

1-1-1972

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Recommended Citation

Goodrich, James W.. "Revolt at Mora, 1847." *New Mexico Historical Review* 47, 1 (2021).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol47/iss1/4>

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REVOLT AT MORA, 1847

JAMES W. GOODRICH

WAR WITH MEXICO was declared May 13, 1846. One of the first objectives of the United States was the occupation of New Mexico. Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny and the Army of the West accomplished this feat during the summer of 1846, without fighting one major or minor engagement. On August 18 the Army of the West took possession of Santa Fe. Three days later Kearny announced "his intention to hold the department, with its original boundaries . . . as a part of the United States, under the name of the Territory of New Mexico."¹ On the twenty-fourth Kearny wrote to the adjutant general that he had organized the civil government, appointed officials, prepared and published laws for the territory, and "made the necessary Military arrangements for maintaining the perfect order, peace & quiet, now so happily existing."²

Peace and quiet, however, did not "happily exist." After Kearny and Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan's expeditions left the territory, Colonel Sterling Price assumed command of the remaining American troops in New Mexico. Both he and Charles Bent, Kearny's appointee as civil governor, were aware of native unrest and pockets of resistance. Too many New Mexicans opposed the American occupation and were prepared to rebel against the invader, when afforded the chance.³ In addition, Indian raids in the territory continued against American troops and civilians, supply trains, and mails. Most of these were isolated incidents. It was not until December 1846 that a concerted and fairly well-conceived plan of revolt was formulated.

The revolt was to take place in Santa Fe, capital of the territory, on Christmas Eve. The attempt to retake Santa Fe and to murder Price and Bent was squelched when an informant warned the Americans. Price and Bent acted quickly. American troops went through the town rounding up revolutionary leaders. Some, including Tomás Ortiz, Pablo Montoya, Manuel Cortez, and Tomasito, a Pueblo Indian chief, managed to escape and to renew their attempts to foment rebellion.⁴

Their opportunity came in January 1847 when Bent, much to the dismay of many officials, decided to leave the comparative safety of the capital for his home in Taos. The governor apparently underestimated the signs of increased hostility among the native population, perhaps believing that his twenty-two-year association with the territory would protect him from harm.⁵ Bent left for Taos on the fourteenth, with a small party. Four days later, near the end of the journey, a band of hostile Pueblo Indians confronted the travelers. Some of their tribesmen had been jailed as thieves, and the Pueblos demanded their release. Bent refused to comply; such matters were handled through the processes of the law. Maneuvering his horse through the crowd, Bent led his party over the snow-covered countryside into Taos.⁶

Taos was ripe for revolt. Unfortunately for Bent and his companions, Pablo Montoya was in town. Once aware of the governor's presence, Montoya, Manuel Cortez, and other revolutionaries quickly enlisted anti-American townspeople to their cause. Throughout the day of the eighteenth Indians from Taos pueblo, three miles away, swelled the ranks of Montoya's recruits. During the night groups of enraged natives rumbled through the streets of Taos and occasional bursts of gunfire were heard. Friends of the governor periodically stopped at his home and pleaded with him to flee with his family. Bent refused, revolt erupted, and the next morning he was dead, his lifeless body pierced with arrows and shot; his scalp was paraded through the town.⁷

The murders of Bent and other officials were the first bloody acts of the Taos revolt. Their appetite for insurrection only whetted, the insurgents rushed through the territory carrying the word to rebel

against the Americans. Manuel Cortez relayed the grisly news over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to his native village of Mora in eastern New Mexico.⁸

Meanwhile a group of Americans and one Frenchman had left Las Vegas for Independence, Missouri. This party of traders and trappers included two Missourians who had been active in the territory. Lawrence L. Waldo had entered the southwest trade as early as 1829. Benjamin Pruett had ranched or traded in the area for a number of years, and in 1846 he opened the first American hotel in Santa Fe. Another Missourian, Romulus E. Culver, came to New Mexico in the fall of 1846, employed by the United States government as a Superintendent of Teamsters, Teams and Wagons for Bent's Fort. He also engaged in trading ventures.⁹ Joseph Funk, Lewis Cabanne, a Mr. Noyes, a Mr. Valentine, and Ola Ponett completed the party.¹⁰

Culver was not overly concerned for his safety. He once wrote his wife that, "Several men have been killed by the Indians as for My part I have never been molested I have passed through hundreds."¹¹ And when he informed her of the attempted Santa Fe uprising he did not express any undue alarm for his safety. He believed the revolt had been "suppressed."¹²

Waldo, however, was particularly aware of the unrest among the New Mexicans. A few days before he prepared to leave the territory he wrote one of his brothers, David Waldo, a captain of the 1st Missouri Volunteers, that:

It seems that a general mistake has been made by all that were acquainted with the *gente* of this Territory in regard to their willingness to be subject to the rule of the United States. It is satisfactorily ascertained that not one in ten is *a gusto*, and as I can judge, and I am well acquainted with the eastern side of the mountains, not one in one hundred is content.¹³

Despite Waldo's concern, the traders loaded their profits and provisions into his wagon and began their trip to Missouri.¹⁴ As they journeyed north from Las Vegas, the traders were unaware of the events taking place in Taos. Waldo presumably had unfinished business in Mora, a village of some two hundred homes about

thirty miles north of Las Vegas, and the group planned to stop there, possibly spend the night of the twentieth, and proceed on their way the next morning.¹⁵

Cortez, who had reached the village before the traders, stirred many of the people with his news of the Taos murders. Soon those who wanted to rid their lands of the Americans were prepared to act. When Waldo's party appeared, an angry mob surrounded them and ordered them to surrender their weapons. Culver balked; he preferred to fight, even though greatly outnumbered. Then, informed they would not be hurt but only held prisoners, they finally gave up their arms. Within minutes they lay sprawled in the dirt street, shot to death. The mob dumped the bodies in a ravine outside the village.¹⁶ Instigated by the Taos revolt, Cortez and his followers had taken the first American lives in the eastern half of the territory.

News of the murders at Mora spread through the countryside. On the twentieth, a witness to the deaths rode into Las Vegas. Locating the town's mayor, Juan de Dios Maes, the rider reported the killings and produced a proclamation urging all New Mexicans to join in the revolt. Maes gave it to American Levi Keithley and asked his advice. After talking with Keithley and other leaders, Maes called a meeting of the townspeople. He pleaded with them not to join the revolt. His views prevailed. Moments later, Captain Israel R. Hendley and Lieutenant N. J. Williams of Lieutenant Colonel David Willock's Battalion, Missouri Volunteers, arrived.¹⁷ Hendley, who was in charge of a grazing detachment near Las Vegas, was immediately informed of the uprising in Mora and shown the incriminating document. To calm the fearful Las Vegans the captain promised to come to their aid if insurgents from Mora, or anywhere, attacked the town. Then he left to join his troops.¹⁸

Americans in Las Vegas were deeply worried and sent a rider after the two officers. He implored Hendley to return to the town with his command to protect the people. The captain balked, saying that his orders did not allow him to transfer the detachment. He did offer to let those fearing attack join the volunteers at their

camp. Finally, after more discussion, Hendley relented, and the next morning he returned to Las Vegas with his company.¹⁹

By January 23 Hendley had further information on the Mora killings plus reports that every town in the eastern part of the territory, except Las Vegas and Tecolote, had revolted. The same day he sent a dispatch to Colonel Price summarizing the occurrences in Las Vegas and Mora. He also ordered Lieutenant Thomas C. McKamey, Co. A of the 2nd Missouri Volunteers, to bring his men to Las Vegas. Told that the revolutionaries were still in Mora, Hendley planned to take part of his command and attack the place. To ensure the success of any potential engagement, he asked Price to send more ammunition and two pieces of artillery; his troops were short on powder and shot.²⁰

Late the following day, Hendley, Lieutenant Jones H. Owens of Co. C, Battalion of Missouri Volunteers, and McKamey started for Mora with some eighty men. That evening the volunteers made camp in a mountain canyon and luckily found a "half-starved" cow to add to their meager dinner. Their horses went hungry, for the canyon contained no grass or forage. Before sunup, the troops mounted and rode toward Mora. Six miles from the village snow began to fall and increased to storm proportions. When they entered Mora Valley the storm abated.²¹

A half-mile from the village the volunteers came upon a plundered ranch owned by a Frenchman who had been murdered by the insurgents. The volunteers dismounted and in the fire-gutted ranch house the American officers conferred. Hendley and McKamey wanted to attack immediately, but Owens believed the volunteers should wait for possible reinforcements, or at least the ammunition and the artillery they hoped Price would send.²²

Besides lacking sufficient ammunition—the volunteers had only some ten rounds per man—they faced an apparently well-fortified village occupied by some two hundred insurgents. Any attack against Cortez and his men would prove difficult, if only because of the layout of the village. Threats of Indian attacks had delayed the permanent settlement of Mora until 1840, even though settlers had made their homes in the area since the early 1830's. To protect

themselves against further Indian depredations, in the 1840's the people built their homes close together and constructed a fort.²³ Private John Hudgins, one of the volunteers, pictured the town as:

... about 250 or 300 yards square, with lines of adobe houses joined together except in two places, which was occupied by cedar pickets eight feet high, one two-story L[-shaped] adobe building at the north-west angle and a wood block [house] at the southeast angle. The two-story building was pierced with loopholes for small arms and one embrasure for cannon (but no cannon) all in the upper story.²⁴

While the American officers were formulating their plans, four New Mexicans dashed from the mountains toward the village. Immediately Hendley ordered McKamey and five volunteers to mount, pursue, and apprehend the New Mexicans before they reached the safety of Mora. As the Americans rode to cut them off, revolutionaries emerged from the village to rescue their compatriots.²⁵ McKamey's party was temporarily checked, then driven back. The New Mexicans formed a skirmish line in the cornfields about one hundred yards from the walls of the village. Hendley countered by ordering his remaining troops to mount and charge the New Mexican line. Riding down a gentle slope of some three hundred yards the Americans pressed their mounts. At the edge of the cornfield was a ditch "eight or ten feet wide and three or four feet deep," filled with snow. The oncoming horsemen were unaware of the dangerous pitfall. When the volunteers reached the ditch the insurgents opened fire. Horses stumbled and fell; several volunteers were thrown but only one man failed to recapture his mount.²⁶ The charge was broken but the volunteers continued their attack as the New Mexicans fired two or three volleys, then hastily retreated back to the village, leaving fifteen of their party to be captured.²⁷

About sixty insurgents ran to a large L-shaped building with a wall ten feet high. Fourteen volunteers in close pursuit dismounted "within twenty steps of the wall" and took aim. When the New Mexicans peered over the wall the volunteers fired, killing two and wounding one. Those remaining flew the white flag and sur-

rendered.²⁸ Other volunteers had left their horses. Firing independently, they forced the New Mexicans from the housetops on the west side of the village. Although Cortez and his men attempted to return shot for shot, the only loopholes were in the upper story of the large fort. Unable to shoot from safe positions, the insurgents were at a disadvantage.²⁹

Elsewhere the Americans who had reached the outer walls of the buildings were trying to burn them or break through. Hendley, McKamey, and a detachment of volunteers, still mounted, rode around a corner of the town and came within close range of the New Mexicans manning the loopholes. The insurgents fired repeatedly, but the volunteers reined their horses against the walls of the fort, using the structure as protection. After dismounting, Hendley and his party rushed the connecting houses, capturing or killing any revolutionary who could not get into the fort. Then, returning to the walls of one of the fort's compartments, the Americans, using a makeshift battering ram, broke through one of the doors. When they entered the room, they were met by gunfire which, along with the dense smoke from surrounding fires, forced them to retreat.³⁰ Hendley appeared as his men were leaving the compartment. He ordered them to follow him back into the smoke-filled room. Private John Speaks told the captain not to go in; the New Mexicans were pouring a deadly fire from the door at the end of the room. Hendley paid no attention. As he entered, a shot struck him in the groin, drove downward, and severed the main artery in his left thigh. The volunteers picked up their leader and retreated; in minutes, Hendley was dead.³¹

After almost three hours of fighting, Cortez and his men were still entrenched in the fort. Lieutenants Jones and McKamey, fearing that the insurgents might be reinforced, called off the attack. Gathering up their prisoners, securing their dead captain to a mule, and locating the wife of a trader who was safe in Santa Fe, the expedition began the return to Las Vegas.³² From there McKamey on the twenty-fifth wrote Price apprising him of Hendley's death, the number of wounded (three), and the battle. He ended his report with the comment: "If we had only one or two pieces of

artillery to scare them out of their dens we could whip all the Mexicans this side of the [Sangre de Cristo] range."³³

Price was not in Santa Fe when McKamey's dispatch arrived. Lieutenant Colonel Willock, temporarily in command, read the report. He selected Jesse I. Morin, a captain in the Battalion of Missouri Volunteers, to assume Hendley's command and ordered him to lead a force of some two hundred men, with one piece of artillery, back to Mora to renew the attack.³⁴ On February 1 the expedition entered the Mora Valley prepared to exact retribution. Once aware of the approaching Americans the insurgents, instead of preparing for battle, hastily exited from the village and struck out for the safety of the mountains. Morin's troops rode through the village, killing or capturing stragglers and putting the torch to every building, except those housing invalids.³⁵ Continuing through the valley, the volunteers burned ranches and grain fields, destroying everything that could be used for food and shelter. They questioned captured insurgents about the deaths of the traders. Continuous threats finally induced the New Mexicans to tell where the bodies were. After collecting their prisoners and recovering the bodies, Morin and his men began the return to Santa Fe.³⁶ American lives taken at Mora had been avenged.

Although the routing of the Mora insurgents officially ended the outbreaks, the American military operation in the valley was not completely successful. By razing the village and destroying crops, the volunteers did deprive other guerrillas of housing and foodstuffs. In this vein the *Liberty, Missouri, Weekly Tribune* of March 27, 1847, commented that Morin and his men had left the New Mexicans "nothing whatever to subsist on—a just retribution for their assassination of innocent people." But the volunteers also destroyed foodstuffs that were vitally needed by their own army. As another American newspaper more appropriately observed: "He [Morin] made the inhabitants feel the horrors of war, but unfortunately, we must come in for a share of it, by the destruction of wheat and corn."³⁷

And, as in Santa Fe, the Americans failed to capture the insurgent leader. Escaping to the mountains, in the months to come,

Cortez continued to harass the invaders of his homeland, at times allying his followers with the Apache or Cheyenne Indians. Ironically Cortez, who had no allegiances, returned to Mora with his band and attacked the rebuilt village and the people who had joined him in extending the Taos revolt.³⁸

NOTES

1. R. E. Twitchell, *Leading Facts of New Mexican History* (Cedar Rapids, 1912), vol. 2, p. 211n.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 215n.

3. Opposition to the American occupation began as soon as Kearny established the civil government. Many were angry because their homeland had been surrendered without a fight; others were worse off than before the occupation. The obnoxious behavior of some of the troops was infuriating. Mexican newspapers printed untrue accounts of their armies' victories to the south, thus encouraging potential rebellion. Price's command in the territory was not an imposing force, and, many of his scattered troops were ill.

4. Discussion of the abortive Santa Fe revolt can be found in: Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico, 1530-1888* (San Francisco, 1889), pp. 429-32; Warren A. Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (Norman, 1962), pp. 132-35; R. E. Twitchell, *The Military Occupation of New Mexico* (Denver, 1909), pp. 240-42; Sister Mary Loyola, "The American Occupation of New Mexico 1821-1852," *NMHR*, vol. 19 (1939), pp. 161-62, 167; Twitchell, *Leading Facts*, vol. 2, pp. 229-32; David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (New York, 1954), pp. 277-78; *Insurrection Against the Military Government in New Mexico and California, 1847 and 1848*, Sen. Doc. No. 442, 56th Congress, 1st sess. (Washington, 1900), p. 8 (hereafter cited as *Insurrection*). This document includes the same information as Sen. Ex. Doc. No. 1, 30th Congress, 1st sess. (Washington, 1848).

5. Beck, *New Mexico*, pp. 135-36.

6. Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, p. 280; George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (New York, 1848), pp. 200, 226. Traveling with Bent to Taos were: Sheriff Stephen Lee, Circuit Attorney James White Leal, and Prefect Cornelio Vigil, all Taos officials; Pablo Jaramillo and Narciso Beaubien.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 280-82. Those who had accompanied Bent to Taos were also killed. Historians differ about the planning of the Taos revolt. Beck, pp. 136-37, states: "Most writers of New Mexico history contend that the Taos outbreak was an outgrowth of the earlier plot at Santa Fe and was carefully planned in advance. Evidence to substantiate this point of view is lacking, and Bancroft is probably correct when he states that 'it does not clearly appear that the Taos outbreak had been carefully planned in advance.'" Probably it was not carefully planned in advance but since the leaders of the Taos revolt were among those who planned the Santa Fe uprising, there is some merit in the contention that the Taos incident was an outgrowth of the earlier plot. The key to the revolt in Taos was Bent's arrival and Montoya's presence there. Montoya could then have devised an impromptu plan for insurrection.

8. *Insurrection*, p. 4; Twitchell, *Leading Facts*, vol. 2, p. 244.

9. Twitchell, *Leading Facts*, vol. 2, pp. 484-85n.; [Louise Barry, comp.,] "Kansas Before 1854: A Revised Annals," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, vol. 30 (1964), pp. 84, 241, 350, 390; James Josiah Webb, *Adventures in the Santa Fe Trade 1844-1847* in Ralph P. Bieber, ed., *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, 1931), vol. 1, pp. 47, 84, 139, 145, 146, 148, 150, 154, 157, 158, 162, 181; George Rutledge Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier under Kearny and Doniphan 1846-1847* in Bieber, ed., *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, 1935), vol. 3, pp. 41, 240; Captain R. E. Clary's Report of Persons Employed at Fort Leavenworth, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 92.

10. William Matney in a personal interview with William L. Culver, June 17, 1886, Romulus E. Culver Papers, State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts Collection, Columbia. Matney was employed by the army as a teamster. Sources differ as to the number of traders in the group but the majority mention eight. For example, L. Bradford Prince, *Historical Sketches of New Mexico* (Kansas City, 1883), p. 325, agrees with Matney's figure, while Capt. William S. Murphy, 1st Missouri Volunteers, wrote Price that eight or nine men composed the party; see *Insurrection*, p. 20. Benjamin M. Read's *Illustrated History of New Mexico* (Santa Fe, 1912), p. 447, mentions seven of the traders but is incorrect on a few names. James Madison Cutts, *The Conquest of California and New Mexico . . . 1846 & 1847* (Albuquerque, 1965, reprint of an 1847 edition), p. 233, reported eight traders as did Bancroft (p. 433).

11. Culver to Mary Ann Culver, Nov. 1, 1846. Culver Papers.

12. *Id.* to *id.*, Jan. 1, 1847. Although incorrectly dated Jan. 1, 1846, the letter referred to events occurring in Dec. 1846.

13. Lawrence Waldo to David Waldo, Jan. 13, 1847, as quoted in Twitchell, *Military Occupation*, p. 331.

14. Prince, *Historical Sketches*, p. 318. Accounts differ on the traders' method of travel. Prince (p. 138) stated that Waldo "had a wagon in which he travelled, and on this occasion the other seven Americans . . . had accompanied him in the wagon from Las Vegas." David Lavender (p. 285) mentions that the traders were in a caravan. Twitchell also mentions a caravan in *Military Occupation*, pp. 127-28.

15. W. H. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnoissance from Fort Leavenworth . . . to San Diego in California . . .*, Ex. Doc. No. 41, 30th Congress, 1st session (Washington, 1848), p. 24; Matney interview, Culver Papers. Thomas Caldwell, who sent periodic reports to Missouri newspapers, gave the population of Mora as 2,000.

16. *Ibid.*; *Insurrection*, p. 3. Most sources report the traders were shot. T. P. Burke, however, in a letter to William L. Culver, March 30, 1886, Culver Papers, believed Waldo, Culver, and the others were stoned and lanced to death. An even more lurid report is given in *The Histories of Clay and Platte Counties, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1885), pp. 621-22: "as soon as the . . . assassins obtained the arms of their prisoners, . . . they threw a lasso around the neck of each of them, and with the other end attached to the horn of the saddle dashed about the streets of the place on horseback, dragging their unfortunate victims to death." Matney and Burke both implied that they were at the burial of the traders. Matney stated that he "assisted at the burial, being a pall bearer" and that Culver "had two bullet holes in his right shoulder 1½ to 2 inches apart; also a dent in his forehead over left eye—supposed to have been caused by their manner of burial." See Matney interview, Culver Papers.

17. Prince, *Historical Sketches*, p. 325; Twitchell, *Leading Facts*, vol. 2, p. 245n.

18. Prince, *Historical Sketches*, p. 325.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Insurrection*, pp. 18-19.

21. Jewell Mayes, in a series of newspaper articles concerning Israel R. Hendley, included the reminiscence of Pvt. John Hudgins, Co. A, 2nd Regiment, Missouri Mounted Volunteers, a member of the Mora expedition. *The Missourian* (Richmond, Mo.), April 10, 1930. Hereafter cited as Hudgins' Reminiscence.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., "Part II of Gregg's Commerce of the Prairies, or the Journal of a Santa Fe Trader 1831-1839," in *Early Western Travels 1748-1846* (New York, 1966), vol. 20, p. 229n.

24. Hudgins' Reminiscence.

25. *Insurrection*, p. 19; *Histories of Clay and Platte Counties*, p. 622.

26. Hudgins' Reminiscence; *Insurrection*, p. 19.

27. *Ibid.*
28. Hudgins' Reminiscence.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*; *Histories of Clay and Platte Counties*, p. 622.
31. Hudgins' Reminiscence; Liberty, Missouri, *Weekly Tribune*, April 3, 1847.
32. *Insurrection*, p. 19; Hudgins' Reminiscence.
33. *Insurrection*, p. 20.
34. Baltimore, Maryland, *Niles National Register*, April 24, 1847; Cutts, *Conquest of California and New Mexico*, p. 233; Hannibal, Missouri, *Journal*, April 3, 1847. Price was engaging insurgents at La Embuda on January 29.
35. *History of Marion County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1884), p. 290; Cutts, *Conquest of California and New Mexico*, p. 233.
36. Liberty, Missouri, *Weekly Tribune*, March 27, 1847; *Insurrection*, p. 26. Matney told William L. Culver that the body of Ola Ponett was not found. Written on Culver's report of the interview is the thought that Ponett may have been a traitor. See Matney interview, Culver Papers.
37. *Niles National Register*, April 24, 1847. See also Cutts, *Conquest of California and New Mexico*, p. 233. Lewis H. Garrard estimated that "several thousand dollars" worth of grain was burned. See Garrard, *Wah-To-Yah and the Taos Trail*, in Bieber, ed., *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, 1938), vol. 6, p. 207.
38. Frank McNitt, "Navajo Campaigns and the Occupation of New Mexico, 1847-1848," *NMHR*, vol. 43 (1968), pp. 173, 174, 185; Twitchell, *Leading Facts*, vol. 2, pp. 243, 244, 247, 262; "Diary of Philip Gooch Ferguson, 1847-1848," in *Marching with the Army of the West* in Bieber, ed., *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, 1936), vol. 4, pp. 4, 349, 350, 352; *Insurrection*, pp. 4, 13.