

7-1-2011

New Mexico's Delegate in the Secession Winter Congress, Part 1: Two Newspaper Accounts of Miguel Otero in 1861

Mark J. Stegmaier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Stegmaier, Mark J.. "New Mexico's Delegate in the Secession Winter Congress, Part 1: Two Newspaper Accounts of Miguel Otero in 1861." *New Mexico Historical Review* 86, 3 (2011).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol86/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

New Mexico's Delegate in the Secession Winter Congress, Part 1

TWO NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS OF MIGUEL OTERO IN 1861

Mark J. Stegmaier

Newspapers are an important and often underutilized research tool for historians. They have certainly entered prominently into my own research concerning the effort to grant full statehood to New Mexico during the second session of the Thirty-sixth Congress from 1860 to 1861, the secession winter session. In 2009 my article on that subject appeared in the spring issue of the *New Mexico Historical Review*, since then I have continued to research the debate over New Mexico's statehood in the U.S. Congress just prior to the Civil War.¹ This research has acquainted me with two newspaper accounts relating to New Mexico's territorial delegate Miguel A. Otero. These articles included informative reports about him personally and his particular role in the crisis.

At the time of the statehood debate, Otero, a thirty-one-year-old Democrat, had served his territory's interests conscientiously during his two terms, working hard to secure federal funding for New Mexico. However, Otero did not seek reelection following the election of Republican president Abraham Lincoln and was a "lame duck" congressman during the winter session. Republican John S. Watts, his successor as territorial delegate, was already in Washington. Otero realized that in this session, he and New Mexico sat on the periphery of the essential topics of debate: Union or disunion, peace or civil war. Congress-

Mark Stegmaier is professor of history at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma, where he has taught since receiving his PhD from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1975. His research field is the political history of the sectional crisis. His wife Diane provides valuable research assistance on his projects.

sional politicians would have probably ignored New Mexico altogether, except the proposition for New Mexico statehood provided Republicans a means to avoid painful concessions on the slavery issue in national territories, while also displaying Republican goodwill to border slave states through their support of statehood for a territory with a nominal slave code.

Otero must have felt almost totally isolated under the circumstances. Even the moderate Republicans advocating the New Mexico-statehood scheme had not consulted him but had instead interviewed delegate-elect Watts at length. Republicans disliked Otero for his close association with southern Democrats, his proslavery views and his support for New Mexico's legalization of slavery in 1859. Otero owned none of New Mexico's handful of black slaves, but he had married into a family of Charleston, South Carolina, disunionists. Yet, Otero must have also experienced some sense of alienation from his traditional Southern associates because, despite his proslavery sympathies, he remained a Unionist as long as the new administration did not commit some overt act of aggression against the South.²

In spite of his relegation to the role of supernumerary in the crisis, New Mexico's delegate was not entirely inactive. Although he delivered no prepared speech in the House during these months and assumed no public stand for or against the statehood bill, in mid-January Otero seemed to favor the measure to give New Mexico a state government. According to one reporter's account, Otero began telling everyone he conversed with that New Mexicans would "gladly embrace the opportunity to become a State." Despite this report, any reservations Otero may have harbored about his territory's ability to shoulder the increased costs of a state government or any resentments he possessed at not having been consulted on the framing of the proposition he withheld from public discourse. He also vigorously defended New Mexico and its people whenever newspaper editors or congressional Republicans, opposed to the New Mexico statehood bill, attacked either one as unfit for admission to statehood. The most significant example occurred when Otero penned a long essay, originally published in the *Washington Constitution* on 12 January 1861, and later reprinted in the *Santa Fe Gazette* on 16 February 1861, in response to the vicious anti-New Mexico editorializing of Horace Greeley in the *New York Tribune*.³

No Republican in Congress insulted the character of the New Mexican people as extremely as Greeley did, but on occasion congressional Republicans described that territory and its people in obviously pejorative terms. One such occasion occurred in the House on 18 January 1861, during a speech on the secession crisis delivered by John Sherman of Ohio, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and one of the most powerful Republican leaders in

the House. Until only a few days prior to his speech, Sherman had not only favored the New Mexico statehood bill, but had also attempted to persuade some of the more radical House republicans of the bill's merits.⁴ By the time of his address, Sherman discovered that the radicals were impervious to his arguments and adopted their view asserting that New Mexico and its people were unfit for statehood. Near the end of his address on 18 January, Sherman ridiculed the character of New Mexico's populace, prompting a spirited response from Otero.⁵ The report of their exchange in the *Congressional Globe* conveyed the words, but otherwise failed to describe adequately the scene in the House or the frustration and anger of Otero. While several reporters who witnessed the event provided some commentary, none opined more completely and colorfully than Republican correspondent Benjamin Perley Poore of the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, who signed his letters with the pseudonym "Sigma." The relevant part of his letter, dated 19 January, is as follows:

Mr. Sherman was describing the poverty and insignificance of the territory, about which Southern gentlemen were raising so unreasonable a row. He said it was filled with Mexicans and Peons, and Quadroons and half-breeds—when MIGUEL A. OTERO, the semi-Spanish gentleman who represents New Mexico in Congress, sprang up fiercely, and stigmatized Mr. Sherman's words as a malicious libel upon the people he represented. The little Spaniard is a young, tight-built, creamy-faced gentleman, with a fierce mustachio, and an elegant walking stick. Instantly the House and galleries were in a roar of laughter. There stood the defiant MIGUEL, his brow knit, and his face dark with wrath, sputtering his charming broken English, and violently gesticulating in the direction of Mr. Sherman. There stood Sherman, calm as a summer's morning, smiling at him with a deprecating wave of the hands, and assuring him he designed to cast no reflection upon his constituents, but simply to state the facts as to the races who constitute that population. He went on to say he was told by the census that there were but twelve negro-slaves in New Mexico, with a large number of Peons and others—when Mr. Otero cried out, "The Peons are the gentleman's peers." The laugh was now on the other side, but was speedily changed when Mr. Sherman instantly retorted—"The Peons are the peers of the gentleman and they have a right to be—for they elected him;" and quickly passed on with his argument.

The Hon. Miguel sat fuming in offended dignity for a time, condoled with by southern members (he is a strong pro-Slavery man) and nursing his wrath, till it was eventually cooled off by a good supper

at the National [Hotel], where the honorable member for New Mexico boards. There was no one who seemed to enjoy this ludicrous scene more hugely than the Hon. Tom Corwin [Republican from Ohio], who shook with glee till his burly form rocked again. There was a ridiculous story afloat in the city that evening, that Otero would send a challenge to Mr. Sherman.⁶

Ten days or so after Sherman's speech, newspaperman John Greiner, visiting Washington D.C., from Columbus, Ohio, called upon Miguel Otero and later printed an account of the interview. Greiner's wife Laura probably accompanied him to the nation's capital. The newspaperman was John Greiner, probably accompanied by his wife Laura. He was then editor of the *Columbus Gazette*, a weekly devoted primarily to news of local interest in that city. The fifty-year-old Greiner had previously worked as a painter, a songwriter for the temperance movement and Whig political campaigns, and state librarian for Ohio. Under the Zachary Taylor–Millard Fillmore administrations, Greiner had received an appointment to New Mexico as Indian agent and as territorial secretary. During his tenure in New Mexico Territory, Greiner became acquainted with Otero, then a young lawyer and aspiring politician in Albuquerque.⁷

The Greiners encountered a more subdued and frustrated Otero than the impassioned young territorial delegate who had responded to Sherman on January 18. Otero also had to answer retorts from other Republicans. In his speech on 22 January, Cadwallader C. Washburn of Wisconsin argued that the "white" population of New Mexico totaled 1,000 or less and implied that the rest of New Mexico's populace was an inferior mix unsuited for statehood. Delegate Otero challenged Washburn's statistics on who was "white" in the territory. Washburn also referred to Otero's alleged role in instigating New Mexico's slave code of 1859. Although he did not directly address the slave code issue, Otero denied any personal connection with slave-owning. On 29 January, Rep. Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, a noted Republican antislavery radical, renewed the Republican assault on black and white servitude in New Mexico (i.e., slavery and peonage). Otero interrupted to explain that under New Mexico's peonage laws, masters could employ only mild forms of punishment against dilatory peons.⁸

Since the date of Greiner's meeting with otero is unclear, their interview may have taken place a day or two before Otero's reply to Stevens. Nonetheless, Otero revealed to Greiner his doubts as to why the United States had even wanted to take possession of New Mexico, given all the negative comments he heard in Congress about the territory and people he represented. Disheartened,

Otero shifted from his recent acceptance of the statehood bill to a generally unfavorable attitude toward the measure. Here follows Greiner's account:

This young gentleman who has been twice elected a delegate to Congress from New Mexico, from his fine social qualities and gentlemanly bearing, has become one of the most popular men in the House, and to the strong hold he has gained upon the affections of his colleagues may be attributed the secret of his success in gaining such liberal appropriations for his Territory. He is a native of New Mexico, connected with the wealthiest and most influential families, was educated at St. Louis, and married there a charming and accomplished young lady, and no man possesses a greater influence in the country where, Mr. Sherman says "a turkey buzzard would starve in flying over." We were glad to meet him as an old acquaintance, and while conversing upon the admission of NEW MEXICO AS A STATE, he earnestly protested against any such action by Congress, until provision was made in the enabling act to afford her the means of paying the expenses of a State government.

He admitted that much of the territory was poor and sterile, in some places sandy, in others mountainous, and that there was a great scarcity of water—that many of the people were poverty stricken and not as intelligent as they might be; yet, he contended, that was no reason why she should be incessantly abused, why the finger of scorn should be constantly kept pointed at her; she could not help it, nature had dealt hardly by her, and to him it looked rather ungenerous, that a great and powerful nation should thus treat her with contumely and contempt. She was made subject to the United States against her will, came in only as a conquered province, and if she was not to be protected and supported, why was General [Stephen Watts] Kearney [Kearny] sent into the country to conquer and subdue it, as he did? This reminded us forcibly of a reply we received, while traveling over the Jornada [del Muerto], near the Cimmaron [Cimarron], on our first trip to Santa Fe. "What a poor, miserable, heaven forsaken country this is, you live in," we remarked to our peon companion one day, as we were crossing the desert. "Si Señor," replied he, sorrowfully, "what a pity the Americans would not let us retain possession of it for ourselves, when they have such a rich country of their own to live in."⁹

My own previously published judgment that Otero probably did not oppose New Mexico statehood in the session of 1861 appears erroneous, or at

least incomplete, in light of this recently discovered interview. Otero had taken no direct stand on the issue and his political friends in New Mexico strongly supported the move. By the time of the Greiner interview, however, Otero had become opposed to New Mexico statehood, unless the federal government provided the financial support necessary to sustain the economic burdens of a state government. This was the basic argument used by those in New Mexico who opposed statehood, that New Mexico's population simply could not and would not pay the increased taxes needed for state government. Otero may have accepted New Mexico statehood earlier in the congressional session. He never actively opposed statehood, but by late January, given the constant Republican criticism of New Mexico as unfit for statehood and his own marginalization from the development of the bill, Otero was willing to express a decidedly negative view of New Mexico statehood.¹⁰

A little over a month after the Greiners visited Otero, the secession winter session ended, with no overall compromise settlement enacted by Congress. The New Mexico statehood bill failed to pass the House and New Mexico maintained its status as a territory under the federal government. Both Otero and Greiner were soon back in the territory. Ex-delegate Otero and his family waited until winter snows no longer blocked the Santa Fe Trail, and thus traveled back home to New Mexico in April. In July 1861, Pres. Abraham Lincoln appointed Henry Connelly governor and Otero secretary of New Mexico. Although Otero was a Democrat with strong Southern associations, Lincoln considered the young Hispanic leader Unionist enough for the appointment in a territory with a huge Hispanic majority. The U.S. Senate confirmed Connelly's appointment, but Senate Republicans refused to confirm the proslavery Democrat Otero as secretary on 19 July on a roll call vote of 14–23. During the Civil War, Otero and his wife did collaborate with Confederates when they invaded New Mexico under Gen. Henry H. Sibley, but after the Confederate defeat at Glorieta Pass and retreat back to Texas, the Lincoln administration took no action to punish the Oteros for aiding the enemy. Meanwhile, Greiner, with his previous territorial work and solid Whig-Republican credentials, easily achieved appointment as receiver of public monies for land distribution in Santa Fe.¹¹

Notes

1. Mark J. Stegmaier, "‘An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place’? The Issue of New Mexico Statehood in the Secession Crisis, 1860–1861," *New Mexico Historical Review* 84 (spring 2009): 263–90.
2. *Ibid.*, 280. Southern Unionists in the secession crisis were of two types—unconditional and conditional. Otero was definitely of the conditional sort. He would remain Union-

- ist unless the North refused to grant any concessions to the South, or until the North attempted to use military force to bring the seceded states back into the Union.
3. Stegmaier, "An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place?" 280–81; *Baltimore (Md.) Clipper*, 16 January 1861; *Washington (D.C.) Constitution*, 12 January 1861; and *Santa Fe (N.Mex.) Gazette*, 16 February 1861.
 4. Rep. John A. Bingham (Republican from Ohio) to Joshua R. Giddings, 14 January 1861, r. 4, Joshua R. Giddings Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, Ohio.
 5. *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 2d sess., 1860–1861, 455. Sherman's negative comments on New Mexico and his exchange with Otero were completely eliminated in the versions of his speech printed in the *Columbus Daily Ohio State Journal* a few days after the address and many years later in Sherman's autobiography. *Columbus Daily Ohio State Journal*, 24 January 1861; and John Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Senate, and Cabinet: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Werner, 1895), 1:215–25.
 6. *Cincinnati (Ohio) Daily Commercial*, 22 January 1861. Benjamin Perley Poore was one of the most well-known Washington correspondents of that time. Poore's popularity stemmed from his letters as "Perley" in the *Boston Journal*, not from letters he wrote as "Sigma" to the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*. He did not begin his "Sigma" letters and dispatches for the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* until the latter half of January 1861, after a correspondent signed "Omega" had taken over in late December for correspondent "W. D. B." "Omega" continued to send dispatches irregularly to the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* after "Sigma" took over. A comparison of two of his writings showed that "Sigma" was Poore. In his two-volume work *Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (1886), Poore gave a vivid description of Illinois abolitionist and Republican congressman Owen Lovejoy during his speech on 23 January 1861. Poore's account of Lovejoy is almost exactly, word-for-word, a copy of Sigma's account of Lovejoy's speech in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* on 26 January. *Cincinnati (Ohio) Daily Commercial*, 26 January 1861; and Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1886), 2:50–1.
 7. For additional biographical information on John Greiner, see Alfred E. Lee, *History of the City of Columbus, Capital of Ohio* (New York: W. W. Munsell, 1892), 429, 478. For information on Greiner in New Mexico in the early 1850s, see Annie H. Abel, ed., "The Journal of John Greiner," *Old Santa Fe* 3 (July 1916): 189–243; and Annie H. Abel, ed., *The Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun while Indian Agent at Sante Fé and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in New Mexico* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1915), 321, 388, 393, 475.
 8. *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 2d sess., 1860–1861, 515, 623.
 9. *Columbus (Ohio) Gazette*, 1 February 1861. Greiner may have overestimated Otero's popularity among non-Southern House members. Sherman's "turkey buzzard" comment may have come from a private conversation with Greiner on his Washington trip; it was not part of his remarks on New Mexico in his speech on 18 January. Stegmaier, "An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place?" 280–81.
 10. Stegmaier, "An Imaginary Negro in an Impossible Place?" 270, 280–81.
 11. President Lincoln also appointed Greiner his new position in July 1861. Greiner returned to Ohio at the end of the Civil War. For Henry Connelly's and Otero's

nominations and rejections, see U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Journal*, 37th Cong., 1st sess., 10 July 1861, 376, 397; 13 July 1861, 430; 17 July 1861, 468; 20 July 1861, 472. For Greiner's appointment and confirmation, see U.S. Congress, *Senate Executive Journal*, 37th Cong., 1st sess., 5 July 1861, 369; 10 July 1861, 373; 13 July 1861, 430; 16 July 1861, 445. For Otero's journey to New Mexico in April, see *New York Daily Tribune*, 30 April 1861. For Otero's collaboration with Gen. Henry H. Sibley's Confederates, see Donald S. Frazier, *Blood and Treasure: Confederate Empire in the Southwest* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 198; and Martin H. Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960), 116. For Greiner's subsequent career as newspaperman and painter in Ohio, see Lee, *History of the City of Columbus*, 478.