Many people began to move to the region from the eastern United States and Mexico, exploring economic opportunities. Among these were the Rowlett brothers, William and Alfred, Virginia natives skilled in operating grain mills. They saw the mule-powered mills in Tucson grinding wheat and corn into flour and decided to build a dam on the Santa Cruz River and construct a more efficient water-powered mill. Throughout the American Territorial period (1856–1912), the water in this stretch of the river would serve many purposes – running the mill, making beer, swimming, fishing, and irrigating crops.

The Mexican military left the Tucson Presidio fortress in March 1856, two years after the Gadsden Purchase made southern Arizona part of the United States.