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THE BATTLE OF PERALTA

DON E. ALBERTS

BY SPRING 1862, THE GREAT BATTLES of the Civil War that had been and were being fought in the major theaters began to affect more and more Americans living east of the Mississippi. Although not nearly so pronounced, the impact of the war also spread to New Mexico Territory during the same period. Residents enlisted in volunteer regiments or were enrolled in local militia units. When their enemies arrived, many of these amateur soldiers, as well as territorial officials, got an excellent though fleeting view of the destructive potential of nineteenth-century warfare. Other New Mexicans, residents of the towns and villages along the Rio Grande valley, often experienced that destruction also, among them those living in Peralta, some twenty miles south of Albuquerque.

At the time of the Civil War, the village of Peralta included, as it does today, some two miles of adobe buildings and field enclosures; cottonwood groves, and irrigation ditches. Also included was a residence belonging to the territory's chief executive, Gov. Henry Connelly. A wealthy merchant and long-time resident of New Mexico, Connelly had married Señora Dolores Perea, widow of former governor Mariano Chávez. In the process, he acquired extensive land holdings in the Rio Grande valley. Among those holdings were the large house and adjoining fields just north of the main village area and church at Peralta. Twin rows of huge cottonwoods lined the lane leading up to the plantation-like mansion and outbuildings. (The stumps of these trees are still visible along part of the lane, although the house was eventually torn down to make way for more recent residences and businesses.¹) Despite being near the Camino Real, the main road south from Albuquerque and Santa Fe to the Mesilla Valley, the Connelly residence was almost untouched by

the effects of civil war.² Untouched, that is, until April 1862, when it became the site of the Battle of Peralta during the final stages of the Texan invasion of New Mexico.

The Texans were troops of the Confederate Army of New Mexico, better known as the Sibley Brigade. Brig. Gen. Henry H. Sibley, a former Regular Army officer in the territory, proposed to capture and occupy New Mexico. He would then continue northward to bring the Colorado mining districts under Confederate control. Thereafter, Sibley planned to march westward to the Pacific, securing southern California seaports. In the process, he also planned to recruit disaffected Mormons in Utah Territory, as well as New Mexicans, whom he thought to be equally disenchanting with the federal government. To carry out this ambitious plan, General Sibley recruited a brigade of Texans, approximately three thousand mounted men, and marched from San Antonio to the Mesilla Valley in late 1861.³

During February 1862, Sibley's men fought their way past Federal forces at Fort Craig, south of Socorro. They defeated Col. Edward R. S. Canby's mixed force of U.S. Regulars and New Mexico Volunteers at the Battle of Valverde, but failed to destroy Canby, who retreated to the security of Fort Craig. Having won little, and with rations running desperately short, the Texan command continued north, occupying Socorro, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe within a month and forcing the governor and territorial officials to flee to the protection of Fort Union, near Las Vegas. Even the territory's larger towns could not support the Texans for long; Sibley's hungry men cleaned out Albuquerque and Santa Fe, then advanced eastward toward Fort Union, military supply center for the Southwest.⁴

Enroute to Fort Union, along the Santa Fe Trail, the Confederates ran into more Federal troops than they had bargained for. A mixed force of Regulars and the First Colorado Volunteers met and defeated the Texans at the Battle of Glorieta on 28 March 1862, burning the Rebels' supply wagon train in the process.⁵ With no significant reinforcements available, Sibley was faced with the prospect of starvation or retreat to Texas; he decided on the latter course and prepared to start south.⁶

Sibley naturally believed he would have to fight his way back

through the forces at Fort Craig. That prospect was grim enough, but while still recuperating at Santa Fe after the Battle of Glorieta, the Texans learned that Canby, leaving Col. Kit Carson and his New Mexico Volunteers to guard Fort Craig, had come north to Albuquerque with approximately twelve hundred men and four cannons—a force only slightly inferior to the entire remaining Confederate numbers. Canby also ordered Federal forces around Fort Union, another twelve hundred troops, to march rapidly south and join him.⁷ After making a diversionary demonstration toward Albuquerque and firing on Confederates guarding the few supplies still stored in the town, Canby took his men east through Tijeras Canyon and joined the Fort Union troops near the village of San Antonio (Cedar Crest). Federal soldiers were elated with their recent success at Glorieta and looked forward to final victory over the Texans when they next met.⁸

Colonel Canby wasted little time in the mountains east of Albuquerque and moved his command, numbering about twenty-three hundred men with an additional battery of artillery from Fort Union, after Sibley. By late afternoon on 14 April, the Union troops emerged from Tijeras Canyon and could see the Rio Grande glistening in the distant valley. After a quick dinner, they marched all night southwestward along the old road that crossed present-day Kirtland Air Force Base and the Isleta Reservation. Aided by mild weather and bright moonlight, Canby's men covered thirty-six miles that day. By three o'clock the following morning, they finally left the sand hills and camped in the bosque bottomland about one mile northeast of Peralta, near the Connelly mansion.⁹

What greeted the Union men was, literally, music to their ears. The Texans were at Connelly's, and their officers were celebrating departure from despised New Mexico with a wild celebration. "The sound of revelry by night" was clear to Canby's men, along with raucous fiddle music and the occasional crash of glass and wood from the governor's house. One Union artilleryman, Lt. J. M. Bell, remembered that "the sounds of the fandango carried into the morning hours," and that "all was merry as a feast within the dark outline of the town, just growing visible in the gloomy light of approaching day." No Confederate outposts or sentries were en-



Henry H. Connelly. Courtesy Museum of New Mexico.

countered, and the Union troops awaited the dawn in anxious expectation of a surprise victory over their enemies.¹⁰

The Confederates near Peralta were actually Col. Thomas Jefferson Green's Fifth Texas Mounted Volunteers, approximately five hundred men, or about one-third of Sibley's force. The other Texans were camped on the west side of the Rio Grande, near Los Lunas, three miles from Peralta.¹¹ Hurriedly evacuating Santa Fe on 8 April, Sibley then abandoned Albuquerque four days later, shortly before Canby marched from the mountains. After burying eight small howitzers for which they had no draft animals, most of the Confederate troops crossed the river by ferry and ford, near the present-day Barelás Bridge south of Albuquerque's Old Town. Progress along the sandy roads was slow, and Colonel Green decided to march his regiment south along the east side of the Rio Grande, parallel to Sibley's other units, and rejoin after crossing at a good ford near Peralta. Green found himself near the governor's house at nightfall on 14 April and decided to camp there and cross the following morning. Usually an excellent commander, Green was negligent that night, as were his tired, sick, and dispirited men. Separated from Sibley by a high, swift-running river, the Fifth Texas was unaware that Canby's impatient soldiers waited nearby.¹²

How completely Canby surprised the Texans became apparent at dawn. His bugles, then his cannons, shattered the early stillness, startling Union and Confederate soldier alike. Lieutenant Bell could "imagine the hurrying to and fro in that little Mexican town, the terror of the quick transition from the hilarities of the night to the sternness of the day."¹³

The Federal troops assumed that there would be an immediate assault by infantry and cavalry, supported by the artillery posted to the east and north of the governor's mansion. Canby, however, thought that the ground the Texas troops held was too strong to be taken easily, even though his men outnumbered the enemy about five to one. The ditch banks and low adobe walls enclosing fields around the Connelly residence and outbuildings formed strong natural fortifications. Several Confederate cannons were within this maze of fields, but Canby's men were confident of success and clamored for permission to attack the Texan positions.¹⁴

Their attention was almost immediately diverted to the north, however, where a Confederate supply train approached Peralta from the direction of Albuquerque. Consisting of seven heavily laden wagons, the train was escorted by a detachment of Texans with a mountain howitzer. When a party of mounted Colorado Volunteers galloped across the bosque to intercept this force, the Texans stopped to defend themselves, but were forced either to surrender or take "leg bail" after the Colorado troopers charged to within fifty feet of the wagons and cannon. One Union man was mortally wounded, and four Confederates were killed in the skirmish, which saw the wagons captured and the howitzer turned against its former owners.¹⁵

As the Colorado Volunteers returned from this fight, an independent company of New Mexico Volunteers (Graydon's Spy Company), led by flamboyant Capt. James "Paddy" Graydon, dashed into Peralta, fired a few shots, and retired. Canby then opened a furious artillery fire on the Texans around the governor's house. The cannonade looked and sounded grand, especially the firing of a large twenty-four pounder howitzer, but the soft ground and adobe walls absorbed much of the impact of shot and shells. The Texans were not hurt, and Green responded with a barrage of his own, which killed two of Canby's soldiers and several draft animals, but otherwise accomplished little.¹⁶

Infantrymen from both sides exchanged musket shots at long range throughout the day, but Canby decided not to risk a direct attack on the Connelly mansion. At mid-day, he sent separate columns under Colonels Gabriel Paul and John Chivington around to the north and west of Peralta to prevent reinforcements arriving from Sibley. These troops skirmished with Green's men during this encircling movement, and marching south near present-day West Bosque Loop, they turned back a relief column that Sibley led, just as it was emerging from an icy river crossing. There was little action, however, except for the continuing crash of artillery. One Colorado trooper claimed the Union cavalrymen were "always about to do something but never doing it."¹⁷

The Confederates were untrained gunners, and their artillery fire on the Union troops moving around their positions typically went over the heads of Canby's men. In addition, the Texans had

expended most of their explosive shell ammunition earlier during the campaign and, with few exceptions, had only solid shot to fire.¹⁸ Such shot was not very effective against troops, and as a result, no more Federals were killed during the battle. Likewise, the Texans reported only two wounded in addition to those lost during the morning wagon train attack. Both sides were showered with limbs and branches, however, as cannon fire shattered the cottonwood groves north of Peralta.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the remainder of Sibley's Confederates across the Rio Grande were not idle. They were the remaining troops of the Second, Fourth, and Seventh regiments of Texas Mounted Volunteers, about one thousand strong. Leaving their camps at Los Lunas early in the morning and marching south, they were soon overtaken by a courier from Peralta, who informed them of the Federal attack on the Fifth Texas. The force immediately counter-marched, left their supply train and four small howitzers with a wagon guard at Los Lunas, and by mid-day advanced northeastward toward the river. Led by General Sibley and their commander, Col. William Scurry, the dismounted troopers of the Fourth Texas regiment waded the icy Rio Grande. This was the relief column that Union forces stopped as they proceeded around to the north and west of Peralta. Without making any vigorous attempt to unite with Colonel Green's besieged men, Sibley promptly recrossed the river, leaving the relief forces to guard the ford over which they had just passed.²⁰

During early afternoon, the men from both sides ate and slept on the line of battle during a lull in the firing. Sibley's failure to relieve the isolated Texans left them in a precarious position at Peralta. Outnumbered and outgunned, Green stuck to his position in and around Governor Connelly's mansion and fields. One Fifth Texas soldier recalled being "taken from one position to another several times during the day," and that "our position was a strong one. . . ." ²¹ The Texans desperately needed to avoid defeat until night would bring the opportunity to withdraw west of the Rio Grande.

Nature, however, relieved their worries about two o'clock in the afternoon and ended the Battle of Peralta. Out of the southwest came a furious New Mexico dust storm. One Union participant

described the effect as "one solid cloud of moving sand and dust in which one could scarcely breathe," while a Texan opponent remembered that "the wind was blowing clouds of dust through the town and obscuring the view in every direction."²² New Mexicans present were probably less impressed, but further operations were impossible, and under the cover of the storm, which lasted until after dark, Green withdrew his men and equipment across the river and rejoined Sibley. Late that night the last Texans, wet, cold, hungry, and sleepy, straggled into Los Lunas on their way out of New Mexico.²³

Behind, they left a shambles of buildings and groves in and north of Peralta. In the center of the battle, the Connelly house was sure to have received serious damage from the Federal artillery and musket fire, in addition to that inflicted during occupation by the Texans. Ditch bridges, field enclosures, and outbuildings around the mansion were battered. Several houses in Peralta were also damaged by artillery fire that passed over its intended targets. Union cavalymen noticed one such dwelling as they rode through the village following the Confederate withdrawal. Dismounting to inspect the damage, a Third Cavalry officer found a whiskey bottle and three half-filled glasses on a recently vacated table inside the house. A twelve-pounder solid shot had penetrated the adobe wall near the table, and the owners of the whiskey had apparently taken to their heels. The cavalymen finished what was left before scouring the village for any remaining Texans, and probably any remaining whiskey. They found several wounded Southerners left in a nearby makeshift hospital.²⁴

Governor Connelly was naturally pleased with the military results of the Battle of Peralta, but he was furious about destruction of his property by the Texans. After returning territorial government to Santa Fe, Connelly visited his mansion a month after the battle. He claimed more than \$30,000 worth of damage to his residence and surrounding property. The Texans were, the governor claimed, "devoted to the destruction of everything of value about the premises. The same would have happened . . . to my neighbors of Peralta had it not been for the timely arrival of General Canby. . . ." He was especially incensed over destruction of household goods and furniture, for which the Texans could have had no

use, and over damage to the nearby village.²⁵ It was some time before Henry Connelly was sufficiently calm to see these sacrifices as part of the final Union effort to rid New Mexico of its Confederate invaders.

The last battle of the Civil War in New Mexico thus ended undramatically—one of the least bloody on record. Colonel Canby's force followed the Texans down the Rio Grande and out of the territory without further conflict. Besides the dead, the wounded, and the debris, the Battle of Peralta resulted in considerable criticism of Canby and his conduct of the campaign. Since the battle was essentially an artillery duel, Federal infantrymen and cavalrymen played little part and in frustration condemned their chief as a coward or traitor. Some even claimed that Sibley and Canby were related or were old comrades, although they were mistaken on those as well as on the other counts.²⁶

Canby realized that if he captured the entire Texan force, which he could have done, he would have to feed and care for the prisoners. With his own men already on reduced rations, and with the Rio Grande valley stripped of food and forage, the Union commander was unable to provide subsistence for any large number of captive Confederates.²⁷ The wise and prudent course, therefore, was to hurry the invaders back to Texas, and that he did.

Sibley's men reached the Mesilla Valley and Fort Bliss areas during the last days of April 1862. There, they gathered their strength and what meager supplies remained. During June, in small detachments so as not to deplete limited water sources along their route, the Texan survivors began a slow, grim return to San Antonio, straggling into that city during late summer, having left approximately one-third of their number behind as casualties or prisoners. In summarizing their New Mexico campaign, Governor Connelly observed, "This is the second invasion our Territory has suffered from Texans, both of which have proved equally disastrous [to them], and it is hoped we will never witness another."²⁸

NOTES

1. Ralph E. Twitchell, *The Leading Facts of New Mexico History*, 5 vols. (1911–17; reprint of first two volumes, Albuquerque: Horn & Wallace Publishers, 1963),

1. 391-92; interview with Henry Connelly (a grandson of the Civil War governor), Peralta, N. Mex., 15 October 1977.

2. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series One, 9: 651-52. Hereinafter cited as *Official Records*, with all citations to Series One.

3. For details of the Civil War invasion of New Mexico, see Martin Hardwick Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960). Reasonably accurate, although dated and poorly annotated, this work was completed before the late Dr. Hall had access to several significant journals of campaign participants. See also Theophilus Noel, *A Campaign from Santa Fe to the Mississippi . . .*, ed. Martin H. Hall (Houston: Stagecoach Press, 1961). An unofficial history of the Sibley Brigade by a member of the Fourth Texas Mounted Volunteers, this work contains much hearsay, but also much useful primary material.

4. Alfred B. Peticolas, "Journal of A. B. Peticolas," 3 vols. (Manuscript, author's collection, 1861-63), 2: entries for 27 February, 1, 3, March 1862. This journal includes an account of the New Mexico campaign by an observant and intelligent sergeant of the Fourth Texas Mounted Volunteers. The original has been loaned to the author for editing and publication. It is the best primary Confederate source. Hereinafter, all citations are to vol. 2.

5. Strangely, there are few journals or narratives of the New Mexico campaign by Union participants. The best primary source to date is Ovando J. Hollister, *Boldly They Rode: A History of the First Colorado Regiment of Volunteers* (1863; reprint ed., Lakewood, Colo.: Golden Press, 1949). Hollister's dislike for the Regular soldiers and officers, however, clouds an otherwise excellent account.

6. *Official Records*, 9: 541, 714.

7. *Official Records*, 9: 549-50.

8. *Official Records*, 9: 549-50. J. M. Bell, "The Campaign of New Mexico, 1862," in *War Papers Read Before the Commandry of the State of Wisconsin, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States*, 8 vols. (Milwaukee: Burdick, Armitage & Allen, 1891), 1: 67. A copy of this article is in the MOLLUS Collection, Archives, U.S. Army Military History Research Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa. It contains excellent accounts of the Battles of Valverde and Peralta by an officer of the Third Cavalry serving with Canby's artillery. This material was brought to the author's attention by Andy Gregg of Albuquerque.

9. Bell, "Campaign of New Mexico," pp. 67-68; Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, p. 89.

10. *Official Records*, 9: 655; Bell, "Campaign of New Mexico," p. 68.

11. Peticolas, "Journal," entries for 14, 15 April 1862.

12. Peticolas, "Journal," entry for 14 April 1862; Howard Bryan, "The Man Who Buried the Cannons," *New Mexico Magazine* 40 (January 1962): 14; William R. Howell, "Journal of W. R. Howell, Fifth Texas Mounted Volunteers" (Manuscript, University of Texas Library, Austin, 1862), entries for 14, 15 April 1862.

Dr. Philip L. Mead of Albuquerque provided a typescript of this journal to the author.

13. Bell, "Campaign of New Mexico," p. 69; Howell, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

14. *Official Records*, 9: 551; Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, p. 94.

15. Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, pp. 92-93.

16. Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, pp. 92-93; Howell, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

17. *Official Records*, 9: 551; Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, p. 94.

18. Bell, "Campaign of New Mexico," p. 69; Nolie Mumey, ed., *Bloody Trails Along the Rio Grande: The Diary of A. F. Ickis* (Denver: Fred A. Rosenstock, 1958), entry for 15 April 1862.

19. Peticolas, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

20. Peticolas, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

21. Howell, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

22. Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, p. 95; Peticolas, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862.

23. Howell, "Journal," entry for 15 April 1862. Because of darkness and the treacherous river bottom, some Confederate wagons had to be abandoned during the Rio Grande crossing.

24. Bell, "Campaign of New Mexico," p. 70.

25. *Official Records*, 9: 672-73.

26. Hollister, *Boldly They Rode*, pp. 95-96. See also Max L. Heyman, Jr., *Prudent Soldier: A Biography of Major General E. R. S. Canby 1817-1873* . . . (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1959).

27. *Official Records*, 9: 669-70.

28. *Official Records*, 9: 672-73.