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The Civil War in New Mexico: Tall tales and true

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THE CIVIL WAR IN NEW MEXICO: TALL TALES AND TRUE

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INTRODUCTION

The very mention of the Civil War, that most important event in American history, conjures up images of the great battlefields in the east. Names of the campaigns and individual battles, such as the Peninsula campaign, and the battle of Gettysburg, Antietam, "bloody Shiloh" with casualty lists into the thousands, come easily to the most casual reader of the Civil War. The names of the battlefields are further remembered because of the practice of each side, North and South, to give separate names to the same battles; hence, the first Battle of Bull Run was named the first Battle of Manassas by the Southerners. All this seems quite distant from the far west of New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California. The names of campaigns and battles may not be as familiar, but boys from north and south suffered and died of disease, exhaustion, and bullets for the same reasons as they did back east. Considering the number involved the casualty lists were comparable, their suffering just as intense.

The Confederate Government in Richmond, at a very early stage, looked upon the west with great interest. There were some very good reasons for launching a major campaign to try to extend Confederate control over the barren country of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and, especially, California. There was gold in those mountains of Colorado and California, and the South needed that gold to finance the war. That was probably the primary inducement for sending an army into the territories. There were other considerations, too. The matter of slavery in New Mexico territory, which at that time included Arizona, was left open by the Compromise of 1850, to be settled at a later date by the people and practices of the territory. Therefore the introduction of more slaves, there were already some, into New Mexico might eventually lead to the admission of another slave state. By the early 1850's, a projected railroad running across Texas to El Paso and ultimately on to California was to be the vehicle, literally, for pushing slaves into New Mexico. It did not really matter that the nature of that arid land practically precluded the success of the plantation system along with the "peculiar institution" of black slavery. With New Mexico conquered, the road was open to both Colorado and the gold of the Denver area, and to California and more gold. Not only was the gold an attraction but the ports of the west coast would give the South a secure outlet for trade and, equally, a safer base for imports. Some of the Southern leaders saw even more opportunities with the possible acquisition of Northern Mexico, the states of Chihuahua and Sonora, for expansion and, again, ports on the Pacific. So all in all, quite a lot rode on the success of a major effort to seize New Mexico (Hall, 1960).

THE NEW MEXICO CAMPAIGN

By July 1861 the Confederate troops occupied the abandoned Federal installation of Fort Bliss at El Paso (fig. 1) and the stage was set for an incursion into New Mexico. That same month the Confederates advanced to Mesilla, modern Las Cruces, and a skirmish was fought

with Union troops from nearby Fort Fillmore (fig. 1). A few days later the Union force abandoned Fillmore but shortly found themselves prisoners of a small Confederate unit. Other Union stragglers, hearing of the fall of Fort Fillmore, fled to the north to Fort Craig, just 32 km south of Socorro along the Rio Grande (fig. 1). The Confederate authorities in Mesilla then proceeded to organize the new Territory of Arizona, centered at Mesilla.

Meanwhile, General H. H. Sibley, in San Antonio, Texas, was authorized by Richmond to organize forces for the conquest of all of New Mexico. By November he was ready to move his forces, now called the "Army of New Mexico," from San Antonio to Mesilla, and in January, 1862, he started up the Rio Grande (Hall, 1960).

Union forces were concentrated at two points, Fort Craig, below Socorro, and Fort Union, located north of Las Vegas (fig. 1). Fort Union was the major administrative and supply base for the entire territory, and as such, was the real objective of the Confederate thrust. Capture of that place would put their forces in a commanding position throughout the entire area.

In November, 1861, Colonel E. R. S. Canby was in command of Union forces with headquarters at Fort Craig. He immediately ordered both forts to be strengthened and the stage was set for conflict.

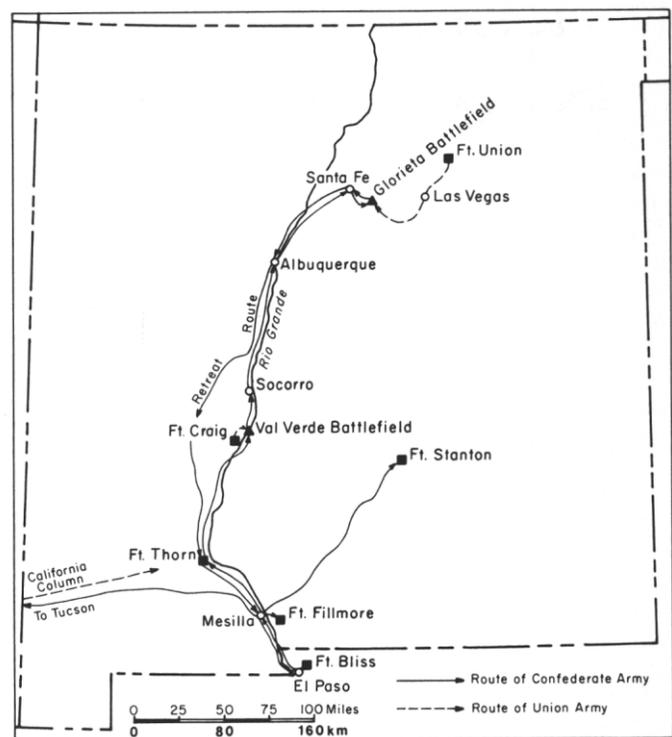


Figure 1. The Confederate campaign in New Mexico, 1861-1862.

In January Sibley headed north. On February 16 the first contact was made near Fort Craig and on the 21st and 22nd the battle of Valverde (fig. 1) was fought across the river from the Fort.

On the evening of the first day, Captain James "Paddy" Graydon, of the Union forces, proposed the novel idea of sending some explosive-loaded mules into the Confederate camp. Presumably the subsequent explosion would do serious damage to the enemy. The mules were dutifully loaded and, in the dark of night, were led to a point a little way from the Confederate camp. The fuses were lit and with a slap on the rump, the mules were sent off on their suicide mission. As Graydon and his aides were heading back to Fort Craig, they suddenly realized that the mules had also turned back and were following them home! Graydon's group managed to out-distance the mined mules before the explosion! The Confederates thought some artillery ammunition had exploded in Union lines (Johnson and Buel, c. 1887).

The battle continued the 22nd and the action became quite desperate. By the end of the day the Union army was forced back across the river and into the Fort. The total number of both armies was less than 6,000 but casualties for both sides amounted to about 263 for the Union and 240 for the Confederates, a total of 503, or 12 percent!

Col. Canby holed up in Fort Craig in a secure position. The Confederates did not have heavy artillery so an attack on the fort was out of the question. Besides, Sibley wanted to continue on north toward Fort Union and, while en route, capture much needed supplies he knew were in Socorro and Albuquerque. Conventional military wisdom dictated against leaving a still large and well-equipped force in his rear at Fort Craig, but Sibley pushed on.

The Civil War even lapped at the gates of Socorro. While the fighting raged on at Valverde, a detachment of the Second Regiment New Mexico Militia, Col. Nicolas Pino commanding, was en route from Fort Craig to Polvadera, just north of Socorro. On February 24, two days after Valverde, Col. Pino and his men were in positions in and around Socorro, with pickets out to the south of town. The New Mexicans were just about to move against an advance element of the Confederates, or Texans as most New Mexicans referred to them, when a cannon shot from the Confederate line passed over them. Their return fire forced the Texans to retreat. Col. Pino ordered the entire command "to keep . . . under arms and to be ready for immediate action." More guards were posted.

The Texans quickly occupied some high ground just to the south and sent other units to cut the road to the north. About 8 p.m. a second cannon ball was sent flying over the town. From then on, things fell apart for Col. Pino and his command, "our men began to desert and to hide themselves away." Pino and his officers tried to arouse the local population "in defense of their Government, their homes, and firesides. Vain endeavor! No one responded to the call." Even an appeal to a leading citizen brought only scorn and curses.

Negotiation between Col. Henry C. McNeill of the Texans and Col. Pino went on with Pino trying to uphold his honor. He offered to do battle in the morning somewhere south of the town. McNeill pushed for immediate surrender. When Pino was advised that his entire command consisted of 37 men, he called it quits! In the morning, however, about 150 of his men came out of hiding to take an oath of neutrality. His original command was 280! The victorious Texans acquired some booty and continued their march north to Albuquerque (Hall, 1960).

Upon arriving at Albuquerque Sibley's luck failed him. He was disappointed to find the stores were destroyed, so then, in desperation, he went on to capture Santa Fe.

While all of this was going on, reinforcements for the Union forces were arriving at Fort Union. These were volunteers from Colorado under the command of Col. John P. Slough. They arrived at Fort Union after some very hard marching the first week in March. The stage was

now set for a second confrontation between the now rapidly approaching armies.

The site of the battle was Glorieta Pass, a very rugged passage through the mountains about 24 km east of Santa Fe (fig. 1). This was the route of the Santa Fe Trail and a well-known resting place for the caravans on the trail. Here in Apache Canyon and at Pidgeon's Ranch they fought a second time. To Unionists this was the battle of Apache Canyon while the Southerners called it the battle of Glorieta. The first encounter was March 26 and the contest lasted through the 28th. The Confederate forces appeared to triumph on the field, with the Union army in retreat. But just as victory seemed assured, word came to Sibley that a Union force had slipped around him, over the rugged mountains, and descended on his rear. Col. Chivington and his forces, led by Lt. Col. Manuel Chavez, fell on the Confederate supply train, drove off the guards and burned all the wagons, loaded with the supplies for the Confederate force, killed the mules—reported to number 1100 and then returned to Union lines with only one Union casualty. The die was cast for Sibley. He could not subsist his force off the country or in Santa Fe (Hall, 1960, 1978).

He was now in dire straits—short of supplies and, he learned, faced with entrapment. Col. Canby left Fort Craig on April 1, arrived at Albuquerque on the 8th, and was about to link up with forces coming down from Fort Union. After a short artillery duel, Canby moved his command to Carnuel Pass (modern Tijeras Canyon in the Sandia Mountains) and linked up with the Union force from Fort Union. Sibley, meanwhile, rushed south from Santa Fe to Albuquerque by April 11 and reunited his command. The next day, Sibley was moving south from Albuquerque, with his army divided by the Rio Grande. A sharp skirmish was fought at Peralta, south of Albuquerque and on the east bank. Sibley managed to extricate himself to the west bank and both forces moved down river within sight of each other, the Union on the east and the Confederate on the west banks.

Just below present Bernardo, junction of present-day U.S. 60 and I-25, both sides went into camp. Sibley decided to slip away in the night by leaving large fires and taking a route into the wilderness to the west. Sibley had good reason to strike off in another direction, leaving the river and bypassing the settlements around Socorro and, even more important, avoiding the Union forces still well protected by Fort Craig. His force was in no condition to fight. Losses in men and material, with strong forces dogging his trail, plus the existence of Fort Craig, dictated taking the round-about route to the west, ending some 50 km below Fort Craig.

As the Confederate column stole away in the night to the west, they began an odyssey which has captured the imaginations and interest of Civil War scholars and buffs ever since. More effort has been put into the researching of the route of that retreat than into the rest of the story of the Confederate invasion of New Mexico. The very route followed by the column, the locations of buried cannon, among other stories, have commanded the attention of many. The approximate route (fig. 1) is fairly well known. They marched west from Bernardo, along the bed of the Rio Salado to the south of Ladron Mountain, through the narrow canyon of the Rio Salado and on west and north of the present-day Magdalena Mountains, crossing the San Mateo Mountains in order to avoid Fort Craig, and continuing into the watershed of Alamosa Canyon. All the while they suffered extremes of thirst, hunger, and lost men, animals, and equipment. At the mouth of Alamosa Canyon, where it empties into the Rio Grande, they were met by a relief column from Mesilla (Johnson and Buel, c. 1887).

Sibley arrived at Fort Bliss by the first week in May while the rest of his command drifted in the days following. There Sibley received news of another Union force closing in on Mesilla from the west. This was the California Column, a force of Union troops commanded by

Col. James H. Carleton pushing the few Confederate troops from Arizona ahead of them. Sibley had no recourse but to abandon the entire area and retreat to San Antonio, Texas. The demoralized Confederates drifted into San Antonio until all the survivors had come in. Sibley started with about 3700 at Fort Bliss in 1861 and counted only 2000 by the time they had reached San Antonio the next year.

POSTMORTEM

The Confederate retreat from Bernardo to below Fort Craig has been searched and researched from then to now. Even as they straggled across the rugged, sparse land, they were followed by Union troops who scooped up the remains of the defeated and demoralized army. Captain Graydon, originator of the bomb-loaded mules at Valverde, reported finding "3 dead bodies half buried. . . . Here they blew up a caisson, burned three wagons, hospital department, medicines, etc." At another point he found 6 caissons and artillery carriages. "I found out where they had buried some 40 shell, loaded, in one place, and 38 in another. I took them up and hid them in another place. All total they burned 19 wagons, 10 ambulances, 6 caissons, and 3 carriages. I think they left 3 howitzers."—and therein lies a tall tale (Johnson and Buel, c. 1887).

When Sibley retreated from Albuquerque he buried eight 12-pounder Mountain Howitzers in the town—modern Old Town (fig. 2). In 1889, Major Trevanion T. Teel, a participant in the retreat and then a substantial citizen of El Paso, returned to Albuquerque and located the buried guns. After much argument and Congressional pressure, the United States Government gave four of these guns to the State of Colorado and the other four to New Mexico. The four Colorado guns are accounted for and are catalogued among the holdings of the Colorado State Museum. Of the four guns given to New Mexico, two are missing, and the other two stood in the plaza at Albuquerque until the spring of 1983. They have subsequently been removed to the Museum of Albuquerque for permanent display and are to be replaced with replicas in the plaza.

Prior to World War II, two cannon stood in the plaza in Santa Fe, but it is uncertain whether they were 12-pounder Mountain Howitzers or not. They, along with an estimated 300 to 500 weapons which were recovered from Glorieta Pass Battlefield are rumored to have been donated to a World War II scrap drive. The donation of the cannon to a scrap pile by the Santa Fe City Council was reported in the October 15, 1942 issue of the Santa Fe *New Mexican*. That article refers to the cannon as "monsters" weighing 700 lb (315 kg). Twelve-pounder Mountain Howitzers are hardly "monsters." They are the smallest of

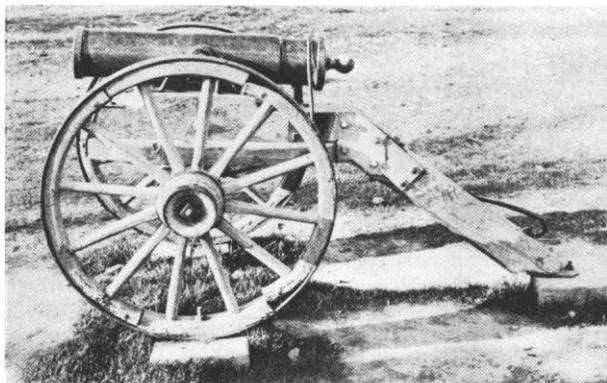


Figure 2. One of the eight 12-pounder Mountain Howitzers buried near Old Town Plaza, Albuquerque, by retreating Confederate troops. This cannon plus one other is now at the Museum of Albuquerque. Photo by Raymond McCoy for New Mexico Magazine.

Civil War period cannon, measuring about 33 in. (84 cm) in length and weighing about 220 lb (99 kg). In 1967, two of the Colorado cannon were moved from the Colorado State Museum in Denver to the restored army post at Fort Garland. In getting ready for the move, it was discovered that three of the four Colorado cannon were still loaded. An army demolition team from Fort Carson unloaded them 105 years after they were buried in Albuquerque (Letter: F. E. Walsh to F. G. Smith, June 8, 1967, Files of the State Historical Society of Colorado).

In the early stages of the retreat from Bernardo through the Salado, as reported by Graydon, the Confederates buried some more guns—one or three, depending upon who is reporting. Graydon thought that they consisted of one Field Howitzer and two Mountain Howitzers. In a letter published in the Albuquerque *Daily Citizen* on August 26, 1889, Major Teel stated that he thought those buried in the mountains opposite Fort Craig were large pieces, field guns, 6's and 12's brass. Teel also mentioned the burial of cannon in Santa Fe. He did not state the number buried but unconfirmed reports mention one or twelve 6-pounder Field Howitzers. With one exception, none of these guns are known to have been recovered. The exception is the rumor that a 12-pounder Mountain Howitzer was found sticking out of an arroyo bank west of Socorro many years ago (Letter: F. G. Smith to F. E. Walsh, June 12, 1967, Files of the State Historical Society of Colorado).

While the Confederates buried cannon and otherwise abandoned much equipment and supplies during their retreat, they did manage to take along with them the six guns comprising the Union McRae Battery captured at the Battle of Valverde. These trophies of war, named the Valverde Battery by the Confederates, saw further Civil War action in Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. One account states that, at the close of the Civil War, these guns were thrown into the Red River rather than surrendering them to Union forces.

A second tall tale arising from the Confederate retreat concerns the lives of at least some of the survivors. Local stories abound concerning the founding of Monticello, a small farming village in Alamosa Canyon, a few miles northwest of modern Truth or Consequences. The story goes that deserters from the Confederate column stayed, farmed the land, married local girls from the Socorro area, and built Monticello. That might explain some of Sibley's losses!

The Confederate claim to New Mexico continued throughout the Civil War even though they never saw it again. Indeed, there was a nominal representative from New Mexico to the Confederate Congress in Richmond throughout the war. The Civil War went on to a bloody conclusion in the east, but no more Confederate boys marched and fought in New Mexico.

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SCHEDULE OF PRICES

PAID FOR ORE

DELIVERED AT THE

NEW ORLEANS & LA JOYA

Smelting & Mining Co.'s

WORKS.

SOCORRO, NEW MEXICO.

JULY 1st, 1881.



NEW ORLEANS & LA JOYA SMELTING & MINING CO.

Socorro, N.M.

Until further notice, the New Orleans & La Joya & Smelting & Mining Company will pay for gold, silver or lead ores delivered at their works at Socorro on the following basis:

For ores assaying under \$400 per ton, deduct 10 per cent. of the value of the gold, (figuring gold at \$20 per oz.) 10 per cent of the value of the silver (figuring silver at the market rate in New York), and \$20 per ton.

For the lead contents of any gold or silver ores coming under the foregoing schedules, not paying for any of the lead when the contents are under 21 per cent., and for all the lead contents when exceeding 21 per cent., viz:

- 21 to 30 per cent., 30 cents per unit.
- 31 to 40 per cent., 40 cents per unit.
- 41 and upwards, 45 cents per unit.

No charges will be made for crushing, sampling and assaying ores purchased by these works.

On the foregoing basis, ores assaying 2 ozs. gold, 200 ozs. silver, and fifty per cent lead,

would be figured as follows:) Present price of silver in New York, \$1.12.)

2 ozs. gold at \$20.00, \$40.00 less 10 per cent.	\$ 36.00
200 ozs. silver at \$1.12, \$224 less 10 per cent.	201.60
50 per cent. lead, at 45.	22.50
	\$260.10
Deduct	20.00
Amount paid	\$240.10

NOTE.—Special contracts can be made with the company for handling ores.

Wm Van Hooker

Ore purchase schedule of the New Orleans & La Joya Smelting & Mining Company, July, 1881. For the example given, difference between amount paid and actual value was \$71.90 per ton! Lack of metallurgical expertise was probably responsible for the extraordinarily high smelting charges and soon spelled doom for this plant. Schedule courtesy Rio Grande Historical Collections, Skidmore Papers, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces.

CERTIFICATE OF ASSAY

OF

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Lot No. _____ Class *3 Sacks by Express; No Fluxes*
W. W. Skidmore

GROSS WEIGHT OF ORE—Pounds.	PER CENT OF Moisture.	MOISTURE, Pounds.	DRY WEIGHT, Pounds.	PER CENT Lead.	OUNCES SILVER Per Ton.	OUNCES GOLD Per Ton.	REMARKS.
<i>Charges \$5.50</i>				<i>920</i>	<i>580</i>	<i>trace</i>	
<i>Please remit.</i>							

Sampled by **GUSTAV BILLING.**

SOCORRO, N. M., *Sept 11,* 188*1.* *J. J. MacPeaque* Assayer.

Sampling department assay certificate, Billing smelter. Sampling advised shipper of gross ore value and instructed plant metallurgist as to quantity of fluxes needed for optimum smelting. Above 3 sacks shipped by William Skidmore, superintendent Organ Mountain Mining & Smelting Association (soon-to-be proprietors of Stephenson-Bennett mine), assayed only \$13.25 per ton which was, after deducting mining, transportation, and smelting costs, sub-economic. Courtesy Rio Grande Historical Collections, Skidmore Papers, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces.