

New Mexico Historical Review

Volume 29 | Number 1

Article 2

1-1-1954

Hugh Stephenson

James Magoffin Dwyer Jr.

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

Recommended Citation

Dwyer, James Magoffin Jr.. "Hugh Stephenson." *New Mexico Historical Review* 29, 1 (1954).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol29/iss1/2>

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.



Hugh Stephenson

NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOL. XXIX

JANUARY, 1954

No. 1

HUGH STEPHENSON

By JAMES MAGOFFIN DWYER, JR.*

JUST AS dawn was breaking one August day in 1824, three horsemen, who spearheaded a long wagon train, reined in under an enormous cottonwood tree. They gazed up at the purplish peaks of what is now Mt. Franklin. From the heights on the northeastern side of the middle peak, a smoke signal fire rose in alternate puffs into the early, blue sky, unmistakably saying: "White men passing in the valley below."

Two of the three riders could have easily passed for school teachers, or even ministers; while the younger one, a tall 200 pound man of 26 years, whose neck-length hair curled up from his leather and chamois-lined jerkin, appeared to be a hunter or prospector. His powerful roan horse bore the unmistakable lines of a thoroughbred. For the horse, like his master, first saw the light of day in the Bluegrass country of their native Kentucky. His owner and rider was Hugh Stephenson.

At the time and in that manner, did Hugh Stephenson arrive at the portals of the site now occupied by the City of El Paso, Texas, where he, some thirty-six years later, was the highly esteemed owner of the 900 acre estate of "Concordia" (what is now the greater part of East El Paso), and lent two friends \$4,000.

At the time that Hugh Stephenson, a first cousin of former Governor Stephenson of Kentucky, left Kentucky, he was 26 years of age. He left his comparatively sheltered life

* This article was submitted for publication by Col. M. H. Thomlinson, 4515 Cumberland Circle, El Paso, Texas:

among his aristocratic friends and relatives to become the pioneer, trapper, miner, and, in later life, a wealthy merchant of the real West.

What spell did the desert slopes of Mt. Franklin (named many years afterwards, when the town of El Paso was, for a time, called Franklin), cast on the young Kentuckian to induce him to choose this region for his future home? Let us look at the scene as he saw it. Here is what he saw:

The turbulent, muddy Rio Grande then ran approximately where San Antonio Street is now. El Paso del Norte, meaning in Spanish "The Pass of the North," was so named because it was through the gap through the mountains, known now as the Franklin Range, Texas, and Mexico, that travelers from the South went North, and vice-versa. At the present time one can clearly see where the gap was before modern industries appeared.

When the wagon train, with the three horsemen at its head, stopped at the small settlement which afterwards became El Paso, Texas, and which was then located at about where El Paso and San Francisco Streets now intersect, they decided to stay until the next day, when the caravan would continue on its journey to what is now "Old Mesilla," which even then was a rather important settlement. Afterwards, around the 1850's, it became a trading wayside town of some 4,000 inhabitants, the peak of its boom era.

The next day, the three companions separated and only Hugh Stephenson continued on to what is now called Old Mesilla. The other two decided to go to Chihuahua City, Mexico, where they afterwards became highly important and wealthy citizens. At Old Mesilla, Hugh Stephenson left the wagon train and established his headquarters. As the years went by, he acquired considerable land and property, building his home to the north of Old Mesilla, where Las Cruces now stands. He acquired "El Brazito" Grant, where afterwards Fort Fillmore was located; the ruins are still there. He personally prospected, equipped, and sent out other prospectors. Through one of these prospecting parties he located or acquired the famous "Stephenson Mine," in the Organ

Mountains, near Las Cruces, which has steadily produced through the years.

When Hugh Stephenson arrived at Mesilla, he knew that his hunting and trapping days were over; first, because the country was not suitable and no valuable fur-bearing animals abounded; and, second, because he was almost 27 years old, and thought it was time to settle down, as much as his boundless energy and adventurous spirit permitted. Therefore, he decided to give his time to mining and trading, in which occupations he was well qualified.

He purchased a large tract of land, directly to the northeast of Mesilla, and very close to it, where Las Cruces, New Mexico, now stands. Here he built a spacious Spanish type house, common to that part of the country.

He purchased crude silver from agents and emissaries of the rich and well-known Cristobal and Jacinto Ascarate family, whose extensive cattle ranches and silver properties were located across the Mexican border to the southwest, at Corralitos, Janos and Casas Grandes, in the State of Chihuahua. The Ascarate family who owned the Old Spanish Ascarate Grant, from Spanish days, lived in the big manor house, Casa Grande de Amo, and made welcome any visitor or trader as a house guest. It was here that Hugh Stephenson met and courted Juanita Ascarate, one of the youngest daughters of the head of the family. They were married and she went to live with him at his house in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He continued to go to Janos and Casas Grandes, and purchased majority interests in two of the richest Corralitos mines. From them, he smelted and refined the silver in small portable bars with their value in dollars and his name stamped on them. These were widely used as a medium of exchange at a time when ordinary money was not readily available. This was the first makeshift but practical mint of the West, from which it was jokingly said his bars came.

Hugh Stephenson and Juanita had five children, Horace Stephenson, who married Elena Miranda; Margarate Stephenson, who married J. M. Flores from San Antonio, who

later became a well-known merchant of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; Hugh Stephenson; Adelaide Stephenson, who married Colonel James Zabriskie, a well-known attorney of San Francisco, California, and later of Tucson; and Benacia Stephenson, who married Captain Albert French, a California Cavalry Captain, who was born in Boston.

Captain French, husband of Benacia Stephenson, purchased from the heirs of Hugh Stephenson:

F. Neve Survey No. 6 and E. R. Talley Surveys Nos. 7 and 8, which comprises 900 acres of land beginning as a northern boundary,

approximately where Montana Street runs, and the river as the southern boundary, and Stevens Avenue as the western boundary, and Marr Street as the eastern boundary. On the western side, just north and adjoining where the Mitchell Brewing Company now stands, he built and rented to the United States Government the second fort barracks near El Paso, which were the first adequately constructed, and on high, suitable ground for that purpose; and even now some of the old barrack buildings still stand. This was the site of the old settlement of "Concordia," the Hugh Stephenson, and later the Stephenson-French home property. Captain French was a trusted Union officer and civil engineer, upon whom the Government entrusted various important missions. He was referred to as being one of the most capable and valiant and courageous officers of the Union Army. He and Benacia Stephenson had three children: Florence French, Julia French and William French. I am the son of Florence French Dwyer and James Magoffin Dwyer, Sr., whose father was Major Joseph Dwyer, a pioneer of San Antonio, Texas, and whose wife was Annette Magoffin, daughter of Colonel James Wiley Magoffin of El Paso, Texas.

Returning to Hugh Stephenson and his life and interests—because of his interests in his silver mines at Corralitos and near Casas Grandes in the State of Chihuahua, Mexico, he changed his headquarters from Mesilla, New Mexico, to El Paso, Texas, and built his large manor house at Concordia in East El Paso, on the vast tracts which he owned as hereinbefore described.

Henry S. Gillett and
John S. Gillett
to
Horace Stephenson
Trustee for
Hugh Stephenson.

18

DEED OF TRUST.
Date Sept. 3, 1860.
No File Date.
Book B, p. 144.
Consideration \$4,000 paid
by Horacè Stephenson.

Do bargain, sell, release, convey and confirm the following described property towit: One undivided interest consisting of $\frac{1}{4}$ of the entire town tract of El Paso, Texas, the same being the undivided half of that tract of land conveyed by William T. Smith to the said Henry & John of this instrument and others, on the 30th day of January 1859, Said interest being 450 acres, more or less, also the store house, goods & all other real estate now owned by the said Henry & John in said county. To have and to hold the said undivided, and unsold interest of $\frac{1}{4}$ in said town tract etc.

General Warranty.

In trust to secure note of Henry S. Gillett & John S. Gillett for \$4,000, for money loaned by Hugh Stephenson to them which note is as follows, viz:

\$4,000. Sept. 3rd, 1860

Three months after date we promise to pay unto Hugh Stephenson, or order, the sum of Four thousand dollars, value received.

(Signed.) H. S. & J. S. Gillett.

With power of sale on default of payment.

(Signed.)

H. S. Gillett. (Seal)

John S. Gillett. (Seal)

Witnesses:

J. M. Flores.

W. Clang Perez.

State of Texas, }

County of El Paso. }

Before me, J. M. Lujan, Clerk the County Court of the aforesaid County & State personally appeared Henry S. Gillett to me well known who acknowledged that he signed the foregoing instrument of writing for the purposes and intentions therein expressed.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my official seal at office, this 30th day of October A. D. 1860.

(No Seal of Record)

J. M. Lujan.

C. C. C. E. P. C.

In his large storerooms at Concordia, he stored all kinds of merchandise and dry goods, which he had freighted from St. Louis, Missouri. With this he also traded for silver in and around Corralitos, and besides the output from his mining properties, he re-smelted and as before stated refined into small bars on which was his stamp and its weight and value. He was so well liked and esteemed by the Mexican people and they confided so much in his integrity, that these bars were used as a medium of exchange. Also with this silver he had a great deal of silver plate made and he furnished many of the wealthier families in Northern Mexico and New Mexico with silver services. And in the City of Chihuahua, Mexico, he continually kept busy a very competent silver-smith, who was well equipped to manufacture the silver services. This ware he also used exclusively in his own home. But if he devoted much time to his business enterprises, always his greatest zeal was in personally helping, counselling and befriending the poor, sick and needy. These came to him from far and near, surely knowing that his house was always open to them and that they would not be disappointed.

This great humanitarianism was wholeheartedly shared by Mrs. Stephenson. She was untiring in her activities in providing food and clothing, and nursing wounded Texas prisoners whom Governor Armijo of New Mexico had sent from San Miguel, New Mexico, to El Paso in 1841.¹ The young Parish Priest, Father Ramon Ortiz,² was greatly esteemed and at times officiated and said mass at the chapel-church at Concordia, which was built by the Stephenson family and kept in good order by Captain French, his son-in-law, and his wife, Benacia Stephenson French, later Leahy. It stood in its original form until a few years ago when John T. McElroy purchased the Union Stock Yards from the three grandchildren of Hugh Stephenson.

It is pertinent also to point out, at this time, that Mr.

1. Geo. Wilkins Kendall, *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition*, 2:40 (London, 1844).

2. [The reader might be interested in Fidelia Miller Puckett, "Ramon Ortiz: Priest and Patriot," *NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW*, 25:265-295 (October, 1950). Ed.]

Mills,³ in his roster of ante-bellum residents of El Paso, refers to "Col. Hugh Stephenson, mine owner and merchant," without classifying him either as a "Union Man" or "Confederate," although it is well known that Mr. Stephenson had large amounts of Confederate Bonds left on his hands after the war. He never regretted what he had done for the South. It is most commendable to note that such was the personal friendship existing between Mr. Stephenson and Mr. Mills that it lasted through the years. Mr. Mills repurchased for his friend, with money derived from the Corralitos Mines, extensive holdings which had been confiscated during the war.

Hugh Stephenson had weathered three great crises of the times, The Texas War, The Mexican War, and the Civil War, and he was still highly esteemed by men of both sides and races. Notwithstanding the staggering amounts lost in Confederate money and bonds, he was still able to rebuy his Texas-American real estate after the Civil War. The friendship between the Stephenson and Mills families was manifested by the fact that when Mr. Mills first brought his bride from Austin to El Paso, Mrs. Adelaide F. Zabriskie, youngest daughter of Hugh Stephenson, had his house on San Antonio Street ready for her and was her close friend and neighbor. Captain French and Colonel James Zabriskie, his sons-in-law, were personal friends and political backers of Mr. Mills, who refers to Colonel James A. Zabriskie as his colleague in the "Star" mail contracts business.⁴ Mr. Mills shows the mutual friendship and esteem which he and Captain French had for each other, when Mr. Mills was a candidate for the legislature in 1869, and at which time Captain French was County Judge, as follows:

Judge French wrote me: After the battle, December 4th, 1869. Dear Mills: We won the election, but the first night, we having one hundred and forty-three to their forty-eight votes, they opened the box and scratched our one hundred and forty-three votes for themselves. Fountain's name represents yours on the scratched tickets. I have sworn two hundred and seventy-

3. W. W. Mills, *Forty Years at El Paso, 1858-1898*, p. 19 [1901]

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 131 ff.

seven men who voted for you. You got only one hundred and thirty-four as counted. Yours, French.⁵

Treasure-seeking vandals dug holes in the old Stephenson residence house and around the grave of his wife, protected by a large cement and stone carved slab, within the Concordia Chapel. But these vandals did not know that all this silver was used in purchasing Confederate money and bonds. The remains of Juana Ascarate Stephenson, Hugh's wife, were removed from Concordia Chapel burial place some years ago with other deceased members of the family, and were buried in the Stephenson-French family private cemetery, located at the southeast corner of the intersection of Alamogordo and Stephens Street in the City of El Paso, Texas.

Hugh Stephenson was born on the 18th day of July, 1798, and died on the 11th day of October, 1870, at Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he is buried.⁶

5. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

6. According to statement of H. F. Stephenson.