

10-1-1976

An Appraisal of the 1862 New Mexico Campaign: A Confederate Officer's Letter to Nacogdoches

Martin Hardwick Hall

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

Recommended Citation

Hall, Martin Hardwick. "An Appraisal of the 1862 New Mexico Campaign: A Confederate Officer's Letter to Nacogdoches." *New Mexico Historical Review* 51, 4 (2021). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol51/iss4/6>

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.

AN APPRAISAL OF THE
1862 NEW MEXICO CAMPAIGN:
A CONFEDERATE OFFICER'S LETTER
TO NACOGDOCHES

MARTIN HARDWICK HALL

AT THE CONCLUSION of the disastrous Confederate New Mexico campaign of the Civil War, most of the Texan survivors viewed their commander, Henry Hopkins Sibley, with utter disgust and contempt. There was much validity for such feeling, as the general's drunken incompetence had been manifest from beginning to end. One officer, in a letter to a prominent friend back home, undoubtedly expressed the sentiments of the bulk of his compatriots. His account also reveals the destitute condition of the Confederate Army of New Mexico after its arrival in the Mesilla-El Paso area prior to its 700-mile return march to San Antonio, Texas. Since unofficial correspondence of this nature has special value to historical study it is worth presenting in its original form with editorial additions for clarity.

Captain William Lee Alexander, the fourth of six children of William Julius and E. Catherine (Wilson) Alexander, was born in North Carolina (probably Mecklenburg County) on May 21, 1833. Alexander's family was one of prominence: his grandfather was a graduate of Princeton and his father, after graduating from the University of North Carolina in 1816, became a lawyer and a Jacksonian politician. The elder Alexander, upon leaving the superintendency of the branch mint at Charlotte in July, 1849, took his family to McDowell County to engage in the practice of law.¹ The census of 1850 shows that nineteen-year-old William Lee was a student residing in the home of his parents.² Young Alexander enrolled in the University of North Carolina, where his father was a trustee, and was awarded the bachelor of arts degree in 1854,

ranking highest in his class. After two years as an engineer with the Blue Ridge Railroad of South Carolina, Alexander returned to his alma mater to fill the post of tutor of Latin.³ In February, 1860, he arrived in Nacogdoches, Texas to accept the position of president of Nacogdoches University.⁴ For one week he resided in a hotel, during which time the census recorded that he was an unmarried "College President" with personal property valued at \$1,000.⁵ He temporarily moved into the home of Dr. James Harper Starr, a trustee, until suitable quarters were ready at the university building.⁶

With the outbreak of the war, Alexander resigned the presidency and was mustered as a private into Company H, 4th Regiment, Texas Cavalry in San Antonio on September 29, 1861. Shortly thereafter he transferred to the 4th Regimental Artillery as a corporal.⁷ Soon after entering New Mexico, Benjamin Livingston Rusk, captain of Company H, resigned his commission and returned to Nacogdoches.⁸ On February 4, 1862, William Lee Alexander was elected commanding officer of the unit and remained in that capacity throughout the ill-fated New Mexico campaign.⁹

Alexander addressed this letter to Charles Stanfield Taylor, a native of England who had settled in Nacogdoches in 1828 to engage in the mercantile business, and who, at this time, was Chief Justice of Nacogdoches County.¹⁰ The document was furnished through the courtesy of Mmes. Linda Nicklas and Frances Ferguson of the Special Collections Department of the Stephen F. Austin State University Library, Nacogdoches, Texas, and is an item in the Taylor family manuscript collection.

After the Civil War William Alexander farmed near Quitman in northeast Texas. The former Confederate officer died in this Wood County community on January 29, 1870.

Franklin, El Paso Co., Texas, May 31, 1862.

Hon. Charles S. Taylor.

My Dear Sir: I now for the first time, so far as concerns my body, feel comfortable and rested since this Brigade left San Antonio last Oct. [1861]. I cannot say as much for my mental case

for these reasons. I have scarcely 10 men in my Co. fit for duty and seven of my best men are dead, 16 are prisoners of war in New Mexico & among them Mr. [Albert A.] Nelson, my orderly Sergeant, which is a great loss to me & the Company. I've written to Dr. [James Harper] Starr and told him the names of the men left in N. M. Since my letter to him I've heard nothing from them. Here we have many sick, none dangerously. W. [William] Tindall and A. B. [Andrew Bennett] Allen are in the [El Paso] Hospital, and at the Co. Quarters there are R. [Richard] P. Wisener, R. [Rufus] G. Bruton, A. [Andrew] J. Dees, T. [Thomas] J. Hill, M. [Madison] F. Whitaker, sick besides that there are many complaining and some just getting over measles, being quite weak. All the Lieutenants, [Charles R.] Finley and [Giles B.] Crain & [Francis M.] Rainbolt, are sick. All those have had the measles. Finley and Crain are up and getting well very slowly. Rainbolt is in bed, but I hope will be up in a few days. Crain and I am trying to get him (Crain) a seat on the next stage for San Antonio. Captain [William W.] Foard [Company K, 4th Regiment, Texas Cavalry] and Charley [Charles Mansfield] Raguet will go down on it. It seems to be a settled fact that Sibley's Brigade (What is left of it) is to take up the line of march in a few days for San Antonio. I suppose the entire brigade will get a furlough of sixty days. We are in need of everything except good arms. We want horses and clothes. Horses we cannot get in Nacogdoches Co., we must get them in Western Texas. I suppose we can get clothing at home. I am afoot, but if Giles goes by stage I'll get his horse. If not, I'll try my legs again. I walked all over N.M. and can take another jaunt, although I must confess that I do not like the business.

Well, sir, we gave the Yankees the devil in every fight up the country, but in the long run they got the better of us by a long ways. Have you seen in the tri-weekly Houston Telegraph, Tom P. [Thomas Peck] Ochiltree's letter in defense of Gen. Sibley and Col. Tom Green [5th Regiment, Texas Cavalry]? And answer me one more question, Did you ever know Tom to tell anything that *was not true*?¹¹ Well, you know that there must be some reason for our retreat from N. M. We had possession of the entire valley of

the Rio Grande save Ft. Craig, and had the enemy so well thrashed that 1000 would not attack a town [Albuquerque] defendant [sic] by 150.¹² I can say this, that the *men* did *their duty*. You surely see or have some notion where I think the fault lies. It is to be hoped that there will be some courts-martial and Courts of Inquiry, and let the people of Texas see whether certain persons can be any longer allowed to play-off when the bullets begin to whistle, and stay in comfortable quarters in towns soaking themselves with *rum and whiskey* while others are doing the work.¹³ I'm an officer, and unless called on by proper authority have to hold my temper to a certain extent. But in truth, my dear sir, I could a tale unfold that would make Texas too damned hot to hold some men, that up here have been carrying high heads. In my humble opinion, the battle of Valverde ought to have settled the question of the conquest of N. M. by 7 o'clock of the same night we could have taken Ft. Craig with [out] losing one man more than we lost at Valverde. The enemy were totally routed and scattered and all we had to do was to *push on* and the fort was ours. As it was, we were ordered to stop just as we had them in a good run,¹⁴ and although a party of 500 men might have been sent up the river with despatch and taken the *entire* Territory including Ft. Union (for there were not 500 men in arms above Ft. Craig at that time) such was our *masterly* inactivity that large reinforcements from Denver City came in¹⁵ & so we got neither Ft. Craig nor Ft. Union, & at Ft. Union I am satisfied we would have found rations sufficient to last the brigade 12 months and an immense amt. of other public property. All this has been lost and after all our toils and losses of good and noble officers & men, and of wagons and in fact everything save our guns,¹⁶ we have to return to Texas without having benefitted our country one dime's worth. Remember me to all your family.

Yours truly,
W. L. Alexander.

You can show this to Dr. [James Harper] Starr,¹⁷ [Madison G.] Whitaker¹⁸ & others there at home, but be prudent about it.

NOTES

1. Biographical data courtesy of Dr. William S. Powell and Mrs. Carolyn A Wallace, The University of North Carolina Library.
2. Census of 1850, McDowell County, North Carolina, Schedule 1. Photocopy courtesy of the National Archives.
3. Letter: D. L. Swain to Richard S. Walker and Jas. H. Starr, October 26, 1859. Photocopy courtesy of Dr. Powell and Mrs. Wallace.
4. Letter: W. L. Alexander to My Dear Mother, February 9, 1860. William Alexander Hoke Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina. Photocopy courtesy of Dr. Powell and Mrs. Wallace.
5. Census of 1860, Nacogdoches County, Texas, Schedule 1. Photocopy courtesy of the National Archives.
6. Letter: W. L. Alexander to My Dear Mother, February 9, 1860.
7. Compiled Military Service Record, William L. Alexander. Photocopies courtesy of the National Archives.
8. Compiled Military Service Record, Benjamin L. Rusk. Photocopies courtesy of the National Archives.
9. Compiled Military Service Record, William L. Alexander.
10. Walter Prescott Webb, et al. (eds.), *The Handbook of Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin, 1952), 2:714-15.
11. Thomas Peck Ochiltree served as Sibley's aide-de-camp. At Albuquerque in early April, 1862, the general ordered him to Richmond, Virginia as the bearer of dispatches. At the outbreak of the war, Ochiltree was editor of the *Jeffersonian*, a newspaper published in Jefferson, Texas. He was well known throughout the State for his glib tongue and flamboyance. Webb, *Handbook*, 2:299-300.
12. On April 1, 1862, Colonel Edward R. S. Canby, the Federal Departmental Commander of New Mexico, sallied from Fort Craig with most of the soldiers there to effect a junction with those marching from Fort Union. Canby correctly reasoned that if his strategy succeeded, his united command would be able to drive the enemy from the territory. Following the battle of Glorieta Pass (March 28, 1862), Sibley had concentrated the bulk of his troops at Santa Fe, and had left only a small detachment to hold Albuquerque, his supply depot. Canby, in order to minimize any possible Confederate attempt to prevent the union of his forces, launched a feint against the small Albuquerque garrison on April 8. It is this engagement to which Captain Alexander makes reference. Canby's ruse was a complete success, for while the confused enemy rushed from Santa Fe to the defense of Albuquerque, the colonel cleverly slipped away under the cover of

darkness to Carnuel Pass where his forces were safely united. Ed. R. S. Canby to the Adjutant-General of the Army, April 11, 1862, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series I, IX, 549-50.

13. Captain Alexander is undoubtedly referring to General Sibley and Colonel Thomas Green, 5th Regiment, Texas Cavalry, who were in Albuquerque during the skirmish of Apache Canyon (March 26, 1862) and the crucial battle of Glorieta Pass (March 28, 1862). Both the general and the colonel were known to imbibe heavily, particularly the former. Martin Hardwick Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (Austin, 1960), pp. 165-66.

14. In the late morning of the battle of Valverde (February 21, 1862), Sibley professed illness and turned over active command of operations to Colonel Thomas Green. Near dusk the Confederates successfully charged the Federal lines, captured a battery of six guns, and compelled the enemy to flee across the Río Grande to the safety of Fort Craig. As Green was preparing to send troops in pursuit, Colonel Canby dispatched a flag of truce. For some time the Confederates interpreted this to mean that the Union commander intended to surrender. Canby had sent it, however, to ask for a cessation of hostilities to allow for the caring of the wounded and the burying of the dead. In a sense, Green had been deceived by his opponent, so Captain Alexander's criticism is not entirely warranted. Hall, *Campaign*, pp. 89, 100-101.

15. Sibley's failure to move rapidly up river after Valverde enabled the few Federal troops at Albuquerque and Santa Fe to destroy considerable quantities of supplies before they evacuated the towns and fled to the security of Fort Union. The governor of the Territory of Colorado responded to Canby's plea for reinforcements, and on February 22, 1862, the 1st Regiment, Colorado Volunteers set out from Denver. Commanded by Colonel John P. Slough, the unit was composed mainly of hearty, rugged miners eager for a fight. After a most difficult trek through the snow, the "Pike's Peakers," as the Texans called them, arrived at Fort Union on March 11. The Coloradoans comprised the principal force at the battle of Glorieta Pass, and were consequently primarily responsible for the failure of the Confederates to conquer New Mexico. Hall, *Campaign*, pp. 114, 118, 125-27, 132, 138, 160.

16. The Confederates, during their retreat through the mountains to avoid Fort Craig and a collision with Canby's united command, destroyed virtually all their wagons and equipment. Before evacuating Albuquerque, they buried eight cannons and did the same with another three while in

the mountains. They did, however, with great toil and hardship bring back the six guns captured at Valverde, for these were considered prized trophies. Captain Alexander's letter. Webb, *Handbook*, 2:660.

17. James Harper Starr, a trustee of Nacogdoches University, was a native of Connecticut who had settled in Nacogdoches in 1837. During the Republic he had, for a time, served as secretary of the treasury. Following the passage of the Sequestration Act by the Confederate Congress in 1861, Starr was appointed a receiver, a post he was holding at the time of Captain Alexander's letter. Webb, *Handbook*, 2: 660.

18. The Census of 1860, Nacogdoches County, Texas lists Madison G. Whitaker as a Tennessee-born farmer with real estate valued at \$20,000 and a personal estate of \$45,000. Photocopy courtesy of the National Archives.