

10-1-1929

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Recommended Citation

Romero, Cecil V.. "The Riddle of the Adobe." *New Mexico Historical Review* 4, 4 (1929).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol4/iss4/3>

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THE RIDDLE OF THE ADOBE

BY CECIL V. ROMERO

History has been called many harsh names, probably because it seems so illogical. If we place ourselves at any important juncture in the past, divest ourselves of the advantage of hindsight, and, on the basis of the deepest and broadest knowledge of facts then existing, try to anticipate the course of events, the result is likely to be very much at variance with the story to be told by the historian.

Acquaintance with the large and ever-charming part of our country that the late Charles F. Lummis named, with simple dignity, "The Southwest," will always lead to the question of why a race that had the vision and the vitality to discover, explore and partially to colonize the immense region from Florida to California, all within a generation after the discovery of the New World, should have played such a minor role in the subsequent development of the continent, while the race that established a few unpretentious settlements on the northeastern coast, at a much later date and under much less auspicious circumstances, should have been the one to fulfill the destiny of the continent.

There is a tendency to consider the present status as the inevitable outcome of events. But the search for an adequate explanation of this American paradox of "The first shall be last and the last shall be first" reveals how far from inevitable the outcome has been at times. It brings a fresh realization of the truth that history represents the line along which many conflicting forces have balanced. With the passage of time some of the forces that entered into the American historical balance have been forgotten, which is the same as to say that some of the factors in our historical equation are missing. The Southwest recalls many of these forgotten factors, and with their help new logic

and reason is seen behind much of our history. The equation works out better.

* * *

Long before the English had set foot on the North American continent, the Spaniards had reconnoitered it in its entirety, from Florida to the Strait of San Juan de Fuca; had explored its heart as far as northeastern Kansas; had established permanent settlements at widely separated points; and were actually in possession of, or dominated, much the larger part of what is now the continental United States. This predominant position seemed to be further strengthened by the fact that it was held by a nation whose empire girdled the earth, from the Spice Islands of the East to the golden realms of the Incas, and extended in America from the Equator into the temperate zones on both sides, the scope and absolute power of which has never been equalled before or since.

At this stage of the game the English entered the picture. The motives that brought them and their procedure after arrival provide an illuminating contrast. It is notable, particularly, that the policy of the English government and the procedure of the English colonists, when compared with the policy and the procedure of the Spaniards, seem singularly negative and even timid.

The English colonists did not come spontaneously at all, but constrained in one sense or another. They were either dissenters running away from religious oppression, debtors running away from financial oppression or Utopians running away from all the oppressive conditions of the Old World. They saw in the New World, not the vast field for daring enterprise that the Spaniards had seen, but merely a haven and a refuge. This difference of outlook explains, in some measure, why the Spaniards exuberantly overran a whole New World, venturing wherever wealth beckoned or mystery challenged, while the English accepted with a strangely contrasting finality their chance settlements along the northeastern coast.

To the English government these new colonies meant an expansion of empire, and, as long as the expenses were borne by private companies or individuals, this was favored and encouraged. Not that the government considered the colonies themselves important, for little promise could be seen in those stark wildernesses. What was important was to check the northward advance of Spain and the southward advance of France on the North American continent, that, between them, promised to leave England without a foothold in the New World. It was this political pressure from without, coinciding with the religious and social pressure from within, that resulted in the establishment of the English colonies in America. Their subsequent value to the government lay, not in their own resources, which were always a disappointment to the English, but in their relation to the more opulent Spanish dominions to the south. They were important, not as a source of valuable commerce themselves, but as a base from which to prey on the valuable commerce of Spain with her possessions. As a later generation would have put it, the American policy of England was less "constructive" than that of Spain.

Such was the situation and such the background during, say, the first half of the seventeenth century. It was Spain then, and not England, that was the dominant, positive force in American history. The Spaniards came first to the North American continent, and by their successes attracted the others. Their possessions were larger than those of the English, and they were more constructively conceived. Any observer then would have conceded to Spain an important if not a dominant part in any future development of the North American continent.

* * *

The fundamental reasons for the failure of Spain to fulfill this early promise of dominance on the North American continent have been so largely obscured by certain misconceptions and generalizations that have come to be as-

sociated with the very mention of her name that it is almost as important to remember what these reasons were not as to remember what they were.

A great deal is heard, for instance, about the Spaniards' lust for gold, and about all the weaknesses of character and policy to which it gave rise. Perhaps most prominent among these is the treatment of the Indians under the "encomienda" system. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this lust for gold was a peculiarly Spanish trait, or that only among the Spaniards did its indulgence lead to cruelties. The first Virginia colonists, it will be remembered, were gold hunters to a much more exclusive extent than any Spanish expedition ever was. Elsewhere, also, the activities and the policy of the English centered around gold quite as much as those of the Spaniards. In fact, they usually centered around Spanish gold. The only difference that can be seen between the two as regards gold is that the Spaniards were more successful in finding it. And while the Spaniards' treatment of the Indians, wherever gold was involved, was hard and cruel, it should not be thought that the English of the same period were by nature any more humanitarian. Because the Spaniards established themselves first at all the principal sources of gold and silver in the New World, the English never had occasion to inflict on the Indians just the same cruelties that the Spaniards did. But in other pursuits, the English inflicted other cruelties just as bad. That their lust for gain did not permit of any more humanitarian scruples than did that of the Spaniards may be seen by comparing two contemporary incidents.

In the year 1619 the first cargo of African slaves to be brought to America arrived at Jamestown, thus initiating a sordid, brutal trade, for which it is impossible to find any apology from a humanitarian viewpoint. The grim details of this fleshy commerce are too well known to need recounting. Suffice it to say that nothing could be more repugnant than this trade to modern sensibilities. Yet it was a trade

in which the English, and especially the Yankees, excelled, a fact that eventually gave point to the saying in regard to Faneuil Hall, at Boston, that "The Cradle of Liberty rocks on the bones of the Middle Passage."

In the following year, 1620, the Governor General of New Mexico, at Santa Fé, received from the Viceroy, in Mexico City, a communication from which the following extracts are translated:

"And whereas it has been understood that for some errors and cases of misdemeanour that have been brought against some Indians, they have been sheared, punishment from which they receive notable affront. . . . I command thee not to inflict, nor consent to the infliction, upon said Indians of such punishment, rather shalt thou order that those recently converted shall be treated well and charitably.

"Also it has been reported to me that the said Indians suffer notable inconveniences and travail in the Distributions. . . . I command thee that in the distribution of them that thou shouldst have to make that it be only for the labours of the fields and the care of livestock, and for no other purposes. . . . and the number that thou shalt apportion shall be at the rate of two per cent. Of those that there may be in each pueblo in simple times, that is when there is neither sowing nor harvesting, and in double times, that is when there is said sowing or harvesting, thou shalt make the apportionment at the rate of eight per cent., giving order that said Indians shall be paid for their work at the rate of half a 'real' a day and board, or if they are not boarded then they shall be paid one 'real' a day: and thou shalt take care that they are given good treatment, and to the Spaniards who do not do so, or who do not pay them for their work, no more Indians shall be given in the apportionments: and whereas it has been understood that after giving to the inhabitants of said town of Sancta Fee (sic) Indian women in the apportionments, there have been practised some offenses against God, our Lord: Henceforth thou shalt not make said distribution of Indian women, nor shalt thou oblige them to go to serve in said town or any other place unless it be that they go with their husbands voluntarily, and thou shalt protect them, that no person of any estate or quality soever shall take them to perform said service. -----"*

* New Mexico Historical Review, Vol. III, No. 4, October, 1928.

Of the two, it would seem that the Spaniards' treatment of the Indians in the Southwest was by far more humane than the Englishmen's treatment of African natives who were captured, transported and sold practically as cattle. The "encomienda" system of the Spaniards, as applied in the present territory of the United States, was never really oppressive. With the passage of time, as the interest of the central government in those remote, unproductive settlements waned, the power of the Spaniards in the Southwest became less, and the "encomienda" system had to be abandoned entirely. The Spaniards were only nominally masters. They lived among the peaceful Indians of the region more as neighbors. Since they made the important additions of sheep and cattle to the economy of the Indians, and since they helped the peaceful pueblo Indians to defend themselves against their natural enemies, the nomad Indians, their rule in the Southwest may be considered more beneficent than otherwise. Elsewhere in America, it is true, the Indian policy of Spain, beautiful in principle, produced some results that were decidedly ugly in practice. No attempt need be made to justify them. It can only be said that they could not have been more sordid nor more inhuman than slavery or the slave trade; and that the period was not noted for its humanitarian principles among any of the races.

Another popular conception regarding the Spaniards, and one to which it is also possible to attach too much importance in considering the reasons for the failure of Spain to fulfill her early promise of dominance on the North American continent, is the one to the effect that the Spaniards were naturally lazy, improvident and unenterprising.

Before accepting such a view implicitly, it should be remembered that the Spaniards of the Southwest had to deal with a soil and a climate less friendly even than those with which the New Englanders were faced. Under such circumstances, laziness would have been fatal. The Spaniards had to work hard to exist at all. Constant drudgery was

rewarded by a living that was precarious at best. The peculiar, fatalistic philosophy of the region, conventionally epitomized in the Spanish word "mañana," was perhaps more the result than the cause of these precarious circumstances. There were undoubtedly notable differences of character between the two, but there is little justification for the belief that the Spaniards of the Southwest, as farmers and husbandmen, were any more indolent or less skillful than their contemporaries of the English colonies. In this respect only two material differences can be seen.

Speaking of agricultural methods in the English colonies, Harold Underwood Faulkner, in his "American Economic History," says:

"Rich virgin soil, with an inexhaustible supply to the west, was no incentive to scientific farming. The value of manure was hardly appreciated, crop rotation was rarely used and 'land butchery' was the usual practice. One observer said that the colonial farmer seemed to have but one object—the plowing up of fresh land. 'The case is,' he says, 'they exhaust the old as fast as possible till it will bear nothing more, and then, not having manure to replenish it, nothing remains but to take up new lands in the same manner.' With land butchery and crude methods in the north and south, went ignorance in the care of livestock. . ."

No credit need be given the Spaniards of the Southwest for not making the same mistake. With them such methods would have meant suicide. Paradoxically, although they lived in the "great open spaces" and in the "land of magnificent distances," they were more crowded than their contemporaries in the English colonies. They were restricted to narrow strips of fertile land along rivers, or to a few mountain valleys where a brook or two could be diverted to water the thirsty soil. From the Indians they learned the technique of irrigation. Sometimes the salts in the irrigations water would eventually render some fields unproductive. But the numerous little mountain valleys of New Mexico, with their not extensive fields still green and fertile

after centuries of use, are eloquent witnesses to the fact that neither the Spaniards nor the Indians were ever "land butchers," of necessity, both were eminent conservationists.

The most serious charge that can be made against the Spaniards of the Southwest as farmers is that their methods were primitive, and have remained more or less so even to the present. In the seventeenth century, when the settlements in New Mexico were established, agriculture as a science was unknown, and the improved implements and methods that have come since were not even dreamed of. It will be remembered that a practical steel plow was not developed until about 1825, and even then was not immediately accepted because of a superstition that the metal somehow poisoned the soil. Other implements that we consider commonplace today did not exist as late as a century ago. The Spaniards brought to the Southwest the primitive agricultural methods of their time, and their subsequent complete isolation in that remote, inland region explains their failure to adopt the improved implements and methods that were developed in Europe and in America during the years of their isolation. In this respect the Spaniards of the Southwest did differ from the English colonists on the eastern seaboard; but this difference, obviously, is not sufficient to explain the ascendancy taken by the latter.

The failure of Spain to follow up her early advantage on the North American continent can be attributed to very definite economic and political reasons, without resorting to broad and untenable generalizations.

In the seventeenth century, and in fact until the advent of the railway, the value of land was in direct relation to its distance from navigable water. For this reason the great interior development of the North American continent could not be foreseen. This was also one reason why all the European powers considered the West Indies and the lands bathed by the Caribbean—"The Spanish Main"—as much more important strategically than any part of the North American mainland. Another reason for this view

was the fact that in Mexico and Peru, Spain had made the first important discoveries of precious metals, and the Caribbean was the gateway through which this fabulous wealth must flow to the mother country. Besides, these tropical regions produced sugar, coca, vanilla, cochineal and other items that in the aggregate surpassed in value even the gold and silver. Against this long list of important raw materials, the North American mainland could offer only tobacco and furs. So it is not strange that the American policy of every European power centered, not around the North American continent as would seem logical now, but around the West Indies and the Spanish Main. This was the principal battleground of that long, four-cornered struggle between Spain, Holland, France and England for colonial supremacy.

The first crack in the vast, powerful empire of Spain was produced by the Dutch rebellion. The Lowlanders ended for all time the claim of the Spaniards to maritime supremacy. This was a serious blow to a nation with a far-flung empire, whose very life-blood, it can almost be said, flowed from the far-off mines of Mexico and Peru and from the fields and forests of the rich, tropical regions surrounding the Caribbean. With a fine sense of her vulnerable spot, her enemies were quick to attack Spain in this Caribbean area. Their efforts were directed, not towards dislodging her from the sources of wealth, but towards preying on her commerce and securing for themselves as much of that wealth as possible after it had been produced. But even after the Dutch revolution, Spain was still a formidable power, and it was not always safe or expedient to attack her too openly. It was for this reason that piracy became the order of the day along the Spanish Main. It was better that the plundering should be done by private individuals—freebooters, buccaneers and filibusters, who flew no flag but their own "Jolly Roger" or other piratical insignia, and therefore implicated nobody but themselves. There was also a lucrative smuggling trade that they could en-

gage in, for the many official restrictions and regulations that Spain placed around the commerce of her colonies had then the same effect that such artificial restrictions have always had. For all these reasons the efforts of Holland, France and England were directed towards securing a foothold wherever they could in this Caribbean area. While openly at war with Spain they had to have bases of operation in this important sector, and during the intervals when it was more expedient to be nominally at peace with her, they had to have bases from which their nationals could share in the profitable smuggling and pirating to be had along the Spanish Main. The map of the West Indies is still dotted with these islands belonging to England, France and Holland. Today they seem small, unimportant and hardly worth the attention that was given them. But they were once considered more important than the much larger colonies that these countries possessed on the mainland.

The race for colonial supremacy was a four-cornered affair, but there were really but two sides to it in the Caribbean. The field was against the leader. England, France and Holland vied with one another merely to see who could plunder the most from Spain. It is interesting, although not especially pertinent here, to note that the same tactics were followed in the later phases of the struggle. Spain was succeeded by Holland in the position of leadership, whereupon France and England turned on and eliminated her, and then fought it out between themselves in the long series of wars that ended with the final victory of the English at Waterloo. It was in the Caribbean that the most telling blows were dealt against Spain, and it is here that we find an explanation of her failure to follow up her early advantage on the North American continent. The atmosphere of romance that has surrounded the campaign of piracy along the Spanish Main has obscured its practical significances. The romance of those hearties contains the even greater romance of why Santa Fé today is a quaint relic

and not one of the great seats of government of the North American continent.

The wealth of the Indies, in transit to Spain, would fall into the hands of her enemies, strengthening them and weakening her by so much. No longer able to keep open her avenues of communication, her vast empire became topheavy and began to fall apart of its own weight. Constantly sapped and harassed, weakened Spain began to lose, not only wealth and prestige, but territory as well. The English descended on Havana in an unguarded moment, and it cost Spain all of Florida to ransom it back. Years later she recovered Florida, but this first deal with it reveals her attitude towards all her possessions on the North American continent. They were merely chips in her Caribbean and European game. As such the vast valley of the Mississippi—Louisiana—came into her possession. As such she treated it. She lost it, however, under special circumstances, and not exactly by the ordinary rules of the game. The territory had been transferred conditionally to Napoleon in return for some promises of a dynastic nature. These promises were never fulfilled, and therefore Napoleon never acquired a legal title to the territory. Besides, he had further agreed never to cede the territory to any nation but Spain. However, when the American commissioners came to negotiate for the purchase of the island of New Orleans, Napoleon happened to be especially in need of money, so he offered to sell them all of Louisiana instead. Both parties realized the defects in the title, but the price was cheap—Napoleon could afford to make it so—and the territory was highly desirable to the United States. So the deal was closed. Fallen Spain could only protest. After that she was never again an important factor on the North American continent.

It may be sustained that all these events were themselves effects and not causes, and that the ultimate explanation of the whole matter must lie in finding the cause or causes for that rapid disintegration of the social fiber of

Spain that set in during the early part of the seventeenth century and so soon supplanted the many sturdy virtues that had characterized the Spaniard of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with all the vices and weaknesses that have come to be synonymous with the Spaniard of a later day. This is a matter that has been widely and ably discussed, but the conclusions rarely agree. This disintegration has been attributed at one time or another to every institution of Spain and to every one of the forces that were at work within her during the time of her greatest glory. Some have laid it to the degeneracy of her royal family, some to her Church, others to the corruptive effects of the great riches that flowed in to her from her conquests. It has even been attributed to the publication of "Don Quixote," "for," said one worthy Spaniard of the last century, "since that time men have grown ashamed of honor and love, and have thought only of pursuing their fortune and sating their lust."* There is probably a certain amount of truth in each of these explanations, and by that token each of these influences has had a part in determining the destiny of our country. Such is the complexity of our historical equation.

If Spain failed completely to foresee the great potentialities of the North American continent, it can almost be said that England was equally blind. There is reason to believe that there were a few in England who realized some of the possibilities of the American colonies, but their opinions did not prevail and the Revolution was brought on by matters that would have seemed trivial had any one been able to see but one generation into the future. Adam Smith, in his great textbook on economics, "The Wealth of Nations," refers to the "present disturbances" in the American colonies, and says:

"The last war, which was undertaken altogether on account of the colonies, cost Great Britain, it has already

* From the Prefatory Memorandum to the Motteux translation of "Don Quixote."

been observed, upwards of ninety millions. The Spanish war of 1739 was principally undertaken on their account; in which, and in the French war that was the consequence of it, Great Britain spent upwards of forty millions, a great part of which ought justly to be charged to the colonies. In those two wars the colonies cost Great Britain much more than double the sum which the national debt amounted to before the commencement of the first of them . . . It was because the colonies were supposed to be provinces of the British empire, that this expense was laid out upon them. . . If the colonies, notwithstanding their refusal to submit to British taxes, are still to be considered as provinces of the British empire, their defence, in some future war may cost Great Britain as great an expense as it ever has done in any former war. The rulers of Great Britain have for more than a century past, amused the people with the imagination that they possessed a great empire on the west side of the Atlantic. This empire, however, has hitherto existed in imagination only. It has hitherto been, not an empire, but the project of an empire; not a gold mine, but the project of a gold mine; a project which has cost, which continues to cost, and which, if pursued in the same way as it has been hitherto, is likely to cost, immense expense, without being likely to bring any profit. . .”

The greatest economist of his time could not see the potentialities of the American colonies. The rub of the matter, of course, lies in the phrase: “and which, if pursued in the same way as it has been hitherto.” The English thought only of the thirteen colonies. They never looked with anything but apprehension beyond the Alleghanies.

This view persisted for some time after the Revolution. It was really the accident of Napoleon’s necessity that brought a larger view. It must be admitted, though, that there were men far-sighted enough, not only to embrace the opportunity presented, but to see even beyond its immediate implications. To Thomas Jefferson must go the credit of being the first statesman to think in terms of a continent. By the expedition of Lewis and Clark, following the purchase of Louisiana, it is evident that he foresaw a nation extending to the Pacific.

The nation visualized by Jefferson, however, was not the solid block that we see on the map today. There is no reason to believe that he included in his plans the southern half of the projection west from the Mississippi, including Texas, the desert regions of the Southwest, and California. All this belonged to Spain at the time; but even after the Mexican revolution, Jefferson would have been the last statesman in the world to look aggressively towards this territory. And certainly there was nothing in that arid, barren region to justify a purchase such as he made in the case of the Mississippi valley.

The influences that brought about the acquisition of this territory, giving to our country its present solid, admirably compact shape, are not popularly appreciated. An earlier generation, amazed at the apparently inexorable expansion towards the Pacific, along both the northern and the southern frontiers, and unable to find a more concrete explanation, coined the phrase "Eminent Destiny." But that, of course, begs the question. The real causes can be summed up in one word: Slavery.

The prospect of the territories of the Northwest entering the Union as free states, made it vitally necessary for the South, in order to preserve its balance in Congress, to provide new territories in the Southwest that could be admitted as slave states. The maintenance of this balance in Congress was an ever-present problem from 1820 onward. In that year, by the Missouri Compromise, Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine as a free state. With the election of Polk in 1844, the annexation of Texas was assured, and, in order to prepare for the future, the southern statesmen brought about the War with Mexico, thinking, no doubt, to carve new slave states from the territory thus to be acquired. While the war was still in progress, the Wilmot Provison was urged in order to prevent the spread of slavery to the new territory that might be acquired from Mexico, but it was not successful. The plans of the South suffered a reverse when California petitioned to be admit-

ted as free. Unable to maintain its balance of power in Congress during the following decade, the South was forced to secession as the only means of preserving an institution it considered vitally necessary. Ironically, it failed in this largely because of the flood of gold that flowed to the North from the very territory that had been acquired in hopes of strengthening the South.

It was slavery, then, that was perhaps the most important single influence in the westward expansion of the United States. The Lost Cause must be remembered respectfully when it is considered that it gave to the Union, not only the means of preserving itself, but also a vast and a varied empire, without which it is impossible to imagine our country occupying its present enviable position.