

Battles for Gold and Glory:

*Civil War
Skirmishes
in New Mexico
Territory*

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Civil War Skirmishes in New Mexico Territory
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Introduction

“Citizens of New Mexico, your Territory has been invaded, the integrity of your soil has been attacked, the property of peaceful and industrious citizens has been destroyed or converted to the use of the invaders, and the enemy is already at your doors. You cannot, you must not, hesitate to take up arms in defense of your homes, firesides and families.” New Mexico Territorial Governor, Henry Connelly

*There was the sun of Valverde, which many of us would not live to see set. ...*Rafael Chacon, Company K, 1st Regiment, New Mexico

... We have no mean and cowardly foe to fight. William Davidson, Company A, Fifth Texas Volunteers

Our Capt. stepping in front said, “Steady there my brave mountaineers...do not fire till I command. Alonzo Ickis, Company B, 2nd Colorado Volunteers

Nothing broke the stillness of night but the steady tramp of men and the rattle of the wagons. Ovando Hollister, Company F, 1st Colorado Volunteers

Fearing nothing for our train, we left it behind and marched out to give battle... Alfred Peticolas, Company C, 4th Texas Volunteers

...The Texan artillery was again playing a lively tune Ovando Hollister, Company F, 1st Colorado Volunteers

These men from Confederate and Union sides wrote their impressions of the battles in the western territory of New Mexico. From their words, we learn of those Civil War battles and the consequences.

In 1862, while the attention of United States citizens was on the movement of the Army of the Potomac and newspaper articles reported the results of the battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac, New Mexico was invaded by Confederate troops. The battle at Shiloh involved 85,000 soldiers. The skirmishes in New Mexico occurred between armies of about 2,500 men each. But the echoes of the New Mexico campaign reverberated to Washington DC and Richmond, Virginia.

Why invade New Mexico? The answer: three things that the Confederacy desperately needed to win the war were available in the West. To capture the West, New Mexico must be conquered.

The first of these items was gold. Running a country and supporting an army, especially in war, requires money. Mines in Colorado produced thousands of dollars a day. California mines would add even more gold to the Confederate treasury.

The second item vital to the Confederacy: the seaports of



This map shows the split of the Union and the Confederacy, even in the far western United States. Credit: Library of Congress

California. As soon as the war started, the North blockaded the ports of the South. The Confederacy was unable to export its money crop of cotton and receive desperately needed supplies. A few blockade runners pierced the blockade, but they carried barely enough to feed the people of the South.

The third item coveted by the South was land. President Jefferson Davis believed that the land of the West would be perfect for growing cotton. Southern pioneers would build farms and plantations, bringing their slaves along as workers.

The Texas Confederates considered the capture of New Mexico Territory an easy task. But they ran into animosity built up by years of feuds between Texans and New Mexicans.

After Texas won independence from Mexico and became a new country, the Republic of Texas claimed about half of New Mexico. In 1841, troops from Texas invaded New Mexico three times trying to gain control over the area. Animosity grew

between the residents of Texas and New Mexico, which was still part of Mexico.

When Texas became a state of the United States in 1845, the situation led to war between Mexico and the United States. At the end of the war, New Mexico became a Territory of the United States.

As the tensions between North and South exploded into conflict in 1861, citizens and soldiers in New Mexico and Texas faced difficult choices. Most residents of Texas had come from southern states and they were strongly on the side of the Confederacy. A secession convention began to meet in January 1861. On February 28, the people of Texas voted to secede from the United States.

Most Texans felt that New Mexico Territory would follow them into the Confederacy. The southern part of the Territory was settled by mostly southern born people and they seemed to welcome the Confederacy. But the majority of the residents of New Mexico were Hispanics whose families had settled the land decades before. They had only been citizens of the United States for fourteen years and had no strong allegiance to the Union. Still they detested Texans because of past disputes.

The 29 forts in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona protected settlers against Indian attacks. About 1500 men assigned to these forts had roots in the North and the South. They were forced to choose sides in the conflict that became the Civil War.

Many officers and men in New Mexico Territory resigned their commissions, intending to serve in the Confederate Army. They headed for Texas, the nearest Confederate land. Two high-ranking officers resigned; Colonel William Loring, the commander of New Mexico Territory, and Major Henry Hopkins Sibley. Their departure left Colonel Edward Canby in charge of the military loyal to the Union. The strength of Federal troops dropped as

men trickled away to Texas.

Like many commanders of the Civil War, Sibley and Canby had known each other for years, including their service in New Mexico Territory together. Both attended West Point, served in the Mexican War, and campaigned in the frontier territories. Sibley had invented a tent design and a campaign stove that were used by soldiers of both sides in the conflict. He had even served briefly as commander of Fort Union, one of his main targets in the coming fight.

***Henry Hopkins Sibley resigned from
the Federal army and became a
commander for the Confederates.***



After resigning his Union commission in New Mexico, Sibley traveled to Texas and then to Richmond to get Jefferson Davis' approval of his plan to capture New Mexico Territory, and then the rest of the western states. Impressed with the grandeur and possibility of the plan, Davis gave his permission for Sibley to raise an army in Texas and invade New Mexico Territory. He promoted Sibley to the rank of Brigadier General in the Confederate Army.

As Sibley returned to Texas to recruit troops for his invasion, Colonel Canby was ordered to release most of the Federal troops to Kansas. He wrote letters urging that the regular troops remain in New Mexico to guard against invasion from Texas. The governor of New Mexico Territory, Henry Connelly, issued a call for volunteers saying, "Citizens of New Mexico, your Territory has been invaded..."

By February 1862, Canby had managed to keep about 1200

Federal soldiers and 2500 New Mexico volunteers had been mustered. The famous Kit Carson commanded one regiment. Canby also sent messages to the governor of Colorado. A regiment of Colorado Volunteers was sent south into New Mexico Territory to fight for the Union.

As a Confederate Army marched north out of Texas and a Union Army and Colorado Volunteers marched south to meet them, the eyes of the country were on battles in the east. But the fate of the Confederate scheme to capture the West and maybe win the war would be decided in a narrow canyon of New Mexico Territory, 1400 miles from Washington and Richmond.

Many of the soldiers from both sides of the conflict kept journals or later recounted their experiences to their families. From these writings, we get the soldier's view of the events in New Mexico Territory.

Canby was certain that Sibley would head for Fort Union, the largest post in New Mexico Territory and the key to controlling the Santa Fe Trail. Once they captured Fort Union, the Confederates would be ready to invade Colorado and press west into California. Canby decided to take a stand against the Confederate invasion farther south on the Rio Grande at Fort Craig, denying the Rebs an easy passage up to Fort Union. The fight between the Blue and the Gray for New Mexico Territory was beginning. The battles for gold and glory had come.

“The People of Texas Expect Much of You”

Before General Sibley returned to Texas, Texan Colonel Baylor invaded southern New Mexico Territory and occupied it. He appointed himself governor of the Confederate Territory of Arizona, encompassing southern New Mexico and Arizona. Meanwhile, Brig. Gen. Sibley arrived in San Antonio, Texas and began recruiting for his campaign into the rest of New Mexico Territory and on to Colorado and California. One recruit was Alfred B. Peticolas.

Peticolas was born and raised in Virginia. As a young man, he moved from Virginia to Texas and set up a law office in Victoria. He signed up as part of the Victoria Invincibles and was elected fifth sergeant by the troop. When Sibley was organizing his brigade, the Victoria Invincibles joined up on August 22, 1861. Peticolas was mustered into the Confederate Army on September 11, bringing with him a horse valued at \$110 and equipment worth \$15, according to Confederate records. He was 23 years old. The Victoria Invincibles were designated as Company C of the Fourth Texas Mounted Volunteers.

Peticolas wrote in a journal daily and he often sketched battle scenes and villages or mountains near his campsite. His first

journal volume was destroyed, but a comrade had made a short copy and this chapter comes from that source. Peticolas' other volumes still exist. They tell the story of his experiences in New Mexico Territory.

The Brigade marched east of San Antonio to the new Camp Sibley. Their officers drilled them every day to learn the movements, guard mounts and discipline.

As other regiments formed, the camp was full of drilling, eating men. Finally on October 22, 1861, the Brigade saddled up early and heard Colonel Reily, the regimental commander, give a stirring speech and marched to San Antonio. They formed up in the town square and more speeches were given. Colonel Reily told the men, "The people of Texas expect much of you," and at that moment the men would have done anything for him or for Texas. They hurraed three big cheers and marched west toward New Mexico.



The Plaza House in San Antonio, where Sibley Brigade was sworn into service for the Confederates.

At the first camp, the weather turned cold and rainy. After two weeks, they reached San Felipe Springs, "the end of civilization," as most called it. Word spread through the camp that Colonel Baylor in New Mexico Territory anticipated an attack by the federal forces at any time. General Sibley was still in San Antonio gathering up men, so Colonel Reily ordered the Brigade

to pick up the pace to be ready in case of attack. Water was short along the trail, so he divided the men into three groups to travel a few days apart. This would give waterholes time to refill before the next group arrived.

The country was so bad that mesquite couldn't grow and cactus was drying up. Men and animals had only a few mouthfuls of water each day. When Sibley's Brigade reached the Devil's River, water was plentiful.

Just as they reached Fort Davis, Peticolas' horse gave out. To keep from being afoot, he bought a mule. At camps along the way, Peticolas would read whatever he could borrow from someone, sketch the scenes he saw, and write in his journal.

Peticolas' company reached Fort Bliss (near El Paso, Texas) on December 17, 1861. General Sibley had gotten there a couple of days earlier and he assumed command of all forces of the Confederate States in the Territory of New Mexico and Arizona. He called his men the "Army of New Mexico."

Peticolas spent a lonely Christmas near Fort Bliss. The day after Christmas, a dust storm blew in that was so thick it was impossible to see a horse fifty yards away. Colonel Reily left for a diplomatic mission to Mexico and left Lieutenant Colonel William Scurry in charge of the regiment. His men considered him the most popular colonel in the whole outfit.

In January, the Brigade moved north and passed Fort Fillmore which the Feds had surrendered. Near Fort Thorn, they camped for a boring month of routine drills and guard duty. More men were sick as the weather got colder and some snow fell.

February 7 arrived and they marched out again. Fort Craig and all of New Mexico lay ahead.