I just recently noticed the change.

³ The best overall summary of the history of Jemez Historic site, IMO, including the old mission and Gíusewa is in this document: The National Historic Landmark Nomination, *NPS Form 10-900 USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86) OMB No. 1024-0018*, San Jose de los Jemez Mission and Gíusewa Pueblo Site, prepared by Michael Elliott. This document uses Gíusewa with an accented “í” and a “u” throughout.

⁴ And regarding various spellings of names, note the variations in the spelling of “Jemez” used in this essay, and as quoted in old Spanish documents. I use the name “Hemish” here as a preferred and commonly used name for the people of Jemez Pueblo. (For example, see Joe Sando’s book “*Nee Hemish*.”) I use the term “Jemez” when referring to placenames that now have that name well established and used on maps and documents, such as Jemez Springs, Jemez Mountains, etc. Note that Spanish, Mexican, and American historical documents have also used many differently spelled versions of the name, including: Xemes, Hemes, Emmes, Henex, Jemes, and others. I suspect a deep search of this history might turn up as many spellings as for Gisewa.

⁵ This quote is in footnote number 1, page 205 in Adolf F. Bandelier’s 1892 “Final Report: Investigations Among the Indians of the Southwestern United States, Carried on Mainly in the Years 1882 to 1885, Part II, Papers of the Archaeological Institute of America, Cambridge University Press; cited in the footnote as “Fray Geronimo de Zarate-Salmeron, Relaciones de todas las casas que en Nuevo Mexico se han visto sabado, MS., par. 11.”; Amoxiumqua is thought to be the large ancestral village, now in ruins, that is directly west of modern day Jemez Springs on the top of Virgin Mesa.

⁶ The (mis?)spelling of the placename as “Guisewa” appears in “The Place Names of New Mexico”, by Robert Julyan. This book entry also gives names and dates of the various post offices at Jemez Springs.

⁷ William Henry Holmes. Notes on Antiquities of the Jemez Valley. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Apr. -Jun., 1905), 198-212.

⁸ Link to Francisco Perea bio: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Perea

⁹ This quote is from footnote number 3, pages 207-208 in Bandelier 1892, *ibid*; It is cited as “The dates for Oñate [visit to the Jemez villages, 3rd, 4th, 5th of August 1598] taken from *Discurso de las Jornadas* [by Can], p. 261”