

1-1-1931

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Recommended Citation

Santee, J. F.. "The Battle of La Glorieta Pass." *New Mexico Historical Review* 6, 1 (1931).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol6/iss1/5>

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THE BATTLE OF LA GLORIETA PASS¹

By J. F. SANTEE

NEAR the southern extremity of the Sangre de Cristo range, in northern New Mexico, is the elevated, corridor-like opening known as La Glorieta Pass. Several miles in length, narrow at either end, and approaching a quarter of a mile in width at the middle, this passage-way—a part of which is sometimes called Apache Cañon—has afforded, from time immemorial, a ready means of traversing the Sangre de Cristo barrier. Here may have passed the Aztec in that ancient day when, if the myth be founded on fact, he came out of northern lands seeking a southern home. Marauding Apache, questing Spaniard, and dauntless American frontiersman here found a thoroughfare; and when at last the Santa Fe Trail was established, that historic highway followed as a part of its course the cañon of La Glorieta.

La Glorieta Pass, too, is a battle-field of the Civil War. Within its narrow confines, late in March, 1862, was fought a desperate and decisive struggle which resulted in the frustration of the well-laid plans of the Confederacy concerning the Far West. As a military achievement, however, this Union victory in the Sangre de Cristo mountains was overshadowed by those greater battles which characterized our stupendous fratricidal conflict. In a war of lesser magnitude, the stubborn contest at La Glorieta Pass, with the issues involved, would have been heralded afar in song and story.

Of course, the mere conquest of New Mexico, and even of Colorado in addition, would have resulted in no par-

1. Much of the material for this article was obtained from William Clarke Whitford's *Colorado Volunteers in the Civil War*, published by the Colorado State Historical and Natural History Society, Denver, 1906.

ticular advantage to the Confederacy; but the possession of both would have been of paramount importance in moving toward certain greater objectives. Foremost among these was the separation of the Far West from the Union.

“With the Pacific Coast in their possession by conquest, or with a free way to it by an alliance with the ‘Western Confederacy,’ the world would have been open to the Confederates, since it would have been impossible for the Federal navy effectively to blockade that coast.”²

In the earlier period of the Civil War, extension of Confederate territory was prominent in the thought of many Southern leaders. “The South, Seward asserted, had in fact revolted with the avowed intention of expanding in Mexico and Cuba.”³

Casually considered, the effort of the Confederacy to separate the Far West from the Union has the aspect of a war measure only. This effort, however, like the Civil War itself, was the logical outcome of that contest for power which had been going on between the North and the South since the earliest years of our existence as a nation.⁴ In that contest the West held the balance of power. When, finally, the South lost the political leadership of the West, the South appealed to arms. Having lost one “West,” the Confederate leaders considered the possibility of gaining another—the Far West.

Utah had recently passed through a period of disagreement with the Federal government, and was thought to be disaffected. Although California and Oregon remained in the Union, and notwithstanding the conspicuous sacrifices of such men as Colonel Edward Dickinson Baker, of Oregon, and General Isaac Ingalls Stevens, of Washington territory,

2. Smiley, Jerome C.: preface, Whitford's *Colorado Volunteers in the Civil War*, p. 13.

3. Pratt, Edwin F.: “Spanish Opinion of the North American Civil War,” *The Hispanic American Review*, Vol. X (February, 1930), p. 16. Duke University Press, Durham, N. C.

4. Brogan, D. W.: “The Origins of the American Civil War,” *History*, Volume XV, No. 57 (April, 1930,) p. 48.

there existed in those sections, during the Civil War, an under-current of sentiment favorable to secession. . . . Southern sympathizers were much in evidence, and their secret organization, the Knights of the Golden Circle, flourished.

As for California in particular—"Politically, it was a part of the United States; geographically, it was an isolated community, separated from the central government by thousands of miles of prairie, desert, and mountains. . . . This isolation naturally fostered . . . a feeling that California had interests distinct from those of any other part of the Union. . . . On the eve of the Civil War, this idea of a Pacific Republic was discussed more seriously than at any previous time. Its advocates . . . were not mere adventurers, but men high in the counsels of the state. . . . These men were largely Southerners, holding pronounced Southern views."⁵

The territory now included within the limits of New Mexico and Arizona was declared a part of the Confederacy by a convention which met at Tucson in 1861. This convention elected a delegate to the Confederate congress.

In March, 1861, Colonel William W. Loring was assigned to command the United States forces in New Mexico. About three months later he entered the service of the Confederacy, and was succeeded by Colonel Edward R. S. Canby, afterwards General Canby of Modoc War fame.

The Confederacy now made its first military move toward the consummation of its aims in the Far West. In July, 1861, Lieutenant-Colonel John R. Baylor, at the head of Confederate troops, invaded New Mexico by way of El Paso. All the lower part of the Rio Grande valley in New Mexico fell into his hands. Colonel Canby then concentrated the Federal forces at Fort Craig, about midway between El Paso and Santa Fé.

On July 8, 1861, General Henry H. Sibley was charged, at Richmond, with the task of expelling the Federal troops

5. Ellison, Joseph: "California and the Nation, 1846-1869," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Volume XXX, No. 2, (October, 1926,) pp. 108-9.

from New Mexico, but not until the following December was he able to assume command at Fort Bliss, near El Paso. Soon thereafter General Sibley concentrated the Confederate forces in western Texas and New Mexico at Fort Thorn, well up the Rio Grande toward Fort Craig.

General Sibley definitely assumed the offensive when, on February 7, 1862, he set out for Fort Craig with about 3,000 men and a long and heavy supply train. On this expedition General Sibley was ably assisted by several of the Confederacy's most dashing officers, among whom were Lieutenant-Colonel Baylor, before mentioned, and Major Trevanyon T. Teel, in command of the two batteries of artillery.

To oppose the Confederates, Colonel Canby had at Fort Craig, according to the report made later to the adjutant general at Washington, a force of 3,810 men. This included regulars, New Mexican troops, and a single company of Colorado volunteers. The most distinguished of Colonel Canby's officers was Colonel Kit Carson, in command of the first regiment of New Mexico volunteers.

On February 16, the Confederates reached the vicinity of Fort Craig, and offered battle within two miles of that stronghold. This offer Colonel Canby declined. Three days later, General Sibley, with the troops under his command, crossed to the eastern side of the Rio Grande, the side opposite Fort Craig. The next day, the Confederates moved northward until due east of the fort. They were protected from the fire of the Federals, however, by the immense ridges of volcanic rock, among which they sheltered themselves.

Early on the morning of February 21, the Confederates moved to a point five miles farther north, with the object of re-crossing the river and resuming their march toward Santa Fe. Colonel Canby now resolved to take the initiative. About the middle of the forenoon, the Federal troops, advancing on the west side of the Rio Grande, reached a

point where they could fire across at the enemy, and so began the battle of Valverde. Early in the afternoon, the Federals crossed the river and desperate fighting ensued. However, the raw and untrained New Mexican volunteers gave way under fire, Captain Alexander McCrae was killed and the Federal battery under his command was captured. Colonel Canby was able to withdraw his surviving troops and they retired in good order to Fort Craig, leaving the Confederates in possession of the field.

The Federal loss at Valverde was reported by Colonel Canby at 263. General Sibley acknowledged a Confederate loss of 140.

Colonel Canby's reverse at Valverde should not be attributed to lack of personal bravery nor to mismanagement. As a proof of the former, it may be said that during the engagement the horse upon which Colonel Canby rode was killed. General Sibley's Confederates were very formidable antagonists.

The day following his victory at Valverde, General Sibley demanded the surrender of Fort Craig. This demand met with refusal. The Confederates did not attack the fort, probably being impressed with its strong defenses.

After two days' delay, the Confederates proceeded northward, their advance guard reaching Albuquerque on March 2. Here supplies were secured, and preparations were made to move on Fort Union.

Meanwhile, early in February, 1862, David Hunter, in command of the department of Kansas, which then included Colorado territory, had requested Acting Governor Weld, of Colorado, to send re-enforcements to Colonel Canby.

Accordingly, the First Colorado Regiment, commanded by Colonel John B. Slough, was ordered to the scene of operations. After being assembled near the site of the present city of Trinidad, the Colorado troops marched as rapidly as possible over the snow-covered country to Fort Union, where they arrived on the evening of March 10. They were

welcomed by the officers and 800 men of the garrison, and likewise by the governor of New Mexico, who, with the other territorial officials, had abandoned Santa Fé, and had made Las Vegas the emergency seat of their government. Colonel Slough assumed command of the post, because of the seniority of his commission over that of Colonel Paul, the former commander.

On March 22, Colonel Slough set out for Santa Fé, taking with him 1,342 men. Besides his own Colorado regiment, Colonel Slough had a company of independent Colorado volunteers, a company of New Mexico volunteers, and, of regulars, a battalion of infantry, three detachments of cavalry, and two artillery batteries of four guns each.

Major John M. Chivington, with about one-third of the Colorado regiment and a force of cavalry, 418 men in all, on the afternoon of March 25, started for Santa Fé, Colonel Slough having been informed that the enemy had there only about one hundred men. Late at night these troops stopped at Kozlowski's ranch, near La Glorieta Pass, where they learned that a Confederate scouting party was in the neighborhood. The scouting party was captured and Major Chivington then discovered that the advance guard of General Sibley's army was at the farther end of La Glorieta Pass.

At eight in the morning of March 26, Major Chivington's troops broke camp and marched toward the enemy. Proceeding up La Glorieta Pass, they reached the divide about two in the afternoon. Here at a sharp turn in the road, and in the midst of a thicket, the advance guard came unexpectedly upon a Confederate scouting party, consisting of thirty mounted men, led by a lieutenant. The Confederates were taken prisoners without any casualties.

Major Chivington urged his men to proceed, but with caution. Three-fourths of a mile farther on, at the point where the trail turns to the right to enter Apache Cañon, the western section of La Glorieta Pass, the Federal troops

sighted a body of Confederates, under the command of Major Pyron.

Upon seeing the Federals, the Confederates immediately halted, unfurled the "Lone Star" flag of Texas, and planted in the road their two pieces of artillery.

Without delay the Confederate gunners opened fire, throwing the Federals into momentary confusion. Major Chivington, however, proved equal to the emergency. Instructing the main body of his troops to seek cover, he sent his mounted troops to the rear, and deployed several companies as skirmishers among the pines on the mountain slopes on either side of the Confederate guns. The fire of the skirmishers soon caused the Confederates to retire hastily to a point almost a mile from where their first stand was made. They were now at a place where the mountains drew near together and this afforded better advantages for defense. As the Confederates retired, they crossed a deep arroyo, by means of a bridge. This bridge they destroyed, in order to check the Federal onset. The guns were then posted in a defile just beyond the place where the bridge had been, and the slopes on both sides of the road were covered with troops to support the artillery.

Again Major Chivington resorted to his former tactics. From the mountain sides a galling fire was poured into the Confederates, who, after sustaining the punishment for almost an hour, began to show signs of giving way. At this moment, the Federal cavalry charged, the horses leaping across the arroyo. The Confederates fled in confusion, taking their guns with them, however.

In the Apache Cañon fight, the Confederates probably had between 500 and 600 men, the majority of whom had participated in the victory at Valverde. The Federals were predominantly Coloradoans, who had not been under fire previously. Major Chivington himself had just left the ministry of the gospel, yet the tactics which he employed when matching infantry and cavalry against artillery were worthy of a trained strategist.

The Federal troops, with their dead and wounded, and with about seventy Confederate prisoners, retired to Pigeon's ranch. This ranch, by the way, belonged to a Frenchman, Alexander Valle, nicknamed "the Pigeon."

During the following night, 300 Federal infantry and cavalry arrived, Colonel Slough having sent forward reinforcements. On the morning of March 27, after burying their dead, the Federal troops fell back to Kozlowski's ranch, the water supply having proved inadequate. Here, on the afternoon and the night following, Colonel Slough's entire force was reunited.

At the opening of the battle in Apache Cañon on March 26, Major Pyron, in charge of the Confederate forces engaged there, had dispatched a courier to Lieutenant-Colonel Scurry, the Confederate commander at Galisteo, fifteen miles to the rear. By daylight the next morning, all the Confederate troops at Galisteo, with their baggage train of at least seventy wagons, had reached Major Pyron's encampment at the western end of La Glorieta Pass.

For twenty-four hours the Confederates remained there, expecting an attack. The attack not occurring, Lieutenant-Colonel Scurry decided to move his troops forward.⁶ Leaving his wagon train behind, he proceeded, with about 1,100 men, toward the Apache Cañon battlefield. About half past eight in the morning of the twenty-eighth, when the Confederates were less than a mile west of Pigeon's ranch, they discovered an advancing column of Federals.

This column was a part of Colonel Slough's command, which was advancing from Kozlowski's ranch, Colonel Slough himself being in charge.

The Confederates formed in battle line immediately upon sighting the Federals. The latter were only about 800 yards distant when they discovered the presence of the

6. It will be noted that Scurry was now the ranking officer of the Confederates. General Sibley, at the time of the battle, was twenty miles away in Santa Fé and well supplied with whiskey. See Hayes, as quoted by Twitchell, *Leading Facts of New Mexico History*, II, 384, note.

enemy. Fighting began at once and raged until five in the afternoon. In the course of the engagement, all the Confederate field officers were killed or wounded. Lieutenant-Colonel Scurry was twice grazed by bullets.

A peculiar feature of the situation was that, throughout the engagement, Lieutenant-Colonel Scurry supposed his forces to be opposed by the entire Union force under Colonel Slough's command. Until late in the afternoon, he was unaware that Major Chivington, with perhaps one-third of the Federals, was executing a circuitous movement through the rough mountainous country. Colonel Slough had expected to find the Confederates at the western end of La Glorieta Pass, and had planned to have Major Chivington launch a surprise attack from the flank or rear.

At the western end of the pass, however, Major Chivington found only the Confederate wagon train and a small guard. The guard was captured and the wagons, together with the supplies, were destroyed.

Apparently, news of this disaster reached Lieutenant-Colonel Scurry just before five o'clock, and was probably one of the causes of his raising a flag of truce about that hour.

Shortly before midnight, Major Chivington's body of troops rejoined the part of command which had participated in the engagement of Pigeon's ranch. Then, possibly on account of the limited water supply, the Federals again returned to Kozlowski's.

So ended the battle of La Glorieta Pass. Conflicting reports have been made as to the losses in this two-day struggle. Governor Connelly of New Mexico, writing to Secretary Seward, reported the Federal loss as 150. Yet it is known that the losses of the Colorado troops alone exceeded this number. Governor Connelly estimated the Confederate loss at 400.

After two days, the Confederates, who were without shelter or blankets, and virtually without food, retreated

to Santa Fé. Colonel Slough made no attempt to follow up the enemy, although it is certain that the Confederates, in their wretched plight, could have offered but slight resistance. Possibly both armies had had enough of the horrors of war.

At this juncture, a courier arrived from Ft. Craig with an order from Colonel Canby, instructing Colonel Slough's force to return to Fort Union. In the absence of telegraphic communication, it is possible that Colonel Canby was unaware of the Confederate predicament. This appears to be a logical conclusion, because soon after the Federals fell back to Fort Union, Colonel Slough received a message from Colonel Canby ordering him to proceed at once, with his troops, to Albuquerque. Colonel Slough resigned, however, and was succeeded by Major Chivington.

The Federals, upon arriving at Albuquerque, found Colonel Canby there with a small force which had marched northward from Fort Craig. General Sibley now definitely gave over further prosecution of the campaign and retreated with his army to Texas.

Some of Colonel Canby's critics have thought that he might have followed up the Confederate retreat more vigorously, and have attributed his alleged leniency to the fact that General Sibley was his brother-in-law. Such relationship was nothing unique in Civil War annals. Lincoln had relatives by marriage in the Confederate service, and Major, afterward Colonel, Chivington's brother died in battle as a champion of the Lost Cause. Colonel Canby had been charged with the task of clearing New Mexico of Confederates. This, in the later phase of the campaign, at least, he accomplished with the minimum amount of bloodshed, and the war department manifested its approval of his services in New Mexico by promoting him to the rank of brigadier-general.

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