

H. Davis with the U.S. military was surveying the area for use as a military post.

Today, the Diversion Dam is part of Leasburg Dam State Park, designated a state park in 1971.



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FORT SELDEN

HISTORIC SITE

LEASBURG DIVERSION DAM



The Leasburg Diversion Dam flows along the Rio Grande River about a mile and a half northwest of Fort Selden Historic Site. This diversion dam is vitally important to the region because water is one of New Mexico's most important commodities.

For thousands of years the Rio Grande has been a source of water for travelers, settlers, and livestock and provided water for crop irrigation. However, the Rio Grande is an extremely powerful force of nature. It is a naturally moving river whose path changes on an almost yearly basis.

In the mid-19th century, settlers in the Upper Mesilla Valley were looking for ways to control the regular flooding throughout the Rio Grande Basin and to harness the river's power for their own use. Man-made structures such as small dikes, dams, and canals helped to restrain the river's wild nature but they simply could not stand against its powerful floods and, as a result, these structures had to be rebuilt on a regular basis.

The other issue that arose was political. Because water in the Rio Grande flows south, the more water that was diverted in northern and central New Mexico, the less that water was available at the river's southern end including the Mesilla Valley, El Paso, and Mexico.

These issues were not isolated to just New Mexico. Flooding and the desire for better control over crop irrigation was an issue throughout the American West. In 1902, Congress passed the Newlands Reclamation Act. This act funded massive irrigation projects in twenty states. The newly formed Bureau of Reclamation would enact three irrigation projects here in New Mexico over the first half of the 20th century: Carlsbad, Hondo, and Rio Grande.

The Rio Grande Project consisted of Elephant Butte Dam and Caballo Dam; a power plant located at Elephant Butte;

two flood controls in Picacho North and Picacho South; and diversion dams Percha, Mesilla, American, Riverside, and Leasburg.

Leasburg was the first structure built for the Rio Grande Project. Construction began in 1906 and by 1908, this structure was providing irrigation water to over 31,000 acres in the Upper Mesilla Valley—well before the larger storage dams of Elephant Butte and Caballo, which were completed in 1916 and 1938 respectively.

As a diversion dam, Leasburg's job is to—as its name suggests—divert water from the Rio Grande River—where the dam is located—into the Leasburg Canal, also completed in 1908. It is the Leasburg Canal which then delivers water to the hundreds of acres of farm land that stretches down the Mesilla Valley for more than 3 dozen miles.

Whereas the Elephant Butte Dam towers at 300 feet high, Leasburg is only 10 feet tall. However, this dam is a remarkable 600 feet in length. In contrast, Elephant Butte is only 205 feet wide at its base and narrows at the top to only 16 feet. This is because the function of the two dams is different. Elephant Butte is designed to collect and store water. This helps to mitigate issues of water supply and ensures farms and crops from the Mesilla Valley south

through to the Juarez Valley can have access to water when needed.

Leasburg, on the other hand, isn't built to keep the water. The water isn't being stopped by the dam, it flows naturally over it.

Controlling the water in the river as well as the water that was diverted out of the river has been vital to prevent flooding as well controlling the growth of sustainable crops. Agriculture is a key industry here in Southern New Mexico and the Leasburg Diversion Dam is certainly a part of keeping that industry in motion.

The Leasburg Diversion Dam is located within the Rio Grande rift, which covers approximately 6,500 square miles throughout central New Mexico. Geologically, a rift is a long, narrow feature where the Earth's crust is being pulled apart. This is the reason you find mountain ranges of varying sizes along both side of the Rio Grande Valley.

This dam was named for the small community of Leasburg that existed nearby during the second half of the 19th century. The community sprang up around the same time that Fort Selden was under construction. Adolphe Lea, a respected merchant from nearby Las Cruces, filed a homestead claim on the land around the same time that Nelson