

Turquoise: The Cerrillos Mineral Gem

The mines of Cerrillos, New Mexico produce a particularly beautiful blue/green variety of turquoise, so stunning in fact that they have been mined for roughly the last 3,000 years! Chemically, it is a phosphate of aluminum carrying small quantities of copper and iron and a green mineral, variscite. These give the gemstone its color as well as its value and beauty. This is the only phosphate that is considered a precious stone.

Ancestral Puebloans first started mining the Cerrillos hills circa 900 BCE, and it's been mined ever since. This "gem" of a mineral has been found across the state, and archaeological evidence shows it's been mined and fashioned into ornaments and jewelry for centuries, with remnants found at one of the most ancient sites in the state, Chetro Kettle at Chaco Canyon. Southwest indigenous groups call turquoise *chalchihuitl*, as did the ancient peoples of Mexico and Central America who used the same word to describe jade or green turquoise. One of the hills still being mined in Cerrillos still bears the name, Mount Chalchihuitl. Combined with shell and coral from the California coast acquired in trade, turquoise jewelry itself became a valued commodity.

Spanish settlers didn't have much interest in turquoise as they were looking for what they considered a more important prize, namely gold and silver. In fact, outside of local indigenous groups, other cultural groups weren't much interested in it and it didn't really gain popularity with the American cultural at large until the 1890s. Today it is synonymous with New Mexico and its people.

The mines that dotted the landscape of the Southwest continue to be exploited for the sake of tourism, and is often available at local markets. There are still mines open in Cerrillos that are still producing the same unique blend of beautiful blue-green turquoise. Cerrillos turquoise has also been found at El Rancho de las Golondrinas.